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# DISIDENTIFICATIONS

## Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics

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# Performing Disidentifications

## Marga's Bed

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

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

Marga Gomez. Courtesy of Marga Gomez.



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

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

She then channels the lesbian panelists:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## Dissing Identity

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

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

making processes that are no longer of much use. Political theorist William E. Connolly argues that

> [t]o treat identity as a site at which entrenched dispositions encounter socially constituted definitions is not to insist that any such definition will fit every human being equally well or badly. Some possibilities of social definition are more suitable for certain bodies and certain individuals, particularly after each had branded into it as "second nature" a stratum of dispositions, proclivities, and preliminary self-understandings.[2]

Connolly understands identity as a site of struggle where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions. This account of identity offers us a reprieve from the now stale essentialism versus antiessentialism debates that surround stories of self-formation.[3] The political theorist's formulations understand identity as produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self (fixed dispositions) and socially constructed narratives of self. The chapters that make up this study attempt to chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates. The cultural performers I am considering in this book must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects. The essentialized understanding of identity (i.e., men are like this, Latinas are like that, queers are that way) by its very nature must reduce identities to lowest-common-denominator terms. There is an essential blackness, for example, in various strains of black nationalist thinking and it is decidedly heterosexual.[4] Socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions. Following Connolly's lead, I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always, *work*) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways.

The version of identity politics that this book participates in imagines a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit. Such identities use *and* are the fruits of a practice of disidentificatory reception and performance. The term *identities-in-difference* is a highly effective term for categorizing the identities that populate these pages. This term is one of the many figurations that I borrow from Third World feminists and radical women of color, especially Chicana theorists, who have greatly contributed to discourses that expand and radicalize identity. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, in their individual writings and in their groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, have pushed forward the idea of a radical feminist of color identity that shrewdly reconfigures identity for a progressive political agenda. The thread that first emanated from those writers is intensified and made cogent for an academic discourse by Chela Sandoval in her theory of *differential consciousness*. All of these writers' ideas about identity are taken up by Norma Alarcón in her influential articles. In one particular essay, Alarcón synthesizes the work of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Sandoval, along with the other theories of difference put forward by Audre Lorde and Jacques Derrida (who employs the term *différance*), in an attempt to describe and decipher identity-in-difference:



> By working through the "identity-in-difference" paradox, many radical women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) "identity politics" and "postmodernism" without a clear cut modernist agenda. Neither Audre Lorde nor Chela Sandoval's notion of difference/differential consciousness subsumes a Derridean theorization—though resonances cannot be denied and must be explored—so much as represents a process of "determined negation," a nay-saying of the variety of the "not yet, that's not it." The drive behind that "not yet/that's not it" position in Sandoval's work is termed "differential consciousness," in Lorde's work, "difference," and in Derrida's work, *différance*. Yet each invokes dissimilarly located circuits of signification codified by the site of emergence, which nevertheless does not obviate their agreement on the "not yet," which points towards a future.[5]

Alarcón's linking of these convergent yet dissimilar models is made possible by the fact that these different paradigms attempt to catalog "sites of emergence." The disidentificatory identity performances I catalog in these pages are all emergent identities-in-difference. These identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere. Although I use terms such as "minoritarian subjects" or the less jargony "people of color/queers of color" to describe the different culture workers who appear in these pages, I do want to state that all of these formations of identity are "identities-in-difference."

The strict psychoanalytic account of identification is important to rehearse at this point. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define "identification" in the following way: "[A] psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified."[6] Can a self or a personality be crafted without proper identifications? A disidentifying subject is unable to fully identify or to form what Sigmund Freud called that "just-as-if" relationship. In the examples I am engaging, what stops identification from happening is always the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site.

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

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

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

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

These normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities. We see these ideological barriers to multiple identifications in a foundational cultural studies text such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks,* the great twentieth-century treatise on the colonized mind. In a footnote, Fanon wrote what is for any contemporary antihomophobic reader an inflammatory utterance: "Let me observe at once that I had no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique. This must be viewed as the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The schema of homosexuality is well enough known."[9] In his chapter on colonial identity, Fanon dismisses the possibility of a homosexual component in such an identic formation. This move is not uncommon; it is basically understood as an "it's a white thing" dismissal of queerness. Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from the Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his writing on the colonized woman. What process can keep an identification with Fanon, his politics, his work possible for this woman? In such a case, a disidentification with Fanon might be one of the only ways in which she is capable of reformatting the powerful theorist for her own project, one that might be as queer and feminist as it is anticolonial. Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics.



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

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

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

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

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



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

### The Pêcheuxian Paradigm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## Identification beyond and with Psychoanalysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Disidentification's Work

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

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

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

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