

**FROM PAIN TO POWER: A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ANTI-  
RACIST FEMINIST *RESSENTIMENT***

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## Abstract

In recent years, identity-based movements have increasingly been criticized by outsiders for espousing a “culture of outrage” both in terms of their academic expressions and activist mobilizations. In the present study, I examine this charge from *within* the struggle by advancing a self-reflexive socio-psychological investigation into certain emotional responses, attitudes, and practices that have, in significant ways, come to define this type of political agitation. Specifically, I focus my analysis on anti-racist feminism given my personal ties and investment in this movement. Following Wendy Brown, I investigate whether anti-racist feminism suffers from the Nietzschean affliction of *ressentiment*, and if so, what can be done to reorient the movement towards a more affirmative and humanist future. I address this latter objective through the work of Erich Fromm who I argue provides us with insights that are especially pertinent to our current problem, and which, when developed further with the aid of anti-racist interventions, can offer a fruitful means to moving forward.

*For my parents, Abdul and Nasim Amarshi, without whom none of this would have been possible – thank you.*

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction: A Self-Reflexive Study

*"Self-knowledge is no guarantee of happiness, but it is on the side of happiness and can supply the courage to fight for it."*

-Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstances*

*"Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its imperfections, its perversions."*

-Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

For some years now, identity-based movements have been under attack by critics from across the political spectrum. One of the most prominent conservative opponents in the Canadian context has been University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson who, in the fall of 2016, uploaded a series of YouTube videos that would propel him into the public eye. These videos announced his views on what he perceives as a dangerous scourge spreading across university campuses in recent years: the political correctness (PC) movement.<sup>1</sup> In Peterson's view, this movement is comprised of "social justice warriors" or "equity authoritarians" – that is, members of identity-based struggles such as feminists or anti-racists<sup>2</sup> – who are bound to an ideology in which they see the world as divided between "oppressors" and "victims." In aligning themselves with the victims, "PC extremists" engage in a

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<sup>1</sup> He has especially been opposed to what he saw as the imposition of non-binary gender pronouns and bill C-16 which, in his terms, would "ad[d] the ill-defined categories of gender expression and gender identity to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination" (see Jordan B Peterson, 2017/05/17: *Senate Hearing on Bill C16*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnIAAkSNtqo&feature=youtu.be>).

See his YouTube channel for a collection of videos and interviews in which he discusses these views: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL\\_f53ZEJxp8TtlOkHwMV9Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL_f53ZEJxp8TtlOkHwMV9Q)

<sup>2</sup> Identity-based movements or "identity politics" refer to political mobilizations that articulate along lines of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, ability, age, and more.



toxic form of moral righteousness in which they use shame and guilt to defeat their chosen enemies, over fighting for true social change. For Peterson, identity-based movements are inherently prone to tribalism and dangerously motivated by hatred and resentment. Referencing George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Peterson claims that Leftist radicals are driven more by their hate for the successful than their love for the oppressed.

While Peterson's perspectives are deeply problematic on a number of grounds – most notably his dismissal of structural oppression<sup>3</sup> – his critique bears some similarity to challenges that have been emerging amongst members of identity-based movements themselves. British radical feminist Julie Bindel, for example, decries contemporary identity politics as being characterized by a “tendency towards putting trigger warnings on everything and wrapping each other in cotton wool.”<sup>4</sup> Referring specifically to feminism, she argues that:

Moral superiority and “call out” culture has trumped political activism. Feminists have a proud history of taking state institutions and corporations to task. It would seem this is being lost in a sea of vitriol. We built this movement on a desire and willingness to question and challenge old assumptions and truisms. We are in danger of becoming autocrats who

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<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons for which Jordan Peterson is an indefensible character. Some of these include his refutation of social phenomena (racism, for example) merely on the basis of methodological objections; his defense of socio-biological arguments that reinforce social inequalities and discriminatory stereotypes; his staunchly positivistic epistemological bias which permits him to automatically dismiss other types of knowledge production; his sweeping denunciation of academic disciplines such as sociology and women's studies; his participation in reinforcing discrimination against members of the trans community; his tacit support for and incitement of right-wing groups and conservative ideologies; his tendency toward hyperbolic statements such as the claim that the radical left is animated by a ‘murderous’ ideology; and his messianic delusions of grandeur. See his YouTube channel for a collection of videos and interviews in which he discusses these views: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL\\_f53ZEJxp8Tt1OkHwMV9Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL_f53ZEJxp8Tt1OkHwMV9Q)

<sup>4</sup> Julie Bindel, “Feminism Is in Danger of Becoming Toxic,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2014, sec. Opinion.

would rather organise a pile-on than try to change systems. The life blood of feminism is in danger of becoming bile.<sup>5</sup>

Like Peterson, Bindel argues that current forms of identity politics are driven more by resentment and moral superiority, than a commitment to social change. Although positioned on opposing ends of the political spectrum, both thinkers raise some important questions as to the relationship between contemporary identity-based struggles and ‘negative’ emotions such as hatred and resentment, and the types of political possibilities that are available and foreclosed when the latter drive the former. In this dissertation, I investigate some key emotions associated with one expression of identity-based movements – anti-racist feminism.<sup>6</sup> These include the negative feelings of outrage, anger, hatred, mistrust, suspicion, envy, resentment, and a desire for revenge. While this is not to deny the affirmative dimension of negative emotions and the role they play in solidarity-building, consciousness-raising, and political mobilization, my concern is that they have become dominant within many articulations of anti-racist feminism with troubling consequences.<sup>7</sup>

A central question animating this dissertation is to what extent are negative feelings *driving* the political actions of anti-racist feminists? And moreover, how might a political project driven by outrage and resentment toward an oppressor (a

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<sup>5</sup> Julie Bindel, “Feminism Is in Danger of Becoming Toxic.”

<sup>6</sup> My choice to focus on anti-racist feminism is based in my own personal investment and participation in the movement. Although this focus is maintained through the bulk of the present work, Chapter 5 places anti-racist feminism within the context of identity politics as I explore how the problems I locate within anti-racist feminism belong to identity-based movements as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, and as will be discussed later in the dissertation, sharing negative emotions and outrages provides a common language and outlook, while also promoting belonging, intimacy, and political solidarity.

changing signifier) diminish anti-racist feminism's ability to envision and move towards an emancipated society built on alternative and affirmative principles? In order to answer these questions, I investigate the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of anti-racist feminism using conceptual tools drawn primarily from sociology, social psychology and from identity movements themselves. By examining a range of voices from both academic and activist fields of the movement, as well as my own experiences, I undertake an exploration that is relevant not just to anti-racist feminism but also to other forms of struggle along lines of identity that, I suggest, share a common culture and collective character. In this introductory chapter I reflect on my personal motivations for this project, and then outline some of the theoretical perspectives that orient the chapters to come.

### ***A Self-Reflexive Study***

This project is informed by feminist insights that have made a case for the crucial connections between the personal and the political.<sup>8</sup> Challenging objectivist methods, feminists have argued in favour of using personal and everyday experience as a starting point from which to access wider political and social processes. Moreover, they have stressed the importance of self-reflexivity as a central principle of feminist approaches. As Michelle D. Young and Linda Skrla explain, "reflexivity involves self-reflection of one's research process and findings, self-awareness of one's social positionality, values, and perspectives and self-

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<sup>8</sup>Barbara Merrill and Linden West, *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* (SAGE, 2009).

critiques of the effect of one's words and actions..."<sup>9</sup> Rather than imagining the scholar or researcher as a disembodied and disinterested universal subject, feminist inquiry reimagines her as a "real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests."<sup>10</sup> In this section I discuss how my experiences, desires, and interests animate this particular project.

What is my personal relationship to anti-racist feminism and how did it lead me to the current investigation? I have identified as an anti-racist feminist for much of my adult life. My introduction to feminism in its more general form came in the first year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Victoria (UVic) in British Columbia. It was there that I took my first Women's Studies course, which acted in many ways as a consciousness-raising experience. It was in this course that I was finally given the language with which to articulate a number of feelings, experiences, structures, and relationships that I had hitherto lacked the conceptual tools to fully understand. I remember this to be an exhilarating experience and can still recall the excitement and energy with which I would walk home with my classmates to our residence after class. This initial experience was followed by more courses in Women's Studies and Sociology that strengthened my ability to engage in feminist analysis and critique, and which, in turn, solidified my commitment to the movement as well as my identity as a feminist.

What is it that made these lessons in feminism exciting and energizing? For me, feminism validated my experiences of everyday unfairness and inequality. The

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<sup>9</sup>Michelle D. Young and Linda Skrla, *Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership* (SUNY Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>10</sup>Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?," in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 9.

many instances of unequal treatment, dismissal, objectification, silencing, shaming, humiliation, and double standards that I had personally experienced as well as witnessed around me were finally exposed for what they were: manifestations of oppression that operated on both personal (micro) and societal (macro) levels. The naming of this oppression *as* oppression was a crucial first step in giving me the confidence with which to challenge it. Importantly, this confidence was also rooted in the knowledge that I was not alone in this fight but, rather, I now belonged to a worldwide movement committed to recognizing, exposing, and challenging all forms of gendered oppression and injustice. This for me was a very new and very powerful feeling, and it energized me a great deal.

I discovered anti-racist feminism when I moved to Toronto, Ontario for my Master's degree. While my feminist education at UVic had used an intersectional lens to emphasize the interlocking oppressions of gender, race, and class,<sup>11</sup> the political climate of the university and of the city as a whole, was very much slanted toward what we might call a "white" feminism. That is, while racial and other oppressions were noted, there were few (if any) professors and courses that offered in-depth instruction as how to practice anti-racist feminism. My educational experience at York University was completely different. It was here that I took a number of classes that centered on anti-racist, post-colonial, and third world feminism taught by anti-racist feminist scholars. It was also at York that I met a number of fellow women of colour with whom I would attend and participate in

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<sup>11</sup> This was before other forms of oppression, most notably those pertaining to sexuality, were (commonly) included in intersectional analysis.

anti-racist feminist academic (conferences, talks, book launches, reading groups), and activist (rallies, marches, sit-ins) events.

Whereas my undergraduate experience gave me a feminist orientation and identity, my graduate (MA) experience was a complete immersion in anti-racist feminist politics and everyday practice. Almost every facet of my life reflected my commitment to this movement including the courses I took, the professors I chose to work with, the books I read, the films I watched, the coffee shops and restaurants I frequented, the cultural events I attended, the clothes I wore, and the people that I invited into my life. This latter point was especially salient as I formed very intimate bonds with a number of other anti-racist feminists who during this time became my closest friends and companions on this path. Like me, these friends were of colour (brown, black, and Asian), cis females, either heterosexual or heterosexual passing,<sup>12</sup> from middle-class immigrant families, and pursuing graduate studies in the Social Sciences. These friendships were extremely meaningful and impactful in the validation, belonging, and support they offered. Even more than the resonances I found with classmates in Victoria, my friendships in Toronto went much deeper in affirming my experiences of gendered and racial oppression, and providing the confidence and support with which to speak out against these forms of injustice. In many ways, these friendships offered a community that very much felt like a home.

This home, however, was not necessarily a “happy” one. The feelings of confluence, support, and affirmation were also accompanied by rage, resentment,

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<sup>12</sup> By “heterosexual passing” I am referring to those of us whose sexualities were more complex than just “straight” but who maintained femme/straight presentations often for cultural reasons.

outrage, hatred, mistrust, suspicion, frustration, bitterness, despair, and sadness (among other emotions) against the gendered and racial oppression that we felt. It became common for us to get together and “rage,” so to speak, about men, or white men, or white women. Of course these were not un-provoked instances. What I began to notice, however, is that whatever the incident, if it involved a white person, we would automatically label it as “racist” or as an expression of the person’s racial privilege. The lines were becoming increasingly blurry between hating whiteness and the institution of white supremacy, and hating white people themselves. Personally, I made a decision to ensure that most of my graduate courses were taught by women of colour, and if this was not possible, then at least by a woman. I also refused to read anything written by a white man during the years of my Master’s degree. Many of my friends made similar decisions.

If white people were our enemy, then people of colour, and especially women of colour, were our automatic friends/sisters in solidarity. Following standpoint perspectives (discussed in the following chapter), we held the work of feminists of colour as most authoritative, actively collecting and sharing whatever books and articles we came across. We also submitted to the belief that whoever suffered the most oppression should be granted most space and most authority.

For me, these “radical” and intensely emotionally charged years of anti-racist feminism lasted for the duration of my (two year) Master’s degree, the few years between my MA and PhD, and the first year of my PhD. It was in the second year of my PhD that I experienced a shift in my thinking and feeling – a shift brought about by an extreme emotional burnout. “Burnout” is a common term used in activist

circles (as well as helping professions). In the activist context it refers to the “physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that causes a decline in your ability to experience joy and feel and care for others.”<sup>13</sup> My burnout was not necessarily due to taking on excessive tasks in the realm of activist organizing but rather the cumulative toll of embodying an emotional and attitudinal disposition that drove me into a deep state of exhaustion, despair, depression, and anxiety. It felt like a complete emotional collapse.

In the wake of this collapse, there were a few things that made a great impact on me as I “recovered,” so to speak, and which, as a result, have found their way into this dissertation. One was the chapter “Wounded Attachments” written by Wendy Brown that I felt gave some language to aspects of my experience, and which I wished to explore at greater length. Another influence was the work of Erich Fromm on humanism and positive freedom, which inspired an interest in imagining an affirmative and emancipatory vision for anti-racist feminism. And the third was the practice of mindfulness that has played a significant role in helping me put back together the pieces of my life, as well as envision new types of relationality.

To be clear, the emotional exhaustion that I experienced did not mark the end of my engagement or identification with anti-racist feminism. It did, however, prompt my interest in asking the questions that I do in this dissertation around the types of practices and tendencies that I have encountered (and embodied), the

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<sup>13</sup> For articles that discuss burnout in the activist context, see Melissa A. Fabello, “Burn-Out Prevention and Intervention,” *Everyday Feminism*, February 7, 2014, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/02/burn-out/>; Aliya Khan, “Activist Burnout Is Real – And You Probably Need to Read These 4 Ways to Manage It,” *Everyday Feminism*, May 27, 2015, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/dealing-with-activist-burnout/>.



nature of our political agenda as anti-racist feminists, and the role of freedom within it. Why this interest in freedom? I came to the realization that I did not want to spend my entire life fighting, challenging, opposing, and reacting. I began to wonder what it would be like to envision an emancipatory future. That is, I became interested in how we – as anti-racist feminists – might achieve the admittedly naïve sounding objectives of happiness, peace, unity, love, freedom, and futurity. And more, I became concerned that if these objectives are indeed plausible, they have been shrouded in the garb of Western white male liberalism – thus leading us to believe that these objectives were not for us if they did exist, or something that we were too disillusioned (for good reason) to believe could exist for anyone. Although I understand both positions, this dissertation attempts to challenge them as well as to suggest that perhaps we should reconsider these objectives as worthy of our sights too.

The question remains, however, of how did I make the leap from my personal experience in anti-racist feminism to that of the wider movement? That is, what makes me think that the types of thinking, feeling, and acting that I personally encountered are relevant to anti-racist feminism as a whole? Could they not just be expressive of my localized context as a graduate student at York University, or even as a graduate student at York University with a particular group of friends who practiced anti-racist feminism in a particular way? While I certainly believe that my specific positionality, background, and context are germane to my experience, I suggest that they are not alone responsible for my experience with anti-racist feminism. Rather, I propose that there are a number of emotional expressions,

attitudes and practices that are not only more widespread but that could be seen as forming a common culture across activist groups, university campuses, and cities. I have come to believe this not only through my encounters with anti-racist feminists and other activists and academics of identity in my own social and political context (but outside of my friend group) – within the university and at activist events – but also through the social and cultural commentary, reflections, and reports I have come across written by anti-racist feminists, other activists/academics of identity, and critics from across Canada and the United States. To be sure, critiques of identity politics – such as that presented by Peterson – are much more readily available, especially as we see a rise in reactionary right-wing political movements in recent years. At the same time, though, I have encountered a number of thoughtful self-critiques from progressive scholars and activists – such as Bindel – who, while committed to combatting social oppression, have also noted some concerning and self-sabotaging trends in the identity movements (including anti-racist feminism) of which they are a part. It is among these self-critiques that I wish to situate the present discussion, and which I would like to explore in greater detail.

### ***A Theoretical Analysis***

While the impetus for this project is decidedly personal, the dissertation advances a primarily *theoretical* analysis of the problem, in which I present the insights of a number of theorists in order to evaluate their relevance and explanatory power. Given the complexity of the questions that I am investigating, I draw upon ideas and theories that have sometimes been seen as marginal within

sociology. These include the work of diverse thinkers situated in the fields of moral and political philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, feminist theory (including anti-racist feminism), social movement theory, literary theory, and (secularized) Buddhist mindfulness. The socio-psychological contributions of German sociologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm are particularly germane. His concepts of *social character* and the *social unconscious* will be employed as key tools for grasping how emotions can be understood in the context of identity movements, while his theory of radical humanism will be explored for the affirmative suggestions and inspiration it offers with which to move forward. Political philosopher Wendy Brown also plays a prominent role in the dissertation, especially in the first few chapters which are dedicated to formulating and understanding the issue of *ressentiment* as a central emotional feature of anti-racist feminism. The following outline of the chapters to come gives some sense of how I engage with the work of these theorists and others.

In Chapter 2, I provide a contextual sketch of anti-racist feminism, looking at its history, contributions, and aims. I then explore the experiences of activists and scholars within anti-racist feminism and other identity movements who have registered similar observations to the ones that I have in this introduction. Indeed, activists and scholars have gone so far as to refer to identity movements (including anti-racist feminism) as exemplifying a “culture of outrage,” “call out culture,” “dragging culture,” “outrage addiction,” and “toxic culture of the Left.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Assam Ahmad, “A Note on Call-Out Culture,” *Briarpatch Magazine*, March 2, 2015.; Stacey Patton, “Is Outrage Addiction Derailing Our Most Important Conversations?,” *Dame Magazine*, June 26, 2017; Bailey Lamon, “Why This Radical Activist Is Disillusioned by the Toxic Culture of the Left,” *The Independent*, February 29, 2016.; Julie Bindel, “Feminism Is in Danger of Becoming Toxic” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2014, sec. Opinion.

In Chapter 3, I explore some theoretical concepts to better understand the role of emotions in social movements. I argue that the emotions, practices, and attitudes I have described might more usefully be understood as belonging to a collective *character*, given the ways in which they are *psychologically* embodied by members of the anti-racist feminist movement. I develop this idea through examining the field of social movement theory, focusing especially on its relation to emotion. I then turn to Erich Fromm's theory of social psychology and his ideas around *social character* and the *social unconscious* as a means of developing a way of speaking about the collective character of anti-racist feminism.

Chapter 4 explores exactly what *type* of social character anti-racist feminists embody. Following Wendy Brown and Rebecca Stringer, I examine the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* in order to determine whether it may give insight into the current predicament of anti-racist feminism. I argue that while *ressentiment* does indeed capture salient aspects of anti-racist feminism's social character, Nietzsche's bias against the oppressed demands revision. I thus engage his theory self-reflexively by balancing accountability for troubling tendencies on the one hand, with the recognition of the racial pain that lies beneath a *ressentimental* social character on the other.

In Chapter 5, I examine Wendy Brown's contention that identity politics is constitutionally bound to *ressentimental* attachment. I investigate a number of charges that have been levelled against identity-based movements (like anti-racist feminism) and argue that while not all such movements are necessarily *ressentimental* in character, the divisiveness, envious investment in state and

capitalist power, and attachment to injury certainly make identity movements vulnerable to the grasp of *ressentiment*.

In Chapter 6, I present the humanistic perspective of Erich Fromm as a future-oriented, anti-capitalist, emancipatory theory that foregrounds interconnection, love, accountability, and positive freedom. I argue that Fromm's insights can be useful in building an anti-racist humanism, with some important correctives offered by Civil Rights writer James Baldwin.

Chapter 7 returns to both the idea of racial pain, and of *ressentiment*. Drawing on an online course facilitated by anti-racist feminist educator Sandra Kim, I explore how mindfulness provides a method through which anti-racist feminists can touch our pain, rather than cover it with *ressentimental* rage. In making contact with our pain, Kim argues that we open ourselves up to the possibility of a compassionate activism that centers co-existence and co-operation, over the *ressentimental* type character discussed previously. I argue that while Kim provides a useful methodology to healing pain and building the ground for a more affirmative, future-oriented movement, this does not mean that we need to cut out negative emotions completely. Indeed, as philosophers Jean Améry and Thomas Brudholm argue, there is a moral value in emotions like *ressentiment*, which while not necessarily *politically* effective, are nonetheless *humanizing*. I conclude the dissertation by suggesting that we, as anti-racist feminists, need to learn how to imagine new possibilities for living, being, and relating to one another if we are to re-orient ourselves toward the future.

It should be noted that my intention in this dissertation is neither to decisively define or critique anti-racist feminism, nor to suggest proper ‘solutions’ that might be implemented to ‘fix’ things. Rather, as an anti-racist feminist who feels a great deal of affection, love, need, and pride for her movement, my central aim is to open a conversation around what things might be hurting us and promote a greater self-understanding of the movement itself. Given the diversity within anti-racist feminism in terms of its aims, objectives, visions, and forms of mobilization, however, it is not expected that this exploration will resonate with all anti-racist feminists, nor represent anti-racist feminism in any cohesive sense. Instead, my concerns and perspectives stem from my personal experiences within the movement from my particular social, historical, generational, and geographical context. That is, as rooted in my experiences in largely graduate and activist spaces in Toronto, Ontario, over the last decade or so, and in conversation with women of colour activists and scholars largely from my generation (i.e. born between the late 1970s and the late 1980s). Although I make the claim that these experiences are echoed beyond these boundaries, it is still important for me to make clear the context from which I am writing as it informs much of my analysis. I might also emphasize that despite the critiques that I present in this dissertation, I am by no means above them. To the contrary – unlike the types of analyses offered by critics like Jordan Peterson – this project is undertaken in the spirit of self-compassion as well as compassion and understanding toward my fellow anti-racist feminists for whom I write this. It is an imperfect work for an imperfect social movement that I hold with fierce love and an optimistic hope for the future.

Another aim of this dissertation is to make a contribution to the sociological study of social movements (social movement theory), which continues to underestimate the importance of psychological factors in influencing the direction and possibilities of political expressions. As I argue in Chapter 3, social movement theory's ambivalence toward integrating an analysis of emotions in their investigations of social justice movements severely curtails the field's ability to fully grasp how psychic dynamics influence political behaviour. Before considering this relationship between the emotional and the political, however, it is necessary to first provide some background and context on this dissertation's object of study: anti-racist feminism.

## Chapter 2 – Anti-racist feminism: A Culture of Outrage?

*“Some of us are fighting for freedom, while others don’t want freedom, because if we have it, then they will no longer have anything to make them the center of attention. Those people are the ones who wear oppression like coats they refuse to take off, and the very act of being marginalized is what defines them. It is what gives them purpose.”*  
-Luvvie Ajayi, Facebook public post

*“We are currently living under an outrageous regime that gets more outrageous by the minute. But have we become addicted to our own sense of outrage? Are we starting to alienate ourselves from one another because of our rage at the world?”*  
-Stacey Patton, Dame Magazine

In the introductory chapter I discussed anti-racist feminism as one expression of an identity-based movement. In this chapter I explore its particular historical formation, impact, and objectives. I then provide an analysis of some problematic emotional and behavioural features of anti-racist feminism – as discussed by anti-racist feminists, feminists, and activists/academics of identity – which I suggest are indicative of a certain culture within the movement.

### **(2. 1) Anti-racist feminism**

Anti-racist feminism<sup>1</sup> is at once a part of the wider feminist movement, as well as a reaction to it. It belongs to the greater movement in that it is also committed to exposing and dismantling patriarchy, and establishing equality between the genders. It stands apart, however, in its insistence that gender oppression is coterminous with, and inextricable from other forms of oppression, particularly racial. While the recognition of overlapping oppressions is increasingly becoming a mainstream feminist position, this was not always the case. Indeed, the

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as “critical race feminism” and “intersectional feminism.” Anti-racist feminism is a term I have found to be used more in Canada than other countries.



first and second wave periods of feminism (1830s-early 1900s and 1960s-1980s respectively) have been critiqued by anti-racist feminists as being centered on the issues and concerns of white middle-class women to the exclusion of the voices and experiences of women of colour. Anti-racist feminism is part of the contemporary third wave that began in the mid-1980s across Canada, the US, and Britain, as “a definite body of literature...emerged in sociology, political science, history, and women's studies that clearly focused on the interconnections between race and gender.”<sup>2</sup> It was during this time that women of colour were finally able to make an indelible impression on what had largely been a white middle-class movement.

Before exploring some of the interventions and aims of the anti-racist feminist project, there is the question of *who* exactly are anti-racist feminists? While the movement is largely comprised of “women of colour,” this term is not without difficulties. On the one hand, the usage reflects a certain commonality of experience in terms of our exclusion from white feminism (and white society as a whole), as well as allows us to express and make demands from a place of political solidarity.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, however, the concept is also contested on the grounds that it obfuscates important differences between women of colour in terms of our particular histories, experiences, opportunities, the forms of domination that we are subjected to, and the ways in which we organize around these particularities.<sup>4</sup> As

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<sup>2</sup> Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson, *Scratching the Surface: Canadian, Anti-Racist, Feminist Thought* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Spivak's concept of “strategic essentialism” is relevant here.

<sup>4</sup> See Dua and Robertson (1999) for a discussion of the difficulties in using the term “women of colour.”

There is also the additional difficulty of determining whether people who are not women of colour can be anti-racist feminists.

such, although I refer to anti-racist feminism as a singular movement in this dissertation, it can perhaps more accurately be seen as an umbrella term for different mobilizations that center race as a key marker of identity, experience and oppression. These mobilizations includes black feminism (Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Andrea Davis, Afua Cooper), Indigenous feminism (Andrea Smith, Bonita Lawrence, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Winona LaDuke, Linda Tuhiwai Smith), Third World and Postcolonial feminism (Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jaqui Alexander, Saba Mahmood), Queer anti-racist feminism (Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Jasbir Puar, Gayatri Gopinath), and feminism that might simply be characterized as “anti-racist” (Enakshi Dua, Tania Das Gupta, Roxana Ng, Sherene Razack, Nandita Sharma, Malinda Smith, Sunera Thobani, Himani Bannerji, Njoki Wane).<sup>5</sup> Each of these feminist groupings is distinct (as are the feminists within them), and not without tensions.<sup>6</sup> Still, though, the foregrounding of overlapping oppressions and attendant critiques against white feminism, the advancing of a particular epistemic standpoint, and the reclaiming of anti-racist feminist histories, are important points of connection which engender strong ties of solidarity amongst

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<sup>5</sup> This is not an exhaustive list, and moreover, the feminists listed are not necessarily confined to these designations as many of them define themselves as belonging to multiple feminist schools of thought.

<sup>6</sup> A good example of a tension is the debate between feminists Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005), and Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright (2008), over the role people of colour play in settler colonialism, and the exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives from the mainstream anti-racist movement.

many of us, and that make “anti-racist feminism” a meaningful designation.<sup>7</sup> I will now explore these three interventions in greater detail.

The first anti-racist feminist intervention is based in the insight that gendered oppression always intersects with racial and class oppression. This point is articulated by the theory of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which describes how multiple social identities overlap simultaneously to structure experiences of social oppression.<sup>8</sup> Intersectional theory was formulated as a challenge to the idea that there is “some uniform experience common to all women”<sup>9</sup> as well as the “notion that ‘gender’ was the primary factor determining a woman's fate.”<sup>10</sup> Writing in 1984, bell hooks argued that “white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experience of women as a collective group.”<sup>11</sup> Hooks has emphasized that by using the banner of “common oppression” in fomenting the feminist movement, the vast differences among women have been silenced and subsumed by white women’s “opportunistic” political platform.<sup>12</sup> Anti-racist feminists are thus quick to point out the ways in which white women have

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that not all feminists of colour share this view. For a perspective on the limitations of women of colour organizing, see Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in *Are All the Women Still White?: Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*, ed. Janell Hobson (SUNY Press, 2016), 61–71.

<sup>8</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. Also see Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) for an early formulation of simultaneous oppressions.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy A. Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* (Psychology Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>10</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Routledge, [1984] 2014), xiii.

<sup>11</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 44.

historically *colluded* with racializing powers against women of colour, objecting to the insincere ways in which “sisterhood” has been evoked.

In response to mainstream feminism’s essentialist ideas of the category of “woman” and our “common oppression,” women of colour have articulated alternative theories that represent specific situated perspectives and experiences. This leads to the second intervention: the idea that the lives and experiences of women of colour *matter*, and are the basis for a unique epistemology. For some anti-racist feminists, this distinct epistemology is articulated through the lens of standpoint theory. Developed by Nancy Hartsock, feminist standpoint theory contends that the fact that women and men’s lives are structured differently from one another has epistemological consequences; namely, that patriarchal oppression positions women in a manner that offers a more complete and accurate vision of social relations.<sup>13</sup> Building on this theory, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women’s ways of knowing can be viewed as subjugated knowledge that grants them a kind of epistemic privilege.<sup>14</sup> Other anti-racist feminists, such as Himani Bannerji, eschew the idea of privileged “subjugated knowledge,” arguing instead that the “strength of a standpoint epistemology is that it allows for a more sophisticated

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (Psychology Press, 2004). See also, Sandra G. Harding, *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> For more on Collins’ theory of black feminist epistemology, see her influential Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2002).

understanding of the ways in which the discourse of race shaped the contingent character of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.”<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, and relatedly, “given the neglect of women of colour in feminist historiography,”<sup>16</sup> anti-racist feminism has made efforts toward reclaiming our histories – both in terms of the oppressions faced, and the political mobilizations against these. This archiving has revealed that women of colour have indeed engaged in anti-racist feminist struggle for many years: “Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces, and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, scholars have argued that anti-racist feminist political resistance has existed even before the advent of white feminism. Some Indigenous women have indeed made the claim that for them, feminism began in 1492, upon “contact” with colonial forces.<sup>18</sup> As Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson similarly recount, the “rich history of resistance began with the arrival of Europeans. Since contact, First Nation women fought the marginalization of indigenous peoples through activities that ranged from negotiating treaties to organizing armed resistance to the appropriation of indigenous lands.”<sup>19</sup> Dua and Robertson also unearth the largely undocumented political resistance of women of

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<sup>15</sup> Dua and Robertson, *Scratching the Surface*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Dua and Robertson, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> See Christa Craven, “Women’s and Feminist Activism in the United States and Canada,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016), 705.

<sup>19</sup> Dua and Robertson, 11. See also, Sherene Razack, Sunera Thobani, and Malinda Smith, *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century* (Between the Lines, 2010), 1–2.

colour during the first and second waves of feminism. Speaking within the Canadian context, they explore how the most pressing issues for first wave anti-racist feminism “were treaties, immigration policies, settlement policies, and access to democratic rights”<sup>20</sup>; while second wave anti-racist feminist “initiatives included challenging the racism of the police, challenging discriminatory immigration policies (especially towards domestic workers), organizing those sectors in which women of colour were concentrated, challenging racism within the women's movement, [and] creating a shelter movement to provide women of colour with a space safe from both male violence and racism.”<sup>21</sup> The second wave was also a period in which many anti-racist feminist writers employed a socialist feminist position in exploring the connections between gendered and racial oppression.<sup>22</sup>

The third wave (mid 1980s-present) has been marked by the continuation of second wave concerns, as well as a number of new issues and initiatives corresponding to changes in the socio-political climate. In Canada, the early decades of this period were dominated by an analytical focus on the economy and the state – looking at gender and race in relation to immigration, citizenship, multiculturalism, and labour, as neo-liberal ideology became entrenched in government policies. In more recent years, a number of themes have come to impact anti-racist feminist scholarship and activism. Some of these include: a focus on the racialized construction of “us vs. them” with the advent of the “war on terror,” especially with

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<sup>20</sup> Dua and Robertson, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Dua and Robertson, 12–13.

<sup>22</sup> Dua and Robertson, *Scratching the Surface*. See, for example, the work of Himani Bannerji, *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics* (Sister Vision, 1993).

regards to the Othering of Muslim men and women, and other racialized peoples<sup>23</sup>; an interest in dismantling Canada's peacekeeping image to reveal the state's complicity with "empire," both in terms of its participation in neo-imperialist wars, and "neo-liberal globalized capitalism"<sup>24</sup>; a commitment to recognizing the Canadian state as an ongoing white settler colonial project that continues to enact material, cultural, emotional, physical, sexual and spiritual violence on Indigenous men, women, and children;<sup>25</sup> a focus on decolonization, Indigenous self-determination, and the recovery of Indigenous knowledges<sup>26</sup>; an analysis of anti-blackness as a particular type of oppression that leads to disproportionate forms of social inequality, and physical violence (especially police violence) against black men, women, and children<sup>27</sup>; a deepened understanding of how sexuality intersects with race, gender, and class to produce particular experiences, oppressions, and ways of knowing for queer and trans people of colour<sup>28</sup>; an investigation of the academy as a white space<sup>29</sup>; and finally (but not exhaustively), an interest in exploring whiteness as "inextricably connected to the construction of the Other."<sup>30</sup>

The diversity of these above projects begs the question as to whether any underlying aims or objectives can be located that animate the anti-racist feminist

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<sup>23</sup> See Razack, Thobani, and Smith (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Razack, Thobani, and Smith, xv. See Sherene Razack (2008), Sunera Thobani (2002)

<sup>25</sup> See Sherene Razack (2000), Winona LaDuke (2005), Andrea Smith (2015)

<sup>26</sup> See Audra Simpson (2014), Leanne Simpson (2008, 2011), Andrea Smith (2005)

<sup>27</sup> See Angela Davis (2011, 2016), bell hooks (2015), Katherine McKittrick (2006), Tania DasGupta (2008)

<sup>28</sup> See Sara Ahmed (2006), Audre Lorde (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (2007), Jasbir Puar (2007), Gayatri Gopinath (2005)

<sup>29</sup> See, Malinda Smith (2017), Himani Bannerji (1992), Sara Ahmed (2012), Sherene Razack (1998)

<sup>30</sup> Razack, Thobani, and Smith, *States of Race*, 10. See Sedef Arat-Koç (2010).

movement. In general terms, I would identify some central aims as: exposing structures of domination including white supremacy, neo-colonialism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and the suffering they cause for people of colour; contesting current forms of oppression and inequality through scholarship, direct action, legal redress, and publicization; demanding recognition and justice for past (historical and recent) injustices; fighting for equal access, inclusion, and opportunity within societal institutions, and the labour market; and demanding protection from all forms of discrimination and violence, including that enacted by the state.

These objectives form a (partial) list of what can be characterized as aims that address and relieve immediate forms of oppression and suffering. In addition to this set of ambitions is a second order that concerns a somewhat more ambiguous, fraught, and even ambivalent aim: that of *freedom*. Indeed, as an emancipatory movement, feminism has always been linked to the achievement of this ideal. Its articulation, however, is a more complex matter, as many feminists are aware.<sup>31</sup> How might the emancipatory ambitions of feminism be understood? To begin with, Western feminism, from its inception, has been informed by liberal Enlightenment ideas that take freedom as its normative object. The desire for freedom is recognized as both an “*a priori* assumption” and a universal aim.<sup>32</sup> In terms of the meaning given to freedom, liberal definitions conceive it as “the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of ‘universal

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<sup>31</sup> For a good discussion of feminist hesitations and negotiations regarding freedom, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press, 1995), chapter 1.

<sup>32</sup> John Stuart Mill in Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 10.



reason' or 'self-interest,' and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition" or "the capacity for self-mastery and self-government."<sup>33</sup>

Despite early feminism's rootedness in these liberal formulations of freedom, liberation as conceived in these terms has been the subject of critique among feminists from various traditions for some decades. For example, feminists have taken issue with liberalism's "autonomous, self-interested, excessively individuated subject" on the grounds of its decidedly androcentric and bourgeois character.<sup>34</sup> Autonomy, as a liberal ideal, has also been polemicized as a masculinist concept that diminishes traditionally "feminine" values such as relationality, emotion, intimacy, and embodiment.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these points, feminists have also questioned the value and meaning of freedom in conditions of gendered inequality. As Wendy Brown discusses,

a liberal formulation of freedom, proffering liberty as individual license, appears to aggravate the vulnerability of the socially weak to the socially privileged, and thereby to facilitate as well as legitimize the exploitation of wage labor by capital, the racially subordinate by the racially dominant, and the sexually vulnerable by the sexually exploitative.<sup>36</sup>

This has prompted feminists to consider whether it might be equality and protection that women need most, rather than freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Post-structural feminism has also challenged the grounding of feminism in an ideology of freedom. Following the interventions of Michel Foucault, these feminists

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<sup>33</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> See Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), Mahmood (2011), Brown (1995).

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> For more on this position, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

eschew the idea of the rational and autonomous liberal subject; the notion of power as strictly domination; and the belief that resistance and autonomy can ever exist outside of relations of power. For Foucault, power must be understood as “a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses.”<sup>38</sup> The process of subject formation, or *subjectivation* is a paradoxical one in which the very forces of power that render one’s subordination are the same that furnish his/her possibilities for agency.<sup>39</sup> Following these insights, post-structural feminists like Judith Butler repudiate the idea of a pre-determined emancipatory project, as well as the idea of a pre-discursive subject with an intrinsic yearning for freedom. Rather, Butler locates possibilities for agency in the disruption of social norms, which only come to be through processes of continual reenactment. It is in the instability of this process of iteration that “gaps and fissures are opened up” and the potential for subversion can be realized.<sup>40</sup> This resistance, as well as the resisting subject herself, however, always exists within the confines of power, and “is no way constrained to a radical or emancipatory aim.”<sup>41</sup> Post-structural thinking of this sort has led Brown to remark that “the death of the essential subject appears to eliminate the possibility of the free subject, as the death of the essential world eliminates the possibility of a free world.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, it has resulted in Butler having to “defend herself against

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<sup>38</sup> Mahmood, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Psychology Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *States of Injury* 22.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *States of Injury* 19.

the charge, levelled against her by a range of feminists, that her work has the effect of undermining any agenda of progressive political and social reform by deconstructing the very conceptions of subject and power that enable it.”<sup>43</sup>

Anti-racist feminists have also contested liberal notions of freedom in dialogue with the above critiques. As Brown writes, “freedom,” for post-colonial and cultural feminists, “has been swept onto the dust heap of anachronistic, humanistic, androcentric, subject-centered, and ‘Western’ shibboleths. Challenged politically as a token of the bourgeois-individualist modern West, freedom’s valorization has been marked as ethnocentric and its pursuit as implicitly imperialistic.”<sup>44</sup> Anti-racist feminists have exposed freedom’s imperialistic markings in recent years as militarist projects have borrowed the rhetoric of the ‘fight for freedom’ in the name of a so-called ‘war on terror’ to enact horrific forms of violence on racialized peoples both domestically and globally.<sup>45</sup> Anti-racist feminists have also questioned dominant definitions of freedom and the way in which freedom is positioned against oppression. For example, in the 1970s, Black and Indigenous feminists challenged mainstream feminism’s denunciation of the nuclear family on the grounds of its oppression against women, arguing that *their* understandings of freedom included the ability to *form* families, given the assault on familial bonds during their respective histories of slavery and colonialism.<sup>46</sup> More recently, in her work on Egyptian women’s participation in the Islamist revival movement, Saba Mahmood has challenged liberalism’s assumption of the universal desire for freedom as

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<sup>43</sup> Mahmood, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *States of Injury* 18-19.

<sup>45</sup> See Razack (2008), Thobani (2002).

<sup>46</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

foreclosing feminism's ability to "analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics."<sup>47</sup>

For Brown, the above factors – in addition to the failure of socialism; the appropriation of the language of 'freedom' by libertarian, militarist, and Right wing forces; and the anxiety that the responsibility of freedom places upon the modern subject in an age marked by unprecedented helplessness, despair, and disenchantment – have attenuated the Left's very *desire* for freedom. As she states,

The question, then, is not whether freedom can be discerned as *the* aim of politics or of history in the political projects of the present but a more modest, albeit still tendentious one, which borrows as much from the revolutionary outlook of Rousseau as from the teleological thinking of Marx: Might the desire for some degree of collective self-legislation, the desire to participate in shaping the conditions and terms of life, remain a vital element – if also an evidently ambivalent and anxious one – of much agitation under the sign of progressive politics? Equally important, might the realization of substantive democracy continue to require a desire for political freedom, a longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them? And have we, at the close of the twentieth century, lost our way in pursuing this desire? With what consequences?<sup>48</sup>

Brown's concern is that the contemporary flight from freedom in progressive politics has resulted in a capitulation to "despair, misanthropy, narrow pursuit of interest, or bargains of autonomy for state protection" that run the risk of "twist[ing] into a more dissimulated political discourse of paralyzing recriminations

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<sup>47</sup> Mahmood, 14. More specifically, Mahmood looks at the women's piety movement in Cairo as exhibiting a form of political agency that "exceed[s] liberatory projects" (x) and the feminist/leftist analytic of subordination vs. resistance that animate them. Her ethnographic work makes the case for developing an alternative means of analyzing political practice that considers "the work they perform in the making of subjects, in creating life worlds, attachments, and embodied capacities" (xi).

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 4

and toxic resentments parading as radical critique.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, she sees this as an already dominant manifestation in feminism (and other identity movements), as “in its economy of perpetrator and victim, this project seeks not power of emancipation for the injured or the subordinated, but the revenge of punishment, making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does.”<sup>50</sup>

Following Brown, this dissertation seeks to pose some similar questions pertaining to anti-racist feminism and the aim of freedom – including: what are anti-racist feminism’s long-term desires and visions? To what extent do these involve “a desire for political freedom, a longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them?” And to what extent does a lack of such a desire – as Brown fears – make anti-racist feminism vulnerable to becoming a recriminatory/ reactionary political project? While Brown’s site of investigation is the turn to legal redress and recognition as a means of securing justice for social injury, this dissertation focuses on a different site: the more micro, everyday feelings, thoughts, and practices that some anti-racist feminists exhibit in engagement with those who are identified as “the oppressor.”

It should be emphasized that my desire to discuss freedom as an anti-racist feminist aim should not imply a dismissal of the feminist, post-structural, and anti-racist critiques considered above. In terms of Butler’s position, while I believe that her objection to freedom as an *a priori* aim is a legitimate one, I echo the concerns of other critics who have argued that her formulation poses challenges for envisioning

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<sup>49</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, xi.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 27.

the possibility of wholesale social change.<sup>51</sup> Anti-racist objections, on the other hand, are important in that they signal the importance of cultural and political context in determining whether political agency should be equated to emancipatory action or if an alternative and more appropriate framework should be pursued. Critiques like that of Mahmood's, however, overstate the centrality of "liberation" today as a central feminist objective in the Western context. To the contrary, while there is indeed an emphasis on "agency" and "empowerment," I contend that dominant expressions of contemporary feminism – including anti-racist feminism – focus more on exposing and contesting current forms of oppression, seeking legal redress and recognition, demanding equality and inclusion, and forging strong communities. My argument in this dissertation is not to deny the importance of these as they certainly play a crucial role in the struggle toward social change. Rather, my position is in favour of recuperating freedom as *one* of the central aims of anti-racist feminism in order that we might develop an anti-oppressionist future based in affirmative values and possibilities. With this being said, this recuperation need not mean the re-installment of freedom as correspondent to an autonomous, self-interested masculine bourgeois Western subject. Instead, following Brown, I am interested in asking the much more basic question as to whether we, as anti-racist feminists, might wish to engage in projects of collective self-determination and in the creation of alternative futures, rather than simply "navigate or survive them"? What this means and the precise forms these projects take are something that we

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<sup>51</sup> See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (University of California Press, 2004); Nancy Fraser et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (Routledge, 2013).

must determine for ourselves. In Chapter 6 I explore Erich Fromm's concepts of negative and positive as a means of offering a place to start. For the remainder of this chapter, however, I concentrate on investigating the everyday feelings, thoughts, and practices of anti-racist feminism that I argue can be seen as manifesting a distinctive culture.

## **(2.2) A Culture of Outrage**

What does it mean to speak of the "culture" of a political struggle?

Sociologists of social movements have argued that movements often have distinctive cultures that both influence and are influenced by the outside culture.<sup>52</sup> While movement cultures are protean and evolving, they nonetheless allow for an analysis of how distinct expressions and practices come together to make up a perceivable social form recognizable to those within and outside the movement. The culture of a movement includes its worldview (or ideology) and how it seeks to align this worldview with potential recruits and sympathizers; the collective identity of a group and how it expresses this identity; behavioural routines or rituals that translate ideology into practice; and the material and discursive productions of the movement.<sup>53</sup> The charge that identity-based movements suffer from a culture of outrage implies that negative emotions both produce and drive these different aspects of movement culture. That is, it suggests that an ethos of outrage permeates the attitudes, practices, and productions of anti-racist feminism.

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<sup>52</sup> Doug McAdam, "Culture and Social Movements," in *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Lane Corthers and Charles Lockhart (Springer, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Doug McAdam, "Culture and Social Movements"; Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Analytical Approaches to Social Movement Culture: The Culture of the Women's Movement," in *Social Movements And Culture*, ed. Hank Johnston (Routledge, 2003).

In this section I move from the personal experiences discussed in the introductory chapter to those of other activists and scholars within anti-racist feminism and other identity movements<sup>54</sup> who have registered similar observations. Such challenges from within progressive movements are not common. Indeed, as one academic/activist confided, it is only upon learning that a fellow progressive academic/activist is also willing to share their critical observations about the anti-racist movement that he will open up in terms of his views – the political environment is too intolerant otherwise.<sup>55</sup> In the following paragraphs I explore some recent examples of tactics, tendencies, emotional expressions, attitudes, and practices that make up this “culture of outrage.” These examples come from Canada and the United States and give some sense of the political environment found across some university campuses and activist circles. I include the viewpoints of activists and scholars who, like me, advance critical observations and self-reflective analyses, while remaining committed to the anti-oppressionist movements to which they belong. To be clear, my purpose is not to reduce anti-racist feminism to these forms of feeling, thinking, and action, and in so doing, to discount the richness of our history, the value of our contributions, the validity of our demands, the realness of our injury, or the deep sense of solidarity and support that has been so essential to the survival of many of us in an oppressive world. Nor is it my intention to flatten anti-racist feminism into a singular and homogenized representation or to speak on

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<sup>54</sup> As I stated in the introduction (and will discuss at greater length in Chapter 4), I believe the culture that I am exploring as pertaining to anti-racist feminism to also belong to other identity-based movements.

<sup>55</sup> Personal conversation with educator and anti-racist activist, Sheldon Holder, that took place after a workshop on racism and diversity at the Gestalt Institute of Toronto, March 25, 2018.



behalf of a diverse movement. My contention, rather, is that the practices that I have observed and participated in in my own experience are a part of a wider cultural current that is worthy of self-reflexive consideration and investigation.

The first example I discuss is an episode of racial divisiveness at Reed College, a liberal-arts school in Portland, Oregon, where in-classroom protests have been raging since the fall of 2016.<sup>56</sup> Organized by a student activist group – Reedies Against Racism (RAR) – formed in September of 2016, these protests have been described in the following terms:

A Hum[anities] protest is visually striking: Up to several dozen RAR supporters position themselves alongside the professor and quietly hold signs reading “We demand space for students of color,” “We cannot be erased,” “Fuck Hum 110,” “Stop silencing black and brown voices; the rest of society is already standing on their necks,” and so on. The signs are often accompanied by photos of black Americans killed by police.

As can be gathered by the above description, RAR’s activism is centered on challenging the white supremacy of required Humanities courses, as well as calling attention to the marginalization of black and brown people both on campus and in society as a whole. While these demands in addition to the others outlined by the group are quite reasonable, it is the vitriolic character of their activism that has prompted concern.<sup>57</sup> One professor, Lucía Martínez Valdivia, revealed that “I am intimidated by these students. I am scared to teach courses on race, gender, or sexuality, or even texts that bring these issues up in any way – and I am a gay mixed-

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<sup>56</sup> This story was covered in Chris Bodenner’s article, “The Surprising Revolt at the Most Liberal College in the Country,” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2017. While the article is somewhat biased against RAR, it captures some important elements of the type of protest under investigation in this section.

<sup>57</sup> See here for a full list of RAR’s 25 demands:  
<http://reediesagainstracism.tumblr.com/demands>

race woman.”<sup>58</sup> A number of students, including students of colour, have also spoken up against this type of anti-racist activism that privileges “unsolicited emotional theater” and “demagoguery” over “any comprehensive conversation about race outside of ‘racism is bad,’” and which sees people of colour (POCs) who do not participate as “race traitors.”<sup>59</sup> As one student of colour comments, RAR effectively squanders a “beautiful opportunity to address police violence” due to its extreme racial rhetoric and divisive tactics.<sup>60</sup>

This is just one of many stories from academic settings that expresses the way in which two sides are pitted against each other, often within the progressive camp.<sup>61</sup> It is not only students who come head to head in this way, but professors as well. A recent example that attracted much attention was the publication of an article on transracialism in the Spring 2017 edition of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*. The author of the article, feminist scholar Rebecca Tuvel, contends that given that we accept the grounds upon which transgendered individuals wish to change genders, we should also accept the decision of transracial individuals to change races, due to the similarity between the arguments for transgenderism and transracialism.<sup>62</sup> The publication, however, resulted in what one commentator

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<sup>58</sup> Bodenner, “The Surprising Revolt at the Most Liberal College in the Country.”

<sup>59</sup> Bodenner.

<sup>60</sup> Bodenner.

As discussed in the introduction, one especially negative outgrowth of this type of activism is the conservative backlash that we see by critics like Jordan Peterson who advance a reactionary kind of politics under the banner of “freedom of speech.”

<sup>61</sup> See related events at Evergreen State College: Anemona Hartocollis, “A Campus Argument Goes Viral. Now the College Is Under Siege.,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2017; and UC Berkeley: Jennifer Duplessie, “Berkeley Students Attempt To Protest Exam, Tell Professor To ‘Check His Privilege,’” *Turning Point News*, October 2, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Rebecca Tuvel, “In Defense of Transracialism,” *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 263–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12327>.

called a “modern-day witch hunt” as 830 signatories stood behind an open letter addressed to the journal, demanding the retraction of the article. The letter, signed by a number of feminist scholars, refuted the scholarly standard of the paper due to a number of factors including its failure to “seek out and sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color) in its discussion of ‘transracialism.’”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the allegation that Tuvel spoke on behalf of identities that she did not embody herself resulted in a charge of “epistemic violence,”<sup>64</sup> leading scholars like Rogers Brubaker to consider the implications of this for scholarly writing:

[T]he Tuvel affair raises issues that go beyond the controversial notion of transracialism. First, it invites reflection on what might be called “epistemological insiderism.” This is the belief that identity qualifies or disqualifies one from writing with legitimacy and authority about a particular topic. Few would argue directly that who we are should govern what we study. But subtler forms of epistemological insiderism are at work in the practice of assessing scholarly arguments with central reference to the identity of the author. Does the often-mentioned fact that Dr. Tuvel is white and cisgender (as am I) disqualify her from raising certain questions? Is her identity relevant to assessing her argument for according more weight to an individual’s racial self-identification and less weight to ancestry?<sup>65</sup>

This idea of “epistemological insiderism” or “spokespersonship”<sup>66</sup> is indeed a key position within anti-racist feminism and other identity movements. As discussed earlier in the chapter, feminist standpoint theory is a central tenet of

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<sup>63</sup> For the full open letter, see <https://archive.is/IUeR4#selection-127.3-130.0>

<sup>64</sup> Lindsay McKenzie, “Journal Apologizes for Article Likening Transracialism to Being Transgender,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/journal-apologizes-for-article-likening-transracialism-to-transgenderism/118084>.

<sup>65</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The Uproar Over ‘Transracialism,’” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/opinion/the-uproar-over-transracialism.html?referer>.

<sup>66</sup> I borrow the term “spokespersonship” from Adolph Reed Jr. (2015).

many anti-racist feminist projects aimed at recovering and centering the voices of women of colour. While some earlier anti-racist feminists acknowledged and were inclusive of the work of scholars and activists outside of this group who wrote about race,<sup>67</sup> the recent trend has been an outright dismissal of the views, perspectives, and scholarly work of people (especially white people) who do not belong to the identity category that their work addresses. Moreover, there is a strong belief that it is the oppressed themselves who are also best positioned to lead their anti-oppressionist struggles in the field of activism.<sup>68</sup>

Opponents like Adolph Reed Jr., a POC political scientist from the United States, have challenged this line of thinking, however, as an opportunistic strategy whereby “some racial identitarians ha[ve] grown bolder in laying bare the blur of careerism and arbitrary, self-serving moralism at the base of this supposed politics.”<sup>69</sup> He uses the current Black Lives Matter movement to clarify his point:

In an unintentionally farcical homage to Black Power era radicalism, various racial ventriloquists claiming to channel the Voices of the Youth leadership of the putative Black Lives Matter "movement" have lately been arguing that the key condition for a left alliance is that we all must "respect black leadership." Of course, that amounts to a claim to shut up and take whatever anyone who claims that status says or does.

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<sup>67</sup> For example, Dua and Robertson write that “Not all of those who write on the interconnections of race, class, and gender are women of colour. I want to be inclusive of these writers.” *Scratching the Surface*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> While this idea is perhaps especially strong in our current moment, we can trace its roots to a much earlier time. For example, the Combahee River Collective stated in their 1977 manifesto that “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.” I will discuss the Collective and their role in the development of identity politics at greater length in Chapter 5.

<sup>69</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much,” *Common Dreams*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much>.

Reed argues that spokespersonship requires the policing of racial boundaries so as to ensure that only those who speak “authentically” can represent the struggle. In his view, the problem becomes one of a politics based in “who you are” as opposed to “what you do.”<sup>70</sup> While Reed’s lack of sympathy for the reasons *why* people of colour feel compelled to lead our own movements and take control of knowledge that pertains to us is problematic, his concern is valid in so far as it provokes an examination of which views and leadership are followed unquestioningly by virtue of someone’s “authentic” victim identity, and which are automatically rejected due to one’s “privileged” status.

In addition to spokespersonship, there is the common practice of “calling out.” Calling-out can be described as “a tactic to challenge privilege and bigotry in all their forms, within and outside activist circles to incite accountability. Calling-out is a verbal or written retort to an organization or person that (at its best) isolates specific actions which are unacceptable and (in the very least) gets people to re-think what they meant and where they are coming from.”<sup>71</sup> Often practiced in the form of a public reproach against someone, calling-out has become a practice so widespread within progressive movements that it has been spoken of in terms of a “culture.” Calling-out happens in a number of academic and activist settings – in scholarly papers (like in Tuval’s case), in classrooms and conferences, at activist meetings and protests, and perhaps most frequently, in online forums.

In his widely circulated article, “A Note on Call-Out Culture,” activist Assam Ahmad argues that “What makes call-out culture so toxic is not necessarily its

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<sup>70</sup> Adolph Reed Jr.

<sup>71</sup> Lynne Williams, “Calling People Out,” *Rabble*, (no listed date).

frequency so much as the nature and performance of the call-out itself. Especially in online venues like Twitter and Facebook, calling someone out isn't just a private interaction between two individuals: it's a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are."<sup>72</sup> Besides the performative aspect of calling out, Ahmad is also critical of how it reduces people to their social status and polices boundaries between an "us" and a "them." As he states,

In the context of call-out culture, it is easy to forget that the individual we are calling out is a human being, and that different human beings in different social locations will be receptive to different strategies for learning and growing. For instance, most call-outs I have witnessed immediately render anyone who has committed a perceived wrong as an outsider to the community. One action becomes a reason to pass judgment on someone's entire being [...]It isn't an exaggeration to say that there is a mild totalitarian undercurrent not just in call-out culture but also in how progressive communities police and define the bounds of who's *in* and who's *out*. More often than not, this boundary is constructed through the use of appropriate language and terminology – a language and terminology that are forever shifting and almost impossible to keep up with. In such a context, it is impossible not to fail at least some of the time. And what happens when someone has mastered proficiency in languages of accountability and then learned to justify all of their actions by falling back on that language? How do we hold people to account who are experts at using anti-oppressive language to justify oppressive behaviour? We don't have a word to describe this kind of perverse exercise of power, despite the fact that it occurs on an almost daily basis in progressive circles. Perhaps we could call it *anti-oppressivism*.<sup>73</sup>

Ahmad is highlighting a number of concerning aspects of calling-out here: the way in which people who are called-out are stripped of their humanity when they are reduced to their social location or "privilege"; how this practice creates a system of insiders and outsiders, with outsider status immediately being bestowed upon anyone who breaches community standards (including POCs who are seen as

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<sup>72</sup> Aisha Dadi Patel and Dana da Silva make a similar argument in their article, "Calling out Racism Online – Is It Helping?," IOL, February 10, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Ahmad, "A Note on Call-Out Culture."

disloyal, as seen with the ‘race traitors’ designation in the Reed College example); and how this allows certain players who have perfected the rules of the game to act in oppressive ways through weaponizing progressive language. It is important to note that Ahmad is not saying that all forms of calling-out are destructive or that calling-out has no space in our movements.<sup>74</sup> Rather, he is arguing that “there are ways of calling people out that are compassionate and creative, and that recognize the whole individual instead of viewing them simply as representations of the systems from which they benefit” and how being attentive to “these other contexts will mean refusing to unleash all of our very real trauma onto the psyches of those we imagine to only represent the systems that oppress us.”<sup>75</sup> Ahmad is just one of many activists and scholars who have written about the dangers of call-out culture to anti-oppressionist politics and the way in which it fragments those with shared commitments to social justice.<sup>76</sup> POC activist and scholar Stacey Patton echoes Ahmad’s sentiments, referring specifically to online calling-out practices:

Many of us have witnessed these sorts of exchanges on social media, where a friend posts about a difficult topic or poses an uncomfortable question to spark a lively discussion. But before the conversation begins, the poster is attacked, criticized, and vilified and the dialogue is pre-emptively derailed by a virtual playground fight. New terms, which are concocted and hurled every

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<sup>74</sup> Indeed, he writes a follow up piece outlining instances in which calling-out is an appropriate response in our anti-oppressive work: “When Calling Out Makes Sense,” *Briarpatch Magazine*, August 29, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Ahmad, “A Note on Call-Out Culture.”

<sup>76</sup> See for example: Kitty Stryker, “The Problem with Callout Culture,” *The Walrus*, May 30, 2016, /the-problem-with-callout-culture/; Suzanna Danuta Walters, “Academe’s Poisonous Call-Out Culture,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 5, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Academe-s-Poisonous-Call-Out/240016>; Aaisha Dadi Patel and Dana da Silva, “Calling out Racism Online – Is It Helping?”.

An alternative to calling-out, as discussed by Ahmad (2015) and other activists, is that of “calling-in.” I discuss this further in Chapter 7.

time folks feel hurt, add more distractions and don't result in real healing and empowerment.<sup>77</sup>

As implied above, it is not just oppositional political exponents who are called-out but allies too. An “ally” is someone who, while not occupying a certain status of oppression, is supportive in the fight to challenge it. Allyship refers to the “active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group of people.”<sup>78</sup> Activist literature on allyship is replete with a number of responsibilities and guides for proper allyship.<sup>79</sup> Allies are to “actively acknowledge [their] privileges and openly discuss them” but also to know when to “shut up” and listen.<sup>80</sup> They are to “take guidance and direction” from the people they work with but never to ask questions or expect to be educated by them.<sup>81</sup> They are to “build [their] capacity to receive criticism” but to keep their emotional responses to themselves.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, in reference to this last point, people of colour in activist and academic communities frequently decry expressions of “white guilt” and “white tears” that are encountered in activist/academic spaces. White guilt and tears refer to the emotional fragility of white people in situations where their racism or the

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<sup>77</sup> Stacey Patton, “Is Outrage Addiction Derailing Our Most Important Conversations?”

<sup>78</sup> PeerNetBC, “Allyship,” *The Anti-Oppression Network*, November 22, 2016, <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/>.

<sup>79</sup> See for example, PeerNetBC.; and Jamie Utt, “So You Call Yourself an Ally: 10 Things All ‘Allies’ Need to Know,” *Everyday Feminism*, November 8, 2013, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/things-allies-need-to-know/>.

<sup>80</sup> PeerNetBC, “Allyship.”; Tanya DePass, “One Last Time...on Performative Allyship,” *Medium*, July 16, 2016, <https://medium.com/@cypheroftyr/one-last-time-on-performative-allyship-1a2151beb0fe>.

<sup>81</sup> PeerNetBC, “Allyship.”

<sup>82</sup> PeerNetBC.



racism of others is exposed or discussed.<sup>83</sup> Sarita Srivastava traces the root of such emotionality to a number of overlapping moral discourses that frame Western feminism, including white female innocence, national narratives of tolerance and multiculturalism, and “moral visions of social justice and commitments to activism.”<sup>84</sup> She argues that these discourses coalesce in particular ways to explain why in “the face of antiracist challenges, many white feminists may feel that it is their self-image—as good, implicitly nonracist people—and particularly their shared moral identity as feminists, that is under siege.”<sup>85</sup>

The problem with such emotional responses is that they often centre the feelings of white people who feel entitled to shed tears or take up space, while ignoring the experiences of the people of colour who have actually suffered the racism. As one activist writes,

People of Color should not have to listen to your feelings about racism. Having to do so forces us to put aside our own complex emotions. It is also exhausting – because intentionally or not, you unloading on a Person of Color says, “My having to face my whiteness and the complex emotions that come with that is more important than the ways in which whiteness is a tool of violence against you.”<sup>86</sup>

These criticisms are valid and signal a real issue regarding what has been called “white fragility” or “inability of white people to respond constructively when

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<sup>83</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Women’s Tears and the Men Who Love Them -,” *The Good Men Project*, September 19, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Sarita Srivastava, “‘You’re Calling Me a Racist?’ The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism,” *Signs* 31, no. 1 (2005): 37.

<sup>85</sup> Srivastava, “‘You’re Calling Me a Racist?’,” 30.

<sup>86</sup> Jennifer Loubriel, “4 Ways White People Can Process Their Emotions Without Bringing the White Tears,” *Everyday Feminism*, February 16, 2016. For more on this: Michal Jones, “4 Reasons People of Color Can’t Cater to White People’s Guilt – Or Their Tears,” *Everyday Feminism*, November 22, 2015.; Suey Park, “Challenging Racism and the Problem with White ‘Allies’: A Conversation with David Leonard,” *[Young]ist* (blog), December 26, 2013.

[their] racial positions are challenged.”<sup>87</sup> For many people of colour, white fragility demonstrates the degree to which some white allies are more interested in the performance, identity or moral status that allyship confers, rather than in engaging in the actual work of it. It also reinforces a suspicion that white people ultimately cannot be trusted and that people of colour are better off sticking to ourselves.

In addition to the critiques above, I suggest that the often *visceral* reactions against hearing the pain of white people is also partly due to the fact that we, as people of colour, have so much undigested and unrecognized pain of our *own*. I also believe that many of the responsibilities that we charge allies with, and the harshness with which we may police their behaviour are motivated by feelings of revenge and envy. Perhaps we want them to know how it *feels* to be silenced and told to stand in the back? And, in turn, perhaps we also wish to feel something that we never (or infrequently) got the opportunity to feel – whether it be belonging, or authority, or a sense of power? While such emotional strivings certainly make sense, and while I am no stranger to them myself, my concern is around the question of to what degree do such emotions drive anti-racist feminist political behaviour and inhibit our ability to forge real political (and relational) ties with white allies? And, in Ahmad’s words, to what extent are we “unleash[ing] all of our very real trauma onto the psyches of those we imagine to only represent the systems that oppress us”?<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Women’s Tears and the Men Who Love Them -.” For an excellent article on white fragility and white innocence, see Aisha Mirza, “White Women Drive Me Crazy,” *BuzzFeed*, May 23, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Ahmad, “A Note on Call-Out Culture.”

Related to the concept of allyship is that of “safe spaces” which Indigenous scholar Andrea Smith describes as a growing concern in Western activism. As Smith discusses, “once we have confessed our gender/race/settler/class privileges, we can then create a safe space where others will not be negatively impacted by these privileges.”<sup>89</sup> She further describes how it is only “certain privileged subjects” that can make a space *unsafe*.

This idea of “privilege” is another central tenet of anti-racist feminist and other identity-based understandings of the world, and is embedded in our collective vocabulary. Privilege, commonly conceived, refers to the unearned and largely unacknowledged social benefits and advantages bestowed upon certain societal groups. As mentioned above, one of the responsibilities of allyship is the open recognition and discussing of how one enjoys these benefits and advantages. As Smith argues, these confessions have limited political use, and they are often turned into political projects in and of themselves. Reflecting on her own experiences, she writes:

The benefits of these confessions seemed to be ephemeral. For the instant the confession took place, those who do not have that privilege in daily life would have a temporary position of power as the hearer of the confession who could grant absolution and forgiveness. The sayer of the confession could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power and relief from white/male/heterosexual/etc. guilt. Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact that in the end, it primarily served to re-instantiate the structures of domination it was supposed to resist. One of the reasons there was little critique of this practice is that it bestowed cultural capital to those who seemed to be the “most oppressed.” Those who had little privilege did not have to confess and

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<sup>89</sup> Andrea Smith, “The Problem with ‘Privilege,’” *Andrea Smith’s Blog* (blog), August 14, 2013.

were in the position to be the judge of those who did have privilege. Consequently, people aspired to be oppressed.<sup>90</sup>

Smith is describing a cultural practice that does more to grant temporary feelings of power, and perhaps satisfy a need for revenge, than actively lead to collective social change. As she clarifies, this is not because accountability on the part of the dominant group is not important, as it surely is. Rather, it is because the ritual of confession becomes a political end rather than a step towards dismantling and changing oppressive structures themselves.<sup>91</sup> More, as Smith writes, it leads to a situation in which oppression is valued in terms of the status it confers, manifesting in what some activists have called the *oppression Olympics*. As she describes,

Inevitably, those with more privilege would develop new heretofore unknown forms of oppression from which they suffered. “I may be white, but my best friend was a person of color, which caused me to be oppressed when we played together.” Consequently, the goal became not to actually end oppression but to be as oppressed as possible. These rituals often substituted confession for political movement-building. And despite the cultural capital that was, at least temporarily, bestowed to those who seemed to be the most oppressed, these rituals ultimately reinstated the white majority subject as the subject capable of self-reflexivity and the colonized/racialized subject as the occasion for self-reflexivity.<sup>92</sup>

In this section I have discussed some emotions (outrage, anger, suspicion, vengefulness, envy, pain, belonging); practices (calling-out, spokespersonship, allyship, checking privilege); and concepts (white guilt/tears/fragility, privilege, oppression Olympics) that I suggest form a significant part of anti-racist feminist

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, “The Problem with ‘Privilege.’”

<sup>91</sup> Srivastava makes a similar argument, claiming that many anti-racist workshops advance a “personalized antiracist ethic” that emphasizes self-examination and confession over organizational change. See Srivastava, “‘You’re Calling Me a Racist?’”

<sup>92</sup> Smith.

culture. This culture permeates both academic and activist settings, and is perceptible in online as well as face-to-face encounters.

Whereas the concept of “culture” gives some sense as to how these practices are embedded features of anti-racist feminism – rather than fleeting expressions – it does little to explain the relationship between emotions, attitudes, and practices within anti-racist feminism. Moreover, cultural explanations are insufficient in articulating how these aspects might come to be *psychologically* embodied by members of anti-racist feminism. I believe that this embodiment contains a number of conscious and unconscious elements, which this dissertation seeks to explore and bring to awareness. In the next chapter, I look at some theoretical concepts and tools that give some ground to better understand the role of emotions in social movements, and how emotions and attitudes come to be psychically internalized by members of a movement.

## Chapter 3 – The Political is Personal

*“If we start close to home, we open ourselves out...in making sense of things that happen, we also draw on histories of thought and activism that precede us...I thus reflect on how feminism itself can be understood as an affective inheritance; how our own struggles to make sense of realities that are difficult to grasp become part of a wider struggle, a struggle to be, to make sense of being.”*

-Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

In this chapter I lay the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for the rest of the dissertation. I explore the relationship between politics and emotions through examining insights from social movement theory’s engagement with emotions in political protest, and Erich Fromm’s concepts of *social character* and the *social unconscious*. I argue that Fromm’s concepts fruitfully build upon insights from social movement theory, offering an especially instructive means of capturing how anti-racist feminists can share a common psychic character, in addition to how some anti-racist feminist behaviours and practices can stand in opposition to emancipatory political aims. As per the title of this chapter, I suggest that as much as the feminist slogan “the personal is political” is true, the political should also be understood as *personal*, in so far as it is driven by emotional forces rooted in the collective and individual psyche.

### **(3.1) Social Movement Theory and the Study of Emotions**

Social movement theory can be described as having a fraught history with emotions. Once the dominant means through which political movements were understood, the 1970s would mark the beginning of a turn away from affective explanations and toward rational structural theories that still exert considerable

influence in the field.<sup>1</sup> It is only in the last two decades that the question of emotions has once again emerged as a topic of study, influenced by developments in the sociology of emotions, feminist and queer theorizing of emotions, and the cultural turn within social movement theory. In this section I provide a brief history of the field of social movement theory in terms of its relationship to emotions, followed by an exploration of recent contributions that are relevant to the current study. Given the considerable limitations that still exist in the field, I argue that these contributions might be instructively paired with Erich Fromm's concepts of *social character* and the *social unconscious*.

As Goodwin et al. discuss, “until the 1960s, emotions were considered a key—for some, *the key*—to understanding virtually all political action that occurred outside familiar political institutions.”<sup>2</sup> Two schools of thought dominated in this time period: the collective behaviour approach, and theories inspired by psychoanalytical and personality perspectives. In terms of the former, collective behaviour theory derives from the work of symbolic interactionists including Herbert Blumer, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian, and Neil Smelser.<sup>3</sup> According to this approach, “collective phenomena are not simply the reflection of a social crisis

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<sup>1</sup>Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Wiley, 1999)., Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2009)., James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): 285–303., Craig Calhoun, “Putting Emotions in Their Place,” in *Social Movements: A Reader*, ed. V. Ruggiero and N. Montagna (New York: Routledge, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Herbert Blumer, “Collective Behaviour,” in *Principles of Sociology*, ed. Alfred McClung Lee (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1939); Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957); Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

but rather an activity aimed at producing new norms and new solidarities.”<sup>4</sup> Although the collective behaviour school may have been the first perspective that attributed meaning to social movements, the approach was challenged in the 1960s for its tendency to classify less deliberate and structured phenomena under the same heading.<sup>5</sup> That is, collective behaviour as diverse as crowds, panics, manias, fashions and trends were interpreted as belonging to the same analytical field. The study of protest in terms of the “the crowd” would especially impact ideas around social movements and emotions: “Crowds were assumed to create, through suggestion and contagion, a kind of psychologically ‘primitive’ group mind and group feelings, shared by all participants and outside their normal range of sensibilities.”<sup>6</sup>

In opposition to the perspective that political protest was spurred by emotional contagion from outside oneself, the psychoanalytical approach understood political action as being rooted in one’s individual psychic disturbances. Theorists explored psychological dispositions and personality structures that would make an individual especially vulnerable to political protest.<sup>7</sup> Toward this aim, “Freudian psychology was often appropriated to show that participants were

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<sup>4</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*.

<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 2.

Preceding these studies, of course, is the influential early study on crowd psychology by Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Macmillan, 1896).

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth D. Hutchison, “Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements: Resources and Motivation for Social Change,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 31, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2012): 105–27; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*.



immature: narcissistic, latently homosexual, oral dependent, or anal retentive.”<sup>8</sup> Non-psychoanalytical personality theories also emerged, rooting political participation in factors like alienation and aggression. William Kornhauser’s *The Politics of Mass Society*, for example, argued that “[p]eople who are atomized readily become mobilized,”<sup>9</sup> while Floyd Allport’s work examined factors that predisposed an individual to violence.<sup>10</sup> Orrin Klapp attributed political participation to “identity trouble,” characterized by “a feeling of being blemished, self-hatred, oversensitivity, excessive self-concern (including narcissism), alienation, a feeling that ‘nobody appreciates me,’ a desire to be someone else, a feeling of fraudulent self-presentation, Riesman’s ‘other-directedness,’ and an identity crisis.”<sup>11</sup>

While both collective behaviour/crowd theory, and psychoanalytical/personality theories recognized the central role of emotions in political action, their analyses were inherently biased in their interpretation of social movement actors as deviant and pathological. Moreover, while the first approach ignored individual agency and motivation, the second precluded the possibility of political action as a response to external conditions. As Goodwin et al. contend,

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<sup>8</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 2–3. See for example, Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1930/1986).

<sup>9</sup> William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*. See Floyd Henry Allport, *Social Psychology* (Houghton Mifflin, 1924).

<sup>11</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 3. See Orrin Edgar Klapp, *Collective Search for Identity* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969).

Riesman’s “other-directedness” refers to a character typology developed in his book *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Yale University Press, 1950/2001).

Protestors either already had their set of emotions, or they got them in the crowd. Driven by forces outside their control, whether subconscious drives or the mysterious pull of the crowd, they were not rational agents with purposes of their own. Most of all, the actual stuff of politics—moral principles, avowed goals, processes of mobilization, strategizing, the pleasures of participation—was absent.<sup>12</sup>

A shift in perspective came, however, in the 1970s when “attention turned to movements...and to struggles with which analysts had sympathy.”<sup>13</sup> By this time, a large enough contingent of sociologists had joined the ranks of academia with direct ties to progressive struggles of the moment (i.e. the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the anti-war movement). These scholars were invested in casting political actors as rational beings fighting for legitimate aims. It was during this time that two major theories emerged to form the contemporary field of social movement theory: resource mobilization theory, and political process theory.

### ***A Turn Away From Emotions***

Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the importance of both the rational and strategic elements of collective social action. According to this perspective, protest actions derive from “a calculation of the costs and benefits, influenced by the presence of resources – in particular by organization and by the strategic interactions necessary for the development of a social movement.”<sup>14</sup> Social movements cannot simply be explained through examination of the tensions and conflicts that mark a certain historical moment. Rather, it is “necessary also to study

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<sup>12</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Putting Emotions in Their Place,” 289.

<sup>14</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*, 8.

the conditions which enable discontent to be transformed into mobilization.”<sup>15</sup> This means looking at the resources that facilitate mobilization – both material (labour, money, concrete benefits and services) and non-material (authority, solidarity, moral engagement). Moreover, resource mobilization theorists are interested in how the “type and nature of the resources available explain the tactical choices made by movements and the consequences of collective action on the social and political system.”<sup>16</sup>

While the definition of social movements as being premised upon rational choice is among resource mobilization theory’s “most important innovations,” this characterization has also been the target of a number of criticisms. Firstly, it has been accused of eliding the structural sources of conflict, as well as “the specific stakes for the control of which social actors mobilize.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, it has been charged with ignoring the self-organizing of marginalized social groups due to its focus on resources controlled by select political entrepreneurs.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the focus on rationality in collective action has come at the cost of ignoring the role of emotions.<sup>19</sup>

Political process theory (also known as political opportunities theory) similarly adopts a rational view of collective action. Unlike the resource mobilization approach, however, this perspective engages more systematically with the political

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<sup>15</sup> Della Porta and Diani, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Della Porta and Diani, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Della Porta and Diani, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*.

<sup>19</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Putting Emotions in Their Place.”; Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*.

and institutional context in which social movements exist.<sup>20</sup> The political process approach “begins with the assumption that social institutions, particularly political and economic institutions benefit the more powerful members of society, often called elites, and disadvantage many.”<sup>21</sup> While this relative disempowerment can make it difficult for the masses to contest dominant institutions, political process scholars argue that there are a number of variables that can make these institutions, as well as the political system itself, vulnerable or receptive to challenges.<sup>22</sup> Theorists are thus interested in determining the degree of openness (or “closedness”) of a political system and how this might impact the kinds of collective actions that are possible.<sup>23</sup>

Like the former approach, the political process perspective has also been the recipient of criticism. On the one hand, it has been accused of “political reductionism,” whereby “theorists of political process have paid little attention to the fact that many contemporary movements (of youth, women, queer folks, or minority ethnic groups) seem to have developed within a political context and in a climate of cultural innovation at the same time.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, as with resource mobilization theory, the political process perspective’s emphasis on rationalism has meant that it has tended to ignore the structural sources of protest, along with “non-rational” elements such as emotions.

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<sup>20</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*.

<sup>21</sup> Hutchison, “Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements,” 108.

<sup>22</sup> Hutchison, “Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements.”

<sup>23</sup> Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Della Porta and Diani, 10.

Craig Calhoun discusses how due to past (socio-psychological) trends that conceptualized social movements in terms of pathology and irrationality, theorists have been discouraged from engaging with affective dimensions of collective action.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Calhoun argues that due to the way in which emotions have been set in opposition to rationality (or seen as disruptive to rationality) in Western thinking, they have consequently been trivialized or ignored. Radha D'Souza echoes this analysis, arguing that the academy is pervaded by modernist dualisms that prevent social activist scholars from truly grasping the realm of action and activism, which is significantly governed by intuition, passion and emotion.<sup>26</sup> As such, emotions, due to their intrinsically messy character, and association with irrationality, have been effectively cut out of the conversation until relatively recently.

### ***The Return of the Repressed***

In the last 20 years, social movement theory has become increasingly receptive to the recognition and study of the affective aspects of political struggle, with a number of theorists stressing the inextricable connection between emotions and political movements. A leading proponent of this recuperative effort is James Jasper, who writes:

Emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest...They motivate individuals, are generated in crowds, are expressed rhetorically, and shape stated and unstated goals of social movements. Emotions can be

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<sup>25</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Putting Emotions in Their Place," in *Social Movements: A Reader*, ed. V. Ruggiero and N. Montagna (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Radha D'Souza, "What Can Activist Scholars Learn from Rumi?," in *Pathways of Creative Research: Towards a Festival of Dialogues*, ed. Ananta Kumar Giri (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010).

means, they can be ends, and sometimes they can fuse the two. They can help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements. Cooperation and collective action have always offered an opportunity to think about social action more generally, and the return of emotions is the latest inspiration for doing this.<sup>27</sup>

Jasper identifies a number of factors that have influenced social movement theory's "return of the repressed," as well as theories of emotion that currently inform the field. I have chosen to focus on three of these bodies of scholarship – the sociology of emotions, feminist and queer theories of emotion, and cultural constructivism – looking at select thinkers whose work offers some direction in terms of how to understand the psyche and the political in relation to anti-racist feminism.

### *The Sociology of Emotions*

As a legitimate field in its own right, it is beyond the scope of this section to provide a comprehensive review of scholarship in the sociology of emotions. Instead, I focus on a key figure in this sub-field who has been central in developing this disciplinary focus: Arlie Hochschild.<sup>28</sup>

In her 1975 article, "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities," Hochschild declares that "there is now no sociological theory of

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<sup>27</sup> James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," 286.

<sup>28</sup> Other foundational works in the sociology of emotions include Theodore Kemper's social structural theory of emotions (*A Social Interactional Theory of Emotions* (Wiley, 1978)); David Heise's affect control model (*Understanding Events: Affect and the Construction of Social Action* (CUP Archive, 1979)); and Randall Collins' theory of emotional energy (*Conflict Sociology* (New York: Academic, 1975)). Despite the influence of these scholars in the field, Jasper argues that Hochschild's work has effectively eclipsed their contributions. For a review of the field of the sociology of emotion, see Jonathan H. Turner and Jan E. Stets, *The Sociology of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

feelings and emotions.”<sup>29</sup> She reasons that this is not so much due to the fact that emotions have never been theorized in a sociological manner but rather that there is no cohesive theory that integrates these insights. For Hochschild, for such a theory to obtain, a new subject must be imagined. This new subject cannot just be the conscious cognitive actor, or the unconscious emotional actor, but the “*sentient actor* who is both conscious and feeling.”<sup>30</sup> Emotions, for this sentient actor, take on their meaning according to normative, expressive, and political context. The normative context refers to what the actor *should* feel, as opposed to what he/she does feel. Here, Hochschild discusses “feeling rules,” or socially appropriate ways that we are expected to feel in a given situation. In her view, not only are we aware of what we should feel, but we also actively manage our feelings so that they meet societal or situational expectations (i.e. *trying* to feel anger, in a situation where one *should* feel moral outrage).

While the normative context refers to one’s self-evaluation of feeling, the expressive context points to the judgment of the *other’s* emotional display. That is, we evaluate how truly or falsely one’s emotional expression corresponds with their inner feeling. In a commercialized society, Hochschild argues that expressions can be likened to a medium of exchange whereby the trust we attach to someone’s emotional expression depends on the abundance or scarcity (so that a receptionist’s smile is devalued given its abundance).

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<sup>29</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, “The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities,” *Sociological Inquiry* 45, no. 2–3 (April 1, 1975): 280.

<sup>30</sup> Hochschild, 283.

Finally, the political context speaks to the relationship between the distribution of power and emotion. While the other two contexts involve conscious management, Hochschild suggests that this third level is often unconscious. As she explains, the direction of our feeling often corresponds to hierarchies of power, so that positive feelings (respect, awe, gratitude etc.) are often directed upwards, and negative feelings (anger, hatred, disgust) are deflected downward. An example Hochschild gives is of a working husband who unleashes his frustrations (displaced from the office to the home) on his wife who, in turn, gets angry at her children, who then take it out on the dog. In the exceptional case of rebellion, Hochschild notes that the direction of affect can be reversed so that hostility is pointed upwards, toward the oppressive parties that are the aim of contestation. This dissertation's discussion of anti-racist feminist feelings is a good example of this redirection of affect.

Hochschild develops her theory further in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, where she focuses her inquiry on how women in the service industry manage their emotional lives in accordance with corporate expectations. In this volume, she draws from the work of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Erving Goffman (among other interactionist theorists) to define emotions as biologically given senses that are *deeply* social. From Darwin, Hochschild preserves the link between emotion and action. From Freud, she takes the "signalling" function of emotions, although arguing that this function does not simply signal a truth about the outside world, but rather gives a comparison. That is, "when an emotion signals a message of danger or safety to us, it involves a reality newly grasped *on the template of prior*



*expectations.*"<sup>31</sup> Finally, following Goffman, she elaborates on feeling rules (discussed above), and the vantage point of the affective deviant which emphasizes the amount of *work* it takes for one to affectively align themselves within a situation to achieve social solidarity. Moreover, Goffman's "fly-on-wall" analysis shows how each situation is, in turn, loaded with a "social logic of its own that people unconsciously sustain."<sup>32</sup> Hochschild strings together these insights to construct a sociology of emotions tailored to investigating how women in the service industry are expected to manipulate their feelings as part of the *emotional labour* that they perform.

Hochschild's formulation of feelings as socially and culturally constructed, organized by rules, managed by oneself and others, and socially evaluated has been influential to social movement theorists.<sup>33</sup> While her most important contribution to my project is in formulating the intrinsically social aspect of emotionality, she also offers a number of other points that are worth mentioning. Specifically, her work echoes my preliminary observations of how certain spaces and situations create affective economies of belonging that can easily be disrupted by affective deviance. Her emphasis on the self-consciousness and self-managing of emotion is useful in explaining the ways in which emotions may be oriented to align with the "feeling rules" of a situation or movement in order to achieve social solidarity. Finally, Hochschild's discussion on power and emotion is also helpful in understanding how emotions are *oriented* in certain ways and for certain aims. While this last insight

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<sup>31</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 1983), 221.

<sup>32</sup> Arlie Russel Hochschild, 214.

<sup>33</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 12.

begins to examine how emotions relate to politics, her theory has “not been applied to political action in a thorough and systematic way.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Feminist and Queer Theories of Emotion*

Hochschild’s work has also been influential for feminist and queer theorizations of emotion. While this field has exploded in the last few years, I focus on two scholars whose work lies at the intersection of feminist and queer theories of emotion, and who have especially pertinent insights in relation to my investigation: Sara Ahmed and Ann Cvetkovich.<sup>35</sup>

Ahmed describes her work as also belonging to the sociology of emotions. Unlike Hochschild, however, Ahmed has been more explicit in articulating the relationship between feelings and politics. Inspired by Spinoza’s view of emotions as shaping what the body can do, Ahmed asks: *What do emotions do?* Ahmed refutes the belief that emotions are *caused* by an object. Rather, she argues that “emotions are shaped by contact with objects.”<sup>36</sup> Using affect, emotion, and feeling interchangeably, Ahmed is interested in developing a “sociality of emotion” that foregrounds the relational aspect of emotions. As she discusses, our feelings are shaped through contact with an object, in addition to our orientation toward that

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<sup>34</sup> James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” 287.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to these theorists, other notable feminist/queer thinkers who have been influential in the field include Judith Butler (1997a, 1997b, 2006), Lauren Berlant (1997, 2011), Ranjana Khanna (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002), Teresa Brennan (2004), Clare Hemmings (2005, 2012) and Sianne Ngai (2005). See bibliography for full references. For a good summary of feminist/queer contributions to the field of emotion, see Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, “Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 115–29.

<sup>36</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2013), 6.

object. The object then often becomes imbued with the affective association that we give it, so that it is seen as an inherent property. This formulation, for example, allows Ahmed to understand how the immigrant or asylum seeker becomes coded as “fearsome.” Fear, as an emotion, arises only upon contact with the Other. One’s orientation towards this Other is determined by cultural history and memory. If one is taught that the Other is to be feared, then the quality of fearsome is attributed to the Other as an innate characteristic (immigrants *are* scary).<sup>37</sup> Ahmed is interested in this movement of emotions, and how they attach or “stick” to certain objects, while passing over others.

Ann Cvetkovich’s work is also helpful in linking the psyche to the political. Like Ahmed, Cvetkovich employs affect “in a more generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling.”<sup>38</sup> Cvetkovich locates her scholarship within the Public Feelings Project – an initiative that began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US in order to track the emotional dynamics of the consequent militarism and wars in Afghanistan and

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<sup>37</sup> Ahmed’s discussion of this encounter between the Western self and the racialized Other is informed by her background in post-colonial and anti-racist feminism. For more on this relationship between self and Other, see Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Psychology Press, 2000).; Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014).; and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967)., among many other volumes on the subject. For additional perspectives by postcolonial and subaltern thinkers who engage with emotions, see Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2012), 4. Deleuzian theorists have used Spinoza’s insight, among others, to define affect as the “suspension” between activity and passivity; the indeterminate, pre-personal, and pre-conscious intensity that must be distinguished from emotion. For more on this differentiation between affect and emotion, see Brian Massumi’s, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 83–109.

Iraq. Grounded in the insights of Eve Sedgwick (who draws upon Silvan Tomkins<sup>39</sup>), as well as queer theory, the project has since embraced the wider aim of depathologizing negative emotions, as well as exploring their political usefulness. Cvetkovich focuses on depression, arguing that it is both a public and political feeling that not only tells us something about the despair of the neo-liberal order, but might also direct us toward the “hope that is necessary for political action.”<sup>40</sup> Cvetkovich’s project is also a response to the neoliberalization of the queer movement, which she argues has shifted its focus from the language of emancipation to demands for equal marriage and domestic partner benefits. As she states, “As a queer project, *Public Feelings* tries to reimagine a liberatory version of social and affective relations beyond the liberal versions that have come to dominate in the sphere of gay politics.”<sup>41</sup>

Feminist and queer theories have been essential in critiquing Western scholarship for “ignoring, denying, and denigrating the role of emotions in social and political life.”<sup>42</sup> In terms of my specific interests in this dissertation, Hochschild, Ahmed, and Cvetkovich’s work resonates with my own exploration of what emotions do socially and politically. Hochschild provides crucial inroads into understanding the fundamentally social nature of emotions. Ahmed’s similar emphasis on the sociality of emotions, in which the personal and political are

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<sup>39</sup> Tomkins belongs to the psycho-biological school of emotions which sees affects as reflexive, autonomic, and genetically hardwired responses that developed for survival purposes over the course of human evolution. See Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S Tomkins* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Cvetkovich, 6.

<sup>42</sup> James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” 288.

mutually constitutive, and her claim that “emotions ‘matter’ for politics,” are central premises that underlie my approach. Similarly, Cvetkovich’s insistence that seemingly private emotions such as depression should be regarded as political, in addition to her interest in locating the political usefulness of emotions, are extremely helpful for my purposes. Her focus on negative emotions is especially relevant given that I am interested in looking at the anger, bitterness, hatred, envy, suspicion, among other emotions, in anti-racist feminism. In terms of my particular aim in tracking the political costs of being attached to these emotions, as well as my concern around how we might re-orient our collective psyche toward emancipatory political possibilities, both Ahmed and Cvetkovich offer pertinent insights. For example, in asking “how emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination,” Ahmed directly echoes a key concern of this dissertation.<sup>43</sup> Cvetkovich’s emphasis on reimagining a liberatory politics through the interplay between the political and psyche, is moreover a fundamental goal of my work. Despite these resonant theoretical perspectives, however, neither Ahmed and Cvetkovich give a systematic model or framework with which to specifically understand the emotions, attitudes, concepts, and practices of anti-racist feminism as explored thus far.

### *The Cultural Turn in Social Movement Theory*

While the feminist, queer, and sociological analyses of emotion have been influential to social movement theory’s development of an affective focus, “the analysis of the emotions of protest and politics departs from much work in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

sociology of emotions, which has tended to concentrate on intimate settings and longstanding affective relationships.”<sup>44</sup> Instead, many protest theorists are interested in developing an emotional analysis rooted in the field’s cultural constructivist approach, which developed in the 1990s. As Jasper discusses, “Cultural constructionism offer[s] other useful tools for understanding the emotions of politics, especially by suggesting that emotions are a part of culture alongside cognition and morality.”<sup>45</sup> Concepts such as frame alignment, which was hitherto understood on solely cognitive terms, have lent themselves to also uncovering emotional processes.<sup>46</sup>

In social movement theory literature, a frame is defined as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment.”<sup>47</sup> For a social movement to be successful, it is important that organizers are able to align their frames with that of recruits, in order for there to be resonance in terms of the issue at hand and how to act upon it. David Snow and Robert Benford suggest that there are three kinds of framing needed for effective recruitment within a social movement. The first is diagnostic framing, referring to a movement’s ability to convince a recruit that there is a problem that requires attention. The second is prognostic framing, which

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<sup>44</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” 288.

<sup>46</sup> For more on cultural constructivist concepts and emotions, see James M. Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 1998): 397–424.; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*.

<sup>47</sup> Snow and Benford, quoted in Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 6.

persuades recruits in favour of certain strategies and tactics; and lastly there is motivational framing, which encourages members to directly participate in political action.<sup>48</sup> Although these types of framing have traditionally been understood as motivated by cognitive factors, cultural constructivists acknowledge that emotions also play a part in frame alignment.

The application of emotions to injustice frames is especially relevant to the present investigation. Elaborating on William Gamson's work, Goodwin et al. describe this type of framing as instrumental to "viewing a situation or condition that expresses indignation or outrage over a perceived injustice and which identifies those blameworthy people responsible for it."<sup>49</sup> Adding emotions to framing tells us something about the ways in which both feelings and cognition must be harnessed in order to inspire someone to join a movement. It is not enough to feel emotions such as anger, hostility, and suspicion but rather, these must be interpreted by a movement in order that blame might be directed toward a concrete target. Gamson and Goodwin et al. warn how strong emotions are furthermore capable of *distorting* the cognitive interpretive process, leading political actors to "misdirect their anger at easy and inappropriate targets."<sup>50</sup> This is relevant to my analysis of anti-racist feminism in that it allows for an investigation into how feelings relate to thoughts around injustice with demonstrable effects on political action.

Cultural constructivist concepts like frame alignment have played an important role in ushering in the return of affect to the study of social movements.

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<sup>48</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*.

<sup>49</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 8.

In the next section, I consider some analyses that further develop this connection between the psyche and the political, looking specifically at concepts and theoretical tools that can help to explain emotions, attitude, and practice in the anti-racist feminist context, and how these come together to form a distinct cultural character.

### *New Research and Limitations*

As discussed earlier, the literature on social movement theory and emotion has grown considerably in the last two decades.<sup>51</sup> These studies have made significant strides in emphasizing that emotions *matter* to politics. As Jasper argues:

Emotions are a core part of action and decisions, which we analysts ignore at our peril. Actions, whether consciously made as choices or not, come with long lists of potential risks, costs, and benefits. We need to include the emotional risks, costs, and benefits because these help shape actions and choices. These were excluded from rationalistic traditions as too hard to reckon with, but surely they guide decisions. If we are to understand the actions undertaken, we need to understand the emotions that lead, accompany, and result from them. If political actors care about them, analysts must too.<sup>52</sup>

In this section I focus on just two theoretical developments within this growing body of scholarship that relate directly to the anti-racist feminist context, and which specifically help me in developing an understanding of anti-racist feminist emotions, thoughts, and practices in relation to one another, as well as how these come to form the collective character of a movement: Jasper's theory of political emotions and Deborah Gould's concept of *emotional habitus*.

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<sup>51</sup> For a review of this scholarship, see James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research."

<sup>52</sup> James M. Jasper, 298.



As mentioned previously, James Jasper has been a leading figure in exploring the affective dimensions of political protest. His work centers emotions as crucial to the proper understanding of social movements. Using a cultural constructivist perspective, Jasper makes three key points that are useful to understanding anti-racist feminist emotions. The first is the *social* nature of emotions. Drawing on traditions within the sociology of emotions (e.g. Hochschild's model), Jasper stresses that "emotions are constituted more by shared social meanings than automatic physiological states."<sup>53</sup> Rather than relegating the study of emotion to biological or microsociological analysis, he argues (along with Goodwin et al.) that emotions "are collective as well as individual, and they permeate large-scale units of social organization, including workplaces, neighborhood and community networks, political parties, movements, and states, as well as the interactions of these units with one another."<sup>54</sup> This formulation of emotions as social and *collective* is especially important in thinking about how the emotional expressions of anti-racist feminism can constitute a shared affective character.

Secondly, and relatedly, is the connection he makes between emotion and cognition. As he states, "we need to recognize that feeling and thinking are parallel, interacting processes of evaluating and interacting with our worlds, composed of similar neurological building blocks."<sup>55</sup> Although cognition is often seen as separate from emotion, Jasper underscores how political emotions are often deeply linked to cognitive processing:

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<sup>53</sup> Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest," 400.

<sup>54</sup> Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," 286.

Activists work hard to create moral outrage and anger and to provide a target against which these can be vented. Inchoate anxieties and fears must be transformed into moral indignation and outrage toward concrete policies and decision makers (Gamson et al. 1982; Gamson 1992). Activists must weave together a moral, cognitive, and emotional package of attitudes. By framing the problem as, say, “big business” or “instrumentalism,” they suggest a moral judgment: humans are being abused by greedy businesspeople or unfeeling bureaucrats. The proper emotion shifts from dread to outrage. There is someone to blame...Such characterizations enhance protestors’ outrage and sense of threat, transforming emotions at the same time as cognitive beliefs. Demonization fuels powerful emotions for social movements, such as hatred, fear, anger, suspicion, and indignation.

The above passage offers a useful ground on which to understand how the emotions of anti-racist feminism identified earlier (outrage, anger, suspicion, vengefulness, envy) interact with cognitive understandings and attitudes (producing concepts like white tears), which then lead to distinct practices and political behaviours (such as calling-out). Jasper demonstrates how these cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes each stimulate, influence, and reinforce one another, together forming a “moral, cognitive, and emotional package of attitudes” that I will discuss below as the “emotional habitus” or social character of anti-racist feminism.

The final contribution that I would like to highlight for its relevance to the anti-racist feminist context is Jasper’s differentiation between *reciprocal* and *shared* emotions. He describes the former in the following terms:

Some of the emotions generated within a social movement—call them *reciprocal*—concern participants’ ongoing feelings toward each other. These are the close, affective ties of friendship, love, solidarity, and loyalty, and the more specific emotions they give rise to. Together they create what Goodwin (1997) calls the ‘libidinal economy’ of a movement, yielding many of the pleasures of protest, including erotic pleasures.

This is an important concept in that it allows for a means of thinking about the specific “economy” of emotionality between members of the anti-racist feminist movement, which I have argued include a great deal of support, affection, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. For many of us, I imagine this has been the only place in which we are able to feel a sense of acceptance, love, and recognition. In this particular context, I have suggested that the “pleasures of protest,” however, are not stable or guaranteed. Rather, the moral policing described earlier means that one’s acceptance in the group is contingent on acting (and indeed, emoting) according to the “feeling rules” (to use Hochschild’s term) of the movement, or one may be called-out and subjected to censure. What results, as described in the previous chapter, is a culture of insecurity and anxiety in which views are often withheld or censored by members of the movement who fear public shaming.

Shared emotions, on the other hand, are the common emotions that a political group holds against their stated enemy. Jasper elaborates on how these emotions interact with, and cultivate the first type:

Other emotions—call them *shared*—are consciously held by a group at the same time, but they do not have the other group members as their objects. The group nurtures anger toward outsiders, or outrage over government policies. Reciprocal and shared emotions, although distinct, reinforce each other—thereby building a movement’s culture. Each measure of shared outrage against a nuclear plant reinforces the reciprocal emotion of fondness for others precisely because they feel the same way. They are like us; they understand. Conversely, mutual affection is one context in which new shared emotions are easily created. Because you are fond of others, you want to adopt their feelings. Both kinds of collective emotion foster solidarity within a protest group.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest,” 417.

A number of the affects discussed earlier – rage, bitterness, envy, vengefulness – fall into the category of shared emotions. As Jasper suggests, these emotions are indeed central to forming bonds of solidarity among anti-racist feminists, reinforcing reciprocal affections and loyalties, and shaping the culture of the movement. Jasper’s terms for in-group and out-group emotions are also instructive in that they describe what protest emotions *do* within a movement and their central role in building the movement’s culture. This insight, along with his emphasis on the social and cognitive nature of political emotions provide some theoretical tools to better grasp the importance of emotions to anti-racist feminism, and build on last chapters analysis of how these interact with cognitive and behavioural dimensions to produce a political culture. But how might we understand how these emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects harden, so to speak, into embodied collective dispositions or characters? For this, I turn to Deborah Gould’s work on *emotional habitus*.<sup>57</sup>

Looking at AIDS activism among gays and lesbians in the US in the 1980s and 1990s, Gould develops the concept of emotional habitus as a means of “thinking of the emotional and the social together while simultaneously foregrounding the bodily, affective dimensions of emotion.”<sup>58</sup> She defines the concept as follows:

With the term emotional habitus, I mean to reference a social grouping’s collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, members’ embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting. By directly affecting what people feel, *a collectivity’s emotional habitus can decisively influence political action*, in part because feelings play

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<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that this concept was initially introduced by Anne Kane (2001) who develops it from the work of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thomas Scheff.

<sup>58</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 34.

an important role in generating and foreclosing political horizons, senses of what is to be done and how to do it.<sup>59</sup>

Gould's concept builds on Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, which can be explained as "socially constituted, commonsensical, taken-for-granted understandings or schemas in any social grouping that, operating beneath conscious awareness, on the level of bodily understanding, provide members with a disposition or orientation to action, a 'sense of the game' and how best to play it."<sup>60</sup> Individuals who belong to a class or status group share a habitus due to their common early experiences and socialization. The habitus provides one with a frame with which to understand the world and one's place in it. It can be thought of as the "cognitive and expressive mechanism that generates activity" or *practices* within a social *field*, as well as structures one's relationship to others within it. Within a field, or social context, there is often a struggle between different social classes or status groups for economic, social, cultural and symbolic *capital* – or different types of social power.<sup>61</sup> We remember Andrea Smith's reference in the last chapter of how oppression comes to be viewed as *cultural capital* in activist settings, leading to what some have called the "oppression Olympics." As one activist further explains, using the term *social capital*, "social capital can also be awarded because someone is intersectionally oppressed. For example, there may be a transwoman or black-femme who can get away with acting abusively because they have too much oppressed social capital to get called out by anyone other than another with the

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<sup>59</sup>Gould, 32., emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup>Gould, 33. See Bourdieu (1977, 1990); Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Meisenhelder, "From Character to Habitus in Sociology," *The Social Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 55–66.

same rough oppression tally, with whom they've built a personal solidarity or someone else who is exceptionally trusted, brave, and otherwise delicate."<sup>62</sup>

Returning to Gould's work, she describes how *habitus* has also been usefully applied to social movements.<sup>63</sup> Extending the concept into the realm of affect, the emotional habitus "of a social group provides members with an emotional disposition, with a sense of what and how to feel, with labels for their feelings, with schemas about what feelings are and what they mean, with ways of figuring out and understanding what they are feeling."<sup>64</sup> The use of habitus to understand emotion furthermore "locates feelings within social relations and practices, thereby pointing toward their conventionality and countering a standard understanding of feelings as wholly interior to the individual."<sup>65</sup> Gould notes that her concept departs from Bourdieu's in that she uses emotional habitus to track how social groups enact social *change*, whereas Bourdieu was interested in how habitus facilitated social *reproduction*. Her concept also emphasizes the malleability of the habitus, as an affective shared disposition that requires constant reiteration (à la Butler) through "practices that generate, stabilize, reproduce, and sometimes transform them."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Emmi Bevensee, "The Conversations We Can't Have: Social Capital and Violence in Radical Communities," November 25, 2016, blog entry.

<sup>63</sup> For examples of scholarship on social movements that employs Bourdieu, see Nick Crossley, *Making Sense Of Social Movements* (McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2002); Hanna-Mari Husu, "Bourdieu and Social Movements: Considering Identity Movements in Terms of Field, Capital and Habitus," *Social Movement Studies* 12, no. 3 (August 1, 2013): 264–79; Mustafa Emirbayer and Chad Alan Goldberg, "Pragmatism, Bourdieu, and Collective Emotions in Contentious Politics," *Theory and Society* 34, no. 5–6 (December 1, 2005): 469–518; Joseph Ibrahim, *Bourdieu and Social Movements: Ideological Struggles in the British Anti-Capitalist Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Gould, 35.

<sup>66</sup> Gould, 36.

Emotional habitus is an especially instructive term in my analytical context in that it offers a means of conceptualizing how emotion, attitudes, and practices can come together to form a relatively stable disposition for anti-racist feminists. This concept, coupled with Jasper's elaboration of political emotions, gives some sense of how emotions like anger, suspicion, hatred, spite, resentment, and envy can feed into cognitive attitudes or frames around injustice, to produce certain types of behaviour, and how each of these – emotion, cognition, and practice – feed and reinforce one another.

Jasper and Gould give some helpful theoretical tools with which to start thinking about anti-racist feminist emotions, thinking, and practices. As discussed earlier, their contributions belong to a greater effort to reincorporate affect into the field of social movement theory. While this recovery has been a major advancement in the discipline, the current treatment of emotions suffers from a lack of depth, which I argue is reflected in both Jasper's notion of political emotions, and Gould's concept of the emotional habitus. Specifically, there is ambivalence around *unconscious* elements of the psyche, which has led to an overemphasis of conscious, active, functional, and strategic understandings of emotion in relation to social movements. This, in turn, means that explanations around emotions and emotional dispositions that might be contradictory, or even destructive to a movement are underdeveloped, given that there is little attention paid to the deeper forces that drive feeling and behaviour. Rather, for the most part, emotions have become unhinged from deeper realms of the psyche, and the constitutive inner needs and forces that produce messy and often contradictory human emotions and

behaviour.<sup>67</sup> As such, although emotions have been re-introduced into the discipline, they have been “cleaned up” in a way that serves the field’s normative bias toward presenting social movement actors as rational agents. As Jasper himself recognizes, “The apparent threat to rationality remains, though, in any model of the unconscious.”<sup>68</sup> Despite this recognition, however, Jasper’s work continues to skirt the unconscious dimension of emotionality, preferring a cultural constructivist approach over one that incorporates aspects of depth psychology.

Gould’s concept of emotional habitus is also weak in this regard. This may be, in part, due to Bourdieu’s own troubled relationship with psychology and psychoanalysis. While, as some theorists have argued, his thinking was certainly influenced by psychoanalytical ideas, he was reluctant to admit this confluence.<sup>69</sup> As a result, although Gould is able to recover the affective aspect of the habitus, which includes “preconscious” dimensions, the *unconscious* as that interior realm of the psyche composed of the often conflicting inner needs, desires, and drives, is never properly recuperated.

As the father of psychoanalysis, and principle theorist of the unconscious, it might seem instructive to look to Sigmund Freud at this point. As social movement theorists have argued, however, “Freud’s hydraulic imagery of libidinal flows [first through the individual (either sublimated or released sexually), then out into social

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<sup>67</sup> This is admittedly a generalization. Jasper, for example, does speak of belonging as a human need, and one that can be satisfied in collective action. Still, there lacks an underlying theoretical system for understanding how these needs arise, how they interact with other needs, and how they are constituted generally.

<sup>68</sup> Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest,” 403.

<sup>69</sup> See Diane Reay, “Habitus and the Psychosocial: Bourdieu with Feelings,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 9–23.



networks] relied on an extreme mind-body conflict that was less and less tenable.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Freud makes many assumptions and theories that make his work challenging to incorporate in its original form. There have been a number of revisionary socio-psychological works, however, that retain the depth element of psychoanalysis (i.e. the unconscious) while fruitfully engaging with the social. German sociologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm is one such theorist whose concepts of *social character*, and *the social unconscious*, are particularly useful in developing this missing aspect. Interestingly, Thomas Meisenhelder argues that Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is a sociologizing of Fromm’s *social character*. Social character, like habitus, “determines the thinking, feeling, and acting of individuals” and also gives explanatory power to how the social order is reproduced.<sup>71</sup> As Meisenhelder describes, however:

Bourdieu’s use of the concept of habitus specifies the original idea of social character in a fully sociological way, without the biological or innate traits of some earlier conceptions. While like Fromm (and even Freud) Bourdieu stresses the importance of early experiences, habitus cannot be boiled down to innate or essential drives and needs being repressed or molded by experience with reality. Rather, habitus is a more sociological idea referring to the set of internalized (learned and shared) dispositions and tastes that guide perception and action within the structural situations, or fields, that compose society....Bourdieu stresses that habitus is manifested in specific shared bodily stances and practices but *does not propose that these embodied dispositions reflect internal “deep” drives or essential characteristics...* It is not a part of some deep unconscious mind but a deep and durable subjective consequence of the experience of society and social structure.<sup>72</sup>

Against Bourdieu’s eschewing of “the deep unconscious mind” and its “essential characteristics,” this dissertation will employ the insights of Erich Fromm

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<sup>70</sup> James M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” 288.

<sup>71</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Discus Books, 1965 [1941]), 305.

<sup>72</sup> Meisenhelder, “From Character to Habitus in Sociology,” 63, emphasis added.

in arguing that shared psychic needs *can* be identified in human beings, and it is in understanding these unconscious underpinnings of the psyche that anti-racist feminists can better grasp our behaviours, including our political actions. In the next section, I introduce Fromm's socio-psychoanalytical system, focusing on his ideas around social character and the social unconscious, to build on my discussion of political feelings. As I will show, Fromm's insights are especially useful in providing a theoretical foundation with which to understand the relationship between the social, the political, and the psychological.

### **(3.2) A Frommian Understanding of the Psyche and the Political**

Fromm often developed his theories by starting with Freud. In many, if not in most of his works, Fromm would analyze an issue by examining what Freud's response would be, followed by his own corrective ideas/revisions.<sup>73</sup> In what ways did Fromm's thought follow Freud and in what ways did these thinkers diverge? Although Fromm has been heavily criticized by a number of doctrinaire thinkers for his rejection of (orthodox) Freudian psychoanalysis, Fromm relied on a number of Freud's concepts and theories for the basis of his own thought.<sup>74</sup> Primary among

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<sup>73</sup> Kieran Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (Springer, 2014), 69.

<sup>74</sup> Some of these orthodox thinkers, as will be discussed in greater length in Chapter 6, included his former colleagues at the Frankfurt School, as well as other thinkers such as psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel (Neil McLaughlin, "Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: Escape from Freedom Revisited," *Sociological Theory* 14, no. 3 (1996): 241-61; Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*).

Indeed, despite these critiques, Fromm always maintained that his work "constitute[d] a needed development of [Freud's] theories and an affirmation of what is their essence" (Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby, *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (Transaction Publishers, 1970), 8).

these was the concept of the *unconscious* – Freud’s key discovery.<sup>75</sup> As Fromm writes,

[Freud] and his followers in modern psychology not only uncovered the irrational and unconscious sector of man’s nature, the existence of which had been neglected by modern rationalism; he also showed that these irrational phenomena followed certain laws and therefore could be understood rationally. He discovered that these irrationalities as well as the whole character structure of an individual were reactions to the influence exercised by the outside world and particularly by those occurring in early childhood.<sup>76</sup>

Related to the unconscious, Fromm also embraced Freud’s concepts of *repression*, *character*, and *transference*, although he modified them to better represent his own clinical discoveries.<sup>77</sup> Fromm’s modifications largely targeted Freud’s mechanistic and libidinal understanding of the psyche – both central points of critique for Fromm.

Freud’s mechanistic approach was influenced by German physician and physiologist Ernst Brücke whose lectures he attended as a medical student. Brücke

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<sup>75</sup> Perhaps “discovery” is inaccurate given that unconscious elements of the psyche were recognized by other thinkers before Freud. In Fromm’s view, Spinoza was the first thinker to form a clear concept of the unconscious (see Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Continuum, 2009)). Nietzsche, who clearly speaks of what we today know as “repression” is another pre-Freudian example. In Fromm’s words, though, “Freud went further than anybody before him in directing attention to the observation and analysis of the irrational and unconscious forces which determine parts of human behaviour” (Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 23).

For Fromm’s slight modifications to Freud’s idea of the “unconscious,” see Erich Fromm, “My Own Concept of Man,” *Fromm Forum* 17 ([1969] 2013): 5–10; and *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*.

<sup>76</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 23–24.

<sup>77</sup> What should be noted here is that Fromm maintained a clinical practice for most of his life with many of his theories finding empirical backing in his experiences with psychoanalytic clients (Erich Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” in *From Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychoanalysis*, ed. Rainer Funk (New York: American Mental Health Foundation, 2010).

For a revealing account on this aspect of Fromm, see Rainer Funk, *The Clinical Erich Fromm: Personal Accounts and Papers on Therapeutic Technique* (Rodopi, 2009).

proposed the theory that all psychic phenomena were of physiological origin. As Durkin discusses, “[a]lthough Freud was later to demur from this quantitative natural-scientific task...and explore the more qualitative and esoteric realm of the unconscious, his residual and underlying debt was nevertheless to the mechanical materialism of Brücke, which informs even his psychoanalytic work.”<sup>78</sup> Just as the “inner chemistry” of the body produces a tension, the reduction of which is the organism’s aim;<sup>79</sup> the psyche, for Freud, is similarly governed by this principle of “tension reduction.” According to his account, human psychology is composed of two biologically-rooted forces: the ego (associated with the “reality principle”) and the libido (related to the “pleasure principle”). Freud’s use of the term “libido” here is rooted in his belief that the physiological or materialist basis for the human drives was found in sexuality. That is, psychic strivings were rooted in sexual sources. For Freud, “mental events are seen as precipitated by the libido and its concomitant psychical correlate, the pleasure principle, imposing a constant, quantitatively similar pressure—or “unpleasurable tension,” as it is described later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—which it is the task of the mental apparatus to reduce.”<sup>80</sup> The gratification of the pleasure principle, however, is regularly frustrated by the pressures of society, which lead to inner psychic conflict.

This psycho-biological theory based around “tension” and “release” rooted in Freud’s libido theory was wholly inadequate in Fromm’s view. For him, the idea of “man as an animal coerced by his instincts but domesticated by society,” excludes

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<sup>78</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 72.

<sup>79</sup> Erich Fromm, “My Own Concept of Man,” 3.

<sup>80</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 73.

“all categories of spontaneity, such as love, tenderness, joy and even sexual pleasure as far as it is more than relief from tension.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it paints the individual as fundamentally *asocial*, a closed system dominated by his/her biological drives.

This is not to say that Freud did not recognize the need for others. As he would state, “in the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first, individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well.”<sup>82</sup>

Fromm delineates two principles that capture Freud’s understanding of the individual’s relationship to the outside world. The first principle is as follows: “the individual, driven by pressure for satisfaction of his needs, especially his sexual needs, must come to terms with the outside world, which serves partly as a means toward the satisfaction he seeks and partly as a hindrance to that satisfaction.”<sup>83</sup> Fromm discusses the Oedipal Complex as an example of this principle. According to this theory, the male child’s sexual desire for his mother is frustrated by the threat posed by his father, forcing him to convert his hostility toward his father into submission through identifying with him, and repressing his impulses towards his mother. Hostility, submission and identification become the affective products that mark the boy’s interaction with the outside world.

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<sup>81</sup> Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas : An Illustrated Biography* (Continuum, 2000), 93.

<sup>82</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, ed. Albert Dickinson (Penguin, 1991), 95.

<sup>83</sup> Erich Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” 2.

Whereas in the first principle, the individual *reacts* psychologically to the outside world which fulfills/frustrates his needs, the second principle relates to the *expression* of the individual's innate sexual impulses, which are modified by the external world. The latter process, known as Freud's libido theory, is characterized by stages of sexual development: the oral, anal, phallic and genital phases. Each individual is biologically compelled to go through these stages until genitally organized sexuality, what Freud saw as normal and healthy adult sexuality, is achieved. Psychological pathology obtains, for Freud, when external circumstances stunt the individual's growth by fixing them to one of these earlier stages either through denial or over-indulgence. Character, in Freud's account, results from the "unchanged prolongations of the original [childhood] instincts, or sublimations of those instincts, or reaction-formations against them."<sup>84</sup> For example, a character trait such as "parsimony" would be interpreted as the "sublimation of pleasure in withholding feces."<sup>85</sup>

Whereas Fromm saw potential in Freud's first psychic principle, he was unable to accept his second:

We believe that Freud's first method must be consistently continued and developed into a general principle of explanation for all psychic impulses and behavior, with the exception of course, of impulses such as sexuality, hunger, thirst, and so on, which require no psychological explanation but a physiological one. However, the assumption that impulses like parsimony, greed, orderliness, and so forth can be understood as direct offshoots of sexual strivings, more correctly, of the pregenital libido, seems to us untenable.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Freud in Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 220.

<sup>85</sup> Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 14.

<sup>86</sup> Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 14.

Fromm argues that despite his determination in applying Freud's libido theory of character in his clinical practice, "the efforts seemed more and more hopeless."<sup>87</sup> In the cases where he was able to find, for example, a parsimonious patient who also exhibited a disturbance in childhood defecation, he found that this interpretation did nothing to advance the patient's therapy, nor was it adequate in explaining the entirety of the patient's personality structure. In many cases, however, no connection between childhood libidinous stages and adult behaviour could be established at all.

Not only is Freud's theory clinically unsubstantiated, Fromm contends that it also fails to hold up on a number of sociological, and socio-psychological grounds. Firstly, Fromm is critical of the bourgeois and patriarchal bias that undergirds Freud's understanding of human nature, the psyche and its processes. For Freud, "the middle-class character' was essentially identical with human nature" with no thought as to "the historical, that is to say, the social principle of explanation."<sup>88</sup> For example, Fromm discusses how Freud's Oedipus Complex, disproved anthropologically as a universal psychic phenomenon, actually derives from the social context of the middle-class family. According to Fromm, it is the middle-class taboo around child sexuality leading to the inhibiting of sexual play with other children; the primacy of the family as the sole place of love and intimate feelings that directs sexual feelings inward, rather than outwards; and the fact that incestuous feelings in children may be reactions to the unconscious sexual invitations of parents suffering from middle-class sexual dissatisfaction, that

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<sup>87</sup> Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 14.

<sup>88</sup> Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 5.

explicates “Oedipus” strivings in children. Moreover, Fromm explains the child’s hostility towards the father as a reaction to his patriarchal authority, rather than mainly the result of sexual jealousy. While it is difficult to judge the accuracy of Fromm’s claims, what is compelling is his ability to root psychic processes – in this example love, desire, and hostility toward one’s parents – in one’s social context, an important corrective to Freud.

Fromm was also critical of Freud’s psychology of women. As he writes, “that woman feels inferior and frequently would prefer to be a man stands to reason and is the necessary result of her position in society.”<sup>89</sup> Given the long history of patriarchy, Fromm argues that “woman” has been hindered from developing “her human capabilities and forces,” confined instead to the interiority of the family, and “developing herself on the level of ‘feelings’ as the only expression of her humanness.”<sup>90</sup> Freud’s treatment of women in his work was invariably influenced by the low status accorded to women during his time, a status that he in many ways reinforced.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,”12.

<sup>90</sup> Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,”12.

<sup>91</sup> Early psychoanalysis had a complicated relationship to women. On the one hand, psychoanalytic theory is clearly indebted to women, given that much of it is based on clinical work with female clients. Freud’s work with women, especially his cases on “hysteria” were foundational to the development of psychoanalysis, while Carl Jung admitted that “it was essentially because of them [the women patients] that I was able to strike out on new paths in therapy” (Gordon, 34). On the other hand, the portrayal and treatment of women by these early psychoanalysts was marred by a deep sexism, as have been discussed by a number of feminists (see Luce Irigaray for example).

Avery F. Gordon’s book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, for instance, chronicles the life of Sabina Spielrein, a patient of Jung’s who also corresponded with Freud. Spielrein would write about the death drive, 10 years before Freud’s published his account of it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud dismissed her paper saying “her destructive drive is not much to my liking, because I believe it is personally conditioned. She



A second critique given by Fromm is centered on Freud's asocial view of the human being. For Freud, the individual is defined by a "primal narcissism." As Fromm elaborates:

Freud starts with the point that the individual originally loves only himself and is concerned only with himself and that all relations to objects, especially the feeling of love and solidarity with others, are secondary attitudes built on that basis, which can readily disappear, giving way to the fundamental narcissistic attitude.<sup>92</sup>

The individual only needs others insofar as these others fulfill his libidinal needs. Fromm argues that Freud's tendency to view the individual in this way also stems from his bourgeois bias in which "the middle-class individual represents a self-secluded system, revolving in and around itself, in which other individuals and all things are estranged and are only the means of satisfying needs."<sup>93</sup> As Durkin further elaborates, "Such a view of man as relatively self-sufficient fits well with the bourgeois view of the self-sufficient individual as the ever lone competitor eternally seeking his own power or gain—a form of Hobbesianism in which society features only as a constraint on the gratification needs of the individual."<sup>94</sup>

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seems abnormally ambivalent," only to publish his "seminal" work on the death drive a decade later.

<sup>92</sup> Erich Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 11.

This conflation between "self-love" and "narcissism" was something that Fromm strongly opposed. In Fromm's view narcissism stemmed from a *lack* of self-worth, rather than an excess of it. As Fromm states, "Freud has pointed out that the narcissistic person has withdrawn his love from others and turned it toward his own person. While the first part of this statement is true, the second one is a fallacy. He neither loves others nor himself," *Selfishness and Self-Love* (William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1939), 16.

<sup>93</sup> Erich Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 11.

<sup>94</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 75.

This “Hobbesian” pessimism in Freud’s thought was also challenged by Fromm. Freud’s belief that “In reality there is no such thing as ‘eradicating’ evil,”<sup>95</sup> his emphasis of the death drive (*Thanatos*), and view that civilization was merely the repression of instinct (i.e. sublimation) painted a largely unfavourable picture of human nature. This negative perspective on humanity, coupled with the idea of the self-contained, selfish view of the human being were ideas to which Fromm was deeply opposed.

Finally, as alluded to previously, Fromm rejected Freud’s libido theory. In Fromm’s view, Freud’s system grossly overemphasized the role of sexuality in his understanding of the psyche. Like many theorists, Fromm surmises that Freud’s focus on sexuality was likely due to the fact that his middle-class patients were suffering from the severe sexual repression characteristic of the Victorian era. For Fromm, while the sexual drive may exert a powerful influence on the individual, it is by no means the “basic force which motivates human passions and desires.”<sup>96</sup> While he agreed with Freud’s claim that the individual’s needs are either frustrated or fulfilled by their external world, he maintained that these are not *sexual* needs, but rather needs of an entirely different order. Here we are introduced to Fromm’s humanistic framework of psychoanalysis which differs radically from Freud in rooting human needs in the *existential situation* of the individual, rather than in sexual drives. While I will examine Fromm’s framework at greater length in Chapter

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<sup>95</sup> Freud in Durkin, 63.

<sup>96</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett World Library, [1955] 1967), 34.

6 in my discussion on humanism, what I would like to highlight in the present chapter is the *social* nature of Fromm's theory.

Fromm's humanistic revision of Freud's psychoanalytic theory is premised on the individual as a *social* being whose primary need is for *relatedness*. As Fromm argues:

*First of all, man is a social animal. His physical constitution is such that he has to live in groups and therefore must be able to cooperate with others, at least for the purposes of work and defense. The condition for such cooperation is that he must be sane. And in order to remain sane – that is, to survive mentally (and, in an indirect sense, physically) – man must be related to others.*<sup>97</sup>

Distinguishing himself from Freud's individualist and asocial theory of the ego, for Fromm, "psychoanalysis interprets the human being as a socialized being, and the psychic apparatus as essentially developed and determined through the relationship of the individual to society."<sup>98</sup> In Fromm's view, the connection between psychoanalysis and sociology is a crucial one. He was careful to emphasize, however, that this should not mean that psychoanalytic explanation be applied to social problems where economic, technical or political facts are sufficient. At the same time, sociology must realize that the abstract concept of "society" in actuality is composed of individual human beings whose thoughts, emotions, and behaviour are of sociological significance.<sup>99</sup> Fromm's critique was thus aimed not only at psychoanalysis but also against those "sociological theories which explicitly wish to eliminate psychological problems from sociology," such as those of "Durkheim and

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<sup>97</sup> Fromm, "On My Psychoanalytic Approach," in *The Revision of Psychoanalysis* (Westview Press, 1992), 4, emphasis in original.

<sup>98</sup> Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 68.

<sup>99</sup> Funk, 68.

his school.”<sup>100</sup> Although writing some time ago, Fromm’s critique of the division between sociology and psychology remains pertinent to our current moment in which the split between these disciplines (as can be detected in social movement theory) still persists.<sup>101</sup> This dissertation attempts to challenge this theoretical divide by heeding Fromm’s counsel that social phenomena can only be fully understood through taking seriously the psychic dimension of the social.

What resulted from Fromm’s critical appraisal of Freud was a psychoanalytic approach that was thoroughly social. In particular, Fromm was to bring together Freudian analysis with Marxist theory. Fromm’s admiration of Marx, however, was not without critique. He challenged Marx’s lack of appreciation for the role played by the psyche – especially those unconscious “irrational needs and satisfactions”<sup>102</sup>– in the path to social change:

[Marx] did not recognize the irrational forces in man which make him afraid of freedom, and which produce his lust for power and his destructiveness. On the contrary, underlying his concept of man was the implicit assumption of man’s natural goodness, which would assert itself as soon as the crippling economic shackles were released. The famous statement at the end of the Communist Manifesto that the workers “have nothing to lose but their chains,” contains a profound psychological error. With their chains they have

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<sup>100</sup> Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> Sociologists, for example, have pejoratively used the term “psychologism” to refer to “the attempt to analyse characteristically social phenomena in psychological terms” (David Bloor *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*, First Edition edition, New York: Columbia Univ Pr, 1983: 6). David Bloor locates the “classic denunciation of psychologism” in Durkheim’s insistence that “the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness” (Bloor, *Wittgenstein*: 187). “Sociologism,” similarly, is the term applied by psychologists and others for studies that “overevaluat[e]...methods which focus on group phenomena” (see Richard W. Moodey, “Psychologism, Sociologism, and the Madness of Social Science,” in *Perspectives on Psychologism*, ed. Mark Amadeus Notturmo (BRILL, 1989), 263). For the German philosophical debate on psychologism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Martin Kusch, *Psychologism: The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>102</sup> Fromm in Durkin, 63.

also to lose all those irrational needs and satisfactions which were originated while they were wearing the chains. In this respect, Marx and Engels never transcended the naïve optimism of the eighteenth century.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, in Fromm's view, this theoretical marriage brought a much needed historical-materialist analysis to Freudian analytic theory, while simultaneously developing the psychological aspect in Marxist thought.<sup>104</sup> Disavowing the claims to "objectivity" in the social sciences, Fromm's theoretical work was openly oriented toward psychological and societal freedom (something that I will discuss at greater length when exploring his humanism in Chapter 6). For Fromm, his candid political position was preferable to the hidden bias of Freud, who he labeled an "apologist for middle-class morals."<sup>105</sup>

Of central interest in this dissertation are four ideas that Fromm developed: social character, the social unconscious, his humanistic framework of existential needs, and his theory of radical humanism. The first two will be discussed in the present chapter, while the last two will be taken up in Chapter 6.

Fromm's concept of social character is perhaps his most significant theoretical achievement. Fromm's idea of character grew out of his dissatisfaction with Freud's understanding. For Freud, as was discussed earlier, character is based

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<sup>103</sup> Fromm in Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 63.

<sup>104</sup> In Fromm's words, his work was "an attempt to concretize the empirical Marxist statement that it is man's social existence that determines consciousness. I believe I can show that Freud's discovery makes full sense only if one looks at it from the standpoint of Marx, and that Marx's statement becomes open to empirical study only if one uses the empirical method of studying the unconscious" (letter to Adam Schaff, 1965, in Durkin 103). Fromm was not the first to bring together Freudian and Marxist theory, but rather this interest in applying a psychological analysis to Marxism was of interest to Karl Korsch and Georg Lukás in the late 1910s and early 1920s. This line of inquiry would then be taken up in the mid to late 1920s and 1930s by Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich, and members of the Frankfurt School (For more on this, see Durkin, 105).

<sup>105</sup> Durkin, 6.

in pregenital libidinal fixations that result from disturbances in childhood sexual development. For Fromm, these libidinal character associations lacked an important explanatory dimension – that of the historical social context. Fromm found it absurd that a trait like ambition, found widely among the middle-class, would be the effect of a common experience of toilet-training, rather than the result of “the whole life practice of this class.”<sup>106</sup>

In contrast, rather than based in instincts, Fromm’s concept of character is a “substitution for absent instincts.”<sup>107</sup> In his view, and in direct opposition to Freud’s understanding, human beings differ from animals precisely due to their highly developed brains and weak instinctual system. In place of animal instincts, character allows the human being to act “quasi-automatically” without having to expend too much energy on deliberation. Individual character is the mechanism that directs human energy “during the process of ‘socialization’ (relatedness to others) and ‘assimilation’ (mode of acquiring things).”<sup>108</sup>

Just as we have individual character, Fromm argued that we can also speak in terms of *social character*. Moreover, just as individual character can be analyzed and understood, Fromm believed the social character could also be studied empirically.<sup>109</sup> Social character refers to “the matrix or nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group...this character structure develops as a result

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<sup>106</sup> Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” 15.

<sup>107</sup> Fromm, “On My Psychoanalytic Approach,” 4.

<sup>108</sup> Fromm, “On My Psychoanalytic Approach,” 4.

<sup>109</sup> Fromm’s two primary attempts to study social character empirically are published in his books *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Berg, 1984); and *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby).

of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group.”<sup>110</sup> Fromm describes the *function* of social character is as follows:

In order to function, each society needs not only material productive forces, but also the energies contained in the productive force = man. These energies, however, can not be used in their general form, but only in specific forms, namely in character traits which make man desire to do what he has to do in his social function: to serve, to rule, to cooperate, to make war, to consume, to work, etc....The social character has the important function for all individuals of making attractive, or at least tolerable, what is socially necessary, and to create the basis for consistent behavior because the social character becomes ‘second nature,’ substituting for the lost instincts.<sup>111</sup>

The function of social character is thus to convert general human energy into “a socially useful form” for the functioning of society through supplying individuals with the “inner compulsion” to support the economic system.<sup>112</sup> Social character “mediat[es] between the socio-economic structure and ideology,” providing a conceptual bridge between Marx’s concepts of “economic base” and “ideological superstructure.”<sup>113</sup> What Fromm’s concept adds to Marxist thinking is effectively the *reason* why even after changes are made to the social structure, psychological chains persist given that social character often lags behind. It is in understanding the inner workings of social character that Fromm was able to explain why individuals and groups often behave in irrational ways, contrary to their interests.

For example, much of Fromm’s early work was devoted to using social character as a means of understanding how fascism could take root in Europe. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm set out to “analyze those dynamic factors in the character structure of modern man, which made him want to give up freedom in

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<sup>110</sup> Fromm, “On My Psychoanalytic Approach,” 4.

<sup>111</sup> Fromm, “My Own Concept of Man,” 7.

<sup>112</sup> Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 282.

<sup>113</sup> Erich Fromm, “My Own Concept of Man,” 7.

Fascist countries and which so widely prevail in millions of our own people [i.e. Americans].”<sup>114</sup> Fromm’s theory was that the lower middle-classes in Germany, which he understood as Hitler’s base of support, suffered from an *authoritarian* character structure that made them vulnerable to fascism.<sup>115</sup> Using a unique method of historical socio-psychoanalysis, Fromm argues that this social character was formed through the influence of Calvinism and Lutheranism, which primed the lower middle-classes with sadomasochistic character strivings that were “activated” by Nazism. Fromm considered the psychic impact of these religious doctrines, in addition to socioeconomic changes of the time that made this class characterologically vulnerable to Nazi ideology. Despite the fact that Fromm’s argument has been challenged on many points, the uniqueness and central message of his analysis are still relevant.<sup>116</sup> As he writes,

Only a psychology which utilizes the concept of unconscious forces can penetrate the confusing rationalizations we are confronted with in analyzing either an individual or a culture. *A great number of apparently insoluble problems disappear at once if we decide to give up the notion that the motives by which people believe themselves to be motivated are necessarily the ones which actually drive them to act, feel, and think as they do.*<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 4.

<sup>115</sup> The authoritarian character was just one of many social character typologies developed by Fromm. While a full discussion is beyond the scope of this project, I will review Fromm’s productive character orientations in Chapter 6. For a more complete description of Fromm’s theory and examples of social character, see *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, *Sane Society*, *Man for Himself*, and *Escape from Freedom*.

<sup>116</sup> For a good critical analysis of Fromm’s argument in *Escape From Freedom*, see Neil McLaughlin’s paper, “Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions.”

One of the points McLaughlin makes is that Fromm’s ideas around which segments of the German population supported Nazism and the reasons behind this support are questionable. It should be noted that this remains to be an unresolved topic with different thinkers offering distinct positions. See, for example, Theodore Abel’s empirical study *The Nazi Movement* (Routledge, [1938] 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 136, emphasis added.



This idea that human behaviour is motivated by factors that are outside of our conscious grasp brings us to his second concept: that of the *social unconscious*. Just as the principles of individual character can be applied to social character, Fromm believed the social unconscious functioned similarly to the individual unconscious. As he describes, "By 'social unconscious' I refer to those areas of repression which are common to most members of a society; these commonly repressed elements are those contents which a given society cannot permit its members to be aware of if the society with its specific contradictions is to operate successfully."<sup>118</sup> Fromm develops his concept with the aid of both Freud and Marx who he argues offer explanations of the unconscious that share similarities and differences.

In terms of Freud's understanding, "psychoanalysis can be defined as a system which is based on the assumption that we repress the awareness of the most significant experiences; that the conflict between the unconscious reality within ourselves and the denial of that reality in our consciousness often leads to neurosis, and that by making the unconscious conscious, the neurotic symptom or character trait can be cured."<sup>119</sup> According to Freud, most of what we know about ourselves and others is based in self-deception, while our actual strivings are hidden from our awareness. The mechanism that facilitates our self-deception is *rationalization*. Fromm provides us with an example:

a political leader may conduct a policy which leads to war. He may be motivated by a wish for his own glory and fame, yet he is convinced that his actions are determined exclusively by his patriotism and his sense of responsibility to his country. In all these instances the underlying and

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<sup>118</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 70.

<sup>119</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 71.

unconscious desire is so well rationalized by a moral consideration that the desire is not only covered up, but also aided and abetted by the very rationalization the person has invented. In the normal course of his life, such a person will never discover the contradiction between the reality of his desires and the fiction of his rationalizations, and hence he will go on acting according to his desire.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to rationalization, Freud identified how *resistance* also plays a role in keeping our true motivations repressed. Continuing with the above example, Fromm states the following:

If anyone would tell him the truth, that is to say, mention to him that behind his sanctimonious rationalizations are the very desires which he bitterly disapproves of, he would sincerely feel indignant or misunderstood and falsely accused. This passionate refusal to admit the existence of what is repressed Freud called "resistance." Its strength is roughly in proportion to the strength of the repressive tendencies.<sup>121</sup>

Our rationalizations and resistance are thus the psychic forces that keep our true aims repressed. What are these true aims and why do we repress them? According to Freud, that which is most rigorously repressed is sexual strivings, especially the incestuous ones described in his Oedipal theory. In addition to these are "hostile and aggressive" impulses that belong to the "primitive" side of man. In Freud's view, we repress these in order to conform to familial and societal norms. As Fromm reminds us, "increasing civilization, to Freud, means increasing repression."<sup>122</sup>

The repression of an impulse does not however mean that the impulse disappears. It merely indicates that conscious awareness of the impulse has been diminished or, in Fromm's words, that "unconscious forces have gone underground

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<sup>120</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 71.

<sup>121</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 72.

<sup>122</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 73.

and determine man's actions behind his back."<sup>123</sup> In the case of someone who is driven by sadistic strivings, for example, the awareness of the desire to inflict pain upon others is hidden from conscious view. This does not mean that the individual does not hurt others, however. To the contrary, if they are able to rationalize their treatment of others (as duty, for instance) or deny that their actions are causing pain, then the hurtful treatment of others may continue unabated.<sup>124</sup>

For Freud, then, human behaviour is largely controlled by forces that are obscured from consciousness. The illusion of free will is maintained through the use of rationalizations, which convince us that we act in accordance with reason or our moral convictions. This fatalistic picture can be interrupted, however, by bringing awareness to our unconscious strivings. This awareness, which for Freud could be accomplished through psychoanalysis, allows an individual "to transform himself from a helpless puppet moved by unconscious forces to a self aware and free man who determines his own destiny."<sup>125</sup>

Marx similarly believed that much of our conscious thinking is rooted in factors of which we are unconscious. While Freud argued that these unconscious strivings are rooted in libidinous drives, Marx posited that it was *ideology* that alienated the individual from her/his true self. As Fromm discusses:

Marx, like Freud, believed that man's consciousness is mostly "false consciousness." Man believes that his thoughts are authentic and the product of *his* thinking activity while they are in reality determined by the objective forces which work behind his back; in Freud's theory these objective forces represent physiological and biological needs; in Marx's theory they represent

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<sup>123</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 72.

<sup>124</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 72.

<sup>125</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 79.

the social and economic historical forces which determine the being and thus indirectly the consciousness of the individual.<sup>126</sup>

Marx contended that an individual's consciousness is "determined by his being, his being by his practice of life, his practice of life by his mode of producing his livelihood, that is, by his mode of production and the social structure, mode of distribution and consumption resulting from it."<sup>127</sup> Marx's view is thus that one's social existence produces one's consciousness, while for Freud, society impacts consciousness only so far as it represses those libidinal and biological urges that are deemed unacceptable. Fromm comments that from this difference in views we see a further one: "Freud believed that man can overcome repression without social changes. Marx on the other hand was the first thinker who saw that the realization of the universal and fully awakened man can occur only together with social changes which lead to a new and truly human economic and social organization of mankind."<sup>128</sup>

Fromm's understanding of the social unconscious incorporates Freud's concepts of rationalization and resistance, with Marx's emphasis on how human consciousness is determined by one's social existence. Fromm discusses how members of a society are permitted awareness of only certain things based on the society's way of life and mode of being (relatedness, feeling and perceiving). Social consciousness is comprised of whatever is able to pass through the "socially conditioned filter" of each society, determined by language, logic and social taboo. All that is unable to find expression in a society's particular language and system of

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<sup>126</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 82.

<sup>127</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 86.

<sup>128</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 86.

logic, and all that is deemed forbidden or inappropriate according to its taboo structure, is repressed into the social unconscious. Fromm identifies social taboo as the most important of the three components of the social filter given that “it is the one that does not *permit* certain feelings to reach consciousness and tends to expel them from this realm if they have reached it.”<sup>129</sup> Examples of such feelings, as offered by Fromm, are a sense of revulsion over killing felt by a man who belongs to a violent “primitive tribe”; or a sense of generosity toward the poor felt by a shopkeeper from “our civilization.” In both instances, the repulsion towards violence and the desire to give are immediately repressed given their incompatibility with the social order of the given society.

What necessitates social repression? As Fromm implies with the above examples, social repression serves a functional purpose in maintaining the social order. Fromm further argues that if people in unequal societies were aware of the full extent to which they were being oppressed, this awareness could result in a resentment capable of endangering the social order.<sup>130</sup> Besides the self-preserving function of social repression, Fromm posits that we also repress due to a fear of being isolated from and ostracized by members of our group. Given that our need for others is our strongest psychic striving, Fromm contends that it is “for this reason the individual must blind himself from seeing that which his group claims does not exist, or accept as truth that which the majority says is true, even if his own eyes could convince him that it is false.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 90.

<sup>130</sup> An idea that anticipates our discussion of “explosive *ressentiment*” in the next chapter.

<sup>131</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 94.

Fromm shares with Freud and Marx the conviction that freedom (or mental health) is contingent on the “full awakening” or “de-repression” of the individual. In Fromm’s view, Marx’s insights into the social process provide us with the possibility of such awakening. He cautions that this awakening must happen at both individual and social levels, and in accordance with humanistic values: “If uncovering the unconscious means arriving at the experience of one’s own humanity, then, indeed, it cannot stop with the individual but must proceed to the uncovering of the social unconscious. This implies the understanding of social dynamics and the critical appraisal of one’s own society from the standpoint of universal human values.”<sup>132</sup>

Fromm’s combination of Freudian psychoanalytical insights with Marxian historical material analysis has produced an especially unique and instructive theory of social psychology. His concept of social character, like Bourdieu’s habitus, provides a means of understanding how a group might come to share a common consciousness that determines their thinking and behaviour, and how this consciousness is *socially* constituted. More importantly, however, (and unlike Bourdieu) Fromm pairs his analysis of social character gainfully with that of the social unconscious, inviting us to consider *how our political actions, as a group, might be rooted in hidden psychic forces that we have largely repressed through the use of political and moral rationalizations.*

Fromm’s characterological study, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany* is instructive here. Despite the fact that the majority of the study’s participants declared themselves as politically left-wing, their “radicalism” was severely

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<sup>132</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 98.

challenged upon analyzing the responses to a questionnaire that asked about their beliefs on a number of subjects. This suggests not only “profound complexity to political commitment” but also reveals that “in spite of the subjective honesty, an individual’s statement about his or her thoughts and feelings cannot be taken literally but must instead be interpreted so as to try to unearth their deeper psychological motivation.”<sup>133</sup>

This idea of a deeper psychological motivation, for Fromm, demands that we interrogate our own political commitments and the psychic strivings that may be driving them. His example of the political leader is unsettling in that it suggests that our “unconscious desires” maybe also be “so well rationalized” by moral and political rhetoric that we may also fail to fully “discover the contradiction between the reality of [our] desire and the fiction of [our] rationalizations.”<sup>134</sup> To what extent might anti-racist feminism, like Fromm’s political leader, be driven by inner strivings that we may also “sincerely feel indignant or misunderstood and falsely accused” if they were revealed to us? For example, how might we feel to be confronted by our “true” reasons for engaging in practices like calling-out, or demanding that people check their privilege? How might this threaten the rationalizations we use to legitimize these behaviours? And what might we discover under these rationalizations? These are deeply uncomfortable questions. As Fromm insists, however, it is only through a commitment to *awareness* that one can undo the unconscious traps that they rationalize themselves into, releasing them to

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<sup>133</sup> Durkin, 120 and 121.

<sup>134</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 72.

greater possibilities of psychic and political freedom. By engaging in a self-reflexive analysis in this dissertation, I hope to work toward realizing this greater aim.

While Fromm's concepts are certainly useful, they are also not without limitations. A central limitation of Fromm's concepts relates to their functionalist or deterministic nature. This point, also discussed by Durkin, refers to the degree to which social character and the social unconscious respond to and fulfill the needs of a society. We remember that social character traits are those that allow one to function optimally in their social role in support of the wider socio-economic system. Similarly, the social unconscious is responsible for repressing all that threatens the smooth operation of society. Part of the issue here, of course, is that Fromm's concept of social character (like Bourdieu's *habitus*) was not intended to describe a *social movement*, let alone any group that includes members of different classes. For our discussion, therefore, social character, in its strictly original form, has limited purchase due to its inability to capture social groups that exhibit significant characterological aspects but belong to different class groups. Moreover, understanding anti-racist feminism through the lens of social character applies a fixity and determinism that fail to capture the fluid and subversive elements of the anti-racist feminist movement. Similarly to Gould's revision of *habitus*, a use of social character that pertains to anti-racist feminism must also call for a malleability missing from the original formulation, as well as a understanding of social character/social unconscious that can apply to groups that are not only moored together on the basis of social class.



Finally, while the concepts of social character and the social unconscious provide the conceptual scaffolding upon which to investigate the characterological psychic elements motivating some of anti-racist feminism's political practices, they are unable to aid in determining exactly what *type* of character anti-racist feminism inhabits. Given that Fromm was focused on class-based groups, his character typologies fail to grasp the kind of socio-political psyche that might belong to a social justice movement. Social movement theory is also limited in this regard, as protest theorists still struggle to understand how emotions manifest in "combinations" or complexes.<sup>135</sup>

Some thinkers, including Wendy Brown, have suggested that identity movements (including anti-racist feminism) suffer from the psychological disposition that Friedrich Nietzsche termed *ressentiment*. The next chapter explores this possibility at greater length.

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<sup>135</sup> James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research."

## Chapter 4 – An Anti-Racist Feminist *Ressentiment*

*“Dear white people, you made me hate myself as a kid, so now I hate you and that’s my secret shame”*

–Coco says to Sam White, *Dear White People*

*“The whole movement is about pain, that’s why we’re out on these streets. Because of our pain. You don’t think Martin had pain? You don’t think Malcolm had pain?”*

–Sam White, *Dear White People*.

*“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”*

– Nelson Mandela

In the preceding chapters, I have made a case for the social and political significance of emotions. Drawing on some reflections and insights from anti-racist feminism and other identity activists and scholars, I have identified calling-out, checking privilege, spokespersonship and allyship as some cultural practices that allow entry into the characterological landscape of anti-racist feminism. I discussed outrage, anger, suspicion, vengefulness, envy, and pleasure (in belonging) as emotions that are fundamentally linked to these practices in contemporary identity movements. What are the implications of these emotionally charged practices for anti-racist feminism? To what extent might they foreclose an emancipatory future? In this chapter I am interested in addressing these questions through investigating the charge of *ressentiment* that has been levelled by feminist thinkers against different forms of feminism since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I explore whether *ressentiment* might appropriately capture the *social character* of anti-racist feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> These thinkers include Marion Tapper (1992), Anna Yeatman (1993), Joan Cocks (1991), Wendy Brown (1995), Rebecca Stringer (2003, 2014), and Dina Georgis (2008).

*Ressentiment*, as formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche, depicts a psyche mired in “reproach, rancor, moralism and guilt,”<sup>2</sup> emotions that, at least at first glance, appear to bear some resemblance to those we have been discussing. For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* can only be a reactive orientation, incapable of producing affirmative possibilities for change. It is a psyche that is invested in its own pain and impotence, keeping it bound to the very conditions it purports to challenge. As such, a *ressentimental* social character is a distinctly unsettling one.

The present chapter is comprised of three parts. The first part provides a psychological and sociological description of *ressentiment* through the writings of Nietzsche and Max Scheler. This inquiry into the intellectual history of the concept of *ressentiment* serves as a theoretical backdrop for the second part, which examines the degree to which this term captures practices within anti-racist feminism. The third part argues that although *ressentiment* seems to carry some explanatory power in the anti-racist feminist context, it carries with it two significant “diagnostic” limitations.<sup>3</sup> I explore these limitations, enlisting the help of Rebecca Stringer whose work on feminist *ressentiment* underscores both issues of concern. Stringer’s analysis is especially interesting due to the argument she makes in favour of the *transformative* potentiality of *ressentiment*. I conclude this chapter by considering her position in regards to the case of anti-racist feminism.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Following Brown and Stringer, I use the term “diagnostic” to signal my attempt to evaluate the suitability of *ressentiment* as a descriptor for the tendencies of interest in anti-racist feminism.

## **(4.1) The Psychology and Sociology of *Ressentiment***

### ***Nietzsche***

In order to understand the full significance of how the concept of *ressentiment* might apply in the context of anti-racist feminism, it is necessary to examine it as it was formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nietzsche develops this term most comprehensively in his book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>45</sup> Comprised of three essays, *the Genealogy* launches an investigation into the origin of morality. Nietzsche identifies two sets of conceptual dualities: good vs. bad morality (characteristic of what he calls “master morality”), and good vs. evil morality (the logic of “slave morality”).<sup>6</sup> In master morality, “good” is the self-affirmed quality of the nobility: “the judgment ‘good’ did not originate with those to whom goodness was shown! Rather it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche borrows the word *ressentiment* from Eugen Dühring, although altering its meaning to suit his purposes. We see his first use of the term in 1875 (twelve years before it appears in *Genealogy of Morals*) in an unpublished notebook containing a critical appraisal of Dühring’s book *The Value of Life: a course in philosophy*. See Rebecca Stringer’s discussion of this in, “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim’” (Australian National University, 2003), 296.

<sup>5</sup> *Ressentiment* was first introduced to philosophy/psychology by existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is unclear as to whether Nietzsche or Dühring were familiar with Kierkegaard’s formulation of the term.

<sup>6</sup> A number of scholars have sought to understand Nietzsche’s account of master and slave against that of Hegel’s. See, for example, Deleuze (1962/2006) who was convinced of the irreconcilability of Nietzsche and Hegel in this respect, vs. Kaufmann (1950, 1965) who found there to be a parallel between the two accounts.

For an interesting discussion of Hegel and Nietzsche’s respective understandings of blackness in their master/slave formulations, see Sander L. Gilman, “The Figure of the Black in the Thought of Hegel and Nietzsche,” *The German Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1980): 141–58.

themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank.”<sup>7</sup> In this moral system, “bad” emerges only afterward, “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.”<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, slave morality (good vs. evil), that is, Judeo-Christian morality, develops in the opposite manner. Slave morality is invigorated by a spirit of *ressentiment*, or what Nietzsche describes as a vengeful and moralizing anger. The introduction of the good vs. evil configuration was occasioned by what Nietzsche calls the “slave revolt in morality” whereby the “Jews” “dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good=noble=powerful=beautiful=happy=beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying ‘the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone – and you, the powerful and noble, godless to all eternity and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accused, and damned!’”<sup>9</sup>

For my investigation, what is important to focus in on is the psychological nature of these distinctions. Nietzsche describes *ressentiment* as the *psychological disposition* of the weak toward the strong. Unable to react to the injuries inflicted by

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, 34. As will be discussed later, although this “slave revolt in morality” began two thousand years ago, Nietzsche argues that its reverberative effects continue to be felt. Indeed, *Genealogy of Morality* can be read as an appeal against the democratization of Europe that was occurring at the time in which Nietzsche was writing – a process that he strongly opposed and saw as originating in slave morality.

the strong, the weak recoil in feelings of anger, vengefulness, rancour, hatred and envy. The inability to discharge these emotions (either through “redemption” or “vengeance”) poisons the weak who continuously and often *joyfully* re-live their pain and injuries. As Nietzsche states,

The suffering are one and all dreadfully eager and inventive in discovering occasions for painful affects; they enjoy being mistrustful and dwelling on nasty deeds and imaginary slights; they scour the entrails of their past and present for obscure and questionable occurrences that offer them the opportunity to revel in tormenting suspicions and to intoxicate themselves with the poison of their own malice...<sup>10</sup>

For Nietzsche, *ressentiment's* most creative deed comes in the rejection of dominant morality (master morality) and the subsequent “perverse” inversion of dominant values so as to make virtues out of the impotence of the weak (slave morality). In this inversion of values, the noble are transformed from “good” to scornfully and irredeemably evil (at least in the eyes of the slave). The new morality that is produced, as well as the identity of those who produce it, is constituted only after and *in reaction to* what they have reviled as evil. As Nietzsche describes, “in order to arise, slave morality always needs a hostile external world. Physiologically speaking, it needs external stimuli in order to act at all — its action is fundamentally a *reaction*.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, Nietzsche argues that the weak define themselves in contradistinction to the qualities of the powerful, making trophies out of their meekness, weakness, and inability to act.

It is important to point out that for Nietzsche, neither the weak nor the strong in fact *choose* their station. The weak are *constitutionally* weak, just as the

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, 37, emphasis added.

strong are *constitutionally* strong.<sup>12</sup> In an order in which transcendence is thus foreclosed, there can only be management. That is, the management of the weak's *ressentiment* through the method of legalism and the figure of the ascetic priest. Legalism, for Nietzsche, alleviates the fury of *ressentiment* by reframing the injury as being against *the law*, rather than the subject. As Nietzsche explains, "... it treats violence and capricious acts on the part of individuals or entire groups as offenses against the law, as rebellion against the supreme power itself, and thus leads the feelings of its subjects away from the direct injury caused by such offenses."<sup>13</sup> In this way, legalism redirects the vengefulness of *ressentiment* in protection of the master class. As Nietzsche discusses, legalism requires the powerful to sacrifice a portion of their power in gestures of legal redress and reparation in order to maintain their wider rule.

The function of the ascetic priest is similarly to contain and tame the *ressentiment* of the masses. He does this by re-directing *ressentiment* inwards, so to convince the herd that it is only they themselves who are to blame for their suffering. The weak are thus inducted into a religious framework where the doctrines of guilt and sin foster self-discipline and hard work, and where their suffering is given meaning. Nietzsche emphasizes that the ascetic priest does not *heal* the weak, indeed his methods only make them sicker through weakening their will. His role is rather to *anesthetise* their suffering, and in doing so, he protects the healthy from contamination.

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<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, 45-46.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, 76.

Although undoubtedly provocative, Nietzsche's views were extremely influential among his contemporaries. One such contemporary was German sociologist Max Scheler, who provides an especially comprehensive response to and expansion of Nietzsche's work on *ressentiment*. We will consider his work now.

### **Scheler**

In his 1913 book entitled *Ressentiment*, Scheler declares that "among the scanty discoveries which have been made in recent times about the origin of moral judgments, Friedrich Nietzsche's discovery that *ressentiment* can be the source of such value judgments is the most profound."<sup>14</sup> Writing twenty-six years after Nietzsche published his treatise, Scheler also shares in Nietzsche's lament of the loss of "higher values" (as espoused by the nobility) in exchange for the *ressentimental* morality of the masses. For Scheler, however, Nietzsche's thesis contains a central fault: the morality of the masses stems not from a *ressentiment* rooted in Christian ethics but rather from bourgeois values which, Scheler argues, have largely replaced Christian morality since the French Revolution.<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, however, I would like to focus on Scheler's *sociological* development of the term *ressentiment*, beyond the realm of Christian morality.

Although clearly indebted to Nietzsche, Scheler's work on *ressentiment* provides a much more systematic description of the concept. Scheler begins by explaining that the term appears in its original French due to the inability to find an

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<sup>14</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Marquette University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Scheler accuses Nietzsche of confusing Christian love – a pure and sublime expression – with the "love of mankind" championed by bourgeois humanism – an inferior ideology that Scheler sees as rooted in *ressentiment*.



adequate translation in German.<sup>16</sup> As Scheler argues, the French term contains two central elements: the first being that *ressentiment* refers not only to the remembrance of past injury but the visceral *reliving* of such injury to the extent that one's hostile reaction deposits itself deep into the *personality* of the individual. Secondly, the character of this hostile reaction is one of rancour, which Scheler later pairs with "revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite."<sup>17</sup> For Scheler, as for Nietzsche, this rancour must also be coupled with impotence, in order for *ressentiment* to ensue. Scheler notes, however, that *ressentimental* embitterment can be avoided with any discharge of one's inner negative feelings. As he explains, "if an ill-treated servant can vent his spleen in the antechamber, he will remain free from the inner venom of *ressentiment*, but it will engulf him if he must hide his feelings and keep his negative and hostile emotions to himself."<sup>18</sup> Let us keep these aspects of visceral reliving as well as emotional discharge in mind as we come to investigate the relationship between *ressentiment* and feminism.

In addition to expanding upon Nietzsche's definition of *ressentiment*, Scheler also expounds its sociological nature, relating it to social inequality. As he discusses, "through its very origin, *ressentiment* is therefore chiefly confined to those who serve and are *dominated* at the moment, who fruitlessly resent the sting of

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche translator and scholar, Walter Kaufmann (2010) similarly argues this point. Otto Delmos (1971) moreover discusses how although the English word "resentment" derives its etymology from the French *ressentiment*, it fails to retain the notion of "moving back," an irreducible component of the Nietzschean formulation.

<sup>17</sup> Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Scheler, 6. In this way, Scheler discusses how the criminal, contrary to common belief, is actually free from *ressentiment* in that the criminal is "an active type" who is able to release negative emotion in committing his/her crime (18).

authority.”<sup>19</sup> Those who are dominated, however, must still imagine themselves to be equal to their oppressors since, “a slave who has a slavish nature and accepts his status does not desire revenge when he is injured by his master.”<sup>20</sup> For Scheler, this imagined equality is a product of modern liberal society in which all individuals are taught that they are equals. Thus, as he explains, “*ressentiment* must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.”<sup>21</sup> Scheler enumerates “situations” which are likely to be *ressentimental* due to such structural inequalities. These inequalities derive from hereditary factors, which then have social consequences. Unsurprisingly, women appear at the top of Scheler’s list as the “weaker and therefore the more vindictive sex.”<sup>22</sup> What is important to note here is Scheler’s emphasis on the “*types of ressentiment* which are grounded in certain typically recurrent ‘situations’ and whose emergence is therefore largely independent of individual temperament.”<sup>23</sup> This very important insight, echoed by Wendy Brown in the next chapter, gives some sense of how the very *structure* of liberal society *produces ressentiment*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Scheler, 6, emphasis in original.

<sup>20</sup> Scheler, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Scheler, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Scheler, 15. Nietzsche makes this comparable “observation”: “The sick woman especially: no one can excel her in the wiles to dominate, oppress, and tyrannize. The sick woman spares nothing, living or dead; she will dig up the most deeply buried things” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 123).

<sup>23</sup> Scheler, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Scheler, 8.

A final point to this discussion is Scheler's mention of the "pleasure" that can come from *ressentimental* opposition. As he explains, in certain situations, a type of "ressentiment criticism" can erupt which is largely void of positive aims and in which "improvement in the conditions criticized cause no satisfaction – they merely cause discontent, for they destroy the growing *pleasure* afforded by invective and negation."<sup>25</sup> For Scheler, such a position is characterized by a joy in criticizing and an aversion to power. This point recalls Nietzsche's contempt for the ways in which those who suffer find joy in their pain. I would like to flag this point for later consideration when I discuss the pleasure in anger and opposition, and the sense of belonging it can bring.

In summary, Scheler builds on Nietzsche's psychological analysis by discussing the sociological dimensions of *ressentiment*. Both Nietzsche and Scheler emphasize a number of characteristics worth enumerating. Firstly, as they theorize it, *ressentiment* is the disposition of the weak characterized by anger, suspicion, bitterness, envy, hatred, vengefulness, and spite. Secondly, they emphasize that *ressentiment* is marked by impotence, that is, an inability to act. Thirdly, they describe *ressentiment's* only creative deed as the transvaluation of values, whereby all that is associated with the strong is re-evaluated as bad or evil, while the ways of the oppressed are simultaneously elevated as morally superior. Fourthly, they stress an investment in one's own pain, which includes a backward orientation in which one constantly conjures up injuries of the past while imagining assaults in the present. Fifthly, the subject of *ressentiment* seeks to blame another for his/her pain

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<sup>25</sup> Scheler, 8, emphasis added.

(a corollary of his/her weakness), and more, to make this Other *suffer* in effort to achieve relief.<sup>26</sup> For Nietzsche and Scheler, *ressentiment* is thus a psyche that desires revenge, while revelling in the pleasure of recrimination. Finally, it is a psychic disposition that is *reactive* in constitution, unable to formulate an affirmative orientation. While Nietzsche largely describes the *ressentimental personality* of the weak, Scheler identifies a number of situations that, by virtue of a contradiction between formal equality and actual inequality, are *prone to ressentiment*.

*Ressentiment* as a psychological and sociological explanation has been mobilized by a number of thinkers since Nietzsche and Scheler's time. In the 1990's some feminist theorists employed the concept in order to diagnose some troubling tendencies that they observed within feminism.<sup>27</sup> These theorizations of *ressentiment* could be seen as combining Nietzsche's largely psychological approach with Scheler's sociological insights. That is, these theorists were interested in understanding the *psychological* character of feminism as contextualized within conditions of gender inequality. Unlike with Nietzsche, these inquiries were not premised on the immutable weakness of women, but rather they recognized domination as *social* and *political* in nature. Given the feminist orientation of this scholarship, these *ressentiment* theorists were concerned that the rage, rancour,

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<sup>26</sup> Scheler, 127.

<sup>27</sup> These thinkers include Marion Tapper (1992), Anna Yeatman (1993), Joan Cocks (1991), and Wendy Brown (1995).

As Stringer notes, this was part of a larger "rethinking" of the relationship between feminism and the category of "victim" that took place simultaneously in the popular press and in academic feminism (see *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*. Routledge, 2014.).

reproach, and vengefulness of feminism could be foreclosing its emancipatory future. As such, their concerns very much echo mine. But is *ressentiment* an accurate description of the psychic character of anti-racist feminism? How useful is it in helping to explain tendencies specific to this movement? In the next section I build on the experiences and examples presented in the foregoing chapter in order to explore the degree to which the related practices of calling-out, checking privilege, spokespersonship and allyship and their corresponding emotions and attitudes can be understood as *ressentimental*.

#### **(4.2) An Anti-Racist Feminist Ressentiment**

In Chapter 2, I examined some everyday tendencies and practices within academic and activist anti-racist feminism and identity movements generally. In particular, I discussed what I suggest to be common cultural practices (calling-out, checking privilege, spokespersonship and allyship) and some accompanying concepts that might allow insight into the social character of anti-racist feminism. In this section, I return to these examples in order to re-examine them against the concept of *ressentiment* as developed by Nietzsche and Scheler.

There are a number of elements that characterize a *ressentimental* disposition. The first is the existence of strong negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, suspicion, bitterness, envy, and spite. I believe one can make a strong case for the existence of most, if not all, of these emotions in the anti-racist feminist movement. To be clear, this is not to make an over-generalization and to imply that *all* anti-racist feminists are oriented by these feelings. Rather, it is to suggest that the

current cultural climate is one where these affects circulate in many expressions of anti-racist feminism (as well as other identity movements).

From my own experience, I have observed, as well as personally felt, all of these emotions in my engagement with the movement. As I described at the start of the dissertation, many of my interactions with other anti-racist feminists consisted of sharing in expressions of rage, resentment, and even hatred. These anti-racist feminists and I felt intense anger toward systems of oppression and individuals that we perceived as embodying this oppression. For us, there were also strong feelings of suspicion and mistrust, leading us to feel safer in sticking together as opposed to risking ties with white people who could, at any time, show their true (oppressive) colours. Envy is perhaps a more difficult emotion to track but which I believe has also been present in my experience. In my discussions with the anti-racist feminists in my life, envy could perhaps be detected not just in the (understandable) desire for the entitlements of those who held privilege but also in the desire for the very *ease* with which they navigated life. I recall many moments in which we would say to one another with some bitterness, “how nice for her to be able to achieve such and such so easily!”

The designation “culture of outrage” suggests that the negative feelings that I describe above can also be found in the wider movement. I believe that the practices of calling-out, checking privilege, spokespersonship, and allyship are each embedded in an emotional economy in which these negative affects plays a central role. This, of course, is not to say that these emotions and practices are not responses to real oppression. They most certainly are. Instead, what is of interest

here is the way in which particular emotions mobilize particular practices, and what the political and characterological consequences of this might be.

A second aspect of *ressentiment* is impotence, or an inability to act. Anti-racist feminism, as an activist and intellectual movement, certainly acts in a number of ways – whether through protests and demonstrations, lobbying for policy changes, or the production of critical academic work, among other forms of action. I explore this further in the next section where I discuss limitations of *ressentiment* in terms of its ability to capture anti-racist feminism.

Third, there is the *ressentimental* tendency to transvaluate values, whereby all that is associated with the oppressor is re-interpreted as bad or evil, while the ways of the oppressed are elevated as morally superior. I believe we can see this in anti-racist feminism and other identity movements as expressed by the concept of the oppression Olympics. As examined previously, the oppression Olympics refers to a tendency in progressive movements to apply a moral righteousness to those who are oppressed, while simultaneously lowering the moral status of those who hold privilege. In this inversed order, the more intersectional oppression one faces, the more they are seen to hold a moral authority, spokespersonship, and cultural capital over others. By the same token, those who hold the most structural power are viewed with the most mistrust and, I would even suggest, rejection.

A fourth point is the active investment in one's own injury. For Nietzsche and Scheler, this is characterized by a backward orientation where one is frequently consumed by the pain of the past while projecting imaginary assaults into the present. Is this an observable tendency in anti-racist feminism? On the one hand, I

do believe that past racial and gendered trauma still lives on in many of us, perhaps in part due to the lack of public acknowledgment that could facilitate healing. Even when such acknowledgment has been given, however, such as with the Truth and Reconciliation process underway with First Nations communities in Canada, this does not erase the continued effects of intergenerational trauma.<sup>28</sup> As such, I do believe that the past understandably haunts many people who have suffered historical, recent, and continued indignities. On the other hand, the tendency to “project” the past onto the present is perhaps a trickier matter to determine. To what extent do we, as anti-racist feminists, accurately identify encounters as racist/sexist and to what extent do we assume racism/sexism to be at work when there may be other factors at play? This is admittedly an uncomfortable and activating question to consider but perhaps also a valuable one.

A fifth symptom of *ressentiment* is the subject’s desire to blame another for her pain and to make this other suffer as a means of achieving both relief and pleasure in recrimination. In my experience, I have observed this phenomenon most in classroom and activist environments in which clear lines were drawn between “the oppressed” and “allies.” I have sensed an air of satisfaction in practices of silencing and shaming that, in my interpretation, seemed to betray a strong element of revenge – a certain pleasure in exercising the same power over the other that one is commonly subjected to herself. As Assam Ahmad and Andrea Smith discuss,

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to clarify while there has been some acknowledgment of past abuses, this by no means amounts to a challenge to settler colonialism that might afford true justice. As Glen Coulthard argues, reconciliatory politics takes on a deceptive “temporal character as the individual and collective process of overcoming the subsequent *legacy* of past abuse, not the abusive colonial structure itself” (*Red Skin, White Masks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 108).



practices like calling-out and confessing privilege can result in the oppressed taking part in a “perverse exercise of power”<sup>29</sup> whereby they might shame those with more privilege as a means of achieving temporary feelings of superiority and, in Brown’s words, pleasure in “making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does.”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, a *ressentimental* disposition is one of a *reactive* rather than affirmative nature. As discussed earlier, some central anti-racist feminist aims include exposing and challenging current oppression, demanding legal redress and recognition, and calling for equality and inclusion. While these interventions and demands are necessary, it is my concern that much less attention is dedicated toward affirmative visions of the future. The abandonment of an affirmative political vision in contemporary progressive movements has also been noted and discussed by scholars such as bell hooks and Robin Kelley, as well as activists like Sandra Kim – all of whom will be discussed in upcoming chapters.

Given the above discussion, to what extent is Nietzsche’s formulation of *ressentiment* a good fit for describing the social character of anti-racist feminism? I suggest that a number of resemblances *can* indeed be traced between Nietzsche’s concept and anti-racist feminist emotions, attitudes, and practices. These resonances are troubling in that they potentially signal a political project limited to “facilitate[ing] the empowerment of victims *as victims*”<sup>31</sup> with little capacity for affirmative possibilities. Before discussing the significance of these *ressentimental*

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<sup>29</sup> Assam Ahmad, “A Note on Call-Out Culture.”

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Stringer, “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim,’” 286.

aspects of anti-racist feminism any further, however, I would like to register two important shortcomings that complicate a diagnosis of *ressentiment*.

### ***Some Limitations***

The first limitation pertains to Nietzsche's neglect of the oppressiveness of those who dominate, and the pain of those who are subordinated in his rendering of the relationship between the master and slave. Nietzsche's lack of attention to these is surely due to his celebration of the dominant and contempt for those he labels as "the weak". Without proper appreciation of the violence of domination and the pain it inflicts, a charge of *ressentiment* not only re-victimizes those who suffer, but prevents inquiry into how to move past this pain and in doing so, undo the hold of *ressentiment*.

The second issue refers to Nietzsche's discussion of impotence as a central element of *ressentiment*. Unlike Nietzsche's slave who is unable to act, anti-racist feminists engage in many forms of action. Indeed, we write, research, protest, rally, organize, occupy, and more. The recent (2016) encampment outside of the Toronto Police Headquarters by a group of anti-racist feminists (specifically, feminists against anti-black racism) representing the Black Lives Matter movement is but one example of the agency of anti-racist feminists.<sup>32</sup> If the anti-racist feminist scholar or activist is thus able to "vent her spleen" as Scheler discusses, does that mean she will

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<sup>32</sup> This took place from March 20-April 4, 2016 in protest of a number of police shooting deaths of black males in the Toronto area.

“remain free from the inner venom of *ressentiment*”?<sup>33</sup> Or can there be a *ressentiment* that includes action?

In order to address the above limitations, I turn to the scholarship of Rebecca Stringer whose exploration of feminist *ressentiment* thoughtfully engages both the issue of Nietzsche’s bias toward the master and the possibility of an active *ressentiment*. Her work also provides a competing interpretation of feminist *ressentiment* to that of other feminist theorists who consider this term. Unlike her contemporaries, Stringer argues that *ressentiment* is capable of leading feminists to emancipatory aims. This section ends by considering the possibility of such a transformative *ressentiment*.

#### *A Bias Towards the Master*

There is no doubt that Nietzsche’s representation of the master and the slave is heavily biased against the slave and in support of the master. Indeed *Genealogy* should be understood as a political project that *aims* to denigrate the slave and elevate the master. In order to fully appreciate Nietzsche’s position, it is important to look at the socio-political context in which he was writing. Published in 1887, Nietzsche’s work can be read as an urgent appeal against the current of democratization that was sweeping Europe at the time.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, he is responding to the relatively late unification and development of the modern German

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<sup>33</sup> Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> For more on the political context in which Nietzsche was writing, see Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche and Napoleon: The Dionysian Conspiracy* (University of Wales Press, 2014); Frank Cameron and Don Dombowsky, *Political Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche: An Edited Anthology* (Springer, 2008); Christian Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also Rollo May’s *The Discovery of Being* (W. W. Norton, 1994) for an interesting discussion on how the political context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced the ideas of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Freud.

state and attendant changes in political culture. For Nietzsche, these changes inaugurated a levelling movement that threatened to pervert the superior values of the aristocracy, infecting the “higher man” with the inferior morality of the masses. As he warns, “the diminution and levelling of European man constitutes our greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian – there is no doubt that man is getting “better” all the time.”<sup>35</sup> The purpose of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* is to beckon his readers to understand these current developments as originating in the slave revolt in morality that began two thousand years earlier and which continues to threaten human prosperity by elevating “slavish mediocrity” over masterful power.<sup>36</sup>

Nietzsche makes his case for the superiority of the master over the slave in three primary ways: firstly, in naturalizing the master/slave relationship; secondly, through emphasizing the deceitfulness of the slave; and lastly, through engaging in a reverse victimology in favour of the master – all of which together minimize both the severity of the master’s oppression and the slave’s correspondent pain. In this

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<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Stringer, “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim,’” 298.

As Stringer discusses, Nietzsche’s rendering of master and slave morality in his earlier text *Beyond Good and Evil* is markedly more fluid. Indeed, it is here that he describes master and slave morality as “at times...occur[ing] directly alongside each other – even in the same human being, within a *single* soul” (in Stringer, 200). Stringer reconciles this inconsistency between *Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* through urging a reading of the text that is *performative*. That is, Nietzsche dramatizes his prose in order that it might *do* something to the reader – namely awaken them to what he conceives as disastrous socio-political developments.

section, I follow Stringer in exploring these three strategies in order to consider how they impact my exploration of *ressentiment* within anti-racist feminism.

For Nietzsche the master's superiority over the slave is a *natural* arrangement. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Nietzsche stresses the degree to which the slave is constitutionally weak, and the master, constitutionally strong. He does this most memorably in his metaphor of the lambs and birds of prey, which I quote at some length below:

That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no grounds for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: "these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb – would he not be good?" there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view this a little ironically and say: "we don't dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb."...To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that is should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength..."<sup>37</sup>

We see in the above passage what, at first sight, appears to be a sympathetic gesture on the part of Nietzsche toward the slave. In an uncharacteristic extension of understanding, we witness Nietzsche effectively saying: 'it is understandable that you would hate those who prey upon you but don't you realize, they have no choice!' Upon further consideration, however, this ostensibly gentle posture reveals itself to be no more than another insult – a rhetorical strategy by which Nietzsche expresses the unequivocal incommensurability that marks the relationship between the master and slave. To frame human beings in terms of "little lambs" and "birds of prey" severs them from one another as though they are creatures of an entirely

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<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 45.

different order.<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche's sympathy reveals itself to be no more than a patronizing gesture that denies any wrongdoing on the part of the oppressor given that their instinct to injure, torture, rape, and kill is beyond their choice. In Nietzsche's vocabulary, their actions express their *will to power*. As he describes,

Life is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation...exploitation...belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, Nietzsche's master and slave *do* hail from an entirely different order. He describes the modern noble as descending from "a pack of blond beasts"<sup>40</sup> who ruthlessly and forcefully imposed civilization on the formless masses, the ancestors of the "man of *ressentiment*." After a substantial period of subservient obedience, in which resentment grew but remained dormant, the slave revolt occurred, marking a new era in Nietzsche's genealogy: the *creative stage of ressentiment* (and the beginning of slave morality). It is in this stage that we encounter the mendacity of the slave – Nietzsche's second strategy of discrediting those who he designates as immutably weak. In what way is the slave deceptive? According to Nietzsche, we see the slave's deceit in his imagination of *choice*, which he applies to both his weakness, and the strength of the master. As Stringer notes,

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<sup>38</sup> The immutability of this relationship, its resistance to transcendence and its non-reciprocal structure of recognition distinguish it from the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. As discussed earlier (see footnote 6 of this chapter), however, despite some evidence that claims that Nietzsche rejected Hegel's model, some scholars argue for the existence of a dialectical movement within Nietzsche's conception.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 203.

<sup>40</sup> Despite the scholarly disputes around the exact character of Nietzsche's racial beliefs and his influence on Nazism, this notorious phrase, which makes explicit mention of the physiognomic differences between master and slave, clearly foreshadows the racial politics to unfold in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany.

Slave morality's grammar of causation and accountability separates the doer from the deed, transforming the beast of prey into a subject of free will, overlaying the master's expression of power with a moral drama in which the master is cast as a subject who chooses to behave in the way they do, a subject who is, therefore, free to behave otherwise. The slaves invent the concepts of blame and free will, by which they are able to suggest that the beast of prey is responsible for the other's suffering and is free to choose not to enact violence on the other.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of the slave's behaviour, the application of free will ('we *choose* to be this way') is furthermore accompanied with a valuation ('because it is *better*'). This move accomplishes what we discussed previously as the slave's "transvaluation of values." Nietzsche describes this process below:

Weakness is being lied into something *meritorious*...and impotence which does not requite into 'goodness of heart'; anxious lowliness into 'humility'; subjection to those one hates into 'obedience'...The inoffensiveness of the weak man, even the cowardice of which he has so much, his lingering at the door, his being ineluctably compelled to wait, here acquire flattering names, such as 'patience,' and are even called virtue itself; his inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness ('for *they* know not what they do – we alone know what *they* do!'). They also speak of 'loving one's enemies' – and sweat as they do so.<sup>42</sup>

What inspires Nietzsche's ire here is twofold: on the one hand, he is outraged by the manipulative and deceitful means through which the weak not only claim their lowliness, depravity, impotence and weakness as a choice but also celebrate these characteristics. On the other hand, Nietzsche is disturbed by the effect that their deceitfulness has on the nobility, the master race. Here we encounter the third way in which Nietzsche devalues the plight of the slave, standing instead on the side of the master. As Stringer puts it, he engages a *reverse victimology* whereby he mourns the effects of slave morality on the master. Specifically, he mourns the *moral*

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<sup>41</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 47.

*technology* with which the slave reproaches the master for his strength, his *will to power*, creating in him a sense of “bad conscience” or guilt.<sup>43</sup> As Stringer explains,

It is the slaves who invent the concepts of guilt, responsibility, blame and ethical consideration of the victimized other. These concepts (slave morality) act like poison on the healthy body of the noble, signalling a degenerative turn in the course of human history...The nobles’ untrammelled will to power is crippled by slave morality’s transformation of how human action is conceived. In the context of slave morality the beast of prey can no longer be what he is. His good conscience and animal innocence are destroyed by feelings of shame and guilt as he succumbs to the ‘ugly growth’ of bad conscience.<sup>44</sup>

For Nietzsche then, it is the master who is the *true* victim in this developing drama, *not* the slave. Indeed, even in the moments in which he does refer to them as “the oppressed” or “the deprived,” his sympathies still lie with the master. In his view, we remember, human prosperity depends on the masterful domination of the nobility over the lowly masses who should sacrifice themselves to it.

Nietzsche’s naturalization of the master/slave relationship, his focus on the slave’s deceitful imagining of free will and transvaluation of values, and his lamenting of the “victimizing” effects of these on the master, demonstrate an abiding support for those who dominate and a corresponding disdain for those who are dominated. For this reason, it would be correct to interpret his charge of *ressentiment* as an unquestionably disparaging one.

*What would a charge of ressentiment that stands on the side of the oppressed look like?* From an anti-racist feminist perspective, it is unthinkable to speak of a *reaction* to oppression without considering the very oppression that is being

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<sup>43</sup> I borrow the term “moral technology” from Stringer (see “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim’”).

<sup>44</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 137-138.



*responded to*. How might the current exploration of anti-racist feminist *ressentiment* change once this oppression is considered? The next section attempts to balance Nietzsche's bias for the master by considering the story of the slave. I do this not necessarily to clear anti-racist feminism from the charge of *ressentiment* but rather to create the conditions for a self-reflexive dialogue whereby we might grapple with some of our limiting tendencies.

### *The Story of the Slave*

As Stringer warns, diagnostic uses of Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* are susceptible to victim-blaming, whereby "the diagnostician of *ressentiment* assumes the role of Nietzsche's ascetic priest, encouraging the resentful towards introspective self-blame."<sup>45</sup> If we recall from earlier in the chapter, I discussed how Nietzsche furnishes the ascetic priest with the task of re-directing the *ressentiment* of the masses inward so that they are encouraged to blame themselves for their own disempowerment. As Stringer suggests, accounts of feminist *ressentiment* that fail to take Nietzsche's bias against the slave into consideration risk engaging in "resubordinative self-blame," rather than "productive reflexivity."<sup>46</sup> In order to undertake an exercise in productive reflexivity, in which the *ressentimental* tendencies of anti-racist feminism are examined, this investigation must be placed within the context of the slave's experience of oppression – that is, *our* experience as women of colour.

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<sup>45</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, 113.

<sup>46</sup> Stringer, "Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category 'Victim,'" 386.

As identified in the preceding section, Nietzsche's inherent prejudice against the slave prevents him from empathizing with the slave's plight and seeing *ressentiment* in anything but a reproachful light. To give voice to the pain of those who suffer, however, takes us deeper into the psyche of *ressentiment*. Indeed, I suggest that it is the pain of oppression that forms the primary emotional substratum, upon which *ressentiment* grows as a secondary affective configuration. Uncovering this pain can thus lead to a fuller understanding of the *ressentimental* practices – the calling-out, spokespersonship, allyship, checking privilege – that were identified earlier. How do we begin to capture the pain of racism and sexism?<sup>47</sup> The pain that many of us know so intimately as anti-racist feminists? Indeed, the pain that most likely made us turn to anti-racist feminism in the first place?

Understanding the nature of pain has not been an easy task for scholars.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, one of the most influential works on pain, Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, argues for the inexpressibility of physical suffering. As Scarry claims,

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language... Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> While I focus on the psychic harms of racialization in this section, there are a growing number of studies interested in identifying racism's impact on the body. Indeed, these investigations have shown that racist encounters "cumulatively...act like sort of low-grade microtraumas that can then end up hurting you and your biology. It's not just having your feelings hurt. It's having your biology hurt as well," quote from Dr. Roberto Montenegro in Rae Ellen Bichell, "Scientists Start To Tease Out The Subtler Ways Racism Hurts Health," *NPR*, November 11, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> This section by no means offers an exhaustive summation of critical perspectives on pain in contemporary scholarship.

<sup>49</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

For Scarry, physical pain is an immutably interior experience, which can only be known by the one who suffers. To know someone else's pain is invariably a knowledge that is marred with doubt, as one can never truly grasp what the other feels.

Veena Das counters Scarry's contention by making a case for the "alternative forms of language and meditation that we can rely upon in order to understand pain."<sup>50</sup> Looking at the violence of partition in India that resulted in 100,000 women being abducted and raped, Das asks "how one should inhabit such a world that has been made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss."<sup>51</sup> She analyzes women's incantations of lament and rituals of mourning as ways in which certain types of pain can be expressed, while other forms of pain – such as that associated with sexual violence – are introjected by the victim to be housed in silence within them. Unlike Scarry who emphasizes the isolation that accompanies pain, Das traces the relational and social aspects of it:

In this movement between bodies, the sentence "I am in pain" becomes the conduit through which I may move out of an inexpressible privacy and suffocation of my pain. This does not mean that I am understood. Wittgenstein uses the route of a philosophical grammar to say that this is not an indicative statement, although it may have the formal appearance of one. It is the beginning of a language game. Pain, in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim asking for acknowledgment, which may be given or denied. In either case, it is not a referential statement that is simply pointing to an inner object.

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<sup>50</sup> Amali Ibrahim, "The (In)Communicability of Pain: Some Issues from the Anthropology of Violence," The Reading Group, December 28, 2006, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Veena Das, "Language and Body- Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 67.

Das, along with Arthur Kleinman and Margaret Lock “sugges[t] that we should move away from looking at pain as a phenomenon experienced by the individual to looking at the social dimensions of pain, or how pain can be experienced by a collectivity.”<sup>52</sup> For my purposes, this idea of collective pain, or what these authors term “social suffering” better captures the experiences of racial and gendered forms of oppression that this dissertation explores. This allows for an analysis of pain that recognizes “that pain is not just a sensation that merely resides in the individual body but it is also a condition that has been produced by overarching structures of power in the society.”<sup>53</sup> While physical violence is most certainly one aspect of such oppression, Das and Scarry’s analyses do not adequately offer us a means of conceptualizing the “‘soft knife’ of routine processes of ordinary oppression.”<sup>54</sup>

Amali Ibrahim highlights the importance of recognizing forms of pain beyond physical violence, including emotional suffering. He examines Lisa Green’s ethnography on Mayan widows whose husbands were murdered by Guatemalan military forces in the 1970s and 1980s in a campaign to obliterate left-wing insurgents, as a means of discussing how the fear experienced by these widows constitutes a significant type of social suffering. Specifically, he calls attention to how their psychological distress damages their “ontological security” by “creat[ing] a situation where one cannot trust oneself, one’s own judgments and one’s

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<sup>52</sup> Amali Ibrahim, “The (In)Communicability of Pain: Some Issues from the Anthropology of Violence,” 8.

<sup>53</sup> Amali Ibrahim, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Kleinman et al. in Amali Ibrahim, 8.

surroundings.”<sup>55</sup> While the Mayan case is certainly not one of “ordinary oppression,” UK-based psychotherapist Guilaine Kinouani applies the concept of ontological (in)security to experiences of racialization. Using R.D. Laing’s work, she argues that, “racism implies the systematic negation of the other coupled with a wilful effort to deny them every attribute of humanity including, the fundamental capacity to know reality and indeed trust the reality as they apprehend it.”<sup>56</sup> White denial of this racism, in turn, “can be thought of as depriving people of colour of the opportunity to know themselves and to integrate all aspects of their self, as we are socialised into cutting ourselves off from our phenomenological reality.”<sup>57</sup>

For many of us, it was the work of Frantz Fanon that first exposed us to what it might look like to articulate the deeply fragmenting and ontologically destabilizing effects of racialization. As he famously narrates in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. "Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me. "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history... Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by an epidermal schema...Nausea... I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'." On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me

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<sup>55</sup> Amali Ibrahim, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Guilaine Kinouani, “White Denial, Black Mental Health and Ontological Insecurity,” *Race Reflections* (blog), December 11, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Guilaine Kinouani.

but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? ... Where shall I hide? "Look at the n\*\*\*\*r! ... Mama, a Negro! ... Hell, he's getting mad ... Take no notice, sir, he does not know you are as civilized as we..." My body was given to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a n\*\*\*\*r, it's cold, the n\*\*\*\*r is shivering, the n\*\*\*\*r is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the n\*\*\*\*r, the n\*\*\*\*r is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the n\*\*\*\*r is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the n\*\*\*\*r's going to eat me up...<sup>58</sup>

Fanon's haunting account cogently traces the phenomenological movement from subject to object. He recalls how it feels to *become an object*, a mere thing that can be pointed at by a (white) child on the train. In this passage, we encounter Fanon's ontological crumbling. His initial amusement implies a subject, a sense of personhood capable of reacting to the world. His ability to laugh is soon overwhelmed by the weight of a gaze that "assails" his corporeal integrity, replacing it with the fact of his blackness. He feels himself disintegrate, breaking apart into competing selves as his individuality is both radically erased and replaced by dehumanizing racial stereotypes. Unable to recover himself, he disassociates, taking refuge in an amputated existence.

I suggest that Fanon's narrative is not just powerful due to his skill in capturing and giving words to the psychic violence of his experience but also because of his ability to capture how many people of colour also feel in racialized encounters. In being pointed to and called a "Negro!" Fanon witnesses what it feels like to be *named* by the dominant Other and the hurtful and dehumanizing effects of this naming. Indeed to be called a "Negro" or "black girl" or "brown girl" carries with

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<sup>58</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111–14.

it stubborn and all-encompassing images, histories, and ideas – all of which are coded as “different,” “strange,” “backward,” “ugly,” and almost uniformly bad. To be a person of colour in a racialized society is an experience of humiliation. An experience that is rife with many reminders of one’s inherent inferiority, immutable difference, and undesirability. It is an experience in which one’s individual qualities and personality are routinely erased in favour of a multitude of degrading beliefs that come to be projected onto one’s body – a deeply painful experience that Fanon describes with profound acuity.

On a different train, some years later, Audre Lorde offers us another vivid depiction of racism:

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother’s sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. The wet smell of winter clothes, the train’s lurching. My mother spots an almost empty seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat close to her.

I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she’s looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realise there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch. The fur brushes my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train.

Born and bred a New York City child, I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down. No word has been spoken. I’m afraid to say anything to my mother because I don’t know what I have done. I look at the side of my snow pants secretly. Is there something on them? Something’s going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 147–48.

Similar to Fanon's narrative, Lorde invites us into the subjective experience of racialization as we see it, in this case, inflected with class contempt. We follow her as she recalls her confusion as a small child, slowly realizing that the loathsome gaze of the white woman next to her is aimed *at her*. Indeed, she discovers that this "very bad" thing that has evoked this woman's horror is not a roach between the seats, or something on her snowsuit but she, herself. Lorde leaves us with the double image of her shame, as she sits in confusion over what she "has done," and the woman's look of hatred that still haunts her so many years later.

As in Fanon's account, Lorde's recollection emphasizes the power of the gaze. The women's disdain and disgust are palpable to the little girl, who clearly comprehends that the woman is responding to something horrible. The moment in which she realizes that it is in fact *her* that is this hateful thing is marked with confusion and shame. To be the object of disgust and hatred *is* a confusing and shameful thing for those of us who have felt it. Lorde's encounter is even more resonant due to the *unspoken* nature of the racism. It is more common than not to be in situations where racism and sexism (as well as other oppressions) are conveyed in silent ways that nonetheless are immediately perceptible to those who experience them. These messages invariably communicate that: *You don't belong here. You are not as good as we are.*

A final story, Nellie Wong's poem "When I Was Growing Up," echoes many of these themes and how they become internalized in the psyche:

I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How? you ask.



Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me  
I was dark and I believed my own darkness  
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision

when I was growing up, my sisters  
with fair skin got praised  
for their beauty, and in the dark  
I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines  
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,  
sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become  
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear  
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud  
of my English, my grammar, my spelling  
fitting into the group of smart children  
smart Chinese children, fitting in,  
belonging (getting in line)

when I was growing up and went to high school,  
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,  
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere sweaters,  
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have  
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered  
for American food, American styles,  
coded: white and even to me, a child  
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese  
was feeling foreign, was limiting,  
was un-American

when I was growing up and a white man wanted  
to take me out, I thought I was special,  
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit  
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed  
of some yellow men, their small bones,  
their frail bodies, their spitting  
on the streets, their coughing,  
their lying in sunless rooms,

shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask  
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.  
They named all colors except white, the shell  
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt  
dirty. I thought that god  
made white people clean  
and no matter how much I bathed,  
I could not change, I could not shed  
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore  
I would run away to purple mountains,  
houses by the sea with nothing over  
my head, with space to breathe,  
uncongested with yellow people in an area  
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned  
was a ghetto, one of many hearts  
of Asian America

I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How many more ways? you ask.  
Haven't I told you enough?<sup>60</sup>

Wong's poem is able to capture some of the persistent and recurrent features of the lived experience of racialized, gendered, and classed oppression. We follow Wong as she is first informed of her "darkness" – a category that clearly excludes beauty. She comes to internalize this discovery, believing her darkness to be who she truly is ("in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision"). Despite this imprisonment of race, Wong desperately attempts to transcend its unwelcomed imposition, seeking instruction in magazines on how to become "a woman, a desirable woman." She is unable to escape her "darkness," however, no matter how

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<sup>60</sup> Nellie Wong, "When I Was Growing Up," in *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (SUNY Press, 2015), 5–6.

much she bathes, fantasizes of being white, or perfects her English. Her experience is one of perpetual longing. That is, a longing for the imported clothes and curly hair of her richer classmates, a longing for American food and styles, and ultimately a longing to belong to a world she is immutably barred from as a Chinese-American girl. Regardless of this, Wong is still desperate to fit in, even if it means conforming to a fetishized stereotype of the “oriental chick” in exchange for limited acceptance. Her poem is also marked by a deep shame – at the “dirtiness” of her skin, at the sight of “some yellow men” shooting up in dark rooms. In the final few passages we encounter Wong’s fantasy of escape, sensing that underlying her dream of fleeing her crowded and impoverished Chinatown neighbourhood, is a wish to escape from the shackles of her racialized and gendered experience as well.

Wong’s account, as well as that of Fanon and Lorde intensely capture the pain that many of us know intimately as women of colour. I would like to draw attention to a few especially salient points of convergence in their accounts. The first is a deep feeling of exclusion. The authors of all three stories very strongly feel that they do not belong. Their “otherness” or “strangeness” is moreover something that they cannot transcend, no matter their efforts.

Secondly, this difference is marked by a sense of inferiority. This inferiority is first *imposed externally*, often in the form of dehumanizing stereotypes and beliefs, which are then *internalized emotionally*. As we see in Lorde’s account, her early encounter with the white woman on the train *teaches* her that she is contemptible, something that she later “accepts” as true. Wong similarly writes of how she gets called dark, and then later starts believing in her darkness. The black man, as Fanon

recounts, is mean, bad, and ugly, next to the handsome little boy who cowers in his presence. It is Fanon's internalization of these beliefs that leads to his fragmentation.

The fragmentation, self-objectification, and self-loathing of racialization are the third point I raise. The hatred, fear, exclusion, invisibility/hyper-visibility and mockery that one feels at the hands of the dominant group radically disturb one's ability to form a consistent and affirmative subjectivity. These assaults can be explicit and violent, or silent and subtle. No matter their form, they invariably damage the psychic health of the recipient who is repeatedly told: *you are not good enough* and that *you don't belong here*. These feelings often then result in a pervading sense of *shame* and a sense of deep unworthiness.

Fourthly, the experience of racialization is inextricably tied to one's experience of gender and class. Fanon's experience in the train is that of a professional black man, just as Lorde and Wong's experiences are that of poor women (or child in Lorde's case) of colour. We might make a further distinction between the *type* of racial category that is imposed on one seeing as a Chinese woman undoubtedly experiences race in a different manner than a black woman in North America. What I would like to emphasize, however, is the degree to which the overarching messages remain the same. These messages tell women of colour from a very young age that we are inherently unworthy, unwanted, and deeply flawed. The profound psychic pain of these messages is further compounded by corresponding rates of physical and emotional forms of violence, social and cultural exclusion, and economic deprivation.

Finally, Das' thesis on the communicability of pain is upheld by these very writings offered by Fanon, Lorde, and Wong, which demonstrate how language can be used to express suffering. It is important to mark that the type of suffering articulated in these passages is emotional in nature and not physical. Still, Ibrahim stresses how diverse textual and visual representations can allow victims of emotional and physical social suffering to express their pain. This dissertation argues that this pain also finds its expressibility in the rage, hatred, moral reproach, and vengefulness of *ressentiment*. It is *this* pain that must be acknowledged and honoured while engaging in a self-reflexive critique of certain *ressentimental* tendencies and practices within anti-racist feminism. Indeed, as I argue later in this chapter, it is in facing and feeling this pain that we might avoid getting "stuck" in *ressentiment*.

Nietzsche's insistence on oppression as a natural expression of the master, rather than a calculating capacity to objectify, deprive, and harm; and his refusal to see the violent impact of this oppression on the slave as a *human* suffering (rather than a suffering tethered to weakness) marks, in the words of Das, a failing not "of the intellect but [a] failing of the spirit,"<sup>61</sup> and indeed, is something that must be taken into consideration when using his concept of *ressentiment*.

### *An Active Ressentiment?*

In the last section, I discussed the way in which Nietzsche's preference for the master and disdain for the slave poses a serious limitation to the use of his

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<sup>61</sup> Das, "Language and body," 67. Das, of course, is not referring to Nietzsche here specifically, but to anyone who denies the pain of the other.

concept in engaging in a sympathetic self-critique of certain tendencies and practices that display *ressentimental* characteristics within anti-racist feminism. This section looks at a second key limit, one that concerns the appropriateness of *ressentiment* in its application to anti-racist feminism. This limit concerns *action*, that is, anti-racist feminism's strong tradition in engaging in active resistance, revolt, protest, radical scholarship, and other forms of agentic behaviour. This indisputable aspect of the movement challenges charges of *ressentiment* made by Brown and other scholars, seeing as *ressentiment* as envisioned by Nietzsche and Scheler is a fundamentally *impotent* psychological disposition. While Brown and others do not attend to this contradiction, Rebecca Stringer does. Indeed, Stringer offers a re-reading of Nietzsche that incorporates action into his schema. Moreover, she argues that not only is action possible within the structure of *ressentiment* but that in the feminist context, it can also be *emancipatory*. This subsection focuses on the question of action within *ressentiment* while the next looks at its potential usefulness for emancipatory aims.

Let us recall that a central characteristic of the slave is his fundamental impotence outside of his transvaluation of values. We, as anti-racist feminists, to the contrary, regularly and as we have observed, often forcefully, speak our truths and *act* in our everyday lives. Indeed, calling-out is a form of action, as is protesting at rallies, and engaging in feminist scholarship, among many other forms. In Scheler's formulation of *ressentiment*, the mere shaking of the slave's fist would constitute the action necessary to discharge his resentful feelings. Does this signal the

inapplicability of *ressentiment* to the anti-racist feminist context or might there be another way to account for its active nature?

Stringer's work attempts to not only discuss this contradiction but also resolve it by *reading action into ressentiment*. She accomplishes this by locating a third stage in Nietzsche's formulation of the concept. As Stringer argues, *ressentiment* can be formulated as moving through three distinct moments.<sup>62</sup> The first has been termed the "noncreative" or "brute" stage and refers to the starting condition in which the slave is "maximally repressed."<sup>63</sup> The second is the "creative" stage, or the moment in which the slave says "no" and actively inverts dominant values, marking the beginnings of slave morality. The third stage, argues Stringer, is the one in which emancipatory action is possible. As she posits, this third stage refers to the *explosive* moment in *ressentiment*, whereby the slave revolts against the master. For Stringer, Nietzsche only acknowledges this stage implicitly in his discussion of the two strategies by which *ressentiment* can be contained so as to protect the social order. As she reasons:

That creative *ressentiment* has an explosive quality and poses a threat to the sociopolitical order within which it appears is clear from Nietzsche's account of this threat (anarchy) but also from the time he spends detailing the two primary strategies the powerful employ to diffuse the threat posed by slaves who contest their social constitution as slaves.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Stringer follows Ridley and Deleuze in making this distinction. See Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, 132. Towards the end of her book, Stringer goes further to posit the possibility of a *fourth* phase that entails "a refusal of asceticism that assumes the form of 'reclaiming' slave morality and undertakes the work of disarticulating its 'best ideas' from their ascetic double" (155).

<sup>63</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 141.

<sup>64</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 148.

We recall from earlier in the chapter that Nietzsche's two tactics of managing *ressentiment* consist of legalism and the ascetic priest – both geared toward the *redirection of ressentiment*. Nietzsche describes legalism as a mechanism by which those who dominate can quell the *ressentiment* of the masses. This is accomplished:

...partly by taking the object of *ressentiment* out of the hands of revenge, partly by substituting for revenge the struggle against the enemies of peace and order, partly by devising and in some cases imposing settlements, partly by elevating certain equivalences for injuries into norms to which from then on *ressentiment* is once and for all directed.<sup>65</sup>

Legalism thus provides the powerful with an effective means of redirecting the rancorous feelings of the weak by furnishing them with an institution through which their injuries might be addressed. Stringer notes that feminist reformism, that is, feminist efforts to seek redress through the law, operates in precisely this manner. These efforts have resulted in changes in legislation around sexual violence, employment equity, reproductive rights, and many others. In such instances, however, "law reform is no substitute for substantive socio-political change, and has the effect of extending the power of law to divert, contain and recuperate radical political projects and energies."<sup>66</sup> Legalism, thus, ultimately functions as a re-subordinative device that prevents, or at least postpones, a more radical reckoning with power. For Stringer, Nietzsche's framing of legalism in such a manner gestures towards his acknowledgment that such an active reckoning is indeed possible.

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<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 75.

<sup>66</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 150-151.



Nietzsche's second strategy for the containment of *ressentiment* provides Stringer with further evidence for its explosive and active potentiality: the ascetic priest. The ascetic priest can be described as a "liminal" figure that straddles the boundary between the weak and the strong.<sup>67</sup> Despite his ability to feign strength and dominate over the weak, the ascetic priest, whose role it is to contain and redirect the *ressentiment* of the masses, is also infected with the very disease that he treats. Nietzsche describes the priest as performing a number of tasks, which simultaneously protect the weak from the wiles of the strong while also preventing the weak from infecting the strong with their weakness. Like with legalism, however, the most important task of the priest is the rerouting of *ressentiment*. He redirects the *ressentimental* feelings of the weak squarely back on themselves stating, "*you alone are to blame for yourself!*"<sup>68</sup>

As Nietzsche describes, the priest does this through "such paradoxical and paralogical concepts as 'guilt,' 'sin,' 'sinfulness,' 'depravity,' [and] 'damnation'" in order to "render the sick to a certain degree *harmless*, to work the self-destruction of the incurable, to direct the *ressentiment* of the less severely inflicted sternly back upon themselves – and in this way *exploit* the bad instincts of all sufferers for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-overcoming."<sup>69</sup> As can be gathered from this description, Nietzsche has no trust in the ascetic priest's ability to offer a true cure to the suffering of the weak. The most he can do is *anesthetise* their pain, and for this, Nietzsche commends Christianity as "a great treasure house

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<sup>67</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 151.

<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 128.

<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, 128.

of ingenious means of consolation.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed for Nietzsche, the function of all world religions is to combat the suffering of the masses.

Nietzsche lists a number of methods in which the ascetic priest employs religion as a means of offering consolation, including 1) deadening desire through reducing the feeling of life (religious escapism); 2) mechanical activity (“the blessings of work”)<sup>71</sup>; 3) petty pleasure (especially love of one’s neighbour); 4) congregation (communal feelings of power); and 5) “orgies of feeling” (overwhelming one’s pain with the evocation of a stronger emotion).<sup>72</sup> As Stringer describes, this “range of labours the priest performs through this interweaving of suffering, guilt and sin...are designed to dispel the slave’s ‘discontent with his lot’ by encouraging them towards obedience rewarded with redemption in the afterlife.”<sup>73</sup> According to Stringer, it is in this way that the priest redirects the slave’s energy away from the “explosive threat of *ressentiment*.”<sup>74</sup>

How convincing is Stringer’s argument regarding the existence of this third and explosive stage of *ressentiment*? A stage in which the slave might *act* against the master? On the one hand, Stringer’s question is certainly compelling: why *does* Nietzsche expend so much energy expounding methods by which *ressentiment* can be contained if it poses no threat to the powerful (with whom he aligns himself)? On the other hand, it must be remembered that Nietzsche *does* envision the slave as a *threat* – a point that he does not conceal. Indeed, perhaps the central purpose of the

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<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche, 130.

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, 134.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche expounds these methods in great detail in his *Genealogy*, 131-139.

<sup>73</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 152.

<sup>74</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 152.

*Genealogy* is to awaken his contemporaries precisely to this threat. I would argue that it is the *nature* of this threat that is actually being contested here. Nietzsche clearly decries the imposition of slave *morality*, seeing it as posing an imminent and serious danger to the *moral* character of the noble. He certainly fears the slave might “infect” and “emasculate” the master with his inverted world of values that celebrate weakness while reprimanding strength. As he laments, “undoubtedly if they succeeded in *poisoning the consciences* of the fortunate with their own misery, with all misery, so that one day the fortunate began to be ashamed of their good fortune and perhaps said to one another: ‘it is disgraceful to be fortunate: *there is too much misery!*’”<sup>75</sup> It is *this* “poisoning of the consciences” that Nietzsche refers to as the “ultimate, subtlest, sublimest triumph of revenge.”<sup>76</sup> For him, it is a triumph that follows a slow attrition of the master by the slave, whose “inexhaustible and insatiable...outbursts against the fortunate and happy” and “masquerades of revenge and pretexts for revenge” finally wear the master down, undermining his trust in life, in humanity and in himself.<sup>77</sup>

There are a few things to note here. The first is that Nietzsche *does* fear that there will be a “reckoning” in which the weak will overtake the strong. He describes this, however, as a *moral* reckoning. In fact he locates the first instance of this struggle in the slave revolt two thousand years earlier. His present fear concerns the spread and contagion of these values, and worldview as he sees them slowly seeping into the moral, political, and cultural fabric of European society. The second thing to

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<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, 124, emphasis in original.

<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche, 124.

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche, 124, 122.

note is that this moral reckoning does include practices that might be thought of as action. Indeed, as we see above, Nietzsche refers to the “inexhaustible and insatiable outbursts” of the slave against the master. What can furthermore be discerned from his description of Legalism is that the masses must protest/lobby/make demands in order for the institution to serve its mediating function. Somewhat of a contradiction can thus be located in Nietzsche’s account. On the one hand, he refers to the man of *ressentiment* as he who “understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.”<sup>78</sup> The man of *ressentiment* is distinctly “poor, impotent [and] lowly.”<sup>79</sup> And yet, on the other hand, he is also capable of limitless outbursts, reproachful moralizing, and seeking remediation through the Law.

As Stringer emphasizes, the subject of *ressentiment* also nurtures an “explosive” quality. How does Nietzsche describe this? In a reference to “priestly aristocracies,” he mentions their “unhealthy” ascetic habits which “turn them away from action and alternate between brooding and emotional explosions.”<sup>80</sup> In another reference, Nietzsche discusses the role of the ascetic priest: “he fights with cunning and severity and in secret against anarchy and ever-threatening disintegration within the herd, in which the most dangerous of all explosives, *ressentiment*, is constantly accumulating. So to detonate this explosive that it does not blow up herd and herdsman is his essential art, as it is his supreme utility.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche, 38.

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, 126-127.

What can be made of these accounts? What exactly is the *nature* of this explosive capacity? In the first instance it can be understood as an *emotional* explosiveness framed in opposition to action. In the second, Nietzsche describes *ressentiment* as a constantly accruing explosive energy that threatens to wreak anarchy *within* the herd – so as to “blow up” both the herd (the *ressentimental* masses) and the herdsman (the ascetic priest). Although there is no reference here to the master class, we might infer that anarchy and disintegration in the herd and the annihilation of the priest would undoubtedly affect the nobility – especially given that the role of the ascetic priest is to separate the herd from the master class. The question still remains as to what form this explosion might take and exactly how it would threaten the masses. It is Stringer’s assertion that this explosive quality translates into an “actual reckoning” which leads to an “unruly break with obedience and act[s] as the potential source of the slave’s power in the world.”<sup>82</sup> For Stringer, “by recasting enslavement as a preventable wrong rather than a necessary sacrifice, [the] slave revolt opens social being to contingency, enabling the slave to imagine becoming something other than a slave.”<sup>83</sup>

I agree with Stringer that *ressentiment* offers the necessary moral scaffolding upon which the slave can realize his ontological contingency, and it is as a result of this contingency that he may agitate for change. I would like to suggest however, that his agitations are severely circumscribed by the nature of his *ressentimental* disposition – so much so that Nietzsche repudiates their active dimension. That is, given the *reactive* character of *ressentiment*, it is possible that Nietzsche recognizes

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<sup>82</sup> Stringer, “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim,’” 330.

<sup>83</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, 142.

the slave's ability to speak and act in the world (remember, his silence and humility are only *provisional*) but denies their affirmative, productive, and creative nature, thus rejecting them as constituting *true* action. Thus, my view here is that while a third *active* stage can be read into *ressentiment*, I doubt the degree to which this stage possesses the explosive and transformative potentiality that Stringer attributes. I explore this further in the next section.

### *A Transformative Ressentiment?*

As noted previously, Stringer not only reads action into *ressentiment* but *transformative* potentiality. She does this by identifying a third and explosive stage in which the realization that “self and world could be otherwise...open[s] up the very possibility of identificatory resignification, the very possibility of becoming something other than what one is considered.”<sup>84</sup> In realizing the free will of both himself and the master, the slave is presented with the prospect of “assuming political agency and claiming power in the world.”<sup>85</sup> For Stringer, *ressentiment* is thus positively interpreted “as an effect of domination that becomes a source of collective strength, creativity and, as such, a potent weapon against domination.”<sup>86</sup> Feminism, Stringer contends, has already entered this third and explosive stage. She admits that *ressentiment* does include the possibility of self-subversion but she sees these self-subversive tendencies as instances where the explosive element of *ressentiment* has been diverted or contained. Stringer indeed regards *ressentiment* as somewhat of a “revolutionary spirit,” arguing that it is thus not “a matter of

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<sup>84</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 146.

<sup>85</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 146.

<sup>86</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 133.

moving feminism *beyond resentment*, but rather of retaining or regaining feminist *resentment's* explosive – that is, fierce, intelligently impertinent, uncompromising and *plastically* creative dimension.”<sup>87</sup> This is a dimension, she contends, that was at its peak during the women’s movement of the late 1960s but which has since been largely contained by political reformism. Stringer entrusts that the “cleverness” that Nietzsche accords to the slave will provide feminists with the self-reflection they need to protect their political agenda from the lures of reformism that threaten their emancipatory aims.<sup>88</sup> In her final statement, Stringer constructs *resentment* as a necessary vehicle that will ultimately deliver feminists not only from the need of *resentment*, but of feminism itself.<sup>89</sup>

Stringer’s analysis offers a hopeful and redemptive analysis of the *resentimental* tendencies within anti-racist feminism. Her work presents a number of questions, such as: Could it be that the practices of calling-out, checking privilege, spokespersonship, allyship and the *resentimental* emotions and logics that animate them, might *fuel* an anti-racist feminist revolution rather than thwart it? Could it be that anger, rage, suspicion, hatred, resentment and the desire to avenge are the exact ingredients that are *needed* to create transformative social change? In this

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<sup>87</sup> Stringer, “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim,’” 354. In her later publication, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, Stringer would state that, “While the interpretation of feminism and *resentiment* I have provided here departs from those articulated in existing theorizations of feminism and *resentiment*, I do ultimately agree that the goal is to move ‘beyond *resentiment*’. However, I see this in the sociological sense of moving beyond socio-political and economic arrangements that institute conditions of gaping inequality. Such a movement necessarily involves critiquing and countering the forms of discursive asceticism that attempt to rebaptize these conditions as the final shape of human freedom” (155).

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche discusses the cleverness of the slave on page 38 of *Genealogy*.

<sup>89</sup> In “Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category ‘Victim.’”

section I suggest that the answer to these questions is both *yes* and *no*. I start by discussing some points of convergence with Stringer's view before registering some concerns.

Stringer's positive appraisal of *ressentiment* continues the story of the slave that I began developing earlier in the chapter. She chronicles the moment in which the slave's suffering is inducted into a moral economy through which he understands his inferiority as contingent, rather than absolute. It is through developing this analysis that the slave is able to move into the realm of action against the master. That is, in realizing that the master/slave arrangement is not a *natural* expression of power, the slave realizes, in Stringer's words, that the socio-political order is open to contingency. In (Western) feminism, this moment often came about through the practice of *consciousness raising (C-R)* – a method developed by feminists during the women's movement of the 1960s. C-R encourages women to come together and share their experiences for the purpose of understanding how their *particularistic* suffering stems from *socio-political oppression*. As Sandra Bartky explains below, the resulting consciousness is one of both victimization (in realizing one's oppression) and strength (in discovering one's personal and collective power):

Feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization ... to come to see oneself as a victim, to have such an altered perception of oneself and of one's society is not to see things in the same old way while merely judging them differently ... [t]he consciousness of victimization is a divided consciousness. To see myself as a victim is to know that I have already sustained injury, that I live exposed to injury, that I have been at worst humiliated, at best diminished in my being. But at the same time, feminist consciousness is a joyous consciousness of one's own power, of the possibility of unprecedented personal growth and the release of energy long suppressed. Thus, feminist consciousness is both a consciousness of weakness and a consciousness of



strength. But this division in the way we apprehend ourselves has a positive effect, for it leads to the search both for ways of overcoming those weaknesses in ourselves which support the system and for direct forms of struggle against the system itself.<sup>90</sup>

The realization of one's victimization is a startling experience – as I discussed in my self-reflexive account. For women of colour, it is the moment in which we may learn that the rejection, inferiority, self-loathing and shame that we know so intimately are not due to our intrinsic unworthiness but are rather expressive of a gendered/racial order that systematically devalues who we are and what we are able to contribute. For many of us, this discovery is met with intense *anger*. As Karen Mueller and Margie Whittaker Leidig write, this anger is often encouraged and even cultivated by C-R groups:

The Women's Movement as a whole, both in its literature and its support groups, encourages the expression of women's anger. The underlying message of the majority of its articles, research, stories is to encourage women to become aware of what has been done to women by institutions, ceremonies, patterns of thinking, and the domination of men, in general. The effect of this literature, as well as the direct effect of most consciousness-raising (C-R) groups is to produce anger in women because they realize the immensity of the conditioning system, its subtlety, and the universality of women's experiences in this system.<sup>91</sup>

Why might anti-oppressionist struggles endeavour to produce anger? As the 2014 documentary, "She's Beautiful When She's Angry" vividly illustrates, anger acts as a crucial mobilizing force when facing oppressive institutions, beliefs and practices. The film, which chronicles the progression of the Women's Liberation Movement from the 1960s to the present, features a number of angry protests, and

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<sup>90</sup> Sandra Bartky, quoted in Stringer, "Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category 'Victim,'" 134.

<sup>91</sup> Karen Mueller and Margie Whittaker Leidig, "Women's Anger and Feminist Therapy," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1, no. 3 (1976): 23–30.

impassioned speeches that repudiate patriarchy, as well as racism, and heterosexism. As one feminist states in the film, "Maybe the anger was what carried us through and made us fearless."<sup>92</sup>

Although the above accounts make reference to the women's movement of the 1960s, and although consciousness-raising no longer takes place in the same form as it did in the past,<sup>93</sup> anger remains a powerful force, both in the political awareness stage of feminism, as well as its politically active stage. Indeed, anger for feminists has also been praised for its *transformative* potentiality. As Audre Lorde discusses:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, as discussed in the previous chapter, emotions like anger can play an important role in instigating energy for social change. Anger as a shared emotion against an enemy, can also be the basis for reciprocal feelings of solidarity. As feminist social psychologist Carol Tavris posits:

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<sup>92</sup> Mary Dore, *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, Documentary, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> I would argue that a large part of consciousness-raising takes place today in the university classroom. Indeed, for myself and many feminists of my generation – as discussed previously – it was our first year Women's Studies classes that gave us the language and concepts with which to understand and speak about our experiences of oppression.

<sup>94</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut, June 1981).

Rage, I believe, is essential to the first phase of a social movement. It unifies disparate members of a group against a common enemy; the group becomes defined by its anger.<sup>95</sup>

This solidarity against a common enemy is not only politically advantageous but also, I suggest, offers members a wider sense of belonging that compensates for the societal exclusion that accompanies their oppression. Shared anger and rage can thus be pleasurable due to the feelings of inclusivity that they engender among individuals who share similar experiences of oppression – something that social movement theorists of emotion have also noted.<sup>96</sup>

While anger may contain the potentiality to inspire political action and foment solidarity between members, the *form* that the anger takes, as well as the *type* of political action and solidarity that it enables is largely determined by the *social character* that it is informed by. To what extent can a *ressentimental* character mobilize feminist anger toward the goal of social and political transformation? We see that on Stringer's view, it is *ressentiment* that produces not only the consciousness that is required for action but the creativity, courage, and cleverness with which to challenge domination and achieve emancipatory change. I believe Stringer is correct in identifying *ressentiment's* ability to *prepare* the slave for transformative political action. Given the nature of *ressentiment*, however, I doubt the degree to which it is capable of the affirmative, visionary, and emancipatory action imputed by Stringer.

In order to explain this view further, I would like to highlight a few points. The first concerns this nature of *ressentiment* that I refer to. Let us remember that

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<sup>95</sup> Carol Tavris, *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), 272.

<sup>96</sup> See Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest"; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, *Passionate Politics*.

both Nietzsche and Scheler refer to *ressentiment's* "embittering" and "poisoning" of the personality.<sup>97</sup> It is a psyche that is effectively *stuck* in its feelings of hatred, bitterness, spite, anger, and suspicion. As Nietzsche describes, to be *ressentimental* is to hold grudges, to be unable to "get over" one's psychological pain.<sup>98</sup> He compares the begrudging nature of the man of *ressentiment* with that of the noble in the following passage:

*Ressentiment* itself, if it should appear in the noble man, consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction, and therefore does not *poison*: on the other hand, it fails to appear at all on countless occasions on which it inevitably appears in the weak and impotent....Such a man shakes off with a *single* shrug many vermin that eat deep into others.<sup>99</sup>

In comparison to the noble man described above, Nietzsche describes the *ressentimental* weak as "dreadfully eager and inventive in discovering occasions for painful affects; they enjoy being mistrustful and dwelling on nasty deeds and imaginary slights; they scour the entrails of their past and present for obscure and questionable occurrences that offer them the opportunity to revel in tormenting suspicions and to intoxicate themselves with the poison of their own malice..."<sup>100</sup> As Nietzsche argues, the *ressentimental* psyche is one that is attached to its own pain, continually reinscribing this pain in both the past and the present. Indeed, it is this suffering that affords the man of *ressentiment* the moral legitimacy upon which he is dependent. Moreover, *ressentimental* attachment to pain creates a certain type of "enjoyment," what Scheler refers to as a "growing pleasure afforded by invective

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<sup>97</sup> See p 20, 36, and 127 in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*; and p 4 and 6 in Scheler's *Ressentiment* for some examples.

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 129.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, 39.

<sup>100</sup> Nietzsche, 127.

and negation.”<sup>101</sup> The pleasure that arises in shared emotions of rage and anger, and the reciprocal feelings of belonging it creates, however, grows into a dependence on criticism and reproach as a means of achieving moral satisfaction.

My second and related point is to emphasize *ressentiment* as an inherently *reactive* disposition. Stringer describes how this reactive element operates in the second or “creative” stage as follows:

Only on the basis of this initial negation of the master can the slave achieve an affirmative sense of self: ‘He is evil therefore I am good.’ This places the slave’s affirmation of self as an immanent perversion of – rather than a transcendent alternative to – master morality, a reversal of its terms, which, as a reversal, remains dependent on those terms. The slave achieves self-affirmation and breaks with self-loathing, but only by shifting the terms of their dependence on the master, not by eliminating this dependence. In short, the slave achieves an immanent form of emancipation rather than emancipation as such.<sup>102</sup>

If *ressentiment* in its creative stage can only be reactive in nature, and if it is a disposition that finds itself “stuck” in its negative affects, then how can it be trusted to produce anything outside of the very suffering that it is attached to? To the contrary, wouldn’t the very affects that motivate the action be deeply embedded *within* the action? So that a bitter psyche might likely produce a bitter deed? Indeed, I suggest that it is in light of the reactivity of *ressentimental* action that Nietzsche did not consider it to be action at all. In his view, after all, action is an expression of *will to power* – a proud and affirmative demonstration of dominance and freedom.

For my third point, I come back to the topic of pain. As I mentioned earlier, it is my belief that *ressentiment* can be thought of as a secondary affective structure that effectively “sits” atop the more raw affects of rejection, exclusion, inferiority,

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<sup>101</sup> Scheler, 8.

<sup>102</sup> Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 145.

and shame. The *ressentimental* emotions of anger, hatred, spite, malice, suspicion and vengefulness lend the psyche a type of opacity that provides a protective distance from these more tender and vulnerable emotions. Nietzsche discusses this in terms of their “overwhelming” and “deadening” effect:

For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a *guilty* agent who is susceptible to suffering – in short, some living thing upon which he can vent his affects: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, *anesthesia*– the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actual physiological cause of *ressentiment*, vengefulness, and the like: a desire *to deaden pain by means of affects*. This cause is usually sought, quite wrongly in my view, in defensive retaliation, a mere reactive protective measure, a ‘reflex movement’ set off by sudden injury or peril, such as even a beheaded frog still makes to shake off a corrosive acid. But the difference is fundamental: in the one case, the desire is to prevent any further injury, in the other it is to *deaden*, by means of a more violent emotion of any kind, a tormenting, secret pain that is becoming unendurable, and to drive it out of consciousness at least for the moment: for that one requires an affect, as savage an affect as possible, and, in order to excite that, any pretext at all.<sup>103</sup>

Some important insights can be gleaned here as to how the “violent emotions” of *ressentiment* might deaden the “tormenting, secret pain” of rejection, exclusion, inferiority, and shame “that is becoming unendurable.” Surely it is not difficult to understand how an oppressed person might choose to live in the anger of racism and sexism, rather than the raw hurt and shame of them.

The topic of anger leads me to my fourth point: the fact that some effort should be made in separating the emotions within *ressentiment* from the emotional reactive body that we call *ressentiment*. Doing this reveals that emotions like anger or rage do not *belong* to *ressentiment*. Nor is *ressentiment* simply the sum of all its emotional parts. Rather, as I have discussed at some length, *ressentiment* can be

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<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche, 127, emphasis in original.

thought of as a complex *social character* prone to certain mental and emotional formations. With this being said, one can surely appreciate the profound consciousness awakening and politically mobilizing role of emotions like anger and rage without advocating for a politics of *ressentiment*. Indeed, some feminists have been careful in separating their calls for anger from incitements to what can be seen as more *ressentimental* appeals to action. As Maya Angelou instructs:

You should be angry. You must not be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of its displeasure. So use that anger. You write it. You paint it. You dance it. You march it. You vote it. You do everything about it. You talk it. Never stop talking it.<sup>104</sup>

Melina Bixler similarly provides a discerning account of anger in reference to feminism:

Anger is the appropriate reaction to oppression, be it sexism, racism, classism, etc. Anger in this sense is not an internal feeling but an abstract conception that includes sensation and the appraisal of the world around us. It is an affect that moves between bodies. Anger won't destroy us. Demise will come from failing to hear, translate, process, and sculpt anger into something new.<sup>105</sup>

Both Angelou and Bixler emphasize the useful as well as harmful implications of anger. Angelou's warning against bitterness and its ability to devour its host is resonant with Nietzsche and Scheler's descriptions of the toxicity of *ressentiment*. Bixler's account also differentiates between anger as a fluid affect and healthy response to oppression, and the type of anger that becomes intractable. It is this latter type of anger, the anger that fails to hear, process, and transcend that she

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<sup>104</sup> Maya Angelou in Joe Berlinger, "Dave Chappelle & Maya Angelou," *Iconoclasts*, November 30, 2006.

<sup>105</sup> Melina Bixler, "The Use of Anger in Constructing Inclusive Feminist Movements," *Academia.Edu*, accessed February 11, 2018.

states will lead to our “demise.” It thus appears that some of the emotions that are attributed to *ressentiment* might play an intrinsic role in emancipatory struggle, so long as they do not actually crystalize into *ressentiment* itself.

My last point pertains to what exactly anti-racist feminists might do with our pain so as to arrest the development of these emotions before they turn *ressentimental*. I believe that the answer to this question is that we must, in Nietzsche’s terminology, *digest* our pain, in order to emerge from it. This involves *feeling* our pain in its fullness so that we might heal from it, rather than armouring ourselves with the psychic encasement of *ressentiment*.

In her article “Moving Past *Ressentiment*: War and the State of Feminist Freedom,” Dina Georgis makes a similar argument. She laments that feminism has failed to teach us how we might mourn our pain, and in doing, has prevented us from moving past *ressentiment*. Using the work of Anne Anlin Cheng, Georgis considers the “psychic and social cost” of moving from grief, “the melancholic response from suffering injury such as discrimination, exclusion and dehumanization,” to grievance, “the act of speaking out against injury.”<sup>106</sup> Georgis discusses how grievance and resistance have often led to punitive or reparative action that buries grief rather than allows one to get acquainted with it. For Georgis, it is this grief that underlies our political identities, and it is this grief that we habitually ignore, keeping us locked in cycles of revenge and hatred. She notes that this can be seen within feminist politics as much as in state responses to terrorist attacks such as 9/11. Georgis invites us to consider “what we can learn from

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<sup>106</sup> Dina Georgis, “Moving Past *Ressentiment*: War and the State of Feminist Freedom,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 20 (September 1, 2008): 118.



resisting our compulsion to *act out* melancholically from injury and from being prepared, instead, to be *touched* by injury.”<sup>107</sup>

So how might we, as anti-racist feminists, “touch” our grief and what might this accomplish? Georgis suggests that this involves a process of mourning:

For me, this is the work of mourning: giving up our defenses implies we can learn how to live with loss. Over the years we have seen a great deal of change made through battles. So perhaps it is now time to abandon ourselves to loss and mourn what in the past may have felt too dangerous. For Butler, mourning means that we are ready to allow ourselves, not to change, but to be changed by loss....While it may seem that I am suggesting that social change is not as important as being changed, my concern is that if we do not open ourselves up to being changed, we may not achieve meaningful social change.<sup>108</sup>

Touching our pain and mourning our grief for Georgis thus involves a de-armouring and a moving toward that which once felt too dangerous. Georgis discusses the “transformative effects of loss” that become available once we “open ourselves up to being changed” – an opening that Georgis believes is necessary to achieving transformative social change. So how might anti-racist feminism move towards this opening and de-armouring? Georgis provides the beginnings of a new philosophical framework based in recognizing the universality of suffering and loss, and our vulnerability to being hurt by one another. This, according to Georgis, could furnish us with a commonality that could form the basis of a new humanism. Georgis’ discussion on healing and exploration of a revisionary humanism is of especial significance to the second half of this dissertation and will be revisited then.

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<sup>107</sup> Georgis, 119.

<sup>108</sup> Georgis, 123. For Butler’s work on loss, mourning, and melancholia, see *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997b); *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2006); and *Undoing Gender* (Psychology Press, 2004).

For now, however, I would like to provide some concluding remarks to sum up my discussion on *ressentiment*.

In this chapter I have mobilized the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* as a *social character* that gives some insight into the psyche of anti-racist feminism. I have noted some similarities between certain anti-racist feminist practices and the emotions and logics that underpin them, and the structure of *ressentiment* as developed by Nietzsche and Scheler. As I have argued, in order for this discussion of *ressentiment* to be self-reflexive in nature, as opposed to self-lacerative, we must take into account our experiences of exclusion, humiliation, self-hatred, and shame as women of colour. It is through distilling this under layer of *ressentiment* that a tendency toward *ressentimental* action (if we are to defy Nietzsche in calling it *action*) is entirely understandable given its protective function. In terms of its transformative potentiality, however, I disagree with Stringer due to the inherently *reactive* and *self-subversive* nature of *ressentiment*. I am doubtful as to how such a psyche can betray its own character to engender creative, productive, and affirmative possibilities for social change. Rather, I believe that we, as anti-racist feminists, must continually watch that our necessary and mobilizing expressions of anger and rage do not succumb to the sticky affective web of *ressentiment*. I believe this can only be done through attending to the raw feelings of pain and finding ways to heal and work through them, rather than sealing them under the protective layer of *ressentiment*. I continue this exploration into how we might, in the words of Georgis, “touch our injury” as well as move toward a more emancipatory psychological and political orientation in the second half of the dissertation. Before

moving on to how anti-racist feminism might “go beyond” *ressentiment*, however, I would like to add another, and somewhat more troubling, layer to the current analysis: the degree to which anti-racist feminism may not only be *ressentimental* in terms of *character* but also *structurally* beholden to *ressentiment* due to the very nature of anti-racist feminism’s political formation and articulation. For this, I turn to Wendy Brown’s work, which I examine, in close detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5 – The Problem with Identity

*"Beneath the current black-female-student-chicano-homosexual-old-young-handicapped, etc., etc., ad nauseum, "struggles" lies a simple truth: there is no coherent opposition to the present administrative apparatus."*

-Adolph Reed, *"Black Particularity Reconsidered."*

*"...questions of identity are always questions about representation. They are always questions about the invention, not simply the discovery of tradition. They are always exercises in selective memory and they almost always involve the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak."*

-Stuart Hall, *"Negotiating Caribbean Identities."*

In the previous chapter I employed *ressentiment* both diagnostically and analytically as a means of excavating the social character that underlies certain practices and ways of thinking within anti-racist feminism. It has been my concern that these behaviours are expressive of a character that is steeped in a negative emotionality that may reinscribe our suffering as anti-racist feminists, rather than emancipate us from it. As thinkers like Erich Fromm have shown, the psychological characteristics of an individual or a group have a demonstrable impact on the type of political and social action they take. The *ressentimental* aspects that I have identified within anti-racist feminism are thus a troubling discovery worthy of careful self-reflection. As anti-racist feminists we must ask ourselves the honest question of exactly *what* are we fighting for? While there may be several answers to this question, the present inquiry is concerned with whether the aim of freedom is among our objectives. And if freedom *is* of importance to us, then to what extent have we become caught in a toxic cycle of anger, hatred, vengeance and despair that is draining us of the vital energy we need to pursue a project of self-determination that involves imagining and creating a different world? Moreover, if we do admit

that *ressentiment* does figure into our politics, how might we free ourselves from its venomous grasp?

A reasonable place to start might be to brainstorm different practices that we, as anti-racist feminists, could implement in our struggle. As I have suggested, we might begin to do this through “touching” our pain and discovering ways to heal it, rather than react from it. Before exploring how this might be done, I would like to attend to Wendy Brown’s claim that identity politics is *structurally* attached to its pain. Indeed, she argues that such movements configure identities based on their suffering that then require past and present pain in order to maintain their political salience. Brown’s concern is that this *ressentimental* attachment to pain prevents identity-based movements from achieving a futurity beyond injury. One of the intentions of this chapter is to explore how the character and attendant practices examined in the previous chapters might be more generally rooted in, and expressive of, identity-based politics. That is, to what extent is the *ressentimental* character discussed previously *endemic* to anti-racist feminism given the structural nature of identity-based politics?

I address this question through firstly providing a contextual sketch of identity politics in terms of how it emerged from New Left struggles of the 1960s and 70s. Secondly, I explore some critiques made by different factions of the Left against identity politics. Specifically, I look at charges around identity’s attachment to injury, essentialism, and relationship to power in terms of the interpellative imposition of identity categories, and complicity with legalism and capitalism. I then examine some responses from anti-racist feminists and other proponents of

politicized identity. I conclude by arguing that while it may not be accurate to say that *all* identity-based struggles are *ressentimental*, identity politics certainly does have a concerning structural compatibility with *ressentimental* thinking and behaviour.

### **(5.1) Identity Politics**

This section gives a brief introduction to identity-based movements as they have developed in the North American context. Identity politics<sup>1</sup> can be defined as:

a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.<sup>2</sup>

Identity-based movements include those that organize on the basis of a shared experience of race, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion or language identity. These movements are often aware of how different identities intersect and interlock, producing different experiences among members of one identity affiliation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant that we, as feminists, rarely refer to our movements as “identity politics.” The term is one that has been imposed on us from the outside and which carries somewhat pejorative connotations.

As Zandria Robinson writes, “It suggests that people actively choose to be aligned with minority groups/identities rather than the reality that they are organized into them by structures of oppression — sexism, racism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, capitalism, imperialism,” (Vanessa Williams, “Analysis | An Identity Crisis for Identity Politics,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2017).

When it *is* used by us, however, it is often when in conversation with our opponents. It is in this tradition that I use the term in this chapter and in this dissertation as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2018 Edition.

Identity-based struggles emerged from the New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> The New Left, in turn, developed in response to the “skepticism about the prevailing top-down communist orthodoxy – a mode of politics that had dominated Old Left praxis.”<sup>4</sup> The New Left’s break from the Old Left was marked not only by its disillusionment with Soviet Communism, but also a challenge against “worker” as a universalist category, and its commitment to “open[ing] up new spaces in politics – to get issues and ideas previously ignored on the political agenda, and to win cultural and political acceptance of the methods used to propagate their message.”<sup>5</sup> It was during this time that the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Women’s Movement, the Gay/Lesbian Liberation Movement and the Anti-Vietnam movement rose to prominence. As Grant Farred describes, it was the struggles of this era – for the first time organized around issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation – that would furnish identity politics with the foundation upon which to structure its politics:

The diversity of political activity in the 1960s demonstrated to its 1970s and 1980s successors how to mobilize marginalized constituencies, how to ‘politicize’ culture, and how to deploy ‘difference’ as an ideological tool in racially hegemonic societies. Having rejected the Old Left’s narrow conception of politics, the New Left expanded it to include – and provide a precedent and a platform for – modes of oppositionality that would, in the 1980s, be construed as struggles over representation and identity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The “New Left” was a term popularized by C. Wright Mills in his open letter, “Letter to the New Left” published in *New Left Review*, No. 5, September-October 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Grant Farred, “Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics,” *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 628.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Byrne in Farred, 629.

<sup>6</sup> Farred, 630. See Farred (2000) for a more detailed historical account of the Left’s political evolution from Old left traditionalism to the New Left movements of the 1960s/70s to present-day identity politics. See also Todd Gitlin’s *Twilight of Common Dreams* (1995) for his take on the development of the contemporary Left. For a more macro historical perspective, see Immanuel Wallerstein’s *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction* (2004),

An important difference between the New Left and identity politics, however, revolved around the issue of class. Emerging out of the Old Left paradigm, the New Left movements remained tied to a critique of class, albeit unhinged from the orthodoxy of their predecessors. The large-scale retreat of the working class from the New Left in response to appeals by the Thatcher/Reagan New Right to their bourgeois aspirations and patriotism, coupled with the New Right's decimation of the welfare state and reversal of many of the victories of the 1960s and 1970s, would lead to "crisis" for the Left. This crisis, marked by a number of ideological and political tensions led to the decline of the New Left and the creation of an "identity politics" marked by a "profound black, female, and gay wariness of class as an organizational instrument."<sup>7</sup>

While the birth of identity politics was a product of the historical processes described above, its inaugural moment has been linked to the publication of the Combahee River Collective's manifesto in 1978.<sup>8</sup> The Collective was comprised of black lesbian feminists who gathered in Boston between 1974 and 1980 to develop a political theory and practice of black feminism that recognized interlocking systems of oppression and addressed their needs in a way that white feminism did not. During this time, the group released a statement in which they declared the political importance of identity:

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which looks at the development of anti-systemic movements from 1848 onwards within the context of his world systems theory.

<sup>7</sup> Farred, 636.

<sup>8</sup> Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1978/1986).



This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the Combahee River Collective has been credited with coining the term “identity politics” although their political vision is arguably different from identity-based movements today.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophically, Wendy Brown argues that liberalism’s promise of universal recognition and justice, and concurrent failure to deliver on this promise forms “a key condition of possibility for contemporary identity politics.”<sup>11</sup> As Brown states,

In this story, the always imminent but increasingly politically manifest failure of liberal universalism to be universal—the transparent fiction of state universality—combines with the increasing individuation of social subjects through capitalist disinterments and disciplinary productions. Together, they breed the emergence of politicized identity rooted in disciplinary productions but oriented by liberal discourse toward protest against exclusion from a discursive formation of universal justice.<sup>12</sup>

As the next few sections will show, Brown’s critique of identity politics is not only tied to its emergence from the myths of liberalism, but also its complicity with

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<sup>9</sup> Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1978/1986).

<sup>10</sup> A principle difference is the group’s explicit concern with class oppression and capitalism – a concern that current identity groups have been critiqued for ignoring. Rather, the Combahee River Collective Statement pronounced its members as socialist, stating that they “realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.” Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1978/1986).

<sup>11</sup> Heyes, “Identity Politics.”

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 58.

disciplinary naming, legalism, and capitalism. First, though, I examine her argument around politicized identity's "wounded attachments."

### ***Injurious Attachments***

In what ways might we, as anti-racist feminists, be attached to our pain? In the last chapter I discussed the considerable psychic and spiritual damage that is done to us through our everyday experiences in a world hostile to women of colour. I suggested that *ressentiment* becomes the shielding emotional layer that protects us from the pain of these raw emotions of unworthiness, shame, and inferiority. I then explored how we might touch this underlying pain in order to move beyond both our *ressentimental* character and its expression in anti-racist feminist politics. Wendy Brown's influential piece, "Wounded Attachments" complicates this discussion, however, by suggesting that there is something specific to identity-based politics that prevent it from relinquishing its pain. Rather, Brown argues that politicized identity is *attached* to its suffering in a way that might be understood as *structural* to identity politics.

As Brown explains:

In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion augments or 'alters the direction of the suffering' entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 73-74.

Politicized identities such as “women of colour,” “feminists,” and “queer folks” do not emerge naturally, or affirmatively, but rather in *protest* against oppression and exclusion. That is, we are “women of colour” because we are *not* white women, nor white men, and do not get to participate in whiteness. We are “feminists,” because we are *not* men, and do not get to partake in patriarchal power. We are “queer folks” because we are *not* heterosexual and do not benefit from heteronormativity. For Brown, becoming in identity politics is thus born out of our exclusion and our politics are based in our protest against this exclusion. This marginalization and its attendant pain and suffering becomes *who we are*, so that I know myself as a woman of colour because I have suffered and suffer *as* a woman of colour. Similarly, I understand my fellow women of colour as those who have suffered and suffer *like me*. Our specific suffering confers both our individual political identities, and is that which ties us together politically.

Politicized identity’s *ressentimental* moment, for Brown, is in its “finding a site of blame” for its suffering and “installing” its pain over its “unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity.”<sup>14</sup> And so it seems that identity politics as a political expression that requires its suffering as requisite to its identity, is *structurally* vulnerable to *ressentiment*. Brown elaborates on this, describing its implications for politicized identity’s emancipatory aims:

Insofar as what Nietzsche calls slave morality produces identity in reaction to power, insofar as identity rooted in this reaction achieves its moral superiority by reproaching power and action themselves as evil, identity structured by this ethos becomes deeply invested in its own impotence, even

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, 74.

while it seeks to assuage the pain of its powerlessness through its vengeful moralizing, through its wide distribution of suffering, through its reproach of power as such. Politicized identity, premised on exclusion and fuelled by the humiliation and suffering imposed by its historically structured impotence in the context of a discourse of sovereign individuals, is...more likely to punish and reproach – “punishment is what revenge calls itself; with a hypocritical lie it creates a good conscience for itself” – than to find venues of self-affirming action.<sup>15</sup>

There are two points that I would like to register here. Firstly, I suggest that Brown adds a further dimension to my investigation of *ressentiment* in the previous chapter. *Ressentiment* as a social character with political expressions such as “calling-out”, “checking privilege,” “spokespersonship,” and “allyship” is now seen as endemic to identity-based politics itself, not just a peculiar perversion of a certain type of emancipatory movement. That is, Brown asks us to consider how a political expression that *requires* an injured identity, in a context of “historically structured impotence” becomes especially vulnerable to a *ressentimental* psyche, a psyche that is mired in its own suffering which leads it on a path of vengeful moralizing. According to this view, the *ressentimental* practices that I outlined in the last chapter can be seen as not just the expressions of mismanaged pain, but rather a pain that is *actively* harvested for political purposes. As Brown, writes “politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain.”<sup>16</sup>

The second point is related to this lack of futurity that Brown forecasts for identity politics, given its investment in its own pain and tendency toward

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, 74.

“punishing and reproaching” rather than “self-affirming action.” As Brown argues, identity politics as a *ressentimental* politics that defines itself in opposition to power comes to “reproac[h] power and action as themselves evil” so as to not only embrace powerlessness but also to re-value it as morally superior (Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values). Brown believes this posture can be seen in politicized identity’s political actions which often focus on achieving recognition of injury through legal recourse which not only frames the historically oppressive state as the “neutral arbiter” of justice but also codifies identity in ways that can be mobilized for disciplinary control. I unpack these charges further in the section on Legalism. For now, however, I discuss perhaps the most common critique made against identity politics: essentialism.

### ***Confronting Essentialism***

The argument of essentialism is as follows: in mobilizing a politicized identity – such as “black” or “woman” or “queer” – this identity obtains a kind of reified quality that not only obfuscates the social construction of these qualities but also commits members to a false homogeneity and fixity.

In an especially cogent articulation of this critique, Adolph Reed Jr. asks us to consider the controversy around Rachel Dolezal. Dolezal, a former leader of the NAACP, attained notoriety in June of 2015 when she was “outed” as a white woman masquerading as black. Reed argues that the commotion caused by her exposure illustrates a profound paradox that lies at the heart of identity politics. He writes that:

... this affair has exposed identitarianism's irrational underbelly. The fundamental contradiction that has impelled the debate and required the flight into often idiotic sophistry is that racial identitarians assume, even if they give catechistic lip service ...to the catchphrase that "race is a social construction," that race is a thing, an essence that lives within us. If pushed, they will offer any of a range of more or less mystical, formulaic, breezy, or neo-Lamarckian faux explanations of how it can be both an essential ground of our being and a social construct, and most people are willing not to pay close attention to the justificatory patter. Nevertheless, for identitarians... we aren't, for instance, black because we do black things; that seems to have been Dolezal's mistaken wish. We do black things because we are black. Doing black things does not make us black; being black makes us do black things. That is how it's possible to talk about having lost or needing to retrieve one's culture or define "cultural appropriation" as the equivalent, if not the prosaic reality, of a property crime. That, indeed, is also the essence of essentialism.<sup>17</sup>

Reed is critical of the logic of identity politics that, on the one hand, grants the social construction of identity while simultaneously propounding its realness. What are the dangers of essentialism?

Firstly, there is the problem of assumed homogeneity. In suggesting that there is such a thing as "blackness" or "woman," a certain universality is assumed to inhere within a group of people that in actuality does not exist. Of course, this can be especially harmful when these supposedly universal traits correspond only to those with the most power within a group. Indeed, one of the loudest charges of essentialism has come from third wave feminists who argue that second wave feminism was premised on a construction of "woman" based on the experiences of white, middle-class women to the exclusion of women of colour, queer women, and poor women.<sup>18</sup> Essentialism typically works to homogenize the experiences,

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<sup>17</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., "From Jenner to Dolezal."

<sup>18</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, black feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw were some of the most outspoken critics of this, leading to the

personalities, and perspectives of oppressed groups in ways that render us “all the same” while dominant groups (whites and men, for example) enjoy multiple possibilities for expression and self-making. Essentialism is often expressed through stereotypical assumptions (“Women are emotional,” “Black men are violent”) in ways that significantly flatten such identities in discriminatory and dehumanizing ways.

The second key danger of essentialism is the way in which socially constructed categories become the grounds for oppression. Indeed, a slew of historical oppressions from the domination of women to European practices of slavery to the colonization of Indigenous peoples have been justified using essentialist arguments. The most common expression of this type of thinking identifies a biological root to what binds a certain group together and makes them *different*. This difference is always read as inferior and the biological nature of this inferiority makes it immutable. In this way, women’s oppression has been explained due to our “weaker” nature that ties us to the body, the family, and childrearing justifying everything from our exclusion in the public sphere to violence against us. Black Africans and Indigenous peoples were seen as biologically “primitive” and “childlike,” justifying practices of slavery and colonization. Biological essentialism in each of these cases renders another group as “Other” – irrevocably different and inferior. In this way, groups of people have been excluded from “humanity” as perceived through a Western masculinist lens. In recent times biological essentialism has graduated to *cultural* essentialism through which cultural/religious

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development of the concept of *intersectionality* in acknowledgment of the multiple identities (and corresponding oppressions) that we occupy at once.

identities such as “Muslims” can be viewed simultaneously as “all the same” and inherently “violent” and “backward.”

Indeed, the argument is that identity-based movements, which have done much work to expose and oppose these two harmful forms of essentialism, engage in their *own* essentialism when they invoke identity politically. Politicized identity’s problem is that it cannot avoid essentialist appeals to identity in articulating its claims. The very nature of identity politics is a desire for recognition *as* identity (i.e. as black, as woman, as queer etc.), and making claims for redress/inclusion on the basis that one’s identity group has been wrongfully denied access or unjustly treated *because* of their identity. While some feminists have attempted to sidestep this issue by making a case for “strategic essentialism,” critics of essentialism remain sceptical.<sup>19</sup> As Brown argues, politicized identity “fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Nancy Fraser argues that identity politics “often...impose[s] a single, drastically simplified group identity, which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations.”<sup>21</sup>

Keeping with Reed’s focus on black identity, how might his critique be applied to the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement? BLM members make

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<sup>19</sup> This term is most commonly attributed to Gayatri Spivak. Some years later, Spivak herself would retract the term given its problematic usage. See *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2006); and *Other Asias* (Blackwell Pub., 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Brown, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Recognition without Ethics?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2001): 24.



the cogent argument that they, as black people, experience unwarranted amounts of police brutality because they are black people. But in articulating their claim *as black people*, they are saying that *black people exist* and that *blackness is real*. How else could they not only speak as black people but advocate on behalf of black people? The problem that thus arises, is that in the moment that one speaks of (or as) “black people” one makes certain assumptions about the likeness of the group, as well as assumes that blackness is composed of a tangible essence. In the Dolezal case, this “essence” is articulated in terms of biology. Dolezal’s parents are white, and therefore she *cannot* be black. What Reed is challenging here is the continued salience of discourses around race and sanguinity – the very discourses that birthed disciplinary policies like the “one drop rule” in the United States. Indeed, it is likely due to the traumatic history of racial blood politics that Black Lives Matters uses the language of “black identified” at their rallies, such as when leaders encourage “black identified members” to come to the front and for their “non-black identified allies” to stand behind them. But, as we know, self-identification has its limits. Dolezal’s statement, for example, in which she states: “I identify as black,” has been the subject of much rage and ridicule.<sup>22</sup>

For Reed, the reason why Dolezal’s self-naming is so offensive relates to the politics of spokespersonship. As I described in Chapter 2, spokespersonship refers to the idea that oppressed peoples should be the only people to speak on behalf of their oppression, and more, that they should lead their struggles for emancipation.

Sociologist and prominent identity critic Todd Gitlin echoes Reed’s assessment:

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<sup>22</sup> See Rachel Dolezal, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2017).

Sometimes what is sought is a license to pursue a monoculture. Only the members can (or should) learn the language of the club. Only African Americans should get jobs teaching African-American studies; conversely, African Americans should get jobs teaching only African-American studies. Men, likewise, have no place in women's studies. As the T-shirt slogan had it: "It's a Black Thing, You Wouldn't Understand." As Sister Souljab rapped: "If my world's black and yours is white/How the hell could we think alike." Essentialists, when they secede from the commons, dismantle it.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Identity as Imposition***

Another problem with identity is the degree to which it reiterates and reifies imposed categories of being. It raises the question of to what extent is who we claim ourselves to be determined from without and to what extent is it self-consciously chosen? For Brown, identity is the co-optation and politicization of the very categories once used to mark difference and inferiority: "just when polite liberal (not to mention correct leftist) discourse ceased speaking of us as dykes, faggots, colored girls, or natives, we began speaking of ourselves in this way."<sup>24</sup> This has led Brown to ask: "what kind of political recognition can identity-based claims seek – and what kind can they be counted on to want – that will not resubordinate a subject itself historically subjugated through identity, through categories such as race or gender that emerged and circulated as terms of power to enact

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<sup>23</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (Metropolitan Books, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Brown, 53.

Todd Gitlin makes a similar point, describing what Nietzsche would identify as a transvaluation of values: "Hasn't history already done its detestable and irreversible work, stamping inferiority on dark-skinned peoples, enslaving them in the name of that classification? Without doubt, the group identities that have lasted longest and cut deepest are the ones that persecution has engraved. Once engraved, they stay engraved – that has been the reality.... Often the persecuted revolt by converting the mark of their subordination into a badge of pride" (in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*).

subordination?"<sup>25</sup> Brown describes how this process takes place through discussing an ordinance that was pushed into law by different identity-based groups in order to prohibit discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation, transexuality, age, height, weight, personal appearance, physical appearance, physical characteristics, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, sex, or gender"<sup>26</sup> in employment and housing. For Brown this is a perfect example of politicized identity's complicity with liberal universalism and disciplinary power in its own resubordination, even as these dual powers respond to its demands. As Brown explains:

This ordinance...aims to count every difference as no difference, as part of the seamless whole, but also to count every potentially subversive rejection of culturally enforced norms as themselves normal, as normalizable, and as normativizable through law. Indeed, through the definitional, procedural, and remedies sections of this ordinance (e.g., 'sexual orientation shall mean known or assumed homosexuality, heterosexuality, or bisexuality') persons are reduced to observable social attributes and practices defined empirically, positivistically, as if their existence were intrinsic and factual, rather than effects of discursive and institutional power, and these positivist definitions of persons as their attributes and practices are written into law, ensuring that persons describable according to them will now become regulated through them.<sup>27</sup>

According to Brown, it is precisely politicized identity's simultaneous shaping by, and responding to the powers of liberalism and disciplinarity, that makes identity-based movements *structurally* vulnerable to re-subordination. Her example illustrates how in seeking legal recognition, even radical identities must bend to the logics of liberalism which depoliticize them through normalization,

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 66.

classification, and featuring them side by side as equalizable “diversities,” rather than effects of racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of social power. We see here again the essentializing consequences of politicized identity but more, how identity comes to be organized through disciplinary power for regulation and control. Following Foucault, Brown describes disciplinary productions as “work[ing] to conjure and regulate subjects through classificatory schemes, naming and normalizing social behaviors as social positions...”<sup>28</sup> Politicized identity’s relationship with disciplinary power is thus twofold – in the first moment, it politicizes the very categories of disciplinary oppression as identity (“black,” “brown,” “women,” “queer”). In demanding justice on behalf of these categories (now co-opted as identities), these identities are neutralized by liberalism that greets them as “lifestyles” and “special interests” that can be digested as part of the “seamless whole.” Indeed, it is only through this depoliticization that “an African American, an obese woman, and a white middle-class youth festooned with tattoos, a pierced tongue, and fuchsia hair” can be “render[ed] as juridical equivalents.”<sup>29</sup> Through inscribing them in the law, as with Brown’s ordinance, these identities become essentialized as not only “real” and “fixed” but also empirically defined for the purposes of regulatory control.

Like Brown, Judith Butler is also interested in tracking the co-emergence of power and identity. Butler draws on Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and psychoanalytical insights to illustrate the entanglement of oppressive power with subject-making. She argues that the process of subjection, is “the process of

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<sup>28</sup> Brown, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, 66.

becoming subordinated by power and the process of becoming a subject.”<sup>30</sup> In Althusser’s language of *interpellation*, “a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed.”<sup>31</sup> Foucault’s “discursive production of the subject” echoes Althusser’s insight that the subject invariably emerges at the site of subordination. For Butler, this generates a paradox in which the subject depends on the very subordination and social categories (i.e. *identity* categories) that represent this subordination. As she discusses:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination.<sup>32</sup>

Butler adds to Brown’s discussion on identity’s attachment to pain by insisting that this site of subordination is the place from which social being is born. Echoing Nietzsche, Butler considers this a case in which the subject prefers a subordinated social existence to no existence at all. What does this mean, however, for the political possibilities premised on these subordinated social categories mobilized and politicized as identity? In order to answer this question, it follows to consider the “ambivalence” that Butler locates at the site of subject-formation. On the one hand, there is the manner in which “regulatory power” produces the subject and organizes him/her in terms of social categories that at once render social existence even while they subordinate. Butler takes from Nietzsche in explaining

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<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Psychology Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Butler, 20.

how this existence is an existence of self-negation, whereby the subject turns on him/herself (as in slave morality). As she explains:

Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's "own" being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. If such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself.<sup>33</sup>

Butler's passage is reminiscent of Brown's formulation of how identity categories premised on exclusion come to rely on their very exclusion and alterity to exist in a social world that otherwise refuses to recognize the subjects who covet them. On the other hand, however, Butler discusses the possibility of political autonomy that arises as an unintended "excess" of this process of subjectivation. Indeed, without the subject formation occasioned by subordination, autonomy would not be possible given that there must be a subject for there to be autonomy. This autonomy, although "complicit" with the disciplinary power that produces it, "may do more than reiterate the conditions of its subordination."<sup>34</sup> As Butler further explains:

I would suggest that no historical or logical conclusions follow necessarily from this primary complicity with subordination, but that some possibilities tentatively do. That agency is implicated in subordination is not the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject and, hence, further proof of its pernicious or obsolete character. But neither does it restore a pristine notion of the subject, derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always and only opposed to power. The first view characterizes politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism; the second, naive forms of political optimism. I hope to steer clear of both these alternatives.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Butler, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, 17.

For Butler, then, there is no deterministic trajectory to be traced here: the power wielded by subjects need not reflect the power that birthed them into social being. Moreover, as Brown also notes, the categories that mark their emergence are necessarily imposed from the outside. We grasp them, nonetheless, due to the ontological possibilities – that is, possibilities for subject formation – that they offer. Given this story of politicized identity’s emergence, the question arises as to whether identity-based movements, as we see them today, offer the non-reiterative political autonomy that Butler promises as a possibility? For Brown, and other critics of identity, the answer appears to be no.

### ***Collusion With Dominant Power***

Thus far I have examined three problems with identity as argued by Wendy Brown and others: its attachment to injury, its tendency toward essentialism, and its interpellative imposition. Identity-based movements have also been challenged by a number of scholars for the degree to which they not only fail to challenge state and capitalist domination, but actively reinstate it. That is, opponents of identity politics argue that feminism, anti-racism, queer politics and other such social movements engage in a political program of seeking legal recognition and economic reformism rather than emancipation from these systems of oppressive governance. As with the other critiques of identity in this chapter, scholars argue that identity’s uncritical statism and capitalist enmeshment is a *structural* element of its mode of political articulation. This section will look at both these challenges before considering some responses from anti-racist feminists.

### *Appeals to Legalism*

Identity-based politics have also been dubbed the “politics of recognition” due to their strivings for legal recognition and redress. Created by disciplinary power and then erased by liberal universalism, Brown argues that politicized identity strives to inscribe its *difference* as politically significant in legal registers. As she argues in regard to the anti-discrimination ordinance discussed earlier, this demand for legal recognition is concerning in that it frames the state as though it were the “neutral arbiter of injury.” Brown argues that politicized identity’s tendency to “pursue legal redress” for social injury related to racism, sexism and homophobia, and to “establish these as morally heinous in the law” is expressive of its *ressentimental* desire. As she contends,

This effort also casts the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure. Thus, the effort to ‘outlaw’ social injury powerfully legitimizes law and the state as appropriate protectors against injury and casts injured individuals as needing such protection by such protectors. Finally, in its economy of perpetrator and victim, this project seeks not power or emancipation for the injured or the subordinated, but the revenge of punishment, making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does.<sup>36</sup>

For Brown, then, politicized identity’s desire for legal justice entraps it in a *ressentimental* cycle of installing its injury in the law, and avenging its pain through the legal punishment of others, all the while reinforcing the legitimacy of the law. This not only creates a situation in which oppressed peoples are poised to look to the law and the state for protection but also where the categories of “perpetrator” and “victim” get entrenched in the law. In Nietzsche’s view, as was discussed in the

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, 27.



last chapter, legal redress, far from being a means to emancipation, is a method by which the strong lend the weak a bit of their power in order to maintain their overall hegemony.

Politicized identity's appeal to legalism is also about attaining *recognition*. Theorists of recognition often cite Hegel's well-known master/slave dialectic as initiating a shift in how the self is conceptualized. Reflecting on Hegel's insights, Linda Martin Alcoff explains that:

an individual can only...become a subject and a moral agent after social absorption and recognition from the Other....The classical liberal core/periphery model of the self is displaced by a fundamentally holistic model in which the self can only come into being – can only achieve the capacity for self-reflection and agency – given certain external relations. Consciousness itself becomes an emergent entity of a social and historical process rather than a kind of pre-social thinking substance that could conceivably exist entirely on its own. The locus of agency, in particular, is not simply internal to the self. Moreover, one's social identity as slave or as master is the product of social interaction and social institutions rather than determined by intrinsic features, and is subject to the possibility of radical transformation.<sup>37</sup>

The work of contemporary recognition theorists like Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth is informed by the Hegelian thesis on intersubjectivity. Unlike Butler who takes a post-structural approach to understanding subjectivity by focusing on the way in which it is formed through and within discursive power, Taylor and Honneth are interested in our need for recognition and the dangers of misrecognition.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Taylor identifies recognition as a "vital human need," whereas misrecognition can "inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling

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<sup>37</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?," 2000, <http://www.alcoff.com/content/afraidid.html>.

<sup>38</sup> This, however, is not to equate the two in how they conceptualize recognition.

self-hatred.”<sup>39</sup> Honneth agrees with Taylor’s characterization of recognition, arguing that its denial “provides the motivational and justificatory basis for social struggles.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, for Taylor and Honneth, the denial of recognition for women, people of colour, queer folks and other oppressed groups explains the development and persistence of identity-based politics today.<sup>41</sup>

Nancy Fraser is another leading contemporary theorist of the politics of recognition. She argues that the politics of recognition is not an issue of intersubjectivity or what she calls the ethical issue of “self-realization”<sup>42</sup> but rather, a matter of justice. That is, she believes it is a moral issue where in which the social status of a person, specifically, their ability to participate in society at parity with others, is compromised by institutional practices (e.g. racial profiling by the police) based on harmful cultural beliefs. The injury is thus one of social status – the ability to actively partake in the social, and the claim for recognition is a *political* one that is freed from the “vicissitudes” of the psyche.<sup>43</sup> For Fraser, it matters little what the psychological effects are given the difficulty she sees in proving or making generalizations about matters of the psyche. Rather she advocates for political

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: (Expanded Paperback Edition)* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Paddy McQueen, “Social and Political Recognition,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 20, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> McQueen.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (Verso, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> In contrast to Fraser’s view, the master/slave dialectic has also been taken up by psychoanalytic thinkers who stress the deeply psychological aspects of domination/subordination. For one example, see Jessica Benjamin’s excellent book, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (Pantheon Books, 1988).

grievances to be mounted upon the indisputable fact of social exclusion, and to mobilize on the basis of recognition *and* redistribution.

The critique against recognition – whether based on Taylor, Honneth or Fraser’s conception – is premised, in Brown’s argument, on the dependence it creates on legal structures, which are not only legitimized in the process but also neutralized of their own capacities to harm. The struggle for same-sex marriage might serve as an example here. According to this critique, in appealing to the law to grant same-sex marriage rights, the law is necessarily recognized as an authority with the legitimate power with which to grant privileges. The law is also depended upon to fairly adjudicate between same-sex claims and those of opposing groups hostile to these aims. In doing so, the fear is that identity groups might exhibit a type of historical blindness, forgetting the role the state has played in administering oppression precisely *through the institution of the law*. An instrument of domination is converted into a benevolent protector, while the oppressed are fixed in their role as victims. This type of state paternalism is dangerous not only for emancipatory movements in that it encourages a political scheme of concessionary successes over wholesale structural change, but also in the ways that it *structures* claims. That is, appeals for legal recognition and legal redress are limited to demands that only allow for an approximation of the status quo, never a transcending of it. To continue with the example of same-sex marriage, while the removal of the injunction against gay/lesbian marriage undoubtedly corrects a legal injustice, it does nothing to challenge marriage as an institution – an institution itself rooted in oppression and

inequality. Rather, marriage as a hegemonic structure and practice is legitimized and even valorized.

Glen Coulthard makes a similar argument in regards to the politics of recognition in the context of relations between the Canadian State and Indigenous peoples. He argues that the politics of recognition and reconciliation, as they currently stand, work to disempower Indigenous peoples. Not only are the terms of both these political projects set in favour of the colonizing state, but they work to further the colonization of Indigenous people who, by entering into agreement/negotiation by the state, become interpellated as *subjects* of the state.<sup>44</sup>

As Brown thus argues, a politicized identity that makes demands based on its exclusion must articulate that which it is *excluded from*. This requires an ideal that is necessarily internal to the oppressive system against which identity-based movements are ostensibly opposed. For Brown, appealing to this ideal not only leads politicized identity to assume a conciliatory posture toward state and legal power, but also implicates it in *capitalist power*. The next section explores this in more detail.

### *Capitalist Enmeshment*

As was discussed earlier in the chapter, Farred describes how the rise of identity politics was accompanied by a “wariness of class as an organizational

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<sup>44</sup> See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014). This is admittedly an abbreviated summary of Coulthard’s argument, as well as an exceedingly limited engagement with the politics of recognition as it pertains to Indigenous struggles. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to explore how the question of identity as it relates to indigeneity would complicate the present discussion.

instrument.”<sup>45</sup> Wallerstein similarly discusses how the “explosion” of issues of race and sex on the social scene resulted in the recession of labour/economic issues from the time of the 1968 revolutions onwards.<sup>46</sup> This has led critics to argue that identity politics has not only abandoned a class analysis but is *complicit* with capitalist power.

Recognizing the commonly made argument that identity-based movements were born out of the demise of class-politics, Brown contends the following:

Without adjudicating the precise relationship between the breakup of class politics and the proliferation of other sites of political identification, I want to refigure this claim by suggesting that 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. In a reading that links the new identity claims to a certain relegitimation of capitalism, identity politics concerned with race, sexuality, and gender will appear not as a supplement to class politics, not as an expansion of left categories of oppression and emancipation, not as an enriching augmentation of progressive formulations of power and persons – all of which they also are – but as tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure.<sup>47</sup>

Brown’s claim needs some unpacking. She traces the emergence of identity politics as *dependent* on the abandonment of capitalism and capitalist values as objects of critique. This dependence arises with politicized identity’s need for an ideal internal to capitalism. That is, a bourgeois and masculinist ideal that “renaturalizes” capitalism and its offerings as “good,” “desirable,” and in the case of

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<sup>45</sup> Farred, 636.

<sup>46</sup> Wallerstein, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 59. Nancy Fraser makes a similar point regarding politicized identity’s abandonment of class critique. As she states: “questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them” in “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 3 (2000): 107–20.

those who are excluded from it, “enviable.” For Brown it is the ideal of the “phantasmic middle-class” premised on “an imagined idyllic, unfettered, and uncorrupted historical moment (implicitly located around 1955).”<sup>48</sup> It is this vision that becomes the referent against which “nonclass identities refer for proof of their exclusion or injury,” whether they be queer people fighting for marriage rights, child custody or employment security; single mothers struggling to care for their children while being employed; or people of colour facing discrimination in employment, housing, and health care, in addition to being the recipients of unprovoked harassment.<sup>49</sup> As Brown argues:

The point is not that these privations are trivial but that without recourse to the white masculine middle-class ideal, politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion, their claims to the political significance of their difference. If they thus require this ideal for the potency and poignancy of their political claims, we might ask to what extent a critique of capitalism is foreclosed by the current configuration of oppositional politics, and not simply by the ‘loss of the socialist alternative’ or the ostensible ‘triumph of liberalism’ in the global order.

Brown’s argument, thus, is that in order for politicized identity to articulate its exclusion on a political register, it must express what it is being excluded *from*. Insofar as what we are being excluded from is based upon the middle-class ideal (ie: “educational and vocational opportunity, upward mobility, relative protection against arbitrary violence, and reward in proportion to effort”<sup>50</sup>), capitalism will largely be protected from critique. This is because the things desired by identity movements are *precisely* the promises of capitalism (and liberalism), and are framed

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<sup>48</sup> Brown, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, 60.

as desirable and indeed *neutral*, rather than the product of a bourgeois masculinist ideology. For Brown, identity politics can thus “be partly configured by a peculiarly disguised form of class resentment, a resentment that is displaced onto discourses of injustice other than class, but a resentment, like all resentments, that retains the real or imagined holdings of its reviled subject as objects of desire.”<sup>51</sup> On her view, then, politicized identities, in their quest for bourgeois norms (“social acceptance, legal protection, and relative material comfort”<sup>52</sup>) are endemically repelled from challenging class power and norms because they *buy into them*. This causes them to heap all blame for their suffering on other “markers of social difference” (i.e. race, gender, and sexuality) when in actuality, it is the injurious physical and psychic effects of capitalism that should be faulted. Brown lists a number of these effects as “alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement, [and] disintegration of sustaining albeit contradictory social forms such as families and neighborhoods.”<sup>53</sup> All of these, when normalized and depoliticized, produce a suffering that gets wrongly added to the suffering that is “attributable to the explicitly politicized marking.”<sup>54</sup>

Adolph Reed Jr. makes a similar argument to Brown’s. In his view:

Race politics is not an alternative to class politics; it is a class politics, the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism. It is the expression and active agency of a political order and moral economy in which capitalist market forces are treated as unassailable in nature. An integral element of that moral economy is displacement of the critique of the invidious outcomes produced by capitalist class power onto equally naturalized categories of ascriptive

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<sup>51</sup> Brown, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, 60. Rosemary Hennessey also makes this point in her book, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (Psychology Press, 2000).

identity that sort us into groups supposedly defined by what we essentially are rather than what we do.<sup>55</sup>

Reed figures race politics (and all identity-based movements) as class politics in a social order where the “unassailability” of capitalism renders the capitalist order normal and incontestable. According to the logic of this “moral economy,” Reed argues that although 90% of resources might be under the control of 1% of society, this arrangement would nonetheless appear just to the proponents of identity politics as long as the 1% was divided in a manner proportionate to the populations of different identity groups (so for example, if half of the 1% went to women, 12% went to blacks etc.).<sup>56</sup> What Reed is attempting to show is that for identity-based movements, the issue of justice hinges not on the fact that we live in an economic system *premised* on inequality and exploitation, but rather that we (as women, as people of colour, as LGBTQ people) are not receiving our fair share of the spoils.

Sociologist Todd Gitlin is perhaps one of the most outspoken and well-known critics of identity politics in terms of its failure to contend with the forces of capitalism. Indeed, Reed goes so far as to identify him as “both fairly and as caricature, the symbol of a ‘class-first’ line.”<sup>57</sup> Gitlin has come to earn this reputation by virtue of a number of publications (primarily in the 1990s) that expose what he sees as significant limitations in identity-based movements in terms of how they impact the future of the Left. Broadly, Gitlin makes two key points. The first pertains

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<sup>55</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “From Jenner to Dolezal.”

<sup>56</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “The Limits of Anti-Racism,” *Left Business Observer* 121 (September 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “The Limits of Anti-Racism.”



to how the symbolic gains of identity, especially in the university, have replaced any serious reckoning with the increasing ravages of capitalism outside of the academy. Gitlin's book *Twilight of Common Dreams* is replete with examples of what he describes as emotionally charged battles over admissions, hiring practices, appropriate speech, and curriculum omissions by identity-based groups (feminist, anti-racist, and queer students). Gitlin argues that identity-based struggles "flourish" in universities given that they are "far more winnable" there than in the larger world. This is due, in part, to the defeat of the New Left which led to the "partisans of identity politics bec[oming] preoccupied with what they might control in their immediate surroundings – language and imagery."<sup>58</sup> For Gitlin, the consequences of this are politically damaging given that they fail to address the more pressing issues of economic inequality. As he argues:

the politics of identity is silent on the deepest sources of social misery: the devastation of cities, the draining of resources away from the public and into the private hands of the few. It does not organize to reduce the sickening inequality between rich and poor. Instead, in effect, it struggles to change the color of inequality.<sup>59</sup>

Gitlin's second point relates to identity's fragmenting of the Left – a concern shared by a number of Leftist thinkers who also lament the demise of class politics in the movement.<sup>60</sup> Gitlin alternates between a sympathetic and disparaging stance in discussing what he sees as the reasons for the Left's disintegration into identity

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<sup>58</sup> Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*.

<sup>59</sup> Gitlin.

<sup>60</sup> See also Eric Hobsbawm, Michael Tomasky, Richard Rorty, Sean Wilentz, Robert W. McChesney, Jim Sleeper, Walter Benn Michaels, Rosemary Hennessey, Nancy Fraser, Richard Wolin, and Joanna Williams.

groupings. On the one hand, he recognizes current exponents of identity politics in the university as heirs of the dissolution of New Left universalism, conceding that “this generation had no direct memory of a unified Left...their experience of active politics was segmented, not unified.”<sup>61</sup> Gitlin is also somewhat sympathetic to the sense of belonging and pleasure that come with identity, especially given the lack of rootedness and anxiety of our current moment. On the other hand, however, Gitlin is unequivocal in his contention that the cultural boundaries and in-group mentality of identity-based politics obstruct the Left from achieving the common ground needed to effect serious political change. As he states:

A Left that was serious about winning political power and reducing the inequality of wealth and income would stop lambasting all white men, and would take it as elementary to reduce frictions among white men, blacks, white women, and Hispanics. Could it be more obvious that the Left and the Democrats alike are helpless unless they offer all these constituencies something they benefit from in common?<sup>62</sup>

Gitlin calls for a “political system of mutual reliance and common moral obligations” that does not forfeit political citizenship for cultural identity. In his view, our task is one of “building bridges,” rather than emphasizing and protecting our differences.

Brown, Reed, and Gitlin are only a few of the many thinkers that critique identity politics for failing to challenge capitalism, and indeed aspiring towards it.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Gitlin.

<sup>62</sup> Gitlin.

<sup>63</sup> Again, see the work of Eric Hobsbawm, Michael Tomasky, Richard Rorty, Sean Wilentz, Robert W. McChesney, Jim Sleeper, Walter Benn Michaels, Rosemary Hennessey, Nancy Fraser, Richard Wolin, and Joanna Williams.

Moreover, these thinkers often also challenge identity politics for fragmenting the Left, and emphasizing group interests over universal commonalities. As can be seen from this chapter, identity-based movements have attracted significant criticism. I have discussed some of the most dominant challenges: attachment to injury, essentialism, and complicity with power in terms of the disciplinary appropriation of identity, legalism, and capitalism. The proponents of identity-based movements have not been silent in response to these challenges. Indeed, a number of exponents of the movement have defended their style of political engagement. The next section gives some of these responses.

### **(5.2) In Defense of Identity-based Politics**

Given the sustained attack on identity in the academy since the 1990s, a number of defenses have emerged from proponents of the movement. This section offers a selective representation of some of the most dominant responses as provided by Carrie Bramen and Linda Maria Alcoff.

Carrie Bramen launches an incendiary attack against critics of identity politics including Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Todd Gitlin in her article “Why the Academic Left Hates Identity Politics.”<sup>64</sup> She identifies these critics as “left traditionalists” who bemoan the elision of class in identity-based movements and who argue that such movements fragment the Left “into distinct, mutually exclusive groups without a common ground so that potential alliances are thwarted in the

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<sup>64</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, “Why the Academic Left Hates Identity Politics,” *Textual Practice* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 1–11.

name of special interests.”<sup>65</sup> For left traditionalists, identity politics is “bad” politics, to be differentiated from the “good” and more pressing politics of class.

Bramen challenges these critics on three grounds. Firstly, she argues that Leftist opponents of identity politics are almost uniformly reticent in terms of *who* they are talking about in their critiques of identity. As Bramen states, “the most striking feature in the criticism of identity politics is the absence of names and examples.”<sup>66</sup> She charges Wendy Brown, for example, for giving Nietzsche “all the best lines [in *States of Injury*] at the expense of people of colour who rarely appear except in an occasional footnote (and then only those scholars who agree with the author).”<sup>67</sup> Later in the article, Bramen reasons that this refusal to name names might be due to the fact that the term “identity politics,” for the traditional Left, largely operates as a euphemism for people of colour, even while it formally also represents the political struggles of women, queer folks, and other ethnic groups. Focusing again on Brown, Bramen argues that, “rhetorically speaking, it is easier to criticize abstract terms like ‘politicized identity’ or simply ‘identity’ rather than ‘black people’ or ‘minority scholars.’”<sup>68</sup>

The reason for this discomfort around race, leads to Bramen’s second point. Bramen contends that the white liberal Left is terrified of the anger of racialized peoples, and especially the anger of black people. As she discusses, “an angry black student speaking out in class, for instance, may be accused of ‘silencing’ white

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<sup>65</sup> Bramen, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Bramen, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Bramen, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Bramen, 5.

students by using the authority of her experience as a racialized subject.”<sup>69</sup> In speaking from a place of authority, moreover, Bramen argues that this student might be accused of engaging in “essentialist exclusion” in which the charge of essentialism operates as means of dismissing the anger of people of colour against racism, and protecting white people from the potential “emotional consequences of such confrontations.”<sup>70</sup> As Bramen explains, “Accusations of essentialism function, in part, as a mode of evasion, as a way to ignore and deflect ‘minority’ anger and to stay within the realm of the safely familiar.”<sup>71</sup> Bramen also makes the point that in depicting people of colour as angry, “a disturbing racial allegory” arises which “links people of colour with emotionalism, blinding attachment and excessive behaviour – perhaps rage? – in contrast to a race neutral (read Anglo-American) cosmopolitanism, which would be more rational and objective.”<sup>72</sup>

Bramen’s third challenge to Leftist critics of identity politics centers on their dismissal of racial victimage. She identifies a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” narrative in circulation in both Leftist and conservative rhetoric. Bramen quotes Cornell West in saying that “While black people have never been simply victims, wallowing in self-pity and begging for white giveaways, they have been– and are – victimized.”<sup>73</sup> Bramen discusses a number of post-identity and cosmopolitan models that have been suggested by Leftist scholars as denying the extent to which race still

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<sup>69</sup> Bramen, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Bramen, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Bramen, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Bramen, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Bramen, 4.

matters. As she argues, “post-ethnicity cannot address the fact that bodies still signify according to racial categories...”<sup>74</sup>

While Bramen does concede some limitations of identity politics, namely “in prescribing modes of behaviour that pressure individuals to conform to certain standards of authenticity,” she quotes Grant Farred in arguing that identity has “empowered more than disenfranchised.”<sup>75</sup> Positive aspects of identity-based politics for Bramen include the community building produced by strategic self-essentializing, as well as “the right to self-definition as a public act that has politicized minorities’ sense of themselves and has given these groups a sense of agency that was fought for and continues to be fought for in daily struggles against discrimination, poverty and brutality.”<sup>76</sup> Bramen, moreover, emphasizes the institutional policies and structures that activists from identity-based movements have successfully challenged, leading to real material gains for minority groups. She provides the examples of the 1999 UC Berkeley hunger strike in protest of drastic budget cuts to its Ethnic Studies Program, and Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow/PUSH organization against racist marketing and hiring practices at Toyota. Both, Bramen contends, resulted in victories that demonstrate the real-life effects of identity politics.

In addition to these above productive features of identity-based movements, Bramen discusses the “dissident subcultures” that identity politics has created political space for. She describes these subcultures as semi-autonomous groups that

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<sup>74</sup> Bramen, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Bramen, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Bramen, 7.

trouble the distinction between separatism and integration by engaging with the dominant culture at times, and at other times, maintaining a type of dissident autonomy. Bramen mobilizes West's concept of "subcultures of criticism" as those which "position themselves within the dominant culture, 'while clearly being aligned with [marginalized] groups who vow to keep alive potent traditions of critique and resistance.'"<sup>77</sup> Bramen argues that "this understanding of subcultures gives 'minority' intellectuals the chance to lay claim to the local, national and international while at the same time maintaining a critical space of separation."<sup>78</sup>

Linda Martin Alcoff also provides a defense for identity politics. In her article entitled "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics," Alcoff offers a philosophical engagement with identity in which she considers and responds to some dominant critiques. Alcoff's main contention is that while there are problematic ways in which some take up identity, these "political ills and theoretical mistakes" have unfairly and unrepresentatively tarnished the entire identity-based movement. These political and theoretical errors include homogenizing group characteristics, engaging in a politics of radical separatism, and making essentialist arguments and assumptions. While these practices exist, Alcoff claims that they do not represent the ideas and commitments of the majority of those who base their politics in identity. Most proponents of identity, in Alcoff's view, have no dispute with the fact of internal heterogeneity within identity groups, the fact that identity categories are socially constructed or that experience is interpretive and mediated. Yet, as she shows, "we also want to claim that identities refer outward to objective and causally significant

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<sup>77</sup> Bramen, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Bramen, 8.

features of the world, that they are thus non-arbitrary, and that experience provides both an epistemic and political basis for understanding.”<sup>79</sup> She argues for a post-positivist realism that is compatible with ontological pluralism and makes a case for our ability to know the world through our experience, without committing to a positivist project of finding an uncontaminated ‘truth.’ In terms of how this relates to identity, Alcoff writes that “social identities are often carried on the body, materially inscribed, perceived at a glance by well-disciplined perceptual practices, and thus hardly the mere epiphenomena of discourse.”<sup>80</sup>

For Alcoff, then, identities are certainly *real*, but this realness need not mean that members of an identity group are indistinguishable or share an essential core. As she contends:

This is not the ordinary language understanding of identity, of course, in which it is common to talk about national identity or ethnic identity even while one assumes that there are differences between the individuals who might share such an identity as well as similarities that such individuals may share with those in another identity group. Identity is conceived as something common to a group, but what this something is can be variously spelled out: for example, it might be something that is socially based and historical rather than stable and inherent...The worry that identity *entails* an ahistorical essentialism or that it posits an absolute sameness seems to me to be the sort of worry Wittgenstein said philosophers develop when we let language go on holiday. It is based on a conflation of contextually based meanings and standards.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to challenging critiques related to essentialism and epistemic privilege, Alcoff also takes up the charge of identity as interpellative imposition. Alcoff challenges both Brown and Butler on the grounds of their inability to see past

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<sup>79</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff, “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?”

<sup>80</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff (web version, page number not available).

<sup>81</sup> Alcoff.



the “negative valence” that they give “to identity, as rooted in domination and always alien to the self.”<sup>82</sup> For Alcoff, identity is more than a coercive labeling. She cites Robert Gooding-Williams’ formulation of black identity to help explicate her point:

Gooding-Williams argues that “being racially classified as black is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a black person.” The third person interpellation, the public identity, must be designated black; one cannot simply negate the modes and norms of description in one’s social world or reinvent new ones at will. But Gooding-Williams does not give this public inscription the last word. He argues that “One becomes a black person only if (1) one begins to identify (to classify) *oneself* as black and (2) one begins to make choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns, etc., in light of one’s identification of oneself as black.” This definition highlights the individuals’ negotiation and their subjectivity. That is, black identity involves both a public self and lived experience, which means that it is produced out of the modes of description made possible in a given culture but it is also dependent upon any given individual’s active self-understanding.<sup>83</sup>

Alcoff, here, is not denying the interpellative process that Butler describes, nor the classificatory scheme of disciplinary power emphasized by Brown. What she is saying is that this is only the initial step in developing a racial identity. What must follow the injurious naming from the outside must be an inner becoming based in choice, agency, and negotiation.<sup>84</sup> Using the work of Manuel Castells, Alcoff argues that identity is a “generative source of meaning, necessarily collective rather than

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<sup>82</sup> Alcoff.

<sup>83</sup> Alcoff. See Stuart Hall “Negotiating Caribbean Identity” (1995) too for a discussion on interpellation and self-recognition in relation to identity. See also Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (and his section in *Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*), Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, and John L. Comaroff’s “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution,” in *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power* (1996).

<sup>84</sup> It is unclear how Alcoff or Gooding-Williams might apply these criteria to Rachel Dolezal. We might assume, however, that Reed would find it acceptable, given his tacit support for a definition of blackness as premised on “doing black things” (see Adolph Reed Jr., “From Jenner to Dolezal.”).

wholly individual, and useful not only as a source of agency but also as a meaningful narrative.”<sup>85</sup>

Thus, for Alcoff, identity is a generative appropriation and re-working of often imposed social categories. She argues that a post-positivist realist approach to identity politics is one in which “real” is employed to challenge the view that interpellative social naming is always just imposed on subjects from the outside. Rather, as she explains, “to self-identify even by a racial or sexed designation is again not merely to accept the sad fact of oppression but to understand one’s relationship to a historical community, to recognize one’s objective social location, and to assert one’s own power to negotiate the meaning and implications of one’s identity.”<sup>86</sup>

Bramen and Alcoff together respond to many of the objections raised by those who take a critical stance against identity-based movements. Bramen attacks Leftist critics for their silencing of marginalized groups; their dismissal of racial anger; and their refusal to acknowledge racial victimage. She defends identity politics on the grounds of its strategies for community building, reclaiming rights to self-definition, challenge of institutional policies and related material gains; and defense of dissident subcultures that straddle the boundary between dominant society and political autonomy. Alcoff, on the other hand, rejects many of the charges laid by critics from the outset, arguing that they refer to anomalies in the movement, rather than dominant expressions. She claims that most common sense understandings of identity are not essentializing, nor strictly interpellative. Rather,

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<sup>85</sup> Alcoff.

<sup>86</sup> Alcoff.

Alcoff contends that identity is a fluid and generative process of creative negotiation and agentic meaning-making. For both scholars, identity-based struggles, despite their imperfections, offer its members a productive form of political engagement. To conclude this chapter, I examine their assertions along with those of their critics, in order to answer the question I laid out at the start of our discussion.

This chapter has outlined some of the major Leftist criticisms of identity politics in order to explore the degree to which the *ressentimental* character discussed in the previous chapter are inevitable outgrowths of this type of politics. I have also given a brief overview of some of the dominant responses from exponents of identity, as presented by Bramen and Alcoff. What is to be made of this battle that is still being waged across university campuses and activist platforms? Is it true that identity politics is stuck in a *ressentimental*, essentialist game that (whether unwittingly or opportunistically) is complicit with dominant power? Do proponents of identity politics engage in a divisive type of politicking which prefers to fix its sights on symbolic and linguistic recognitions over the more radical political aims of the Left? *Or* are the supporters of identity valid in claiming that their mode of political engagement attends to their pain, their experiences, and their interests in a way that the wider Left refuses to? And further, are they justified in celebrating the productive elements of identity and the achievements that derive from them? As an anti-racist feminist, and thus a 'participant' of identity politics myself, I have a complicated response to these questions.

Both the proponents and opponents of identity make important points. The proponents are absolutely right in arguing that the pain of oppressed peoples is

denied and silenced both in the wider Leftist movement and in society at large. The everyday victimage of physical, psychic, and spiritual injury is often minimized, doubted, mocked, or erased altogether. Proponents are also correct in emphasizing the communities that we form through our politics, which provide us with generative self-identities and collectives of understanding and support. Both Bramen and Alcoff highlight these points cogently. On the other hand, if we – as anti-racist feminists – are willing to engage self-critically with our detractors, we might concede that they also raise a number of valid points. Brown is correct in asking: if it is our pain that ties us together, then do we not *need* this pain in order to cohere politically? There is also the very important question of the degree to which identity politics engages in legal reformism and seeks capitalistic gains, rather than desires to overthrow the current economic system itself. Finally, there is the challenge of divisiveness and separatism that is often pinned on identity. While our group identities have brought us a meaningful in-group solidarity, to what extent has this come at the cost of a vision of commonality? Indeed, even Bramen admits to this issue towards the end of her article, suggesting that we need to move towards an anti-racist humanism.

I believe that Bramen's concession is representative of a wider, although often unspoken consciousness among anti-racist feminists – that is, an *ambivalent* consciousness which, while invested in the project of anti-racist feminism, is simultaneously cognisant of its limitations. The question that thus emerges is what is it about identity politics that secures the investment/commitment/loyalty/participation of its members in spite of the latent

realization that our political actions and tendencies might run contrary to our greater interests? As I have discussed, there are a number of benefits that identity offers us, including a sense of belonging, solidarity, a shared purpose, and a means by which we might fight against injustice. In the following chapter, I examine – through the work of Erich Fromm – how despite the problems I have explored in regards to the anti-racist feminist movement, its ability to satisfy some central human needs, such as relatedness, identity, and rootedness, can partly explain our attachment to it.

Before moving to the next chapter, however, I return explicitly to the question that I introduced at the start of this chapter that seeks to determine the relationship between *ressentimental* practices and identity politics. In exploring both sides of the debate in this chapter, I suggest that identity politics is most definitely *prone to resentment*. While this development might not be inevitable, it is the collision of identity's prefigured matrix of belonging and exclusion, together with the unresolved pain of racial/gendered injury in a context of continued injustice, that make *resentiment* a probable outcome. The structure of identity politics offers a fertile breeding ground for *ressentimental* thinking and practices to grow. And thus, while not all proponents of identity politics are *ressentimental*, I argue that many of loudest voices in the movement today betray a character of *resentiment* as explored in the previous chapter. This again leads to the question of how we, as anti-racist feminists, might contact and move through our undigested pain before it grows into a *resentiment* that can flourish in the complementary environment of identity politics. Chapter 7 will seek to answer this question as part

of the chapter's wider aim to explore a practice that might allow us to contact and move through our pain, rather than react from it. This still leaves unanswered the dilemma as how to overcome the divisiveness of identity politics, along with its uncritical investments in legal redress and capitalist attainment. In the next chapter I turn to Erich Fromm's theory of radical humanism as a means of addressing some of these shortcomings.

## Chapter 6 – Towards an Anti-Racist Humanism: Lessons from Erich Fromm

*“Love has never been a popular movement. And no one’s every wanted, really, to be free. The world is held together, really it is held together, by the love and passion of a very few people.”*

-James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*

*“When we look at modern man, we have to face the fact...that modern man suffers from a kind of poverty of spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to this scientific and technological abundance; We’ve learned to fly the air like birds, we’ve learned to swim the seas like fish, and yet we haven’t learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters...”*

-Martin Luther King Jr., *Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 1964*

In Chapter 3 I discussed some of Erich Fromm’s theoretical contributions, especially his ideas of social character and the social unconscious. In this chapter, I will look at Fromm’s concept of *humanism*. As was discussed previously, identity politics has been critiqued for its divisiveness and tendency to rally around shared differences rather than recognizing commonalities. It has also been challenged for its attachment to its injury and investment in the status quo, which prevent it from building affirmative and emancipatory possibilities for the future. This has led Leftist critics and even some supporters of identity to call for a return to a universalist ethic that might counter or temper some of the harmful divisions and attachments that impede identity-based movements.<sup>1</sup> I believe Fromm’s humanistic

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, for example, states the following in an interview when asked about her thoughts on humanism: “I would have answered this question very differently five years ago. I would have gone straight for the critique of humanism. I would answer differently now. What happened for me in thinking about the critiques of humanism that many of us have now been steeped in for a couple of decades is finding ways of defundamentalizing and de-essentializing both every political concept and the ‘human being’ or the human subject itself, while still permitting ourselves attachments to political projects that require at certain times provisional descriptions of certain things as dominating or more

framework can offer a helpful launching point from which to engage with these ideas around commonality, universalism, and freedom, potentially providing the beginning steps in constructing an *anti-racist humanism*. Although Fromm is known for his application of psychoanalysis to the social context, according to Durkin, his “thinking, including the psychoanalytic framework he generally employed as central to it, is constituted by a prior and deeper humanism that characterizes his corpus *as a whole*.”<sup>2</sup>

I begin this chapter by providing a brief sketch of Fromm’s biographical and intellectual evolution so as to provide some context in terms of his influences and give some sense of his major works. Next, I engage Fromm’s theory of humanism, which I examine in two parts. The first relates to his humanistic psychoanalytical framework which lays the ground for the ways in which human beings are connected. I then discuss Fromm’s idea of *radical humanism*, which centers on achieving negative as well as positive freedom. Fromm characterizes this latter freedom as an affirmative and humanizing force in both one’s inner and outer life. Finally, I examine the usefulness of Fromm’s humanism for anti-racist feminism, as well as some of limitations, which I address through the work of James Baldwin. I argue that Baldwin – a contemporary of Fromm’s – offers a critical intervention in his insistence on the dehumanizing effects of racism for both dominant and oppressed groups, and the need to attend to this issue of race if there is to be a shared humanistic future.

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emancipatory.” See Wendy Brown et al., “Learning to Love Again - An Interview With Wendy Brown,” *Contretemps* 6 (January 2006), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 2.



## **(6.1) Erich Fromm: biographical and intellectual evolution**

Before delving into Erich Fromm's ideas as they pertain to my investigation, it is worthwhile to give some attention to Fromm's biographical and intellectual development. Although Fromm has in the last few decades become somewhat of a "forgotten intellectual," he enjoyed many years of fame in both academic circles and as a public scholar.<sup>3</sup> His accessible writing style and focus on pressing societal trends influenced his popularity, leading to book sales over the 100 million mark.<sup>4</sup> As a writer, Fromm is impressive for both the range of topics he examines and the coherence he maintains throughout his works. Two central unifying features underlie Fromm's work: the connection he makes between the psyche and the social; and his philosophy of humanism.<sup>5</sup> The present chapter will offer a brief sketch of Fromm's personal and intellectual evolution as a radical humanist thinker through examining his major influences and works,<sup>6</sup> before delving into his humanistic philosophy and framework.

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<sup>3</sup> See McLaughlin's article "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm," (*Sociological Forum* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 1998): 215–46) for an interesting account of Erich Fromm's disappearance from the public intellectual scene.

With this being said, there has been a renewed interest in his work in recent years, with scholars from diverse fields finding new resonances in his insights. See for example: Braune (2014), Durkin (2014), Miri, Lake & Kress (2014), Friedman (2013), Funk (2009), Thomson (2009), Wilde (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Mauricio Cortina, "The Greatness and Limitations of Erich Fromm's Humanism," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 388–422.

<sup>5</sup> Kieran Durkin (2014), and Mauricio Cortina (2015) also make the claim that Erich Fromm's humanism can be traced throughout his work.

<sup>6</sup> For a more comprehensive account of Fromm's life, see Funk's, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas*; and Daniel Burston's, *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (Harvard University Press, 1991). In more recent years, a somewhat controversial biography has been published by Lawrence J. Friedman entitled *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.) The proprietor of Fromm's estate, Rainer Funk, maintains that this

## ***Influences***

While Fromm's thought could be seen as deriving from three primary sources – Judaism, Freudianism, and Marxism – closer examination reveals a number of additional influences that made a marked impact on the development of his ideas, including, but not limited to: the sociology of Max and Alfred Weber; the psychoanalytic methods of Georg Groddeck and Sándor Ferenczi; the interpersonal psychology of Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan; the existential thought of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Jaspers; and the spiritual insights of religious mysticism and Zen Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

Fromm was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family in Frankfurt at the start of the twentieth century. He received advanced training in Jewish scripture and philosophy, under the instruction of his great uncle and two rabbis who would make a deep impression on the young Fromm.<sup>8</sup> Durkin discusses three main ways in which Fromm's Judaic education influenced his concept of humanism. Firstly, Fromm's understanding of universalism, or the unity of all of humanity, is rooted in

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book contains a number of erroneous, misleading, and sensational statements about Fromm and his life (Funk, lecture, Tübingen Germany, Sept 2016).

Interestingly, Fromm was largely opposed to having a biography of his life written although the reasons for this are unclear (Funk, lecture, Tübingen Germany, Sept 2016). He does, however share some biographical details (somewhat uncharacteristically) in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: my encounter with Marx and Freud*, originally published in 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Some other thinkers not mentioned here but who have been quite impactful on Fromm's thinking include: Spinoza, the Greek philosophers, Enlightenment humanists, and the cultural anthropology of Margaret Mead, Johann Jakob Bachofen and others.

<sup>8</sup> The first of these two rabbis was Nahemia Nobel who Fromm met at the age of 16 in Frankfurt. Nobel, who studied under the philosopher Hermann Cohen, introduced Fromm to Hasidic mysticism and Enlightenment philosophy.

Fromm met the second rabbi, Dr. Salman B. Rabinkov, in Heidelberg where they studied together almost daily for 6 years. For a more detailed discussion on the influence of Judaism on Fromm's thinking, see Funk (2000), Durkin (2014), and Braune (2014).

the Old Testament, which he credits as one of the first historical articulations of the idea.

Secondly, Fromm's understanding of human freedom and potentiality is based in his humanistic interpretation of the Creation Story of the Old Testament. In Fromm's rendering, the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating from the forbidden tree marks the beginning of human history, and more, of *human freedom*.<sup>9</sup> As Durkin explains, "Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit stands at the beginning of a dialectical process in which man comes to experience himself as a stranger in the world, estranged from himself and from nature, but who, through this very estrangement, and through the subsequent development of his love and reason, can again become one with himself, with his fellow man, and with nature, returning to Paradise but on a new level of human individuation and independence."<sup>10</sup> Fromm's interpretation of the Creation Story is connected to his wider belief in prophetic messianism. For Fromm, however, the "messiah" is not a prophet sent to humanity by God's grace, but rather a symbol for the individual's own capacity for full human realization; a potentiality that is only achieved through human effort and action. As Durkin argues, "Fromm's understanding of prophetic messianism...forms an absolutely central pillar of his thought, providing, in either explicit or implied tone, the underlying basis to the utopian thread that runs throughout his work."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See here Fromm's essays published under the title, *On Disobedience* (1981).

<sup>10</sup> Durkin, 45. As Durkin notes, Fromm's interpretation here has been challenged by some as an inaccurate representation of Judaic thought.

<sup>11</sup> Durkin, 46. For a more in depth analysis of Fromm's prophetic messianism, see Joan Braune's *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future*, (Sense Publishers, 2014).

Thirdly, and relatedly, Durkin discusses Fromm's central humanistic tenet of "radical autonomy," or "idea that man must 'develop his own powers' and reach the goal of complete independence, 'penetrating through fictions and illusions to full awareness of reality,' as rooted in his reading of Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Fromm found this idea in both Hasidic mysticism and in the stories of the Old Testament. He locates a prime instance of this principle in the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah where Abraham challenges God over the destruction of the two kingdoms. Fromm interprets Abraham's courageous behaviour as that of an equal to God, rather than a "meek supplicant." For Fromm, the aim of the human being is to rise to equality with God by liberating oneself from illusions and "shackles that bind us to the past, to nature, to the clan, and to idols in general."<sup>13</sup> Although Fromm read these biblical ideas on human autonomy, and liberation in his early years, he would find great resonance in the works of Freud and Marx (among others) in relation to these concepts, and would write about them, along with universalism, human potentiality and freedom, for the rest of his life. Indeed, even after Fromm renounced Orthodox Judaism in his mid-20s, his Judaic education would influence his radical humanistic ideas for years to come.<sup>14</sup>

Fromm studied sociology under the supervision of Alfred Weber in Heidelberg in the 1920s. Weber impressed upon Fromm the inextricability of the

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<sup>12</sup> Durkin, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Durkin, 51.

<sup>14</sup> As Douglas Kellner notes, "Although he later distanced himself from Judaism, it is reported that Fromm never tired of singing Hasidic songs or studying scripture." ("Erich Fromm, Judaism and the Frankfurt School," *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project*, accessed February 28, 2018).

individual from collective life.<sup>15</sup> Weber's impact on Fromm would continue throughout his life, as expressed in a letter written in 1975:

I had only one non-Jewish teacher whom I really admired and who deeply influenced me and that was Alfred Weber, the brother of Max, also a sociologist but in contrast to Max, a humanist not a nationalist,<sup>16</sup> and a man of outstanding courage and integrity...the only one of my university teachers whom I considered a real teacher and a master.<sup>17</sup>

Fromm's doctoral research was a psychosocial investigation of the diasporic Jewish community and their unification through Jewish law – a study that impressed his supervisor and earned him second-best grades.<sup>18</sup>

It is likely that during Fromm's time in Heidelberg he was also introduced to existential philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Fromm studied under the existential thinker Karl Jaspers who was a professor at the University of Heidelberg during Fromm's tenure as a student there.<sup>20</sup> While it is unclear as to what Fromm took from Jaspers's thought,

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<sup>15</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Despite Fromm's disparaging of Max Weber, we see Weber's undeniable influence in Fromm's work including in his discussion of Protestantism in *Escape from Freedom* (McLaughlin 1996), as well as in his ideal type social character formations (Cortina 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Written to Lewis Mumford, April 29, 1975 in Funk 2000, p 52.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Weber encouraged Fromm to seek an academic position but Fromm felt that such a career would "restrain" him, especially given his emerging interests in psychoanalysis (Friedman, 15).

<sup>19</sup> While some consider Fromm to be an existential psychoanalyst, it is unlikely that Fromm thought of himself as such given his criticism of the school: "the 'existential' psychoanalysts are supposed to be more concerned with problems of human goals – and some are. Others understand little, and simply use a philosophical jargon taken from Husserl, Heidegger or Sartre as a gimmick, without really penetrating the depth of the patient's personality" (*The Art of Being*, p 66-67, also *The Heart of Man*, p 15). It is unclear if Fromm is speaking about the existential psychoanalyst Rollo May here, given their contentious relationship (Friedman, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Jaspers also served as doctoral supervisor to Hannah Arendt, who moved from Marburg to Heidelberg as a means of protecting the secrecy around her affair with Heidegger (see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton University Press, 2003)).

there are notable resonances between their philosophies, including their focus on human transcendence and freedom; their emphasis on human relatedness and connection; their appreciation for the insights of different spiritual traditions (including the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart and Eastern thought, especially Buddhism); and their humanism.<sup>21</sup> Given the influence of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on Jaspers' thinking, it is also certain that Fromm would have come across these two philosophers in the lectures he gave. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm discusses both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as "visionary thinkers" in their ability to anticipate the plight of the individual in our modern age:

Kierkegaard describes the helpless individual torn and tormented by doubts, overwhelmed by the feeling of aloneness and insignificance. Nietzsche visualizes the approaching nihilism which was to become manifest in Nazism and paints a picture of a 'superman' as the negation of the insignificant, directionless individual he saw in reality.<sup>22</sup>

Fromm's relationship to Nietzsche's thought is especially interesting for the purposes of this dissertation. As evident from his philosophy as explored in Chapter

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky To Sartre* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016). Despite these resonances, Burston (1991) claims that Jaspers did not appear to make an impact on Fromm's thinking as can be seen by the fact that Fromm does not mention him in his published works. We know, however, that Fromm did not always refer to those who influenced his thinking – for example the Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen who Fromm mentions sparsely despite his central influence on his thinking (Durkin 2014). We also see that Fromm at least accepted Jaspers' concept of the "axial age" which he references in a footnote in *You Shall be as Gods* (1966, p 20). Of course Jaspers was not the only existential thinker who was also a humanist. Jean-Paul Sartre also classified himself in similar terms (see *Existentialism is a Humanism*, based off of his well-known 1945 lecture). In Fromm's view, however, Sartre's "claim that there are no objective values valid for all men," and his "concept of freedom which amount to egotistic arbitrariness," mean that he and his exponents forfeit "the most important achievement... of the humanist tradition" (*The Heart of Man*, 15).

<sup>22</sup> *Escape from Freedom*, 154. Interestingly, Freud also held Nietzsche in high regard, stating that "Nietzsche had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live," in May, *The Discovery of Being*, 144.

4, Nietzsche is a firmly anti-humanist thinker. What was it about his philosophy that attracted Fromm? Fromm claims that many interpretations of Nietzsche's thought fail to capture the essence of his ideas. Besides his visionary insight, Fromm was drawn to Nietzsche's insistence that the individual should not be viewed as a means to anything outside of his/her own development or happiness.<sup>23</sup> In *Man For Himself*, while discussing his humanistic ethics (and the distinction between self-love and love, in particular), Fromm states Nietzsche's view in the following terms:

For Nietzsche, the quest for love is typical of slaves unable to fight for what they want and who therefore try to get it through love. Altruism and love for mankind thus have become signs of degeneration. For Nietzsche it is the essence of a good and healthy aristocracy that it is ready to sacrifice countless people for its interests without having a guilty conscience. Society should be a 'foundation and scaffolding by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves to their higher duties, and in general to a higher existence.'"<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, Fromm is not deterred by Nietzsche's beliefs despite their apparent contradiction to his own. Rather, he exonerates Nietzsche by arguing that his tendency for "overstatement" owes to the reactive quality that animates his work. Fromm claims that there were insecurities and anxieties in Nietzsche's personality that attracted him to this image of "the strong man" as a reaction formation.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Fromm cites the influence of evolution theory, and specifically

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<sup>23</sup> Fromm identifies Nietzsche as one such thinker who forwarded this view, along with the philosophers of the French Revolution, as well as Feuerbach, Marx, and Stirner (*Escape from Freedom*, p 143).

<sup>24</sup> Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics* (Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 129.

<sup>25</sup> True to his psychoanalytical training, Fromm had a keen eye for penetrating the unconscious elements that were likely driving Nietzsche's work. We know, for example, that Nietzsche suffered from a number of health problems throughout his life that rendered his body quite weak. We also know that he failed romantically, turned down by his love interest

the “survival of the fittest” on Nietzsche as providing some explanation for his views. Indeed, Fromm is able to see past the provocative elements of Nietzsche’s thought in order to interpret his injunction against the love for others as an attack against altruism that is rooted in weakness and a lack of self-love, as opposed to a love based in strength, generosity, and self-worth. As Fromm argues,

The essence of [Nietzsche’s] view is this: love is a phenomenon of abundance; its premise is the strength of the individual who can give. Love is affirmation and productiveness, “it seeketh to create what is loved!” To love another person is only a virtue if it springs from this inner strength, but it is a vice if it is the expression of the basic inability to be oneself.”

Thus, it is through such an interpretation that Fromm is able to reconcile the incendiary ideas of Nietzsche with his own, applying a humanistic veneer to Nietzsche’s staunchly anti-humanist position.

Also while in Heidelberg, Fromm grew close to psychiatrist Frieda Reichmann who he would marry in 1926. It was through Reichmann that Fromm learned about psychoanalysis. Although Fromm would initially be a proponent of orthodox Freudianism, his ideas quickly evolved under the influence of Georg Groddeck <sup>26</sup> and Sándor Ferenczi. <sup>27</sup> Unlike Freud who emphasized the

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Lou Andreas-Salomé. It is thus reasonable to suspect, as Fromm did, that Nietzsche’s overemphasis on masculine virility in his writings was indeed compensatory.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Groddeck (1866-1934) was the director of the Marienhöhe Sanatorium in Baden Baden, Germany. Trained as an MD, Groddeck offered his patients a unique regimen of therapeutic massages and psychoanalysis. Groddeck’s key insight was that physical illness and one’s psychic strivings are deeply connected - laying the groundwork for future psychosomatic therapies. (For more on Groddeck’s approach, see his selected psychoanalytical writings in *The Meaning of Illness: Selected Psychoanalytic Writings* (International Universities Press, 1977)). In a 1956 letter, Fromm would recount his impression of Groddeck in the following terms:

When I think of all the analysts in Germany I knew, he was, in my opinion, the only one with truth, originality, courage and extraordinary kindness. He penetrated the



psychoanalyst's distance from his/her patient, Groddeck and Ferenczi's approach focused on the *human* relationship between the analyst and analysand – an approach that Fromm would use in his own clinical practice.

It was at Groddeck's sanatorium that Fromm made the acquaintance of Karen Horney, with whom he would be romantically and professionally linked for most of the 1930s, after the dissolution of his first marriage. Fromm shared Horney's critique of Freud's Oedipal theory and his overall patriarchal bias. Horney and Fromm would together apply cultural anthropological insights to maternal/paternal social structures in their studies on the psyche.<sup>28</sup> Fromm's interest from early in his career was in making a connection between the social and the psychological. Indeed, most of his work would hinge on the investigation of the social unconscious, a

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unconscious of his patient, and yet never hurt. Even if I was never his student in any technical sense, his teaching influenced me more than that of other teachers I had (in Funk 2000, 62).

Interestingly, in 1931 when Fromm fell ill with a bout of tuberculosis and needed to relocate to Switzerland, Groddeck encouraged him to see his illness as his body's expression of his mental wish to separate from his wife, Frieda Reichmann who he would indeed separate from a few years later.

<sup>27</sup> Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933) was a Hungarian psychoanalyst belonging to Freud's inner circle but who would ultimately become dissatisfied with orthodox Freudian methods. Fromm characterized the differences between him and Freud as "the difference between a humane, kind attitude which wholeheartedly promotes the well-being of the patient, in contrast to the patricentric-authoritarian, basically misanthropic 'tolerance'" (in Funk, 112). Strongly influenced by Groddeck, Ferenczi would increasingly move away from Freud's therapeutic approach and toward a more humane one that would make a strong impression on Fromm. For more on Ferenczi's approach, see *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Specifically, they were interested in the work of Johann Jakob Bachofen, Adolf Bastian, and Lewis H. Morgan. See *Love, Sexuality, and Matriarchy: About Gender* (Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1999) for a collection of Fromm's essays on gender and sexuality as influenced by these writers. See also Douglas Kellner's essay, "Erich Fromm, Feminism, and the Frankfurt School," (1991) for a critical analysis on Fromm's view of gender relations.

concept discussed at length in Chapter 3. Distinguishing himself from Freud's individualist and asocial theory of the ego, Fromm's "psychoanalysis interprets the human being as a socialized being, and the psychic apparatus as essentially developed and determined through the relationship of the individual to society".<sup>29</sup>

The emphasis on the social in Fromm's work was especially influenced by Marxist theory. In Fromm's view, Marx was the first to make the important discovery that the individual's "awakening" must be accompanied by change in social and economic relations.<sup>30</sup> Fromm was particularly attracted to Marx's earlier works in which he located the most "articulate expression" of his philosophy.<sup>31</sup> For Fromm, Marx was an important existential and humanist thinker, whose work: "like much of existentialist thinking, represents a protest against man's alienation, his loss of himself and his transformation into a thing; it is a movement against the dehumanization and automatization of man inherent in the development of Western industrialism. It is ruthlessly critical of all 'answers' to the problem of human existence which try to present solutions by negating or camouflaging the dichotomies inherent in man's existence."<sup>32</sup> Fromm distinguishes Marx's existentialism from that of Kierkegaard's by the *materiality* that foregrounds Marx's analysis. For Marx, the human being can only be understood as a member of a

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<sup>29</sup> Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Fromm's book *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961) would include some of these early writings by Marx, translated in English for the first time.

<sup>32</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (F. Ungar, 1961), v.

society and social class – a crucial contextualization missing from existential philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

Fromm's interest in wedding psychoanalysis to Marxist social theory led to his invitation to join the Institute for Social Research (aka the Frankfurt School) in 1930.<sup>34</sup> Despite the fact that the period in which Fromm was associated with the Frankfurt School was marked by frequent bouts of illness, he nonetheless remained quite productive. It was during this time that he developed his concept of the *authoritarian character* (discussed briefly in Chapter 3), which would hold the interest of the mainly Jewish émigrés of the Frankfurt school for many years to come.<sup>35</sup> Having fled Nazi Germany, these other members were also striving to make sense of the fascism and authoritarianism of 1930s Europe.

As Fromm's ideas further developed, however, members of the Institute would become less accepting, eventually leading to his break from the Institute in 1939. In brief, Fromm's departure can be understood as largely rooted in his revision of Freud's basic theories which were rejected by Institute director Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno – a newer member to the

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<sup>33</sup> Fromm's critique of existential philosophy's inadequate materiality was not limited to Kierkegaard. Indeed, he was perhaps most contemptuous when it came to Sartre. As he writes in *The Heart of Man* (1964), "Sartre...who claims to represent Marxist thought and to be the philosopher of the future...is nevertheless an exponent of the spirit of the society of *anomie* and selfishness which he criticizes and wants to change" (p 15). See also Fromm's footnote in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) for another instance in which Fromm attacks Sartre's lack of understanding of Marx's historical materialism (1973, p 262).

<sup>34</sup> Although Fromm made important contributions to the Frankfurt School, his presence as an early member has been erased by many accounts. For some texts on the Frankfurt School that do mention Fromm, each with differing appraisals of his contributions, see Martin Jay (1973) Douglas Kellner (1989), Stephen Bronner (1994), Rolf Wiggershaus (1995), and most recently, Stuart Jeffries (2016).

<sup>35</sup> See *The Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950 by Adorno et al.

Institute who was especially hostile to Fromm's approach. This led to public sparring between Fromm and his former colleagues in which the latter accused Fromm of conformist revisionism based on his rejection of Freud's libido theory which they saw as a capitulation to reified or "identity" thinking. Identity thinking is contrasted with non-identity thought, which is a philosophy based on the belief that concepts do not exhaust the objects which they describe. For theorists like Adorno, who was perhaps the most staunch proponent of this philosophy, it was in the remainder or in that which is negated, that emancipation lies. For the thinkers of the Institute, Freud's libido theory offered that very space which was outside of capitalist ideology.<sup>36</sup> In denouncing libido theory, Fromm was thus dismissing the emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis in favour of what they perceived as "commonplace psychology."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Fromm's suggestions for social change and call for a "New Man" and "New Society" were considered "naïve," "utopian", as well as conformist by his ex-colleagues.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For Marcuse, the radical aspect of Freud's work was in his theory of polymorphous sexuality. It was in this spontaneous and non-alienated capacity that Marcuse located the potentiality for liberation (see *Eros and Civilization* for further explanation of Marcuse's thought, as well as his critique of Fromm). In denying Freud's instinct theory, Fromm was seen to be abandoning this potentiality for what could only be a repressive alternative. Fromm's response to Marcuse's position was scathing: "Marcuse's revolutionary rhetoric obscures the irrational and anti revolutionary character of his attitude....he is attracted by infantile regression perversions and – as I see it – in a more hidden way by destruction and hate" (p 31, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology*).

For a published record of the intellectual dispute between Fromm and Marcuse, see their famous correspondence between the summer of 1955 and the winter of 1956 in *Dissent* magazine.

<sup>37</sup> Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Durkin, 167. For a more detailed discussion on the dispute between Fromm and his former colleagues at the Frankfurt School, see Durkin's excellent summary in *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*.

In what way did Fromm's theories specifically challenge orthodox Freudian analysis? As was discussed in Chapter 3, Fromm was critical of Freud's mechanistic and libidinal emphasis. Fromm criticized Freud's assumption that the human being was dominated by his/her instincts which were frustrated by society/culture. Fromm offers a different theory, which while acknowledging biological drives (hunger, sleep, sex etc.), stresses the "historical psychic impulses, developed in the social process."<sup>39</sup> The human being's needs are thus not understood by looking at his/her physiology only but rather the whole "life process."<sup>40</sup> Finally, for Fromm, the psyche of an individual cannot be understood apart from looking at the mode of production of a society and its role in shaping both the individual and social character.

Fromm's reformulation, presented in 1937 in an article rejected by Horkheimer, would form the basis for his further work. Rainer Funk describes this reformulation in the following terms:

This new approach enabled new insights into the passionate strivings of human beings. Since action is no longer determined by instinct but by economic and societal imperatives, it becomes clear why, in authoritarian systems, sadism and masochism are dominant drives. Fromm demonstrated the fertility and modernity of his approach, not only with his research into the authoritarian character, but also with his later studies into the 'marketing character' and the necrophilic orientation. The current omnipresent desire always to be a success, or the widespread tendency to calculate everything as if it were a dead thing cannot be explained, fatalistically, as a predetermined outcome of inherent instincts, developed during early childhood, rather as an internalization of an economy and society oriented toward marketing or toward the reification of everything.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Funk, 95.

<sup>40</sup> Funk, 95.

<sup>41</sup> Funk, 96-97.

Fromm would find a new home for his ideas among thinkers like Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan whose theory of interpersonal relationships emphasized the relatedness and social nature of human beings.<sup>42</sup> In addition to Horney and Sullivan, Fromm's work would find resonance with psychoanalysts Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (his ex-wife)<sup>43</sup>, and Clara Thompson, both of whom were also influenced by the work of Groddeck and Ferenczi. Following these latter practitioners, this new generation of therapists would agree that "observation of patients does not imply objective distance, rather it involves taking part on a human level."<sup>44</sup> Together, they would establish the William Alanson White Institute in 1943 – an institution based on seeing the human being as primarily a *social* being.

In addition to the influences thus far mentioned, Fromm was also profoundly impacted by a number of spiritual traditions outside of Judaism. He was especially drawn to the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart<sup>45</sup> and Jakob Böhme; the Islamic

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<sup>42</sup> While sharing many similarities with Sullivan and Horney, Fromm resisted the "neo-Freudian" label that was often applied to all three thinkers. Not only did Fromm feel himself to share a greater affinity to Freud than Sullivan and Horney, but he was also critical of a cultural psychology that did not recognize the influence of social and economic structures upon the individual's psyche (see Durkin 2015 and Cortina 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Reichmann was a talented psychoanalyst in her own right, known for her groundbreaking work on treating patients with psychosis. She rose to fame when a former patient of hers, Joanne Greenburg, wrote an autobiographical novel, *I Never Promised you a Rose Garden* (1964), about Greenburg's recovery from schizophrenia under her care.

<sup>44</sup> Funk, 108. Although Fromm planned to publish a four volume series on his psychoanalytic technique, it is unfortunate that this project did not come to fruition (Friedman 2013). It has been suggested that one of the reasons for Fromm's decline on the intellectual scene is due to the fact that he never established an institutional base or trained analytic students in his specific approach outside of Mexico (see McLaughlin 1998; and Cortina 2015).

<sup>45</sup> As one of Fromm's contemporaries remarked, Fromm's reading of Meister Eckhart favoured an agnostic interpretation, rather than a Christian theological one. See Dietmar Mieth, "Meister Eckhart: Leidenschaft des Denkens, Spiritualität und Lebenskunst," in *Meister Eckhart aus theologischer Sicht*, ed. Christine Büchner (W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 2007).

Sufism of Rumi; and the Buddhism of the Zen monk Daisetz T. Suzuki and Theravadan monk Nyanaponika Mahathera.<sup>46</sup> Fromm was interested in identifying and secularizing common aspects among the teachings of different “Masters of Living.”<sup>47</sup> As he states, “the human reality, for instance, underlying the teachings of Buddha, Isaiah, Christ, Socrates, or Spinoza is essentially the same. It is determined by the striving for love, truth, and justice.”<sup>48</sup> For Fromm, these thinkers and the traditions they belonged to, offered important answers to the perennial existential questions that animated his humanistic philosophy.

While the influences discussed in this section are diverse and varied they are united in terms of the humanistic aspects that Fromm was able to find in each. Indeed, Friedman has noted the different humanistic communities that Fromm gravitated towards over the course of his life – all of which deeply impacted his theory of humanism.<sup>49</sup> Fromm’s strength is in his willingness to incorporate disparate and non-traditional elements into his theory, furnishing it with a dynamism and an impressive multidisciplinary. On the flip side, his eschewing of orthodoxy and his unconventional interpretations have resulted in his being cast

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<sup>46</sup> Funk, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Being*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 62.

In Burston’s view, Fromm’s appeal to these religious figures is a weakness in his analysis. As he states, “to cite religious preceptors or ‘Masters of Living’ as issuing convergent testimony in one’s favor as Fromm did, lends an argument superficial plausibility at best. It amounts simply to another appeal to authority or consensus” (1991, 87). I disagree with Burston that Fromm’s discussion of the similarities between different traditions is a contrived attempt to sway his reader through an appeal to authority. Rather, the convergences between different religious traditions have been convincingly demonstrated by a number of thinkers (including the popularized works of the “perennial philosophers” Joseph Campbell, Aldous Huxley, and Huston Smith), and Fromm’s bringing this to light is consistent with his general focus on locating universal principles that pertain to the human situation.

<sup>49</sup> Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, xxxiii.

out, so to speak, by many established disciplines, including traditional Judaic philosophy, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Furthermore, Fromm's approach has been criticized for its many generalizations and oversimplifications.<sup>50</sup> What can be said for sure is that Fromm's many influences across diverse epistemic fields – from Judaism to psychoanalysis to sociology to existentialism to Marxism to spiritual mysticism – have resulted in a truly original humanistic approach that is reflected throughout Fromm's expansive corpus.

### ***Major Works***<sup>51</sup>

It was after Fromm left the Institute for Social Research that he would rise to fame with his 1941 publication, *Escape From Freedom*.<sup>52</sup> In it, Fromm gives a full account of his theory of the authoritarian character, which he had been developing for some years. Between 1941 and 1949, Fromm lectured extensively at the New School for Social Research (NY), Bennington College (Vermont), and as a visiting scholar at Yale University. From these lectures would come his books *Man for Himself* (based off his New School lectures, published in 1947), and *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (based off his Yale lectures, published in 1950). The first of these outlines his humanistic ethics, while the second, conceived as a continuation of *Escape from Freedom*, discusses the contentious relationship between psychoanalysis and theology.

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<sup>50</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*.

<sup>51</sup> This list of works is not exhaustive. See Funk (2000) for an index of Erich Fromm's writings, including those published after his death.

<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that *Escape from Freedom* was Fromm's second monograph, preceded by his first book, *The Dogma of Christ* (1930), written as a response to Theodor Reik's psycho-religious work, *Dogma and Compulsion*.



In 1950, Fromm moved to Mexico, where he established the Mexican Psychoanalytic Society and training institute.<sup>53</sup> For the next many years, Fromm taught at this institute while making trips to the United States each spring to lecture. In 1955, Fromm published *The Sane Society* which proposed a humanistic socialism, and in 1956, he released one of his most popular books, *The Art of Loving*. Funk describes the core idea of this latter book in the following terms: “To be able to love is not a question of being loved or being in love, rather the realization of potential inherent within each individual: being able to connect lovingly with the inner and outer realities.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1957, a week-long seminar in Mexico taught alongside the Zen monk Daisetz T. Suzuki would result in the book *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (published in 1960). Buddhism appealed to Fromm’s “interes[t] in the experience of oneness with the object of perception...”<sup>55</sup> Fromm also discusses this idea of oneness in his book *You Shall be as Gods* (1966) in which he calls for a *radical humanism*. As he writes, “the most fundamental idea of humanism is the idea that all

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<sup>53</sup> Fromm’s move to Mexico was prompted by the health concerns of his second wife, Henny Gurland. Gurland, also a German émigré, had trekked alongside Frankfurt School member Walter Benjamin (among others) between Nazi occupied France and Spain, before making her way to safety in the United States (Funk, 2000). It was to Gurland that Benjamin gave his final two letters (including one addressed to Adorno) before his suicide in 1940. Some years later, in 1952, Gurland herself would commit suicide after having suffered the painful effects of rheumatoid arthritis for four years (see Noa Limon’s article “Chronicling Walter Benjamin’s Final Hours” in *Haaretz* for a more detailed account).

<sup>54</sup> Funk, 138. This book, published a few years after his third and final marriage to Annis Freeman, was inspired by their relationship (Funk 2000).

<sup>55</sup> Funk, 133. Although Fromm’s book on Buddhism was published later in his life, his interest in the spiritual tradition started in his earlier days in Heidelberg. While he did not identify as a Buddhist, Fromm was “deeply impressed by the core of Buddhist teaching” as is demonstrated by the co-authored book, as well as his references to Buddhism throughout his work (*The Art of Being*, 52).

of humanity is contained in each man, and that man develops his humanity in the historical process".<sup>56</sup>

Between 1959 and 1962, Fromm published a work on Freud entitled *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (1959), a book on Marx entitled *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961), and *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962), a book that looked at his "encounter with Marx and Freud," as was the subtitle of the volume. These works clarified Fromm's relationship to both thinkers, as well as laid out the limitations of their thinking.

*The Heart of Man*, published in 1964, continued many of the themes Fromm had raised in his previous books. Specifically, he focuses on human destructiveness and evil through the concepts of group narcissism and necrophilia, looking at the cases of both Hitler and Stalin.

From 1966 onward, after his first heart attack, Fromm's health began to decline. Even still, he would publish four more books before his death. *The Revolution of Hope* (1968) was inspired by his activism against nuclear armament during the 1960s.<sup>57</sup> Two years later, Fromm would publish *Social Character in a Mexican Village: A Sociopschoanalytic Study* (mentioned in Chapter 3). This study, co-conducted by Michael Maccoby was a unique socio-psychological empirical project on the character structure of a Mexican village in the state of Morelos. In it, Fromm sought to finally establish an empirical basis for his theory of social character.

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<sup>56</sup> Funk, 134.

<sup>57</sup> Unlike most members of the Frankfurt School, Fromm engaged in many years of political activism. In 1957, he cofounded the American peace movement SANE ("National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy") and would continue his activist efforts throughout the 1960s.

In 1973, Fromm released his expansive study on aggression, entitled *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. This impressive volume investigated anthropological, neuroscientific, and evolutionary theories on human aggression, ultimately arguing in favour of an explanation based in Fromm's existential humanist psychology.<sup>58</sup> Fromm's attention would turn back to his critique of consumer culture in his final book, *To Have or To Be* (1976), which analyzed two types of existence that can be summarized as "the one in which the world is perceived in terms of an object of having and the other in which what matters is the act of living itself, of productive work, of the unfolding of human capacities and in which the sense of identity is not based on the formula 'I am what I have' but 'I am what I do.'" <sup>59</sup>

Shortly after the publication of *To Have or To Be*, Fromm suffered a second, third, and then fourth and fatal heart attack, leading to his death on March 18, 1980, five days before his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. The executor of his estate, the psychoanalyst Rainer Funk, has published a number of Fromm's works posthumously, striving to keep his legacy alive.

As has been demonstrated in this section, Fromm's topics of analysis span a large array of themes, including psychoanalysis, authoritarianism, human destructiveness and aggression, religion, consumerism, alienation, love, ethics, and Marxism. Despite this range of interests, Fromm's body of work nonetheless evinces a cohesiveness that can be traced throughout. Specifically, Fromm's humanistic perspective and ethic are maintained across his corpus, no matter the topic of

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<sup>58</sup> Cortina, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Funk, 156.

analysis. I turn to the next section to examine his philosophy of humanism in closer detail.

## **(6.2) Erich Fromm's Humanist Theory**

As can clearly be seen from the last section, Fromm's theory of humanism was formed through his encounter with many influences, as well as developed over the course of many publications. How might his humanistic philosophy be characterized? This section will explore Fromm's theory in three parts. Firstly, I discuss Fromm's humanistic framework of psychoanalysis as it contains the basis of his understanding of how human beings are connected. Secondly, I examine Fromm's philosophy of radical humanism as presented in his many works. Finally, I review his theory of humanism in terms of its applications and limitations for anti-racist feminism.

### ***Humanistic Psychoanalysis***

In order to understand Fromm's theory of humanism, it is essential to explore his perspective on what unites us as human beings. This is found in his humanistic psychoanalytical framework, most extensively discussed in *The Sane Society*, and refined in *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Fromm's framework argues that human nature can be understood upon inspection of our shared human existential situation. This existential situation is one that he describes in terms of a paradox between being a part of nature, and simultaneously transcending nature. He contends that unlike animals who are dominated by their instincts, and for whom life is not "a problem," human beings are equipped with a largely

indeterminate instinctual structure, making them among the most helpless of animals. Unique to the human species is not only our weak instinctual system but also our expanded intelligence. Here Fromm speaks especially of our *self-awareness* or the capacity of the human being to not only “know objects but [to] know that he knows.”<sup>60</sup>

Fromm presents our existential situation in the following terms:

Self-awareness, reason and imagination disrupt the ‘harmony,’ which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures. Cast into this world at an accidental place and time, he is forced out of it, again accidentally. Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end: death.<sup>61</sup>

Fromm uses the biblical imagery of the Creation Story discussed earlier to depict the human situation. When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they find themselves cast out from heaven, which, for Fromm, is analogous to being cast out from nature.<sup>62</sup> The fruit has awakened them to knowledge, to self-awareness. For the first time, they realize their *separateness* as this self-awareness disturbs the natural harmony and unity that previously marked their existence (and which characterizes animal existence). Fromm sees the usefulness of this story not only in terms of symbolic rendering of the history of human beings – from prehistoric oneness with nature to the modern human being – but also in terms of the

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<sup>60</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 225.

<sup>61</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 30. Also see *The Anatomy*, 225.

<sup>62</sup> This could be likened to the existentialist notion of *abandonment* (see Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*).

individuation process of each individual human being who must graduate from motherly enmeshment to individuated subjecthood. His view of human existence is rooted in this tension between the desire to fuse into nature/mother/the group, and the desire to realize oneself – to grow, individuate, and grasp one’s own potentiality.<sup>63</sup> As Fromm describes, “We are never free from two conflicting tendencies: one to emerge from the womb, from the animal form of existence into a more human existence, from bondage to freedom; another, to return to the womb, to nature, to certainty and security.”<sup>64</sup> This tension, coupled with the separateness (loneliness) of one’s situation, the self-awareness of one’s bodily fragility, and the inevitability of one’s death are for Fromm, universal elements of the human condition.

It is from this basis that Fromm offers a list of shared needs that he presents as *solutions* to our existential predicament. He proposes these needs as a corrective to Freud’s system, which argues that our human strivings are rooted in our libidinal structure. The first need he discusses, the need for *relatedness*, is perhaps the most essential of all human requirements. As social beings, our connection to others is necessary in order to overcome the anxiety of our separation. Indeed, Fromm argues that relatedness to others is required for sanity to obtain. As he states, “this need is behind all phenomena which constitute the whole gamut of intimate human relations, of all passions which are called love in the broadest sense of the word.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> This tension, of course, has been captured by a number of thinkers, including existentialists (such as Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre), psychoanalysts (with Freud being the most obvious), as well as sociologists (for example, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel).

<sup>64</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 36.

How do human beings attempt to satisfy their need for relatedness? This need, like all needs, can be satisfied in either a “productive” or “unproductive” manner.<sup>66</sup> For Fromm, a productive solution is that which is life affirming, conducive to joy, and ensures the optimal functioning of the individual. The unproductive solution, on the other hand, is wasteful of human energy and destructive.<sup>67</sup>

In terms of relatedness, Fromm contends that this connection can be facilitated either through sado-masochistic attachment or more productively, through love. In the first case, the individual seeks union through submitting themselves to another person, a group or a higher force, and thus dissolving their separation through becoming part of this other entity (masochism). Union can also be achieved by making the other a part of oneself through domination (sadism). In both instances, Fromm warns that the individual gains relatedness at the cost of their integrity and freedom, preventing true satisfaction. In contrast, the more productive solution to our need for relatedness is *love*. Fromm defines love as “*union with somebody, or something, outside oneself under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one’s own self.*”<sup>68</sup> He discusses four different

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<sup>66</sup> Fromm’s use of the word “productive” is somewhat unfortunate due to the connotation productivity has with economic performance as per capitalist ideology. While Fromm attempts to redefine the word in accordance with his philosophical principles, the connotation arguably persists. For Marcuse’s critique of this, see *Eros and Civilization*.

<sup>67</sup> See paper “My Own Concept of Man”, 1977.

This value judgment attached to how one fulfills these shared needs is the reason for which Fromm labels his theory as “normative.” Indeed, as a clinical psychoanalyst, Fromm is not hesitant to evaluate human behaviour in this way, despite the dominance of relativist thinking in social theory. Aware of his unpopular perspective, Fromm argues that false or incomplete ideas about the nature of human beings should not dissuade us from our attempts to understand this nature. He contends that many of the sciences do not claim complete knowledge but are still willing to posit tentative theories.

<sup>68</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 37, italics in original.

expressions of this love: *erotic love*, which exists in the realm of romantic relationships; *motherly love*, which pertains to parental relationships; *brotherly love*, or the feeling of human solidarity; and *self-love* which he contrasts with narcissism. Indeed, for Fromm, narcissism, which has often been confused with self-love, signals the failure to relate appropriately to oneself and the world.

Fromm argues that productive love is never exclusive to one person. Rather, "If I can say 'I love you,' I say, 'I love in you all of humanity, all that is alive; I love in you also myself.'"<sup>69</sup> Such love is marked by care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Fromm describes each as follows:

If I love, I care – that is, I am actively concerned with the other person's growth and happiness; I am not a spectator. I am responsible, that is, I respond to his needs, to those he can express and more so to those he cannot or does not express. I respect him, that is...I look at him as he is, objectively and not distorted by my wishes and fears. I know him, I have penetrated through his surface to the core of his being and related myself to him from my core, from the center, as against the periphery, of my being.<sup>70</sup>

The second of Fromm's needs is that of *transcendence*. Our need to transcend comes from our urge to go beyond our situation as a "passive creature" who is born and who dies without consent, to an active "creator" of life. As he discusses, "in the act of creation man transcends himself as a creature, raises himself beyond the passivity and accidentalness of his existence into the realm of purposefulness and freedom."<sup>71</sup> Creativity implies activity, as well as love and care for the object of creation. If one is not able to create as a means of attaining transcendence, Fromm argues that they may resort to destruction, the unproductive solution to this

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<sup>69</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 38. Fromm also discusses these in *The Art of Loving*.

<sup>71</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 41.



problem. As he contends, “*there is another answer to this need for transcendence: if I cannot create life, I can destroy it. To destroy life also makes me transcend it.*”<sup>72</sup> Destroying life, like creating life, puts the individual *above* life in their ability to manipulate it. Fromm argues that understanding the nature of human beings is to understand the *need* that underlies the behaviour, rather than to speak in terms of the intrinsic quality. While Fromm sees creativity as the primary potentiality, he claims that this should not mislead us to the naïve belief in human “goodness.” Rather, destructiveness can take on the same power in a human being *if* creation is not possible. As Fromm emphasizes, “...this is the essential point of my argument – [destruction] is only the *alternative* to creativeness. Creation and destruction, love and hate, are not two instincts that exist independently. They are both answers to the same need of transcendence, and the will to destroy must rise when the will to create cannot be satisfied.”<sup>73</sup> Fromm argues that while creation results in happiness for the individual, destruction leads to suffering – especially for the destroyer him/herself.

The third need is for *rootedness*. Rootedness emerges as a need as our severed ties to nature leave us with a terrifying sense of homelessness. As Fromm describes, this “severance is frightening; if man loses his natural roots, where is he and who is he? He would stand alone, without a home; without roots; he could not bear the isolation and helplessness of this position.”<sup>74</sup> Fromm argues that we must replace our natural roots with *human* roots in order to regain a sense of security in

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<sup>72</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 42, italics in original.

<sup>73</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 42.

<sup>74</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 42.

the world again. He notes, however, that the emergence from natural ties is difficult as we cling to that which is familiar and offers security. The most primary natural tie is that to the mother. While the adult is thought to obtain the independence with which to sever this tie, Fromm writes that the desire for motherly protection never completely vanishes: “every adult is in need of help, of warmth, of protection, in many ways differing and yet in many ways similar to the needs of the child. Is it surprising to find in the average adult a deep longing for the security and rootedness which the relationship to his mother once gave him?”<sup>75</sup> When maternal fixation persists in the individual, it can result in psychopathology depending on its degree of severity. Fromm draws a parallel between the individual situation and that of human development, citing the universal incest taboo as that which keeps the human being from incestuous regression. As he explains, “Man, in order to be born, in order to progress, has to sever the umbilical cord; he has to overcome the deep craving to remain tied to mother. The incestuous desire has its strength not from the sexual attraction to mother, but from the deep-seated craving to remain in, or to return to the all-enveloping womb...”<sup>76</sup>

The ties to mother are only the most elementary of incestuous fixation. The individual also looks for rootedness and belonging in wider blood ties including family, state, nation, and church. Indeed, Fromm argues that human history reflects different stages in development from the incestuous rootedness of matriarchal societies that centered “relatedness to mother, blood, and soil,” to our current patriarchal configuration that, in Fromm’s view, has the potential to deliver a more

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<sup>75</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 43.

<sup>76</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 43.

liberated human existence.<sup>77</sup> He sees this potentiality as reflected in the rise of patriarchal religions that emphasize that “man is created in the likeness of God; hence all men are equal – equal in their common spiritual qualities, in their common reason, and in their capacity for brotherly love.”<sup>78</sup> This liberating potential that Fromm traces in the Judeo-Christian tradition was thwarted once Christianity became institutionalized by the Roman Empire, and was further extinguished during the Middle Ages. Emergence from the Middle Ages resulted only in further regression as the Western world has chosen nationalism and racism, over freedom and humanistic solidarity: “Man – freed from the traditional bonds of the medieval community, afraid of the new freedom that transformed him into an isolated atom – escaped into a new idolatry of blood and soil, of which nationalism and racism are two most evident expressions.”<sup>79</sup>

What, then, is the productive way to gain rootedness for Fromm? He answers this question in the following terms: “Only when man succeeds in developing his reason and love further than he has done so far, only when he can build a world based on human solidarity and justice, only when he can feel rooted in the

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<sup>77</sup> Fromm, drawing on the work of Bachofen, offers some nuance to these characterizations by accounting for the positive and negative aspects of both matriarchal and patriarchal systems.

<sup>78</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 55.

<sup>79</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 59. Fromm explores this theory at greater length in *Escape From Freedom*. The “nationalism and racism” that Fromm speaks of here is largely in reference to Nazism and other European nationalist projects of the time.

“Blood and Soil” was a central tenant of Nazi ideology, as well as a present-day rallying cry among white supremacists (see Kellner, “Erich Fromm, Feminism, and the Frankfurt School,” *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project*, 1991).

experience of universal brotherliness, will he have found a new, human form of rootedness, will he have transformed his world into a truly human home.”<sup>80</sup>

The fourth need is for *identity*. Fromm argues that our severed ties from nature and our self-awareness necessitate that we form a concept of ourselves that allows us to say and feel “I am I.” As Fromm explicates, “Because he is not *lived* but *lives*, because he has lost the original unity with nature, has to make decisions, is aware of himself and of his neighbor as different persons, he must be able to sense himself as the subject of his actions.”<sup>81</sup> Fromm posits that the question of “Who am I?” became especially salient after the breakdown of feudalism, when the individual was no longer tied to “his inalterable station.” Although, from Fromm’s perspective, Western culture has provided the individual with the philosophical and political means with which to realize this true sense of individuality (the productive response to the need for identity), only a minority have been able to achieve it. Rather, the masses are attracted to the unproductive substitutes for identity found in “nation, religion, class, and occupation.” Fromm sees these alternative choices as unproductive because they are based in *conformity* rather than true individual expression: “instead of the pre-individualistic clan identity, a new herd identity develops, in which the sense of identity rests on the sense of an unquestionable belonging to the crowd.”<sup>82</sup> This conformity obtains largely below the consciousness of most people who harbour the illusion that they are truly individuals. Fromm states that the need for identity is so imperative that “people are willing to risk their

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<sup>80</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 62.

<sup>82</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 63.

lives, to give up their love, to surrender their freedom, to sacrifice their own thoughts, for the sake of being one of the herd, of conforming, and thus of acquiring a sense of identity, even though it is an illusory one.”<sup>83</sup>

The fifth of Fromm’s needs is our need for a *frame of orientation*, or a means of intellectually orienting ourselves in the world. Just as the child learns to physically orient him/herself in a strange world, “man finds himself surrounded by many puzzling phenomena and, having reason, he has to make sense of them, has to put them in some context which he can understand and which permits him to deal with them in his thoughts.”<sup>84</sup> The productive response to the need for a frame of orientation, for Fromm, is grasping the world in accordance with one’s *reason*. Reason, here, refers to the ability to arrive at objectivity, or the truth unhindered by one’s desires or fears. He sees reason as a uniquely human capacity to be distinguished from intelligence which he defines as the ability to successfully manipulate the physical world – a capacity that we share with other animals. As Fromm argues, however, one’s frame of orientation can be satisfied even if it is not based in reality: “...even if man’s frame of orientation is utterly illusory, it satisfies his need for some picture which is meaningful to him. Whether he believes in the power of a totem animal, in a rain god, or in the superiority and destiny of his race, his need for some frame of orientation is satisfied.”<sup>85</sup> This need can thus be seen as akin to the human need for *meaning*. Fromm argues that this need exists on two levels: firstly, and most importantly, there must be some frame of orientation

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<sup>83</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 64.

<sup>84</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 64.

whether it is based in truth or falsity. Without such, insanity would result. Secondly, and less immediately, this frame must “be in touch with reality by reason [and] grasp the world objectively.”<sup>86</sup> Fromm contends, however, that individuals employ a number of rationalizations to justify and support their irrational beliefs and behaviours, so long as they can convince others that their actions are motivated by some semblance of reason, or as far as they can appeal to social convention or popular morality. Reason, thus, leads the way to the productive response to one’s frame of orientation while irrationality paves the unproductive course.

The above five needs were outlined by Fromm in his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*. Almost twenty years later, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm added three additional needs to his list: the need for *unity, effectiveness, and excitation and stimulation*. The need for *unity*, Fromm discusses, arises with the existential split occasioned by our self-awareness. As he writes, this split would be intolerable if the individual was not able to establish a sense of unity within oneself, as well as between self and nature. This longing for oneness can be achieved unproductively through the “anesthetisation” of oneself: through inducing trance-like states from use of drugs, sexual experiences, fasting, dancing, and cult rituals; or through identification with an animal totem as was practiced by “primitive religions”; or by submitting oneself to a strong passion such as power, fame or destruction. In today’s “cybernetic” society, Fromm argues that it is common “to be identified with one’s social role; to feel little, to lose oneself by reducing oneself to a

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<sup>86</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 65.

thing.”<sup>87</sup> In contrast to these regressive solutions, Fromm believes the only true answer to the human need for unity is by developing one’s powers of reason and love. He sees this as the common message throughout the world’s great cultures and religions: “Great as are the differences between Taoism, Buddhism, prophetic Judaism, and the Christianity of the Gospels, these religions had one common goal: to arrive at the experience of oneness, not by regressing to animal existence but by becoming fully human-oneness within man, oneness between man and nature, and oneness between man and other men.”<sup>88</sup>

*Effectiveness*, as a need, refers to the individual’s existential need to have an *effect* on the world in order to counter the overwhelming helplessness of the human experience. As Fromm explains, “to be able to effect something is the assertion that one is not impotent, but that one is an alive, functioning human being.”<sup>89</sup> The effective person is the person who acts, accomplishes, realizes and fulfills something. This need begins in childhood, where the child’s play can often be observed as revolving around the joy of having an effect on objects. The child’s helplessness, however, means their will can easily be defeated by the strength of an adult. As Fromm notes, however, this is not without consequences: “it would seem to activate a tendency to overcome the defeat by doing actively what one was forced to endure passively: to rule when one had to obey; to beat when one was beaten in short, to *do* what one was *forced* to *suffer*, or to do that what one was forbidden to

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<sup>87</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 234.

<sup>88</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 234.

<sup>89</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 235.

do.”<sup>90</sup> Fromm reasons that this compulsive urge to actively do what was passively done to one attempts, although unsuccessfully, to “heal still open wounds.”<sup>91</sup> In such ways, the adult can achieve this sense of effectiveness through exercising power over others, and inspiring fear and suffering. The productive solution, however, rests in seeking to effect through one’s work – material, intellectual and artistic – as well as through receipt of another’s recognition that may come from “eliciting a smile of satisfaction in the baby being nursed, a smile from the loved person, sexual response from the lover, interest from the partner in conversation.”<sup>92</sup>

Finally, we have the need for *excitation and stimulation*. Fromm uses neurophysiological research to argue that the nervous system requires excitation and stimulation as demonstrated by studies on brain activity, dreaming, and infant development. He posits that “observations of daily life indicate that the human organism as well as the animal organism are in need of a certain minimum of excitation and stimulation, as they are of a certain minimum of rest...[t]he differences between people – and cultures – lies only in the form taken by the main stimuli for excitation.”<sup>93</sup> Fromm makes a distinction between “simple stimulus” and “activating stimulus.” In the first instance, the person passively reacts to the situation at hand such as when threatened, or in satisfying physiological needs. As Fromm disparages, “contemporary life in industrial societies operates almost entirely with such simple stimuli. What is stimulated are such drives as sexual

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<sup>90</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 236.

<sup>91</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 236. This idea could be related to Freud’s concept of the “repetition compulsion.”

<sup>92</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 236.

<sup>93</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 239.



desire, greed, sadism, destructiveness, narcissism; these stimuli are mediated through movies, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the commodity market.”<sup>94</sup> Activating stimuli, in contrast, induce activity in the individual, generating a dynamic response: “you do not remain the passive object upon which the stimulus acts, to whose melody your body has to dance, as it were; instead you express your own faculties by being related to the world, you become active and productive.”<sup>95</sup>

Together these eight needs are explained by Fromm as a response to the human situation, as well as a solution to it.<sup>96</sup> Fromm presents these needs somewhat unequally, dedicating detailed explanations to some while giving nominal attention to others. He also fails to discuss exactly how he has arrived at these needs although it can be surmised that his clinical work had at least some part in informing his theory. As Durkin argues, however, these weaknesses are “not a fatal blow to his wider radical humanism,” especially given that “Fromm did not claim to be conclusive in this regard.” I agree with Durkin that what is essential, rather, is Fromm’s “*willingness to attempt* to map out some fundamental human motivations in explicit terms.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 240-241.

<sup>95</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 240.

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was influenced by Fromm’s work although Maslow would distance himself from Fromm in later years due to differing political and intellectual commitments (McLaughlin, 1998, 238). Despite this influence, Fromm would critique Maslow’s hierarchy in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* as an “unsystematic enumeration” and challenge Maslow’s lack of attempt in “analyze[ing] the common origin of such needs in the nature of man” (222).

<sup>97</sup> Durkin, 83, emphasis in original.

For Fromm, it is through understanding our existential human situation and the resultant needs that we can comprehend human nature. Fromm acknowledges that the concept of human nature is one that is fraught with controversy. He argues that while the concept of a human “essence” was evident to the Greek philosophers, this view has been challenged in our time on a number of grounds. One of the key challenges comes in response to the ways in which this term has been exploited throughout history. As Fromm discusses, “the concept has so often been abused as a shield behind which the most inhuman acts are committed. In the name of human nature, for example, Aristotle and most thinkers up to the eighteenth century defended slavery.”<sup>98</sup> In addition to providing a justification for slavery, Fromm notes that human nature has also been used to make a case for the inevitability of capitalism, given the supposed universality of competitiveness and selfishness as human traits. As Fromm argues, this has led to the following development:

Against such reactionary use of the concept of human nature, the Liberals, since the eighteenth century, have stressed the malleability of human nature and the decisive influences of environmental factors. True and important as such emphasis is, it has led many social scientists to an assumption that man’s mental constitution is a blank piece of paper, on which society and culture write their text, and which has no intrinsic quality of its own. This assumption is just as untenable and just as destructive of social progress as the opposite view.

If Fromm’s defense of human nature was unfashionable at his time of writing, his ideas would be treated with even greater suspicion today as such arguments have further declined in popularity. Fromm defends his claim, however, by suggesting that the “real problem is to infer the *core* common to the whole human

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<sup>98</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 219.

race from the innumerable *manifestations* of human nature, the normal as well as the pathological ones, as we can observe them in different individuals and cultures.”<sup>99</sup> What Fromm is advancing is what Durkin calls “a qualified form of essentialism compatible with the central ideas of constructionist thought.”<sup>100</sup> To understand the true essence of the human being, Fromm argues, we must look beyond these socially mediated manifestations (some conducive to happiness and health, others the opposite) to see our common existential situation and the contradiction at the heart of it. As discussed above, Fromm describes this contradiction as one that results from our liminal existence between the animal world and the human one; of at once being tethered to nature *and* cast out of it, and the questions that arise from this ontological situation. As such, “what constitutes the essence is the *question* and the *need for an answer*; the various forms of human existence are not the essence, but they are the answers to the conflict which, in itself, is the essence.”<sup>101</sup> It is this idea of human nature, and its existential moorings that give Fromm’s work a unique character and which animates his theory of radical humanism.

### ***Radical Humanism***

Although Fromm only employs the term “radical humanism” somewhat later in his career, Durkin argues that Fromm’s entire corpus is “*primarily* an expression of humanism” and more, that his work can be characterized as “consistently

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<sup>99</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Durkin, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Fromm, *Heart of Man*, 117, emphasis mine.

*radical[ly]* humanist.”<sup>102</sup> So how might we understand Fromm’s theory of radical humanism? Fromm describes it in the following terms:

By radical humanism I refer to a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world. Radical humanism considers the goal of man to be that of complete independence, and this implies penetrating through fictions and illusions to a full awareness of reality. It implies, furthermore, a skeptical attitude toward the use of force, precisely because during the history of man it has been, and still is, force-creating fear – which has made man ready to take fiction for reality, illusion for truth. It was force which made man incapable of independence and hence warped his reason and his emotions.<sup>103</sup>

Fromm’s humanism is *radical* in that he is concerned with “returning to the roots.”

As Durkin explains:

As a radical humanism, then, it is a humanism that seeks for consistency and that is self-consciously grounded on a metaphysical realism/essentialism that recognizes the existence of the human being as an entity possessed of certain properties, the said properties constituting the ground upon which value for human beings exists and upon which the very idea of ethics makes sense. As such, it is a humanism that is centrally motivated by a commitment to the belief in the dignity and unity of humankind and in the possibility of the unfolding toward perfection of human nature. Having such a commitment, it is also a humanism that is centrally focused on the individual and on the development of the characteristically human powers of the individual that are compatible with flourishing and well-being. In particular, it is a humanism that places a marked stress on the goal of achieving authentic selfhood, the stripping away of illusions, achieving inner and outer harmony.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Durkin, 3. Durkin makes this argument against claims that humanism arrives unexpectedly in Fromm’s work with the publication of *Man for Himself* in 1947.

“Radical humanism” as a concept was introduced by Fromm for the first time in *You Shall be as Gods* in 1966. Before then, however, as Durkin notes, Fromm had spoken of “normative humanism,” “socialist humanism,” “Enlightenment humanism,” “dialectic humanism,” as well as just “humanism.”

<sup>103</sup> Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Durkin, 4.

Of central interest to the present discussion are two key aspects of Fromm's radical humanism 1) the oneness of human beings; and 2) the development of political and psychological freedom. This section will discuss these two tenets before considering how they might be useful to anti-racist feminism.

### *Human Unity*

Central to Fromm's theory of radical humanism is his understanding of the oneness and interrelatedness of humanity. As explored in detail in the previous section, Fromm believes that it is our shared existential situation and the needs that arise from it that make up our common essence or nature. Despite our differences, we all are born into this world with an essential ontological insecurity which we must resolve. Fromm discusses this human connection in his explanation of the "common humanist creed":

the creed is that each individual carries all of humanity within himself, that the 'human condition' is one and the same for all men, in spite of unavoidable differences in intelligence, talents, height, and color. This humanist experience consists in feeling that nothing human is alien to one, that 'I am you,' that one can understand another human being because both share the elements of human existence.<sup>105</sup>

This statement, "nothing human is alien to me," borrowed from Terence, is foundational to what Fromm characterizes as the humanist experience.<sup>106</sup> Fromm

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<sup>105</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 93.

<sup>106</sup> The oft-quoted phrase, "*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*", or "I am human, and I think nothing of which is human is alien to me" appeared in the Roman poet's play *Heauton Timorumenos* written between 185-159 BC.

argues that this experience is connected to the *social unconscious*, which he equates with humanity itself.<sup>107</sup> As he explains:

This humanist experience is fully possible only if we enlarge our sphere of awareness. Our awareness is usually confined to what the society of which we are members permits us to be aware. Those human experiences which do not fit into this picture are repressed. Hence our consciousness represents mainly our own society and culture, while our unconscious represents the universal man in each of us. This broadening of self-awareness, transcending consciousness and illuminating the sphere of the social unconscious, will enable man to experience in himself all of humanity; he will experience the fact that he is a sinner and a saint, a child and an adult, a sane and an insane person, a man of the past and one of the future – that he carries within himself that which mankind has been and that which it will be.<sup>108</sup>

Fromm argues that it is through expanding our individual and social unconsciousness that we can access this universal unconscious, and in so doing, cease judging others and imagining ourselves as superior to them.<sup>109</sup> We transcend the separation between us and them, allowing us to connect with our common humanity. Fromm contrasts this type of relatedness with nationalism and tribalism where “we are only in touch with one sector of humanity and we perform a very simple operation: we project all the evil in us on the stranger, and hence the result is that he is the devil and we are the angels.”<sup>110</sup> He argues that this type of oppositional thinking undergirds not only conflicts between groups of people, but also individuals in their personal disagreements – a relevant point for our discussion on *ressentimental* thinking.

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<sup>107</sup> See *On Being Human* (first published in 1991) for a more in depth exploration of Fromm’s connection between the unconscious and the “total man.”

<sup>108</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 93.

<sup>109</sup> While this belief bears considerable resemblance to the concept of the universal unconscious in Jung’s work, Fromm’s theory does not exhibit the same occult/mystical elements of Jung’s. See Durkin (2014) for more on this.

<sup>110</sup> Fromm, *On Being Human*, 78.

## *Freedom*

A central component of Fromm's philosophy of radical humanism is human *freedom*. As an existentially oriented thinker, freedom is a primary theme in Fromm's work. We see, for example, his analysis on the fear of freedom, as discussed in *Escape from Freedom*, as resonant with the ideas of existential thinkers like Sartre and de Beauvoir who were similarly sensitive to the burden posed by freedom on the modern individual. Despite this shared concern, Fromm is sharply critical of Sartre's philosophy on freedom, especially its expectation that all individuals, irrespective of their social context, are equally free to make decisions. Fromm sees this perspective as "deeply unfair to the individual".<sup>111</sup> As he argues, "Can one really claim that a man who has grown up in material and spiritual poverty, who has never experienced love or concern for anybody, whose body has been conditioned to drinking by years of alcoholic abuse, who has had no possibility of changing his circumstances – can one claim that he is 'free' to make his choice? Is not this position contrary to the facts and is it not without compassion and, in the last analysis, a position which in the language of the twentieth century reflects, like much of Sartre's philosophy, the spirit of a bourgeois individualism and egocentricity...?"<sup>112</sup> Fromm thus tempers his own existential spirit of individual

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<sup>111</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 125.

<sup>112</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 125.

Fromm was quick to point out bourgeois biases in social theory and philosophy. In addition to Sartre's bourgeois individualism, Fromm was also critical of the bourgeois patriarchy of Freud's thought (as discussed in Chapter 3). Interestingly, Fromm found this fault in Marx's work too, arguing that "as a child of his time Marx could not help adopting attitudes and concepts current in bourgeois thought and practice. Thus, for instance, certain authoritarian

freedom with a compassionate regard for how the social situatedness of the individual might jeopardize their ability to seize the freedom that Sartre saw as invariably at one's disposal.<sup>113</sup>

This is not to say that Fromm held the deterministic view that one's social situation or background inevitably determined their life's course. His view, rather, was one that blended determinism with a belief in human agency – a complex perspective that is not without contradiction at times in his writing. As Fromm describes it, his theory of the human being is deterministic in that it is premised upon an existential backdrop, which *fixes* the individual to a number of correspondent needs. For sanity to obtain, every human being *must* satisfy these needs, whether productively or unproductively. There is also determinism in Fromm's theory in terms of *character*. As discussed in Chapter 3, Fromm's notion of social character refers to the somewhat permanent system of characteristics shared by a social group in relation to their social context. The relationships between social character and our universal needs is such that social character, and the socio-economic system that it arises in relation to, both attempt to *respond* to the existential needs of the individual. The *authoritarian* social character, for example, employs sado-masochism in order to satisfy the need for relatedness, while the *marketing orientation* responds to the need for identity through the herd conformism that is rampant in commercial societies. From this description, Fromm's

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inclinations in his personality as well as in his writings are molded by the patriarchal bourgeois spirit rather than by the spirit of socialism" (*To Have or To Be*, 159.)

<sup>113</sup> It could be argued, however, that Sartre's portrayal of the Jew in *Anti-Semite and Jew* is not without regard for the specific social structure of anti-Semitism that underlies the Jewish condition. With this being said, the Jew is still given the choice of "authentic" being which, for Sartre, allows for a type of freedom.



system appears overly functionalist and closed. He disturbs his determinism by proposing a way out: *awareness*. Fromm positions his view alongside that of Marx, and Freud. He argues that while both of them argued that human action is determined by previous forces, they were not strictly determinists given that they believed in, and indeed worked toward countering these forces. As Fromm discusses:

They both believed in the possibility that a course already initiated can be altered. They both saw the possibility of change rooted in man's capacity for *becoming aware of the forces which move him* behind his back, so to speak – and thus enabling him to regain his freedom. Both were – like Spinoza, by whom Marx was influenced considerably – determinists *and* indeterminists, or neither determinists *nor* indeterminists. Both proposed that man is determined by the laws of cause and effect, but that by awareness and right action he can create and enlarge the realm of freedom. It is up to him to gain the optimum of freedom and to extricate himself from the chains of necessity. For Freud the awareness of the unconscious, for Marx the awareness of socio-economic forces and class interests, were the conditions for liberation; for both, in addition to awareness, an active will and struggle were necessary conditions for liberation.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, Fromm can be characterized as both a determinist and an indeterminist (or neither) in that while being acutely aware of the play of social forces upon an individual, he also believed that these could be overcome through self-awareness and active effort. Fromm builds on Marx and Freud in discussing the different kinds of freedom that are available to the individual, as well as the various types of awareness that must precede them.

In terms of this latter point, Fromm identifies six forms of awareness. The first relates to one's ability to *decipher good from evil*, with these terms being defined as follows: "good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is

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<sup>114</sup> Fromm, *Heart of Man*, 127, emphasis in original.

reverence for life, all that enhances life, growth, unfolding. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it into pieces.”<sup>115</sup> For freedom of choice to obtain, Fromm argues that one must have a true awareness of what will enhance one’s life and what will diminish it. This awareness must be developed through experience, experimentation, and observation rather than merely theoretical knowledge of what constitutes good and evil. Secondly, there must be an *awareness of the consequences* of one’s actions. One must be able to clearly grasp the implications of their actions, and to evaluate whether they will lead to their desired aim. This means that they must be *aware of their unconscious motivations and desires* – the third type of awareness that must be cultivated according to Fromm. This requires being able to understand the hidden forces that drive one’s actions as well as penetrate the rationalizations that hide these forces from one’s consciousness. The fourth kind of awareness that Fromm discusses relates to knowing *when a true choice is being made* and *what possibilities exist*. Fromm argues that people often mistake their moment of true choice as occurring at a moment when in actuality, their decision has already been determined for them by virtue of their preceding choices. As he states, “one might generalize by saying that one of the reasons why most people fail in their lives is precisely because they are not aware of the point when they are still free to act according to reason, and because they are aware of the choice only at the point when it is too late for them to make a decision.”<sup>116</sup> The fifth kind of awareness necessary for one to make a free choice is dependent on one’s ability to accurately *comprehend the real possibilities* that that are open to them. Fromm argues that both

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<sup>115</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 47.

<sup>116</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 135.

the determinist view that there is only one choice, and the indeterminist view that the individual is faced with innumerable choices, are incorrect. Rather, he posits that one's choices are influenced by the person's environment (class, culture, family), as well as by hereditary and constitutional conditions, so that someone who is already predisposed in a particular way will have a choice of alternatives that are within the confines of this predisposition. Finally, Fromm emphasizes that awareness must be accompanied by a *will to act*, and "by the readiness to suffer the pain of frustration that necessarily results from an action contrary to one's passions."<sup>117</sup> Freedom, for Fromm, requires struggle, effort, and action.

Awareness, thus, in all of its different forms, plays a key role in Fromm's theory of freedom. Without awareness of how best to act, the consequences of one's actions, the unconscious desires that motivate one's choices, the moment when a true choice is being made, the real possibilities that one can choose from, and the will to act, freedom, in Fromm's view, cannot be realized. As for the concept of freedom itself, Fromm makes a few distinctions. Thus far I have been speaking of freedom in terms of freedom of choice.<sup>118</sup> Fromm defines freedom in general terms as the "capacity to follow the voice of reason, of health, of well-being, of conscience, against the voices of irrational passions."<sup>119</sup> Freedom, as such, can be characterized

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<sup>117</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 133.

<sup>118</sup> Freedom of choice, however, is also a function of one's *character* in that, "some people have no freedom to choose the good because their character structure has lost the capacity to act in accordance with the good." In the same vein, Fromm argues that "some people have lost the capacity of choosing evil, precisely because their character structure has lost the capacity for evil" (*The Heart of Man*, 132.) In both these cases, the freedom to choose has been extinguished due to the deterministic influence of character. In most cases, however, the opposing inclinations are "balanced" in the individual, so that there is room for choice.

<sup>119</sup> Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, 131.

further for Fromm, in terms of negative and positive freedom, as well as inner and outer freedom.

With respect to negative and positive freedom, Fromm understands the former as liberation from “the political, economic, and spiritual shackles that have bound men” throughout history.<sup>120</sup> Speaking in reference to Europe and North America, he sees our modern age as one in which considerable strides have been made toward achieving such freedom: “man had overthrown the domination of nature and made himself her master; he had overthrown the domination of the Church and the domination of the absolutist state.”<sup>121</sup> Although important, Fromm argues that negative freedom is not sufficient for total liberation to obtain. Looking at the collapse of medieval society, Fromm argues that while the masses were able to gain freedom from economic, social and political bondage, they became subject to an acute anxiety triggered by the sudden loss of traditional ties that had provided the individual with a sense of security and belonging. As Fromm states, “the individual stands alone and faces the world –a stranger thrown into a limitless and threatening world. The new freedom is bound to create a deep feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, doubt, aloneness, and anxiety.”<sup>122</sup> Fromm argues that the appeal of Calvinism and Lutheranism was based in the fact that these theologies gave expression to both the newly found freedom of the individual, as well as his/her anxiety and powerlessness. Moreover, these doctrines helped to *intensify* both the

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<sup>120</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 17. Fromm is not the only theorist to make this differentiation between negative and positive freedom. See also Berlin (1969), Green (1986), Simhony (1993), and Taylor (1985).

<sup>121</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 81.

sense of independence and self-reliance of the individual, as well as his/her loneliness and insecurity. They also served to psychologically prepare the individual for the demands of industrial capitalist society through their emphasis on productive work, thrift, self-sacrifice, asceticism, and duty. Fromm argues that it is at this point, that is, upon the realization of negative freedom, that society has a choice. In the historical case of Europe, the masses were unable to bear the “burden of ‘freedom from,’” choosing to escape from it by submitting to fascism.

North American society has also capitulated under the weight of modern freedom, although through what Fromm calls *automaton conformity*. Fromm explains this phenomenon as follows:

to put it briefly, the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be. The discrepancy between ‘I’ and the world disappears and with it the conscious fear or aloneness and powerlessness.<sup>123</sup>

What results, according to Fromm, is an individual who thinks her thoughts and feelings are her own but who has in fact surrendered her individuality entirely. Any original act is replaced with a pseudo act because it is rooted in pseudo thinking, feeling, and willing. While this forfeiture of an authentic self for a pseudo self allows some measure of relief from loneliness, it is marked by an intense insecurity as the individual is compelled to seek continuous approval and recognition from others. As Fromm writes, the effects of maintaining this false self are psychologically destructive to the individual:

The inability to act spontaneously, to express what one genuinely feels and thinks, and the resulting necessity to present a pseudo self to others and

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<sup>123</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 208-209.

oneself, are the root of the feeling of inferiority and weakness. Whether or not we are aware of it, there is nothing of which we are more ashamed than of not being ourselves, and there is nothing that gives us greater pride and happiness than to think, to feel, and to say what is ours.<sup>124</sup>

The spontaneity and authenticity that Fromm refers to here are qualities that he ascribes to *positive freedom*. Positive freedom, or “freedom to,” is the alternative choice to escaping from the liberation delivered by negative freedom. Fromm describes positive freedom as based in spontaneous activity in the areas of love and work. In terms of love, he discusses the “spontaneous affirmation of others” that involves neither the dissolution of oneself nor the possession of another.<sup>125</sup> Rather, it is a love that overcomes separateness without threatening one’s individuality. Spontaneity in the realm of work refers to creative activity that brings the individual in union with nature rather than in domination of it. Work is no longer a “compulsive activity” undertaken to flee from loneliness, and resulting in an alienated relationship with the products of one’s labour. Indeed, Fromm argues that all activity in one’s life should embody this quality of spontaneity whereby union with others and nature is forged while preserving one’s independence. It is through such activity that the individual can realize him/herself and relate affirmatively to the world.

Positive freedom also necessitates realizing one’s uniqueness as a human being; refusing belief in a higher power so as never to subordinate human growth to a greater aim; and the ability to recognize genuine ideals from fictitious ones, based on that which contributes to the growth and happiness of the human being. Thus,

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<sup>124</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 288.

<sup>125</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 287.

positive freedom, for Fromm, is the affirmative seizing of one's life so as to live in accordance with human unity, dignity, authenticity, and meaningful activity. It is a means of overcoming the burden of freedom through integrating it productively into one's life. While Fromm's concept of positive freedom is an important one, his explanation as to how one might achieve the qualities he outlines are only vaguely considered in *Escape from Freedom*. I turn now to his analysis on *inner* and *outer freedom* to further flesh out exactly what positive freedom might look like.

Fromm differentiates between inner and outer liberation in his posthumously published book *The Art of Being*. The differentiation can be applied retrospectively, however, to organize his thoughts on positive freedom. With outer liberation, Fromm is referring to emancipation from external forces. What did Fromm have in mind when he spoke of this type of freedom? He answers this in some detail in *The Sane Society*.

Fromm's vision of outer freedom was based in the creation of a communitarian socialist society. In order to fully understand his vision, however, his critique of capitalism must be examined. Indeed, Fromm arguably offers one of the most astute challenges to capitalist society, based in his analysis of the profound psychic damage that it does to the individual. As discussed earlier, he argues that the modern individual has surrendered his/her individuality in exchange for automaton conformity. This phenomenon, for Fromm, is a response not only to the burden of freedom but also an effect of the forces of capitalism on the individual.

Capitalism, Fromm states, is rooted in “*the use of man by man.*”<sup>126</sup> That is, it is a system invariably built on exploitation, resulting in a situation in which “a living human being ceases to be an end in himself and becomes the means for the economic interests of another man, or himself, or an impersonal giant, the economic machine.”<sup>127</sup> Fromm argues that capitalism reduces the human being to “labour,” and views material objects and their accumulation as more valuable than life itself. The processes of commodification, mechanization, quantification, and abstraction have led the individual to a profound state of *alienation*, as one comes to view him/herself as *a thing*, and the world as a means to an end.<sup>128</sup> Fromm provides the following definition for alienation:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively.<sup>129</sup>

Whether in production or consumption or daily living, the individual loses the ability to relate directly with him/herself, with others, and with the world at large. While relationships do exist, of course, they are characterized by a superficial friendliness that masks the distance, indifference, and distrust that lie beneath the surface. Individuals view each other as potential commodities to be used if not now,

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<sup>126</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 88.

<sup>127</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 89.

<sup>128</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the effects of each of these processes, see *The Sane Society*.

<sup>129</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 111.



then at some point down the line. Relationships between people and objects take on an idolatrous quality. Leaders, the state, and even money become objects of worship, as the individual eagerly submits him/herself to forces outside of the self. In terms of the one's relationship with oneself, Fromm uses his concept of the *marketing orientation*. As he recounts,

In this orientation, man experiences himself as a thing to be employed successfully on the market...His aim is to sell himself successfully on the market. His sense of self does not stem from his activity as a loving and thinking individual, but from his socio-economic role...his body, his mind and his soul are his capital, and his task in life is to invest it favourably, to make a profit of himself. Human qualities like friendliness, courtesy, kindness, are transformed into commodities, into assets of the 'personality package,' conducive to a higher price on the personality market.<sup>130</sup>

The individual that Fromm describes above is separated from "the fundamental facts of his existence...the exaltation of love and solidarity, as well as the tragic fact of his aloneness and of the fragmentary character of his existence."<sup>131</sup> It is precisely this individual, lacking in any sense of authenticity or true relatedness, who submits to the automaton conformity described previously. What would freedom look like for such a person?

As mentioned earlier, Fromm advances a theory of communitarian socialism. Unlike Marx's vision of socialism, Fromm eschews the emphasis on the socialization of the means of production. He argues that "the failure – as perhaps also the popularity – of Marxist Socialism lies precisely in this bourgeois overestimation of property rights and purely economic factors."<sup>132</sup> What is of greater significance

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<sup>130</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 129.

<sup>131</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 131.

<sup>132</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 248.

than ownership, according to Fromm, is the “social and human situation of the worker in his work and the kind of relatedness to his fellow workers.”<sup>133</sup> In communitarian socialism, every worker would play an active role in the governing of their society in which work is meaningful, and where labour would employ capital rather than the inverse. Anticipating a number of arguments against his positions, Fromm asserts that the idea that people are naturally lazy and only motivated to work for money or prestige is a fallacy. To the contrary, meaningful work that engages human skill is invigorating and contributes to one’s character. Fromm provides the example of European “Communities of Work,” referring to the one hundred or so communities at his time of writing that embodied a non-alienated work ethic.<sup>134</sup> These communities attended not only to worker’s satisfaction in terms of labour conditions and relations, but also to the wellbeing of the overall human being. As such, the workplace was also a place of learning, recreation, bonding, and democratic self-governance.

Fromm asks the question of whether the practices of the Communities of Work can be replicated on a wider scale for the whole of society. As he discusses:

The aim then would be to create a work situation in which man gives his lifetime and energy to something which has meaning for him, in which he knows what he is doing, has an influence on what is being done, and feels united with, rather than separated from, his fellow man. This implies that the work situation is made concrete again; that the workers are organized into

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<sup>133</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 248. As Fromm further argues, “there is a growing insight among socialists into the fact that the transfer of property rights from the private capitalist to society or the state has, in itself, only a negligible effect on the situation of the worker, and that the central problem of Socialism lies in the change of the work situation” (*The Sane Society*, 288).

<sup>134</sup> Fromm especially focuses on the very interesting example of the Boimondau watch factory based in France. See Chapter 8 of *The Sane Society* for his description of this work community.

sufficiently small groups to enable the individual to relate himself to the group as real, concrete human beings, even though the factory as a whole may have many thousands of workers. It means that methods of blending centralization and decentralization are found which permit active participation and responsibility for everybody, and at the same time create a unified leadership as far as it is necessary.<sup>135</sup>

Fromm lays out some suggestions for how such a situation of active participation might be achieved, including workers having technical knowledge of the entire enterprise; co-management and participation in decision-making; the limitation of property rights on the part of the owners; including unions as shareholders; and the cultivation of a spirit of humanistic solidarity that extends beyond the organization. All of Fromm's suggestions here are geared toward the *humanization* of labour, which ultimately results in a social system in which economic activity will be a subordinate component of social life. To this end, Fromm advocates for a universal subsistence guarantee that would ensure that basic income could be claimed by any worker beyond situations of unemployment, illness, and old age. This would remove the threat of starvation and prevent people from being forced to accept oppressive working conditions. Fromm furthermore argues that this would contribute significantly to establishing more equitable relationships not only between employees and employers, but in everyday life in general.

In addition to the humanization of the economic sphere, Fromm argues that political and cultural transformation are also required. In terms of politics, Fromm claims that if democracy is premised upon one's ability to assert one's will and convictions, then we currently lack the necessary conditions for democracy to

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<sup>135</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 280.

prevail. Rather, the average voter is manipulated by propaganda and advertisements, and is only able to grasp the world in a distanced and alienated way. Moreover, he/she is dominated by conformist views, rather than authentic opinions. Voting becomes the “abdication of [one’s] political will to his representative” rather than the true exercise of democracy.<sup>136</sup> In the place of mass voting, Fromm suggests the reintroduction of the Town Meeting whereby people could gather in smaller groups of five hundred or so. In such a setting, Fromm argues that each member could have an active role in expressing their views and making decisions in a face-to-face format that would encourage accountability and facilitate community. These groups would share power with elected bodies, resulting in what Fromm sees as a truly democratic political system.

With respect to cultural transformation, Fromm firstly proposes changes to the education system. He argues that our current system is narrowly geared toward shaping the individual in a way that prepares him/her for participation in capitalist society, and devoid of teaching one how to think critically. Moreover, Fromm finds fault in the tendency to separate theoretical learning from practical skill – a split that he argues contributes to the alienation between work and thought. What is needed, rather, is an integrated educational structure where practical and theoretical learning is combined, and where education becomes a lifelong pursuit to be continued into adulthood.<sup>137</sup> In addition to education, Fromm writes about the importance of art as an embodied human activity. Specifically, he discusses

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<sup>136</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 296

<sup>137</sup> For more on Fromm’s views on education, see his forward in *Summerhill: a Radical Approach to Childrearing*, by A.S. Neil, published in 1960.

“collective art” as ritual that allows for an engagement with the world using our senses “*in a meaningful, skilled, productive, active, shared way.*”<sup>138</sup> He sees artistic expression as an integral part of life and necessary for meaningful and psychologically healthy living. Finally, Fromm discusses the need for a spiritual transformation that aims at reinstalling brotherly love, truth and justice at the heart of society. Fromm predicts the development of a new religion in the next few hundred years as humanity progresses. As he writes, “the most important feature of such a religion would be its universalistic character, corresponding to the unification of mankind which is taking place in this epoch, it would embrace the humanistic teachings common to all great religions of the East and of the West; its doctrines would not contradict the rational insight of mankind today, and its emphasis would be on the practice of life rather than on doctrinal beliefs.”<sup>139</sup>

To sum up, Fromm believed that outer freedom must be premised upon the humanization of all sectors of life – economic, political, cultural, and spiritual. While some of his suggestions might appear idealistic or utopian, Durkin reminds us to be attentive to the period in which he was writing, when such experimental projects and thinking were much more common than they might be today. What is perhaps of greater importance than the feasibility of Fromm’s ideas is his willingness to imagine and express alternatives to the current system.

Fromm argues, however, that such outer changes are not sufficient for true freedom to develop. Rather, total liberation must involve *inner liberation* as well. Fromm argues that this fact has not been adequately appreciated in our modern

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<sup>138</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 302, emphasis in original.

<sup>139</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 305, emphasis in original.

society which almost exclusively focuses on political liberation. This, for Fromm, has not been without consequences:

...the one-sidedness of the emphasis on outer liberation also did great damage. In the first place, the liberators often transformed themselves into new rulers, only mouthing the ideologies of freedom. Second, political liberation could hide the fact that new un-freedom developed, but in hidden and anonymous forms....Most importantly, one forgot entirely that man can be a slave even without being put in chains – the reverse of an oft-repeated religious statement that man can be free even when he is in chains....The outer chains have simply been put inside of man.<sup>140</sup>

Fromm contends that this internalization of the “outer chains” is even more dangerous than the outer chains themselves because at least in the latter instance, the individual is aware of them. Inner chains, on the other hand, are insidious and not incompatible with the illusion of freedom.

How might one liberate oneself psychologically and spiritually? Fromm offers a number of recommendations, including: to will one thing at a time; to achieve a state of awakesness; to be aware of inner and outer conflicts; to cultivate concentration; to meditate and practice mindfulness; to undergo psychoanalysis; to practice self-analysis; and finally, to move from a “having” to a “being” orientation. Fromm shares that each of these suggestions is based in his own experience, and daily practice. This, however, should not limit an individual from discovering their own methods to achieving psychic and spiritual calmness, clarity, and insight. It is through developing one’s inner state in such a manner that the individual can undo the damage of socialization and alienation, and regain a sense of inner wellbeing and

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<sup>140</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Being*, 7.

freedom. In the next chapter I discuss at some length how one of his suggested methods – mindfulness, can be of great use to anti-racist feminism.

Thus, as Fromm argues, it is only by attending to both outer and inner freedom that true humanistic liberation can be attained: “the Church still by and large speaks only of inner liberation, and political parties, from liberals to communists, speak only about outer liberation. History has clearly shown that one ideology without the other leaves man dependent and crippled. The only realistic aim is total liberation, a goal that may well be called radical (or revolutionary) humanism.”<sup>141</sup>

### **(6.3) Applications to Anti-Racist Feminism**

Fromm’s humanism provides anti-racist feminism with a number of important insights that can aid us in overcoming the impasses thus far identified. In this section, I discuss three key points that are especially pertinent to the present investigation.

Fromm is firstly useful to anti-racist feminism in terms of his theory of *human connection and unity*. As discussed in the previous chapter, anti-racist feminism along with other forms of identity politics, suffers from a crippling divisiveness. Our “us against them” worldview limits appreciation of our common humanity, preventing true feelings of political solidarity and integrated political action. Fromm’s theory of our shared human essence can offer a concept of human connectivity that sidesteps many of the problematics that are often encountered with theories of human nature. In rooting our shared essence in the undeniable

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<sup>141</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Being*, 8.

existential conditions that are common to all human beings, Fromm lays the ground for the cultivation of compassion and a sense of relatedness that transcends race, culture, gender, sexuality and other markers of identity. Significantly, Fromm's understanding of human interrelatedness is also *spiritually* informed, influenced by Judeo-Christian mystic elements, as well as by Buddhism. I believe that a concept of human unity that allows us to forge a sense of connection and compassion across lines of identity is of utmost importance for our movement, and as such, Fromm's offering in this regard is invaluable.

Secondly, Fromm's existential human needs give some explanatory power in terms of understanding some of anti-racist feminism's *ressentimental* tendencies. In particular, the need for relatedness, rootedness, and identity can help to explain how we may use anti-racist feminism to fulfill not only our political aims but also underlying *psychic strivings*, and the relationship between the two. In terms of relatedness, the primary psychological need as identified by Fromm, the effects of racism must be considered in order comprehend our relationship to anti-racist feminism in this regard. Racism effectively ejects the individual from social belonging, resulting in a sense of inferiority and shame that sever human connection – the connection with oneself, and the connection with others. In providing a sense of relatedness to similar others, I suggest that anti-racist feminism importantly facilitates a process of *re-humanization*. When we are together, we are seen, heard, supported, and valued. The existence of, and potentiality for such *love* is a crucial source of healing and survival for oppressed peoples, and something that will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter. Fromm's definition of love is



especially useful for thinking through how anti-racist feminism might harness and find strength in the power of love, rather than *ressentiment*.

As has been discussed, however, anti-racist feminism currently finds at least some motivation in *ressentimental* strivings. *Ressentiment* is an emotional field with both sadistic and masochistic aspects. On the one hand, there is a great deal of pleasure derived from shaming and morally overpowering others. There is a tendency to reproach and humiliate. On the other hand, however, there is a masochistic investment in one's victimhood. Fromm's analysis allows for an understanding of these *ressentimental* strategies as completely *reasonable* from a psychological perspective, even if they are irrational from a political one. He also encourages us, however, to seek productive solutions for the problem of relatedness, in order that we might find greater happiness and freedom.

In addition to satisfying this need for relatedness, anti-racist feminism also attends to the human need for identity. As Fromm argues, our need for identity has intensified in our modern age as traditional ties that once answered the question of "who am I?" have disappeared. Identity for racialized people serves the additional function of supplying a *positive* and *powerful* self-identification in a situation in which such has been denied. One of the major critiques of identity politics, as I have discussed, however, is the way in which identity is essentialized, so as to erase differences within a group. This allows us to make demands as "women" or "as people of colour." For Fromm, the sense of belonging that this type of conformity offers is inferior to the "truly individual sense of identity" of the person who is "the

center and active subject of his powers.”<sup>142</sup> Of course it could be argued that we take on these identities as a political strategy. This does not take away, however, from the fact that we still derive an immense sense of security and stability from them. As noted in the last chapter, this has often taken the form of grasping onto identities tethered to injurious attachments. Fromm challenges us to ask how productive are our identities? Do they foster conformity or allow for individuality?

Lastly, we come to the need for rootedness. Fromm argues that the productive solution to this need is finding a truly human home by embracing solidarity, whereas the unproductive response is forming incestuous ties that lead to nationalism and racism. Anti-racist feminism could be considered a *response* to the unproductive rootedness of dominant society. But like many reactive formations, it could be argued that we have taken on the characteristics of our oppressors by also finding a sense of rootedness in our *own* incestuous ties and in opposition to the other.

This point is reminiscent of Fromm’s observation of the tendency to counter oppression through engaging in oppressive behaviour oneself, or as he states “by doing actively what one was forced to endure passively: to rule when one had to obey; to beat when one was beaten in short, to *do* what one was *forced to suffer*.”<sup>143</sup> In the next chapter, I will consider how this *ressentimental* attempt to “heal still open wounds” has considerable impacts on anti-racist feminism’s ability to achieve freedom – both in the inner and outer sense that Fromm discusses.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 114.

<sup>143</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 236.

<sup>144</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy*, 236.

Viewing anti-racist feminism through the lens of Fromm's framework of human needs thus depathologizes the earlier discussion on *ressentiment*, while challenging us to still reach beyond it in order to embrace more productive solutions. The deep attachment that many of us have to anti-racist feminism can be understood as a means to satisfying needs that are *universal* and which we are attempting to respond to in a hostile social environment. I am not suggesting here that anti-racist feminism is solely a project that aims to satisfy psychological needs under the banner of politics. Rather, rooting anti-racist feminism in Fromm's existential framework allows us to grasp how these needs themselves motivate all human action, *including our political action*. This re-articulates a central argument of this dissertation, which is that *all* politics are psychological, and it is through the psychological that we can better understand our political behaviour. While looking at anti-racist feminist practices through Fromm's perspective "normalizes" them through demonstrating their universal psychic roots, Fromm still compels us to ask ourselves whether we are choosing solutions which facilitate our growth, or stunt our development as human beings and as a society.

Finally, and significantly, Fromm's visionary and liberatory spirit models what a future-oriented emancipatory project could look like. As encountered in the last chapter, anti-racist feminism along with other identity-based movements have been challenged for their backward facing politics, which seek to conjure up past grievances rather than imagine alternative futures. Of course this accusation is problematic because of its unjust disregard for the everyday ways in which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression *continue* to pervade our society. Moreover,

many past injuries have not been recognized by the systems that perpetuated them, making it incredibly difficult for many of us to “move on.” With this being said, however, there are certainly elements in anti-racist feminism that become fixated on past grievances, and moreover, there is a widespread lack of imagination dedicated toward realizing future alternatives or what Fromm calls *positive freedom*. Part of this, as I will discuss in the concluding chapter, may be attributed to a generalized despair that has gripped the political Left in the last many years. Instead of being able to imagine and work toward alternatives, our movements have largely settled for achieving recognition and equal opportunity within the pre-existing system. What Fromm’s work convincingly illustrates, however, is the deeply and immutably destructive core of capitalism. Freedom cannot come from one being awarded a higher place within the capitalist hierarchy; it *must* involve the establishment of a new economic and social system. And thus, I suggest that the lesson to anti-racist feminists here is twofold: firstly, we must recognize the inequality, injustice and dysfunction that are inherent features of capitalist society and stop equating success and progress with its rewards. Does this mean we should cease fighting for equality within the system altogether? No. Such an injunction would be insensitive to the everyday work that we must do just to survive in a society like ours. It does mean, however, balancing these more urgent struggles for survival with imagining and building a new future outside of the system. **Stringer** articulates this dual focus compellingly in the following:

The political work of feminism, like that of other emancipatory movements, has always at least two kinds of tasks. There is the task of cultivating, through collective engagement and debate, a reflexive political imagination willing to ask how the world has become what it is and capable of

envisioning the world otherwise. And there is the task of designing particular politics projects which can serve more immediately to improve the present conditions of women's lives.<sup>145</sup>

The second lesson here then refers to our need to develop this reflexive political imagination. Fromm's work is characterized not only by his humanistic political visions but also by his *willingness* to make suggestions toward a better world. Although his solutions are not always tenable, his capacity to imagine and to formulate alternatives was key to his practice of freedom. I believe anti-racist feminism is in dire need for such alternative visions, and the ability to imagine them – a point I will re-visit in the concluding chapter.

### ***Limitations***

While there are aspects of Fromm's humanism that can be integrated, his theory as a whole is not without problematic features. Fromm writes from a heterosexual white male point of view for a largely heterosexual white male audience. For the most part, he does not consider sexism, racism (apart from nationalism and Nazism), and homophobia. Indeed, in terms of the homophobia, Fromm participates in it by solely using heterosexist examples and by painting homosexuality as a perversion to normal sexuality.<sup>146</sup> For an unconventional and visionary thinker, Fromm is particularly "of his time" in this respect.

As for sexism, Fromm makes mention of patriarchy, male domination and exploitation. Even so, the androcentrism in his work is undeniable – all the more

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<sup>145</sup> Stringer, "Knowing Victims: Feminism, *Ressentiment* and the Category 'Victim,'" 355.

<sup>146</sup> We see many examples of heterosexism and heteronormativity in Fromm's writings. For example: "erotic love is directed to one person, *normally* of the opposite sex" (*The Sane Society*, 39, my emphasis).

punctuated when Fromm does explicitly speak of women, rendering his universal language of “man” as decidedly *male*. Furthermore, Fromm contradicts himself throughout his work in regards to his awareness of sexism, at times granting its problematic status, while at others, seemingly dismissing it as a thing of the past.<sup>147</sup>

In terms of racism, we encounter definite moments of ethnocentrism in Fromm<sup>148</sup> although he counterbalances these with his appreciation for Eastern civilizations and cultures, which he generally discusses with respect and knowledge.<sup>149</sup> What is more perplexing is his oversight of the problems of racism – even more surprising given that he was writing during the Civil Rights Era. To be fair, there are some references but they are uniformly superficial. For example, in *The Heart of Man*, in his section on group narcissism, Fromm classifies the racism of the white lower classes towards blacks in the United States as an example of collective narcissism. Deprived of material satisfactions and esteem, he argues that this group seizes the social capital offered by whiteness as a means of deflecting the class shame that they would otherwise experience. Another example from the same book is in Fromm’s chapter on freedom, where he asks us to consider the example of an 8-year-old white boy belonging to an affluent family who is prohibited from playing with the son of his family’s black maid. When the white child disobeys his

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<sup>147</sup> See for example, *Escape from Freedom*, 127.

<sup>148</sup> For example, in his discussion of “prehistoric” and indigenous cultures – see *The Sane Society*, 52 and *Escape from Freedom*, 20.

<sup>149</sup> With this being said, Fromm’s thinking, as well as that of his influencer Max Weber was certainly impacted by the German Orientalist discourse of his time. For more on German Orientalism, see Edward Said’s classic text *Orientalism* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014); Jennifer Jenkins, “German Orientalism: Introduction,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 97–100; and Sara R. Farris, “An ‘Ideal Type’ Called Orientalism,” *Interventions* 12, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 265–84.

mother, she bribes him with a trip to the circus which he accepts, although, as Fromm argues, it comes at the cost of the boy's integrity. Fromm continues onward to show how every moral capitulation of this boy's life weakens his freedom to choose what is "right."

In both examples, Fromm's reference to racism is firstly, situational: that is, it occurs as a problem specific to the white lower classes, and then as a problem that is specific to the family in question. This type of analysis is indeed uncharacteristic for Fromm who typically exhibits a unique appreciation for the "big picture." While the example of the white lower classes is certainly more sophisticated than the idiosyncratic prejudice of the affluent family, his analysis is nonetheless underdeveloped. Moreover, even as Fromm repeatedly speaks of the ills of nationalism in terms of its incestuous ties to blood and soil, and its pathological hindrance to one's ability to achieve freedom, it is confusing as to why he does not speak directly of *racism*, especially given its brutal and unavoidable centrality in American life during his period of writing.<sup>150</sup> What his oversight seems to suggest is that Fromm did not believe racism to be a generalized orientation among white people in the United States. He could see it in individuals and perhaps in certain classes but had no appreciation for the concept of *white supremacy*, not as a form of nationalism per se, but as a generalized ideology that undergirds every aspect of American life and consciousness. We only need to look to the work of James Baldwin, writing in the same period, to understand the inextricability of white supremacy and American culture. For a thinker like Fromm who demonstrates an

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<sup>150</sup> To give just one example, the brutal abduction and lynching of 14-year old Emmett Till took place in the summer of 1955, the same year Fromm published *The Sane Society*.

impressive grasp of the psychic structure and behavioural patterns of the public, it is reasonable to wonder where his analysis was of the widespread racism that was an intrinsic element of the social character of the nation.

Secondly, it can be seen in the examples given (as well as in terms of his other references), that Fromm is not trying to capture the psychic experience of those who *experience* the racism in the instances that he presents. What is the experience of those who suffer the racist wrath of the disgruntled white lower classes? What is their situation, both in material and psychological terms? And what about in the case of the little black boy who is told that his white companion will be attending the circus rather than playing with him? Who realizes shortly thereafter that he will no longer be playing with this boy, and who will grow up to understand the reasons for this? How does he react? How does this impact his personality, his psychic strivings? Fromm does not tell us. Not because his analysis is too general, but because people of colour were simply not his focus. Does this mean that Fromm's insights are irrelevant for people of colour? No, I do not think so. Indeed, as previously indicated, I believe that his ideas around our existential situatedness, our shared human needs, the emotional substratum of our political actions, and his focus on positive freedom are certainly applicable and indeed instructive to us as people of colour, and as anti-racist feminists. I do, however, believe that his inattentiveness to the racial oppression that moulds our lives and identities in particular ways has implications for his theory of radical humanism. As such, while Fromm's radical humanism offers a fruitful place to start, it is necessary to build on



his insights to construct an anti-racist humanism. The next section attempts to do this by looking at the work of writer and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin.

#### **(6.4) Towards an Anti-Racist Humanism**

While there are a number of thinkers who could provide insights as how to construct an anti-racist humanism, I have chosen to explore James Baldwin's approach for two reasons.<sup>151</sup> Firstly, Baldwin advances a psychologically inflected social analysis that shares many observations and conclusions held by Fromm.<sup>152</sup> Although, as a literary figure,<sup>153</sup> his analysis and concepts are not developed as methodically, his perspective nevertheless adds a much-needed dimension to Fromm's approach, pushing it in the direction of an anti-racist humanism. Secondly, Baldwin's humanism is fraught with complexities and contradictions that capture important aspects of the anti-racist feminist consciousness, including its

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<sup>151</sup> Including but not limited to: Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jaqui Alexander, Kwame Appiah, Dina Georgis, Paul Gilroy, and Cornel West.

Perhaps one of the obvious examples of an anti-racist humanism was that espoused by Martin Luther King Jr. Interestingly, King's philosophy of nonviolence was influenced by Fromm's thought, especially his concept of love (see King's speech of 1964, transcribed by *Democracy Now*, January 15, 2018).

<sup>152</sup> To say this is not to imply that Baldwin was influenced by psychoanalysis, however. As he recounts, "I was not even remotely tempted by the possibilities of psychiatry or psychoanalysis. For on thing, there were too many schools - Freud, Horney, Jung, Reich (to suggest merely the tip of that iceberg) - and, for another, it seemed to me that anyone who thought seriously that I had any desire to be 'adjusted' to this society had to be ill; too ill, certainly, as time was to prove, to be trusted" ("Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," 1985/1998, p 826). Of course, Fromm articulates a similar critique of psychoanalysis, as well as a critique of definitions of sanity that hinge on one's ability to "adjust" to a pathological social arrangement.

<sup>153</sup> As an essayist, novelist and playwright, James Baldwin's collection of works is expansive and impressive. As a writer, he has been situated among other "black-American polemical essayists" that include Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois, as well as among "American romantic-moralists" like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau and John Jay Chapman (see Mel Watkins, 1972).

*ressentimental* character. I argue that these are helpful in that they highlight the difficulties in constructing an anti-racist humanism.

There is a caveat that must be tabled before starting this discussion. It should be noted that Baldwin's analysis is highly specific to black and white relations in the United States during his time of writing (1947-1987). To say this is not to imply that he was limited in his perspective. To the contrary, he frequently made insightful and relevant linkages between different types of oppression worldwide.<sup>154</sup> His focus, however, was predominantly on the relationship between blacks and whites in the American context. Given the specificity of this relationship in historical terms,<sup>155</sup> it is fair to say that Baldwin's analysis cannot simply be transferred to the anti-racist feminist context as I have framed it in this dissertation. With that being said, there are many aspects that *can* shed light on the current predicament as how to construct an anti-racist humanism. Moreover, given that Baldwin was a contemporary of Fromm's, his work provides a direct challenge to Fromm's formulations, which while also rooted largely in the American context, fail to consider race relations. In this section I put Baldwin in conversation with Fromm as he discusses black and white race relations in the US, before examining what we, as anti-racist feminists, might extract for our purposes.

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<sup>154</sup> For example, Baldwin often spoke of the connection between the treatment of blacks in America and the US involvement in the Vietnam War. He also considered the plight of those colonized by Western powers worldwide as an extension of the domestic suffering of people of colour in the United States.

<sup>155</sup> As Baldwin writes, for example, "the American situation is very peculiar, and it may be without precedent in the world" in "White Man's Guilt," in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998), 725.

How might Baldwin's humanism be characterized? While Baldwin never directly answers this question, there are perhaps two primary elements that can be identified in his writings. The first is the fundamental interconnection between all human beings and the transcendent power of love; and the second is the importance of penetrating one's illusions and taking responsibility for one's history, one's identities, and one's future. Baldwin takes up these two points in a way that both overlaps with, and challenges, Fromm's approach.

In terms of the first concept of human interconnection and love, Baldwin speaks of a brotherhood in both the humanistic and literal sense. In terms of the latter, he argues that the race problem in the United States is one based upon white people's denial and mistreatment of their "dark brother," referring here to the history of racial intermixing that literally binds blacks to whites in a familial sense. Baldwin also speaks of human unity in the broader sense as demonstrated in his statement that: "It is not a romantic matter. It is the unalterable truth: all men are brothers. That's the bottom line. If you can't take it from there, you can't take it at all."<sup>156</sup> All human beings are not just to be conceived of as "brothers and sisters" but should also be understood as constitutive of one another. As Baldwin writes, "...each of us, helplessly and forever, contain the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other."<sup>157</sup>

Relatedly, Baldwin's humanism is one premised on the transcendent power of *love*. As he argues, "love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without

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<sup>156</sup> Karen Thorsen, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, 1989.

<sup>157</sup> James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998), 828.

and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or as a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”<sup>158</sup> Like with Fromm, Baldwin is forwarding a definition of love that is based on a mature and courageous reckoning with oneself and the other.

In order for this love to obtain, Baldwin argues that white people must learn how to love themselves and others. As he writes, “white people...will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this — which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never — the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”<sup>159</sup> Black people, for their part, must not let their hearts be hardened by hate or revenge but rather learn to generate love for themselves and their communities while remaining compassionate towards their brainwashed and lost white “countrymen.” In an essay addressed to his nephew he writes: “...these [white] men are your brothers – your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”<sup>160</sup>

What is required from both sides is the realization that freedom for one can *only* exist if there is also freedom for the other. As Baldwin writes in one of his most oft quoted passages, “If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the

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<sup>158</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992), 95.

<sup>159</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 17.

<sup>160</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 10.

consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”<sup>161</sup>

For Baldwin, however, the achievement of human unity and interracial love are dependent on the willingness of Americans to discard their illusions of white supremacy and American exceptionalism, which hurt not only people of colour but whites too. The second aspect of Baldwin’s humanism is based in his demand that both groups assume responsibility for their histories, identities, and futures.

In terms of what this means for white society, Baldwin identifies some common myths held by white Americans. These include: “that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honourably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world’s most direct and virile, that American women are pure.”<sup>162</sup> Baldwin tracks a dual response in the white person who is confronted – whether actually or seemingly – with the rap sheet of history:

The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea: Do not blame *me*, I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway, it was *your* chiefs who sold *you* to *me*. I was not present on the middle passage, I am not responsible for the textile mills of Manchester, or the cotton fields of Mississippi. Besides, consider how the English, too, suffered in those mills and in those awful cities. I *also* despise the governors of southern states and the sheriffs of southern counties, and I *also* want your child to have a decent education and rise as high as his

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<sup>161</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 105.

<sup>162</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 102.

capabilities will permit. I have nothing against you, nothing! What do *you* have against *me*? *What do you want?*<sup>163</sup>

This plea for exoneration, however, is often expressed alongside another sentiment in which, “on the same day, in another gathering, and in the most private chamber of his heart, always, the white American remains proud of that history for which he does not wish to pay, and from which, materially, he has profited so much.”<sup>164</sup>

Baldwin’s emphasis of the *material* nature of the profits afforded by racial capitalism is significant given his attentiveness to the related emotional and spiritual costs. Indeed, the fantasy and exercise of white supremacy has come at an exorbitant price for white people who have not only lost touch with reality but most tragically, their own *humanness*. As Baldwin argues, whiteness is an edifice of power and superiority that is rooted in a deep fear of life, leading to the denial and excision of all of life’s dark elements – suffering, tragedy, and death – which get racially projected onto black people. As he explains,

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” 723-724.

<sup>164</sup> Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” 724.

<sup>165</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 91-92. Interestingly, Fromm thinks that we are in a necrophilic state – the love of dead things. I wonder, though, following Baldwin, if capitalism itself is

The result of this situation has been perilous for white culture, which Baldwin describes as exhibiting "an emotional poverty so bottomless and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable organic connection between his public stance and his private life."<sup>166</sup>

What Baldwin offers white Americans is a choice. Firstly, he instructs white people to understand that they "are not white" and that "part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are."<sup>167</sup> For Baldwin whiteness is a subjectivity based in a false supremacy, a denial of reality, the dehumanization of self and other, the worship of things over human life, and a terror of life itself. White people must be willing to give up their fictitious whiteness and take responsibility for their history, as well as the present.<sup>168</sup> As Baldwin implores:

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and

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based more in the fear of death than in the love of dead things. That is, the creation of a material world that cannot die and that one can flee into in order to escape death, and to escape nature, which is replete with it.

<sup>166</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Streets*, in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998): 385.

<sup>167</sup> Baldwin, *Price of the Ticket*, in *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998): 835.

<sup>168</sup> As Baldwin elaborates: "Or, to put it another way, as long as white Americans take refuge in their whiteness—for so long as they are unable to walk out of this most monstrous of traps—they will allow millions of people to be slaughtered in their name, and will be manipulated into and surrender themselves to what they will think of—and justify—as a racial war. They will never, so long as their whiteness puts so sinister a distance between themselves and their own experience and the experience of others, feel themselves sufficiently human, *sufficiently worthwhile*, to become responsible for themselves, their leaders, their country, their children, or their fate" (in "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," *The New York Review of Books*, January 7, 1971).

our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating: one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.<sup>169</sup>

What Baldwin is calling for is a courageous self-confrontation which, although painful and terrifying, is the only path from "moral monster" to human being.<sup>170</sup> He invites the white person to "consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power, and armed with spiritual traveller's cheques, visits secretly after dark."<sup>171</sup> In terms of the treatment of blacks by white Americans, Baldwin puts the onus on white people to "try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a n\*\*ger in the first place. Because I am not a n\*\*ger. I'm a man. If I'm not the n\*\*ger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question."<sup>172</sup> Baldwin's unequivocal demand that white people take responsibility not only for their own

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<sup>169</sup> Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" 723.

<sup>170</sup> "These people," Baldwin says, "have deluded themselves so long, they really don't think I'm human. I base this on their conduct, not on what they say. And this means ... they have become moral monsters (from Raoul Peck's, *I Am Not Your Negro*, Documentary, 2017).

<sup>171</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 96.

<sup>172</sup> From Raoul Peck's documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2017.

Novelist Toni Morrison in a 1993 interview with Charlie Rose makes a somewhat similar statement when she says, "If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is white people have a very very serious problem. And they should start think about what they can do about it."



moral state of being but also for the terror that they inflict on others is a necessary condition for a racially united future.<sup>173</sup>

For black people, the delusions that must be confronted and the responsibilities that are to be seized are of an entirely different order. In terms of delusions, Baldwin argues that blacks have never been deceived by the lies that white people tell themselves and live by, often viewing them instead as the “slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”<sup>174</sup> Rather, there are perhaps two alternative tasks that must be undertaken. The first is that of shedding “black” identity insofar as blackness is equated with that which is base, immoral, inferior, and subhuman. One of the central achievements of Baldwin’s writing has been to write the black American experience into existence. For Baldwin, this experience cannot be conveyed without understanding the centrality of black suffering:

This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible.<sup>175</sup>

He describes this feeling of unworthiness further as “the American triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit” that aims at

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<sup>173</sup> Perhaps a step in this direction is Tim Wise’s *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections From an Angry White Male* (2008). It should be noted, however, that Wise is not without controversy. See for example: R.L. Stephens, “Tim Wise & The Failure of Privilege Discourse,” *Orchestrated Pulse*, October 1, 2013; and The Stream Team, “Anti-Racism Activist Gets Backlash over Facebook Rant,” *The Stream Blog Aljazeera America*, accessed March 14, 2018.

<sup>174</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 102.

<sup>175</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 98.

inciting self-hatred among black people. As he shares, “When I was little I despised myself, I did not know any better. And this meant, albeit unconsciously, or against my will, or in great pain, that I also despised my father. *And* my mother. *And* my brothers. *And* my sisters.”<sup>176</sup> For Baldwin himself, the overwhelming humiliation and despair of the black experience is what led him to flee the United States for Europe where he was able to metabolize some of the pain of his racialized experience and engage in a project of self-creation. As he describes,

In America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. The question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me.<sup>177</sup>

What Baldwin is speaking of here is the struggle to *rehumanize* oneself. This is needed for black people and other people of colour in order that they may find their rightful place at the table of human belonging. Baldwin emphasizes that should not be confused with wanting to be white or striving toward white civility. To the contrary, he is quick to admonish and expose white civilization for the dishonesty, narcissism, and cruelty that have been hallmarks of its rule. After all, as Baldwin states, “How can one respect, let alone adopt, the values of a people who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they

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<sup>176</sup> Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis.”

<sup>177</sup> Baldwin in Henry Louis Gates Jr., “From the Stacks: ‘The Fire Last Time,’” *The New Republic*, August 2, 2013.

should?"<sup>178</sup> What is needed, rather, is for black people to love themselves and accept themselves as they are. That is, to accept their history and struggle, and to not only remember where they came from but to reap the bitter fruits of their experiences to guide them into the future.<sup>179</sup>

The second task is to avoid the temptations of resurrecting an ideology of counter supremacy while undertaking this rehumanization process. Baldwin discusses this in reference to the Nation of Islam who he at once deeply sympathizes with, while also remaining skeptical that a doctrine of black superiority grounded in a mythical history can provide the type of spiritual and material emancipation that is needed. As he states: "I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. I think I know – we see it around us every day – the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one

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<sup>178</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 96.

As Baldwin further writes, "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption—which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards—is revealed in all kinds of striking ways, from Bobby Kennedy's assurance that a Negro can become President in forty years to the unfortunate tone of warm congratulation with which so many liberals address their Negro equals. It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal – an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man's sense of his own value. Alas, this value can scarcely be corroborated in any other way; there is certainly little enough in the white man's public or private life that one should desire to imitate. White men, at the bottom of their hearts, know this" (*Fire Next Time*, 95).

<sup>179</sup> In Baldwin's words: "this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering--enough is certainly as good as a feast – but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are." (*Fire Next Time*, 98)

that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *whoever debases others is debasing himself.*<sup>180</sup> Baldwin argues that black people must not commit the “European error” of presuming their own superiority over others. Rejecting the model of racial separatism proposed by the Nation of Islam, Baldwin makes the radical statement that white people and black people deeply need one another.<sup>181</sup>

In what way is Baldwin’s humanistic vision similar to Fromm’s? The two writers emphasize a number of common points, including the interrelatedness of all human beings; the importance and primacy of love; the necessity of breaking through illusions and giving up comforting falsities; and the need for people to take responsibility for their lives and actions. Both are also harsh critics of the emptiness and superficiality that governs mainstream culture, and speak of the need to overcome the destructive system of capitalism and embrace a socialist alternative. Baldwin, however, corrects the two limitations of Fromm’s humanism as identified in the last section. That is, his generalizing of the white experience (in the American context) as the experience of *all* Americans; and his failure to include a discussion of white supremacy into his analysis which, in turn, impoverishes his analysis of mainstream culture; socialism; and his theory of humanism as a whole.

Reading Fromm next to Baldwin reveals the one-sidedness of Fromm’s understanding of the American experience and consciousness. We remember, for example, that Fromm’s starting point as established in his breakthrough monograph *Escape From Freedom*, is that negative freedom has been achieved in Europe and North America. Given the situation of blacks in the United States in 1941, the year

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<sup>180</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 83.

<sup>181</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 97.

his book was published, it is undeniably clear that in speaking of negative freedom, or the liberation from social, economic, and political bondage, Fromm was not considering black people or people of colour generally. The situation of black people, as Baldwin's work plainly shows, was that of an entirely different nature.<sup>182</sup> Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement was an attempt to address and seek liberation from the bondage that was long ago achieved by the white people that Fromm takes as representative of the culture. Fromm's omission here should not be pardoned on the grounds that he was forwarding a general argument based on the situation of the majority. Rather, it could be asked how Fromm's denial of white supremacy, and the suffering it causes people of colour, *distorts* his understanding of this majority itself. It furthermore begs the question as to the degree to which white American society was (and is) truly poised to seize positive freedom, given its position as captor of the freedom of others.

Thus, what is missing in Fromm's analysis is a thoughtful investigation into how white supremacy, as an undergirding ideology of North American society, positions us differentially in relation to one another, and determines our differential access to love, belonging, existential security, material resources, power, and freedom. As both authors realize, the relationship between opposing groups cannot be constructed in terms of a simple oppressor/victim binary as oppression guarantees suffering and dehumanization of both sides. With that being said, however, each side is presented with separate challenges and responsibilities that accompany the re-humanization of one's relationship to self and other.

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<sup>182</sup> Contemporary author Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in similarly stirring terms of what it means to be black in the United States today. See *Between the World and Me* (2015).

As it stands, this omission weakens Fromm's notion of humanism, not only in regards to his faulty starting premise but also in terms of the types of future that he imagines. Like Fromm, Baldwin also supports the establishment of a socialist society, stating that: "the necessity for a form of socialism is based on the observation that the world's present economic arrangements doom most of the world to misery; that the way of life dictated by these arrangements is both sterile and immoral; and finally, that there is no hope for peace in the world so long as these arrangements obtain."<sup>183</sup> The difference between Fromm's ideal of socialist humanism and Baldwin's, however, is that Baldwin has little faith in the humanist predecessors that Fromm celebrates.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Baldwin makes the statement that "all of the Western nations have been caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism"<sup>185</sup> as evidenced by their treatment of people of colour. What Baldwin is calling for instead, is an "indigenous socialism, formed by, and responding to, the real needs of the American people."<sup>186</sup> Bill Lyne makes the argument that Baldwin should be read here as a part of a black socialist tradition that demonstrates that "black isn't just an auxiliary to a left moved to the center; Black *is* left as was long

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<sup>183</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 461.

<sup>184</sup> Of course this is not an entirely fair statement given that Fromm was inspired by diverse traditions – not all of which were of Western origin. For the most part, however, Fromm traced his humanistic lineage to Enlightenment/Judeo-Christian writings and thinkers.

<sup>185</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 406.

<sup>186</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 461.

before Marx.”<sup>187</sup> That is, black socialism is rooted in the struggles and experiences of black people, and is informed by the needs and knowledge that arise from these.<sup>188</sup>

The central point here is that given that the doctrine of European humanism has reigned alongside the slavery, colonization, and symbolic erasure of people of colour, the “moral authority” of the West must be called into question.<sup>189</sup> An anti-racist humanism must thus construct an alternative that does not merely attempt to install a pre-existing Western form of humanism but that perhaps cautiously borrows from it while centrally being informed by our own experiences and struggles as people of colour. For this “indigenous” or grassroots (and non-doctrinaire) movement to take form, however, we must heed Baldwin’s counsel and begin to release ourselves from the grasp of white supremacy, and do the work that is required to re-humanize ourselves.

As Baldwin’s own life reveals, however, he was not always able to stand behind this project himself. What makes his humanism all the more honest and instructive is his anger, frustration, despair, bitterness, and contempt – feelings that might be seen as *ressentimental*. Indeed, his career has been split into two phases: his pre-1963 works, dubbed humanist-integrationist, and celebrated by the white liberal literary community; and his post-1963 writings which are seen to suffer from “bitterness and pamphleteering” and which have largely been ignored by the

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<sup>187</sup> Bill Lyne, “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin’s Black Radicalism,” *Science & Society* 74, no. 1 (2010): 34.

<sup>188</sup> For a deeper discussion of this, see Cedric J. Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Zed, 1983).

<sup>189</sup> Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 404.

mainstream establishment.<sup>190</sup> These two phases have come to represent the break between humanist or “good” Baldwin, and black radical or “bad” Baldwin.<sup>191</sup> Scholars and literary commentators have offered conflicting theories to explain this shift in perspectives. It has been suggested that black radicalism was always a current in Baldwin’s writing, including in his “integrationalist” early period, but which developed to its full potential in his later writings.<sup>192</sup> On the contrary, it has also been argued that the authentic Baldwin is the humanist one and his capitulation to Black Panther separatist radicalism was an attempt to preserve his relevance and redeem himself in the eyes of a new generation of black activists who had no patience for his conciliatory cadence.<sup>193</sup> From Baldwin’s own accounts, we know that he was deeply affected by the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., in addition to the murders of other civil rights leaders – all of whom represented the hope of a certain dream that, for Baldwin, died along with them. We may never fully know what accounted for Baldwin’s change in tone from humanist to what could be called

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<sup>190</sup> Lyne, 12.

<sup>191</sup> Lyne 29. The rejection of Baldwin by the white liberal establishment is similar to that of other African American writers and political figures – such as W.E.B Du Bois, Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes and even Martin Luther King Jr – who were also ousted from white liberal acceptance once their views became too “radical.”

<sup>192</sup> See Bill Lyne’s article “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin’s Black Radicalism,” for this point of view.

It should be noted that while Baldwin never saw himself as an “integrationalist,” he would grow increasingly aware of the role that he played in white liberal imagination. As he would recount, “I was, in some way, in those years, without entirely realizing it, the Great Black Hope of the Great White Father” (Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*, Documentary, 2017).

<sup>193</sup> See Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s “From the Stacks: the Fire Last Time” for this view.

Perhaps the most cutting criticism came from Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, who reproached Baldwin for what he saw as “the most gruelling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in any black American writer of note in our time” (in Gates, 2013).



*ressentimental*. What can be said, however, is that his earlier work is certainly not devoid of *ressentimental* elements, just as his later work still contains humanist features in which he speaks of interconnection, and an interracial effort toward freedom.<sup>194</sup>

Gates argues that rather than forcing upon Baldwin the role of spokesperson, we should accept his own self-chosen position as “witness.” For Gates, “the puzzle was that his arguments, richly nuanced and self-consciously ambivalent, were far too complex to serve straightforwardly political ends.”<sup>195</sup> As such, instead of trying to commit him to a certain political position, Baldwin serves us best as a contradictory figure who, in his own words, was caught “between love and power, between pain and rage...perpetually attempting to choose the better of the worse.”<sup>196</sup> Baldwin thus signals that the path to an anti-racist humanism may likely be a shaky one, replete with tensions and contradictions. Like with Baldwin, anti-racist feminist *ressentimental* feelings of hatred, bitterness, anger, and despair may exist alongside a desire for courageous self-responsibility, racial reconciliation, and a future built on the foundations of love, truth, accountability, and peace.

While Baldwin is speaking in regards to the American situation of black and white relations, his words are also helpful in directing white people in the Canadian context toward undergoing their own “pain and terror” of self-confrontation. This means “open[ing] a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal

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<sup>194</sup> See Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2013)

<sup>195</sup> Gates Jr.

<sup>196</sup> Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, 60.

confession – a cry for help and healing.”<sup>197</sup> As Baldwin discusses, this is not the same as shedding, what we discussed earlier as, “white tears” rooted in a guilt for one’s unearned privilege while secretly valuing the social order that it permits. Indeed, Baldwin is calling into question the very basis of this “privilege” by stressing the dehumanizing costs of it. He is not asking white people to simply own up to the material benefits they are assumed to enjoy at the cost of people of colour, but rather to stop *deceiving* themselves into thinking that they are truly happy given the moral decay, emotional poverty, and alienation that can so readily be sensed under their postures of “power.” This is not to deny that white people do not have greater opportunities, access, representation, recognition, wealth, and the psychic comforts that follow (belonging, self-esteem, ease of being, safety) within our current system. Rather, it is to argue that treating white privilege as some type of ontological jackpot 1) obscures the *costs* of whiteness on one’s humanity; and 2) marks these privileges as desirable/aspirational, foreclosing a meditation as to whether we should want to live in such a manner in the first place (i.e. in an alienated and exploitative capitalist society).

Instead of feeling guilty and engaging in inane performances of remorsefulness, what Baldwin is demanding is that white people do their “first works over,” which means “to re-examine everything...go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it.”<sup>198</sup> The crucial point here is that this work is not simply to be done *for* people of colour in the name of “social justice” or “equality” (as seen with current

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<sup>197</sup> Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” 725

<sup>198</sup> Baldwin, *Price of the Ticket*, 841.

conceptions of white allyship). Rather, what white people must realize is that dismantling white supremacy and its attendant economy of racial capitalism is *for their freedom too*. In the Canadian context, part of this reckoning must involve taking responsibility for the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the treatment of Asian immigrants, Islamophobia, anti-black racism and other forms of oppression, in order to engage honestly and with humility in the work of reconciliation.

In terms of anti-racist feminists and people of colour in general, Baldwin also instructs us to do the hard work of facing ourselves with courage and honesty, and renouncing our faith in a system that is incapable of justice and equality. While Baldwin may be correct in saying that people of colour are skeptical of the myths propagated by white supremacy, many of us have indeed fallen victim to the temptations and promises of *capitalism*. As both Baldwin and Fromm remind us, capitalism is structurally incapable of (if not averse to) the justice, equality, and peace that we are seeking. In the same way, a politics based in a reversed racial supremacy is also not amenable with emancipatory and social justice goals. While a socialist alternative might not necessarily be the direction in which we go, I believe that we most definitely need to begin to do the difficult work of imagining and working towards a future that allows us a different way of living, and relating to one another. As I suggest, our ability to do this, however, involves moving through and metabolizing our pain. As Baldwin shares, "It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here."<sup>199</sup> As anti-racist feminists, we might

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<sup>199</sup> Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back" *Collected Essays* (Library of America, 1998): 636.

consider the ways in which we, like Baldwin, are also caught between the poles of love and power, and pain and rage. The next chapter considers this tension in greater detail, exploring some ways in which we might move from pain to power.

Before moving on, however, it would be useful to sum up this chapter's discussion of Fromm. I have argued that given anti-racist feminism's current state of divisiveness, capitulation to legal recognition and capitalist attainment, and insufficient focus on self-determination, Fromm's humanism provides us with an especially cogent theory with which to reconsider: our relationship to one another, the common needs that drive our political behaviours, the deeply psychic harms of capitalist society, and how we might move toward an affirmative sense of *freedom* – a goal that has been marked with ambivalence for anti-racist feminists. Against the risk of appearing naïve and idealistic, Fromm's work persistently emphasizes the possibilities for authentic human connections built on love, reason, responsibility, and compassion; a re-humanized society that embraces alternative political, economic, cultural forms; and an invigorated relationship with oneself that centers one's spiritual and psychic health. In most general terms, Fromm's humanism is geared toward creating the inner and outer conditions that can best respond to our needs as human beings, and while his ideas may not always be achievable (or necessarily desirable), his optimism, hope, and willingness to imagine alternatives are qualities that anti-racist feminism could benefit from considerably.

## Chapter 7 – From Pain to Power

*“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”*

-James A. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

*“The word ‘power’ has a twofold meaning. One is the possession of power over somebody, the ability to dominate him; the other meaning is the possession of power to do something, to be able, to be potent. The latter meaning has nothing to do with domination; it expresses mastery in the sense of ability”*

-Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*.

The title of this chapter, and indeed the dissertation itself, comes from a panel discussion held by anti-racist feminist scholar bell hooks, on October 7, 2015 at the New School in New York City. This discussion, entitled *Moving from Pain to Power*, along with a talk she gave at York University a few weeks later, shared a number of themes central to my investigation in this dissertation. Chief among these was the message that people of colour must begin to do the work of moving from a place of racial and gender trauma, to healing and empowerment. Hooks emphasized that the power she is discussing here is not power *over* someone or something, but rather the personal power that people of colour are often estranged from. Part of reclaiming this power involves doing the inner work of healing and psychological decolonization, as hooks believes that “revolution begins with inner work.” Hook’s work has been influenced by Fromm’s definition of love as a transformative force, which she believes encourages us to act with self-compassion and to help one another heal.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is not to say that hooks is unaware of the magnitude of the oppressive forces of what she calls “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, unknown edition (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018).

patriarchy.” Rather, she argues that psychological decolonization and self-determination are the biggest threats to oppressive power, and thus should be projects that are actively pursued. While hooks is critical of movements that focus on rage rather than taking care of the “PTSD and the trauma of racism,”<sup>2</sup> she recognizes, that attending to our pain is not an easy experience.

Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the anger and resentment of racial trauma is much easier to face than the raw hurt of it. The question remains, however, what is lost when grief is too quickly converted into grievance? This question, as posed by Georgis, leads her to consider the transformative effects of touching our pain, and in so doing, preventing it from hardening into *ressentiment*. How might anti-racist feminists do this work of making contact with our pain? While we might consider various responses to this question, the first section of this chapter examines one specific approach developed by anti-racist feminist Sandra Kim. Based in the secularized Buddhist practice of mindfulness, Kim offers a five-stage online course that provides anti-racist feminists (and other activists) with practical tools with which to work through the negative emotions that arise in our activist work. While Kim’s program gives us a helpful means of touching our pain as well as moving towards the humanist aims discussed in the last chapter, her approach could be perceived as belonging to a popular discourse that privileges reconciliation and forgiveness over recognizing the value of negative emotions. The second section of this chapter examines an argument made by Danish scholar

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<sup>2</sup> October 22, 2015, bell hooks talk, York University. Hooks gave the example of Black Lives Matter here.

Thomas Brudholm who follows the thought of Austrian Holocaust survivor Jean Améry. These thinkers not only warn against dominant trends in reconciliation scholarship and policy but also signal the moral virtues of negative emotions like *ressentiment*. Here I review and build upon some of the helpful aspects of *ressentiment* as discussed in Chapter 4, while remaining cautious of its overall troubling nature. I conclude by considering how anti-racist feminists might simultaneously appreciate *ressentiment* as a legitimate and morally instructive political emotion, while still doing the emotional and political work to ensure that it does not subvert our emancipatory struggles, and debilitate our psychological and physical health.

It should be noted from the outset that the next section by no means attempts to offer a conclusive method that anti-racist feminism might use towards working through racial pain and embracing interrelation over divisiveness. My intention in including this section is rather to counter a dominant trend in academic research in which critique is offered without providing a workable means through which we might begin to address the problem in practical terms. Given the complexity of the issue of *ressentiment* in anti-racist feminism, I am less interested in finding a definitive “solution” per se, and more looking to identify practices that may help us work through some of the more troubling and self-defeating tendencies that I have thus far identified. I explore Kim’s approach as one such practice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For another embodied approach that can be used by activists towards the goal of inner liberation, see Roxana Ng’s ‘integrative embodied antiracist feminist approach’ in “Embodied Learning and Qi Gong: Integrating the Body in Graduate Education,” in *Within and beyond Borders: Critical Multicultural Counselling in Practice*, ed. O. Oulanova et al. (Centre for Diversity in Counseling And Psychotherapy, OISE, University of Toronto., 2009).

## **(7.1) Compassionate Activism**

Since 2016, Sandra Kim has been running an online seminar specifically designed for anti-racist feminists and other progressive activists who are struggling with pain, anger, resentment, and bitterness in their anti-oppressionist activist work. Kim, who is the founder and president of the online magazine *Everyday Feminism*, bases her approach in her “decade long journey of Zen Buddhism-based healing and spiritual growth.”<sup>4</sup> She applies the practice of mindfulness – the focusing of one’s attention on the present moment in order to inspire self-awareness, clarity, and wisdom – to the sphere of activism, taught over 10 weeks through an interactive video forum.<sup>5</sup> Entitled “Compassionate Activism,” the course can be seen as belonging to a wider movement that has been referred to as *Spiritual Activism*, or social justice praxis rooted in spiritual beliefs and commitments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Kim, “About Everyday Liberation and Sandra Kim,” *Everyday Liberation*, 2018, <https://sandrakim.com/about/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mindfulness, translated from the Pali word *sati*, has been a growing buzzword in the West and is readily applied – with varying intentions – to a number of everyday practices (eating, exercising, walking etc.). One of the leading teachers of mindfulness in the West is Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

<sup>6</sup> Spiritual Activism (also called “sacred activism” or “engaged spirituality”) is an umbrella term used to connote “action in society that is motivated by transcendent moral values and is supported by regular practices that seek some connection with God or the sacred” (Miller 2008: 159). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in depth discussion of Spiritual Activism, the movement has recently become a topic of interest among academics from various fields (see for example Baskin 2002; Dillard 2012; Edwards & Post 2008; Gottlieb 2002; Hodge 2012; Hunt 2004; Hutchison 2012; Jones 2003; Keating 2006, 2008; MacIntosh 2008; Miller 2008; Seidlitz 2011; Sheridan 2012).

In regards to Spiritual Activism and Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh developed the phrase “engaged Buddhism” as a type of activism that applies Buddhist insights and practice to social justice struggles.



I have chosen to examine Kim's course due to the ways in which her orientation complements the direction of this dissertation. Firstly, as a woman of colour, Kim is acutely familiar with both the experiences of racism and sexism, and the deep ways in which these injure one's psyche. Secondly, as an anti-racist feminist, she is also aware of some of the problematic ways in which many anti-racist feminists and other activists respond to this pain, especially in terms of the anger, hatred, resentment, bitterness, and despair that we feel and the types of behaviours that stem from these emotions. Kim is both sympathetic to these *ressentimental* emotions and behaviours given the conditions of oppression that provoke them, while also concerned that they limit us in important ways. Third, she is interested in mounting an activism that is rooted in a sense of unity, rather than divisiveness. In the last chapter I discussed how this could be accomplished philosophically through embracing a humanistic ethic. Describing her approach as a "synthesi[s] [of]...Buddhism-based healing and spiritual practices and anti-oppression and pro-liberation work,"<sup>7</sup> her course stresses the ways in which human interrelatedness can be known through compassion, mindful awareness, self-reflexivity, and love. As such, Kim's approach is resonant with Fromm's radical humanism in many ways. Most notably, Fromm offers mindfulness as one especially potent practice to achieving the awareness that is a necessary component of inner liberation. As he states, "every experience, if it is done with mindfulness, is clear, distinct, real, and hence not automatic, mechanical, diffuse. The person who has reached a state of full mindfulness is wide awake, aware of reality in its depth and

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra Kim, "About Everyday Liberation and Sandra Kim."

concreteness.”<sup>8</sup> I thus present Kim’s application of mindfulness to anti-racist feminism as a practical method of moving toward the inner freedom as discussed by Fromm in the previous chapter.<sup>9</sup>

I also write about mindfulness because of the role it has played in my own personal evolution – both in terms of my political engagements and everyday life. As a participant of Kim’s Compassionate Activism seminar myself, I believe that her approach offers anti-racist feminists a helpful *starting point* from which to move from a politics of pain to one of power.

Kim’s seminar presents five practices that she describes as offering “a deeply loving and humanity-affirming alternative to the standard dominating approaches we’ve been taught.”<sup>10</sup> Kim contends that “only a truly loving approach can address injustice... it’s the only thing that heals the psychic wound created and restores the broken connection in our sense of shared humanity.”<sup>11</sup> As mentioned earlier, Kim’s model is responding to the emotional state that she has observed among anti-racist feminists. That is, the anger and self-righteousness that we often express in our anti-oppression work, *as well as* the pain that underlies it. For Kim, this pain often stems from the powerlessness of childhood, which gets triggered in situations of systemic oppression. Central to her approach to dealing with this pain is to engage with it, rather than escaping into the defensive and reactive emotions that I have identified

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<sup>8</sup> Fromm, *The Art of Being*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, Fromm offered mindfulness as *one* of many integrated practices toward the attainment of inner liberation. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore each of them within the context of anti-racist feminism, I offer the present discussion as an exploratory starting point.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Curriculum document (permission to cite curriculum and other documents was obtained by Sandra Kim).

<sup>11</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Curriculum document.

with *ressentiment*. It is this presence with our pain that I believe can grant us a choice with which to *act*, rather than *react*, and importantly, make political and personal decisions that can allow us to work towards creating affirmative social change.

Before exploring Kim's five practices, an important caveat must be forwarded concerning the problematics of cultural appropriation in taking Eastern traditions and putting them to Western use. Kim's evocation of Buddhist philosophy through the concept of mindfulness can be seen as part of the Western appropriation of Buddhist ideas that has been ongoing in North America and Europe for some years now. From an anti-racist, anti-colonial perspective, such appropriation might be critiqued as belonging to a long tradition of cultural theft that often results in the simplification, misinterpretation, commodification, and exploitation of complex cultural ideas and heritages of people of colour from around the world. This critique is certainly relevant to the case of Buddhism in the West.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, in his article "Is Mindfulness Buddhist?", Buddhist Studies scholar Robert Sharf argues that the word *sati* (the Pali word for mindfulness) and the role of mindfulness in general have been distorted by Buddhist modernism.<sup>13</sup> He characterizes Buddhist modernism as rooted in "the notion that Buddhism is a rational, empirical, and therapeutically oriented tradition compatible with modern science," and describes it as a product of "a complex intellectual exchange between

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<sup>12</sup> Kim acknowledges this in the third session of the online seminar although fails to unpack it further.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Sharf, "Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters)," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 4 (2015): 470–84.

Asia and the West that took place over the last 150 years or so.”<sup>14</sup> Sharf is critical that Western uses of mindfulness, removed from their original philosophical and doctrinal context, not only encourage an ethical passivity but also blend uncritically with Western ideals of instrumentality, consumerism, and superficial ideals of happiness. He argues that Western forms of Buddhism that emphasize mindfulness practice in fact derive from a specific Theravādan Burmese reformist movement at the start of the 20th century that developed techniques for the layperson largely removed from greater Buddhist philosophy and practice. While, for Sharf, this does not necessarily negate the benefit of these practices, he advocates for a better understanding of their development and in some cases, distortion.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while Kim may locate her approach in “Zen Buddhism” and “Buddhism-based healing and spiritual practices,” I would argue that her use of mindfulness techniques might more accurately be identified as descending from this particular secularized tradition that has been popularized in the West over the last many years.<sup>16</sup> I agree

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Sharf, “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (And Why It Matters),” 472. For more on Buddhist Modernism, see Robert Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 228–83; and David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> For another critique on the secularization of Buddhism, see Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s article “Facing the Great Divide,” *Inquiring Mind* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

<sup>16</sup> To be clear then, this secularized tradition was not the result of Westerners simply appropriating and translating Buddhist practices (although this of course happens) but rather derived from a more complex historical interchange that has involved the participation of many Eastern Buddhist monks. Many such monks, for example, trained Western monks in the 1960s and 70s with the intention of sending them back to North America and Europe to spread their teachings. One such master was Ajahn Chah who trained a number of Western students at his forest monastery in Thailand, and who he later sent out across the West to become well-known teachers and translators of a more secularized and “modernized” Theravādan tradition to Western practitioners.

In other cases, Eastern monks have made their residence in monasteries in the West. Perhaps the best known of these is the Vietnamese Monk Thich Nhat Hanh who founded a

with Sharf that while this does not vitiate the usefulness or application of these practices, it is important to register that popularized practices of mindfulness are not without criticism and should be properly contextualized. With these considerations in mind, I now explore the five practices that Kim offers.

### Practice 1: Humility and Curiosity

The first practice of humility and curiosity targets what Kim identifies as the common tendency for marginalized activists to assume that we understand the intentions and motivations of people of the dominant group. As she explains,

What most people do is they come into these situations based on their past, and are very strong[ly] anti-oppression now, so they assume they know what's going on. We assume we know why the other person's doing what they're doing. It flares up both our individual trauma, as well as our collective trauma of what we experience related to the situation.... Because it's so loaded and big for us, we feel like we know everything that's going on, and it's possible what you think is true. It's possible what you think is true about the other person, and what's happening in that situation. It's also possible that it's not true. When we assume that we already know, there's no place to learn. There's no place to actually deal with it when it's so emotionally charged for us.<sup>17</sup>

What Kim is pointing to here is what she calls the “emotional charge” that acts as a mediating factor in interactions between marginalized activists and members of the dominant group. This emotionality is rooted in our racial trauma and given language through our anti-oppressive politics. Kim suggests that instead of meeting the other with a sense of openness and curiosity, we assume that we

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living community and retreat centre called Plum Village in the south of France. See <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/>

<sup>17</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

already know who they are and what they are about based on our understanding of systemic oppression. According to this understanding, we also assume that “we’re better than the[se] other people because we’re more socially conscious.”<sup>18</sup> The result is that we foreclose meeting others compassionately and with a sense of curiosity for where they may be coming from. Kim is clear in stating that she is not suggesting that we are imagining oppression in situations where it is absent, nor that it is unreasonable that we might assume that someone is acting oppressively given our past experiences. Rather, she is pointing to the tendency to automatically villainize members of the dominant group without considering the possibility that we may not necessarily know their intentions. This tendency, she argues, prevents us from seeing them as human beings who have also been “raised...on the lies of systemic oppression just like we have.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, we lose the humility of remembering that we, too, were not always so informed and critical ourselves. And perhaps most significantly, we thwart the possibility of engaging in a “different type of conversation”<sup>20</sup> of which Kim discusses in her subsequent practices.

## Practice 2: Distinguishing Realities and Acknowledging External Reality

Related to the last practice, this step focuses on separating our subjective experience from that of the other person’s subjective experience. As Kim discusses, “You’re understanding of what is happening in this conversation is very much informed by your own filters that come from your past; your personality; fears and

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<sup>18</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

traumas; the information that you have; things that you've been exposed to; critical thinking. All this stuff informe[s] what meaning we give to what is happening.”<sup>21</sup> Kim argues that in assuming that our reality is the same as the other person’s internal reality, we often invite a breakdown in communication, and conflict. She contends that we must acknowledge that our understanding of a situation is not only different, but also as valid as the experience that the other person is having. For Kim, it is through the acknowledgment that different realities exist and can *coexist* that we can begin to say “this is what’s true for me. What’s true for you?” In asking “what’s true for you?” and “tell me more,” we suspend our inner narrative and open ourselves to the possibility of making true contact with the other person – a step that requires our humility and curiosity.

Kim posits that our difficulty in making space for the reality of the other often has to do with our pain: “Often times in these emotionally charged conversations, what's happening is that the pain that we feel is pushing out the possibility that they have a different reality. For them to be told that they've done something harmful is also really painful for them, so they're pushing back on our reality at this. We end up doing this...just try[ing] to push our realities [in]to each other.”<sup>22</sup> As discussed previously, it can be challenging for those in the dominant group to hear what the other person is saying when it threatens to disturb the beliefs that they might hold about themselves in terms of being “anti-oppressive” or “progressive.” This, of course, is also something that people of colour might experience when someone calls us out on an issue that we may have been insensitive to.

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<sup>21</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 2.

<sup>22</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 2.

Kim differentiates the inner realities of the participants in a situation, with the “external reality” that frames the situation itself. She refers to this third type of reality as that which can be ascertained through “words, actions, and energy.” That is, we must ask what words were actually spoken, what actions took place, and what was the energy that was communicated. Kim believes that asking these questions can allow us a perspective that is less clouded by the “toxic swirl” of pain, fear, and the trauma of the past that effects the present. As she explains, “The more emotionally charged something is, the more filters we have getting in the way because we have more of the past impacting our experience of the present moment. Often times when you're calmer, you're more peaceful, [and] your ability to receive what is going on as it is, goes up.”<sup>23</sup>

### Practice 3: Gentle Mindfulness and Compassionate Self- Accountability

This third practice brings us to the heart of Kim’s approach. She describes mindfulness as “gentle attention – it’s not trying to change what’s going on; it’s not trying to judge, shame, critique – it’s just noticing. Noticing what is going on in the present moment for me.”<sup>24</sup> She stresses that, “when we get present, we get in touch with our feelings and needs in that moment...[and in] that really emotionally charged situation, we can do something about it.”<sup>25</sup>

Kim discusses how in situations where we are emotionally triggered, we most commonly escape from our pain for fear that we will be overwhelmed by it.

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<sup>23</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 2.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 3.

<sup>25</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 3.



Mindfulness, however, gives us the inner spaciousness with which to hold our feelings and work through them in order to bring choice and healing. That is, it gives us the opportunity to *touch our pain*. As Kim explains:

Those situations where we bring mindfulness to what's going on with us, we get present to our feelings and needs that [are] underneath that stress, frustration, and anger. We can choose what to do about it. This is once again where we're talking about...put[ting] all our energy...into make-believe or resisting reality instead of dealing with what's inside of us. If we deal with what's inside of us, we can heal it [and] take care of ourselves in that moment.<sup>26</sup>

In order to demonstrate how we can use mindfulness to contact our pain, Kim incorporates many exercises, group discussions and coaching sessions throughout the seminar, stressing that a central intention of the course is to provide students with practical tools. In each of these exercises, students are asked to pick an incident that was moderately emotionally charged for them to work with, whether from the classroom, the workplace, their activism or everyday life. In order to teach the class how to apply mindfulness to their chosen situations, Kim leads a guided meditation in which students are instructed to close their eyes and begin to focus on their breath. From there, she asks the class to do a body scan exercise in which they slowly bring their attention up from their feet to the top of their heads. The idea here is not to change anything but rather to move from thought to the felt sense of the body, noting places of tension, as well as laxity. Kim then instructs students to think about the emotionally charged situation that they had chosen. She asks for them to notice where it is arising in the body and to open their awareness to it:

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<sup>26</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

You are not trying to change it, judge it, make it go away. No, say yes to it. I feel X and that's ok. Just pay attention, what does it feel like? How big is it? What does it look like? Just pay gentle attention to it and listen to it. Listen to it with your body. Breathe into it. Tell it "yes I hear you, what do you need from me?"<sup>27</sup>

The intention behind this exercise is to get in touch with our inner reality, *not* in terms of the circular and reactive thought processes that often arise but rather the affective field that is created in the present moment and felt in the body. Kim argues that bringing such attention to this felt experience allows us to access, layer by layer, the complex emotions that we often escape from. As she explains:

Our feelings just are what they are, and we can start to be like, "Okay, I feel something. What am I feeling?" Then as we keep acknowledging and holding it as being important and real and legitimate, we start to notice that there's layers to this, so we go from the initial reaction, whether that's stress, frustration or anger, resentment, irritation, whatever that initial reaction is, we need to unpack it, and it will shift to maybe there's some sadness. Maybe there's some pain. It's really what it's about. There's some pain that we're trying to avoid. That's why we stay in the make-believe world, because it distracts us from the actual pain, because we don't know how to be with pain. We find it very overwhelming.<sup>28</sup>

Kim suggests that it is through making space for our pain and holding it with "gentle, loving and non-judgmental attention"<sup>29</sup> that we begin to heal it by affirming its existence. This affirmation is important given dominant society's tendency to deny and belittle our experiences of racial oppression. It is only through recognizing our pain that we can take care of it by asking what it needs. Kim mobilizes a key

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that Kim's body awareness exercise is familiar to anyone who practices Western secularized applications of mindfulness. The uniqueness of her approach is rather in using mindfulness visualization and meditative techniques that respond to the specific emotional struggles of anti-racist feminists.

<sup>28</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 5.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Curriculum document.

tenet of secularized Buddhist psychology here, which teaches that bringing receptivity to the felt experience of emotion in the body, allows the emotion the space with which to move and change.<sup>30</sup> Emotions, according to Buddhist psychology, are seen as temporary movements or weather systems that are always in flux, and which become fixed only when there is a cognitive narrative that keeps them in place. Thus, in situations where the emotion resists movement, Kim encourages exploration around this resistance through inquiring: Why do you need to feel this way? What kind of investment do you have around this emotion? What kind of identity is it fuelling for you? Kim argues that it is in becoming familiar with our inner world through such exploration that we can interrupt the “toxic swirl” that leads us to anger and resentment, and instead, remain open, compassionate, and present to the situation at hand.

Bringing mindfulness to our inner process allows us to arrive at the second half of Kim’s third practice, which is “compassionate self-accountability.” This step, she explains, has to do with the choice that opens up for us once we become aware of our internal process. It is only at this point that we have the consciousness with which to respond, rather than *react* to life. Kim offers three statements to help facilitate this process. The first is, “I feel X and it’s ok/it matters” which encourages us to become mindful of our feelings and validate them. The second is, “I did/didn’t do X and that happened.” This statement allows us to accept how we may have reacted to a problem with compassion, rather than self-judgment. Finally, we have

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<sup>30</sup> For more on Buddhist psychology, see Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*, Reprint edition (Bantam, 2009); and Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without A Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*, Revised ed. edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2013).

“When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z. I will do A/invite someone to do A.”

Here, we learn how to anticipate and respond to our own emotional needs, while considering how we can act with another in a way that is responsible and in line with our social justice commitments.

#### Practice 4: Compassionate Truth-Telling and Consciousness-Raising Inquiry

The fourth practice relates to how we might engage differently with someone who is triggering us emotionally. Kim contends that once we have gotten in touch with our inner emotional process through mindfulness, we are now ready to communicate our truth in a way that is non-violent and non-reactive. This is in contrast to our habitual way of engaging with the other, which, Kim argues, is: informed by our past pain, and assumptions about the other person’s intentions rather than on what is occurring in the present moment; resistant to what is actually happening by insisting that it “should” not have occurred; based in shaming and judging the other for acting in a way that is unacceptable; and rooted in our “make-believe” narrative of the world. Compassionate truth-telling, on the other hand, requires that we become connected to the present moment; that we acknowledge and accept what is actually happening; that we do not judge what is happening or the other person as inherently right or wrong; and that we act from a place that is rooted in our emotional truth, rather than the secondary emotions and thoughts that we erect to cover our truth.

Kim discusses how compassionate truth-telling and consciousness-raising inquiry happens in two parts (although not necessarily in the following order). The

first part involves us communicating the truth of our experience in a way that is honest, based in our true inner reality, and devoid of shaming, policing or punishing. We might say “I found what you said to be very hurtful because of X” or “When you said this, what came up for me was X.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, we invite the other to share our inner reality. Kim stresses that this can only ever be an invitation, and never an imposition. She also emphasizes that while sharing our truth may hopefully raise the consciousness of the other, this practice is primarily in the interest of our own healing. It is about stating our truth in a way that responds to *our* needs, rather than hoping for a specific response: “It’s about you and what you need to give yourself. It’s not about how they receive it or if they agree with it... At most, you can invite them to consider it as your experience while acknowledging that they also may have a different experience of the situation. They have the right to say no [but] they just may say yes.”<sup>32</sup>

The second part is related to this acknowledgment around the other person’s experience. Here we become curious to know what is happening in their internal reality, listening to their experience of what occurred, and the feelings they are having around it. Kim encourages us to help unpack their experience by asking them questions such as “What did you mean when you said X?” and prompts like “Tell me more.” In this way, we can also be curious about the pain under *their* emotional reaction and consider what created it. As Kim explains,

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<sup>31</sup> Kim’s approach here is very similar to non-violent forms of communication. For more on non-violent communication, see Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, 3rd Edition: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships*, Third Edition, Third edition edition (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 8.

When we hold the space for us to share our truth, we are more able to hold the space for others to also share their truth – even when it’s very different from our own. This allows us to dig deeper into where their biased perspective comes from so they can become conscious of their conditioning from systemic oppression. In that sharing of our truths and genuine listening, we are able to honor our feelings and needs as well as reconnect with each other.<sup>33</sup>

This practice, as can be clearly seen, is starkly different to that of “calling-out,” discussed earlier in the dissertation. Indeed, Kim’s emphasis on listening and empathy make her approach compatible with what some activists have called “calling-in.” Calling-in has been proposed as an alternative practice to calling-out, and refers to “speaking privately with an individual who has done some wrong, in order to address the behaviour without making a spectacle of the address itself.”<sup>34</sup> As opposed to calling-out, “[Call ins] address the harm caused without invalidating our own responses to being hurt and without erasing someone else’s humanity, which in turn keeps our humanity intact.”<sup>35</sup>

As such, the key focus in terms of this practice, along with Kim’s, is *compassion*. It is with compassion towards ourselves that we take care of ourselves and share our truth in order to facilitate our healing and raise the consciousness of the other; and it is with compassion that we view the other as a human being with his/her own experience, perspective, and pain. Kim emphasizes that compassion is not to be forced but rather, arises naturally once we become attuned to our own suffering, as well as the suffering of the other.

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<sup>33</sup> *Compassionate Activism*, Curriculum document.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad, “A Note on Call-Out Culture,” *Briarpatch Magazine*, March 2, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Ngoc Loan, quoted in Katelyn Burns, “This Simple Technique Could End Toxic Call-Out Culture Forever,” *Everyday Feminism*, August 5, 2017.

## Practice 5: Shared Envisioning and Non-Cooperation

The last practice of Kim's model is that of creating a shared vision with which to realize our common goals. As she discusses:

When we view the other person as our adversary, then much of our time and energy goes into handling the resistance in our relationship. However, once we're reconnected through compassion and empathy for our respective truths, we're able to identify our shared values and co-create a vision that is inspiring and strategic in order to advance our shared goals.<sup>36</sup>

The idea here is that once we have dealt with our emotional charge and communicated our truth, as well as allowed the other person to do likewise, we finally find ourselves on common ground. Through compassion and understanding we allow ourselves to open to the other individual who we are now able to see as a fellow human being, rather than the enemy. It is from here that we can identify whether we indeed share common goals toward creating a just, equitable world. If this is the case, then we can begin the work of envisioning this world together as co-creators.

As Kim cautions, however, this is not always the case:

Sometimes it doesn't work out. Then you can practice non-cooperation. But we don't non-cooperate in passive aggressive ways but non-cooperate in ways that still can grieve for the lost hope, the lost opportunity [and] hope that things will heal in the future, where you will be able to create something together. You're not making them wrong for it as a human being, you're not making yourself wrong for it as a human being not being able to do that together. We're just choosing not to cooperate together.<sup>37</sup>

Non-cooperation does not mean that we deny the humanity of the other or villainize them. Nor does it mean we allow it to feed into our narrative around the

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<sup>36</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Curriculum document.

<sup>37</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 1.

incorrigibility of the “oppressor” and his/her inherent evilness. We disengage out of integrity for our political vision, while still retaining our sense of compassion.

Kim’s five-practice model of Compassionate Activism is important for the present discussion in that it directly attends to the psychological process that underlies political conflicts between *us* and *them*. That is, in situations where we, as anti-racist feminists, encounter someone from the dominant group acting in a way that triggers us emotionally, Kim illuminates how we are likely to be taken over by an “emotional charge” that directs us to perceive the situation and act upon it in certain ways. What is triggered, of course, is our pain – the deep injury of living a lifetime of racial and gendered exclusion and humiliation. The experiencing of this pain is often too raw and too overwhelming for us to manage, and so we cover the wound with the less vulnerable emotions of anger, resentment, bitterness, malice, envy – which I have referred to in this dissertation as *ressentiment*. These *ressentimental* feelings can be accompanied by *ressentimental* thoughts and rationalizations which assure us that we are indeed being oppressed in the given situation, and that, by virtue of our oppressed positionality *and* our anti-oppressive commitments as anti-racist feminists, we possess a moral authority and access to reality that is denied to those we identify as oppressors. What Kim is discussing is that once this emotional and cognitive process is complete, we are left with little choice in terms of how we act. In Fromm’s terms, we have surrendered our freedom through capitulating to our habituated way of responding to a certain situation. That is, we are bound to our emotional charge in a way that leaves little space with which to 1) heal the pain that lies underneath this emotional configuration; 2) deal with



the actual situation – whether oppressive or not – which lies in front of us. More specifically, we are unable to imagine nor construct a reality that is actually anti-oppressive, even as we pledge our allegiance to such a political project.

What happens instead, as Kim argues, is that we participate in the logic of domination ourselves, through asserting our moral superiority and acting in ways that are aggressive, dehumanizing, and divisive. We are reminded once again of Fromm’s statement that victimization:

activate[s] a tendency to overcome the defeat by doing actively what one was forced to endure passively: to rule when one had to obey; to beat when one was beaten in short, to *do* what one was *forced to suffer*, or to do that what one was forbidden to do.<sup>38</sup>

This type of emotional and political expression, in turn, takes a considerable toll on our psyches as well as our physical health. In terms of this latter point, there were numerous instances during the 10-week course where participants shared the emotional and physical health issues that have arisen as a result of the psychological stress associated with their activism.<sup>39</sup>

It is in direct response to this predictable and common cycle, that Kim offers an alternative. Through mindfulness, she invites us to take a pause at the very moment in which our emotional spiralling (or “toxic swirling”) would begin. In grounding ourselves in the present moment, rather than in past personal or collective trauma, or in our theories of oppression and domination, Kim asks what it

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<sup>38</sup> Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 236.

<sup>39</sup> Most frequently, as discussed previously, the emotional and physical effects of social justice work has been referred to as “burnout.”

For an illuminating reflection on racism and psychological distress, see Guilaine Kinouani, “White Denial, Black Mental Health and Ontological Insecurity,” *Race Reflections* (blog), December 11, 2016.

might mean to risk coming into true contact with ourselves and the other. Mindfulness becomes the technology through which we soften and open ourselves *to ourselves*. In Kim's words:

Systemic oppression cuts us off from ourselves and from other people so [you] can't connect to your own humanity and other people's humanities...Our realities are erased by systemic oppression. Mindfulness actually gets us back in touch with that. With that reality, our internal realities...[I]t wasn't designed to fight [for] social justice, but I think it can. I think it's the only thing that does. That brings forth our own humanity, our own stories.<sup>40</sup>

Mindfulness allows us to touch our pain, and in so doing, provides us with the possibility to begin to heal ourselves and act from a place of empowerment, rather than constant re-traumatization. As Kim describes:

The goal is not to have no feelings that are difficult for us. It's just that we know how to be with our feelings. We know how to acknowledge their legitimacy, their right to exist, and identify the needs underlying them so that we can take care of ourselves. We can offer that compassion to ourselves and do something about that pain. Because until we can acknowledge it, there's nothing we can do to take care of our pain. We keep having these open wounds on us and then as we go about the world, salt just keeps getting thrown on these open wounds by other people and by ourselves. There's never really a chance for us to heal, to feel empowered, and to feel like we can do something about this. Instead, it's just constant reopening of the wounds, constant salt being thrown on them.<sup>41</sup>

As such, Kim, like hooks, is speaking of a means through which we might move from pain to power as anti-racist feminists. I would argue that her application of mindfulness to anti-oppressive activism provides us with a powerful tool with which to 1) remain self-aware and self-reflexive while engaging with others; 2) attend to our psychological wounds in order to facilitate our healing, and interrupt

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<sup>40</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 3.

<sup>41</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 6.

automatic spiralling into *ressentimental* feeling and thinking; 3) ground our activism in a sense of self-compassion and compassion for the other so as to come from a place of interrelation, rather than divisiveness; and 4) free up some emotional space and energy with which to create affirmative visions for the future.

Central to Kim's approach is facilitating the re-humanization of self and other through recognizing and validating our own suffering as well as that of the other person, and harnessing the compassion that emerges from this realization in the service of co-creating an alternative reality. As stated earlier, this is not to imply that we cannot find weaknesses with her model, nor to suggest that mindfulness is a definitive solution for moving toward a non-*ressentimental* anti-racist feminism. Rather, it is to provide one practical and effective<sup>42</sup> method that we might further explore as a means to helping us realize the anti-racist humanistic ethic that was explored in the last chapter. Specifically, mindfulness gives us a technique with which to move toward the inner liberation that Fromm discusses as necessary to positive freedom.

With this being said, there remains a discomfort in terms of what her model is asking us to surrender. As one student put it, "Anger is a motivator for me, and I'm not ready to give it up. I'll just tell you that. I'm just not ready to give it up."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In terms of evaluating the efficacy of this method, I am referring to the positive feedback that was given by students throughout the course, and especially during the live coaching sessions, and in the chat box that allowed students to communicate with each other during the seminar. Of course these are not empirical measures but they in the very least suggest that the method is worth exploring further. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Kim's application of mindfulness and Buddhist psychology to activism is not unique. Although beyond the scope of this current chapter, it would be interesting to study the achievements of other forms of Spiritual Activism that also use mindfulness for political aims.

<sup>43</sup> Kim, *Compassionate Activism*, Session 9.

Although Kim contends that the compassionate path toward healing and justice is not one that embraces political congeniality or complacency, but which has a place for negative emotions, it is unclear exactly which of these we should retain, and what *value* they bring to our movements. It is also unclear as to how we might manage negative emotions and achieve healing in situations (like ours) where racial oppression *persists*, and is not always manifested in a face-to-face encounter. The next section examines these concerns through re-visiting *ressentiment* through the work of Thomas Brudholm and Jean Améry, who make the case for the moral significance of negative emotions.

## **(7.2) Revisiting Ressentiment**

Kim's system of Compassionate Activism offers a possible model with which to work with negative emotions so that they do not crystalize into the encumbering character of *ressentiment*. While an approach that encourages healing, compassion, and reconciliation might appear morally commendable, Thomas Brudholm warns against submitting to premature pressures to forgive and heal. Rather, following Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, he advances an argument for the moral rehabilitation of *ressentiment*.

Before considering his argument, it would be worthwhile to review what I have thus far discussed in terms of *ressentiment* in this dissertation. In Chapter 4, after delineating Nietzsche's construction and Scheler's elaboration of the term, I explored how it can be applied to contemporary expressions of feminism. Looking specifically at some practices and tendencies in anti-racist feminism, I made the argument that the concept does have explanatory power, although such an

explanation *must* be balanced by the reality of past and current oppression to which it responds. I then considered Rebecca Stringer's assertion that *ressentiment* holds revolutionary potentiality capable of catapulting feminism from a stance of reactivity to creative social change. I argued that while I agree that *ressentiment* furnishes the oppressed with the ontological contingency to realize themselves as capable of new possibilities of being and doing, its tendency towards bitterness, invective, envy, and contempt obstructs this initial contingency from developing into affirmative empowerment and action. I then suggested that in order to free ourselves from the grasp of *ressentiment*, we must attend to the pain that underlies this emotional formation – leading us to consider Kim's system of Compassionate Activism.

The implicit suggestion throughout this dissertation has thus been that although anti-racist feminist *ressentiment* might be understandable, it is ultimately something that must be *overcome*. As my discussion of Baldwin revealed, however, an anti-racist humanism based in interrelationality, responsibility, and love, can still be one that is vulnerable to the grasp of *ressentiment* at times. In this section I investigate Brudholm and Améry's argument of how this might be a *valuable* thing, not so much in terms of offering the political momentum with which to achieve emancipatory goals (as per Stringer's analysis), but rather for the *moral* power contained in *ressentimental* emotions. My choice in selectively engaging with Brudholm and Améry's defense of *ressentiment* over other such arguments<sup>44</sup> is due to a few reasons: firstly, Brudholm's specific critique of the impetus toward

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<sup>44</sup> Another very good defense for *ressentiment*, which also draws upon Brudholm's work, is that of Glen Coulthard in *Red Skins, White Masks*.

reconciliation and compassion addresses a limitation in Kim's approach around the proper role, and importance of, negative emotions; secondly, Améry's position as a humanist *and* a self-described "man of *ressentiment*" is especially relevant for the current investigation in that it continues last chapter's inquiry around the coexistence of humanism and *ressentiment*; and finally, focusing on Améry's *ressentiment* permits a deep engagement with his case, providing insights of a deeper register than what could be achieved otherwise.

Exasperated by the mainstream paradigm of "reconciliation discourse" which commends victim forgiveness and compassion, while disparaging negative emotions, Brudholm inquires into the moral value of the latter. His work intends to serve as a "counterpoint" to the "scores of writings in which outrage, resentment, and refusals to forgive or reconcile are hastily rejected as the negative to be overcome: the irrational, immoral, and unhealthy or understandable but unfortunate attitudes of victims who are not—at least not yet— 'ready' or 'capable' of forgiving and healing."<sup>45</sup> In contrast to this perspective, Brudholm argues for an understanding of resentment, anger, and the refusal to forgive as possessing a "moral protest and ambition that might be as permissible and admirable as the posture of forgiveness."<sup>46</sup> He does this through a close reading of the work of Jean Améry, Holocaust survivor and essayist, who, in the 1960s, writes in defense of his choice to retain his *ressentiment* against the Nazis and German society as a whole. Recognizing the unpopularity of his choice given the predominance of both moral

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Améry and the Refusal to Forgive* (Temple University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 4.

and psychological arguments against *ressentimental* attachment, Améry presents his as an intervention intended to *restore* both the moral order, as well as relations between victim and perpetrator. But how could *ressentiment*, as it has been discussed thus far, accomplish such a feat? In order to answer this I examine the distinction that Brudholm makes between *ressentiment* and resentment, and his placement of Améry's *ressentiment* as a special species between the two.

What, for Brudholm, is the difference between *ressentiment* and resentment? Starting with the latter, he discusses the history and significance of resentment in the Euro-American philosophical tradition of moral emotions. Moving from Aristotle, to Joseph Butler and Adam Smith, to the more recent work of Jeffrie Murphy and Richard Wallace, Brudholm explores how resentment has been defended as a "legitimate and valuable" response to "perceived moral wrongs."<sup>47</sup> For example, Murphy makes the argument that "resentment stands as emotional testimony that we care about ourselves and our rights,"<sup>48</sup> while Wallace contends that in expressing resentment, we are not just "venting feelings," but rather "demonstrating our commitment to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, resentment represents a desire to provoke a response in a community or society to both recognize the victim's claims, and restore the moral order. As such, Brudholm argues that "being susceptible to anger or resentment is inextricably tied to participation in 'the general framework of human life.' A social

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<sup>47</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy in Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Wallace in Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 10.

life bereft of resentment is an impossible and, insofar as it is imaginable, impoverished life.”<sup>50</sup>

While there may be an argument to be made for the moral function of resentment, Brudholm notes that “it seems nearly absurd to try something similar with regard to *ressentiment* or with regard to the moral standing of its holders.”<sup>51</sup> Although *ressentiment* overlaps with resentment in terms of describing anger toward a personal or social injury, Brudholm argues that the former term has been “strongly colored by Nietzsche’s picture of the loathsome and pathological ‘man of *ressentiment*’” who is characterized by “self-poisoning, hypersensitivity, deceitfulness, and emotions like vindictiveness, hatred, malice, spite, and envy.”<sup>52</sup> In fact, the defense of resentment as a justifiable and rational moral emotion is often made through articulating its distinctiveness from *ressentiment*. Despite this, Brudholm follows Améry in his attempt to rehabilitate *ressentiment* as morally worthy. He does this through arguing that Améry’s notion of *ressentiment* is a cross between resentment, and the Nietzschean breed that we have thus far been discussing.

In order to understand Améry’s *ressentiment*, the context from which it arises, as well as his own understanding of it, must be examined. While a comprehensive exploration of Améry’s thought is beyond the scope of this section, let me briefly provide a few central points. Améry was a Holocaust survivor, captured and tortured by the Belgian Gestapo in the later years of the war for his

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<sup>50</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 11.



political activities, after which he was transferred to Auschwitz, and then, to two other internment camps. Améry notes that his *ressentiment* arose not in the immediate aftermath of the war, but rather grew in the following years. The reason for this, he shares, is because the widespread outrage and condemnation against Germany after its defeat permitted him a measure of moral redemption and relief. As he describes, “Still, for quite some time there lasted what was for me a totally unprecedented social and moral status, and it elated me to the extreme: being what I was – a surviving Resistance fighter, Jew, victim of persecution by a universally hated regime – there was mutual understanding between me and the rest of the world.”<sup>53</sup> Within a few years, however, Améry would witness a drastic shift in public opinion from one of shame and remorse, to that of “overcoming” the past.<sup>54</sup> As German people spoke of moving on, his fellow Holocaust survivors “trembled with the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation,”<sup>55</sup> and the world re-embraced the fallen country into its fold, Améry’s *ressentiment* grew.

How does Améry characterize his *ressentiment*? We might answer this question by considering what functions he assigns to it. As mentioned earlier, he defends his *ressentiment* on moral grounds. He does not disagree that his negative emotions have come at a cost to his health, but he rejects the idea that this should be

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<sup>53</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980), 64. As Brudholm writes in response to Améry’s statement, “The importance of “third-party” expressions of strong reprobation cannot be underestimated when one is dealing with responses to state-sponsored mass crime” (*Resentment’s Virtue*, 96).

<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that while considerable effort has gone into memorializing the Holocaust in Germany in the last few decades, this was not the case during Améry’s time of writing.

<sup>55</sup> Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 65.

a deterring factor. Rather, he hopes that his *ressentiment* might accomplish a greater purpose than whatever personal effect it may have on him. As he writes:

Perhaps it is only concern for my own purification, but I hope that my resentment – which is my personal protest against the anti-moral natural process of healing that time brings about, and by which I make the genuinely humane and absurd demand that time be turned back – will also perform a historical function. Were it to fulfill the task that I set it, it could historically represent, as a stage of the world's moral dynamics of progress, the German revolution that did not take place. This demand is no less absurd and no less moral than the individual demand that irreversible processes be reversible.<sup>56</sup>

What Améry's *ressentiment* thus aspires to do is halt what he refers to as the natural process of time, which affords perpetrators a "healing" that he identifies as profoundly anti-moral. He concedes that the adage that "time heals all wounds" also applies to victims but argues that forgiveness is only available to the one who "submerges his individuality in society and is able to comprehend himself only as a function of the social, that is, the insensitive and indifferent person."<sup>57</sup> Améry complements this somewhat Frommian statement with the analysis that the "loudly proclaimed readiness for reconciliation by Nazi victims can only be either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed *genuine* demand for revenge."<sup>58</sup> In opposition to this normal, forward-facing time sense, Améry's *ressentiment* commits him to a distorted or warped temporality that is not only backward oriented, but which also *rejects* that what has occurred (in distinction to Kim's instruction that we must first accept what has happened). As he states:

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<sup>56</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 77.

<sup>57</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 71.

<sup>58</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 71.

Man has the right and the privilege to declare himself to be in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about. What happened, happened. This sentence is just as true as it is hostile to morals and intellect. The moral power to resist contains the protest, the revolt against reality, which is rational only as long as it is moral. The moral person demands annulment of time – in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed. Thereby and through a moral turning – back of the clock, the latter can join his victim as a fellow human being.<sup>59</sup>

The “nailing the criminal to his deed” is less a call for revenge and more a demand that both victim and perpetrator might occupy the same moral space, which for Améry, can be facilitated through a shared rejection of what took place. As such, Améry’s *ressentiment* expresses a “vision of a restoration of human solidarity and responsibility.”<sup>60</sup> He maintains that if only the perpetrator could stand beside the victim – who remains fixed to the moment in which their humanity was violated and their belonging to the world was broken – they might find in themselves the proper moral reaction with which to mend the divide between both groups, as well as “perform the historical function” of integrating what happened, rather than overcoming it. His argument, however, is that it is *ressentiment* that can deliver this aim by demanding a true moral reckoning, which discourses of reconciliation fail to accomplish.

As can be seen, Améry’s *ressentiment*, especially in its humanistic strivings, is one that is quite different from that which I have thus far been discussing. Indeed, even he argues that his *ressentiment* is beyond the grasp of both Nietzsche and Scheler. While he does not unpack this “special type” systematically, Brudholm

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<sup>59</sup> Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 72.

<sup>60</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 157.

identifies it as having affinities to both resentment and *ressentiment*. In terms of its similarities with resentment, a number of parallels can be tracked, including a conviction that a moral violation has occurred and that “at stake are a cluster of deeply ethical concerns about dignity and humanity, moral acknowledgment and repair”; a demand for justice and responsibility on the part of the offenders; a desire for reassurance that offenders may be trusted again and that a “common life” may be restored between offender and victim; and an insistence that resentment can be “testimony of a moral character worthy of respect,” rather than “someone who has ‘failed’ to feel and do something more appropriate or humane.”<sup>61</sup> Améry insists on the “socio-ethical function” of resentment in its ability to signal a moral violation, demand repentance on the part of the offender, and rebuild ties between offender and victim, based on a re-invigorated commitment to the moral order. Asserting his negative feelings is thus not only about reclaiming his personal dignity but importantly also “contribut[ing] to moral repair on the socio-historical level.”<sup>62</sup>

These factors make a strong argument that Améry’s *ressentiment* might be better characterized as resentment proper, rather than *ressentiment* at all. As Brudholm discusses,

Améryean *ressentiment*—if it is to be categorized as a kind of *ressentiment* at all—is certainly of a special kind. It is not fueled by spiteful and malicious envy—which is often used to distinguish *ressentiment* from resentment—and it is not characterized by an excessive self-concern. It does not crave revenge, its attributions of guilt and responsibility are not expressive of a blind and unjustifiable generalization of blame, and Améry does not seem to take secret delight in the continuation of his *ressentiments*. Also unlike the conventional image of the “man of *ressentiment*,” Améry’s anger and fear are not expressive of an irrational or disturbed understanding of the social reality.

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<sup>61</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 173.

<sup>62</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue*, 173.

And yet, despite Améry's significant overlaps with resentment, Brudholm identifies three significant "family resemblances" between his feeling and classical *ressentiment*. The first is Améry's inability to exist outside of his identity as a victim of Nazism. We remember from Nietzsche, and as further elaborated by Brown that the person of *ressentiment* is one who is irrevocably attached to their injury. Améry describes *ressentiment* as the "existential determinant" for people like him who cannot enjoy the world in the same way as the "uninjured."<sup>63</sup> Secondly, Améry is bound to an irrational backward orientation to the past, characterized by a sense of craving reminiscent of Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment*. Finally, Brudholm argues that "Améry's *ressentiments* harbor a vivid sense of what has been violated; *ressentiment* relates to discussions about memory and history in ways that are far from the ethical and social concerns of philosophers of resentment."<sup>64</sup>

In sum, then, while Améry's *ressentiment* bears resemblance to Nietzsche's definition – in so far as it consumes the character and identity of the victim who is confined to his/her victimhood, is unable to let go of the past, and is vividly fixated on its violation – it also defies his formulation. As Brudholm's above quote argues, Améry is not occupied by a sense of revenge, he takes no pleasure in his reproach, and he is not motivated by spite, malice or envy. Améry further distances himself from Nietzsche's formulation in the moral demands his *ressentiment* expresses, as well as his ultimate desire that his *ressentiment* acts as a conduit to repairing relations between fractured groups. Inherent in Améry's *ressentiment* is a wish that

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<sup>63</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 174.

the perpetrators rise to the moral standard that he holds them to and in taking such responsibility, makes his need for *ressentiment* obsolete. As Brudholm elaborates:

Yet, the preservation of *ressentiment* is not only *compatible* with a wish that the resented persons would make the *resentment* inappropriate. More than that, one might even say that [Améry's] *ressentiment* is *expressive* of a stubborn holding on to a demand that the communities of judgment from which he expected better will change...What the victims, according to Améry, can do to promote this outcome is solely to keep alive and express their *ressentiment*. This is the *objective* task of the victims' publicly manifested *ressentiments*: to make the crime a reality to the perpetrator and to catalyze *self-mistrust* among the broader masses of German citizens....In this way Améry actively uses his *ressentiments* to promote a process aimed at their overcoming. A "politics of *ressentiment*" can be combined with a vision of reconstructing the relationship between antagonistic groups; more precisely, between 'all those who wish to live together as fellow human beings'."<sup>65</sup>

This last statement signals a shift from the moral to the political with great significance for this dissertation's purposes in that it asks us to consider whether a *politics of ressentiment* is capable of leading to a humanistic future. Or to put it in slightly different terms, whether it is possible to conceive of a *humanist ressentiment*.

### ***A Humanist Ressentiment?***

This dissertation has thus far suggested that *ressentiment* is harmful to the anti-racist feminist movement and that a politics grounded in a humanistic vision and practice might better lead us to more emancipatory and affirmative objectives. Améry's thought provides a challenge in suggesting that *ressentiment* might be the exact mechanism that can lead us to this sense of humanist solidarity. But is a humanist *ressentiment* possible? In this section I argue that while this is a

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<sup>65</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 159.

provocative concept, and although Améry's special kind of *ressentiment* may have been useful for his specific purposes, it is less useful for anti-racist feminism.

Améry's thought encourages us to consider whether perhaps what is needed is not so much Georgis and Kim's counsel around touching our pain and moving past it, but rather grasping our *ressentiment* even more tightly, so as to achieve humanist aims *through* it. I argue, however, that this is not tenable for our movement for the simple reason that anti-racist feminist *ressentiment* presents a social character that bears more resemblance to Nietzsche's "man of *ressentiment*" than to Améry's special and more "humanist," kind. This is significant because it is exactly the absence of traits such as spitefulness, malice, envy, vengefulness, and a pleasure in the continuation of one's *ressentiment* – qualities that we as anti-racist feminists at times unfortunately betray – that makes Améry's concept capable of a humanistic vision. The inclusion of these qualities, on the other hand, makes our *ressentiment* especially vulnerable to divisiveness, rather than a desire for coexistence and reconciliation.

Is the answer, then, to convert or refashion our *ressentiment* from Nietzsche's toxic kind to Améry's humanistic one? I do not believe this is the most productive aim for at least a two reasons. Firstly, it must be emphasized that Améry's *ressentiment* is particular to his context. As a victim of Nazi torture and internment, he is seeking to use his *ressentiment* as an adamant protest against a society that wishes to turn the page of history without holding accountable a population that Améry insists is steeped in collective guilt. This, however, is not what makes Améry's context incommensurate with our own, given that part of the anti-racist

feminist project is also to insist that historical injuries be accounted for in the historical register, and that responsibility be taken by those who were both directly and indirectly complicit, including contemporary beneficiaries of past violations. The fundamental difference between such anti-racist feminist aims and his, is that Améry's mission was not one of an emancipatory social justice movement. His motivation was surely tied to justice in that he demands accountability, but his central aim is one of *moral restoration* rather than *political liberation*. For Améry, the Holocaust signified a serious breach in human relations between Jewish citizens and the German masses. His *ressentiment* urges both forgiving Jews and forgetting Germans to return temporally to the site of this rupture, and to respond to it in the proper moral tenor of outrage and unacceptability, so that the moral fabric between them, as well as of society at large, might be repaired. It is only upon these grounds that true reconciliation can take place and a future of human coexistence and solidarity might flourish. Améry moulds his *ressentiment* to suit his specific aim, using it to "hol[d] its finger raised" in the "midst of the world's silence."<sup>66</sup> While "the accusing finger of blame [is] very apt to his historical situation,"<sup>67</sup> it is doubtful that Améry's *ressentiment* is capacious enough to facilitate political aims that seek more to disrupt and replace, rather than to restore. Thus, if we are to consider Brudholm's idea that "a 'politics of *ressentiment*' can be combined with a vision of reconstructing the relationship between antagonistic groups; more precisely, between 'all those who wish to live together as fellow human beings'"<sup>68</sup> then what must be asked is

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<sup>66</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 78.

<sup>67</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 133.

<sup>68</sup> Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 159.



precisely what *kind* of vision might such a politics achieve? My strong suspicion is that it is not one that is compatible with emancipatory aims of dismantling current structures of oppression and building affirmative alternatives.

Secondly, despite Améry's humanist tone and wish for ultimate reconciliation, the Nietzschean aspects of his *ressentiment* – his over-determined victim identity, staunchly backward facing orientation, and vivid replaying of past injury – were enough to considerably cripple Améry psychologically and physically. Indeed, Améry would sadly take his own life at the age of 66 in 1978, citing that he was at “the end of my powers.”<sup>69</sup> It must be stressed that his *ressentiment* was strongly opposed to the process of healing and positive self-creation. Améry indeed spurned the prospect of healing, and the natural process of time that would facilitate it, as distinctly “*antimoral*,”<sup>70</sup> and resigned himself to living the rest of his life as a victim of Nazism.

It is, of course, difficult to compare the anti-racist feminist situation to that of Améry's given that his was an experience of surviving mass atrocity. The point to be made here, however, is that an anti-racist feminism that is tethered to its own injury, whether with an ultimately humanist aim or not, is still unable to develop the creative long term potential with which to transform pain into power, and create affirmative visions for the future – or in Fromm's words, to engage in the process of positive freedom. Again, it can be seen that even a more enlightened, so to speak, *ressentiment* is still at odds with any anti-racist feminist aims of affirmative future-

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<sup>69</sup> Taken from Améry's suicide note to his wife Maria Améry, *Salzburg, October 16, 1978*. The note can be viewed online here: <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/jean-Améry-suicide-notes/>

<sup>70</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 72, emphasis in original.

making. This perhaps also emphasizes the value of Kim's approach, which in providing a means of healing injury, allows for the possibility of empowered action.

While it may be the case that Améry's "humanist *ressentiment*" is unable to facilitate emancipatory ambitions for anti-racist feminism, this is certainly not to say that Améry does not offer us important insights, and perhaps even correctives, to the current discussion. There are three points that I would like to emphasize in particular.

Firstly, Améry and Brudholm make a good case for the *value* of negative emotions, providing an interesting counterpoint to Kim's approach by questioning the moral value of compassion in situations of social injury. While it has become popular to speak of forgiveness and reconciliation, they ask us to consider the possibility that premature overcoming might damage the moral health of the individual. This especially pertains to situation like ours in which racial oppression has not been eliminated, and where a forgiving and reconciliatory posture would indeed be premature. While this does not mean that we, as anti-racist feminists, should submit to our *ressentimental* feelings, Améry's emphasis on their socio-ethical function is important in that it alerts us to how negative emotions signal moral violation.

As Brudholm argues, in not forgiving we re-assert the humanity that was taken from us in our moment of injury, and demonstrate to the oppressor our sense of self-respect and self-worth. For Améry, resisting society's pressure towards social harmony is one's moral right, as well as testament to one's true care for, and participation in society (in distinction to his condemnation against the one who

“submerges his individuality in society and is able to comprehend himself only as a function of the social”).

What Améry and Brudholm thus alert us to is the positive moral value of *ressentiment* that may exist, even if this does not necessarily translate into political efficaciousness. In cautioning against the harms of premature forgiveness, they furthermore signal the issue of *readiness*. Perhaps there is a certain time at which one is able to move from a place of *ressentiment* to a place of compassion and reconciliation. As was discussed in Chapter 4 while exploring Stringer’s argument, *ressentiment* can provide the injured with the necessary emotional energy to occasion an ontological break in which they realize that their possibilities of self-becoming and social change are open to contingency. There may be a point, however, when *ressentiment* no longer provides the necessary re-humanizing and mobilizing energy that it did and, instead, starts growing roots and settling into the victim’s personality in the toxic manner described by Nietzsche – perhaps the moment in which resentment turns to *ressentiment*. The crucial point here is that *perhaps our aim should not be overcoming resentment but rather acknowledging its usefulness as a morally and (initially) politically instructive emotion, while safeguarding against its long term self-subversive tendencies on both the political and psychological front*. Kim’s approach of Compassionate Activism provides anti-racist feminism with a helpful practice towards achieving this aim. Indeed, mindfulness – with its attention to one’s inner process – can furnish us with the awareness with which to balance our healthy expression of negative emotions, with our need for healing and compassion.

A second contribution of Améry's is his insistence that his *ressentiment* is directly related to the actions and behaviour of those who he identifies as his oppressors. This contention, as well as his further claim that in taking responsibility, his oppressors are capable of dissolving his *ressentiment*, are important in that they suggest that Améry's negative feelings are less the product of personal pathology, and more a valid *response* to the immoral behaviour of others. What Améry's thinking stresses is the *interpersonal* and *dynamic* quality of *ressentiment*. That is, it is not just something that "we" feel against "them," but rather an emotional state that implicates both sides, even if one side meets it with denial. In terms of the proper response that the oppressor should assume in the face of the injury they have caused, Améry speaks of remorse, guilt, and ignominy. Interestingly, I have discussed earlier how these exact emotions (e.g. white guilt) fail on the political front due to the self-indulgence and impotence they can foster. What Améry offers is the possibility that while these responses may be *politically* counter-productive, they are the appropriate expressions of accountability on *moral* grounds. The challenge for those of the dominant group who are committed to social justice is thus learning how to manage their contrition (much in the same way that we must learn to manage our *ressentiment*), rather than eradicate it.

A third point that might be taken from the above discussion is related to this distinction between resentment and *ressentiment*. While it is attractive to suggest that the solution to the anti-racist feminist impasse is simply to re-shape our *ressentiment* to resemble the more honourable affective state of resentment, such an exercise would prevent us from understanding *why* our *ressentiment* grew in the

first place. If Améry's *ressentiment* is to be understood as an outgrowth of his experience, we, as anti-racist feminists might ask how is our *ressentiment* an outgrowth of *our experiences*? I have discussed how I believe that our *ressentiment* is partly a result of our unexamined pain, and how it is in repression of this pain that *ressentiment* grows as a protective layer. While mindfulness may allow a means to touching and beginning to heal our pain, the question still remains as to why it is *ressentiment* that we find ourselves in the grasp of, and not resentment? I think part of the answer to this is related to the immense despair that underlies our political consciousness. While many of us wish for political change, I believe that most of us feel overwhelmed by the overpowering presence of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" discussed by hooks.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, we recall how Baldwin's episodes of *ressentiment* – such as after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. – were moments not only of immense pain, but also deep despair. We remember also from Nietzsche that the man of *ressentiment* is steeped in his own impotence – which we need not interpret as a personal lack of power, but rather a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming domination. If part of the anti-racist feminist problem is that we have lost the faith in our ability to build a different world and the creativity with which to imagine it, how might we learn how to dream again? I examine this question in the concluding chapter.

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<sup>71</sup> Hooks, lecture at York University, October 22, 2015.

## Chapter 8 – Conclusion: Learning to Dream Again

*“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”*

- Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*

*“I’m afraid that ours in the West is a period of a great lack of faith, that actually the hate we find so rampant more and more in the Western World and in the United States is only an expression that people do not love and in fact that they do not know what they live for. Certainly the hate is an expression of moral despair and moral defeatism.”*

- Erich Fromm, *On Being Human*.

*“The question remains: What are today’s young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?”*

- Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*

*“To express hope for another kind of world, one that is unimaginable in the present, is a political action, and it remains so even in the face of exhaustion and despair.”*

- Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*

In this dissertation I have charted an unconventional journey from Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* to Erich Fromm’s humanism to practices of mindfulness, with many stops in between. I have suggested that anti-racist feminism suffers from a social character that bears similarity to Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*; and I have contended that this character is nurtured by our specific type of political engagement – identity politics – which increases divisiveness, requires attachment to injury, and encourages gains within the system over seeking emancipatory alternatives for the future. In the second part of the dissertation, I looked to some ideas and practices from outside of anti-racist feminism that address the concerns raised in the first half. Specifically, I explored Erich Fromm’s theory of humanism for his articulation of human interconnection based in our shared existential needs; his

explanation of how these needs drive our behaviour, including our political activism; and his vision of a positive freedom that centers affirmative self-becoming and co-creating. I then explored mindfulness as one concrete practice that might not only help us move toward Fromm's notion of positive freedom, but that can also allow us to touch into our pain before it hardens into *ressentiment*. Finally, I considered how given that racialization and other oppressions persist in a society like ours, perhaps our aim is less to eliminate or overcome *ressentiment*, and rather to allow it to operate within its socio-ethical function of signalling a moral breach. I suggested that mindfulness could furnish us with the technology to appreciate the moral value of *ressentiment* without allowing it to overtake our psyches, and our political movements.

I have intended, in this dissertation, to open up a conversation that I think we, as anti-racist feminists, must have. In bringing together a number of thinkers and theories that may not conventionally stand next to one another, I have attempted at "recovering a certain openness" that belongs to the tradition of the radical left.<sup>1</sup> As Brown discusses:

This openness often collapses soon after the left or a radical justice project attaches itself to a certain vision, to a certain end or to a certain practice. What we might need to give now, or what we might need to inhabit now, is that founding openness to possibility, to seeing the world differently, to seeing power differently, to seeing the future differently. This involves a brave and humble intellectual and political openness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown et al., "Learning to Love Again - An Interview With Wendy Brown," *Contretemps* 6 (January 2006): 41.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Brown et al., "Learning to Love Again," 41.

Brown argues that this brave and humble openness must include an allowing of different kinds of ideas to “enter into a kind of productive fusion,” even if they are projects that normally assume a suspicious distance from one another.<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation I have endeavoured to engender such a productive fusion between Erich Fromm’s humanism, secularized mindfulness practice, and anti-racist feminism.

But there still remains the question of *where do we go from here?* I have spoken about anti-racist feminism’s need to reinvigorate our emancipatory spirit and work toward building alternatives for the future but many of us have never learned to do this work of *envisioning*. Indeed, this has become abundantly clear to me in my tenure as a Teaching Assistant during my graduate education. In classes where the aim of the curriculum was more to impress upon students the gravity of societal oppression, the tutorials were not often places of hope or imagination. In spite of this, and perhaps also in light of it, I would pose questions to the students at the end of term such as: *So what should we do? How might we get through this? What kind of a world do you want to live in? What kind of a world might we make together?* I was invariably met with a mixture of apathy and despair. After many months of teaching concepts like “hegemony”, “patriarchy”, “heteronormativity”, “racialization,” “cultural genocide,” and “neoliberalism,” this was not surprising. Finally, and predictably, the students would pose these questions back at me. What could I give them? Nothing in my almost two decades of feminist and anti-racist feminist education had taught me how to answer these questions. The imagination I

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Brown et al., “Learning to Love Again,” 41.



asked from them had not been nurtured in me. It's not that I couldn't talk to them about resistance or even empowerment – I could and I did – but I was left with the abiding dissatisfaction that this was not enough. *It was not enough to fight back, we had to build too.*

In various forms, the overwhelming despair of our current moment and the inability of many of us to imagine alternatives have been noted by a number of thinkers. As Brown vividly accounts, the modern individual is at once flanked with the enormous burden to become something, to produce something, to gain mastery over their life, and the paradoxical sense of disempowerment, overwhelm, and despair they feel from the striking lack of support, guidance, opportunity, resources, and possibilities that might facilitate this achievement. Neoliberal domination coupled with the political melancholia suffered by a Left still tethered to its lost object of socialist revolution, have made for an especially despairing situation for Leftist progressives.<sup>4</sup>

For Stuart Hall, who for some time spoke of the 'crisis of the Left,' progressives have retreated under a "cynical protective shell" that keeps us from realizing potential solutions:

There is a kind of 'nothing ever changes, the system always wins' attitude, which I read as the cynical protective shell that, I'm sorry to say, American cultural critics frequently wear, a shell that sometimes prevents them from developing cultural strategies that can make a difference. It is as if, in order to protect themselves against the occasional defeat, they have to pretend

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Left Melancholia see Brown's "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 19–27.

they can see right through everything – and it’s just the same as it always was.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly for Robin Kelley, “we have lost our sense of utopia.”<sup>6</sup> As he states,

Sometimes I think the conditions of daily life, of everyday oppressions, of survival, not to mention the temporary pleasures accessible to most of us, render much of our imagination inert. We are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present.<sup>7</sup>

Kelley is interested in reinvigorating the revolutionary political energy of Martin Luther King Jr. in our current movements. In his view, contemporary progressive struggles are more geared toward “dialling back to some version of the welfare state” rather than implementing “new values and new morals.”<sup>8</sup> Kelley argues that we can do better than this, and indeed, our success depends on our ability to “seize the future” in the spirit of King, rather than settling for the restoration of policies from the past. He reminds us that King was concerned with moral principles that governed society, not solidarity based in race or nationalism. As King would declare in his 1967 anti-war speech:

We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London ; New York: Verso Books, 1988); and “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (51-52) (1993): 104–14.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Kelley, public lecture: “Fifty Years ‘Beyond Vietnam’: Dr. King’s Revolutionary Dream Against Our Neoliberal/Neofascist Nightmare,” April 1, 2017, Bloor United Church, Toronto.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King, “Beyond Vietnam,” April 4, 1967, New York City’s Riverside Church.

The Frommian resonances in King's thinking are not coincidental. Indeed, King was influenced by Fromm's work, especially his concept of love as a "supreme unifying force of life."<sup>10</sup> As King would contend:

I'm not talking about a weak love. I'm not talking about emotional bosh here. I'm not talking about some sentimental quality. I'm not talking about an affectionate response. It would be nonsense to urge oppressed people to love their violent oppressors in an affectionate sense, and I have never advised that... Love is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. Theologians talk about this kind of love with the Greek word *agape*, which is a sort of overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. And when one develops this, you rise to the position of being able to love the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. And I believe that this can be done. Psychiatrists are telling us now that hatred is a dangerous force, not merely for the hated, but also the hater. Many of the strange things that happen in the subconscious, many of the inner conflicts, are rooted in hate. And so they are saying, "Love or perish."<sup>11</sup>

It would be disingenuous of me to demand that we replace our negative emotions with the kind of love that King is speaking about but I *do* think we could profit from *more* of it in our movements. As anti-racist feminists, we already access this love in the moments in which we expose ourselves from beneath our *ressentimental* exteriors and provide each other with the compassionate care and recognition that we yearn for. I believe that a politics that foregrounds love as a motivating force can give us the inner resources with which to imagine alternative worlds beyond *ressentiment*, while still respecting and recognizing the function of negative emotions. Indeed, having an affirmative vision that we work toward may naturally dissolve much of the *ressentiment* that is generated out of the despair that marks our current situation. But in order to develop this vision, we must be willing

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<sup>10</sup> King, Speech, London, December 7, 1964. For full transcript, see: [https://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/18/newly\\_discovered\\_1964\\_mlk\\_speech\\_on](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/18/newly_discovered_1964_mlk_speech_on)

<sup>11</sup> King, Speech, London, December 7, 1964.

to ask one another the very questions that were never asked of us: *So what should we do? How might we get through this? What kind of a world do you want to live in? What kind of a world might we make together?*

What is certain is that learning to dream again and forge a path into the future is going to take humility, bravery, compassion, self-awareness, humour, and patience. It will likely be an incremental, experimental, and clumsy project, but as such, it will be a deeply *humanizing* one. I believe our ability to develop this capacity is crucial for our collective and individual health as political and spiritual beings. For as Fromm reminds us, “As long as we can think of other alternatives, we are not lost; as long as we can consult together and plan together, we can hope.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fromm, *Sane Society*, 315.

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