
Vocational Melancholy

DOLSY SMITH

"I can't leave it" "ever" "unless"

"we all leave—"

—Alice Notley

*For a long moment she stood on the high stone steps above the avenue,
then shrugged her shoulders and stepped down.*

—Nella Larsen

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the affects that circulate in and around libraries from a perspective informed by feminist cultural studies and Black feminist theory. I situate the library as an institution devoted to the cultivation of sentiment and the creation of virtual publics. Though flush with the promises of freedom and equality, this legacy remains fraught with contradiction: for those promises are implicated in the oppressive structures of capitalism and patriarchal white supremacy. And new rationalizations of old forms of state-sanctioned violence and neglect, though targeted specifically at the most vulnerable, constitute an existential threat to us all. Yet the proper subject of such promises—the liberal subject of racialized and gendered privilege—has failed, again and again, to imagine how the world might turn out otherwise than this. In the hopes of practicing forms of accountability to the wisdom of others, I situate myself, as a beneficiary of structural oppression, *vis-a-vis* the melancholy that troubles the profession of liberal (or library) sentiments with what haunts the present and threatens the future.

PROLOGUE: THE LIBRARY IN RUINS

In May of 2005, I graduated from library school. In August of that year, I finally received a couple of on-campus interviews, and just as my parents' hospitality and I were starting to chafe, I landed a job in Washington, DC. As I set out from Lafayette, Louisiana, in a rented truck, Hurricane Katrina made landfall. I must not have followed the news during the two days' drive, for on the morning of August 31, my first in DC, the *Washington Post* headline left me in shock: "FLOODS RAVAGE NEW ORLEANS. Two Levees Give Way; In Mississippi, Death Toll Estimated at 110." This estimate climbed precipitously during the next several days, as the scale of the cataclysm—and of our collective failures, political, economic, and ecological—came into sharp relief. I had not lived in New Orleans since adolescence; nonetheless, my journey into librarianship feels, in a sense, like a moment of flight. One of many in my life, to tell the truth, repeating the flight of whiteness out of history into that vantage point from which it looks back, with a mournful glance, a sigh, and a shudder of remorse or something more self-righteous—if it looks back at all—at the suffering of others. A suffering now inscribed on the historical record.

A photograph, lifted from that record, depicts the public library I frequented as a child growing up in New Orleans. Some months after Katrina, the library stands shuttered, but what were once its stacks lie, in a heap of twisted and rusted metal, on the street in front, the books (destroyed by water and mold) nowhere in sight. The circulation of this image in the pages of a library trade magazine (like my citation of it here) risks reiterating trauma in the service of an invitation to ethical feeling and, perhaps, collective response.¹ And let's be clear: the people who bore and bear the brunt of that trauma, and who have the largest stake in such a response—disproportionately, working-class Black folk—are not the photograph's intended audience. But unlike much of the imagery made public in Katrina's wake, this photograph does not center the cataclysm's human cost: the doors and rooftops with their mortuary hieroglyphs; the survivors on rafts or in canoes, drifting on muddy, mirrored sky; the survivors on foot, stranded on levees and bridges; the trapped, bloated dead. Rather, this photograph centers fantasies about the historical record itself: about the value of its presence, and about the trauma of its disappearance.

Like an image doubled by superimposition, the mangled stacks signify both the past, whose plenitude libraries are supposed to keep alive, and the imminence of a future in which that plenitude may have vanished. The historical record, as a fantastic object, can function as a metonymy for the institutions, narratives, and practices that elite white men have promulgated—have scored into the flesh of everyone else, their own fugitive better selves included—as universal human achievement. And like the historical record itself, the institutions that organize and house it help to secure the future as a prolongation of the structures that dominate the

present. But as this photograph suggests, libraries are also potent sites for personal and collective attachment. How do those attachments implicate us in legacies of oppression as well as resistance? And how do they harbor the energies necessary for imagining radical futures?

Fobazi Ettarh's essay "Vocational Awe and Librarianship" (2018) strikes a chord among many library laborers. Ettarh identifies a structure of feeling germane to a profession that more often than not construes itself as a calling, the pursuit of which confers moral authority as much as professional expertise. As Ettarh suggests, this sense of awe derives from the sacralization of libraries and librarianship, a process also noted by Thomas Augst (2007). In Augst's analysis, libraries anchor a kind of "civil religion" to the technobureaucratic and capitalist landscape of secular modernity. In the midst of a relentlessly privatized and commodified culture, libraries serve as public "temples," where those faithful to the liberal "gospel" of "self-realization" come to "practice devotions," bettering their community by bettering themselves (154, 182). And as priests in these temples, library laborers are encouraged to perform a selfless devotion to the communities and the institutions they serve. They are encouraged to efface their own needs as workers, and this effacement perpetuates hallowed narratives about the profession, while neglecting those legacies that might undermine the claim of liberal institutions to foster freedom for all (Ettarh 2018). In what follows, I propose the following: if *awe* designates one register of this sacralization, *melancholy* names another. Looking at the photograph of the ruined stacks, melancholy might feel like the tether to a loss that feels both irreparable and destined to be repeated. A loss that, although distant, reveals a deficit or incompleteness in the self. This melancholy might appear as an iterated worry that unsettles the capacity for self-possession, even in the midst of the material signifiers of relative comfort, stability, and ease. It might dampen the otherwise disciplined and devoted spirit, and nettle the pampered flesh, confronting hope and desire with the diminution of their scope and the precarity of their claims. A kind of "ugly feeling" (Ngai 2007), melancholy is also a "public feeling" (Cvetkovich 2012), rather than a purely personal malaise. In this essay, I treat "vocational melancholy" as symptomatic of the failures of modernity that haunt the liberal "gospel" to which Augst refers. By locating melancholy in the library, I hope to do two things. First, I hope to contribute to the ongoing critical project of disrupting the legacies of patriarchal white supremacy and settler colonialism in libraries and librarianship: an effort in which I follow the important critical work of scholars like Honma (2005), Pawley (2006), Hand (2011), de Jesus (2014), Galvan (2015), Schlesselman-Tarango (2016), Hudson (2017), and others. My own aim, like Maura Seale's (2016), is to trace the implication of those forms of violence in the norms of liberalism and neoliberalism: norms that inflect both the professional ethos of library labor and the institutional contexts in which

that labor occurs. Second, I hope to deepen our critical understanding of how affect functions in relation to such forms of violence, how it perpetuates them, and how it prepares for their overcoming through acts of collective resistance.

Melancholy is, as Freud (2001) teaches, the awkward, ungainly cousin of grief. An image of loss can arouse it precisely because I, the spectator, do not experience that loss directly. The ruined library is not *my* library (at least, not anymore), the neighborhood no longer my neighborhood, the city not my city. The human devastation I can hold at arm's length, even as something that escapes words troubles my negation of the possessive in these cases. At once a faraway look and a flutter in the gut, melancholy is both an aesthetic/aestheticized and an affective response. As such, it resembles two other aesthetic/affective schemas that have enjoyed a privileged role in the philosophical and critical discourses of modern European subjectivity: the sentimental and the sublime. While melancholy has traditionally been regarded as a malady, a chronic and clinically treatable affliction of the body as much as the mind, the sentimental and the sublime are categories of aesthetic judgment. They designate genres, practices, or moments in the subjective representation of experience. Thinking through what they borrow from melancholy's affective profile can help us trace a politics of melancholy, which describes the bilious aspects of neo/liberal political and social life.²

In centering these aesthetic categories, I do not mean to treat them as universal forms of experience. On the contrary, I propose to trace their roles in underwriting a concept of the human that remains violently exclusive. This concept privileges those of European descent who are called "white," and within that exclusion, privileges above all heterosexual cis men of property with "able" bodies. In this analysis, I lean heavily on the work of Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva. Both Wynter and Ferreira da Silva draw on traditions of Black feminist theory to interrogate the limits of western philosophical and critical traditions; their interrogation exposes how the latter traditions mobilize racism, misogyny, and other modes of dehumanizing violence. For Wynter (1984), the aesthetic functions as the mode in which, in the secularized societies of the "West," human behaviors reproduce themselves according to a system of densely interlocking symbolic rules. "A boundary-maintaining system" (33), the aesthetic installs "Man," i.e., the human being, at the apex of biological nature. But onto the screen of modern thought, supposedly cleared of old prejudices, "Man" (like the Wizard of Oz) projects the grandiosity of a more particular man. Or rather, of a set of *men*: the aforementioned beings who can embody the arbitrary, but no less structurally conditioned, signs of whiteness, masculinity, etc. By embodying them, white men benefit from how these signs represent institutional sanction, cultural authority, and political/economic power. And they (we) are incited to protect

these benefits through behaviors that, tacitly or explicitly, reinforce the conditions that make these signs mean the way they do.³

According to a sensuous logic, the signs of normalized difference render domination and privilege an aesthetic matter: a mode of projection by which the subject enjoys the feeling of participation in a bounded but universal experience. This sense of the universal depends, in other words, on a prior division, thanks to which those cast outside the boundaries of the privileged set signify as *less* than human. In partial focus under Enlightenment's white glare, these others appear marked by deficits determined by the laws of natural selection. And among the West's globalized subalterns (who need not be "global" in the sense of "not local," "not near to us"), Black folk—and, as Hortense Spillers (2003) and others have shown, Black women in particular—are conscripted into the place of an absent presence.⁴ Their conscription as "objects" permits the subject (of racial and gendered privilege) to recognize himself *in the act of objectification*, and to construe humanity as what escapes the routine and exorbitant violence on which his subjectivity depends. Black women's bodies—or as Spillers insists, their "flesh," historically robbed of those rights to integrity and self-determination that define the body of the liberal subject—supply the place, in the modern episteme, of a "Chaos function" (Wynter 1984, 37). This function produces the Order whose self-evident presence is nothing other than a violent fascination that protests too much. (But in the play of what resists its role as thing, can we find what we need to catch the conscience of a king?)

The Eurocentric discourses that gave us the terms *sentimental* and *sublime* sought to understand how the affects precipitate our identification as subjects; the contexts for their emergence were societies in the throes of transformation by industrial capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Both a pointed and a nebulous term, the *sentimental* ties together tropes, gestures, kinds of labor, and dispositions stereotypically associated with performances of heterosexual middle-class white femininity. Emerging in the shadow of industrial, trans-Atlantic capitalism in the eighteenth century, discourses of sentimentality sought to tidy up the havoc wrought by that colossus. This havoc included the unfettering of competitive impulses in a market-oriented society; new forms of brutality brought home by those doing the work of colonial genocide and the slave trade; and a growing discontent and emergent solidarity among the urban proletariat.⁵ Through its efforts to soften the hard edge of calculating reason and to spiritualize the secular, the sentimental bequeaths us the lineaments of that "civil religion" to which modern libraries are heir. Meanwhile, the *sublime*—denoting the awe and respect occasioned by displays of raw power—occupies a more masculine cultural stance. The breadth of that stance can obscure its entailment with race, gender, sexuality, and class; indeed, the sublime provides a placeholder for what modern Eurocentric reason cannot prop-

erly conceive. But as aesthetic schemas endemic to the social formations we call *liberal*, the sentimental and the sublime work in tandem to manage the contradictions with which capitalism plagues private and public life. Sentimentality's narrative strategies, as I will argue, target the pain felt by the deferral of liberalism's promise of equality and justice. The sublime, meanwhile, refers to an affective investment in the law-like operation of reason itself—which we can feel, acutely, today in the reverence for neo-liberal economic doctrine at immense human and environmental cost.

Before we get down to business, a final disclaimer: if this essay seems at times to lack sufficient focus on libraries, I can only say that is by design. As library laborers, many of us inhabit institutions still defined by an allegiance to the classic image of the liberal (bourgeois) public sphere. We work in places where—as we are encouraged to believe—the free exchange of ideas triumphs over partisan conspiracies. Places that, by making space for the expression of all (legitimate) private interests, ensure that no particular interests dominate. I think it's important to understand these tenets in the context of their European and North American development, i.e., as they sustain our ethical attachments in societies structured by patriarchal white supremacy. So this essay is more about the kinds of attachments that libraries (as exemplary liberal institutions) generate, rather than about libraries themselves. I hope that there is matter there for thinking about the urgent practical struggles by which many of us are seeking to come to terms with the historical legacies and contemporary pressures that shape our institutions, and with the forms of action available to us as we try to shape our institutions for the future. And in fidelity to that aim, my critical discussion of these themes spans an attempt to describe my own vocational melancholy: a sentimentalizing gesture that is meant to perform some of the ways in which my personal and professional identity implicates me in the perpetuation of a history of violence and oppression.

SENTIMENTALITY AND THE “UNFINISHED BUSINESS” OF THE LIBRARY

As evidence of the “religious emotions” that libraries in the modern era recruit and inspire, August (2007) quotes Mary Antin's description of the Boston Public Library:

It was my habit to go very slowly up the low, broad steps to the palace entrance, pleasing my eyes with the majestic lines of the building, and lingering to read again the carved inscriptions: *Public Library—Built by the People—Free to All*. Did I not say it was my palace? Mine, because I was a citizen, though was born an alien. . . . My palace—mine! (151)

Published in 1913, Antin's memoirs evoke the power of the American social contract to elevate a Russian-Jewish immigrant girl to intellectual independence and middle-class respectability. Her enthusiasm for the li-

brary conveys the appeal of liberalism's "civil religion," with its vision of inclusion and social equality. That vision appears here in the reinscription, for "the people," of a monumental architecture style. Aware that this monumentalizing approach to public space, in the designs of elite men like Andrew Carnegie, powerfully expressed a vision of "social control," Augst nonetheless asks us to take "Antin's profession of wonder seriously" (2007, 151–52).⁶ In that vein, I want to attend to the resonance of Antin's wonder with Immanuel Kant's (2001) seminal treatment, in the third *Critique*, of the judgment of taste:

If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, . . . [o]ne only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation. It is readily seen that to say that it is *beautiful* and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of the representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object. (90–91, emphasis in original)

Superficially, of course, Kant's spectator eschews Antin's *sentimental* effusion of liberal faith. What qualifies the former to expound on the beauty of the palace—thereby "prov[ing]" his possession of taste—is his "indifference" to the *existence* of the palace. This indifference would seem to preclude the possessive attitude in which Antin's remembered self indulges. On another level, however, Antin no more possesses the library *as palace* than Kant possesses the palace itself. For one thing, the library is a palace only metaphorically; and for another, it belongs to no one but "the people" (as collective or idea). Celebrating its "majestic lines" on the library steps, Antin possesses the library *as a representation*, and what it represents are the opportunities afforded her of a fruitful identification with her fellow patrons, i.e., her fellow citizens: "all these eager children, all these fine browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books" (Augst 2007, 151). And the pleasure that Antin takes in this representation aligns her feeling of ownership squarely with the teleology that Kant attributes to judgments of taste. For Antin, the library symbolizes her commonality with a public: "I and they had this glorious thing in common. . . . It was wonderful to say, *This is mine*; it was thrilling to say, *This is ours*" (151).

Like the library that mimics it, the palace *qua* beautiful object stands open, in principle, to anyone. Thus, the aesthetic standpoint extolled by Kant furnishes the grounds of a judgment that can claim "universal validity" (2001, 99). Insofar as each of them can take pleasure in the palace by contemplating its form, courtier, servant, philosopher, tourist, and even immigrant meet on that rarefied terrain wherein one's judgment of the object "demands" the assent of everyone else (98). In Kant's text, aesthetic judgment describes a movement, not from the particular to the general (for the palace beautiful is still *this* palace), but from the interested and

private uses of the senses to their disinterested, public use. It opens an avenue onto what Jacques Rancière (2008) calls “a world of virtual community” (57). Performing this Kantian movement, Antin’s initial insistence on what is “mine” gives way, in naming and specifying the source of her pleasure, to what is “ours.” The postulate of virtual community is specifically an *affective* postulate: a matter not of empirically verifiable fact but of a felt vibration inside the relationship of subject to object. And in the assertion of this postulate, we find the sentimental constitution of liberal selfhood: a key element of which, as Augst writes, is the “paradoxical logic” by which “individuals take personal ownership of their identity by entering public space” (2007, 154).

Regulating the individual’s access to a freedom performed by navigating public space, this logic was—and remains—more supple for some people than others. For the “fine browed ladies” in Antin’s description, it might fit like a corset. For Antin herself, as a white-adjacent Jewish immigrant in the early twentieth century, this logic accommodated the anti-Semitism and xenophobia that would have constricted or closed off many other avenues to white bourgeois selfhood. The public library, we might conclude, offers Antin the thrill of a judgment that the white male scholars in her description would have had no need to discover; for them, its essential postulate was never in doubt. But the grammar of the sentimental structures selfhood as a bargain with domination conducted in the future subjunctive. It demands performances of feminized bodies (typically figured as white) anxious to obtain the privileges that, being denied to many others, are figured as rewards for discipline and self-governance.⁷ And sentimental individuality provides the matrix in which the friction between hierarchy and equality, competitive greed and collective need, freedom and coercion, *might* be reconciled. As in the novels and films analyzed by Berlant (2008), capitalism and the state function “as magnetizing forms for *fantasies* of reciprocity and justice whose very impersonality and constitution in an ongoing near future is a source of relief and optimism” (11, original emphasis). The deferral of this future amounts to what Berlant calls sentimentality’s “unfinished business.” But what unfinishes the present promised by liberalism is only the business-as-usual of capitalism and the violence of domination that it requires. This violence frames liberal hopes and desires. White, heterosexual femininity emerges within this frame as a repertoire of survival strategies developed in relation to white patriarchal power.⁸

The business end of modern capitalism began with the dispossession, forced migration, and massacre of indigenous peoples; and with trans-Atlantic slavery, which reduced millions of human beings to the abject status of commodities. And this business remains unfinished: in the ongoing erasure of Native people’s histories and sovereignty, and in the “burdened individuality” that Saidiya Hartman (2010) identifies as the lot of

the formerly enslaved and their descendants. Those whose skin color or family ties consign them to liberty's ongoing eclipse have repeatedly had to prove, in a host of formal and informal ways, and against odds designed to be ironclad, the capacity for citizenship. Jim Crow constrained Black folk's entrance to public space by law, and then reinforced that constraint by the torches, midnight rides, and mob violence of white terror. In the North, the criminalization of blackness proceeded by means less obstreperous but no less systematic. The civil rights movements of the twentieth century made the violence of Jim Crow an object of *white* national judgment, and those who put their bodies on the line in protest helped pull down many legal barriers to public space. But the burdens of racialized and racialized/gendered individuality remain in effect, refactored by new approaches to confinement, material deprivation, and forced labor (Alexander 2012).

The patriarchal and white-supremacist framing of the sentimental elides, too, the ongoing legacy of collective resistance to the ravages of racialized capitalism and the failure of liberal promises. This legacy includes the nineteenth-century Black women writers studied by Hazel Carby (1987), who "establish[ed] an independent and narrative voice" for those who "had to counter simultaneously the implications of their exclusion from being women . . . and their representation as victim, whether of rape or barter" (38). Their novels, speeches, and works of criticism contest the weaponization of sentimentality in support of slavery and white supremacy, calling attention to how

a display of finer feelings worked to affirm the superiority of white sensibilities, and of white people as a group, over and above the slaves who were constructed as being incapable of harboring feelings or generating grief. (28)

According to the hegemonic logic of "white sensibilities," those most aggrieved by the brutality rippling beneath the surface of the social contract must be denied even the capacity for grief. Motivating this denial is the need of white people, who benefit from that brutality—including white women (hooks 2014; Fuentes 2016)—to "prove," as Kant says, their capacity for disinterested appreciation of the beautiful and the good. Then and now, the hegemony of "white sensibilities" dis-interests those most exposed to structural violence. By this, I mean *both* that it brackets their lives as objects of interest for the dominant white culture *and* that it denies their status as liberal subjects, namely, as beings whose part in the social contract is defined by the capacity for pursuing self-interest.

These critiques of the sentimental remain relevant because our "civil religion" retains core elements of its Enlightenment template. Key to that template, as Wynter (2003) puts it, is the "overrepresentation" of the white cis male as *the* human being, universally defined—and the overrepresenta-

tion of his interests as *human* interests. In the same vein, Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) reads the philosophical and scientific texts of European modernity in terms of their production

of two kinds of minds, namely, (a) the *transparent I*, which emerged in post-Enlightenment Europe, the kind of mind that is able to know, emulate, and control powers of universal reason, and (b) the *affectable "I,"* the one that emerged in other global regions, the kind of mind subjected to both the exterior determination of the "laws of nature" and the superior force of European minds. (117)

The "transparent I" possesses, as its essence, the power of self-determination. This "I" is granted at birth by our dominant grammars to those who appear (transparently) to represent normative white masculinity. The "affectable 'I,'" meanwhile, remains hooded in quotation marks. It remains a mark of grammatical concession to those lacking the normative subject's naturalized powers of self-determination. It is "affectable" because burdened by the markers of natural selection and political/cultural subordination: markers assigned, of course, by the transparent I's whose assent to this program carries the day. Although being affected defines them, the affectable are paradoxically "constructed as being incapable," if not of feeling itself, then of packaging their feelings into the self-possessed individuality of the fully autonomous subject.⁹

As compelling a fiction as any on the library's shelves, this "ceremony" (Wynter 1984) draws strength, according to Ferreira da Silva, from a radical anxiety that plagues the normative modern subject. This subject can't, you might say, handle his sovereignty. For the coupled requirements of self-determination and transparency—that I am as I want to be, and that I know what I want—can hold only as long as I manage to stave off the possibility that my knowledge and desires arise outside of me. The threat of this exteriority (Ferreira da Silva's term) begins with my body. Or it begins in the flesh, which spills over the outline of the human body, where the *body* names a thing totally subordinate to the human mind (Spillers 2003). Modern science, per Ferreira da Silva (2007), manages this threat through "strategies of engulfment" that "transform that which is exterior . . . into products, moments, 'other' manifestations of the fundamental interiority" of the normative and privileged modern subject (100).

In Kant's account of the judgment of taste (2001), the move to shore up interiority occurs in the gesture by which the spectator dis-interests himself in the empirical object of his judgment. "Indifferent" to its existence as an exterior thing, he is henceforth affected only by the formal representation of it, i.e., by something that—per the thesis of Kant's critical philosophy—belongs to subjectivity itself. In Augst's citation of it, Mary Antin's reflection on the library steps performs the same gesture. She "read[s]" the building as she enters it, anticipating the reading she will do inside the

library; her movement into its shared space, like her movement through the texts she finds there, describes moments in a trajectory toward what Augst calls “an identification with others unlike oneself” (2007, 169). But though it unfolds in public space, this journey is figured as interior and temporal. A journey, in other words, *away* from those exterior “distinctions of gender, class, ethnicity, or education” that determine life-chances out *there*, in the factory or in the orphanage or in the shadow of the reformatory—a journey toward the common ground *in here* where individuals encounter one another in mutual disinterest, where an “organic evolution of personality” becomes possible: “the progress of a person, rather than a species or group” (166). On this common ground, as Kant says (2001), I can’t claim that everyone assents to my judgment, but I *can* claim that they *should*. This ground is abstract, imaginary, and structured by a normative distancing of the (white, national) self from its global “others.” (Thus, the library’s collections are classified according to the deployment of the racializing and gendering “arsenal” of modern science and philosophy.)¹⁰ In its aura, even a Russian-Jewish immigrant girl can take possession of that “glorious thing” (Augst 2007, 151), shoulder to shoulder with those who would have once asserted their status as her social betters (and might soon do so yet again).

The temporality of this movement is the virtual time of liberalism’s promise.¹¹ It describes a movement *away* from space, the zone of exterior determination, and into time, the dimension of the self-determining subject. A movement *away from the street*. What’s on the street? What does Antin, in climbing the grand steps of the Boston Public Library, turn her back on? In the rest of this section, I want to acknowledge some figures of fugitivity and resistance that our commitments to this movement render opaque. For one, if the public library—in its Carnegie-era incarnation as a place of monumental hush, polished granite, and lions couchant—figures prominently in liberalism’s “civil religion,” it is crucial to recognize that the library has alternative histories, too. As Elizabeth McHenry (2007) demonstrates in her history of nineteenth-century Black reading rooms and literary societies, these spaces nourished a different vision of community:

Because the silent reading of the text was not privileged over its oral performance, literate, semiliterate, and even illiterate members of the Phoenix Society could appreciate a text, and the discussions that followed its reading could involve those who listened to the text’s performance as well as those with the ability to read it for themselves. (106)

Such societies may, like their Carnegie-era cousins, have been animated by narratives of respectability and moral uplift. But as physical spaces where “rigorous critical analysis and discussions” could cut across the boundaries of literacy, they may have also been locations for the invention and repair

of forms of solidarity and collective action. Spaces where oppositional publics might emerge through the participation of those whose racialization inscribed them, literate or not, in the dominant imaginary as targets of curiosity, condescension, and violent contempt. Spaces for the articulation of shared visions and common interests without the mediation of a ritual performance that required, as the price of entry, that individuals be able to provide “for themselves.”

Such spaces might enact ceremonies “after humanism” (Wynter 1984), seizing a hinge in thought to open up a different temporality of the promise: one other than what the phobic arsenals of bourgeois liberalism, in service to capital’s relentless appetite for surplus labor, narrow down to a needle’s eye. The summons to other futures appears in Carby’s reading of texts by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Anna Julia Cooper: texts written against the grain of the sentimental in arguing “not [for] an extension of ‘womanly influence,’ a feminization of society, but [for] a total transformation of the social order” (1987, 70). Theirs is a radical politics grounded in “the unique position of the black woman, unique precisely because her femininity, her womanhood, was so consistently denied authenticity that it could not be used to gain social position or social influence” (104). And what of those who did not write down their stories, who did not manifest their radical feelings in print? Whose experiences do not circulate in the library because, as Saidiya Hartman (2019) puts it, “none responded to the call to write the great servant-girl novel” (237)? Stitching together traces left in case reports and gestures that flit, slantwise, through the confines of newspaper briefs, Hartman reconstructs the partial narratives of young Black women’s lives in northern U.S. cities in the early twentieth century. What Hartman gives us, however, is far from the classic sentimental narrative. Her heroines do not, through a devotion to the secular gospel of grit, virtue, and success, transcend “the larger pathology of the environment in which they moved” (Augst 2007, 166–67). Opting for riot over respectability, pursuing sexual freedom outside the bonds of marriage, fashioning queer and nonbinary selves, trying to escape the worst forms of labor (“the kind of work that possessed the entire person, not just her labor-time but her life-time”) in order to do something else with their days: these lives, refracted through Hartman’s prose, introduce an alternative to sentimentality’s scopic melancholy (2019, 233). What is this hinge that scatters the light? It begins, in a sense, with how to read a word.

Esther Brown longed for another world. She was hungry for more, for otherwise, for better. She was hungry for beauty. In her case, the aesthetic wasn’t a realm separate and distinct from the daily challenges of survival; rather, the aim was to make an art of subsistence. She did not try to create a poem or song or painting. What she created was Esther Brown. . . . She would make a beautiful life. (235)

What does it mean to be hungry “for otherwise”? We typically use the word to carve out an exemption or a distinction, as when Augst writes that “libraries helped to sacralize public space by altering the aesthetic experience of ordinary people, lending to the experience of *otherwise* common existence moral direction and spiritual consequence” (2007, 166, my emphasis). But Hartman’s “otherwise” is not the same, does not fit the mold of the word as Augst uses it. Echoing the rhetoric of Gilded-Age social reformers, Augst’s sentence renders the aesthetic an exercise in bolstering interiority by a gesture of exclusion; in his usage, “otherwise” performs that function, sweeping “common existence” (and with it, the dirt of the ordinary) out the door. Nor does his essay specify which “ordinary people,” once brushed off, were allowed to penetrate the realm of “consequence,” and which remained confined to the dominant culture’s vestibule (Spillers 2003). Augst’s use of “otherwise” is of a piece with his invocation of pathology. “Pathology” belongs to the logic that ascribes “affectability” to all those in opposition to whom the “transparent I,” a.k.a., self-determining reason, a.k.a., the liberal subject in full possession of his faculties, defines his “spiritual consequence.” The markers of pathology include, of course, nonwhiteness, especially Blackness, and more especially Black womanhood; poverty; a trans and/or nonbinary gender; a nonheteronormative sexuality; physical disability. Ascription of these markers serves to make the interiority of someone like Esther legible as an exterior, as an otherness to be managed, regulated, and controlled, if not obliterated. In this process, pathology partakes of the liberal temporality of the aesthetic, operating through “the anticipation of future criminality” (Hartman 2019, 397). Predictably, some might say, Esther served three years in prison for prostitution (a crime for which, under the statutes of the time, it was notoriously easy to secure a conviction on the flimsiest of pretexts). But Hartman wants us to understand this predictability itself as the device deployed to confine and collapse the futures open to those who might otherwise disrupt capitalist white supremacy’s manufacture of progress as the perpetual exploitation of people like Esther.

Hartman’s/Esther’s *otherwise* prompts us to imagine alternatives to the idea that “moral direction” and “spiritual consequence” depend on the enclosure of the self in transparent interiority (or its corollary engulfment of the racialized/gendered other).¹² For Hartman, Esther’s city was not one that invited the nation’s others to identify their thoughts as the property proper to citizens (the way, when walking through an “ethnic” neighborhood, said citizen discreetly pats his back pocket now and then). Rather, as Hartman imagines it, errant Esther’s “thoughts were indistinguishable from the transient rush and flight of black folks in this city-within-the-city. The flow of it carried everyone along, propelled and encouraged all to keep moving” (2019, 235). Esther’s participation in this movement was also her serial act of resistance, her way of charting a path

through pathology—as was her inclination, noted in her reformatory case file, to “smash things up” (235). Is citing that resistance within the perfect respectability of an academic essay not itself a sentimentalizing gesture? Or might it gesture toward a different kind of sentimentality altogether, a sentimental otherwise, what Fred Moten (2003, 84) calls the “sentimental avant-garde”?

A MELANCHOLY INTERLUDE

It is a wet November, and I am in Charleston, SC, for a library conference. While providing platforms for dialogue and debate about issues facing the profession, such conferences serve as spaces of identification for library laborers as professionals—spaces in which to transcend, for the space of a few days, the intimate loyalties, conflicts, and pathologies that characterize the organizations that employ us. In these spaces, we can enjoy a sense of affiliation to a greater whole. At the same time, this conference, like many others, is heavily subsidized by corporate publishers, whose logos emblazon the badges, tote bags, conference programs, ballpoint pens, and other swag under whose load attendees become a swarm of free advertising. But for all that subsidy, participation at these conferences remains costly, so it tends to be a privilege reserved for those occupying “professional” or managerial positions within their institutions: I recognize an image of my labor in colleagues who, like me, have the word “librarian” in their titles. Who are, for the most part, white like me, and who, like me, receive a salary that positions them well above the poverty line. Largely absent here—and for me, rather inconspicuously so, since their exclusion is part of what defines conferences like these, part of their affective, social, and sensory texture—are my colleagues who staff the circulation and access desks, who reshelve the books, who handle acquisitions and copy cataloging, who clean the library’s offices and common areas and restrooms. To borrow a term from Berlant (2008), the conference makes available an “intimate public” at the intersection of librarianship’s civic (and civilizing) mission and the logics of late capitalism (where the purveyors of “information” reap the greatest surplus value).¹³ And that intimacy remains besieged, even if tacitly so, by the hierarchies of domination that render any public a tenuous and incomplete thing.

Once a center of the slave trade, Charleston now beguiles visitors with the legacy of the South’s aristocratic past as projected onto a technobureaucratic future. In the salt marshes outside the city, screened from the highway by sedges and bulrushes, Boeing and Mercedes-Benz stand in white, antiseptic splendor. Downtown, hip venues serve biscuits, craft beer, and farm-to-table cuisine. But walk long enough up King Street, and the “For Sale” signs on shuttered buildings announce the spread of gentrification into neighborhoods once predominantly Black and working class, whose residents are being driven to the geographic and economic

periphery of civic life. And so, even for the casual visitor, a kind of melancholy sets in: for beneath the commodification of what makes it unique, Charleston participates in the same dynamics afflicting any number of U.S. cities, northern or southern. As a taxi driver explained to a group of us *en route* to the conference, the city's official history remains white-washed, obscuring the struggles and achievements of those who made the city thrive throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And as I learned on another occasion from an Uber driver who had recently lost his job at the Boeing plant, the industries that once supported Charleston's working class now wage a war of attrition on their own workers for the sake of shareholder profits.

The conference is headquartered at the Francis Marion Hotel, which holds court at the corner of King and Calhoun Streets—only a few blocks, in fact, from the “Mother Emanuel” African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest church of this denomination in the South, where on June 17, 2015, an avowed white supremacist murdered nine people. Inside the Marion, however, a genteel image of the past stays afloat like flotsam on the tide. From the confusion of the wet and still warm streets, one ascends grand steps to the lobby, where plush carpets muffle the guests' steps; and leather armchairs and velvet Chesterfields, lined with tufted and tasseled cushions, promise to enclose conversation in the trust born of shared privilege. Like a doyenne and her retinue, the conference stuffs the Marion to its gills: a crowd mostly white, mostly middle class, and accommodated by the labor of the largely Black hotel staff. The publishers are (generally speaking) corporate-looking types, their greetings practiced, their suits pressed, their strides infused with hustle and purpose; while the librarians wander from session to session dutifully lugging their canvas totes. And I, having abandoned my tote, swagger (inwardly) with the privilege that white cis masculinity represents, at a minimum, in a feminized setting: the privilege to be seen and heard when I want; and when I want, to stand apart. The privilege to feel disinterested: to feel, with a certain part of myself, in the face of all that performative earnestness and apostolic care (even though I dare not let anyone know it), that I don't have to care.

At this conference, the focus of our care is vigilantly technical and pragmatic: how to do X, how we did Y, etc. As David James Hudson (2017) argues, this kind of discourse frames librarianship as governed by “the imperative to be practical,” reproducing “a sense of status quo utilitarianism” that “tend[s] to assert itself aggressively in racially coded ways” (204–5). In this framing, librarianship resembles any number of professions, in which the complex systems and structures that underpin domination and power manage to convince us that “they are not about domination at all, that they are simple and commonsensical and ordinary” (215). Nonetheless, melancholy clings to the margins: with an inflection of word and gesture, and now and then a sigh. Or subtler yet, in a certain range of postures,

a certain disposition of the space between bodies as they confer, and the way eyes have of meeting or skirting another's gaze. This melancholy troubles the conviction that we librarians, unlike the publishers with whom we share this venue, serve no one's bottom line—that we serve, for what it's worth, the common good. It troubles, too, the sense of duty out of which we persevere, often in the face of scarce resources, gross mismanagement, and relatively low wages, in our devotion to our jobs. And melancholy characterizes, I would argue, our general reluctance, as a profession, to articulate public critiques of the institutions we serve. In this reluctance, a disciplined but often misplaced sympathy for our institutions, bordering on resentment and inertia, seems the appropriate emotional response to labor conditions that might instead call for organized solidarity and resistance. For if melancholy might be said to be a symptom of exchange—a feeling for how the logic of exchange-value, which infiltrates even the most intimate social relations, enforces loss as the necessary condition of profit—then we might be said to be melancholy for the solidarity that we have lost and continue to lose in return for the (dwindling) privileges of “professional” status.

I have described the sentimental as a set of attitudes toward the present that scan it, assiduously, for signs of a deferred promise (the lived fulfillment of liberalism's basic tenets). The sentimental shows its vulnerability to melancholy in the ways in which that deferral makes itself felt: as a certain weariness or exhaustion from the emotional labor of sustaining performances of belief (whether sincere or merely as a matter of convention) in the promise itself. This feeling, moreover, infects self-possession with an “affectability” that the transparent interiority of the proper liberal subject is supposed to exclude: one feels this exhaustion, as it were, in spite of oneself. By its very opacity, its resistance to rational explanation and narrative articulation, melancholy threatens to compromise the very thing proposed as the grounds for the fulfillment of the promise. It is the shuttered building on the commercial street that drives away business; it is the heavy drapes, drawn against the sun, that give the impression that the room's faded finery might appear downright shabby if seen in the full light of day. But this blot upon the scene of desire also lends itself to a different modality of promise, a different strategy of engulfment. In what follows, I will treat the latter under the heading of the sublime. The sublime erupts, you might say, whenever the well-managed sentiments presumed key to liberal consensus threaten to burst their stays. We are in the midst of just such an eruption now, I would argue, in the wake of the profound changes to civil society wrought by neoliberal policy.

Whether as a direct result of state or local policy, or indirectly through the attrition of other sources of support (e.g., tuition money, grant funding, etc.), nearly four decades of liberating capital from public constraint have fueled a familiar cycle: budget cuts lead to layoffs, and layoffs prompt

calls for those who remain to do more with less. In addition to their jobs and the jobs of their laid-off colleagues, this more includes the work of producing narratives and data that will, one has to hope, justify a little longer the library's existence.¹⁴ And the cycle embeds itself ever more deeply in our lives thanks to a "generalized contingency" that prevails in the social fabric of the twenty-first century (Whitehall and Johnson 2011, 67).¹⁵ Pleasure in one's work—as a creative outlet, a source of pride, and/or an opportunity to indulge in camaraderie and practice care—is still possible, of course. Thanks to an inheritance of social privilege that has allowed me to afford the right degrees, land good positions, and maintain a comfortable lifestyle, on most days I do enjoy my job. (And most moments of the day, I do walk around practically oblivious of how my enjoyment partakes of the wages of status hierarchy; economic inequality; and the institutional, social, and political legacies of patriarchal white supremacy. Or perhaps my melancholy is this practice of oblivion in the service of those things.) But the *public*, in relation to which personal enjoyment is supposed to become "moral direction and spiritual consequence," sputters along, evidently having lost its alchemical spark. Moments of Ettarh's "vocational awe" punctuate working lives that seem more and more destined for burnout. And yet, "burnout" feels somewhat like a twentieth-century luxury: let's say, working lives that seem stuck in a space burning around the edges . . . and which way is "out," again?

Toward the end of the conference, I attend a session on consortial efforts to preserve the print record. The sparseness of the audience gathered in this cavernous conference room—as if mirroring the vast storage facilities to which libraries increasingly consign their print books and journals—lends an apocalyptic gloom to the proceedings. A colleague quips that we need these arrangements "for when the EMP's go off." If the sentimental is about sustaining, through a feminized labor of feeling in the present, the unfinished promise of the past, the sublime is characterized by an imperialist, masculinist stance toward the future. But this future appears not unfinished (as in, open to change and difference), but unfinished. It threatens to undo the works of the present altogether. And if sentimental librarianship clings to a fetish of the printed volume—the rare books we cradle and meticulously catalog; the new books we stand up on display; the reference sets collecting dust that we consign, with a sigh, to storage—in the grip of the sublime, we fantasize about the archive. At this scale, proposals and programs for "preserving the print record" tap into apocalyptic imaginaries, visions fed by the fumes of neoliberalism's assault on public institutions and the environment itself. In popular culture, such fantasies (as in the tireless permutations of the zombie narrative) recast sentimentality's intimate publics as spaces of male bonding and heroic violence. Though transformed by neoliberalism, the affective structures at

work in these fantasies participate in the genealogy of the United States as a republic and an empire.¹⁶ In the professional imaginary of librarianship, the frontier's analog might be the idea that the library's civilizing mission will be fulfilled when civilization itself collapses, leaving a clean slate on which—with that archive as the foundation—to realize liberal ideals.

In a restaurant on King Street, I am wined on a publisher's dime, while the vendor rep, already drunk, flirts wolfishly with our server. Seizing her chance to change the drift of that conversation, and turning to the rest of us, she proclaims, "I love libraries!" Her enthusiasm enters the room and the ambit of my dining companion's predatory masculinity like a summons to some fine falsehood I keep to myself, a hidden token, the scrap of something broken and begging for repair. Is it this racializing and engendering interest, this aestheticizing pulse toward youthful white femininity, to the rain's tempo, as I stroll the slick and emptying streets around my hotel, looking in on low-lit interiors where others socialize (another publisher's fete)? Each sense bristles with difference, with absence, opening a void inside a plenum that the affects, lacking an object but flush with potential energy, rush to fill. In such a mood, every feeling feels virtual, the shim of a promise that keeps the flesh open to the future. And it feels, paradoxically, as though what keeps us afloat is this melancholy—this free-floating regret—as one might resort to some scraps, noncommittally kept (a ticket stub, a receipt, a drink napkin bearing an abortive thought), to mark one's place in the book half-read on the bedside table. Melancholy as my misappropriation of the white feminine as "a concept/metaphor for not changing, but adapting, propping the play of surface against a stubborn demand to remain in proximity to the promise" (Berlant 2008, 19).¹⁷ Melancholy as how, textualized and commodified, the affects sometimes circulate. As their whitewashed and scalloped church. As their aestheticized form, in which the senses drift, slackened, on the surface of flesh touched or scored to grief by its own abrasion by labor in the service of hierarchy and domination (a surface that functions—for me, as a white cis man—as the site of privileged identity; and a labor that, although freely chosen, leaves little room for the reflective agency that is that identity's promised wage). Melancholy as the mood of the flesh shoehorned into the shapes prepared for it by the commodity, as that illness of fit—I project it onto others in order to feel their commonality with my own case: the sales rep's hirsute hands and wrists, poking like a pair of stoats from the sleeves of his suit jacket; the colleague who wanders among the vendor booths, a phlegmatic resolve all he can muster in this charade of choice and desire; a young woman's idealism about our profession, performed for our benefit, and inscribed in the tattoo she boasts of (a stack of books between her shoulder blades). Footsteps plashing, cuffs soaked, voices fading into the swish of traffic and the steady silver needling of the rain. Melancholy

as the violence of history that produces our present, but misrecognized and eroticized. Downtown, I pass the weathered front of Charleston's Old Slave Mart, its gated entrance dark behind the slick, dark flagstones.

THE LIBRARY AND THE NEOLIBERAL SUBLIME¹⁸

I want to return to New Orleans. I want to return to the image of the library after the hurricane.¹⁹ The image lends itself to a sublime reading insofar as it shows the inscrutable and destructive power of nature over human life and human works. Moreover, the ruined stacks evoke the geologic scale at which human works all but disappear. In Kant's treatment of the sublime (which draws on and contributes to the European Romantic tradition), such spectacles of power and scale become paradoxical occasions for affirming humanity's "spiritual consequence." As Meg Armstrong (1996) puts it, the Kantian sublime describes a dialectic between imagination and reason, transforming "a failure"—which occurs either because the imagination fails to compass the scale of the spectacle presented to it, or because it is forced to entertain the vulnerability of the human body before the forces of nature—into "a submission to a law of reason which is higher than the material/body upon which it preys (which also exceeds the visceral realities of individual desire and fear)" (227). Like the sentimental, but more explicitly so, the sublime is a rhetorical figure for sacralizing the secular. The sublime channels feelings of reverence and awe away from a relation to the divine, repurposing them for the glorification of human reason itself. I resort to the figure of the sublime for thinking about neoliberalism because I think it might help us see how our "civil religion," under pressure from the flows of transnational capital, becomes something more violent and apocalyptic.

"Failures" of the imagination are also a useful frame for thinking about New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. As Johnson (2011) argues, discourses about the disaster, particularly those by journalists and politicians, have tended to characterize it as a singular event, the scale and nature of which defy understanding. The basic question common to these discourses—"How could something like that happen *here*?"—neglects the history of similar disasters in the United States, even as it forestalls an investigation into the structural conditions of this particular disaster (xix–xx). From a structural perspective, Katrina's devastation was prepared by decades of political mismanagement and exploitation of the environment (xxix–xxx). The fact, moreover, that the greatest losses, including loss of life, were borne by New Orleans' working-class Black citizens stems directly from the economic neglect, oppressive policing, and *de facto* segregation that, in New Orleans as in the nation at large, have long marked Black life as disposable. Since the 1980's, such forms of structural violence have only intensified under policy regimes best described as neoliberal (xxi).²⁰

All that is to say, we can readily comprehend *how* Katrina caused the

devastation that it did, even if the disaster still feels—to those of us who did not live through it—somehow *unimaginable*. But the sublime framing of the disaster (i.e., as truly singular and beyond comprehension) reroutes that feeling toward our capitulation to “a law of reason” operative here in the form of neoliberal rhetoric and policies. Neoliberalism presents itself as a law of reason because its doctrines stipulate that a) a free-market economy develops according to an intrinsic logic, which governs the transactions of all participants; and b) economic growth requires that this logic be allowed to operate unfettered by extrinsic regulation (Foucault 2010). As many critics have pointed out, government regulation under neoliberalism is better described as aggressively “pro-capital,” rather than as minimal or absent (Johnson 2011, xxi). Regulation, from the point of view of the architects of neoliberal policy, serves to create the optimal conditions for the pure laws of the market—hence the “blank slate” sought by Milton Friedman and his epigones in human disaster zones like post-war Iraq and the post-hurricane Gulf Coast (Klein 2010).

The frame brought to bear by Johnson (2011) and other contributors to his edited volume helps us see how, in the case of Katrina, neoliberal reason prepared the conditions for the disaster, just as the disaster’s aftermath presented new avenues for that reason to assert itself. As a body of economic theory aiming to maximize the “pure” flows of capital, neoliberalism might be said to follow capitalism itself in tending to become a totalizing social force. But it’s important to emphasize that neoliberalism—or what I’ve called “neoliberal reason”—comprises a variety of specific discourses, rhetorics, practices, and dispositions. These emerge from the “gospel” of liberalism itself. The latter I have proposed to regard as a suture between, on the one hand, publicly endorsed postulates of a universal human nature; and on the other, the private pleasures and desires of individuals—pleasures and desires that are themselves shaped by the possession of (and by others’ dispossession from) a host of material, embodied privileges. Like that gospel’s Jesuitical arm, neoliberal reason recruits converts through a particular interpretation of liberal doctrine. In its fanatical reverence for the pure logic of the market, neoliberal reason promises to void the necessarily messy moment in which the subject “take[s] ownership of personal identity” through appeals to a public that validates his judgment. The “public” as depicted by neoliberal reason is nothing more than a collection of atomic individuals, each motivated by possibly incommensurable preferences.²¹ What validates the neoliberal subject’s claim to subjectivity, then, is only the sublime warrant of (neoliberal) reason itself, which, like the Kantian categorical imperative, conveys to the individual the optimal ordering of his desires.

Yet the sublime is still an aesthetic moment; it magnetizes feelings and desires in the service of managing modernity’s contradictions. And as the “Bourbon” history adduced by Clyde Woods (2009) shows, the strategies

canvassed by the term *neoliberalism* are by no means new, even if centuries of imperialism and settler-colonialism have honed them to a fine art. White elites have deployed such strategies in an effort to subjugate Black and other nonwhite populations, as well as working-class whites, throughout the history of both New Orleans and the United States. It is in light of this history that the sentimental and the sublime might be said to exist in the tension of a dialectic. The flossy logic of the sentimental expresses yearnings born out of the bone-deep contradictions between our liberal creed and the violent entailments of industrial capitalism, which depends upon a racialized and gendered hierarchy of the human being to secure its hold on the earth. As the aestheticized analog of the press of bodies pushed to their breaking point in the fields or on the factory floor—of bodies swarming in desire and discontent through the nation’s urban centers, flush with an endless supply of consumer goods that wed, more effectively than any holy sacrament, communion and sacrifice, pleasure and debt—the sentimental has evolved as a domesticating discipline of the self, channeling these visceral energies into virtual forms of intimacy. But the globalization of industrial production and the concomitant financialization of domestic capital have transformed much of the United States into a haunted landscape of shuttered factories, housing projects, gated communities, and commercial franchises. Thanks to these processes, any given location in the country becomes the mirror of innumerable others, where the flesh in its daily pursuits comes to resemble a hologram of the data that it produces—a furtive shadow caught between the flicker of neon signs and the blue glow of LED screens. The aesthetic impulses at work here lead to a vision of human life as “containerized” (Passavant 2011). Containerization includes the carving up of physical space as well as the assignment, through increasingly invasive forms of surveillance, of digital identities that remain beyond the individual’s power to curate, correct, or erase. And again, it’s important to remember that confinement and surveillance have been part of the arsenal used against non-European people since Europeans first invented the newness of the New World (Sharpe 2016). As Simone Browne (2015) notes, “The historical formation of surveillance is not outside of the historical formation of slavery” (50). But their contemporary revival reshapes (again) the “strategies of engulfment” by which privileged subjects sustain their identification with patriarchal whiteness. Encouraged to pretend that they don’t “see” race, such subjects are invited to identify instead with the techno-bureaucratic rationality of capitalism itself, which links the others suffering in our backyards with the others suffering on the other side of the globe. This rationality imposes a grid in which each suffering body occupies the place allotted for it by the laws of the market. Like the Romantic subject standing in awe before a mist-shrouded mountain gorge, the subject of the neoliberal sublime enjoys a sense of his own position that remains beguilingly disem-

bodied and abstract. And solitary. As though he stood alone at the edge of the world, at the end of time.²²

Sublime affect helped produce an image of Black working-class neighborhoods in post-Katrina New Orleans as “zone[s] that must be razed, escaped, avoided, or policed,” rather than as communities that deserved to be “rebuilt, transformed, or renewed” (Whitehall and Johnson 2011, 76). Among the city’s white residents, white and Black city officials, state politicians, philanthropists, and real estate developers, a consensus emerged that the storm had cleared the way for resolving the persistent problems of crime and poverty by displacing and/or relocating those most directly afflicted by such problems: in essence, “trying to exchange the residents a city has for residents a city would prefer to have” (Passavant 2011, 110). As Paula Ioanide (2015) argues in a study of post-Katrina public discourse, many white and/or middle-class voices disguised “a guarded hostile privatism” beneath appeals to the sublime attributes of “rugged individualism, self-reliance, and personal responsibility” (154). The figure of pathology, which we saw earlier as marking the point of departure in narratives of liberal self-improvement, reappears here to serve a more openly violent function. Pathology, in these narratives, justifies the erasure of the voices of the oppressed, consigning their bodies to a state of Nature, the threat of which must be contained at all costs.²³

On the one hand, the sublime emerges from a gendered figuration of the *subject’s* mental capacities—which, in Kant’s theory and elsewhere, draws a bright line between “‘masculine’ reason and ‘feminine’ imagination” (Jackson 2018, 623). On the other hand, aesthetic theory casts as *objects* of the sublime “bodies . . . imported from foreign domains, ‘other’ by virtue of racial or cultural differences, often from regions important to imperialistic designs of European empires” (Armstrong 1996, 214). Presented for inspection by European elites via the technologies of empire—at which point elite discourse rendered them “not readily comprehensible, representable, or conceptualized”—the racialized bodies of Europe’s others were conscripted to signify a nature beyond the bounds of human reason, a nature inviting conquest (Jackson 2018, 626). This racializing legacy animates the neoliberal responses to disasters like Katrina: as in a FEMA director’s infamous claim that “we’re seeing people that we didn’t know exist” (quoted in Ishiwata 2011, 32). For the dominant subjects of empire and the settler-colonial nation, the *existence* of people who have been systematically oppressed by nation and empire poses a problem for reason; they remain “not readily comprehensible, representable, or conceptualized” because the imperial/national project can appear reasonable only insofar as the oppressed not exist *as people*, i.e., as countably human members of the social contract. Though perhaps an inconvenient admission to make on national television, the FEMA director’s stance serves the colossus well. It keeps him from having to look down or over

his shoulder as he strides toward the future as if it existed only for him (if it exists at all).

Among the people erased by the FEMA director's admission, many of the most vulnerable were working-class Black women with children (Jones-Deweever 2011; Ioanide 2015). Likewise, Black women in New Orleans played pivotal roles in reorganizing, rebuilding, and fighting for displaced residents' "right of return" after the storm, participating in a diverse coalition that included grassroots organizers, nonprofit groups, hip-hop artists, poets, and many others (Ioanide 2015, 139–74; Camp 2009; Kish 2009). It is important to attend to their agency in the resistance to neoliberal reason in part because, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2018) writes, "the black female body" continues to function as a site of "opacity and aporia . . . in the not-yet-past of Enlightenment thought" (621). Not exactly invisible, but more like a constituent instability in the field of the visible itself, the figuration of this body haunts the dominant discourses of modernity as "an object-conditioning material metaphor" (619).²⁴ Citing its discursive instability, Jackson calls for attention to the subversive power of the "black mater(nal)" as generative for thinking against the grain, against the totalizing grid, of post-Enlightenment rationality.²⁵ As a white man, I am accustomed to consuming critiques of neoliberalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy through the frame of my privileged, pampered, and dominant subjectivity. For me, therefore, refusing the transparent loneliness of (neo)liberal reason might be propaedeutic to what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) have dubbed "black study." Their use of the term describes an antidiscipline, or perhaps an undiscipline, an under- or infradiscipline: undoing the capture by which the subject installs itself as the site of an interminable capacity for suffering (sentiment) and punishment (the sublime). Doing black study would mean learning from Black feminist theory, but as something other than a body of scholarship: as a matriculation, perhaps, to ways of being together in spirit and flesh for an "undercommon" undertaking—in creative resistance and struggle, in anger and sorrow, in comfort and joy—alongside collectives the world over, comprising all sorts of bodies, which refuse the teleological individuation offered by liberal modernity.²⁶ Collectives that draw instead on a "genealogy of resistance" (Philip 1997) that is multiple, uncountable, and committed to hunger for the otherwise.

POSTSCRIPT: IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Dear reader, I've written myself into a corner. Wanting to write about an image that both irks and haunts me, I sought to write about the library through the lens of neo/liberalism as a politics of melancholy. To write about my relation to the latter with honesty is also to write about patriarchal white supremacy. Yet as Christina Sharpe (2016) reminds us, no labor of feeling will undo the neoliberal state's "death-dealing policies"

toward those marked as Black or as occupying the space of Blackness, e.g., migrants from the global South (57).²⁷ What's more, in this very essay I am guilty of citing slavery and its aftermath in the service of a narrative of white male melancholy. There is no way around that fact. And if, as Hortense Spillers (University of Waterloo 2013) offers, "Black culture" can designate "a critical position-taking across . . . lines of race," there is no way around the inevitable: that my efforts at such position-taking will involve the failure of my position (even in the moment of self-criticism). What now? Retreat into the embrace of our "secular gospel," taking shelter among the stacks that, as the narrator of Nella Larsen's (2001) novel *Quicksand* observes, "hous[e] much knowledge and a little wisdom" (63)? (The building less resembles a palace than a fortress, built to withstand the onslaught of the pathological frenzy of the masses. Little did its designers, in their infinite wisdom, anticipate the threat posed to our collective life by alienated individuals—by alienated reason itself.) Of course, I might consign these pages to the indignity mentioned by Burton and stuff them in a jakes. (There's never enough toilet paper in the library anyhow.) Or I can commit myself to the awkwardness of my sentences and sentiments; I can refuse, insofar as I can, what David James Hudson (2017) calls "aggressively self-effacing whiteness," resolving instead to live with and work through the moral and "physical entanglements" of my professional and scholarly practice (221, 225). These entanglements include what links my flesh to others, including the leadership of others who riot, loudly or quietly, against the ruin to which, in our melancholy, we frequently feel consigned. Who already have, because they have to, a theory and a practice of the otherwise. Over there, a figure stands at the top of the steps, turned to face the street. If we see her at all, usually what we perceive are her lack of credentials and her failure to conform to the hallowed norms of this place. But her turning away from us on the inside; her standing there "for a long moment," armed with the knowledge that the arsenal of knowledge we tend is hardly wisdom: these are gestures that we have been trained not to see, not to learn from. For she refuses to indulge our misprision or to entertain the terms of her exclusion, however much we demand those things of her. And with a shrug of the shoulders, she resumes that motion in which, whatever violence we muster, we fail to arrest her, for she is moving always with that arrested motion that is the future becoming other than what is.²⁸

NOTES

1. In the moral entanglements in the archives of violence and trauma—on the ways their use can reinscribe that violence in the present, and on the potential for their reparative use—see Caswell (2014), Fuentes (2016), and Hartman (2010).
2. On the politics of melancholy, see Wendy Brown (1999). Brown is particularly concerned with how melancholy afflicts Leftist political agendas and critical projects. But her approach to theorizing melancholy has closely informed my own, as has Lauren Berlant's

work on sentimentality's "intimate publics" (2008) and on our neoliberal moment's saturation by "cruel optimism" (2011).

3. On one reading, Wynter's work remains optimistic about our prospects for redeeming the categories of the human and the aesthetic from the Enlightenment's program of privilege and exclusion. This optimism is not shared by all those who take up Wynter's mode of analysis. Ferreira da Silva (2018), for instance, argues that critiques like Wynter's "demand equalization, that is, the valorization (or 'humanization') of the subordinate member" of the racialized binary, a move that inadequately addresses the structural conditions that allow such binaries to emerge, thereby "leaving both components and their fundamentally violent context untouched" (33). See also Marriott (2012) for a critical reading of Wynter's methods vis-a-vis the decolonial philosophy of Frantz Fanon.
4. Spillers's argument proceeds from a consideration of the place of enslaved women in antebellum economy and society. The capture of sexuality and maternity by the commodity function confers, as Spillers writes, "few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the only female gender there is" (216). In a similar vein, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2018) argues that "'the black female body' has foundationally and recursively been categorized and measured as an other gender and an other sex" (619).
5. In contemporary parlance, *sentimentality* remains a pejorative term, most often applied to aesthetic expressions that fall short of some presumptive standard of originality or power. But feminist scholarship has produced a robust body of work on the sentimental (especially in the fields of American studies and British cultural studies). I can't do justice to this work in a footnote, but for some key texts, see Samuels (1992), Barker-Benfield (1996), Ellis (1996), Pinch (1996), Douglas (1998), Wexler (2000), and Berlant (2008). My treatment of the sentimental in this essay leans heavily on Berlant's work.
6. As documented by Garrison (2003) and others, the first public libraries took as their mission not only literacy but also the cultivation of taste. And for early champions like Andrew Carnegie, the library's role lay in the education of the masses. While compulsory schooling (and increasingly, colleges and universities) could inculcate the skills and discipline necessary for an industrial workforce, it fell to the library to instill that more nebulous discipline appropriate to the liberal democratic state. This discipline was supposed to transform leisure time—as the remainder of agency left to the worker after the day's work—into a secular discipline of the self. To carve out a space between production and consumption where the affective and sensory energies of the citizen (in a measure appropriate to his station in life, of course) might flow into productive channels, sustaining, rather than disrupting, the social imaginaries most beneficial to capitalism and its white male elite. The American Library Association (2019) endorses this genealogy via a commitment to producing "informed citizenry" and promoting "lifelong learning." As stewards of culture, librarians serve the *civitas* and care for the republic through a labor of aesthetic judgment that sifts items of value from the flows of the mass market. And like other forms of sentimental labor, the librarian's reproduces a sense of belonging through performances flecked with the signs of longing and failure.
7. The feminized professions—paying lower wages and commanding less respect than their traditionally masculine counterparts—construe labor as the extension of a power of "influence" coded as feminine (and white), in contrast to (white) men's political and economic power. The feminized labor of librarians exercises influence to supply a public with what it needs to imagine itself, even if that public never seems sufficiently to acknowledge the librarians' contribution. Although professional discourse has tended to construe the librarian's judgment as neutral, it is perhaps more accurate to say that it strives to be invisible. For in their refusal to identify their professional choices with particular points of view, librarians commit themselves to maintaining the appearance of a collection that exists on its own, as though without the intervention of human labor. And if the library collection represents the self-effacing influence of the librarian (in supplying her constituents with texts without commentary), this white-feminized ethos extends to the physical space of the library and to the personality of the librarian, too. As Dee Garrison writes, paraphrasing the sentiments of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century librarians, the library was to be a place where "not the cold impersonality of the business world should pervade, but rather the warmth of the well-ordered home, presided over by a gracious and helpful librarian" (2003, 179).

- The “helpful librarian” is she to whom we owe our gratitude for her willingness to work without thanks, to be taken for granted. She belongs to that cadre of figures whose hard-working touch proves necessary to prepare the conditions under which the masculine spectator—coded as white and upper or middle class—can assume his disinterested and leisured perspective on the object. That unbroken circuit of feeling, linking his individual pleasure to a universal destiny, feeds on her emotional labor; his ability to “prove” himself in matters of taste requires her willingness to do work that does not admit of demonstration, though she labors to keep the object fit for his demonstrative gaze. For an important theoretical and methodological work on feminization as a historical process affecting (white) women’s (and white men’s) social roles, see Douglas (1998). On feminization in the context of professional work, see Ferguson (1984), and, for a perspective highlighting the role of emotional/affective labor, Illouz (2016). On gender and librarianship, see Garrison’s book (2003), as well as Eddy (2001), Maack (1998), and Radford and Radford (1997). On the cultural mission of the early public library, see, in addition to the sources just cited, Gerolami (2018).
8. As civil servants, merchants, and intelligentsia, the bourgeoisie needed—and still needs—the violence of empire (including slavery and genocide) to sustain its hegemony. But it was through the lens of a racializing gaze that this class learned to disavow its complicity in that violence: a gaze that throws into relief, against the fetishized darkness of the subjugated colonial other, the spotless whiteness of the western self. When the early library leader Samuel Green wrote that “the service to be rendered by a librarian . . . is that of a parent and teacher and never that of a slave,” the compact between whiteness and femininity appeared via the evocation of the figure that, by participating in neither category, seals the compact itself: the “slave” (quoted in Maack 1998, 53). As the figure of a vulnerability and a docility that could cipher for innocence, for untrammelled and untested virtue, the white woman appears to require protection, even as the duty occasioned by this innocence promises to elevate the white man above the beasts. This moral fetishization of the white feminine is possible because white women, vis-a-vis women of color, have historically remained exempt from the ravages of that other fetish: the commodity. On the persistence of tropes of “white innocence” as a rhetorical strategy for justifying white supremacy, see Ikard (2017, 46–68). The *locus classicus* for such tropes is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In addition to Ikard, see Berlant’s discussion of that novel and its legacy (2008, 34–67).
 9. Sentimentality itself, as a set of performances associated with the self-fashioning of heterosexual white cis women, remains associated with both lack and excess: it is the “failure of feeling,” to quote Wallace Stevens (1997), that reveals itself as a failure precisely by exceeding the bounds of reason, authenticity, and good taste (903).
 10. On the role of library classification in producing racially and sexually disciplined subjects of the modern nation-state, see Roberto (2011), Drabinski (2013), and Adler (2017). “Arsenal” is Ferreira da Silva’s term (2007). In context, she uses it primarily in reference to scientific and philosophical strategies of racialization. But it must be reiterated—as Ferreira da Silva herself makes clear in subsequent work (2018)—that racialization does not operate except through the simultaneous ascription of a heteronormative and binary gender.
 11. On the distinction between the actual and the virtual as constitutive of a certain formative moment in European modernity, see McKeon (2009). In a nutshell, the virtual describes the ways in which we participate, imaginatively, in a society that includes, as our presumptive equals, droves of people whom we have never met and will never meet. The vehicles of this virtual sociality include newspapers, novels, and all the other genres of cultural expression mediated by the circulation of commodities (movies and television shows, music, video games, social media, etc.).
 12. I don’t mean to imply that August uses the term “pathology” uncritically. But I do think his sympathy for the liberal project leads him away from an attention to how pathology itself inflects that project. And so, when he writes that “libraries helped to identify a modern public,” and that this public was “a physical space where social difference became visible, a larger theater of heterogeneous diversity that characterized nineteenth-century cities but was otherwise obscured by the residential, occupational, and commercial segregation of the population amongst slums and streetcar-suburbs, ‘downtown’ business and vice districts, crowded ethnic tenements and single-family middle-class homes” (172, my emphasis),

- the word “otherwise” once again appears to suggest that the institutions of liberalism’s “civil religion” can somehow transform segregation into a kind of unsegregated diversity, and that this diversity will henceforth be available to the judging consciousness as a representation affirmative of our fundamental commonality. But what this logic fails to disclose is how that resolution of segregation into diversity remains an exercise, primarily, for the *un*-pathologized consciousness, which thereby has its multicultural cake and eats it, too (enjoying both the private benefits that segregation confers on the privileged, and the personal/public reassurance that we are “all” subjects of the same grand narrative).
13. For Berlant (2008) intimate publics are key to the sentimental, and we all, to varying degrees, participate in them insofar as we are “subjects . . . defined . . . as persons who shop and feel” (13). Her term describes spaces, genres, and practices where fantasies about freedom, belonging, and, indeed, justice exist in a kind of colloidal stasis, preserving moments of liberal promise within the oppressive structures required by capitalism, the state, and the patriarchal family—those Jello molds in which we wriggle without being able to escape.
 14. For work that critiques the impact of neoliberalism on librarianship, see Bourq (2014), Seale (2016), and Beilin (2016).
 15. This contingency leads libraries to pick up the slack and address needs not otherwise being met: a trend that has been quite visible in public libraries for some time (which often function as a lifeline for the homeless and other disadvantaged populations), but which is taking hold in academic libraries, too (as the latter move to offer tutoring services, training in computational skills, and the like). And given the dysfunction of the academy at large—with its crushing exploitation of adjunct labor, its dependence on a funding system biased toward established researchers, and its commitment to a top-down, corporate model of governance—the runaway profits made by monopolistic academic publishers index the degree to which disaster capitalism (Klein 2010) has come to the university.
 16. As J. G. A. Pocock (2003) characterizes it, the American frontier signifies a sublime version of the liberal promise: “An infinite supply of land, ready for occupation by an armed and self-directing yeomanry, meant an infinite supply of virtue, and it could even be argued that no agrarian law was necessary . . . all pressures making for dependence and corruption would right themselves” (535).
 17. This proximity is key to Berlant’s concept of the “juxtapolitical”: “Intimate publics . . . operate in aesthetic worlds that are juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds” (2008, 2–3).
 18. The phrase “neoliberal sublime” is also used by Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (2014) to characterize films whose narratives construct “‘spaces outside history’ that allow all characters to be middle and upper class and that fully erase the visibility of the lower class.” I learned of Sánchez Prado’s article while revising this essay for publication.
 19. The photograph of the gutted library puts me in mind of another image of melancholy, but I hope the juxtaposition can refocus the meaning of the first. Writing in the seventeenth century, in the midst of Europe’s printing revolution, Robert Burton imagines a world overwhelmed by paper, stuffed and clogged by inscription. Noting that writers like himself, by quotation and commentary, “make new mixtures everyday, pour out of one vessel into another,” Burton (2001) records (quoting another author) the idea “that not only libraries and shops are full of our putrid papers, but every close-stool and jakes.” The proliferation of printed matter, much of it recapitulating what was previously published, has created a dangerous, albeit humorous, surfeit, compelling people to find novel uses for such “papers”: “they serve to put under pies, to lap spice in, and keep roast meat from burning.” For Burton, this domestic colonization by the text echoes, too, the conditions of empire; he compares his contemporaries in print to “those old Romans [who] robbed all the cities of the world, to set out their bad-sited Rome” (23).

Brimming with rhetorical and citational excess, Burton’s text undermines the (sentimental) idea of the text as a rarefied commodity for moral uplift. This passage in particular exposes the links between the *locus classicus* and the cloacal: between the copious publicity of the European masculine subject, and his coprophobic and wasteful privacy. And what cements these links—for us latter-day Romans—is the imperialist and

colonialist ambition to live beyond one's means. Even if the tracts we produce stock the jakes, we are filling the world with our shit (twice over). Does Burton's bathos likewise buck the sublime? Burton's text—which, in the course of over a thousand pages, relentlessly and redundantly catalogs the signs, symptoms, symbols, and meanings of melancholy, “pilfering” (Burton's word) from sources ancient and contemporary in search of a unity that never appears—at least feels foreign to that vantage point from which juridical reason (re)discovers its own separateness and superiority. The comforts of abstraction are cold to Burton's melancholic, whose problem lies precisely in his chronic inability to extricate himself from the tangle of what the world supplies—from the coils of memory and the volutes of fantasy—from the interleaving of the human body with history, which includes the voices of the dead, as though time itself were the pages of a vast book, and our living flesh the rustle of its pages.

20. As Johnson defines it, “Neoliberalism is a form of world-making predicated on the abatement of labor rights, social provision, public amenities, environmental regulation, and other artifacts of social democracy deemed impediments to capital accumulation” (2011, xxi).
21. See Amadae (2003) on the development of this idea in opposition to socialism by midcentury American elites. Amadae locates its purest expression in Kenneth Arrow's extension of Condorcet's Paradox; Arrow's highly influential work aims to show, with the finality of a mathematical proof, that a universally “fair” approach to the rank-ordering of preferences by members of a community does not exist. Arrow's proof depends, of course, on a prior decision about what “fairness” means (as defined by a number of theoretical conditions stipulated by his proof).
22. This positioning does not escape the pressures of contradiction, since the subject privileged in virtue of his race, gender, sexuality, etc., is also subjected (to a greater or lesser degree) to a “generalized contingency” (Whitehall and Johnson 2011, 67) in virtue of his role in the production of surplus value. These contradictions appear acutely in the longing for a kind of violent embodiment that can fix its solidity by inflicting pain and death. We might look here, perhaps, to understand the appeal of first-person-shooter video games, as well as the solicitation to their flesh-and-blood reenactment in public space.
23. Ioanide also notes the presence in the debate of what she calls voices of “liberal sentimentality,” which advocated for more morally palatable, but ultimately unworkable, visions, such as “disaggregation and dispersal [of the poor] into mixed-income units” (2015, 164). Such visions imagined tempering the cold logic of the market (whose imperatives required every resident to look out, above all, for their own property values) by the introduction of intimate publics that would encourage respectability among the poor. However, such visions—in addition to being insensitive to the real needs and desires of those they purported to help—remained unworkable because they failed to account for the racism entrenched in New Orleans' white population, no less than because they underestimated the commitment to neoliberal reason on the part of city officials and the moneyed interests that dominated the debate.
24. Metaphorically overburdened by the logics of whiteness and femininity, her or their personhood proves elusive to the gaze of those who wield power because of their race and/or gender. To make matters worse, the metaphor itself becomes the tenor of other metaphors. Thus, the city councilman who described New Orleans public housing projects as “crime incubators” relies on a handy semantic chain to malign working-class Black mothers (Ioanide 2015, 145), in effect making these mothers' lives (and the lives of their children) disappear behind the projects themselves, which then, by proxy, become the proper target of neoliberal policy.
25. Jackson writes, “The black mater(nal) is precisely not a standpoint (cis, trans, or otherwise) but a place in space that conditions standpoint” (2018, 630). This point resonates with Katherine McKittrick's (2006) work on practices of Black feminist geography, which include Black women's agency in “hidden spaces that are antagonistic to transparent space” (43). On these themes, see also Ferreira da Silva (2018), Bradley (2016), and Hammonds (1994).
26. This awkward sentence, refusing, under multiple revisions, to line up the way I want, attests to the awkwardness of sentiments by which the writer's flesh tries to turn away from what magnetizes it, which is the fantastic embodiment of patriarchal whiteness as it situates

- me in relation to reason and desire. In trying to arrange my thinking and language in relation to the “abject-conditioning material metaphor,” whose restless refiguration spells out the legibility of white reason and white desire, I confront the opacity of the latter, which is like a letter, message, ransom note written in iron filings, or any other device for concealing incoherence behind academic jargon or charming turns of phrase.
27. I am aware of the logical, ethical, and practical problems that vex the articulation of the global boundaries of Blackness—problems compounded, of course, when a white person proceeds to make or cite such an articulation. For some sense of the stakes involved, see Douglass and Wilderson (2013), and Olaloku-Teriba’s (n.d.) critique of the Afro-pessimism advocated by Wilderson.
 28. Larsen’s protagonist, Helga Crane, leaves the library after having been refused a job. Helga’s nomadic trajectory in this pessimistic and melancholy novel is structured as a series of disappointments—the teaching position at a rigidly run Black school that she quits in protest; the white relatives who rebuff her; the Europeans who exoticize her; the Black middle-class worlds from which she feels alienated; the rural Southern life to which she eventually resigns herself. According to Hazel Carby (1987), *Quicksand* is “the first text by a black woman to be a conscious narrative of a woman embedded within capitalist social relations” (170). In her essay on Larsen and librarianship (Larsen worked for several years at the New York Public Library), Karin Roffman (2007) describes Helga as “a character who rejects all systems of knowledge as flawed, and who seeks entirely other ways to learn” (215). As a text structured by narrative, stylistic, and affective “blank spots” (Ngai 2007, 174–208), *Quicksand* rejects sentimental tropes in order to question the wages of liberal identity. Occupying the aporetic and opaque place of the sublime object, Helga knows the ontological loneliness of those who confront, in body and soul, the failure of identity’s promise in the estranged circulations of the circum-Atlantic world.

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