CONVERSION:
MELANCHOLIA, MASCULINITY, AND PSYCHIC CHANGE

by

SAMANTHA SEMPER

B.A., McGill University, 2000
M.A., The University of British Columbia, 2004

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ABSTRACT

This study chooses three representations of conversion and asks whether these might challenge or ‘talk back’ to discourse about conversion, or whether they simply transfer a deeply problematic melancholic attachment structure? This analysis considers three primary case studies: the religious conversion of St. Augustine as represented in his *Confessions*; John Howard Griffin’s white racial conversion narrative, *Black Like Me*; and the Hip-Hop conversion testimony of Caesar L. Willis, *Rude Awakening*, and his associated spiritual-autobiographical dance practice of krumping. The first two chapters specifically deal with religious conversion: Chapter One offers a reinterpretation of the role of the maternal and paternal object in religious conversion, and Chapter Two proposes a rereading of the conversion of St. Augustine using this model. The remaining chapters analyze conversion discourse in relation to, and from embedded stances within, the dynamics of racialized oppression and legacy of slavery in the United States of America.

The philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva carefully distinguishes between “revolt”, from the Latin, *revolvere*, a productive ‘return’ and ‘rolling’ over of psychic structures, and the conversion, or *conversio*, turning, of the Christian man. She argues that religious conversion, the turn to religious faith, that ends in “reconciliation” or “unification” is a compromise: “a primary identification with a loving and protective agency” that is compensatory (24). It is a “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving, and protective” “breast” that is “transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world” (24). Building from this, my analysis argues that this compromise is a specifically melancholic compromise marked by the splitting and fusion with the maternal part-object, which is retained in a dynamic of “rejection, yet attachment to”. Because religious conversion is built on a drive toward ‘wholeness’ that is achieved through the fusion with a part-object, it does not represent an ethical relation or productive revolt. However, this analysis asks whether there are examples of conversion that do not end in a melancholic compromise, but instead open up to what Ranjana Khanna calls “critical melancholia” (22).
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TT  ---. Totem and Taboo. 1913. SE XIII. 1-161.


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**Introduction**

The New Testament scene of Saul on the road to Damascus, a man known for his persecutory zeal, hears the voice of God and realizes in an instant, a flash of light, the wrong of his ways; he is transformed into a “new creature”, *Paul*, a Christian. This scene represents, as Dana Andersen describes it, a moment “where both a convert and a paradigm were born” (2). The story of Paul’s sudden and complete transformation from sinner to saint is fundamental to the notion of what we call “conversion”, from the Latin root *conversio*, or “turning”, defined by A.D. Nock as nothing less than the “reorientation of the soul” (7). The narrative of Paul’s life is, as Simon Coleman suggests, “enshrined in Western thought”, and remains the epitome of profound personal change, the ultimate experience of Christian conversion and the grace of God (17). Not only does the narrative of Saul’s abrupt transformation remain a touchstone by which conversion is still understood and measured, it is also the founding narrative of the Western, Christian *discourse* of conversion as a powerful and privileged *trope* of self-definition or transformation.

As Andersen persuasively argues, the foundational accounts of Paul’s experience are mediated tellings shaped by the context and desires of the speaker within the biblical narrative itself, and by their recirculation and reframing by later writers, particularly Augustine (2). While the well-worn story of the blinding light and voice of God on the road to Damascus has taken on a familiarity that verges on banality within Western culture, there are at least three instances of Paul recounting his narrative in the Bible. As Andersen points out, these three accounts contain inconsistencies: “his traveling
companions hear the voice that speaks to him in one version, but not in another; they remain standing in one, but fall to the ground in another” (2-3). Andersen suggests that these differences reveal that every narrative act is “an exercise in emphasis,” marked by contextual pressures on the narrative and the desire of the speaker to produce different effects (3). This premise is central to this study’s two-fold approach to conversion: On the one hand, conversion is a profound experience of personal transformation (“man’s liability to sudden and complete conversion” as “one of his most curious peculiarities,” to use William James’ phrasing) and on the other hand, this experience as intrinsically constructed or discursive and always embedded in structures of power (230).

More than simply a generic form, conversion, as Peter Dorsey argues, in “its sacred and secular manifestations, is an almost inescapable construct” in Western cultures (2). As a trope, as a discourse derived from Paul’s account, conversion has “carried a privileged meaning in Western cultures,” “so privileged that it was once (and, for some, still is) called sacred, and one’s worth as a human being could be dependent upon one’s adoption of it” (2). The privileged or sacred status given to conversion can be explained, according to Julia Kristeva, by its relationship to the “fundamental desires and traumas” of the individual (IBL 43). The experience of conversion and its representation are marked as sacred because they are so intimately bound to the human processes of growth and separation; the terror and anxiety at facing mortality, what Freud describes as the “great necessities of Fate, against which there is no help”, as well as the joy and wonder experienced when an individual takes his or her place as an autonomous subject in the social world (FOI 54). Charged with such emotional intensity, conversion can become a polarized struggle between good and evil, life and death, and take on a mythical quality.
that can produce and sanction violent responses against individuals and other cultures. As a powerful practice tethered to religious structures and institutions, in this case the Christian church, conversion has been mobilized in campaigns of terror, practices of domination and colonization, and continuing imperialism and exploitation in the name of the conversion of infidels through the violent imposition of Christian faith. Conversion narratives reflect the desires of those who have the power to harness such a powerful discourse. As a privileged frame to give meaning to experiences of profound personal change or transformation, dominant forms of Christian conversion narrative structures have often forced women and marginalized, and colonized individuals to inscribe their experiences in the familiar patterns of conversion, in what Mary Mason and Felicity Nussbaum describe as a forced “imitation” of a male Christ and his disciplines (151). From this perspective, profound experiences of psychic transformation have been dominated by deeply problematic white male fantasies built into what Mason calls the “dramatic structure of conversion” found in foundational narratives such as Augustine’s *Confessions* in which “spirit defeating flesh” and a glorious identification with a (white, male) Father God “completes the drama of the self” (151)—a fantasy-structure that has been forced on others, silencing the experiences of the subjects ‘othered’ by the dominant masculine model.

However, as Dorsey suggests, as a powerful trope for self-definition, the Western model of conversion has been “widely available at different times and under different circumstances to conservatives and radicals, traditionalists, and innovators, and those in between” (2). Conversion discourse has been taken up by a multitude of voices for various ends: by anti-segregationists in narratives of what Fred Hobson calls “white racial
conversion” as part of their project to end white racism, by young black men struggling with the traumatic realities and effects of racial oppression, and by politicians seeking election (1). In each of these constructions, the narrative of conversion is entangled in important and revealing ways with the discourses, desires, and the fantasy-structures of its speaker, its time and place, and the work the narrative attempts to do. While the dominant form frames these experiences, referencing a powerful history of conversion discourse, many writers have taken up this discourse and form in potentially subversive ways. The extent to which these various uses of the conversion narrative form ‘talk back’ to the history of Western/Christian conversion or change what we might describe as the underlying fundamental fantasy-structures of conversion discourse is open to debate. In what ways, or to what extent, do these uses of conversion discourses either reflect this fantasy, or shift this powerful frame?

This study uses current reformulations of Freud’s work on melancholia, in combination with Julia Kristeva’s model of subject formation, to analyze a number of contemporary autobiographical accounts and practices that employ the rhetoric of, or claim a relation (whether explicit, implicit, or subversive) to the Christian conversion narrative or experience of conversion. From contemporary critical autobiographical studies, I take up the project of challenging the limits of the canon of conversion narratives and careful analysis of the effect of the author’s subject position—the relation of gender, race, class, and cultural context to the text. From psychoanalytic discussions, I examine the deeper fantasy-structures behind this discourse and focus on the process of conversion as a form of psychic transformation. This approach allows me to consider the complex effects of subject position without flattening the real-world differences into
rhetorical conventions, because the deeper fantasy-structures of the texts are analyzed.1

At the same time, the universalizing tendency of psychoanalytic approaches is limited because attention is paid to the effect of social location. The combined approach allows an analysis of the role of the subject’s position in relation to structures of power, including unconscious effects, while maintaining a focus on language and the constructed nature of narrative.

In order to build a critical frame to analyze the narratives selected for study I begin with Ann Anlin Cheng’s model of “racial melancholia”, which I extend using Kristeva’s discussion of ‘maternal’ melancholia into what I call “melancholic attachments”. I define these as any relation to another individual or social category marked by the dynamic of “rejection, yet attachment to” that becomes reflected in ego or social structures that work to maintain this ‘loss-but-not-loss’. I contrast these melancholic attachments with what Kristeva describes as “herethical” relations, “in which relations to the other are founded on relations to the other within the self”, that are built on the recognition of the tie that binds as well as acknowledgement of the otherness of the other (RK 8). I suggest that these herethical relations involve the transformation of melancholic attachments into what Ranjana Khanna calls “critical melancholia”—a dynamic marked by a “critical identification with the lost object” that cannot be ‘properly’ mourned or assimilated (italics mine, 22-23). I associate this possibility of

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1 My use of the terms “subjectivity,” “subject”, and “subject position,” build on Kelly Oliver formulations in The Colonization of Psychic Space (2004). “Subjectivity,” for Oliver “is experienced as the sense of agency and response-ability constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness—the realm of ethics” (xv). I retain this definition, but also emphasize the relation of “subjectivity” to the process of “subject formation” which I attach explicitly to psychoanalytic discussions of psychic development or formation. Following Oliver, “subject position” will refer to “our relations to the finite world of human history and relations—the realm of politics” (xv). I also retain Oliver’s notion of “the subject,” as “a dynamic yet stable structure that results from the interaction between the subject’s position finitude, being, and history, and subjectivity’s infinity, meaning, and historicity” (xv).
transformation, what Khanna describes as “an undoing of self”, with Kristeva’s model of “intimate revolt”: a profound logic of “return/turning back/displacement/change” that repeats, interrogates and re-elaborates the most archaic phases of subject formation, and in doing this ruptures and re-articulates the dynamic between what she calls the semiotic and the symbolic (IR 6). Revolt not only de-centers the meaning-structures of the symbolic by revealing the unity of the subject to be illusory, but can also, as Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek claim, “renew psychic life and social bonds through symbolic re-articulation, which leads to new forms of social relations, collective identifications, and representations” (3).

In her work, Kristeva carefully distinguishes “revolt”, from the Latin revolvere, a ‘return’ and ‘rolling over’, from the conversion, or conversio, turning, of the Christian man. She argues that religious conversion, the turn to religious faith that ends in “reconciliation” or “unification”, is a compromise: “a primary identification with a loving and protective agency” that is compensatory (IBL 24). It is a “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving, and protective” “breast” that is “transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world” (24). I suggest that this is a melancholic compromise marked by the splitting and fusion with the maternal part-object, which is retained in a dynamic of “rejection, yet attachment to”. Because religious conversion is built on this return to an “already-there” and a drive toward ‘wholeness’ that is achieved through the fusion with the maternal part-object, it does not represent a herethical relation, or a productive revolt. However, while there is a fundamental difference between revolt and conversion as a turn to faith that ends in an attempted ‘return’ and fusion with the other, this analysis asks whether it need always take this form. Does conversion necessarily
represent such a fusing? Are there examples of conversion in which the notion of
unification is not simply an attempt at fusion? Are there examples of conversion that end
in herethical relations that are based on the recognition of the inassimilable externalized
other? Are there conversions that do not end in a melancholic compromise but instead
open up to what Khanna calls “critical melancholia”?

This study considers three primary sites of analysis: the religious conversion of
St. Augustine as represented in his *Confessions*; John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*,
which I see as a “white conversion narrative”; and the Hip-Hop conversion testimony of
Caesar L. Willis’, *Rude Awakening*, and his associated spiritual-autobiographical dance
practice of krumping.

In my extended chapter analyses I ask whether these representations of
conversion experiences offer a more complex model of conversion that might challenge
or ‘talk back to’ conversion discourse, or whether they simply transfer a deeply
problematic melancholic attachment structure, a simple return and fusion, to different
contexts. How do these models, practices, and experiences represent the relationship
between language, specific emotions, the body, trauma or suffering, and expression,
elaboration, or release?2 How might this be understood as working with, against, or

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2 This study follows Teresa Brennan (2004) in distinguishing between “feelings” or “emotions” and
“affects”. For Brennan, feelings are “sensations that have found the right match in words” (5). For example,
according to Brennan, “when I feel angry, I feel the passage of anger through me” and I may call this the
feeling or emotion of “anger” (5). While feelings and emotions may be attached to specific conventional
terms, what she calls “affects” are not so easily captured in language. In one sense, the word affect
describes “surges of emotion or passion” (5) before they become “narrativisable” as “emotions”, to use
Brian Massumi’s (2002) term (221). According to Brennan’s model, while these surges of emotion are
experienced individually, affect is transmitted between bodies (through atmosphere, smell, and touch). This
circulation and transmission of affect is also inherently political because it is embedded within power
relations. Brennan’s model of the transmission of affect complicates psychoanalytic models of projection
and incorporation (particularly Melanie Klein’s) by combining them with a feminist perspective on gender
relations. She argues that the Western foundational fantasy of a contained ego, or the illusion of a unified
subject, is maintained through the projection of some (often unwanted) affects and the incorporation of
through melancholia and melancholic attachments? Do some converts represent or reconfigure their relationship to the other in a way that meets the ideal of a herethical relationship based on recognition of the stranger within, a *critical* melancholia, or do their attachments represent a melancholic attachment to specific individuals or categories of people? In the case of Griffin and Willis, how are their experiences of conversion and their representations of this experience entangled with racial relations in the United States?

While these texts vary in social and historical context, these particular narratives were selected for analysis because they relate to, represent, or take up the rhetoric of the Christian conversion narrative or experience of conversion. While some of the texts chosen for study may be outside the context of traditional discussions of conversion, they all represent experiences marked by the radically transformative effect associated with conversion, described by John E. Smith as a “change that so radically and completely alters the being of the person that we are inclined to speak of a ‘new’ person being involved” (55). To use St. Paul’s phrasing, it is an alteration so complete that it makes sense to speak of the birth of “a new creature” (Galatians 6:15). Each of these texts, then, tells a story of an “encompassing transformation that touches every facet of an individual’s life—physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and political” (Schauffler 6).

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other affects that are projected or transmitted into the individual and the atmosphere. In this scenario if I feel angry I may project or transmit this anger to you, and you may internalize it and begin to feel afraid, depressed, or angry. In a patriarchal society, it is often the privilege of male subjects to transmit negative affects to others while women may be forced to internalize them. Similarly, because of racism and oppression unwanted affects of the privileged white subjects may be transmitted to the racialized other. As Frantz Fanon (1968) famously described it, the anger and aggressiveness of the colonizer is “deposited in the bones” (52) of the colonized, and this transmission can lead to “bloodthirsty explosions” including “feuds” and “quarrels” (54).
In order to narrow down such a wide expanse of possible examples, all the texts selected represent, in psychological terms, what H. Roberts Bagwell describes as “abrupt” conversions (174). All of them represent examples of conversion in which there is a “sense of crisis and subsequent resolution is experienced within hours or days” following the conversion (174 n 12). This is not to say that these conversions do not develop over a length of time (in fact, this analysis will focus on the process of these transformations) but simply that the individual’s conflict peaks in a “crisis” that is ‘resolved’ through a conversion which includes a discrete moment of profound, abrupt, transformation. The climax of conversion is represented as intensely emotional and includes an ‘imaginary’ experience of some kind: an encounter with an imaginary figure, a vision or voice, which may be understood as the voice of God. While all of these conversions are marked by conscious and voluntary elements (whether a spiritual search, chosen journey, or aesthetic crafting), which are elements of what James calls “volitional” conversion, they all centralize the involuntary, emotional expression (what he calls the moment of “spontaneous conversion”) as the primary site of change, and this will therefore be a central site of analysis (210).

The choice to focus on male authors here is in response to the need to analyze the role of gender in complex relation to other structures more specifically than has been previously done in literary or psychological studies of conversion narratives. While conversion narratives by women would entail a different perspective, masculine accounts are the basis for most of the existing studies of conversion. The experience of conversion and its representation, how it is made sense of by the masculine subject, is always bound up with the relation to the maternal object, the feminine other, as well as categories of
race, class, and sexuality. While some studies of conversion narratives are comparative, considering narratives by both women and men, the need to scrutinize the implication of a masculine subject position remains, particularly as it relates to the role of whiteness and experiences of racialization. Contemporary models of racial melancholia and feminist psychoanalytic work on gender and subject formation offer the critical tools necessary to analyze the fantasy-structures of these masculine narratives, and how notions of racial and sexual difference are linked to masculinity in complex ways. In other words, masculinity and femininity are mutually constitutive notions that interlock with structures of racial difference and oppression, notions of whiteness and privilege, heterosexuality and heterosexism, and capitalism and class formations. I therefore strive to examine how these relations are configured and reconfigured in these male/masculine conversion texts, depending on the author’s specific subject position and socio-political contexts, to show how the fantasies that underpin the conversion of each subject are intrinsically shaped by his social location. More specifically, this study critically engages with psychoanalytic based reading of the experience of conversion and then uses this reconfigured understanding of conversion to analyze two contemporary conversion texts in order to draw out connections between masculinity, racial difference, and conversion as represented by these texts. I ask whether in each case the turn to faith in a Father God has the same psychological effect or ethical implications. Does the maternal object function in the same way in the conversion of all the men analyzed despite their differences?
Narratives of Conversion: A Review of the Debates

The study of conversion is a complex and diverse field, as Lewis Rambo’s noted bibliographical overview, “Current Research in Religious Conversion” (1982), attests. Turning through the many pages of Rambo’s extensive bibliographic overview, with listings from a range of disciplines, offers a potent material experience of the multiple, sometimes overlapping, often contradictory, approaches to the study of conversion.

Generally, the modern secular study of conversion narratives can be characterized by a split between those that examine the psychological, psychic, or cultural mechanism or function of conversion, which is understood to be represented in conversion narratives, and those that study the conventions of these texts through various framings such as semiotic analysis or study of their rhetoric. In the following section, I briefly outline and position my approach in relation to these broad categories of the study of conversion. First, I trace the evolution of the study of conversion as a study of self-writing. In response to this history, I outline my use of contemporary models of melancholia, in order to speak specifically to the role of subject positions in these conversion narratives. Second, I draw out aspects of the psychoanalytic/psychological study of conversion, and position Kristeva’s analysis of conversion within this history of thought. Finally, I offer a critical approach that opens up Kristeva’s model to a wider discussion of conversion.
Conversion Narratives and Subject Positions

All discussions of conversion are marked by a tension between investment in the idea that conversion is a universal mechanism of change that exists across time and space, and a view that conversion is specific to individuals, and is affected by its context and production as a narrative. Early secular studies tended to emphasize the universal aspects to the exclusion of discussions of the particular. Critical interventions by feminist, post-colonial, post-modern, and African-American scholars working in this field have led to a shift toward a more complex and critical analysis of the relationship between larger overarching structures, the trans-historical aspects of conversion, as well as a focus on the specific effects of subject positions and the text as a constructed narrative. However, this relationship between the universal and particular continues to be a fraught one.

Historically, spiritual autobiographies, and conversion narratives as part of this genre, are intrinsically bound to the study of autobiography as a whole: much early biographical and autobiographical writing is in the form of spiritual autobiography or testimonies of conversion, and it could be argued that the study of these texts instituted the study of autobiography. Many of the early pre-1960 secular scholarly discussions of conversion narratives as self-writing involve the formation of an authorized tradition: the collection and interpretation of ‘great lives,’ largely authored by white European men. The conversions that figure prominently include biblical figures, church leaders, and conversion texts of particular literary merit: St. Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, and later C.S Lewis. These early studies most often focus on, argue for, or expound the artistic or spiritual merits of these texts. In general, these early
works assume a universal, often religious, mechanism of conversion. By and large they suggest a transparent and direct relation between the text and the reality of the experience: often the inspiration for the writing is attributed to God. This divine hand secures the author’s voice, and by extension the white masculine position, as universal. The attention these authors pay to the construction of the text is primarily in the form of traditional literary analysis, i.e. the literary style or conventions of the telling.

The publication of Roy Pascal’s *Truth and Design in Autobiography* in 1960 marked an important shift in this focus in autobiographical studies. Pascal’s text offered a more complicated notion of autobiography: that it is not simply the documentation of reality. However, as David Leigh explains, Pascal continued to support a model of autobiography that assumed a cohesive progression toward perfection and assigned an essential spirit to the writer, who attempted to reveal or express it. While Pascal offered a more complex way to approach the study of these texts, they were still primarily judged on the author’s achievement of self-expression and coherence. Leigh summarizes Pascal’s position:

> Autobiography in its pure form is the reconstruction of the unified movement of one life from a coherent viewpoint. In this movement, the past and present interpenetrate in such a way that outer events reveal the inner spirit of the person, and inner growth is reflected in symbolic outer events (xi).

Further, as Arnold Rampersad writes, Pascal’s work suffered from the “grave limitation” “that almost all of the insights about the form have to do with male autobiography and not the self-generated life stories of women” (2). In particular, the authors are all white men.

This frame of analysis dramatically shifted in the 1970s, beginning with the intervention of feminist, African-American, and post-colonial scholars working in the
field who insisted on a re-evaluation of ‘the Canon’ and further challenged the assumed
universality and transparency of the ‘divine’ voice of these narratives. The early 1970s
saw a blossoming of critical work on autobiography in North America and Europe and a
shift in perspective that took hold in the early 1980s. This period produced not only
excavation of the archives for texts that had been ignored or suppressed, but also a
fundamental challenging of the terms of inclusion, and the very notion of a canon. Many
feminist critics of autobiography argued that the canon of self-writing had been
dominated by spiritual autobiography and conversion narratives by white men and that
this excluded writing that did not follow this format, which some writers argued was
explicitly masculine. For example, in one of the important collections of scholarship
published during this time, *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* (1988), Mary
Mason claimed that self-writing built on Augustine’s model does not represent a pattern
of a life that women’s lives tend to follow. In this sense, according to Mason as well as
other critics like Carolyn Heilbrun, conversion discourse itself, which had fundamentally
shaped autobiography studies and the canon, is a specifically masculine narrative
structure. Mason writes:

> The dramatic structure of conversion that we find in Augustine’s *Confessions*,
where the self is presented as the stage for a battle of opposing forces and where a
climactic victory for one force—spirit defeating flesh—completes the drama of
the self, simply does not accord to the deepest realities of women’s experience
and so is inappropriate as a model for women’s life writing (21-22).

According to Felicity Nussbaum, these discourses led women to follow patterns that were
not specific to their own experiences but modeled in relation to male examples. Since
these discourses did not reflect women’s experience they do not offer a model of
empowerment for women. As Nussbaum states:
Religious women adopted the mode of discourse established by their (male) religious leaders […]. They inscribed themselves, or were inscribed, in the familiar patterns of awakening, conversion, and ministry, their ‘selves’ shaped in imitation of Christ and his (male) disciples (151).

Sidonie Smith builds from this: “while the biblical tradition offered a template for individual conversion and spiritual growth, it could not clear a space for the figure of an empowered female selfhood” (6).

This debate led to calls for the inclusion in the canon of autobiographical narratives by women, an examination of ‘women’s ways’ of experiencing and interpreting, or writing, their lives, and analysis of the ways in which women have subverted patriarchal forms in order to write themselves in, or write or ‘talk back’ to these limiting discourses. There followed increased critical engagement with autobiographical writing of predominantly white women of various social classes, sexual orientations, and ages, and calls for women to ‘write’ their lives: to use autobiography as a political tool to break the silence concerning women’s experiences.

In a parallel way, during this time scholars in African-American studies, including Henry Louis Gates Jr., Nelly McKay, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Sidonie Smith, and bell hooks, were following a similar project of excavation and collection of key autobiographical texts by African-American writers that had not previously received the critical attention they deserved. Some critics were drawing out a more complex relationship between conversion narratives and freedom narratives, or slave narratives, which employ and subvert the structures of the canon; others were articulating specifically African-American models of spiritual transformation, world-view, or critical perspectives. This multiplication of voices and perspectives declared the necessity for a
fundamental re-evaluation of the concept of a singular canon of life-writing and spiritual autobiography, which began to emerge.

The work of these critics, alongside post-colonial, post-modern, and post-structuralist work in the 1980s, with which many feminist and critical scholars were also engaged, further widened the scope of study, challenged the essentialist models of the subject used in the earlier studies (including those by some early feminist and African-American scholars), and refocused discussion onto the role of the ‘particular’ of social position and location and the powerful effects of language itself. The introduction of ‘post’ theoretical work was marked in autobiography studies by further calls to open the frame of study to texts outside North America and Europe. Critical attention was directed at the structures of power in producing these ‘texts’, particularly the complex interlocking structures and histories of gender, race, and sexuality-based oppressions, alongside colonization, immigration, and ‘difference’. The focus turned to subjects whose work had not received wide critical attention from academics, particularly diasporic, mixed race, and (post)colonial subjects, producing criticism emphasizing the hybridity, fluidity, or fragmented nature of the identity of any given author, provoking the radical questioning of the relationship between the text and the subject. Any easy claims to a direct relationship between the narrative and the ‘reality’ of the experience of conversion were abandoned. Increasingly, from this point on, meaning is viewed as contested, identity as fragmented and shifting, and all texts as embedded in power structures.

The second-wave of the study of conversion narratives, since the early 1990s, is marked by a proliferation of approaches with a notable trend toward comparative studies. In general, these studies are marked by a more complex and critical view of identity and
the consideration of an ever-expanding canon of spiritual autobiography as contested and constructed. The tension remains between larger, overarching perspectives and attention to the particular: some studies are marked by a problematic universalizing via a detour through the particular, while others, conversely, are marked by an extreme focus on the particular, leaving no way to position the analysis in any larger frame. For example, Peter Stromberg’s *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (1993) offers an admirable analysis of the specific micro-contexts of each of the narratives he studies, using detailed transcripts from the interviews he conducted with born-again Christians in the Los Angeles area. He emphasizes the performative aspect of the language of conversion testimonies in creating and shifting the subject’s identifications. However, as a result of his micro approach he is unable to offer any specific comment on how an individual’s relationship to conversion discourse and use of it may be influenced by the larger social context, including differences in gender, race, and class. Further, while he refers to the emotional aspects of the narratives, his language-based approach undermines the role of affect in the experiences of his interviewees and completely ignores the role the body plays both in the conversion process and in producing the narrative.

At the other end of the spectrum, Dana Anderson’s more recent *Identity’s Strategy: Rhetorical Selves in Conversion* (2007) continues the project of challenging the limits of the canon. Anderson includes texts that describe secular conversions, specifically changes in political ideology, or gender, and citizenship status, alongside explicitly religious ones. However, while Anderson’s project enlarges the scope of what may be considered narratives of conversion, his analysis overemphasizes the similarity
between these diverse texts. He turns conversion into a kind of trans-historic yet
rhetoricized, semi-secularized model of change: the particular differences in each of the
experiences are lost.

In *Sacred Estrangement: The Rhetoric of Conversion in Modern American
Autobiography* (1993) Peter Dorsey attaches specific conversion narratives to historical
and social contexts, in order to track what he sees as a shift in the socializing function of
conversion—from bringing the individual into a group, to what he calls “sacred
estrangement” (8). Dorsey’s study includes religious, spiritual, and political conversion
narratives by male, female, white, and African-American writers, including Henry
Adams, Henry and William James, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ellen Glasgow,
and Edith Wharton. Dorsey does an impressive job of drawing out what he sees as a
larger shift in conversion narratives toward a process of “anti-socialization” that ‘allows’
the convert to have a certain distance from mainstream society—a kind of “alienation”
(8). He attempts to pay attention to the specifics of social location in order to achieve his
“goal” of “specific readings of specific texts”, but he is less successful in this respect, as
his larger structure of sacred estrangement does not succeed in maintaining the tension
between the universal and the specific (12). A problematic conflation occurs in what he
terms “alienation”. The specific experiences of subjects of different genders, experiences
of racialization, and social classes, become homogenized under this blanket-term (12).
Dorsey seems to be aware of this concern, as in his introduction he writes:

That writers such as Hurston, Wright, Glasgow, and Wharton would see
themselves in this way [as alienated, ‘on the margin’] might be expected; and one
is more likely to be sympathetic to their feelings of alienation than to those of the
two Jameses or—least of all—to Henry Adams, the grandson of an American
president. Yet all of these figures felt excluded from a mainstream culture they do
not take great pains to identify. The America they feel separated from is almost without center (12).

While Dorsey recognizes that there may be a difference in the readers’ sympathy, or collusion with the idea that all these particular authors have the right to claim status as alienated or marginalized, he does not question whether what he calls their “alienation”, as related to their conversion, their “sacred estrangement,” might be configured differently because of these differences. For example, Dorsey does not even gesture to the possible link between Adam’s estrangement or alienation and his position as a white, wealthy, political figure who was facing the loss of social and political power. Further, as many authors have shown, Adams felt that his loss of social and political power was directly caused by immigration, particularly of Jews. I would suggest that this makes his conversion radically different from Richard Wright’s, for example: different in terms of their experience of alienation, as well as the emotional and political costs and rewards of their “estrangements”.

Secondly, when a spiritual autobiography written by a woman, Wharton’s Backward Glance, does not follow the pattern of the others, Dorsey positions it as an exception, and literally puts her work in brackets (11). He does not inquire if perhaps the exception may disprove the rule, or if a more detailed analysis of gender constructions

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3 According to Robert Michael, Adams once wrote: “I detest [the Jews], and everything connected with them, and I live solely with the hope of seeing their demise, with all their accursed Judaism. I want to see all the lenders at interest taken out and executed” (in Michael, 116). Adams specifically linked the Jewish immigrants to his own alienation and distrust of the entire political system, as shown in Edward Saveth’s American Historians and European Immigrants:

‘We are at the hands of the Jews,’ Adams lamented. ‘They can do what they please with our values’. He advised against investment except in the form of gold locked in a safety deposit box.
‘There you have no risk but the burglar. In any other form you have the burglar, the Jew, the Czar, the socialist, and above all, the total irredeemable, radical rottenness of our whole social, industrial, financial and political system’ (74).
could offer an explanation. In other words, Dorsey reads Wharton’s conversion, which is marked by a drive to “belong” and be included in “a ‘saved’ community”, as an exception, without asking whether the process of conversion as a form of anti-socialization typical of the male examples may have a gendered component (10-11). He does surmise that it was different for women, but fails to examine the exception to his rule as revealing the intrinsically gendered nature of the structure of the narrative.

While Dorsey’s argument for what he calls “sacred estrangement” is interesting in its attempt to attach conversion to specific contexts and reveal its shifting nature, he does not sufficiently speak to the differences in the texts he studies. He not only disregards the specificity of women writers, but also enfolds all the experiences represented by white and black, men and women, into the same notion of “alienation” (8). While he claims that African-American male writers use the conversion discourse differently from white men, “subversively”, his model of conversion discourse itself remains intact, despite the margin’s attempts at subversion (8). The relationship between white writers, particularly white male writers, and conversion discourse is naturalized. It remains transparent because there is no attention paid to the relationships among whiteness, white privilege, and conversion discourse.

While recent comparative work on conversion and spiritual autobiography often includes texts by women and men from different ethnicities, and to a lesser extent different classes and sexual orientations, there remains a need to draw out the role of the subject’s position as embedded in power structures which are reflected, reproduced, and potentially contested, in these narratives. Any discussion of whiteness and masculinity in relation to conversion narratives is conspicuously absent even from these recent studies.
There remains a tendency to naturalize the relationship between these categories and the conversion form in a way that does not interrogate this link, or draw out its contours, to reveal how, and why, they are bound together so closely. Furthermore, while a focus on language as constructed and contested is necessary, reducing the subject’s experience to an effect of language is limiting. Attention needs to be paid to the “material and imaginative realities” of gender and racialized structures, as Anlin Cheng puts it (xi). By this I mean that the imaginary or fantasy structures that underpin representations—the imaginary meanings and effect of this ‘language’—as well the role that the body and emotions play in these narrative-experiences must be analyzed. A direct or simple relationship between material reality and its representation must not be reinstated, but the material effects of the subject’s position embedded in power structures need to be critically considered. These, as Kelly Oliver (2004) points out, have “unconscious effects” producing emotional and embodied realities (xxi). I suggest that attention to these embodied effects is particularly necessary in analyzing conversion narratives that often emphasize the role of emotion and include ‘imaginary’ phenomena. To do this, as Oliver claims, requires a theory that “works between the psyche and the social” (xiv). To this end, I approach these narratives of conversion through a critical reworking of contemporary models of “racial melancholia,” infused with an engagement with gender.

**Melancholia, Masculinity, and Conversion**

In recent years the psychoanalytic concept of “melancholia,” particularly Freud’s distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia,” has received new currency among critical theorists. According to postcolonial critic Ranjana Khanna, this “enormous body of recent work […]” derives from an interest in psychoanalysis on the one hand, and
Benjaminian theories on the other,” particularly Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and “Left-wing Melancholy” (15 n.5). Artificially splitting the trajectories of these two influences, two discernable tendencies emerge in this scholarship: the use of melancholia as a ‘diagnostic’ model, on the one hand, and melancholia (as that which refuses mourning) as a political or ethical tool on the other. Post-colonial theorists, for example, have expanded Freud’s formulation from a focus on the individual and psychopathology to examine intersubjective dynamics and social processes. Some argue, to cite David Eng and Shanhee Han (2003), that “melancholia might be thought of as underpinning our everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization” (344). Some post-colonial authors, such as Cheng, use melancholia primarily to diagnose racial dynamics and discuss the devastating effect of being forced to grieve a lost object that is an idealized image of one’s self. Others emphasize, as Eng and Han do, that while Freud “casts melancholia as pathological”, “the melancholic’s inability to ‘get over’ loss” can also be read as a revolt against the demand to relinquish this loved object (364). In other words, for Eng and Han “the melancholic’s inability to relinquish the other” delineates a “psychic process in which the loved object is so overwhelmingly important to and beloved by the ego that the ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost of its own self” (364). According to these authors, this is a process in which the threatened object may then be retained through the “aggressive and militant preservation of the loved and lost object”, and in this way it is politically productive because it is “one way in which socially disparaged objects—racially and sexually deprived others—live on in the psychic realm (364). According to Eng and David Kazanjian (2003), what they term “racial melancholia” “indexes the ego’s militant
refusal to allow certain objects to disappear into oblivion”, while for Cheng “racial melancholia” represents the “double loss” of the racialized subject who is forced to encrypt a disparaging image of him or herself in the face of an impossible ideal (16).

My analysis does not attempt to resolve the tension between these two definitions, but instead echoes Douglas Crimp in his call for the necessity for “mourning and militancy” (10). In other words, following Eng and Lee I argue that “loss is symptomatic of ego formation, for both dominant as well as marginalized subjects”, and that the crucial point to investigate “is the social and psychic status of that lost object, idealized or devalued, and the ways in which that lost object can or cannot be reinstated into the psychic life of the individual in order to rebuild an internal world” (363). As part of this discussion, further analysis is needed of how the status of the lost object is always intrinsically linked to gender, class, and sexuality in complex ways, particularly concerning the subject’s relationship with the maternal object which is the initial ‘lost object’ (10). In other words, I do not wish to suggest that there can be an end to the act of mourning, or militancy—a forgetting—but I do emphasize ‘the return’ of the lost object to psychic life, and to the social/ symbolic order, and therefore the possibility of sublimation. The elaboration of psychic trauma calls for the necessary critical transformation of what I call melancholic attachments into “critical melancholia”, which will take different forms depending on the specific context.

More specifically, in this study I use Cheng’s model of “racial melancholia”, in conjunction with Oliver’s notion of “social melancholy” and then extend Kristeva’s discussion of melancholia to set up what I call “melancholic attachments”. I define these as any relation to another individual or group marked by the dynamic of “rejection, yet
attachment to” that becomes reflected in ego or specific social structures. I contrast these melancholic attachments with what Kristeva describes as “herethical relations” to others, built on the recognition of both “the tie that binds” and the unassimilable “differences between”. I suggest that these herethical relations involve the transformation of melancholic attachments into what Khanna calls “critical melancholia”, in a dynamic marked by a “critical identification with the lost object” that cannot be ‘properly’ mourned or assimilated (italics mine, 22-23).

In The Melancholy of Race (2001), Cheng builds on Freud’s work to construct a model of what she calls “racial melancholia” (xi). Cheng argues that this model can be useful in understanding racial relations in the context of the United States, because it “tracks a dynamic of rejection and internalization” that makes two particular aspects of American racial culture legible:

[...] dominant, white culture’s rejection of, yet attachment to, the racial other, and [...] the ramifications that such a paradox holds for the racial other, who has been placed in a suspended position (xi).

Articulating her model both at the level of the individual and nation, Cheng argues that this melancholic paradox lies at the centre of the “technology and nightmare of the American dream,” in other words, the construction of the American nation, as well as cultural and individual identity and the process of subject formation.

In her reading of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” Cheng argues that while melancholia “denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment” in Freud’s work, by “taking in the other-made-ghostly, the melancholic subject, in fact, fortifies him- or herself and grows rich in impoverishment” (8). In this sense, melancholia is compensatory, and building from this, following Freud, constitutive of the ego: by
“devouring” the lost object, the subject may then sustain itself and take possession of the object. Cheng argues that the “swallowed object”, which takes on the “feelings of rage, guilt and punishment originally attached to the initial object of loss and disappointment”, produces a relationship that is marked “no longer by just love or nostalgia but also profound resentment” (8-9). Cheng takes this one step further than Freud’s original formulation by arguing for the transformation of loss into “active” exclusion:

What Freud does not address in this essay but what must be a consequence of this psychical drama is the multiple layers of denial and exclusion that the melancholic must exercise in order to maintain this elaborate structure of loss-but-not-loss (8).

The melancholic subject/ego must defensively protect its source of sustenance by refusing to mourn the lost object, or acknowledge the active presence of (the ‘lost’ and unassimilable) Other external to the subject (10). What she calls the “melancholic subject” retains the “melancholic object” as a source of imaginary nutrients, while disavowing this reliance. This includes attempts to deny the melancholic object (in this case the racial Other) access to processes of meaning-making and idealization, entailing the creation of positive images that reflect a diversity of experiences and cultural ideals, as well as access to the means of production. These denials are coupled with a disavowal of the “elaborate structures” of oppression which benefit the white dominant subject (10).

Cheng argues that this melancholic dynamic plays out at the level of the individual and in the construction of the American nation. According to Cheng, at the level of nation, melancholia describes “both an American ideological dilemma and its constitutional practices” (11). She argues that the “peculiar and uneasy dynamic of retaining a denigrated but sustaining loss […] resonates most acutely against the
mechanisms of the racial imaginary as they have been fashioned in this country” (10).

She explains:

Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others (10).

This “exclusion-yet-retention” of an object that becomes “denigrated” and embodied in the form of the racial other, is termed by Cheng, “the melancholic bind.” According to Cheng, this leads to the “melancholic suspension” of the racialized other (as melancholic incorporated object). In the context of the United States, this functions through the “national topography of centrality and marginality” which is legitimated through the retroactive and eternal “positing of the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation” (10). From here, “legal exclusion” naturalizes “the more complicated loss of the unassimilable racial other” and “melancholic suspension” becomes repetitively literalized through various examples of segregation and exclusion on a national scale, and simultaneous, aggressive attempts at assimilation (10).

Secondly, Cheng argues that “the history of American national idealism has always been caught in the melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection”—a history she claims illustrates “how loss is processed and then secured as exclusion” (10). Cheng suggests that “while all nations have their repressed histories and traumatic atrocities,” American melancholia “is particularly acute because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over” (10). In other words, America, a country founded on the proposition, “all men created equal,” is simultaneously, a nation “built on a series of legalized exclusions (of African Americans, Jewish Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and so
on) and the labor provided by those excluded” (10). According to Stern, quoted in Cheng, these “invisible Americans interred beneath the great national edifice whose erection they enable,” produce an “unquiet platform for the construction of republican privilege” and this “disturbs the Federalist monolith in powerful ways”—disruptions made visible in various kinds of defensive melancholic eruptions by the ruling class, and interruptions by those they have attempted to inter (13). According to Cheng, this history and continuing dynamic, “constitute an unresolved issue in the evolution of American democracy” and limits the usefulness of attempts by racialized individuals and groups to address this reality through, what she calls, “grievance” (x), as well as straightforward demands for “public recognition” or reparation (174).

On the other side of this dynamic, racialized others, as melancholic objects, are subject to a “double loss” (175). In an argument that recalls Frantz Fanon’s description of the trauma of “epidermalization” (100), according to Cheng, the racialized subject encounters and internalizes an idealized image that represents what she describes as “an impossible perfection,” an ideal image that is unattainable for the racial Other, as well as denigrated representations of their own ‘likeness’ leading to a form of “racial melancholia” (72). Cheng sums this up thus: melancholia, for the racialized subject, is "the condition of having to incorporate and encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self" (72). While I agree with Cheng’s characterization of the melancholic

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4 Cheng’s use of “incorporation” and “encryption” follow Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s (1994) reworking of Freud’s use of the terms. Contrary to Freud, Abraham and Torok use the term “introjection” to refer to an ongoing process that allows for the assimilation of events (objects and abstractions) which are “‘lost through the passage of time’ into a self-generating life-story” (description in Khanna 23-24). The process described by Abraham and Torok as introjection resembles Freud’s notion of mourning. In Abraham and Torok’s model if objects are “incorporated,” swallowed whole instead of introjected, this can cause a “breakdown in signification that “manifests itself linguistically in terms of silence or demetaphorization” (24). In other words, if a loss of an object or traumatic experience cannot be
subject, I use Oliver’s notion of “social melancholy”, as outlined in her *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (2004), to challenge Cheng’s claim that the melancholic object necessarily “incorporates lack” (175). Oliver argues that “oppression and domination undermine the ability [of those considered Other] to sublimate by withholding or foreclosing the possibility of articulating and thereby discharging bodily drives and affects”, particularly what she calls the “affects of oppression” including depression, anger, shame and rage (xix). This lack of “social support” and “spaces of sublimation” leads to these “bodily drives and affects being turned inward, which ultimately leads to depression and self-hatred”, what she calls “social melancholy,” unless these very affects can be “turned or returned into resistance and fortifying strategies” (43). While Oliver’s model of social melancholy is in many respects similar to Cheng’s concept of “racial melancholia”, Oliver’s discussion of sublimation productively complicates debates about the internalization or incorporation by racialized subjects of the negative images and damaging ideals circulating in the dominant culture. Shifting the focus to sublimation emphasizes possibilities for resistance by making it clear that the dynamic Cheng so convincingly draws out between the melancholic subject and melancholic object is not simply a static formation, but in process. Oliver’s model also allows for a more complex discussion of other identity structures, such as class. While racial oppression affects all subjects, access to means, to social spaces of sublimation and the process of idealization, is dependent on and

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assimilated, it may be incorporated and encrypted. The crypt is created when there is a loss that is inaccessible to the work of mourning, and also refers to the site inside of the subject where the lost object is preserved (24). According to Abraham and Torok, “this block can be carried through generations as a phantom that haunts speech, unbeknownst to its carrier”—a phantom that must be “brought back into unhindered signification through assimilation” (24).
mitigated by factors such as class and gender that the model of social melancholy can help to frame.

While Cheng uses this model to diagnose racial relations in the United States, in this study I use Kristeva’s discussions of melancholia to extend Cheng’s model to include the relationship to the maternal object (which is the ‘original’ object that may be lost-but-not-lost, held in the melancholic bind). Kristeva’s work allows me to examine gender in a more complex way and to further complicate the binary distinction Cheng produces between melancholic subject and melancholic object.

For Kristeva, the ‘lost’ object of the melancholic is always the maternal object: as part of the process of subject formation the original relationship with the maternal object must be lost, mourned, and found, “imprinted” or “transposed” into language, the symbolic (BS 40). In this process, what Oliver calls “the maternal container” must be lost or relinquished, Kristeva would say “abjected”, and the dimensions of that relationship imprinted into the symbolic via the entrance of “the father of prehistory”, who is a third term linked to the formation of narcissism and the archaic pattern of the relation to the Other. Ideally, this process produces what she calls “live meaning” and the possibility of an ethical sociality: Kristeva’s “herethics”, “an ethics, in which relations to the other are founded on relations to the other within the self”, a model of which can be found in the heterogeneity of pregnancy (RK 8).

Building on Cheng’s ideas, I argue that the melancholic subject who fails to transpose the interchange, the relationship with the maternal, instead splits the maternal object into two, into ideal and denigrated part-objects. The melancholic subject retains a reliance on the maternal part-objects, but disavows this reliance, which keeps the
maternal object, the mother, in a suspended position in a way that mirrors Cheng’s model of racial melancholia. If we enlarge this dynamic from the scene of subject formation, the taking of the mother as a melancholic object has particular gendered effects. It allows the subject who takes the masculine position to maintain the mother as a source of imaginary nutrients, a means to access primary narcissism. However, for the female child who resembles this maternal object, holding the mother captive, feasting on the mother’s remains while remaining tethered to her, does not offer the same benefits. The female subject then becomes associated with this split (m)other, divided into abject and ideal. Kristeva’s model of melancholia productively complicates the binary divide between melancholic object and melancholic subject as associated only with the dominant, white subject vs. racialized subject because it draws out the link between melancholia and the initial process of subject formation that all subjects experience. This allows for what I call “melancholic attachments” to be revealed in a multitude of situations and variously in relationship to gender, race, class, and sexuality because it generalizes the process, while allowing the specifics of the dynamics to be analyzed.

In order to achieve a herethical relationship, I suggest that these melancholic attachments must be transformed into what Khanna describes as “critical melancholia”. More specifically, in her reading of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Khanna emphasizes what she calls, following Freud, the “critical agency” that emerges when an object is incorporated and cannot be ‘properly’ mourned or ‘assimilated’ (22):

While melancholia is paralyzing in Freud’s terms, the inassimilable paradoxically becomes the site of what Freud calls ‘critical agency.’ This form of agency, he suggests, is rather like ‘conscience’ (22).
Khanna follows Freud’s development of this notion of ‘critical agency’ in his essay “On Narcissism,” where Freud makes a link between what he termed “critical agency” and the creation of the ego-ideal. This is, in Khanna’s terms, “the combination of an idealized self image and the values of the parents and collective”—an ideal that functions as compensation for the necessary loss of primary narcissism in the process of oedipalization in Freud’s model (22). Khanna follows a path related to Cheng’s in terms of articulating a model of ‘racial melancholia’: both argue that the process of subject formation leads to “the burden of melancholia” for the racialized subject (22). However, while Khanna acknowledges the debilitating effect of inhabiting the space of the other, of melancholia, she emphasizes instead the effect of this in relation to a “critical agency” that she terms “Echo.” She argues:

If such an ideal were lost, it follows, then, that such critical agency, manifested as anger, would be turned inward if the loss could not be assimilated by performing the work of mourning successfully. This critical identification with the lost object constitutes the burden of melancholia, and indeed the traumatic undoing of self and lost object as a result (22).

This “undoing of self” produces an “Echo” that interrupts the narcissism of the subject. In Khanna’s model this echo is both a “burden” and cause for instability (at least partially because of its relationship to the paralyzing effect of melancholy), while simultaneously it allows for a critical perspective—in this case, there is a “critical identification with the lost object” (italics mine 23). Khanna’s model can be related to notions of “double consciousness” found in the work of writers such as W.E B. Dubois, Albert Memmi, and Fanon. However, it remains unclear how she imagines that this melancholic critical agency is established, stabilized, and deployed. What structural features stabilize the ego, allowing it not to succumb to a paralyzing internalization of a limited access to
idealization, or incorporation of a denigrated representation of the self? How do class, caste, or gender privilege function here, for instance? While one may be convinced that a kind of ‘critical agency’ may in fact be the most ethical subjective stance, one must ask, as Cheng does, “what are the conditions and the expenses for supporting such double consciousness?” (26). And secondly, how might access to this ethical position, this critical melancholia, be different for those dominant subjects whose narcissism is not undone, or injured, but who instead see themselves reflected in the idealized image?

In my analysis, Khanna’s critical melancholia as the “undoing of self” that produces an “Echo” that interrupts the narcissism of the subject is juxtaposed with Kristeva’s model of “revolt” as the profound logic of “return/turning back/displacement/change” that puts the subject on trial and allows for a “rupture and re-articulation” of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic (IR 6). Kristeva’s model of revolt is a process in which the symbolic can be reconnected with the semiotic from a position that is “irretrievably symbolic” and therefore for “interrogation”, so that the subject can achieve a critical relationship to this process (6). Importantly, Kristeva’s model of revolt is a process of transformation that happens in, and allows for, the rupture and turning over of the symbolic, and can shift the subject’s relationship to language and sociality. Revolt is a process necessary for all subjects—dominant and marginalized. While Khanna’s model of critical melancholia is ideal for all, the way to it for the dominant subject is not clear in her text, neither is a stabilizing process in which the echo and anger of the colonial melancholic can be elaborated.5 Kristeva’s model of revolt connects the

5 Khanna does offer a model of how the “colonial melancholic” may mobilize a specific position—the burden and echo of being other. For Khanna it is the vocation of this new figure to read “how the melancholic remainder manifests itself through haunting,” because this “allows for the haunting justice
semiotic to the symbolic, offering another way to change the symbolic structures by mobilizing the anger and echo without collapsing the differences between dominant and marginalized individuals. Combining these two models allows for the subject’s attachment-style to be evaluated: do the converts represent or reconfigure their relationship to the other in a way that meets the ideal of a herethical relationship based on recognition of the stranger within? Or do the attachments of these writers represent melancholic attachments to specific individuals or categories of people who are rejected, yet retained as a source of psychic nourishment that is disavowed?

**Psychological/ Psychoanalytic Models of Conversion**

In order to position this study in a history of the psychological and psychoanalytic study of conversion, I will offer a brief chronological sketch of specific aspects of the study of conversion in general that help to frame Kristeva’s discussion.

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affectively summoned by the unrepresentable subaltern” (19). According to Khanna “to do away with the [melancholic/ subaltern] remainder would be an impossible and unethical assimilation of otherness, a denial of loss and of an engagement with the damage brought about by that loss,” therefore, mourning at a personal and collective level is never complete—mourning, according to Khanna, using Derrida’s terms, is “impossible” (24). Following from this, the role of the melancholic intellectual is to continuously hear (or read) the “subaltern call for justice” (25).

The translation of Khanna’s model into the work of Postcolonial and Subaltern studies may appear, in one sense, quite simple. Her work *Dark Continents*, which attempts to read “psychoanalysis symptomatically” to “understand it as a masculinist and colonial discipline that promoted an idea of Western subjectivity in opposition to a colonized, feminine, and primitive other” who may clearly be said to ‘haunt’ its structures, can serve as a good example of this kind of project (ix). However, it becomes difficult to discern what position she retains either for mourning, or for some kind of melancholia which is not deconstructive.

While the deconstructive work of the melancholic remainder may be perpetual and ethical, emphasizing the work of melancholia and an “impossible mourning” as opposed to “an inconsolable mourning” makes it difficult to understand how the melancholic work of heeding justice for the subaltern may be divided in a way that keeps the melancholic intellectual safe from internalizing the paralysis of affective melancholy. Can it allow for some kind of individual and collective working through that may either help produce a new counter-hegemony (a sense of community) or simply offer individual working through that restores the process of healthy sublimation, or what Khanna calls, following Abraham and Torok, “introjection” (24)?
The psychological study of conversion can be characterized by an early empirical drive that asked questions about the relevancy of conversion as a subject of scientific study, its prevalence and psychological mechanisms, in order to develop a clinical description. This changed in the 1920s with the introduction of Freud’s psychoanalytic models of individual psychological development that linked the mechanism of conversion to unconscious complexes, related to earlier states of development, infancy and childhood, and regression in the sense of earlier modes of thinking often referred to as “primitive”. In the 1930s a new interest in the link between conversion and “adaptation” emerged: researchers took an interest in conversion as a generalizable adaptational process, while others argued that it was specifically a way to master childhood trauma or narcissistic wounds. A shift to the discussion of narcissism, along with the introduction of feminist psychoanalytic models in the 1970s, led to a split in psychoanalytic discussions of conversion between those who emphasize its Oedipal aspects and the convert’s relationship to the father as the primary issue, and those who privilege the role of the “narcissistic wounding” or trauma often associated with the pre-oedipal and the mother or maternal object. Kristeva’s model of conversion is marked by an emphasis on the role of the maternal object and the scene of transposition of the initial relationship to the maternal object into the symbolic via primary identification. For Kristeva, conversion, with its link to hallucinatory psychosis, represents a “compromise solution”.

What is considered the modern Western scientific or psychological study of conversion began with the empirical studies of the mid-nineteenth century associated with the work of Granville Stanley Hall, William James, Edwin Starbuck, James Leuba, and George Coe. Starbuck, a student of James and Hall, published the first large-scale
empirical study of conversion in 1899. He used a questionnaire to collect information on
the prevalence and experience of conversion and produced a generalized description.
While there were any number of theological descriptions of conversion, Starbucks’ study,
along with Leuba’s “A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena” (1896),
produced a typical clinical description of conversion that continues to be influential:

Initially there is a period of anxiety, doubt, depression, or guilt. Typically these
are the responses of an individual who has experienced the instruction of certain
feelings or thoughts that he is unable to reconcile with his traditional, culturally
determined world-view. An acute intensification of this discomfort occurs […].
The state of tension is experienced as unbearable, and at that point there is a
conscious sense of ‘giving up’. Then suddenly there is a feeling of the awesome,
the ‘uncanny’. This is interpreted as religious communication and a sense of
resolution and peace is experienced. The previous conflict seems to be resolved,
even if its logical resolution is not yet achieved. In some individuals a discrete,
usually fleeting hallucination (i.e. the voice of God) accompanies the feeling of
awe (cited in Bagwell 164).

James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) offered one of the first and most
influential discussions of the mechanism of conversion. According to James, conversion
is an experience in which the “results” of “subliminal” or “subconscious” “maturing
processes” suddenly emerge into consciousness (207). This process is marked by a period
of subconscious “incubation” of ideas that may become “jammed” and unable to enter
conscious awareness. Because the way to the conscious is ‘blocked’ the individual’s
attempts to resolve the issues through conscious thought become exhausted, and this
leads to a “crisis of self surrender” in which, letting conscious control subside, the
“subconscious forces take the lead” and “mature” or “ripe” qualities enter consciousness
through what he describes as “automatisms” (209-210)⁶. He defines these as “sensory or

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⁶Before James made it famous, Coe described what he called “subconscious automatisms” in his 1900 text,
*The Spiritual Life*. He defined them as organized sequences of thought (or action) that in specific
motor, emotional or intellectual [...] effects” that are “due to the ‘uprushes’ into the ordinary consciousness of energies originating in the subliminal parts of the mind” (234). James gives “special notice” to “hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory” experiences associated with conversion which he calls a specific form of “sensory automatism” (251). He suggests that these experiences, along with the hearing of voices and “convulsions, visions, involuntary vocal utterances”, common in conversion experiences are due to the subject having “a large subliminal region, involving nervous instability” (251). According to James, conversion is a type of psychological event that need not be specifically religious. He writes:

The new birth may be away from religion into incredulity; or it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual’s life of some new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion. In all these instances we have precisely the same psychological form of event (146-147).

Religious vs. secular conversion differ only by the content of the ‘uprush’, according to James. However, he leaves open the possibility of a specifically supernatural aspect to religious conversion in the form of “a subconscious region” “which alone should yield access” to “higher spiritual agencies” (242).

In the 1920s, the study of conversion shifted with the introduction to the discussion of psychoanalytic models of the development of the subject and the notion of unconscious complexes. According to Bagwell, up until the 1920s “there had been little progress in understanding the relationship between the conversion experience to clearly abnormal mental states [because of an] inadequacy […] in precisely conceptualizing both normal and abnormal patterns of individual development” (168). Psychoanalytic models circumstances and contexts, including the experience of conversion, took dominance over conscious volitional structures (51).
were “particularly helpful in meeting this need” (168). This meant that the “automatisms” of the nineteenth-century could be interpreted more specifically as “autonomously functioning unconscious complexes” (168). Because of this, according to Bagwell, “it was recognized that the conflicts related to automatisms were regressive in a temporal sense (i.e. representing developmental issues of childhood or infancy), and that temporarily earlier modes of thinking could be involved in their expression and elaboration” (168).

Freud took up the question of conversion more specifically in his short essay “A Religious Experience” (1927). He offers an Oedipal reading of conversion that would become the most persuasive of psychoanalytic models for analyzing conversion narratives. As I will discuss this essay in greater detail in Chapter Two, suffice it to say here that Freud analyzes a letter sent to him by a young American physician who experienced a conversion after seeing an old woman’s body on a dissecting table. According to Freud, the sight of the old woman first aroused Oedipal jealousy, and because the man’s concepts of father and God were not adequately separated, his rebellious and angry Oedipal impulses were expressed as disbelief in God. The man’s fear of the omnipotent father and wishful need for his protection then produced a sudden submission, a change that was experienced as a moment of conversion. In Freud’s view, the doctor’s experience of hearing voices, an example of what Freud calls “hallucinatory psychosis”, is reflective of the man’s regressive wishful infantile desire for a protective omnipotent father (171). It represents a kind of repetition of his earlier Oedipal solution, displaced into the sphere of religion.
The work of Anton Boisen, particularly his early “Personality Changes and Upheavals” (1926), was crucial in developing a link between the moment of conversion, as a moment of psychosis or a regressive mental state, and its potentially productive adaptational effect. This link has heavily influenced the direction of conversion studies, including Kristeva’s, whether or not Boisen is specifically named as a predecessor. More specifically, Boisen transplants Harry Stack Sullivan’s argument that “in certain forms of acute schizophrenia regression to developmentally more ‘primitive’ thought processes made possible the reintegration of life experiences that had up until then failed to be part of a structural unity”, to the discussion of religious conversion (6). For Boisen, following Coe, while individual in experience, conversion and the related psychopathology are always intrinsically linked to social structures. He argues that psychopathology is not necessarily an individual disease, but may instead be the result of the failure to achieve “unification of the personality on a socially acceptable basis” (4). According to Boisen, the “cataclysmic eruptions of acute psychosis (and conversion) are nature’s attempts to get rid of the sets and attitudes that block growth, and to effect a reorganization of pathology” (531). For Boisen, the only the difference between acute psychosis, schizophrenia, and the religious experience, is determined by what attributes and difficulties are brought into the crisis.

The work of Leon Salzman and James Clark Moloney illustrates a split that emerged in the 1950s and continued well into the 1970s. While both Salzman and his contemporary Moloney agree that conversion is marked by a regression that stems from an intensification of a pre-existing conflict that remerges, and that conversion represents a kind of adaptational process, these authors (and the lines of inquiry they represent)
disagree about its ‘source’. On one side, in his 1958 study entitled “The Psychology of Religious and Ideological Conversion,” and later in “Types of Religious Conversion” (1966), Salzman suggests that psychopathological conversions offer a “pseudo-solution” to the initial conflict, which in these cases is “estrangement from the father” or “conflict arising from hatred toward the father” (17). Salzman and others taking this line argue for the primacy of sexual or homosexual guilt and emphasize the role of the convert’s relationship with the father, whether hatred or a less defined failure to identify with him. These views on conversion are also often linked to Freudian Oedipal readings and issues related to castration. The mother appears as a subject of discussion in Salzman’s work only in a way that reflects an attempt to respond to criticisms that the role of the mother was neglected in the earlier focus on Oedipal-castration/guilt. In general, when the maternal object is discussed she represents a destructive force that might keep the son away from proper identification with the father, a scenario linked to homosexuality, impotence, and a regressive psychopathological conversion experience. In his 1966 analysis of a “Mr. A”, Salzmann argues that this man’s conversion experience and the impotence that brings him to analysis are a result of failure to attach to his father because of his too strong ties to his mother, as well as guilt at his supposed homosexual temptation when a pastor attempted to sexually molest him. Salzman focuses on “Mr. A’s feelings of hatred toward his father and toward the father-figure of the minister who had made homosexual advances toward him” (15). He suggests that “the temptations induced by these advances had mobilized a violent, explosive anger within him which, in turn, had resulted in conversion in an attempt to be relieved and expiated—to be absolved by God” (15). According to Salzman, the conversion minimized his illness and guilt. In
general, this mirrors the Freudian Oedipal line of thought in the way it deals with the need to analyze the role of the mother: it begins by emphasizing the supposed latent homosexuality of the convert, and the mother’s role in blocking the son’s identification with the father.

On the other side, Moloney, in his essay “Mother, God, Super-ego” (1954), similarly argues for conversion as an adaptational process, but links the moment of conversion to a regression to the level of infantile trauma and suggests that it is an attempt at mastery of early narcissistic wounding. Authors following this line of thought emphasize rage at internalized omnipotent parental figures (James Mann) or link conversion to experiences of early infantile trauma (Moloney). Moloney, as well as other writers including John Mann, begin to emphasize the link between oralization (the oral stage) and early infantile trauma leading to narcissistic wounding, as opposed to castration. However, while this led to a focus on the role of the maternal object, these studies also often linked conversion with psychopathology, attributed to the mother’s failure to properly mother, leading to narcissistic trauma. While traces of Boisen’s argument for the adaptational aspects of conversion are visible in the work of Maloney and others, his emphasis on the role of the social was not transferred into this later work, which simply focuses on individual psychopathology and the supposed effects of the family situation/ family romance.
The widespread introduction of feminist interpretations and interventions into psychoanalytic models and psychoanalytic understanding of religion during the 1970s came to bear on the discussion of conversion specifically during the mid-1970s. The effect of feminist work was reflected in a more sustained and critical interest in the role of the maternal object, the pre-oedipal period, and a focus on the effects of trauma, infantile and otherwise. The deconstruction of the essentialist model of the subject and a new attention to the constructed nature of texts led to a crisis in the psychological study of conversion that had stalled in the late 1960s, mired in the debate over the role of the Oedipal/castration vs. pre-oedipal narcissistic trauma.

More specifically, the deconstruction of essentialist models of the subject and attention to narrative construction that affected the study of conversion narratives in autobiography studies was also registered in psychological studies of conversion. According to Rambo, during this time the work of sociologists Brian Taylor and James Beckford echoed the ‘narrative turn’ in other fields, when they theorized and documented that the testimony or conversion autobiography as “not merely a raw report of one’s personal experience but a creation of the convert which combines personal experience with the expectations, theology, and symbolism of the group which the person wants to join” (148-149). By drawing attention to the effects of the social context as well as the narrative medium, their work led to a critical re-appraisal of early psychological studies that assumed a transparent relationship between the experience of conversion and its representation. This re-evaluation resulted in a crisis in the psychological study of

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7 This includes the critical psychoanalytic work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva; American feminists working in religious studies including Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Reuther; critical work on the relationship between psychoanalysis, feminism, and religious studies, including studies by Judith Van Herik, Diane Jonte-Pace, and Martha Reneike.
conversion, as researchers were faced with the question of how to speak about conversion with a focus on the language features of the texts and attention to the specific effect of individual difference. They were forced to acknowledge a stalemate between the Oedipal and pre-oedipal positions, which had seemed to run their course. According to Bagwell, from the 1960s onward there has been “a standstill” in specifically psychological studies of conversion (177):

There is surprisingly little contemporary work on this problem […]. The issue is confused by the variety of different abrupt conversions experiences, the possible differences between group and individual conversions and the specific individuals studied, and the complexities of related sociological issues (177 n 71).

Generally speaking, from the late 1970s onward, this situation led to a shift toward a sociological approach to the topic, and what I would suggest is an anxious turn to the study of the link between conversion, cults, and adolescents, on the one hand, and a biological approach on the other. John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s 1966 article, “Becoming a World-saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective”, hit a nerve during a time of political struggle and the youth movements of the 1960s, and shifted the psychological study of conversion largely to a focus on the study of the recruitment techniques of ‘extreme’ groups. Since the 1980s, the study of conversion has come full circle and is dominated by a return to ‘empirical’ studies. It has focused on attempts to definitively locate or disprove the existence of what has been called “the God spot” in the brain, or answer questions concerning whether certain individuals, or human beings more generally, are “hardwired” for religious belief or experience, or whether there are links to specific stages of development (adolescence) or medical conditions (particularly epilepsy).
Julia Kristeva on Conversion

Kristeva returned to Freud’s analysis of conversion in her 1987 text *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. While Freud argues that the conversion experience represents a wishful Oedipal submission to an omnipotent father, and that belief, and religious belief in particular, is an “illusion” with detrimental effects for the individual and society, Kristeva uses Freud’s scene of the American doctor to open a discussion on the function of hallucinatory psychosis, which she sees as the crux of the conflict of conversion, in order to “restore illusion [to] its full therapeutic and epistemological value” (21). She argues that the recourse to hallucination by the doctor in Freud’s case, followed by a relationship of dependency on Christian doctrine, should be understood as a “compromise solution”—an available means of stabilizing his identity. Kristeva then offers the parallel modern-day clinical example of a patient, aptly named Paul, who experienced ‘inner’ voices that gave commandments in a way related to the American doctor’s experience, though not specifically religious in content. While Freud argues that the doctor’s hallucinatory psychosis marks the son’s defeat, his Oedipal failure, Kristeva tells the story of a son for whom hallucinatory psychosis offers momentary coherence to temporarily help Paul, who is “more dead than alive” to “go on living, until he is brought “back to life” through the psychoanalytic transference (13).

Generally, for Kristeva, what may be experienced as conversion, as a turn to faith, is not necessarily linked to the Oedipal scene but should be associated with the imprinting of the semiotic in the symbolic. In terms of subject formation this is representative of the scene of primary identification that hinges on the abjection of the maternal container and the ‘direct and immediate’ transference to the father of pre-history, which is the
imaginary father. She argues that “faith” should be described as “a primary identification with a loving and protective agency” that is compensatory (24). It is a “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving, and protective” “breast” that is “transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world” (24). According to Kristeva, this represents a compromise solution because the subject’s move into the symbolic and language is not fully carried through. The movement ‘succumbed to another current’ and plays out in the realm of hallucinatory psychosis. Kristeva’s model resembles Boisen’s when she suggests that the scene of regression, the psychosis, is an imaginary structure that stabilizes the subject and may have an adaptive effect. According to Kristeva, because religious discourse has elaborated the role of hallucination in a way that other discourses, including psychoanalysis, have not, it offers a socially acceptable elaboration: after struggle, the son can identify with the glory of the father, which often leads to a religious turn (13). However, this religious turn is a problematic compromise because, according to Kristeva, Christian doctrine clings to deeply problematic fundamental fantasies—particularly the wish for an omnipotent Father and a Virgin mother.

Kristeva’s model of conversion, unlike others, allows for a more specific and complex analysis of the role of the pre-oedipal and the maternal in relation to other structures. More specifically, while the adaptive role of ‘regression’ is noted in other analyses, Kristeva’s model allows the specifics of this to be outlined and attached to their representation in language and the social order. Conversion becomes a dynamic between the semiotic and symbolic associated with the process of subject formation—a configuration that is registered in the subject’s relationship to language and the symbolic, the social. This emphasis on language and the symbolic allows for a more specific
analysis of narrative, and for movement away from past attempts to unearth or diagnose the specific childrearing conditions of the authors of conversion narratives, since for Kristeva the subject is always situated in relation to larger shared symbolic structures of meaning, the social order.

Secondly, Kristeva’s association of conversion with the scene of the movement through maternal abjection to primary identification, the imprinting or transference of the maternal semiotic onto the symbolic structure, allows for a flexibility in the subject’s relationship to this frame, and position within it: while each subject ‘returns’ to this scene in the ‘scene’ of conversion, the emphasis in their conversion process does not have to be identical. Kristeva’s model allows rooms for the authors’ differing positions to be recognized: some may hinge on abjection, others on issues of primary identification. This does not resolve the Oedipal vs. narcissistic wound debate in conversion studies, but multiplies the possibilities. Each conversion marks a specific route through this territory. The represented effect of the conversion can also be registered in an alteration in relation to any of these structures: a change in relation to abjection, primary identification, language, or identification with a parental object.

Having said this, the limits to this model must also be addressed. In her case study of Paul, Kristeva argues that his mother suffers from a “Lady Macbeth complex” and “symbolically murdered” her son because she wanted a female child (25). She suggests that the mother maintained a “cannibalistic” bond to her son and that this is the cause of the son’s “hallucinatory psychosis” (26). Whether or not this is the case in this instance, if used as a paradigm it returns the blame to the mother, whose murderous desires or failure to release the child may have led to a hallucinatory psychosis
experienced as a conversion. While Kristeva attempts to work against this tendency, her narrative about Paul also positions psychoanalysis, and her as his analyst, as a ‘saving grace’ that “brings him back to life” through the transference (13).

**Conversion, Intimate Revolt, and Herethics**

According to Kristeva, conversion as the turn to faith involves the primary processes of early subject development, and in this resembles what she calls “intimate revolt”—practices that return and re-elaborate the early phases of subject formation and rupture the symbolic, allowing for the reconnection or re-articulation of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. However, despite any resemblance, Kristeva argues that conversion and intimate revolt are radically different.

More specifically, according to Kristeva, the process of subject formation ideally allows for the loss, mourning, and imprinting of the relationship to the maternal object, full of affect, into the symbolic. This allows the semiotic and symbolic to come into dynamic relation and produce “live meaning”, both in terms of what she calls the “significance” of language and in relation to the Other (BS 43). This “live meaning” must be kept alive by a process that she calls “revolt”. In her 2000 text, *Sense or Non-Sense of Revolt*, Kristeva links her notion of “revolt” with the etymological meaning of the Latin term *volvere*, and emphasizes its derivatives (“to return”, “to roll”, and “to tell” or “to reread”), in order to draw out a kind of revolt that, as Brandt suggests, is “understood not as a transgression” but “as an anamnesis, a movement of “re-volt” that returns to the past, that repeats, interrogates and re-elaborates the most archaic, intimate, phases of psychic development” (34). According to Kristeva, what she terms “intimate revolt,” as “return/
turning back/ displacement/ change”, constitutes the “profound logic” by which the symbolic can be reconnected with the semiotic to produce live meaning from a position that is “irretrievably symbolic” and therefore allows for interrogation, for a critical relationship to this process (*IR* 6). Revolt, then, can be understood as marked by dual emphases: practices that put the unified subject “on trial” and reinstate the repressed semiotic into the symbolic through a rupture of that imagined unity, on the one hand, and on the other, practices that work toward the symbolization of the semiotic, that bring non-meaning, the semiotic, into the symbolic. Kristeva offers a model of revolt that is marked, as Ziarek and Chanter suggest, by “a rupture and re-articulation” that must “de-center, but also […] renew psychic life and social bonds through symbolic re-articulation, which leads to new forms of social relations, collective identifications, and representations” (3).

In her discussion of “the revolutionary role of “re-volt” in *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva is careful to distinguish it from the conversion, or *conversio* (turning) of the Christian man. According to Kristeva, revolt differs from conversion because it is “not a simple reprise of the retrospective link that founds the innermost recesses of the Christian man, serene in his quest, which is completed by a return to the *summum esse*” and a “reconciliation with God” (*IR* 7). While her notion of revolt offers a “reconnection”, it opens up to both “re-creation” and “irreconcilable conflict”, whereas “the return” of the Christian man does not allow for “displacement/ change” and is marked instead by “reconciliation”, an imaginary ‘wholeness,’ and as an extension a fusing with the maternal (part) object which is the “already there” (7). According to Kristeva, the religious turn is a problematic compromise, because Christian doctrine clings to
fundamental fantasies and leads to what I call “melancholic attachments”, marked by the logic of “rejection of, yet attachment to”. It therefore does not lead to a herethical relation, because it does not open up to a critical relation to the Other, which ideally is the result of revolt.

While there is thus a fundamental difference between revolt and conversion (as a turn to faith that ends in an attempted ‘return’ and fusing with the other), I ask in this analysis whether this is always the case. Does conversion necessarily represent this fusing? Are there examples of conversion in which the notion of unification is not simply an attempt at fusion? Are there examples of conversion that end in herethical relations based on the recognition of the Other as an autonomous subject, as well as the tie that binds? Are there conversions that do not end in a melancholic compromise but instead open up to what Khanna calls “critical melancholia”?

The first two chapters of this study deal specifically with religious conversion: Chapter One proposes a reinterpretation of the role of the maternal and paternal objects in psychoanalytic discourse about religious conversion, and Chapter Two a rereading of the conversion of St. Augustine using this model. In the chapters that follow, I turn my focus to contemporary sites which take up conversion discourse in relation to, and from embedded stances within, the dynamics of racialized oppression and legacy of slavery in the United States of America in order analyze some of the complex ways that Christian conversion and racial difference become entangled in these texts. The first text represents

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8 In this study I use Augustine’s *Confessions* to reconfigure psychoanalytic discussions of religious conversion because his narrative in particular allows for the re-instatement of the role the maternal object in the discussion of representations of Christian conversion. I do not position him as racialized subject (either “white” or “African”) because I remain unconvinced that the categories of racial difference during his lifetime are sufficiently comparable to contemporary understandings to make them relevant to this study.
a “white racial conversion”, that of a well-educated white man, that takes place during the early 1960s in the still racially segregated American South; the second, the religious conversion and associated dance practice of a young black man living in the South-Central district of Los Angeles. I conclude my study with an examination of the political manipulation of the dynamics of conversion through a brief discussion the use of conversion discourse in media representations of the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama.

In Chapter One, I offer a re-interpretation of Freud’s analysis of a conversion experience in his essay, “A Religious Experience.” Building on Kristeva’s discussion of Christian belief in God as a “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving, and protective” “breast” that is “transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world”, I suggest that there is a logic in conversion, crystallized in this structure of religious faith, in which the maternal object is not abjected, mourned, and ‘found’ in language, but instead is repudiated, on the one hand, and maintained as a source of nourishment, on the other (IBL 24). This reliance, however, is denied, split from the mother, and given a paternal face—the loving Father God—and because of this, the maternal object, “lost, but not lost”, returns to haunt this subject as the abject that threatens to destabilize its borders. The convert, in this case, when faced with this return, once again splits the maternal object, “fuses” with (a part-object) and transplants the nourishing quality to the paternal, but does not ‘face’ the return of the repressed.

In Chapter Two, I apply this analysis of the religious turn in a close reading of the scenes of Augustine’s conversion. I posit that Augustine’s conversion in the garden of Milan can be understood as a specific instance of what Kristeva calls “intimate revolt”—
a process that opens up Augustine’s “inmost heart” and revives the semiotic in the symbolic, reconfiguring his melancholic relationship with language and signification more generally. I pose a central question: does the conversion process in its entirety transform the melancholic attachment that binds the mother-son into one in which the maternal may be faced, in which the strangeness, the alterity of the (m)other, as well as the tie that binds, may be present and recognized?

In Chapter Three, I undertake an analysis of John Howard Griffin’s immensely popular but often criticized text, *Black Like Me* (1961). This narrative, which takes the form of a journal that ‘documents’ the author’s experience of traveling through the racially segregated Southern American states disguised as a black man, is almost exclusively critically engaged with as a “passing narrative”. I propose, however, that it takes more from what Hobson describes as “white Southern racial conversion narratives” than is often recognized because of the sensational aspect of the author’s attempts at physically passing as a Black man (1).

Through a series of close readings of key scenes, I show that Griffin’s text represents a process similar to Kristeva’s intimate revolt: Griffin encounters abjection, glimpses “the stranger” within, and experiences a ‘doubling’ and splitting in consciousness, an undoing of self, that leads to a crisis, followed by a racial conversion experience that ‘returns’ the archaic processes of subject formation, reactivated in terms of racial relations. I pose the following questions: do Griffin’s encounters with abjection, this undoing of self and conversion experience, reconfigure his subjectivity in a way that produces critical melancholia and a herethical relation with the differently raced/gendered Other? Or does this process function as what Kristeva describes as a “rite of
defilement”, in which the abject is encountered and then excluded—the dividing line redrawn in a rite that eases the dominant subject’s anxiety through the repetition of the rite of exclusion, of marking the other as abject, while allowing for the revitalization of the subject through the encounter?

Chapter Four critically engages with Kristeva’s understanding of religious conversion through an analysis of Ceasare L Willis’ Hip-Hop conversion narrative, *Rude Awakening*, and his ‘ministry’, “The Kingdom,” built on his social dance practice of krumping—a call and response Hip-Hop dance practice characterized by a great intensity of energy in the body of the dancer and highly personalized gestural ‘styling’ (164). I maintain that the practice of krumping offers an imaginary coherence for dancers that allows for the elaboration (representation, communication, and sublimation) of trauma and works against the debilitating alienation of what Oliver describes as “social melancholy”. The “krump circle” opens what Oliver calls “a social space that supports sublimation” that allows dancers to expose, (re)present, and creatively engage with the painful and angry affects associated with the traumatic legacies of slavery and the everyday experiences of racialization and oppression. While I see the krump circle as a kind of imaginary space, I suggest that this is not only catharsis, or imaginary compensation, but functions rather as what Thomas DeFrantz calls “corporeal orature”, a term he uses to align words with movement (67). In this practice, affect is stabilized and translated into symbolic terms within the practice and through the structuring of the practice by the krump community and the Krump King’s Kingdom ministry. This practice may offer a renewal of agency, but the ways in which hegemonic ideals of
masculinity and heterosexuality are reified in its structuring and association with the
gendered concept of Christianity are problematic.

The concluding chapter considers the status and function attributed by Freud and
Kristeva to the ‘imaginary’ quality—the turning away from ‘reality’—associated with
conversion through an analysis of some of the key issues and dangers that arise when
conversion discourse intersects with politics. Using mainstream North American media
representations of Barack Obama as an example, I conclude this study by examining the
implications when the dynamics of conversion, built on faith in an omnipotent figure,
overtly intersects with (racial) politics in the United States.
1. The Religious Turn: Oedipal Submission or Melancholic Compromise?

Freud on Religion: The Continuing and Primal Father-Complex

Freud opens the third chapter of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) with a question: “In what does the peculiar value of the religious idea lie?” (15). His response to this is that it is based in a continuing and primal father-complex structured by the ambivalence inherent in that relationship. More specifically, Freud argues that human infantile helplessness, which continues into adulthood, functions as the “manifest motive” for submission to a ‘stronger’ Father God; the primal “father-complex” put forward in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) marks the “deeper” latent aspect (21).9

Freud’s earliest discussion of religion, in *Totem and Taboo*, details the emergence of what he calls “the exalted father”, after the murder of the primal father and institution of the totem as surrogate father in the primal patriarchal horde. In that text, Freud outlines what he imagines to be the ‘birth’ of the social tie, based on the murder of the primal father. To summarize briefly: according to Freud’s account, early man lived in a primal horde ruled by a dominant and fearsome male who prohibited his sons’ access to the women of the group, whom he kept solely for himself. These sons plotted together, revolted against the father, and “killed and devoured him” (141). After the meal, the sons

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9 While the term “father complex” was initially used by Freud in his article "The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy" (1910) to refer generally to the guilt and castration anxiety related to the father, and therefore to what would later be termed the Oedipus complex, I use the term “father complex” here to refer specifically to Freud’s definition in *Totem and Taboo*: i.e. the guilt and castration anxiety experienced by the son in the "primitive horde" after the murder of the father, which in turn led to the repression of incestuous wishes toward the mother. It is this “father complex” that is transmitted through the generations and produces the Oedipus complex.
identified with the father, felt guilty, and replaced the dead father with a totem animal. This animal became the symbol of power, and the shared feeling of guilt and love for the father was transformed into repentance and became the social bond among brothers. The “dead father became stronger than the living one had been” and the social-religious tie kept the men’s rivalry and hatred in control through an internalization of a sense of wrong-doing (the prohibition against murder and incest) (143). The sons’ relationship with this totem was invested with a “filial sense of guilt” and “in an attempt to allay that feeling and appease the father” the sons offered the totem-father substitute “deferred obedience” (145). In return, they received imaginary paternal compensation. More specifically:

[...the brothers] could attempt, in their relation to this surrogate father, to allay their burning sense of guilt, to bring about a kind of reconciliation with their father. The totemic system was, as it were, a covenant with their father, in which he promised them everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father—protection, care, and indulgence—while on the other side they undertook to respect his life, that is to say, not to repeat the deed which had brought destruction on their real father (144).

However, the prohibitions and incorporation of the paternal attributes were not sufficient, according to Freud, and the act of parricide must be re-enacted through the “totem meal”:

Totemic religion not only compromised expressions of remorse and attempts at atonement, it also served as a remembrance of the triumph over the father. Satisfaction over that triumph led to the institution of the memorial festival of the totem meal, in which the restrictions of deferred obedience no longer held. Thus it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again in the sacrifice of the totem animal, whenever, as a result of changing conditions of life, the cherished fruit of the crime—appropriation of the paternal attributes—threatened to disappear (145).

In this formulation, the primal father became the exalted father in death and, according to Freud, “the original image of God” (FOI 42). The primal father, exalted, “was the model on which later generations have shaped the figure of God” (42), and “the guilt and
longing for the father was the root of the need for religion” built on this father-God-
substitute (22).

Over a decade later, Freud developed an additional thesis concerning the
emergence of religion in The Future of an Illusion (1927). In this text, he draws out what
he sees as the prototypical and phylogenetic ‘histories’ of the subject and civilization to
illustrate how gods were formed as a defense against the experience of infantile
helplessness—gods that gradually took the form of the monotheistic Father figure. Freud
argues that the storehouse of images and ideas from the Judeo-Christian religious
imaginary, particularly the figure of an exalted Father God, provide a ‘wishful’ defense
for the subject against forces which, because they are external to the individual’s will,
threaten the narcissism of the subject—i.e. a defense “against the superior powers of
nature, of Fate, which threaten him as they threaten all the rest” (16). Freud imagines a
process at the birth of civilization in which the individual and community were subjected
to external natural forces outside of their command, and “humanized” these forces so that
they could be approached in a manner that took its prototype from the infant’s
relationship with its parents, particularly its father, who, according to Freud, is seen as
offering protection. The overwhelming nature of these forces led to the transformation of
them into figures larger and more powerful than those that surrounded these individuals:
gods. Freud writes of the ‘wishful’ response to these wholly external forces:

For once before one has found oneself in a similar state of helplessness: as a small
child, in relation to one’s parents. One had reason to fear them, and especially
one’s father; and yet one was sure of his protection against the dangers one knew.
Thus it was natural to assimilate the two situations. Here, too, wishing played its
part, as it does in dream-life. The sleeper may be seized with a presentiment of
death, which threatens to place him in the grave. But the dream-work knows how
to select a condition that will turn even the dreaded event into a wish-fulfillment
[…]. In the same way, a man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons

with whom he can associate as he would with his equals—that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him—but he gives them the character of a father. He turns them into gods, following in this, as I have tried to show, not only an infantile prototype but a phylogenetic one (17).

From here Freud draws out a historical schema of the response to this helplessness in the history of religion that culminates for him in the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity. This reveals, according to Freud, the father as the figure behind all gods, because it is the child’s relationship to the father which is central in human psychological development according to Freud’s model. He writes of the effect of monotheism:

> It had laid open to view who had all along been hidden behind every divine figure as its nucleus […]. Now that God was a single person, man’s relation to him could recover the intimacy of and intensity of the child’s relation to his father (19).

This concentration on the single Father God in the history of religion simply mirrors the prototypical infantile development in which, according to Freud, there is a turn away from the mother to the “the stronger father” who is viewed as the only object capable of providing protection in this experience of helplessness (24). Freud describes the role of the mother in relation to this:

> The mother, who satisfies the child’s hunger, becomes its first love-object and certainly also its first protection against all the undefined dangers which threaten it in the external world—its first protection against anxiety, we may say. In this function (of protection) the mother is soon replaced by the stronger father who retains that position for the rest of childhood (24).

In her research Judith Van Herik reveals that almost two decades before Freud published this text he suggested the theme of infantile helplessness in a letter to Carl Jung. There he assumes that both parents, not simply the father, play a role in this:

> It has occurred to me that the ultimate basis of man’s need for religion is infantile helplessness, which is so much greater in man than in animals. After infancy he cannot conceive of a world without parents and makes for himself a God and a
kindly nature, the two worst anthropomorphic falsifications he could have imagined (cited in Van Herik 155).

However, as Van Herik suggests, by the time Freud wrote *The Future of the Illusion* he had already produced the “The Dissolution of the Oedipal Complex” (1924) and “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes” (1925) – texts that emphasize the father in psychological development.

Freud cements the singular role of this “stronger father” three years later in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). In the opening of this text, he underscores the centrality of the need for specifically paternal protection, in his response to Romain Rolland’s notion that at the heart of this longing for the father was in fact what Rolland called the “oceanic feeling”—a desire to be part of something “limitless” or “unbounded” associated with the mother-infant relationship (64). Freud dismisses Rolland’s emphasis on this religious feeling and positions the father as the central authority of psychic development and the central religious object:

[...] a feeling can only be a source of energy if it is itself the expression of a strong need. The derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible, especially since that feeling is not simply prolonged from childhood days, but is permanently sustained by the fear of the superior power of Fate. I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection (72).

In sum then, according to Freud, the infant, or the believer, when faced with his own helplessness against external forces outside of his command, ‘wishes’ for, and submits to a stronger protective father who takes on what Freud describes as God’s “three fold task: exorcize the terrors of nature, [...] reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and [...] compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them” (18). This Father God is imagined as a
benevolent protector who compensates the child for the suffering he experiences and guarantees justice.

In Chapter IV of *The Future of the Illusion*, Freud plays his own critic and asks how his argument concerning the need for a strong protecting father in response to helplessness relates to his earlier formulation of the formation of religion as “the longing for the father”, who becomes an exalted Father God. According to Freud, these are the same: one simply represents the ‘continuing’ presence of the other. He writes:

[…] his longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of his human weakness. The defense against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge—a reaction that is precisely the formation of religion (24).

In other words, childhood helplessness continues in the adult’s mental life, experienced as ‘human weakness’, particularly in the face of the superior powers of Fate and death. The defense against childish helplessness—specifically, according to Freud, submission to the stronger father and wish-filled dependence on him—becomes the characteristic feature of the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge, i.e. faith in a religion based on the relationship to an exalted Father.

However, the relationship to this stronger father is “coloured by a peculiar ambivalence” (24). More specifically, “the father constitutes a danger for the child…thus it fears him no less then it longs for him and admires him” (24). The ambivalence that structures this relationship marked by the need for protection/longing on one side, and a fear and a murderous hatred/guilt on the other, becomes “deeply imprinted” in Judeo-Christian religions in Freud’s view (24). According to Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, the two monotheistic religions that he discusses, Judaism and Christianity, both stem
from the same manifest motive and latent content, but differ in the way they structure the return of these ambivalent impulses toward this father-God, i.e. rivalry/ fear of his retribution, vs. guilt at his murder/ the longing for his love/ protection.

In Freud’s ‘historical’ account, Christianity emerged with Saul of Tarsus, Paul, and his realization “that we killed God the Father” (81). More specifically, in Judaism, the religion of Moses, which Freud terms “a Father religion”, “there was no place […] for a direct expression of the murderous hatred of the father” (80). Because of this, “all that could come to light was a mighty reaction against it—a sense of guilt on account of that hostility, a bad conscience for having sinned against God and not ceasing to sin” (80). This became insufficient: the “remainder of what returned from the tragic drama of the primal father was no longer reconciled in any way with the religion of Moses” and this led to a growing “sense of guilt” that “caught hold of the Mediterranean peoples as a dull malaise, a premonition of calamity for which no one could suggest a reason” (81).

According to Freud, it was Paul, in “whose spirit the realization first emerged” that “the reason we are so unhappy is that we have killed God the father”” (81). Freud argues that this is ‘the truth’ within the “delusional disguise of the glad tidings brought by an emerging Christianity” structured around this key idea: “‘we are free from all guilt since one of us has sacrificed his life to absolve us’” (81).

In Freud’s view, “the blissful sense of being chosen” that marked the religion of Moses is then replaced by a “liberating sense of redemption” (82). However, now “the unnamable crime” of parricide became “replaced by the hypothesis of what must be described as the shadowy ‘original sin’” (82). According to Freud, this notion of “original sin and redemption by the sacrifice of a victim became the foundation stones of a new
religion founded by Paul”, Christianity (82). Importantly, for Freud, while Christianity takes a new form that emphasizes reconciliation with God the Father, it still requires getting rid of him and taking his place:

> It is worth noticing how the new religion dealt with the ancient ambivalence in the relation to the father. Its main content is, it is true, reconciliation with God the Father and atonement for the crime committed against him; but the other side of the emotional relation showed itself in the fact that the son, who had taken the atonement on himself, became a god himself beside the father and, actually, in place of the father. Christianity, having arisen out a father-religion, became a son-religion. It has not escaped the fate of having to get rid of the father (82).

In other words, while Christianity emphasizes atonement and reconciliation with the Father, this does not resolve the ambivalence inherent in the son’s relationship with this figure. The son’s murderous hatred, rivalry, and fear of the father remains and returns in the psychic act of taking of the God the Father’s place which in Freud’s view is foundational to Christianity.

> In sum, according to Freud, all monotheistic religions “are…attempts at solving the same problem” (TT 145). While they “vary according to the methods which they adopt” they are all attempts to appease the guilt and longing for the Father that primal parricide brought on the one hand, and the wish for loving protection through deferred obedience from an exalted protective Father against forces outside of the subject’s control, on the other (145).

**Oedipal Submission, Wish-fulfillment, and Sexual Difference**

For Freud, the religious belief in a Father God is specifically attached to the Oedipal situation. In his model, the renunciation of what he calls “the religious illusion”, the wishful belief in a loving protective Father God, is a matter of development: a step in the progress of civilization toward an ideal based in scientific understanding and the primacy
of reason and the intellect, and individual development toward the dissolving of the
Oedipal complex. According to Freud, the male believer who exists under his father’s or
his Father God’s control remains psychologically a child, because he does not
successfully move through the Oedipal conflict. Instead of internalizing, and ideally
depersonalizing, the paternal precepts in the super-ego function, the believer submits to
an external figure and doctrine. Instead of renouncing the ‘wish’ for a loving father who
guarantees security and facing the reality-principle, the believer “disavows reality”, and
falls under the sway of “the narcotic effect of religious compensation” (FOI 43).

In the closing chapters of The Future of an Illusion, Freud describes the need to
move away from the “sweet—or bitter sweet—poison” of religious dependence and face
the reality of the individual’s position in the universe, in direct relationship with the
child’s need to renounce infantilism and dependence on his parents and face the reality of
his “helplessness” and “insignificance” (49). He describes this as a need for “an
education to reality” (49):

[Those fed on the bitter sweet poison of religious belief] will have to admit to
themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the
machinery of the universe; they can no longer be the center of creation, no longer
the object of tender care on the part of beneficent Providence. They will be in the
same position as a child who has left the parent house where he was so warm and
comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot
remain children forever, they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life’. We may
call this an ‘education to reality’ (49).

According to Freud, ideally scientific knowledge will take the place of this religious
illusion culturally, and the male subject will learn to endure the “great necessities of Fate,
against which there is no help” with resignation, and focus his energies on the reality of
the world and its problems. He writes:
Our god *Logos* is perhaps not a very almighty one and he may only be able to fulfill a small part of what our predecessors have promised. If we have to acknowledge this we shall accept it with resignation […]. [Since] we are prepared to renounce a good part of our infantile wishes, we can bear it if a few of our expectations turn out to be illusions (54).

While Freud admits that “men are so little accessible to reasonable arguments and are so entirely governed by their instinctual wishes,” he nevertheless argues for the replacement of these illusions with rational arguments (51). Freud exposes his investment in Enlightenment principles, and asks “whether [men] must be like this in their innermost nature” or this is simply a failure to achieve the ideal:

> When a man has once brought himself to accept uncritically all the absurdities that religious doctrines put before him and even to overlook the contradictions between them, we need not be greatly surprised at the weakness of his intellect […]. How can we expect people who are under the dominance of prohibitions of thought to attain the psychological ideal, the primacy of the intelligence? (51).

In other words, for Freud, the religious attitude based on the ‘wish’ for a loving father who guarantees security is pleasure-principle thinking. Instead of renouncing this “illusion” and accepting the demands of reality, the believer “disavows reality” and falls under the sway of religious compensation (43).

Throughout his discussion of religious belief Freud assumes a male subject as the founding subject—the prototypical child is a male child whose specifically gendered relationship to the father and Oedipal situation is reflected in the Judeo-Christian religions. In building his model from the experiences of the male child alone, Freud not only completely ignores the fact of the female believer, but also associates femininity with that which must be renounced by the mature male subject. In her landmark text, *Freud on Femininity and Faith* (1982), Van Herik convincingly analyzes how Freud’s binding of the Oedipal situation and the dissolution of the Oedipal complex with
renunciation, and his ideal of the primacy of reason and the intellect over faith, in fact produces a deeply problematic alignment of femininity with Christian belief resulting from a weak sense of morality and developmental inferiority.

Van Herik persuasively argues that in this formulation there is an alignment of femininity with belief that locks the feminine subject, or the subject in the ‘feminine’ position, out of Freud’s ideal scenario: “the Christian believer and the feminine man or woman are the same [in Freud’s model]: a weak superego, a poorly developed sense of morality, a restricted intellect, opposition to cultural advance, insufficient respect for reality, *Ananke*, and *Logos*” (192). Freud’s ideal of the postreligious, atheistic, scientific spirit is also, as Van Herik suggests, inherently and exclusively a "masculine [...] ideal" (166). Moreover, it is “an ideal that for similar reasons, the believer and those who are psychologically feminine cannot achieve” (166). She argues that there is a structural association of illusion, infancy, narcissism, wish-fulfillment, emotionality, and sensuality with femininity and Christianity, which is contrasted with the renunciation of illusion and narcissism, necessary for masculinity, reason, morality, masculinity, and science. What Freud constructs is a scenario in which feminine “fulfillment”, the pleasure principle, is ideally replaced by masculine rationality, the reality principle, and renunciation. As Diane Jonte-Pace explains, according to Freud’s model “the pre-oedipal child lives in a dependent and illusory world: comforting parents foster the illusion of a comforting universe” (3). Ideally this will be renounced through the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which is inherently gendered:

For the male child, incestuous desires for the mother, Oedipal conflicts with the father, and the emergence of castration anxiety serve to dislodge these structures. Through a successful resolution of the Oedipal conflict, the male child gains skills that he can later translate into the renunciation of libidinal wishes, unconsciously
motivated illusions and dependence. Ideally, he will achieve an acceptance of socially sanctioned, superego morality, and a resigned, observant reality orientation, always on the alert for hidden wishes underlying thoughts—a position of masculine, postreligious rationality and renunciative morality (3).

However, because the female child, according to Freud’s model, will never fully renounce a dependence on, and submission to, the paternal figure, she therefore does not move through the Oedipal conflict and may never fully renounce illusion. Jonte-Pace traces the daughter’s truncated route:

[For the female child] the Oedipal conflict is not fully engaged. The daughter’s love of the mother poses no threat to the Oedipal father, and without male genitals, castration anxiety cannot emerge in the girl. Without a full-blown Oedipal crisis the resolution of the Oedipal conflicts and all its cultural concomitants are impossible. The daughter is doomed to remain in a dependent relation with the father and will be capable neither of reason nor of full renunciation of libido, dependence, and illusion, or faith (4).

Ideally, in the name of progress, belief in the loving father as a God who guarantees security must be renounced, and the new state of affairs faced with resignation as part of the education to reality for all subjects. In a parallel development, the male child must navigate the Oedipal conflict, internalize and depersonalize the prohibitions of the paternal function, and reach post-religious renunciative rationality and morality. The persistent believer, in contrast to the ideal subject, when faced with the overwhelming forces outside of his or her control, ‘falls back’ on the religious position marked by “a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality” (FOI 43). The male believer in particular ‘wishes’ for a loving protecting father, submits to an exalted Father God to ease the guilt of parricide, and sinks into the “narcotic” of religious compensation—the illusion that Providence is somehow turned in his favour. In terms of the Oedipal situation then, any believer is like the feminine subject: locked in a dependent relationship with the father who is believed to offer compensation in return for
obedience. However, while the male believer may surmount his infantilism and give up his loving father God, the feminine subject, according to Freud’s model, will remain in a dependent relationship to the father.

What then is the role or fate of the mother in oedipalization, for Freud’s ideal male subject? For Freud, the relationship to the mother is a moot point. As Van Herik argues, in Freud’s model, after the introduction of the castration threat by the Oedipal father, the male child’s “incestuous mother complex is no longer possible”, and more generally, the mother “represents wishes which must be surpassed for the child to enter culture at all” (88). In other words, attachment to the mother is simply not at play in Freud’s model of the male subject’s religious turn as based in the Oedipal submission to a stronger exalted Father. Van Herik writes:

Although both parents are involved in the Oedipal triangle, the idea of ‘Oedipus complex’ and ‘father complex’ are inseparable whereas the idea of a ‘mother complex’ arises relatively infrequently in Freud’s writings. Once the father has threatened castration, in fantasy or in reality, and the boy has responded, his incestuous mother complex is no longer possible (88).

Freud proposes that after the sexualization of the dynamic with the mother, marking the entry of the son into the Oedipal situation, the attachment to the maternal object is considered solely in relation to incestuous desire. This desire is ideally severed by the castration threat: the son would rather turn from the mother than risk castration by the Oedipal father. From here the male child may move through the Oedipal conflict.

In a slightly different frame, in this “junction between childhood and culture” the father “represents the cultural reality principle whereas the mother represents wishes that must be surpassed for the child to enter culture at all” (88). As Van Herik writes:

In Freud’s view of the instincts and civilization in contradiction, the principle of contradiction is paternal; the mother-child dyad is the ground prior to the
contradiction (which is instigated by culture and represented by the father), but the mother figure embodies in itself no principle of contradiction or opposition to instinct (88-89).

In Freud’s model, then, the mother is aligned with instinct and must be “surpassed” and given up for the father who is aligned with “culture” in this ideal process of masculine development. The mother is locked out of ‘culture’, the symbolic realm, and remains as part of ‘nature’, unnamable, and according to Van Herik “may return to the independent masculine psyche only as indifferent nature” (88). For Freud, the relationship of the son with the mother is therefore, by and large, not at play in the question of religious belief. When it does briefly emerge in his case study “Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” (1910), it is specifically tied to male homosexuality. In this largely discredited analysis built on a mistranslation of the Italian word for “kite” (translated as “vulture” which he associated with the mother’s breast), Freud famously argues that Leonardo’s homosexuality and religious inclination stems from a “very intense erotic attachment” to his mother due to “too much tenderness on the part of the mother herself” (54). However, here too Freud centers the “father-complex” in the final analysis. It is Leonard’s awareness “of his father’s absence”—the failure of the father to introduce the castration threat and sever the tie between mother and son—which “left him alone with his mother” (43). While this analysis has been discredited, the connection between male homosexuality, an absent father, and taking a substitute in the form of a Father God as part of failed Oedipal resolution forged by Freud in this text has a continuing legacy within psychoanalytic readings of male converts.

In sum, for Freud, God as a Father substitute and the son’s ambivalent relationship to the paternal object is central to male religious belief and reflected in the
structures and practices of monotheistic religions. Because male believers fail to resolve their Oedipal conflict, in Freud’s estimation they are aligned with a failed masculinity and heterosexuality. Male believers remain in a dependent relationship with the Father, which in Freud’s model is the ‘feminine’ position, or as in the case of Leonardo they remain ‘improperly’ attached to the mother because of failure to ‘properly’ identify with the father, leading to homosexuality.

**Kristeva on Religion: From Oedipal Submission to Primary Identification**

Generally, while Freud argues that it is the continuing and primal father-complex that marks the religious attitude, Kristeva unearths the archaic mother and what she describes as the “logic of abjection” ‘underneath’ Freud’s primal father and the act of parricide, and articulates a second aspect of the paternal function by recharacterizing Freud’s “father of individual prehistory” as what she calls an “imaginary father”. We might say that while Freud argues that the murder of the primal father and its subsequent return, ruled by the law of ambivalence, functions as the deeper or latent aspect of the religious attitude, Kristeva argues that repressed within this is the ambivalent relation to the archaic mother shared by all subjects but configured in specifically gendered ways. And while Freud argues that the manifest motive for the religious attitude and belief in God the Father is a wish for a loving protective father in response to the experience of helplessness, Kristeva argues that this loving God is a symbolic representative of the “imaginary father”, involved in the process of primary identification, not simply the ‘stronger’ Oedipal father.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982) Kristeva returns to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* to argue that what is most deeply repressed is a primal abhorrence of the mother, rather than a
primal parricide. Kristeva points to the fact that it is specifically gendered bodies that the sons fight over in Freud’s narrative, and that his text opens with the evocation of a taboo, the dread of incest—specifically meant to keep the son’s body away from the mother’s body—to argue that it is the relation to the archaic mother and what she calls “the logic of abjection” that marks the birth of society and of the subject, and represents “the secret lining” of the sacred (58). According to Kristeva, Freud’s emphasis on the substitution of the murdered father by an animal, which became a sacred totem to be ritually sacrificed and consumed, drew out one aspect of the sacred: that it is “founded by murder and the social bond made up of murder’s guilt-ridden atonement with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it” (57). However, she argues that there is another aspect to the sacred, “a lining” that is “oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad”, which is guarded against through interdictory rituals fundamental to the formation of religion (58).

Kristeva builds her notion of abjection from anthropologist Mary Douglas’ suggestion in Purity and Danger (1969) that what is excluded becomes the basis for prohibitions and religious laws. Kristeva illustrates how in various societies a prohibition is placed on what is considered a filthy element that is used as a means to differentiate and separate groups of people. She argues that this process in which what is filthy becomes defiled, and is separated off, jettisoned from the ‘proper’ social system, in fact produces this social system, in that it draws the boundaries of the society by demarking inside vs. outside, clean vs. dirty etc. (65). According to Kristeva, in these societies “rites of purification” function as what she calls the “essential ridge” which separates the
outcast, defiled or abominated (what she calls “the abject”), from that which is considered clean and proper (65). While the object is variously coded, as defilement, food taboos, or generalized notions of sin, there is a common pattern which she describes as “the logic of abjection”, with its prototypical source in the infant’s movement into the symbolic and language (65).

According to Kristeva, abjection enables the individual to come into the symbolic as a speaking being through a process in which the mother, specifically the mother’s body, or what Oliver refers to as the “maternal container”, is abjected (Hypatia 104). The infant initially experiences oneness and continuity with its mother and environment, existing in what Kristeva calls, after Plato’s Timaeus, the “chora” or “semiotic chora” (14). This is a space-time of ambiguous borders, marked by a fluctuation of inside and outside, pain and pleasure, sound and movement (14). According to Kristeva, before what Lacan described as the mirror stage, the infant begins to develop borders between I and not-I, self and other, through the process of abjection in which there is a rejection, a jettisoning, or expulsion of what seems to be a part of oneself. Kristeva illustrates this with the now classic example of the infant’s rejection/abjection of sour milk, and food loathing. She writes:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with the sight clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at the milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not want to assimilate it. ‘I’ expel it. But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself. (3)
In other words, in order to establish itself as a subject, the child must set up a boundary between the mother and itself, and relinquish what Oliver describes as “the primal narcissistic identification” with the mother (RK 60). However, this proves difficult because the limit of their bodies and relationship is ambiguous, leading to a kind of “narcissistic crisis”: the infant was inside the mother and now is outside, but still feels her as an extension (PH 14). In the sense that it is still one with the mother, the emerging subject must renounce a part of itself in order to become a subject, must transform it into the abject. Oliver writes: “the not-yet subject with its not-yet, or no-longer object maintains itself as the abject. Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost” (RK 60). As Oliver implies, the abject continues to haunt the subject with a kind of horror and fascination. Unlike Freud’s repressed, the abject does not return, but instead remains, haunts, because of the weakness of the incest prohibition, and the vertiginous desire to fall back into the chora along with the terror associated with the loss of subjectivity that would entail.

Following this logic, interdictory religious processes and rituals of defilement work to mark the boundaries of the specifically masculine subject’s proper self and ward off fears of being ‘engulfed’ by the maternal.

This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother (64).

In other words, for Kristeva, it is the male subject’s ambivalent relation to the archaic maternal, and not solely the paternal object as Freud argued, that produces and structures
religious laws and rituals. While both argue for their emergence as a response to the infantile condition, they differ in what they suggest as the source of the ambivalence and the subject’s response. While Freud imagines all religious formations as attempts to appease the guilt and longing for the Father brought on by primal parricide, and the wish for loving protection from an exalted Father, Kristeva argues that it is the masculine subject’s fear of his identity sinking into the mother, and the pull of an imagined return to the continuity and fusion of the chora, that is central. For Kristeva, religious ritual is fundamentally an encounter with maternal abjection.

The Archaic Mother, Abjection, and Melancholic Maternal Incorporation

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva articulates how paganism, Judaism, and Christianity structure differently this encounter with the abject (mother). According to Reineke’s discussion of Kristeva’s analysis, “paganism wards off the mother through elaborate rituals that separate pure from impure,” whereas Judaism “cuts off the mother” through the rite of circumcision, and Christianity “bings and purges the mother” (78-79). Building on Reineke’s reading of Christianity as ‘binging and purging’ the mother, I see this dynamic as revealing a melancholic structure in which the masculine subject retains a melancholic attachment to the archaic maternal object that allows him a safe incorporation of her nourishing qualities, while remaining shielded from the abject. This leaves the feminine subject locked in the ‘impossible’ position of being both the subject and object of abjection.

According to Reineke’s reading of Kristeva, “Judaism inscribes impurity in an abstract moral register as potential for abomination, but not before it pays its last debt to nature” through circumcision (79). According to Kristeva, the act of circumcision,
“through its duplicating and thus displacing through ritual the preeminent separation, which is that from the mother”, i.e. the cutting of the umbilical cord, “seems to insist that the identity of the speaking being (with his God) is based on the separation of the son from his mother” and “presupposes the violent difference of the sexes” because circumcision “carves out on his very sex, [that] the other sex [is] impure, defiled” (PH 100). Importantly, while all other cuttings or marks on the human body are condemned as abomination in the Law of the Old Testament (Leviticus), this ritualized act offers protection against maternal impurity and against the ambiguity that her existence represents, i.e. the blurring of boundaries in human procreation and birth. The circumcision cuts off all traces of this tie to the maternal body: they are lost, sacrificed, to a new (symbolic) identity in relation to God.

In the opening passages of her chapter, “…Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi” in Powers of Horror, Kristeva discusses what she sees as a shift in the New Testament away from the Abomination Law of the Old Testament: a fundamental change visible in “the abolishment of dietary taboos”, the “partaking of food with pagans”, and “verbal and gestural contact with lepers” (111). Kristeva argues that “an essential trait of these evangelical narratives is that abjection is no longer exterior”, but instead is “permanent and comes from within” (111). For Kristeva, the shift to Christianity, then, is marked by “an interiorization of abjection”, the interiorization of Jewish abomination (111):

Threatening, it is not cut off but is reabsorbed into speech. Unacceptable, it endures through the subjection to God of a speaking being who is innerly divided and, precisely through speech, does not cease purging himself of it (111).

In other words, filth, impurity, ‘evil’, is no longer a polluting external substance, but becomes displaced into the subject. It is transformed into an “ineradicable repulsion of
divided and contradictory being” and produces a subject who now seeks “the error within his own thoughts and speech”—a subject who must speak in an attempt to purge him or herself of this error or evil (116).

According to Kristeva, in this way the “Christian religion is a compromise between paganism and Judaic monotheism” (116). She suggests that in Christianity, marked by this process of interiorization, “defilement will blend with guilt…” to produce a “more material, object-like abomination” that will establish “a new category”—sin—that is bound in complex ways with the maternal, femininity, and the body. She argues that the Christian concept of defilement is “a revenge of paganism”, a “reconciliation with the maternal principle” that has been contained, or cut off, in Judaism (116). Specifically, she argues that latent within Christianity and Christian rituals is the attempt to “introject the drive-quality attached to the archaic object”, “particularly the oral relation to his mother”, and to “render guiltless” this “oralization” (114). However, according to Kristeva, the mother who is “swallowed up”, “reabsorbed,” is not “revalorized” or “rehabilitated” by Christianity (116-117). Of the possibilities of the archaic mother, “nourishing as much as threatening”, she argues that “only the idea of sinning flesh” will be kept (117). This is what Reineke describes as “a binging and purging” of the mother (79).

More specifically, for Kristeva the Christian (Roman Catholic) Eucharist represents the ultimate catharsis of this divided subject. As Reineke explains:

The division of the Christian consciousness finds its catharsis in the Eucharist. Identifying abjection as a fantasy of devouring, Christianity effects its abreaction. ‘This is my body’ mingles themes of devouring with those of satiating. Removing guilt from the archaic relation to the object of need—the mother—the Eucharistic narrative ‘tames cannibalism’. The body of Christ, both body and spirit, nature and speech, promises reconciliation (79).
In contrast to Freud, who argues that Christianity is marked by a reconciliation with the father, Kristeva argues, as Reineke outlines, that Christianity and the Catholic Eucharist as its ultimate cathartic ritual, represents and enacts a reconciliation with the maternal principle. The Eucharist functions as a ritual in which there is an attempt by the subject to orally incorporate the drive-quality attached to the archaic maternal object. The divided subject consumes the maternal in this Eucharist, as Freud suggested with the totem meal, to reenact the triumph, in this case over the fearsome, engulfing mother, to re-incorporate her qualities, and ward off the maternal abject. In this, the ritual returns, or repeats, the process of subject formation: the initial oral nourishing/feeding from the mother, and the turn toward the symbolic and language. However, in this process, the maternal object is split. The nourishing part becomes masculinized and idealized (“This is my body”, body of Christ), and the abject quality of the maternal becomes attached to the biological (abandoned) maternal body: the sinning body of flesh, and the female body in particular. In order to render this process guiltless and to ward off the terror of the possible loss of identity, the maternal quality is “purged,” as Reineke suggests (79). The Catholic subject then attempts to purge this incorporated ‘error’ through confession of sin. The mother is by and large removed from the scenario, left with the mark of “sinning flesh”, on the one hand, and made sublime and pure as the Virgin Mother, Mary, on the other.

This process, as interpreted by Kristeva, has profoundly different effects depending on the subject’s gender. For the masculine subject, this scenario potentially allows for the ‘safe’, guiltless, incorporation of the nourishing maternal drive-quality attached to the archaic maternal object in a transubstantiated form (i.e. the body of Christ), and identification with the male-bodied figure that allows for the warding off of
the abject by its association with the symbolic. The Christian son is what Reineke
describes as a “lapsing subject”; not firmly secured in the symbolic, he will return over
and over to feast on the archaic maternal ‘body’ (to reenact a triumph that will never be
complete) and then purge guilt in the form of confession to an exterior masculine subject
representing the law (79). The male priest plays the role of super-ego, Freud’s paternal
function, which is not internalized. The maternal object is retained, but held in the
melancholic bind. She is repudiated, marked as sinning flesh, but is also required because
she is the source of the feast that does not make its mark in symbolic terms. As Freud
argues in the case of the murdered primal father, the abject maternal (the archaic mother),
grows stronger in ‘death’, and despite the attempt to purge her, she remains to haunt the
subject in his terror of the abject, fear of the body, and guilt because of the now
internalized, incorporated, ‘evil’ or sin.

This structure has different and deeply problematic effects for the female subject.
It reveals its ultimate expression, according to Reineke, in what she calls the “bulimic
Christianity” of the “late medieval women mystics” (79). She describes their position
thus:

They live out the multivalent possibilities in the Eucharist—a food that we crave
and that we consume—at the fount of infinite jouissance. Exhibiting in large
numbers the symptoms of self-starvation, these women identify with Christ both
as victim of abjection and as aggressor in struggle against it. With their bodies
they share the guilt of lapsing—the torment of the murderous subject. With their
souls they share in the sacrifice of self that lays anger to rest. Murdering and
murdered, they fight an archaic battle—in all its abjection—to the edge of death
(79-80).

For the female subject, the binging and purging of the maternal is not straightforward.
The process of transubstantiation and identification with Christ is not sufficient
‘protection’ against the abject, for if she splits the mother, she splits herself. She is
locked into an internal struggle as the object and subject of the archaic battle. In this case, while confession may “disgorge sin in words”, as Reineke suggests, it also “permits conscription of the archaic by the Law of the father who, in the form of priestly authority, determines whether one’s words come from God or the devil” (80). The lapsing feminine subject must speak her sins to a father confessor and face judgment by a patriarchal discourse in which she, as the feminine, is already marked as sinning flesh or inimitable sublime Virgin Mother.

**Faith: The Imaginary Father and Melancholic Compromise**

For Kristeva, then, religious law and religious formations always involve the encounter with abjection. The other half of the equation is the process of primary identification. Kristeva takes the masculine subject’s ambivalent relationship to the father outlined by Freud – the longed for loving-loved protector father who is also the object of fear and male rivalry– and splits the paternal function into two: the Father of the Law, who functions as the Oedipal father, and the imaginary father, who is an internalization of a primary identification with what Freud called “the father of individual prehistory”.

Kristeva’s split paternal function forms a narcissistic structure that is held in tension with/against the abject mother – a structure that protects and ‘causes’ narcissism to exist and supports the move into the symbolic or language. More specifically, through primary identification, understood as a “direct and immediate” transference, the maternal container may be abjected, and what Kristeva calls “the maternal Thing”, may be lost, mourned, and ‘recovered’ in language. Unlike Freud’s model that locks the mother out of the symbolic, this allows for the transposition of the relationship with the maternal into the symbolic, and for what she terms “the semiotic” to be imprinted into language and
symbolic terms, allowing for what she describes as “live meaning” (BS 23). According to Kristeva, this “direct and immediate transference” that helps to bring about primary stabilization of the subject is what “Christianity celebrates in divine love” (IBL 25).

In Kristeva’s model of subject formation, what she calls “the imaginary father” is fundamental to both primary narcissism and primary identification. In order to understand the role these processes play in her understanding of faith and the religious turn, I will sketch out the role of the imaginary father in the mourning of the maternal object, or maternal Thing, and its transposition into language in the process of subject-formation. It is central to the structure of primary narcissism, which is the initial structure of subjectivity.

In *Tales of Love* Kristeva develops her notion of the imaginary father from a reference Freud makes in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” (1922) to a “father in individual prehistory” (26). For Kristeva, this father is the third term whose presence initiates and gives form to primary narcissism—the initial structure of subjectivity that pre-dates the Oedipal conflict and emerges from the narcissistic crisis. According to Kristeva, primary narcissism has a triadic structure that takes its shape in tension between the pull of two “magnets”: the archaic mother and this “father of prehistory” (23). The subject, unstable and fragile, emerges suspended between these poles as a kind of ‘covering’ over what Kristeva describes as an “emptiness which is at the root of the human psyche” (23):

Neither screen nor state, primary narcissism is already a structure, previous to the Oedipus complex, which operates on the basis of three terms. The central node of connection and disconnection, fullness and emptiness, positions and losses, represents the instability of the narcissistic subject. He remains there, attracted on one hand by the magnet of primary identification, which is a father imagined to be loving, “a father of individual prehistory”, the seed of the Ego ideal; and on the
other, by a magnet of desire and hatred, fascination and disgust, constituted by the archaic mother who has ceased to be a container of needs but is not yet made up into a taboo object of desire: neither subject nor object, an ‘abject’-mother, a place of warding off and differentiation, an infection (374).

Kristeva suggests that the development of the subject begins with a kind of “mimicry” that she describes as “not with an object, but with what offers itself to me as a model” (25). This mimesis ‘covers’, produces a screen over, and “lines”, the ‘emptiness’. The presence of the two “poles” and the tension between them protect this emptiness and allow narcissism to exist; at the same time, primary narcissism ‘holds’ the shape of this structure:

Narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, ensures elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos would sweep away any possibility of distinction, trace, and symbolization, which in turn confuse the limits of the body, words, the real, and the symbolic (24).

According to Kristeva, it is primary identification with this father of prehistory (who will become/ is the imaginary father) that allows the subject to bridge emptiness and enter the symbolic (73). For Kristeva, following Lacan, there is a loss that propels the subject into the symbolic, into the use of language—the loss of absolute felicity between the subject’s need and what is received—as well as a loss inherent in that process as this initial felicity is replaced by the unceasing and frustrating requirement to articulate his or her desire, his or her demand, to the other in language. Building on Melanie Klein, Kristeva associates the loss that Lacan describes specifically with the maternal. For Kristeva, the loss of the maternal object is acknowledged as necessary for the subject to move into the symbolic, but also causes a kind of depression that must be worked through. As part of the subject’s abjection of the maternal container, the move away from continuity between the child and mother in the chora where the infant’s needs are met without demand and coming to
language (what she calls the “thetic break”), the subject must relinquish the initial relationship with the maternal, must give up what Kristeva terms the “the maternal Thing” and mourn it.

According to Kristeva, in this process there is ideally a loss of the archaic object, (the mother), but also a recovery of ‘her’ in language. Kristeva writes:

Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a negation (Verneinung) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. ‘I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother’ is what the speaking being seems to be saying. ‘But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her therefore I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language’ (BS 43).

Ideally, this process allows for the emotions related to the loss, and also the interchange with the other, to be ‘transposed’ or “imprinted” into the symbolic and language:

From the analyst’s point of view, the possibility of concatenating signifiers (words or actions) appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object—and on the related emotions as well that come out of transposing, beyond loss and on an imaginary or symbolic level, the imprints of an interchange with the other according to a certain order (40).

In order to go beyond the sadness of this loss, the subject must move toward a process of identification that allows separation of the subject from the maternal Thing. For Kristeva, this entails primary identification with the “father in individual pre-history” which offers what she describes as “faith” in the signifier (339). In other words, primary identification is what offers the subject reassurance that there will be compensation for the loss (of the archaic object) in the realm of signs. According to Noelle McAfee, “identifying with this image of the logic of identification gives the subject some faith that one thing could possibly stand in for another, that the sound-image mother could connect in any fashion with the signified meaning of mother” (67).
While it is necessary in order to renounce the initial relationship with the archaic maternal object, this turn to the imaginary father does not necessarily represent, as Jacqueline Rose (1986) famously claimed, “a race back into the arms of the law” (151). Importantly, while Kristeva describes this coming into language as happening via primary identification with a “father”, this scene predates the Oedipal scenario and therefore sexual difference is not yet in play. Kristeva describes this figure as being “endowed with the sexual attributes of both parents” (33), and as a “mother-father conglomerate” (40). The naming of this figure as the “imaginary father”, which follows psychoanalytic conventions and describes the continuing patriarchal structure of subject formation, is unfortunate. However, even though the archaic maternal object must be lost, and the maternal Thing mourned, Kristeva’s model does offer the possibility, the necessity, of a relationship with the mother to be transposed, imprinted, into the symbolic in order to create “live meaning,” and as a continuous challenge to the strictures of this symbolic order (24):

What makes such a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema […]. Such an identification, which may be called phallic or symbolic, ensures the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation. The supporting father of such a symbolic triumph is not the Oedipal father but truly that ‘imaginary father,’ ‘father in individual prehistory’ according to Freud, who guarantees primary identification. Nevertheless, it is imperative that this father in individual prehistory be capable of playing his part as Oedipal father in Symbolic Law, for it is on the basis of that harmonious blending of the two facets of fatherhood that the abstract and arbitrary signs of communication may be fortunate enough to be tied to the affective meaning of pre-historical identifications, and the dead language of the potentially depressive person can arrive at live meaning in the bond with others (23-24).

Following from this, the move into the symbolic is structured both by direct transference to the imaginary father via primary identification with “the father of pre-history” and by
the prohibitions of the Father of law, who is the Oedipal father. This allows for the
maternal container to be abjected and the subject to be tethered to the symbolic.
According to Kristeva, it is through the “harmonious blending of the two facets of
fatherhood” that “the affective meaning of pre-historical identifications” can ‘fill’ “the
abstract and arbitrary sign of communications”—that the symbolic may be imprinted
with the ‘interaction’ and emotions related to the archaic maternal object. While Kristeva
argues that “matricide is our vital necessity” and necessary, it is only through the survival
and imprinting of this relationship in symbolic terms that “live meaning” can be created
(27). Live meaning not only signals the survival of the semiotic elements in language, but
is the necessary ground for productive psychic revolt and for herethical relations to
others.

These two processes—the transposition/imprinting of the maternal relationship,
and the securing of the subject to another dimension via a transference to the imaginary
father in a bond that resembles faith—come together in Kristeva’s analysis of religious
faith. In her discussion of the Catholic Credo (i.e. the Catholic profession of faith in God,
“the Father almighty” and in “Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord”), Kristeva suggests a
relationship between this process of primary identification, the imaginary father, religious
faith, and the experience of divine love. According to Kristeva, faith can “be described
[…] as what can only be called a primary identification with a loving and protective
agency” (24). She describes it as a process/experience in which “Western man”
overcomes “the notion of irremediable separation […] using ‘semiotic’ means rather than
‘symbolic’ means” to reestablish “a continuity or fusion with an Other that is no longer
substantial and maternal but symbolic and paternal” (24). In other words, religious faith
resembles and takes its shape from the initial experience of primary identification: it is a kind of repetition of this situation/ process. More specifically, it is associated with the maternal and the transposition of a nourishing maternal quality to a paternal/ symbolic structure. “Fusion” with this transposed quality allows for the experience of overcoming the separation from the (maternal) object that occurs in the process of subject-formation, according to Kristeva. She uses an example from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* to illustrate the relationship to the maternal, and the role of the semiotic in this process:

Saint Augustine goes so far as to compare the Christian faith in God with the infant’s relations to its mother’s breast. ‘What am I even at the best but an infant sucking the milk Thou givest, and feeding upon Thee, the food that perisheth not?’ What we have here is fusion with a breast that is, to be sure, succoring, nourishing, loving and protective, but transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world (24).

Here, Kristeva specifically argues that it is the nourishing breast, a maternal part-object, which is transferred to an abstracted and paternal location. The son may then feed from this idealized, paternal ‘milk’, which allows for the nourishing quality of the (maternal) archaic object to be ingested without incorporating the abject aspects of the milk of the mother’s biological breast.

According to Kristeva, despite theological claims that this process is a strictly reasonable or intellectual endeavor, religious faith must be understood as relating to primary processes:

However intelligible or reasonable this dynamic may be (and theology excels at describing it), it appears to be driven, in essence, by infra- or trans-linguistic psychic processes which behave like primary processes and gratify the individual in his or her narcissistic core (25).

Kristeva relates it to the “direct and immediate transference” “of the nascent ego to the ‘father of prehistory’” (25). For Kristeva, this is what stabilizes the subject, but it is also
where the Christian notion of divine love from God may come from. The immediate transference “toward the imaginary father, who is such a godsend […] withstands a process of rejection involving what may have been chaos and is about to become an abject” (TOL 41). This transference, which Kristeva describes as “the leap” to this ‘god-sent’ form, offers stabilization as it ‘holds’ through the process of rejection, and allows for and offers compensation for the loss of the maternal container (41). This becomes translated into God’s love:

This ‘direct and immediate transference’ to a form, a structure, or an agency (rather than a person) helps to bring about primary stabilization of the subject through its enduring character; because it is a gift of the self, it both encourages and hinders the disintegrative and aggressive agitation of the instincts. This is perhaps what Christianity celebrates in divine love. God was the first to love you, God is love: these apothegms reassure the believer of God’s permanent generosity and grace. He is given a gift of love without any immediate requirement of merit, although the question of just deserts does eventually arise in the form of a demand for asceticism and self-perfection (IBL 25).

Importantly, Kristeva emphasizes that faith in God, as fusion with God, must be understood as a process in which the semiotic is primary:

This fusion with God, which, to repeat, is more semiotic than symbolic, repairs the wounds of Narcissus, which are scarcely hidden by the triumphs and failures of our desires and enmities (25).

In other words, fusion with God, in faith, offers a reparative function that flows from the semiotic: from the loving, nourishing quality of the archaic maternal breast-object, through a leap of faith to transference to the imaginary father.

According to Kristeva, this should be read as a “compromise solution”, in that “the benefits of the new relationship of dependency are entirely of an imaginary order, in the realm of signs” (25). In other words, it represents a process that does not move fully into the symbolic, but remains instead in the imaginary order. However, this imaginary
structure is then elaborated and encased into a whole symbolic discourse: Christian doctrine:

Once our narcissistic needs are met, we can find images of our desires in stories recounting the experience of faith: the story of the Virgin birth, for instance—that secret dream of every childhood; or that of the torment of the flesh on Golgotha which mirrors in glory the essential melancholy of the man […] (25-26).

These stories function, as Freud suggests, as an external doctrine that takes the place of a full movement into the symbolic, or in Freud’s terms, successful oedipalization and an internalization of the super-ego function. While Kristeva sees a more central role for imaginary structures, and draws comparisons between religious faith as a quest for love and transference in the psychoanalytic field, she argues that Christianity, in contrast to psychoanalysis, is deeply problematic because it adheres to a strictly limited range of symbolic options, and refuses to recognize the sexual and imaginary character of its fundamental fantasies (21).

In sum, then, according to Kristeva religious faith, characterized as fusion with God, is a repetition of, or draws on, the process of primary identification. As a repetition of this it resembles the moment of letting go of the maternal container to be ‘held’ by the form of the imaginary father as a compensation for the loss. Faith gratifies the individual to his or her narcissistic core because of the association with primary narcissism and identification. It repeats the process that produces the experience of “live meaning”, as well as the initial stabilization of subjectivity at the ‘hands’ and in the presence of this third element. However, religious faith, as described by Kristeva, is a compromise solution, and therefore the compensation is primarily imaginary. This repetition offers a re-fusion, or transfusion, of the semiotic into the symbolic frame, displaced to the
religion: i.e. it is experienced as religious faith, which is then elaborated by Christian doctrine.

This process represents a melancholic structure because the relationship to the maternal object does not survive the transposition intact and, therefore it is not ‘truly’ “live meaning” that is achieved, nor a full movement into the symbolic. In this model of Christian faith as a repetition of the process of primary identification, the nourishing quality of the archaic relationship is split, idealized, and transferred to the paternal figure (God). While the God structure is a father-mother conglomerate, in the case of Christianity the maternal aspect is displaced, and denied in the symbolic formation, which takes the form of God the Father. God the Father is the source of eternal milk, while the mother becomes associated with the bodily milk given to the infant that must be relinquished in favour of the father’s spiritual nourishment. The mother becomes associated with the body, infantile helplessness, sin, and death, while the father is idealized as spirit, life, and immortality. Divine love is found in the hands of the Father God. The mother becomes abject, and the maternal aspect in the process is denied, and displaced to the father. However, she is not relinquished. The son does not lose her and find her in language, in the symbolic, but maintains this compromise solution, a melancholic attachment to this maternal object, repeating the scene of splitting and fusion. Again, the notion of “sinning flesh” and the untouchable Mother Virgin are the representations of the feminine that enter the symbolic in the scenario.

In the next section, I turn to the question of how these structures come together in the analysis of religious conversion.
Re-interpreting Freud’s “A Religious Experience”

Freud offers an analysis of a religious conversion in his brief essay, “A Religious Experience” (1928), where he discusses a letter he received from an American doctor who is critical of the “lack of religious faith, and indifference on the subject of survival after death” professed by Freud in an article circulated in North America. The letter’s author, who refers himself as a “brother physician”, recounts his own religious experience and conversion to Christianity in the hope that Freud will reconsider his position.

In the letter the doctor describes an experience in his medical training in which his “attention was attracted” by “a sweet-faced dear old woman who was being carried to a dissecting table” (169). This scene made a deep impression, and filled him with doubt at the existence of God. He was struck by the thought: “‘There is no God: if there were a God, he would not have allowed this dear old woman to be brought into the dissecting-room” (169). Later that afternoon, always a little skeptical of Christian doctrine, he makes the decision to “discontinue going to church” (169). However, this course is interrupted immediately by what the doctor describes as “a voice” that spoke to his soul and cautioned him, asking him to “consider this step” (169). According to his account, the doctor’s “spirit replied to this inner voice” by proposing that if he had “certainty” that “Christianity was the truth, and the Bible was the Word of God” then he would accept it (169). This is followed in the coming days by unspecified revelations that “made it clear” to the doctor’s “soul” that “the Bible was His Word,” and by “many infallible proofs” in
which “God […] revealed Himself”—which lead to his conversion to ‘true faith’ in Christianity (169).

Freud interprets the scenario as follows: the old woman “reminded him of his own mother”—an association revealed, according to Freud, in the doctor’s “affectionately phrased description of the ‘sweet faced dear old woman’” and “the weakness in judgment displayed by the young doctor” toward her (169-170). The sight of the old woman’s body, which Freud imagines to be “naked or at the point of being stripped,” “roused in him a longing for his mother which sprang from his Oedipus complex,” and this impulse toward the mother “was immediately completed by a feeling of indignation against his father” (170). Since the man’s “idea of ‘father’ and ‘God’ had not yet become widely separated”, according to Freud, his “desire to destroy his father” became “conscious as doubt in the existence of God” and this drive sought to “justify itself in the eyes of reason as indignation about the ill-treatment of […] his mother in sexual intercourse”, experienced as indignation at her ‘dissection’ (171).

According to Freud, the resolution of this re-activated Oedipal conflict, displaced onto the sphere of religion, should be understood as a “repetition of the Oedipus situation”, which consequently “soon met a similar fate” to the doctor’s own Oedipal resolution (171). In this case, the rebellious Oedipal impulses “succumbed to a powerful opposing current” (171). For evidence of this, Freud points out that “during the conflict the level of displacement was not maintained”: specifically, the doctor does not make rational arguments for the justification of the reality of God or specifically detail the nature of the “infallible signs” that led to his turn to faith; instead, the conflict “unfolded in the form of a hallucinatory psychosis” (171). In other words, it was “inner voices […]
that uttered warnings against resistance to God” that led to a submission to the father/Father (God) (171). According to Freud, while the outcome of the struggle is displayed in the sphere of religion, it is in fact “predetermined by the outcome of the Oedipus complex: complete submission to the will of God the Father” (171). The doctor was faced with a renewed Oedipal conflict, which allowed his healthy skepticism to “flare up for a last time” before, according to Freud, “being finally extinguished” (172). The young man fails to face the reality of the scenario and succumbs to “everything he had been taught since childhood about God and Jesus Christ” (171-172). He fails his education to reality, fails to face the Oedipal father, and becomes a believer, succumbing to the external authority of Christian doctrine.

In sum, according to Freud, the sight of the old woman roused Oedipal jealousy and anger that were directed at the father for his sole right to the mother and his perceived violence in their sexual relations. This was experienced as indignation and profound doubt in this case, because the man’s concepts of God and father were not sufficiently separated. Wishful longing for/ fear of the “stronger father’ forced a sudden submissive return to allegiance (experienced as belief) to God the Father, which, coupled with the relief from the anxiety of that renewed Oedipal conflict, was experienced as a discrete moment of conversion.

What role does the maternal figure play in Freud’s reading? Half-stripped, she is the object of Oedipal desire for the young man, a desire that needs to be struggled over, relinquished, and then substituted for, as part of the normal Oedipal conflict with the father. Dead, and destined for the dissection table, she is an object lesson for the doctor on the reality of mortality that needs to be faced with resignation. In this case, according
to Freud, the doctor, unable to hold his repose, fails the test and returns to a dependent (feminine, in the Freudian view) relation to the father and the wishful illusion of remaining forever under the protective care of the Father God. However, this particular essay by Freud is unlike any of his other texts dealing with religion, in the fact that it betrays a fracture in Freud’s absolute focus on the paternal aspect of the religious turn. More specifically, the maternal object exceeds its designated role in this scene in two key ways: as a site, or source, of the son’s ambivalence, and as the object that is not fully relinquished in the religious turn.

In the introduction to his collection of essays, *Freud and Freudians on Religion* (2001), Donald Capps suggests (without elaboration) that Freud’s “A Religious Experience” represents “a rare recognition that the son’s ambivalence regarding the lost object may be directed as much to the mother as to the father” (12). While Freud’s discussion does not in any way “recognize” the mother as the site of ambivalence, as Capps suggests, but rather works to minimize the role of the maternal in this crisis, the maternal object is not fully contained, or her role exhausted, in Freud’s analysis. Freud’s attempts to return the focus to the father cannot adequately mask the physically central role of the mother as the initial site of ambivalence and crisis.

Secondly, as Van Herik argues, Freud’s understanding of religious conversion is built on the notion that development into a proper masculine subject involves the necessary renunciation of illusion, belief, and the body associated with the maternal/feminine, in order to achieve a post-religious rational masculine autonomy as opposed to feminine dependency on the father—a process that the religious believer fails to complete (166). The believer’s failure to achieve this ideal masculinity is read in the
Freudian frame as taking the ‘feminine’ position, as dependent on the Father (God).

However, if the initial site of attachment associated with belief, illusion, and dependency is understood as the relation to the mother, the suggestive corollary is that what the believer does not fully relinquish is in fact the maternal object. If this scene is reconfigured in this way, with the maternal returned to a central role as site of ambivalence and the object that is not relinquished, this leads to two questions: when the son finds faith in a Christian Father God, what is this an investment in, or an escape from? And, secondly, what is the mother’s fate in this religious turn? In other words, if the maternal object is not fully renounced, in what way, or form, is she retained?

In the scene described in the letter to Freud, the young medical student comes face-to-face with the corpse of a sweet-faced woman on her way to the dissecting room. He is “attracted” and outraged. This encounter leads him to doubt and despair. He is struck by the thought: “There is no God: if there were he would not have allowed this dear old woman to be brought into the dissecting-room” (169). His affectionate description of the dead woman and his response to her do suggest, as Freud argues, that there is an association with the mother. The question is, however, what does the encounter with this figure ‘arouse’?

Importantly, this is an experience, in its most basic sense, with a corpse, which is the “utmost” example of abjection (3). Kristeva writes of an encounter with a corpse at the morgue:

[…] the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled […]. Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and no longer signifies anything. I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost
of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (3-4).

The young man is in fact faced with the abject maternal in her ultimate form: a half-stripped mother corpse. This encounter inevitably “disturbs identity” (4), and raises the young man’s “fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (64). In this case, the encounter with maternal abjection is penetrating enough that he is deeply shaken and loses his previous easy belief in a transparent, intrinsic, and divine order to things. He experiences this as a loss of faith in a God who guarantees Justice (i.e. the Father who prohibits ‘godless’ acts and who is meant to uphold the incest prohibition).

The doctor decides to stop going to church, which at this point he only attends as a symbolic gesture, as he harbors doubts about Christian doctrine. However, immediately following this decision, he experiences a hallucination in the form of an inner voice that speaks to him and cautions him against this (169). Freud argues that this is a ‘voice’ of caution, a warning not to cross the Oedipal father, the father of the Law, that leads him to ‘fall’ back into illusion through complete submission. However, following Kristeva, one might say that this hallucination offers him the possibility of an imaginary coherence in the face of the threat of maternal abjection and the destabilization of meaning (loss of belief in a God of Justice).

In In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith (1987), Kristeva very briefly returns to Freud’s case of the American doctor. She proposes that the key to this case is not that the idea of “father” and “God” were not adequately separated, but that religion elaborates the meaning of hallucination, which psychoanalysis does not, and therefore religious discourse offers a way through his conflict. She argues that the
recourse to hallucination by the doctor in Freud’s case, followed by a relationship of dependency on Christian discourse, should be understood as a compromise solution—an available and relatively socially acceptable means of stabilizing his identity. According to Kristeva, “when hallucination encounters religion, the result is not always an attenuation of the hallucination to the level of socially acceptable fantasy” (13). However, in some cases “even the paroxysm of hallucination can provide a temporary resolution” (13). Hallucination, according to Kristeva, “can help the subject reestablish a kind of coherence, eccentric or aberrant though it may be” (13). This “resulting imaginary identity can sustain the individual and temporarily help him go on living” (13). In other words, while in Freud’s analysis hallucinatory psychosis is seen as a surrender, a failure to face reality, Kristeva suggests that it can function as a compromise solution by offering an imaginary identity that may help ward off a deeper psychosis and help the subject go on living.

This recourse to a hallucinatory psychosis and imaginary identity suggests that what this encounter initially reactivates is the “narcissistic crisis” and the process of primary identification, the initial ‘defense’ against abjection, rather than simply a Freudian Oedipal conflict. The activation of these primary processes is also visible in the doctor’s turning to religious faith, as opposed to another way through the conflict. In this case, after hearing the voice, the doctor asks for “certainty” concerning the truth of Christianity and God’s Word in the Bible, which he receives through unspecified revelations that lead to his conversion. It is significant that the doctor asks for and receives certainty about the felicity of God’s Word specifically, and experiences the presence of ‘God’ in his life. This suggests that there is a repetition of the process of
primary identification with the imaginary father that allows for a kind of a transfusion of the semiotic, which is displaced into the religious field. The repetition of the logic that produces “live meaning”, and according to Kristeva resembles “faith”, initially during subject formation, is transfigured and experienced as religious faith and as certainty in the felicity of God’s Word.

In this conversion experience, then, there is a kind of repetition of the process of primary identification displaced into the religious field: the abject is disavowed through a ‘defensive’ hallucinatory psychosis that functions as an imaginary structure, that ‘speaks’ in the voice of the imaginary, not Oedipal, father, and guards against abjection. The hallucinatory psychosis allows for the transference of the nourishing aspect of the maternal to the site of the imaginary father, transfigured as symbolic and paternal. This process offers the subject “primary identification with a protective loving agency” which, as Kristeva describes it, is a “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving and protective” breast transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency”, experienced as faith (24). In this case, it is specifically experienced as a reinvigoration of the Word of the Bible, and the experience of faith, or certainty in God the Father’s presence, which leads to conversion to Christianity.

Following Kristeva, the doctor remains within the Christian frame because it can elaborate/support the hallucination in a way that allows him to deal with the abject and, as Kristeva suggests, “grants the son, after his period of suffering, that glory that comes with identification with the father” (12). In other words, the process allows the doctor to attach himself to an idealized father figure (in the form of the Father-God) after a destabilizing encounter with abjection. The religious turn represents a specific way
through this conflict: instead of moving through the process of oedipalization via the transposition of the maternal imprint to the symbolic to make “live meaning”, the convert stops short, and produces an imaginary identity, a compromise solution. The religious turn represents a process in which the relationship with the maternal object is not transposed, but split in two: on the one hand, the abject maternal is disavowed, and on the other, the nourishing aspect is idealized, detached, and then re-attached, in this case to the figure of the loving protective Father God of the New Testament.

In this repetition of the process of primary identification in the religious field, there is a splitting of the maternal object: the abject maternal is disavowed and the nourishing maternal aspect is devoured and displaced onto the imaginary Father God. This process allows for a semiotic transfusion, however, the subject’s reliance on the maternal object is submerged in the process. The son turns away because he is afraid of facing the reality of ‘her’, and his attachment to her. Nevertheless, he returns each time he needs to be fed; refusing to call her by name, he calls her Father. The maternal object is thus held in suspension: the maternal function is left to haunt this subject as the abject (returning in various forms, sins of the flesh, etc), while providing nourishment under the guise of the Father God, but is never directly ‘faced’, except as seen here, as the face of death.

Is there a way in which this scene, this encounter, and this crisis, as an “undoing of self”, to use Khanna’s phrase, at least gestures to the possibility of what she describes as the formation of a “critical agency”, an “echo”, that emerges when an object is incorporated and cannot be ‘properly’ mourned or assimilated (22)? Or is this critical
possibility simply lost in the displacement of the nourishing maternal aspect and the
disavowal of the attachment?

While I take up these questions more specifically in the next chapter, there is a
way in which the doctor himself is implicated in this scene. In the encounter, the doctor
experiences “attraction” and a reactive impulse, a reaction that Freud reads as Oedipal
indignation at the father. However, the indignation can also be read differently. This
reactive impulse is part of the fascination-repulsion response associated with the abject,
but it is also ‘outrage’; that is the reactive impulse is experienced as outrage against a
scene that is ‘godless’. This encounter in which the student-doctor is faced with the
‘reality’ of death in the form of a mother-corpse causes him to doubt the existence of
God, because if there were a guarantor of justice this would not have come to pass—the
death of ‘his’ mother specifically and death in general. His outrage is directed at this
(absent) God of justice, but the doctor himself cannot help but be implicated: no doubt he
has by his own hand taken other mother corpses to the dissecting room, and one day he
too will face same fate as corpse. This outrage is, then, directed against his helplessness
in relation to the scene, his response, and his implication in it. He experiences
ambivalence in relation to the scene/act of matricide, and horror-terror in the face of his
own mortality. As Kristeva argues, the ‘loss’ of the mother is necessary for the subject’s
movement into the symbolic. However, within patriarchal culture this loss becomes a
severing.

This act is mirrored in the scene: the young son about to become a doctor (a man)
is implicated in this scene of maternal dissection. His outrage at the sight of the mother-
corpse, “seen without God and outside of science”, reveals his ambivalent attachment to
the maternal (3). The symbolic frame, the belief in a divine system that held him ‘away’ from his *primal identification* with her, is destabilized. This destabilization of the initial defense that produced narcissism brings back the narcissistic crisis. However, what Freud reads as Oedipal indignation may in fact be his outrage at her loss, at his own hand in it, and at the ‘father’ and patriarchal frame that keep her from him—that demands absolute distance. This outrage may be a defense against the fear and desire of being engulfed by the maternal and death (the mother as the mark of both life and death), as well as anguish at the loss and impenetrable distance. There is potential for a critical identification with the mother in this scene, through the repetition and displacement of this matricide and facing of the mother-corpse. The son may see himself in the face of death, in the face of the mother, and accept the reality of this limit, “the necessities of Fate”, and as Freud suggests focus his energies on the reality of the earthly world and its problems (54).

However, there is no “critical identification” in the sense that Khanna suggested it in this instance: the young man is struck, implicated, but cannot face the ‘reality’. Instead, there is recourse to hallucination, in a process that resembles disavowal more then a repression of the maternal abjection. In other words, while Freud argues that the turn to religious illusion functions as a kind of escape route away from the reality of one’s own mortality and helplessness, and the reality of one’s own responsibility, it also functions here as a structure that helps the subject to escape from the ‘reality’ of the loss the mother and his hand in it.

In the next chapter, I take up these issues in a close reading of the conversion of St. Augustine, as represented in his *Confessions*. This analysis poses the following questions: How does the transfusion of the semiotic into the symbolic in the religious turn
compare with Kristeva’s model of “intimate revolt”? She defines this as “a structuring and de-structuring practice, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and society” that puts the unified subject on trial (RPL 17), and, to use Oliver’s phrase, brings “the speaking body, complete with drives, back into language,” or the symbolic (1). In terms of an encounter with the maternal, how does this classic example of religious conversion function in relation to Kristeva’s model of the possibility of an ethical encounter, of herethics?
2. St. Augustine’s *Confessions*: Reconfiguring Conversion Discourse

In *Intimate Revolt* (2002), Kristeva outlines the possibility of, and possibilities in, what she calls “psychological” or “intimate” revolt: a “profound logic” of “return/turning back/displacement/change”, an anamnesis or movement of “revolt” that returns the past and re-elaborates the most archaic phases of psychic subject formation (5). Kristeva imagines revolt as both reflective and productive of “what is most alive and promising about our culture,” a logic of transgression and transformation that she attempts to “revive” throughout her career and in this work in particular (5). St. Augustine makes a number of fleeting appearances in this text, perhaps most strikingly in the very early pages of the introduction where Kristeva argues that a decisive differentiation must be made between what she calls the revolt of “modern man,” and that of the “Christian man” (7). With particular directness, she writes: “Take note: revolt […] is not a simple reprise of the retrospective link that founds the innermost recesses of the Christian man, serene in his quest, which is completed by a return” (7). While Kristeva acknowledges Augustine and “the return” of the “Christian man” as a distant relation to her intimate revolt, she completely disowns any possibility for resemblance. For Kristeva, in so far as Augustine’s *Confessions* can be read as reflective of an Oedipal drama that seeks and finds “reconciliation with God,” it does not represent a productive kind of revolt (7).

Without taking issue with Kristeva’s criticisms (one cannot disagree that Oedipal revolt is not the key to revolution), the process of Augustine’s conversion and the larger narrative of his *Confessions* may not be so easily contained. In a close reading of the scenes of his conversion, I propose that Augustine’s experience in the garden of Milan
can be understood as a specific instance of what Kristeva calls “intimate revolt”—a
process that opens up Augustine’s “inmost heart”, revives the semiotic in the symbolic,
and reconfigures his melancholic relationship with language and with signification more
generally. Like Kristeva’s melancholic, for whom affect is separated from words, the
fallen Augustine exists in the “region of death,” ‘dealing’ in the language of persuasion,
an endlessly malleable language, empty of “the truth,” to be used only for personal gain
and influence. Through his conversion, Augustine becomes able to (re)experience the
semiotic drive, a transformation that is reflected in his new experiences with language
and affect: he discovers a new relationship with his “inmost heart”, one which resembles
Kristeva’s “semiotic-chora” that revives psychic life and opens up psychic space, creating
possibilities for sublimation.

However, the conversion experience in the garden does not mark the end of the
process. Turning to Book IX of the *Confessions*, and Augustine’s vision at Ostia shared
with his mother, I suggest that this experience extends beyond what traditional
psychoanalytic interpretations describe as representing either “submission” to the
maternal (Capps, 119), or an “erotic” (Dittes, 133), “orgiastic” (Woollcott, 275) or
“passionately orgiastic” (Klingerme, 483) fantasy-exchange that functions as a
fulfillment of the Oedipal fantasy. I find in this scene a reconfiguration of the relationship
between mother and son, which I see as marked by the melancholic structure of
“rejection of, yet attachment to”. Finally, I ask whether the conversion process in its
entirety transforms the melancholic attachment that binds the mother-son into one in
which the maternal may be faced, in which the strangeness, the alterity of the (m)other, as
well as the tie that binds, may be present and recognized.
Failed Oedipalization, Primary Narcissistic Injury, or Melancholic Attachment?

The psychoanalytic encounter with Augustine’s Confessions can historically be characterized by two trends. According to Miller, psychological readings of Augustine emphasize either “his early oedipal conflict” or “the preoedipal narcissistic wound he endured in childhood” (262-263). In general, he is diagnosed as having suffered from a neurotic conclusion to the Oedipal conflict because of a failed identification with his father, due to his absence or an incomplete separation from his mother (with emphasis shifting overwhelmingly toward the latter), or else from “thwarted trust and emotional neglect” because of early infantile trauma—developmental dynamics which these critics argue are conveyed in the Confessions, and “transferred” into Augustine’s theology (263).

In “Augustine the Narcissist” (1984), Capps builds on Fredriksen’s work to question the early dominance of Oedipal readings in psychoanalytic discussions of the Confessions. He writes: “why [is there] such a heavy emphasis on the Oedipal conflict”, when “one could argue for all intents and purposes, the father-son conflict was never

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10 According to Paul Rigby’s chronology, Freudian interpretations of the Confessions appeared as early as 1925 with B Legewie’s “Augustinus, Ein Psychotherapie”. This was followed by D.R Dodd’s “Augustine’s Confessions: A Study of Spiritual Maladjustment” in 1928. Legewie’s analysis was “rejected as superficial and one-sided” by A. Solignac (1962) whose critique built on the work of P. De Labriolle and M Zepf. Charles Klingerman revived Freudian interpretation of the Confessions in “A Psychoanalytic study of the Confessions of St. Augustine” (1957). Rigby mentions P. Pruyser’s (1966) edited collection on the subject, and David Burrell’s “Reading the Confessions of St. Augustine” (1970) as notable. To this I would add Rebecca West’s (1933) early Oedipal reading, and specific mention of the work of James Dittes (1965), David Bakan (1965), and Peter Woolcott (1965), who were all part of the surge of interest in Freudian theory in the mid-1960s. This shifted to an interest in narcissism beginning in the late 1970s, with the work of Paula Fredriksen (1978), Capps (1984), and J.G Kisto (1991). Psychoanalytic interest in the Confessions splinters at this point. A few studies emerge that emphasize mutual recognition, via the work of Paul Ricoeur (Rigby 1984) and Jessica Benjamin (2007). There is some interaction with French psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Luce Irigaray. See Burrus (2007) for an example.
really joined?” (117-118). Capps turns to Dittes’ much cited Oedipal analysis of Augustine to make his point:

Dittes’ own analysis of Augustine’s conflict suggests that there is not the typical resolution of the Oedipal conflict because Augustine ‘wins’ the contest with his father for his mother’s affections, and therefore is not really confronted with the central demand of the Oedipus complex, namely to relinquish his desires and submit to the father’s authority. On the other hand, winning the Oedipal conflict means he must now confront his mother as he would otherwise have had to deal with his father (117).

Capps argues that “a far more decisive issue than the Oedipal conflict […] is his experience of narcissistic injury” leading to, or reflected in, a “troubled separation/individuation process” (119). This is, to a degree, convincing. Augustine’s relationship to his mother is undoubtedly central to the *Confessions*. Theirs is a complex relationship that is absent or radically simplified in early works that focus solely on Augustine’s thwarted relationship to, or search for, his ‘father’. However, Capps’ reinterpretation following the narcissistic injury line of analysis does not de-center or complicate the role of the son’s identification with the father in its shift in emphasis to the mother and/or the preoedipal. More specifically, Capps concludes that Augustine’s conversion is a “submission” to “Monica’s relentless pursuit of her son”, which he, following Fredriksen, accepts as “historically true” (119). Capps writes of Augustine’s plight in attempting to rebel against his mother: “He tries rebellion and escape first and then, discerning that she could be relentless, submits to her and her Catholic faith” (117).

In this account, Augustine’s conversion is simply turned into a submission to the maternal, a conclusion that does not displace the problematic effect of the original Freudian Oedipal model. While it may mark an attempt to return the maternal and pre-oedipal to the discussion, it re-centers the role of the paternal in a very similar way to
Freud’s analysis of Leonardo de Vinci. The focus is now simply on the mother’s engulfing attachment to the son that forecloses the identification of the son with the father. It is still the proper attachment to the paternal that is at stake. Instead of simply absent, the mother becomes, as Miller suggests, constructed as “the ‘manipulative’, ‘possessive’, ‘domineering’, ‘frigid’, ‘constrictive’, ‘controlling’, and ‘devouring’ mother to whom he ultimately surrenders through his conversion to her beliefs, her church and her God” (263). While readings based on narcissistic injury do return the mother to the discussion, responsibility for the failed oedipalization is simply shifted to her. This problematic effect is compounded because the link made to the “historical reality” of this (as an effect of Monica’s actual childrearing) is even further emphasized.

From Capps and the narcissistic injury line of analysis the point can be taken that the Confessions cannot be fully analyzed through the Freudian Oedipal conflict, because of the centrality and complexity of the mother-son dynamic (with its links to the pre-oedipal). However, unlike these studies, my own analysis considers Augustine’s representation of ‘Monica’ in the Confessions to be a fantasy-construction that conveys his imagined relationship to the maternal object and not necessarily a direct and unmediated account of his childhood. As part of this approach, Augustine’s relationship to language and the paternal is examined alongside the analysis of the relationship to the maternal. I aim to demonstrate that contemporary discussions of melancholia and Kristeva’s model of subject formation can help to analyze more productively the complexity of Augustine’s relationship with the maternal object and his movement into the symbolic.
Augustine and the Maternal: The Melancholic Bind

There is a discernable pattern in Augustine’s representation of his relationship with his mother in Book I through Book VIII: there is physical proximity, a rejection of her and/or her Christian beliefs, an attempt to physically move away from her or her belief system, an illness/disillusionment, and a return to his mother. While this pattern has been read as marking a failure to resolve the Oedipal conflict, I argue that this cycle reflects instead the specifically melancholic structure of Augustine’s relationship to the maternal object.

This cycle is, for example, clearly visible in Augustine’s attempt to go to Rome in Book V. In this scene Augustine’s mother, who is now a widow, wishes to accompany him. Augustine tricks his mother into thinking he will sail the following day and ‘escapes’ to Rome without her. He imagines her weeping at the shore the next morning:

There, when morning came, she was crazed with grief, and with recriminations and groans she filled your ears. But you paid no heed to her cries. You were using my ambitious desires as a means towards putting an end to those desires, and longing she felt for her own flesh and blood was justly chastised by the whip of sorrows. As mothers do, she loved to have me with her, but much more than most mothers; and she did not understand that you were to use my absence as a means of bringing her joy (V. viii. 82).

According to Klingerman, this scene of the weeping mother left on the shore must be associated with the earlier scene in Book I in which Augustine reads and weeps over Virgil’s Dido left on the shore weeping for Aeneas. Klingerman argues that Augustine is “preoccupied” with the Dido myth and that it contains the “nuclear conflict of his infantile neurosis” (472). According to this reading, Augustine’s father, Patricius, is associated by Augustine with sexuality, paganism, and Rome, and his mother, Monica, is associated with Africa and Carthage, Christianity, and femininity. Following this logic, in this scene Augustine identifies himself with Aeneas, and Monica with Dido, who “loves
him too much”; he attempts to slip away to Rome to escape her and take up the masculine position. According to Klingerman, “the bitter tears he had in childhood for poor slain Dido were tears of rage, frustration and guilt he felt toward his mother” whose affections were overwhelming (479). Because Monica does not commit suicide in Augustine’s narrative (the option that would apparently lead to a ‘normal’ oedipalization), but instead follows him to Rome, and because Augustine’s father Patricius, who is associated with active masculine sexuality, is rejected or barred by the overwhelming mother, “Augustine ends by identifying with the mother, adopting a passive feminine attitude to the father displaced to God, and thus in a sense fulfills his homosexual longing for Patricius” (483).

In other words, according to Klingerman, Augustine could not identify with the active sexuality of the masculine position and his father because of his mother’s overwhelming attachment or relentless pursuit. He therefore takes up the feminine position in relation to the father-God as a believer, in submission to an overly dominant mother and an external doctrine associated with her (i.e. Christianity). This reading associates conversion with a failed oedipalization (a failure to achieve a post-religious autonomy), and links the idea of the believer not only with femininity but also with male homosexuality. The latter is associated with a mother who fails to control her overwhelming desire for her child, who does not allow her son to ‘escape’ from her ‘clutches’ and renounce his tie to her.\footnote{Klingerman’s work is representative of those writers who argue for Augustine’s homosexuality (or his taking of a homosexual position) in order to address the central role of the figure of the mother. This allows for the centrality of the mother to be ‘explained’ while keeping the paternal identification as the proper site of attachment.}

While Klingerman quite rightly returns to the childhood scene of Augustine crying over Dido’s death to analyze this scene, his claim that Augustine cries only out of “rage, frustration and guilt” is not justified (479). Klingerman’s reading implies that
Augustine is crying because Aeneas flees, while he, still a child, is unable to do so: despite his sadistic wishes to destroy the maternal object, her “too strong affections” keep him chained, and he therefore cannot take his father’s place. However, if we return to the earlier scene in Book I where Augustine writes that he “weeps over the death of Dido dying for the love of Aeneas” we see that there is ambiguity in this phrase (I. xiii. 15). It cannot be assumed that Augustine identifies simply with Aeneas against the Dido/Mother figure. The phrase suggests that his tears may be either for Dido’s death (i.e. the loss of a Dido who would die out of love for the loved one), or for Dido’s loss of Aeneas, or at their separation. More specifically, in the myth Dido and Aeneas must be parted: he cannot ‘have’ her because fate is against it, and as the myth suggests, the intensity of her love would overwhelm him. This idea of a prohibition placed on their relationship by the gods raises the notion of the incest prohibition; as a scene of the loss and mourning of a loved object associated with the mother, it suggests the subject’s move into the symbolic that requires the loss of the initial relationship to the maternal object, what Kristeva calls the “thetic break” or “thetic phase” (RPL 48). Following from this, in Book I there does seem to be a strong attachment to the maternal loved object associated with Dido. However, while the valency of this dynamic is without fail represented as an overwhelming and unrelenting ‘pull’ from the mother, this ‘fact’ is ambiguous. Instead, these scenes appear to render Augustine’s ambivalence and anguish about the loss of the loved maternal object, rather than exclusively Oedipal frustration at her too strong affections. Pushing this further, I suggest that these ‘too strong affections’ are a projection of his own ambivalence, his own ‘too strong attachment’ to the maternal object, and sorrow at the idea of her loss.
More specifically, the imagined scene of the mother weeping on the shore in Book V represents a ‘return’ of this early scene. Here, there appears to be a ‘tangle’ of his Oedipal/sexualized drive, and sadistic urges toward the loved maternal object (mother) from whom he has difficulty parting. More particularly, Augustine imagines the sufferings of his mother whom he feels compelled to leave. There is a sadistic desire for the mother to be chastised by the whip of sorrows that Augustine relates to her “longing” for her own flesh and blood. Klingerman suggests that the desire to punish Monica is out of frustration at her possessiveness and guilt. However, the question must be raised as to whether it might represent guilt at his own eroticized desire toward her, i.e. ‘her’ longing for her own flesh and blood can be read as a displacement of his own longing. The hostility would then reflect the transformation of the object that must be lost or abandoned into the disparaged object that must be attacked and rejected.

Significantly, the scene on the shore does not represent the end of the cycle. It is followed directly by a description of a terrible sickness that strikes Augustine when he arrives at Rome:

At Rome my arrival was marked by the scourge of physical sickness, and I was on the way to the underworld, bearing all the evils I had committed against you, against myself, and against others […]. You had not yet forgiven me in Christ for any of them, nor had he by his cross delivered me from the hostile disposition towards you which I had contracted by my sins (V.viii 82).

This self-admonishment then turns into a long exhortation of Monica’s virtues as mother and Christian: “I cannot speak enough of the love she had for me. She suffered greater pains in my spiritual pregnancy than when she bore me in the flesh” (V. ix. 82).

According to Peter Brown, this “frightening experience of illness in Rome […] coincided with a crescendo of guilt in his relationship with Monica”: Augustine has
broken away, acted out his childhood fear-fantasy of separation and ‘murder’, and ends up in a state of illness (215). This scene reveals the specifically melancholic nature of Augustine’s cycle and of his relation to the maternal. When Augustine claims that in the illness, on “his way to the underworld,” he himself takes on or “bears” all the evils he has committed “against you, against myself, and against others”, brings the pronouns together into one and draws them into himself. He then ties this process specifically to his own “hostile disposition” towards ‘you’, which refers to God, but there is a slippage between ‘you’ as God, ‘you’ as mother, and ‘you’ as himself. Finally, as soon as this hostility breaks through the text, it is followed by a moment of compensating over-idealization of the mother, which supports the notion that the hostility is directed toward ‘her’, though now incorporated into him. In other words, this scene, with its mixing or slippage between the subject, the (m)other, and a third person (retrospectively constructed as God), which are not fully separated, reflects an attempted process of abjection and move toward primary identification with another, a third, which is rendered in this oscillation between hostility and an emerging, but fragile idealization process. However, it fails, and the subject incorporates, or takes in all the elements of that ambivalence and hostility and falls ill. At this point there is no faith in the other, i.e. the presence of a stable third person in the dynamic, and Augustine retains his ambivalent attachment to the maternal object. Augustine, like Freud’s melancholic, does not grieve and give up the lost maternal object, but instead there is an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Augustine introjects the object into the ego and transforms the loss of the object into a loss in the ego—a process that causes a cleavage in the ego, a turning back, marked by the
ambivalent nature of the attachment to the object and the sadism associated with (oral) incorporation.

This cycle ends with Augustine’s continued reliance on his mother’s care. His faith remains in Monica and her visions and prayers that function as a promise held close to her breast. He writes:

You could not have misled her in those visions and responses […]. At her faithful breast she held on to them, and in her unceasing prayer she as it were presented to you your bond of promises (V. ix. 83).

Without making too much of the breast metaphor, suffice it to say here that it remains the mother’s body, her visions, faith, and promises that serve as the intermediary for Augustine. In sum, then, between Book I and Book V there is a cycle of attempted rejection of, or separation from, the maternal object, which leads to illness and a continued fraught reliance on the maternal object.

**Augustine and Signification: Father Ambrose and Figurative Interpretation**

In the end of Book VI and beginning of Book VII Augustine’s cycle is repeated with a difference: it is interrupted by Bishop Ambrose and his figurative interpretation of biblical passages. The encounter with Ambrose functions as a catalyst for the possibility of what Kristeva calls “primary identification” via the “father of pre-history”, and a language in which the semiotic (associated with the initial relationship with the maternal Thing) may be “imprinted” or “transposed” into the language of the symbolic (BS 24). This allows Augustine to conceive of a faithful language that may ‘hold’ God’s Truth, and is a necessary condition for the conversion process that culminates in the garden at Milan and the vision at Ostia.
Early in the text, Augustine discusses his discovery of his abilities with language—that he has the faculty to read whatever is written and write whatever he wishes (I. xiii. 15). However, this joy in language is skewed by the violent methods involved in teaching the rudiments of language, and the discovery that his language skills must be used for worldly gain:

[...] ‘what miseries I experienced’ at this stage of my life, and what delusions when in my boyhood it was set before me as my moral duty in life to obey those who admonished me with the purpose that I should succeed in this work, and should excel in the arts of using my tongue to gain access to human honours and to acquire deceitful riches (I. ix. 11).

At his parents’ urging Augustine studies rhetoric and law and becomes a teacher. During his time he considers himself to be “a salesman of words” (IX. Ii. 155), who “overcome by greed”, used to “sell the eloquence that would overcome an opponent” (IV. ii. 53). He associates his pre-conversion use of language with hostility, as well as a divide between the use of language, the effect of language, and its moral and emotional content:

A man enjoying a reputation for eloquence takes his position before a human judge with a crowd of men standing round and attacks his opponent with ferocious animosity. He is extremely vigilant in precautions against some error in language but is indifferent to the possibility that the emotional force of his mind may bring about a man’s execution (I. xviii. 21).

Prior to his conversion, Augustine characterizes language as an object to be mobilized, a skill, an artifice, that is to be used to “attack an opponent”, and to “gain access to human honours” (I. ix. 11). While there is concern at its pronunciation, formation and structure (the letter), its ‘content’ and effect (spirit) is ignored in ‘the world’. Language is experienced as filled with hostility, which it carries and imparts.
In Book I the reader is told that while Augustine learns Latin “in a free spirit of curiosity”, “without being forced through threats of punishment”, he is forced to learn Greek “under fear and compulsion” and the suffering of corporeal punishment (I. xiv. 17). He chaffes under this control, and it opens a divide between a ‘remembered’, idealized relationship with language as learned “without fear or fret, simply by keeping my ears open while my nurses fondled me and everyone laughed and played happily with me”, and the way he must use this language (as an object for gain) and the relationship he is forced to have with it (as an object subjugated to its structures and the violence of the process) (I, xiv, 17).  

This split is associated with an idealized relationship with the loving embodied language of the maternal, on the one hand, and a hostile, empty, language associated with the paternal, masculinity, and sexuality, on the other. While both parents appear to have a share in the ambition for Augustine to become an orator, his mother is still associated with a language of God, or relationship with God (she is depicted as “chanting” God’s words in his ear); his father is more specifically associated with language in its pre-conversion form, and this drive to use his “tongue” for “human honours” which is associated with what Augustine experiences as hostile sexuality (II. iii. 27). As McDuffie argues, “Augustine associates his growth into adulthood, and his masculinity, with his skill at rhetoric” (114). More specifically, according to McDuffie, “Augustine associates, through his [Father’s] concerns, his tongue with his sexual organs”: “Patricius wants his son to be fertile in both begetting children”, as evidenced in the bathhouse experience in

12 This association is even more clear in Pine-Coffin’s translation of this scene, which reads: “a fine speaker will stand before a human judge, surrounded by a human audience, and lash his opponent with malicious invective” (I. xviii. 39).
which Augustine’s physical maturity is ‘celebrated’ publicly by his father, and “in worldly success” through his oratorical skill (115). As many commentators have argued, Augustine has difficulty identifying with his father, whom he associates with sexuality generally, and with this specific experience of public exposure that Augustine finds disturbing and hostile, as well as worldly endeavors he finds profoundly unsatisfying (II. iii. 26). According to McDuffie, then, for Augustine “words (and masculinity) finally failed him, while in the mute suffering of his soul were ‘loud voices calling on God’s mercy’” (115).

In the subject’s movement into the symbolic the initial relationship with the maternal object (the maternal Thing), is ideally transposed or “imprinted” into symbolic terms, into language, in order to make “live meaning”. Augustine, who is locked in a melancholic bind with the maternal object and unable to identify with his father, is caught between a ‘remembered’, idealized, relationship with language learned “without fear or fret”, a language associated with embodied experience and tickled into him by maternal figures, and the way he must use this language as an object for gain and hostile force. For Augustine, the language of the symbolic, and in the symbolic, is marked by this separation: on the one hand, the idealized maternal ‘language’ filled with the laughter and the fondling of his nurses, on the other, the alienation and hostility he feels at its warping and loss, its use as a kind of weapon. This split in language does not produce a kind of double-consciousness, but instead leaves language as an endlessly malleable artifice. For Augustine, in his work as an orator, the relationship to the Thing itself is captured and cultivated: his tongue is “fertile”, while his “heart bears none of your fruit” (II. ii. 26). Rhetoric, at this point, is empty: not filled with God’s truth it is endlessly malleable, a
type of a Sophistry “available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood” (OCD IV. iii). As James O’Donnell notes in his online commentary on this section of the Confessions (I. xviii. xxix), “order and law exist in human language as it is used here, but it is all shown to be a fraud, and a killing one at that”. Pre-conversion, Augustine cannot conceive of a way to bridge the split between his childhood maternal language and the symbolic, paternal frame—a language that will hold God’s truth.

This configuration is, however, altered by the introduction of Bishop Ambrose, who functions as a new model of masculinity and paternity and opens up a new way to understand language. According to McDuffie, Ambrose stands in contrast to “the negative implications of the masculinity he inherited from his father Patricius as well as his father Adam” (114). Augustine describes Ambrose thus:

[Ambrose…] who was known throughout the world as a man whom there were few to equal in goodness. At that time his gifted tongue never tired of dispensing the richness of your corn, the joy of your oil, and the sober intoxication of your wine. Unknown to me, it was you who led me to him, so that I might be led by him to you. This man of God received me like a father (V. xiii. 88).

Ambrose has chosen the life of God: he has “removed himself from the world of male sexuality and ambition” and is “an advocate and example of celibacy and continence” (114). As McDuffie suggests, in contrast to the “fertile tongue” that Augustine’s own father desired for him, Ambrose’s tongue “is productive of the corn, oil, and wine of God’s grace” (114). In Ambrose, “Augustine finds a father for his new life of continence and dedication to God (5.14), and a new belief that rhetoric could be used in the service of God” (115). Augustine describes his encounter with Ambrose’s teachings:

I used to enthusiastically listen to him preaching to the people, not with the intention which I ought to have had, but as if testing out his oratorical skill to see whether it merited the reputation it enjoyed or whether his fluency was better or inferior than it was reported to be […]. My pleasure was in the charm of his
language [...] I was not interested in what he was talking about. My ears were only for his rhetorical technique; this empty concern was all that remained with me after I had lost any hope that a way to you might open for man. Nevertheless together with the words which I was enjoying, the subject matter, in which I was unconcerned, came to make an entry into my mind. I could not separate them. While I opened my heart in noting the eloquence with which he spoke, there also entered no less the truth which he affirmed though only gradually (V. xiii- xiv. 88).

Augustine approaches Ambrose and his teaching in the way he has come to experience language: with form separated from content. However, Ambrose’s practice of figurative interpretation of biblical passages ‘opens’ up the language of the Bible in a way he did not expect. Not only does it offer him a “valid defense” for Christian doctrine, Augustine also glimpses what he describes as the “secret meaning” of the language in the Bible (VI. v. 96).

Ambrose and his figurative interpretation open the possibility of a relationship between the letter of language, its “charm”, the symbolic form/ warped language of the world, and its spirit, conveyed by a semiotic, idealized relationship with language. Language, filled with hostility and marked by alienation, might now be opened to reveal its ‘secret’, which is also associated with being productive of “God’s wine,” and no longer associated with the male sexuality with which Augustine has difficulty. This opens up the possibility for primary identification: Augustine may now transfer his attachment, his faith, embedded in his mother’s breast and visions, to this new “secret meaning” in language revealed by the figure of Father Ambrose. This leads Augustine to decide to be a catechumen in the Catholic Church, concerning which, he tells the reader, “the precedent of my parents recommended to me, until some clear light should come by which I could direct my course” (V. xiv. 89). Significantly, Augustine acknowledges the precedent of both parents, which suggests the re-entry of a father figure.
The Conversion in the Garden: Intimate Revolt and the Return of the Archaic

Maternal

Book VIII of the Confessions begins with Augustine still caught in what he describes in the preceding book as “a region of unlikeness.” His description of himself as “listless, exhausted by the canker of anxiety”, drifting “from error to error” (VIII. i. 133), strongly echoes descriptions of Kristeva’s melancholic who “wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves” (BS 339).

Augustine follows “inspiration” and visits both Simplicianus and Ponticianus, giving himself over to their guidance in the hope that they can help (VIII. i. 133). While Ponticianus recounts the conversion of two imperial agents, Augustine experiences the first of a series of moments marked by eruptions of emotion, or affect, in which he feels he is “forced” to stand “naked” before himself and “face” what he has “pushed out of his mind”, or what may be understood as “repressed” (VIII. vii. 144). Augustine describes this as follows:

[...]. while he was speaking, Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself [...] and you set me before my face so that I should see how vile I was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers [...]. I had known it, but deceived myself, refused to admit it, and pushed it out of my mind (VIII. VII. 144-145).

Despite being brought ‘face to face’ with himself, and his desire to follow the others in Ponticianus’ story who had given themselves entirely over to God’s care, Augustine remains unable to take the next step (VIII. VII.144). He explains why:

[...] my soul hung back. It refused, and had no excuse to offer. The arguments were exhausted, and all had been refuted. The only thing left to it was a mute trembling, and as if it were facing death it was terrified of being restrained from the treadmill of habit by which it suffered ‘sickness unto death’ (VIII. VII. 146).
Simply, Augustine is held both by fear of the loss of life, and the end of his old “hardened” self, and pride. Interestingly, he does not associate this reluctance with himself, but instead says that “it refused”, implying a differentiation or split between ‘himself’ and the “mute” ‘thing’ inside. At the realization that he is “ashamed to follow,” Augustine experiences a kind of ‘break’ (VIII. viii. 146). Importantly, the significance of this moment is not rendered in words, but is captured through its effect on Augustine, made visible by his friend Alypius’ response:

[…] the heat of my passion took my attention away from him as he contemplated my condition in astonished silence. For I sounded very strange. My uttered words said less about the state of my mind than my forehead, cheeks, eyes, colour, and tone of my voice (VIII. Viii. 146).

In these moments, fissures begin to form in the symbolic: the subject is “put on trial”, to use Kristeva’s phrase (RPL 15). The repressed, what Augustine had “pushed out of his mind” and “refused to admit,” now re-emerges. What can be seen here is the breaking through of an affective charge that is suggestive and representative of the semiotic erupting into the symbolic: the beginning of a movement of “revolt” that returns the past, that repeats and re-elaborates the archaic phases of the development of the subject. Augustine’s description of his face as marked by “sores and ulcers” as well as his association of this with “facing death” clearly associate this with abjection and the abject maternal.

This initial moment of eruption is followed by what Augustine calls a “fierce struggle,” a process marked by a series of gestures and gesticulations that recall the movements Kristeva ascribes to ‘being’ in the semiotic-chora. The association of the
scene with an embodied hostility recalls the struggle with maternal abjection and its redirection of aggressivity (VIII. viii. 171). He describes the process:

Finally in the agony of hesitation I made many physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something and lack the strength […] If I tore my hair, if I struck my forehead, if I intertwined my fingers and clasped my knee, I did that because to do so was my will […]. At this point the power to act is identical with the will. The willing itself was performative of the action […] (Viii viii. 147).13

Here, as in the semiotic chora, a place-time when need and demand are the same, the will itself is performative of the action. The connection of this with the semiotic chora is furthered by what Pine-Coffin translates as Augustine’s description of himself as “trembling at the barrier” (VIII. xi. 176), “waiting to take a fresh breath”, but shrinking from it “in horror” (VIII. xi. 175). These terms clearly represent the motif of rebirth common to conversion narratives, but they take on another level of significance here: the subject is moving through, re-elaborating, the process of the production of the self (birth) via the abjection of the maternal container, and the thetic break. In other words, the subject is re-engaging with these archaic moments of the ‘birth’ of narcissism, that determine the relationship with the maternal object and to signification.

At this point in the narrative, Augustine conjures the likeness of Lady Continence, who conveys a return of the process of primary identification. He is still hanging in suspense because he lacks faith that there will be a compensation for the maternal Thing which must be relinquished (BS 339). Lady Continence appears to Augustine in the form of a loving mother:

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13 Pine-Coffin’s translation makes the link to a re-birth particularly clear:

I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring life […]. I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant […]. During this agony of indecision I performed many bodily actions […]. I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees […] (VIII. viii. 171).
[...] she smiled on me with a smile of encouragement as if to say: ‘Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God? Their Lord God gave me to them. Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon him, do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you will fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you’ (VIII. xi. 151).

This declaration that the other’s will is strong enough to ‘hold’ him (made to and by himself via the figure of Continence), produces the second and most expressive emotional break. In this scene, she functions as the ‘maternal’ face of the ‘father of prehistory’. She is represented as “on the other side” of the barrier, described as “chaste”, “serene”, and associated with “unsullied joy” (VIII. xi. 151). As she stretches out her “pious hands” to “receive and embrace” Augustine, she represents a transformed maternal object, “in no sense barren but ‘the fruitful mother of children’, of joys born of you, Lord, her husband” (VIII. xi.151). The bodily mother is transformed into the “unsullied’ mother whose love helps him across ‘the barrier’. However, at this moment Augustine is overcome with shame and descends further to face the most “pitiful” of his “forgotten” “secrets”:

From a hidden depth of profound self-examination I had dredged up a heap of all my misery and set it ‘in the sight of my heart’ [...]. That precipitated a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears. To pour it out with the accompanying groans, I got up from beside Alypius [...] and moved further away to ensure his presence put no inhibition on me (VIII, xii, 152).

Again, the significance of this moment is rendered less through language, the vehicle of the symbolic, than through the impact on the other person present and the depth of its effect on Augustine, marking it as the domain of the semiotic (VIII, xii, 152). These tears echo the tears he shed as a child at the death of Dido and his imagining of his mother’s tears at his abandonment at Carthage. In this moment, Augustine is once again poised at
the barrier that marks entry into the symbolic, and must relinquish the loved maternal object.

After this decisive break and release, the weeping Augustine asks for “an end” to his sin, and his request is answered by a voice “chanting” from a nearby house (VIII, xii, 152). Augustine writes: “whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain: “Pick up and read, pick up and read’” (VIII, xii, 152). Telling himself that it could only be “a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I may find” he returns to Alypuis, picks up his Bible and “in silence” reads the “first passage” on which his “eyes fell” (VIII, xii, 153). He reads from Romans:

> Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts (VIII. xii. 153).

In these moments Augustine experiences a profound transformation, which he describes: “At once, with the last words of the sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled” (VIII, xii, 153). This transformation is once again registered, signified, by the affect of his appearance. He writes: “With a face now at peace I told everything to Alypius” (VIII, xii, 153).

In this process, the repressed “secrets” (generally speaking “the feminine” and the “unthinkable […] death”), emerge, and are brought before the eyes of his heart (RPL 252). The process of abjection and the thetic break are re-engaged, and the semiotic and symbolic are rendered in a newly radicalized or reconfigured relationship. In this case, this process is marked by the eruption of tears and a shift in awareness, from the eyes to the ears, the sense organ commonly associated with the semiotic. In these moments,
Augustine ‘hears’ a radically personalized meaning in the words of the song sung, interestingly, by a voice that is ambiguously gendered, which points to this as a moment in which the identification with the mother is ‘held’ differently, reconfigured, within the subject. Hearing the command to “read,” Augustine returns to the book, to language and the symbolic, to find that the reading experience has been radically affected. Affect, meaning, and words, are reconnected—they are now revitalized. In other words, the semiotic has been reinstated in the symbolic: the loved maternal object and her idealized language have been ‘lost’ and ‘found’ in symbolic language via the sing-song command.

Augustine’s silent reading of the text recalls his encounter with Ambrose’s practice of silent reading. Here, Augustine ‘takes on’ the function of Ambrose as the ‘masculine face’ of the ‘father of prehistory’, the imaginary father—as Augustine’s example of celibacy and continence and a loving father figure. The content of the scripture Augustine reads functions as what Kristeva would describe as the necessary role of the Oedipal father. The passage ‘commands’ Augustine to give up his hostility toward others (rivalry/ quarrels) and prohibits his sexual desires. Functioning as an Oedipal father, the text, the Word of God, now plays the part of the super-ego and secures his ego-ideal of Christian continence. Following from this, the process of conversion, as represented here, is a kind of intimate revolt: the limits of identity are transgressed, the subject is put on trial, and the semiotic drive is reinstated in language via an encounter with, and a re-elaboration of, the archaic scenes of subject formation.

Augustine’s transformed relation with language and the new affective dimension of his “inmost heart” are represented in the early scenes of Book IX. Reading the Fourth Psalm of David, Augustine experiences such affective resonance, so much of the semiotic
drive in language, that he is convinced that witnessing the effect of this registering on his face and in his body would convert even the worst of sinners, the Manicheans:

My God how I cried to you when I read the Psalms of David, songs of faith, utterances of devotion […]. As I read the fourth Psalm I would have liked them to be somewhere nearby without me knowing they were there, watching my face and hearing my cries, to see what the Psalm had done to me (IX. Iv. 160).

In this, a language that was once ‘filled’ with hostility and associated with the circulation of that hostility now holds “joy”, and has the imagined effect of circulating this affect. According to Augustine, the core of this transformation resides in what he calls his “inmost heart” (IX. iv. 188). It is his new awareness of, and relationship with, this aspect of himself that rescues him from being among the “deaf corpses” who follow “shadows” (IX. Iv. 188-189). In the following passage, Augustine links the transformational affect of conversion, and his new relationship with his “inmost heart,” to this new ability to read with his eyes and have meaning resonate in his “soul”:

It was my inmost heart, where I had grown angry with myself, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had slain my old self and offered it in sacrifice, where I had first proposed to renew my life and had placed my hope in you, it was there that you had begun to make me love you and had made me glad at heart. It was my eyes that read these words but my soul that knew their meaning (IX, iv, 188).

This reanimation of the inmost heart can be linked with Kristeva’s notion of an “inner garden,” or “psychic space”: it offers both what would be imagined as the return of the semiotic (and the associated affective dimension) to language, and the subject in the symbolic. However, Augustine also suggests what could be described very loosely as ‘a something else’ that occurs, or is reflected, in this radicalized relationship—meaning made in the soul, which can be linked to what Kristeva calls “live meaning”: evidence of an imprinting of the maternal into the symbolic, the semiotic alive in the symbolic. This
can be associated with the “wonder” tied to the re-engagement with the thetic break, and the experience of a language now ‘full’ and alive with significance.

In sum, I argue that Augustine’s conversion in the garden represents an encounter with the archaic scene of maternal abjection, a reactivation of the thetic, and of the process of primary identification. This repetition and re-elaboration allows for a kind of “intimate revolt” that opens up Augustine’s “inmost heart” and revives the semiotic in the symbolic—experienced by Augustine as a revitalized and radicalized relationship with language that feels filled with emotion and God’s Truth.

However, how is the relationship with the maternal transformed through this conversion process? More specifically, does the conversion transform Augustine’s melancholic attachment to the maternal into one in which the mother may be faced, in which the strangeness, the alterity of the (m)other, as well as the tie that binds, may be present and recognized in a way that allows the heterogeneity of the subject to be maintained?

**The Shared Vision at Ostia: Transforming the Melancholic Maternal Bind**

While Augustine’s vision at Ostia, shared with his mother, represents a momentary possibility for a relationship with the maternal in which connection to the mother is achieved without denying her alterity, this is not fully translated into symbolic form. Instead, I argue, the conversion represents a process in which the melancholic attachment to the maternal is simply reconfigured into a compromise solution that allows for the son’s identification with the father (Father God) while the maternal object remains a melancholic object. Augustine’s conversion process ends in the splitting of the maternal object into ideal and denigrated aspects and a fusion with the ideal, desexualized maternal
part-object that becomes masculinized (in the form of a loving Father God). This
reconfiguration therefore forfeits the possibility for a relationship with the maternal
marked by a profound recognition of the subject’s relation to the mother, as well as her
absolute singularity.

In the moments before the shared vision at Ostia, Augustine and his mother stand
together “leaning out a window overlooking a garden” having a conversation (IX, x,
170). Augustine describes the experience:

Alone with each other, we talked very intimately. ‘Forgetting the past and
reaching forward to what lies ahead’ […] we were searching together in the
presence of the truth which is you yourself. We asked what quality of life the
eternal life of the saints will have, a life which ‘neither eye has seen nor ear heard,
nor has it entered in to the heart of man’ […] But with the mouth of the heart wide
open, we drank in the waters flowing from your spring on high, ‘the spring of life’
[…]. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at
your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as
to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally
with truth for food […] There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into
being, both things which were and which will be. But wisdom itself is not brought
into being but is as it was and always will be […]. For to exist in the past or in the
future is no property of the eternal. And while we talked and panted after it, we
touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart.
And we sighted and left behind us ‘the firstfruits of the Spirit’ […] bound to that
higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence
has both a beginning and an ending (IX. X. 171).

Traditional Oedipal readings point to the sexualized language of this experience (i.e.
longing, panting, touching, sighing) to argue that it represents a fulfillment of
Augustine’s Oedipal fantasy. However, I suggest this scene reflects the effect of the
newly configured relationship with the maternal object: a post-conversion Augustine has
‘faced’ the repressed and now exists with(in) a newly restored or radicalized relationship
with his “inmost heart”, and henceforth he no longer, at least theoretically, requires the
maternal object to be a “primal shelter” against the “unthinkable […] death” (RPL 252).
She may potentially, therefore, be engaged with differently. In the moments of the vision, Augustine and his mother stand together, side by side, communicating with each other through the symbolic, language, ("we spoke of the eternal Wisdom"), but this apparent ‘absolute’ distance, the distance between subjects that necessitates the continual utterance of demand in words, is ‘transcended’. In these moments in which they reach out and “touch” the ‘Eternal’ that has no beginning or end, there is what is experienced as a blurring that allows them to be present to each other—to blur the boundary of themselves, and between themselves. This allows Augustine to recognize and experience the one in the other, and to have this “Eternal Wisdom” function as a third element that ‘holds’ them together. This allows them to move closer, but not lose one to the other: “we entered into our own minds” (IX. X. 171). Theoretically, the structure of this moment is representative of what Kristeva describes as the possibility of an ethical relationship based on this recognition of the “other in/of the self” who is not collapsed into the self, but remains a stranger within (RK 65). More specifically, Augustine stands in relation to his mother, recognizes ‘her’ in ‘himself’, as well as their difference. This relationship is held together by the eternal Wisdom that is timeless, and simultaneously limited by the opacity of human speech which has a beginning and end.

While this scene has the earmarks of an Oedipal fantasy, Augustine’s description of a kind of energetic exchange that marks this moment cannot be fully contained within that frame. He states: “That is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal Wisdom which abides beyond all things” (X, x, 172). This suggests a “return to the archaic”, an experience of “the impossible temporality that is timelessness” that “shakes” his foundations and offers “a
bridge between the semiotic and the symbolic,” a means to “have subjectivity via the law and the symbolic without having to fight off the semiotic”, to use McAfee’s description of herethics (86).

However, this is not the relationship to the maternal that emerges in Augustine’s theology. Instead of maintaining this relationship of ‘attachment, or relation, yet difference’, in the transposition of the loss of the maternal object into the symbolic, there is a splitting of the maternal object and the associations with ‘her’. As McDuffie suggests, Augustine splits an idealized maternal from the mother (as an actual living woman with a body) and then masculinizes these ideal qualities in his notion of God. According to McDuffie:

The *Confessions* promises this bliss in the eschatological union with God represented through the figure of the mother. It requires a turning away from the woman as an objective other, an ‘other’ Augustine associates with the passions, the body, the lower faculties, and, especially the sexual desire he wishes to disown. Through this maneuver, Augustine can begin to dissociate his ‘true self’ from those aspects of himself he finds disturbing and problematic. Real women are disavowed/ rejected, while the qualities he wants to retain of the idealized feminine are transferred onto God (108).

This split between the idealized, abstracted “mother”, “woman”, “feminine”, and the disparaged, dangerous woman’s body is reflected in his doctrine. While women and men enjoy spiritual equality by virtue of their rational natures, according to Augustine, (“spiritual grace they are as one […] with no more discrimination between them according to their sex than between Jew and Greek or slave and freeman (Xiii, Xxiii”), as McDuffie suggests, “equality on a spiritual level […] does not imply that woman stand on an equal footing in the order of creation” (104). As McDuffie summarizes: “[Augustine] says that men and woman are equal insofar as they have ‘rational intelligence’”, however, he makes it clear that “this is only an abstraction” (104). In fact,
in the kingdom of man, “as an embodied creature, woman is ‘physically subject’ to man, just as the natural impulses should be subject to reason” (Xiii, xxxii).

Further, according to Fredriksen, Augustine’s view of women as objects becomes reflected in his imagining of the relationship between God and man. She writes:

“Augustine would seem to be attributing to God an attitude very like Augustine’s own toward women, who can only be used (for procreation) or enjoyed (for sinful pleasure)” (127). According to Fredriksen, then, for Augustine, “amor dei never rises to the point of love of God for his own sake, but finally remains love of God for the sake of the soul’s beatification—the sign of God’s approval” (127). Augustine writes of God’s love in his

*On Christian Doctrine:*

> God loves us. In what way does he love us? As an object of use, or as an object of enjoyment [*ut nobis utatur an ut fruatur*]?
> If he enjoys us, then he must be in need of good from us, and no sane man will say that […]. He does not enjoy us then, but makes use of us. For if he neither enjoys us nor uses us, I am at a loss to discover in what way he can love us (in Fredriksen, 222).

In general, this suggests that while there is an alteration in Augustine’s relationship with the maternal object—the melancholic relationship to signification or language is reconfigured via the intimate revolt—the ‘content’ of the ‘imagined’ Oedipal injunction sets up Christian continence against sexuality, desire, the body, and women as associated with these. Brown comments on the deeply problematic effect of Augustine’s thinking on the body and sexuality on the West:

> An ancient Roman’s harsh distrust of sensual delight and a fear that the body’s pleasures might weaken the resolve of the public man added a peculiarly rigid note to Augustine’s evocation of human beings forever exposed to concupiscence. He created a darkened humanism that linked the pre-Christian past to the Christian present in a common distrust of sexual pleasure. It was a heavy legacy to bequeath to later ages (426).
In this case, I argue that the process of the conversion, contrary to what Kristeva claims, does in fact function as an intimate revolt that forces the subject to reengage with the archaic relationship to the maternal, to face abjection, and re-elaborate these early primary processes. This allows for a transfusion of the semiotic into the symbolic that revitalizes and reconfigures Augustine’s split relationship with language. The Oedipal injunction given to him in the garden at Milan to ‘revel no more’ functions as an imaginary structure that helps secure his place in the symbolic. However, this is not a full movement into the symbolic. Instead, it represents a compromise solution because the Oedipal injunction takes the form of a hallucination, an imagined voice, and the super-ego function is not internalized, but remains external in the form of a wishful and dependent relationship to Christian doctrine and the Father God figure. While there is a moment in which the son faces maternal abjection and re-elaborates this archaic relationship that allows him to stand side by side with his mother, profoundly together yet separate, this becomes ‘translated’ into a return, the “fusion” with the maternal he desires. The shared vision and energetic exchange between Augustine and his mother at Ostia, then, become an energetic transfusion from her—a feeding. Augustine’s conversion, as Kristeva suggests, is marked by the “fusion” with a “nourishing, loving, and protective” “breast” that is “transposed from the mother’s body to an invisible agency located in another world” (IBL 24). Augustine is, then, transformed in the end into “an infant sucking the milk Thou givest, and feeding upon Thee, the food that perisheth not?”—suckling on the Eternal food of the loving Father (in IBL 24).

The maternal object is, therefore, not fully relinquished in this scenario. The loss of the initial relationship with the maternal object is not fully mourned, not lost and re-
found in symbolic terms. She is instead maintained. ‘She’ as the sinning flesh, the body that gave him life, as the feminine other, remains as the abject, rejected, and disparaged object. ‘She’ as source of imaginary nourishment, as route to primary narcissism, is transferred to the figure of God, the loving Father. ‘She’ as the idealized maternal becomes sublime, holy, and enters the symbolic as Mother Mary, untouched and untouchable—unsullied. This configuration allows the son to play out, to re-enact this imagined scene of the triumph over the maternal, her defeat as well her consumption. It allows him to retrace this route to primary narcissism, and incorporate these qualities while safely associating them with the symbolic through their connection with the loving Father God. In this compromise, the son never has to relinquish the initial relationship with the nourishing maternal breast. At the same time he produces for himself a disparaged object that he may use to contain his terror, hostility, and guilt. The fundamental fantasy of the Holy Mother allows this son to imagine that he too was born of no-body, and is therefore without guilt, without reliance on a maternal body, and therefore without death, without heterogeneity or alterity.

While I claim that this conversion process does offer a return of the archaic, and in this the potential for an ethical relationship with the maternal object, because the process ends with a splitting, a fusion, and rejection, the subject ultimately forfeits or forecloses the possibility for relationship based on ‘relation, yet difference’. This conversion process, as an intimate revolt, puts the subject ‘on trial’, and in this represents a kind of “undoing of self”; the subject produces a compensatory arrangement in which he is positioned as what Cheng describes as “the melancholic subject” who maintains the
other as a melancholic object, as a source of sustenance: by “devouring” the lost object, the subject may then sustain itself and take possession of this object (8).
3. Black Like Me: White Melancholic Masculinity and Racial Conversion

In *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (1999), Fred Hobson proposes that a particular form of “personal social commentary”, which he terms “white racial conversion narrative”, emerged in the southern United States “shortly before mid-century” (15). He argues that works by Lillian Smith, Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, James McBride Dabbs, Sarah Patton Boyle, Will Campbell, Willie Morris, Larry L. King, and Pat Watters represent a “form of southern self-expression” “not seen until the 1940s”: autobiographical texts that employ the language of Christian conversion, “‘sin’, ‘guilt’, ‘blindness’, ‘seeing the light’, ‘repentance’, ‘redemption’ and so forth” to describe the author’s personal awakening to the injustice of racism, their *conversion* “in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment”, often as part of a call for “social salvation” (4).

Hobson suggests that the form of these texts is influenced by both St Augustine’s *Confessions* and the tradition of St. Paul, which he argues is fundamental to the shape of all conversion narratives, as well as the conversion narratives written by Puritan and Calvinist authors (3). An expert on New England Puritan conversion narratives, Hobson cites the works of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards as particular influences on the form of white Southern conversion narratives (2). According to Hobson, these follow a fairly standard pattern, whether religious or racial:

After the recognition of one’s sinful nature—a feeling of extreme misery, unworthiness, and despair (being ‘laid low’ as the Puritans termed it)—came a period, in Mather’s words, of ‘unspeakable Horror and Anger’ at one’s ‘Spiritual Sins,’ and then, either abruptly or gradually, a vision of God’s grace and the
possibility of change in one’s life [...]’. After having ‘their consciences [...] suddenly smitten as if their hearts were pierced through with a dart’ sinners were prepared to move from ‘conviction’ (or full awareness of sin) to conversion. Parts of the process were often accompanied [...] by a ‘Flood of Tears’. One became, finally, a changed being, ‘renouncing the old self and reconstructing a new one...’ (3).

While there were texts written by white southern writers before this time that address the moral or social ills of slavery, in Hobson’s estimation the 1940s should be marked as the turning point that saw the religious, autobiographical, and social impulse become reunited in a return of repressed white racial guilt over slavery. He contends that while southern guilt over slavery had emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in relation to the abolitionist movement, during this period “religion and morality had little to do with each other”; they had become defensively separated in order to protect the southern conscience (10). In fact, he maintains, quoting Samuel Hill, that “many southerners got relief from the guilt of perpetuating an immoral socio-economic system by subscribing to the tenets of a guilt-oriented theology” (10). Personal guilt for private sins took the place of guilt for the more public or social ‘sin’ of slavery that the white southerner was unwilling to face. Hobson quotes James McBride Dabbs: “The more guilt that [the evangelical white southerner] felt for his private sins, the less he felt for his public, though all the time it was the existence of slavery [...] that furnished an unconscious guilt that spilled over into conscious guilt for personal sins” (10).

In Hobson’s view this shifted in the 1940s. He argues that while the “canonical writers of the ‘Southern Renascence’ [...] possessed the autobiographical impulse” they “rarely addressed race autobiographically”, unlike “black southerners [who] had for three-quarters of a century” (15). However, by the early 1940s “less prominent” writers outside of the canon began to address race in what he calls “an outburst of white southern
autobiography driven by racial guilt” (15). He suggests the phenomenon arose because of several factors:

[…] as a delayed response to the awakening of the southern critical spirit in the 1920s, which in the beginning assumed the form of the social criticism of Odum, Gerald W. Johnson, and W. J Cash and took the better part of two decades to assume autobiographical form; from the widespread travel and residence outside the South of most of the writers of autobiography […]—an experience not unlike that of those southerners during and just after World War I who helped usher in the southern literary awakening; from the social upheaval of the Great Depression and World War II; and most of all, from the new realization immediately after World War II that the southern racial status quo could not last forever, that a racially integrated society, heretofore considered so remote in time as to be nearly inconceivable […] was indeed possible and perhaps at hand (15).

The conversion form was taken up in this context, according to Hobson, because cultural and familial familiarity with religion made it “natural […] to the latter-day southerner of Calvinist temper and a racially progressive bent that one’s journey up from racism should be described in religious terms”, whether or not the author claimed a religious affiliation (16). The conversion-narrative proved to be an enduring generic form that “continued for three decades” as a dominant mode of white southern self-expression, according to Hobson, and “indeed still continues to a great degree” (15). While white southern conversion narratives share many qualities, as Hobson suggests, they can be broken down into three tendencies roughly associated with three time periods: early narratives of racial “repentance” that take a particularly confessional ‘greatest sinner’ tone (such as those by Lillian Smith and Katherine Du Pre); followed by texts coming out of the Civil Rights period from the late 1950s onward that often emphasize redemption and “forgiveness by the oppressed” (such as work by Will Campbell, Pat Watters, Willie Morris); followed by texts emerging in the 1970s and onward that are marked by the intersection of class,
gender, and sexual liberation struggles with those against racial oppression (including the work of Mab Segrest, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Thomas Tarrants) (15).

Notably absent from Hobson’s discussion is John Howard Griffin’s immensely popular and much criticized 1961 text, *Black Like Me*. Griffin’s narrative, which takes the form of a journal ‘documenting’ the white author’s experience of traveling through the racially segregated southern American states of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia disguised as a black man in order to directly experience and bring awareness to racial injustice, appears in Hobson’s text only as an extended footnote. In it, Hobson mentions the resemblance of Griffin’s text to this genre and then dismisses the relationship:

The story of Griffin’s trip through the South as a ‘black man’—or rather, a man with chemically changed skin who passed for black—Griffin’s book was in no measure a conversion narrative. His racial transformation had occurred earlier, during a period of blindness that lasted from 1947 until 1957, at which time surgery restored his sight (98n).

According to Hobson, Griffin’s text does not qualify as a racial conversion narrative because it was his experience of blindness, in which he “‘couldn’t tell black from white’”, that was the primary instance of his racial conversion, and not his experiences passing as a black man represented in *Black Like Me* (98n). However, he concedes that “in other respects he sounds a great deal like Lillian Smith and James McBride Dabbs”, particularly in “his emphasis on the ‘sickness’ and ‘evil’ of a racist South and his belief that ‘our humanity is being saved by black people’” (98n).

Hobson places *Black Like Me* outside the genre of white conversion narratives primarily because for him it does not represent the ‘original’ moment of conversion or racial awakening, which suggests that he assumes, problematically, a direct relationship
between the experience and representation in the work of the other writers he includes, seemingly because of their outwardly confessional tone. However, despite Hobson’s attempts to clearly delineate the two, *Black Like Me* is in fact a continuation of Griffin’s journals that document his religious conversion to Catholicism after losing and later regaining his eyesight, published posthumously as *Scattered Shadows*. Biographically, Griffin also fits Hobson’s description of the factors that contributed to the rise of this genre: Griffin traveled outside of Texas as a young man to study at the Lycée Descartes in Tours, France, joined the French underground resistance in World War II, and was finally injured when stationed as a U.S soldier in the South Pacific, where he spent a year as one of the few outsiders living on a remote island in the Solomon chain (13). Griffin attributes his consciousness of the Civil Rights struggles to these experiences of defamiliarization and immersion in a different language and culture in France, and of the horror of Nazi campaigns, as much as to his period of blindness (13). It should also be noted that *Black Like Me* was explicitly intended as an anti-segregationist narrative meant to persuade, to convert to this cause the audience which Griffin acknowledged at that time “tended to be white, educated, and of the middle or upper economic classes” (*MM* 178). Griffin explicitly aligns *Black Like Me* with the history of white racial conversion narratives, particularly the work of Lillian Smith and Ralph McGill, writers he had direct contact with and whose work Hobson includes (190).

While Griffin’s text is almost exclusively discussed as a passing narrative, it takes more from what Hobson describes as “white racial conversion narratives” than is recognized, because that aspect is overshadowed by the sensational aspect of the author’s attempts at physically passing for black. In fact, a closer look reveals that *Black Like Me*
follows a standard, if not cliché, pattern of racial conversion: Griffin faces the horrible ‘reality’ of racial oppression and his role in it (i.e. conviction), and this is followed by a climactic moment of conversion in a scene that borrows from Augustine’s conversion in the garden, a dramatic change that leads him to a life dedicated to the ending of racial injustice.

The reason why Hobson distances his concept of racial conversion from *Black Like Me*, seems to me to be because of Griffin’s controversial and ethically questionable practice of racial impersonation, as well as the fact that Griffin’s narrative does not follow the Calvinist ‘greatest sinner to greatest saint’ structure that Hobson builds into his model of conversion. However, when considered as a passing narrative built around a racial conversion, *Black Like Me*, reveals important aspects of the conversion discourse as it intersects with racial politics. I could argue that the passing aspect of Griffin’s narrative, far from muddying the waters, in fact, literalizes, or acts out, the fantasy-structure fundamental to the conversion discourse, here entangled with the racial politics of Jim Crow segregation, particularly white fears and fantasies of the racial other as the color line was challenged.

Secondly, as an account of the conversion of a self-professed “specialist in race issues”, a far cry from the ‘chief of sinners’ but someone who still felt he suffered from racial myopia, Griffin’s narrative offers an important perspective on racial conversion in relation to entrenched racism (2). In his final work, *A Time To Be Human* (1977), Griffin’s explains that this project initially began with his interest in reports that suggested there was a “rise in suicide tendency among Southern Negroes”, particularly by black males (in *MM 2*). He began his study with a questionnaire and found that the
black respondents most often returned the questionnaire blank, because they questioned his ability to “interpret his findings without thinking white and falsifying the truth” (2). *Black Like Me* is a conversion narrative born from his desire to stop “thinking white”, a reaction to his own entrenched ‘blindness’ after his physical sight had been restored, and his need to address a lingering belief in the ‘illusion’ of Whiteness.

This discussion builds from Eric Lott’s suggestion in his “White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness”, that Griffin “passes less into a black world than into a ‘black’ part of himself” and that what “Griffin uncovers in his trip through the black South are the contours of blackness for whites” and more specifically, “the contours of straight Caucasian maleness” (485). Griffin’s ‘passing’ through the South should be read as an encounter with the structures or “contours” of a melancholic white masculinity characterized by faith in “Whiteness”, which functions as a God-term. This compensatory belief in the illusion of Whiteness produces and maintains for the privileged white male subject a melancholic “attachment to, yet rejection of” the racialized other who functions as both the debased object, the abject, and the keeper of “the Real”, the vitality of what is constructed as ‘pure experience’, related to the semiotic and a route to primary narcissism. From this perspective Griffin’s text represents a white racial conversion marked by a series of encounters with abjection which put this white melancholic masculine subjectivity “on trial”, to use Kristeva’s term. Through a series of close readings of key scenes, I will show that Griffin’s narrative represents a process that functions as a kind of intimate revolt: he encounters abjection, glimpses “the stranger” within, and experiences a ‘doubling’ and splitting in consciousness, an undoing of self, that leads to a crisis, followed by a racial conversion
experience that ‘returns’ the archaic processes of subject formation, reactivated in terms of racial relations.

This analysis leads to the following questions: do Griffin’s encounters with abjection, this undoing of self and conversion experience, reconfigure his subjectivity in a way that produces critical melancholia and a herethical relation with the differently raced/gendered other? Or does this process function as what Kristeva describes as a “rite of defilement”, in which the abject is encountered and then excluded—the line ‘between’ redrawn in a rite that eases the dominant subject’s anxiety through the repetition of the rite of exclusion, of marking the other as abject, while allowing for the revitalization of the subject through the encounter? Does Griffin’s text offer its reader an encounter with abjection, an intimate revolt that allows the audience to achieve a kind of critical melancholia, a herethical relation to the other? Or does it simply allow the reader a vicarious revitalization through a voyeuristic encounter with abjection that is safely contained in a reading experience that allows the catharsis of guilt and responsibility through a sentimentalized identification—an encounter and abjection that take the place of action, of the echo of critical melancholia?

**White Melancholic Masculinity and the Fantasy of Passing**

In *Racial Castration* (2001), David Eng returns to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* and claims that there is a “racial logic” that operates in this text that “must be recognized as one that comes to inhabit and embed itself within the organizing structure of Freud’s metaphysical theories” (10). Eng argues that “from its very inception psychoanalysis has systematically encoded race as a question of sexual development”—that “sexuality often comes to stand for—and serve as a displaced category of—racial difference in Freud’s writings” (6). He
suggests that the ideal of white European civilization that Freud constructs in this text is underpinned by the figure of the pre-modern ‘primitive’, the racialized other, associated with the incestuous and homosexual drives that must be repressed in order to achieve this ‘civility’ (6).

Eng focuses on the role of the primitive man, the savage, in *Totem and Taboo*, and argues that in this text civilization, progress, and whiteness are bound together against darkness, savagery, and stalled psycho-sexual development. He maintains that for Freud, “white European man represents civilized man, or what he suggests to be primitive’s man’s unrealized psychic potential” (7). Eng sees the two as intertwined, since the claims of “white racial progress”, of ‘white civility,’ require this ‘dark other’:

“the claiming of civility by modern European man […] relies on the presumed incivility of the figure of the primitive who underpins the ‘dark origins’ of Freud’s narrative of white racial progress” (7). The ‘dark other’, the racialized subject, in a parallel way to the maternal and the feminine subject, becomes the marker of what has been surpassed, rejected, or abjected, in order to progress to the status of a clean and proper, civilized, masculine subject.

The ‘progress’ to full and proper status as a subject is intrinsically tied in Freud’s work to sexual development and the proper repression of sexual drives and practices which, according to Eng, becomes bound to racial difference. He finds it “crucial to point out that the primitive’s presumed incivility is symptomatized by Freud precisely as a problem of sexual development” (7). In Eng’s reading, then, darkness, dark origins, and dark skin, become associated with specific sexual practices and pathologies:

By invoking the ‘dark origins’ of these primitives, Freud clearly connects the savage tribe under discussion in *Totem and Taboo* with a type of visual
darkness—with a type of visual marking, that of being dark skinned. Yet, the legitimate mark and proof of racialization is ultimately to be found neither in the register of pigmentation nor in any system of visual authentication. To the contrary, this proof is established through Freud’s depiction of the sexual practices and pathologies of primitive people (8-9).

In contrast to “the white, for whom incestuous impulses are unconscious, Freud spends considerable time discussing the prohibitions against incest within savage tribes he discusses” in *Totem and Taboo* (7). This is presumably because, for Freud, uncivilized primitive man must have externalized incest regulation because the incest prohibition cannot be internalized by ‘savages’ who are conflated with the unconscious. In this, Freud not only “hypersexualizes the primitive, racialized body”, he also links “the sexually voraciously primitive with the failure of the incest taboo” (8). This not only locks the ‘dark other’, and by extension the racialized subject, out of the oedipal conflict, but also marks this subject, like the maternal, as outside of culture (the symbolic) and therefore as a potential threat to its stability and dominance. The racialized subject becomes associated with the threat of chaos, collapse, and the return of the repressed (8).

Turning to “On Narcissism”, Eng argues that in this text Freud forecloses the possibility of the racialized subject, associated with the pre-modern primitive, achieving a mature ego, and associates the male racialized other specifically with homosexuality. According to Eng, “Freud initially isolates the figure of the homosexual as an exemplary model of a stalled and pathological narcissism” and then “goes on to elaborate his observations on narcissism in terms of a libido theory that he connects to the mental lives of both children and primitive peoples” (10-11). Freud suggests, according to Eng, that “unlike children, who […] naturally develop out of their narcissism during the process of psychic maturation, the primitive remains interminably trapped within a narcissistic loop,
locked in an atavistic temporal prison” (11). In other words, the racialized subject, in a similar way to the feminine other, as Van Herik pointed out, cannot achieve a mature ego because neither the feminine subject nor the racialized subject can enter the oedipal conflict. The racialized other, associated with the dark origins of the pre-modern and with the unconscious, is deemed by Freud to be incapable of internalizing the incest prohibition and unable to form an ego-ideal, “the central mechanism of sexual regulation” (11).

According to Eng’s reading of Freud, it is the “transformation of homosexual libido into heterosexual identification and esprit de corps—the turning back of homosexual desire as conscience and guilt”—that allows for “the formation of a legible and legitimated heterosexual identity supported by parents and community” (11). In other words, “the formation of the normative Freudian (male) ego depends upon the elimination of homosexual sexuality” (12). In proper oedipalization, the subject’s (son’s) “desire for the father must be transformed into a desexualized identification with him”, for this son to fully enter the symbolic as a proper autonomous rational subject (12). In a persuasive analysis of Freud’s text, Eng points out that Freud ‘forgets’ the primitive in the conclusion of his essay: Freud does not explicitly mention the ‘fate’ of this figure in relation to his model, but instead leaves only the homosexual to stand as the figure of the stalled narcissist. In Eng’s view, it is not an accident that the discussion of primitive peoples falls away and only the figure of the homosexual remains. He maintains that in this erasure the ‘primitives’ “have fallen through the cracks of Freud’s civilized polity” and that in this suppression “the management and erasure of ‘primitive’ sexual impulses
are no longer figured here as the threat of incest but as the threatened return of same-sex desire” (12). He sums up:

In crossing Totem and Taboo with “On Narcissism”, we witness the convergence of homosexuality with racial difference, a coming together of the homosexual and the primitive pathologized, banished figures within the psychic landscape of the social proper. In this merging, the figure of the homosexual is racialized as the figure of the primitive is (homo)sexualized (13).

In his analysis, Eng persuasively illustrates how white western subjectivity is produced and secured against the figure of the primitive and pre-modern savage in Freud’s work. The racialized other, like the feminine other, functions as a screen onto which the privileged white subject is able to project infantile helplessness—the so-called ‘dark origins’ that have been surpassed. As Cheng (2001) observes, the dominant white subject formation operates “as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial” (11). The racial other is ‘required’ and maintained, but this reliance is disavowed. As Cheng argues, this dynamic is secured through denial—a kind of racial myopia—and simultaneously an elaborate system marked by aggressive attempts to assimilate and exclude, such as racial segregation in the American South under the Jim Crow laws (1876-1965).

According to Cheng’s model, in the formation of the privileged subject there is a melancholic incorporation of a denigrated object that ultimately becomes, or cannot be separated from, the socially denigrated racialized other. When the ego of this subject splits developmentally, in the (necessary) surrendering of primary narcissism via abjection of the maternal container and the move toward the ego-ideal, debased aspects of the self and other negative feelings become associated with the denigrated object (attached to the racialized other), and the idealized image of the privileged subject may
be projected. These associations (idealized vs. denigrated imagos) become reflected and reinforced through various cultural institutions and discourses (education, law, science, and representation), reinstituting the cycle. Because this privileged subject’s ego is “formed and fortified” by the possession of the incorporated object (associated with the racialized other), and because the denigrated incorporated object serves as a defense against guilt (and loss) for the privileged subject, this character is marked by a kind of “racial myopia” which resembles, according to Cheng, a kind of “seeing/not seeing”—the mark of Cheng’s reformulated notion of “melancholic ambivalence” (16). Cheng explains:

[…] teetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space. Part of the central dilemma of dominant racial melancholia—since its authority is constituted, sustained, and made productive by this system of the suspended other—is that it does not really want the lost other to return (or demand its right of way) (16).

In other words, because the privileged subject relies on the devalued racial other to shield it from both its own guilt (at continuing material violence and aggression directed toward the racialized other), and its own debased qualities (projected onto the other), the subject ‘retains’ both the incorporated (ghostly) object and ‘suspended’ external absolute other in order to stabilize his identity. This allows the subject to deny any relationship, any harm done, and the ‘original’ loss. According to Cheng’s model, loss becomes exclusion, with denial as the reactive and ‘containing’ force.

This dynamic, then, represents a compromise solution: the privileged subject does not have to mourn the ‘original’ loss of the maternal object, and face what Freud calls an “education to reality” (FOI 49). Instead this subject splits the object into ideal and
debased aspects and retains the wishful notion that he himself is the ideal, while the feminine and racialized other are the denigrated object. However, while this may keep the subject ‘safe’ from the threat of abjection, of excess, which is projected onto the other, this splitting also means the dominant subjects must, as Lott argues, “organize their enjoyment through the other” (482). In this split, the other also comes to represent “enjoyment, the body, an aptitude for pleasure” for the dominant subject, which must be lost, abjected, in order achieve the ‘proper’ white masculine position (482). This means, as Lott suggests, following John Szwed, that the racialized other becomes a “repository of joy and revivification” for the dominant culture (482). This, according to Lott echoing Cheng, produces a dynamic of ‘attachment to, yet disavowal of this attachment’; the other is needed as a site of pleasure, but the other’s ‘excess’ also becomes the source of hatred. The other’s excess is not only the sign of the abject, a source of horror and fear, but also what Slavoj Zizek describes as the “special pleasure”, the jouissance of the other, a ‘sign’ of what exceeds the subject that becomes a source of jealousy and rage, and which the subject longs to incorporate and contain, ideally without guilt or retribution (57).

According to Lott, it is this dynamic that is acted out in white fantasies of passing. He argues that passing narratives (including skin-dying variations such as Griffin’s) are contemporary forms of “blackface”, a term he takes from minstrelsy, a form of theatre performed in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in which mainly white actors performed comic and disparaging representations of black cultures with their faces covered in black theatrical makeup. Passing narratives, in Lott’s view, understood as a form of blackface, represent fantasy experiences in which the white
subject may indulge in the pleasure of the racialized other (exaggerated black makeup and actions) from the safety of an essential, untouched whiteness (makeup may be removed to reveal whiteness). They are fantasy-representations that allow the subject to experience the “excess” that has been attributed “to the ‘degraded’ other”: in “indulging it”—by imagining, incorporating, or impersonating the other” in a form of blackface, “one conveniently and surreptitiously takes and disavows pleasure at one and the same time “(482). Passing, when understood as a kind of blackface, allows whites to “enter ‘blackness’ according to the dictates of white desire” and to experience the “fascinating and threatening proximity of back male bodies” in a way that ensures the belief in whiteness as an essential quality remains intact (486). White fantasy-narratives of passing as black can be read, then, as Lott suggests, as representations in which the writer “passes less into a black world than into a ‘black’ part of himself” (486).

While Lott’s discussion of passing is entirely persuasive, his analysis does not fully address the imagined transformational aspect to passing narratives—that these experiences are often represented not only as offering pleasure, but as producing a profound psychic transformation in the author. And further, while temporary, skin-dying experiments such as Griffin come closer to being performative than staged playacting/parody (blackface). Baz Dreisinger takes up some of these issues in Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture (2008). According to Dreisinger, the fantasy of proximity as well as the fear and anxiety that this possibility arouses are the key to all passing or skin dying texts. She argues that because “‘blackness’ as such” is imagined by the dominant white subject as “transmittable”, “proximity to blackness is invested with
the power to turn whites black”, to different degrees and with varying results depending on social context (3).

In Dreisinger’s view, during Reconstruction when the “free/slave” distinction no longer functioned as a social divide that could be relied on to shore up social differences, in her view particularly between poor whites and free black workers, “some Southerners began to fret that whites were indeed ‘turning black’” because of the new kind of cultural proximity—white men working alongside black men for pay (10). She argues that the narrative of white passing “emerges from this prevalent anxiety” and the passing texts of this time are haunted by “worries about ‘blackening’ whites” and “a fear that whiteness is not an essence after all” (10). She maintains that this anxiety led to the Jim Crowe segregation laws, which are an attempt to alleviate the imagined threat of the transmission or infection of whiteness by ‘blackness’ (10). However, Dreisinger persuasively argues that the configuration or balance of fear and fascination represented in narratives of white passing shifts during the time of the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

She posits that passing narratives that emerge during the Civil Rights movement differ from these earlier narratives in that they are “driven less by anxieties about whites turning black than by fantasies of this transformation, which is imagined as providing white men with a new sense of potency” (11). For white passers during this time, such as Griffin, “black and white are two essential entities, and therefore white men can become better whites through an excursion into blackness” (8). In other words, anxiety that was raised in some white Southerners by the loss of the free vs. slave distinction, which Dreisinger claims was the primary distinction before the abolition of slavery, was eased
to an extent by a shift in emphasis to the white vs. black divide during Jim Crowe segregation (10). This re-inscribing of difference between social groups, with white vs. black constructed as essential differences between races, allowed for the emphasis to shift toward the fantasy of proximity. She positions texts in which passing is represented as producing psychic change, such as *Black Like Me*, as an outgrowth of the captivity narrative “in which a white person would ‘become (for a while) Indian-like in her behavior’ and gain ‘insight into the Indian heart’, but then be ‘restored’ to her old life ‘with newly opened eyes’” (11). According to Deisinger, then, these skin-dying scenarios reflect a fantasy:

> […] that a white man, after a taste of blackness, can safely return to whiteness—carrying a little bit of blackness within. The skin dyer remains essentially white, however, and this little bit, is of course, the idealized part of blackness, the double consciousness that allows for heightened sensitivity and keener insight (47- 48).

Dreisinger argues that this contact with the other allows the white subject to ‘acquire blackness’, in a process that is always bound up with the structure of white masculinity. She maintains that white men envision ‘authentic’ or “potent” blackness as being located in black masculinity, believing that “black men, possess the power to transfer their blackness, so to speak, onto white men and women, while black women cannot do the same” (12). In other words, while proximity to black men is viewed as a source of ‘black potency’ for the white passer, black women are either completely removed from the scenario or associated with exaggerated sexual appetite (attributed either to the perverse white male or “hyper-sexed vixen” black woman) or the sentimentalized figure of the black Mammy (81). Even the loving maternal care of the idealized black mammy, however, is not considered or depicted as having transformative
effect. According to Dreisinger, proximity to the black other in these narratives is bound
to fantasies of achieving manhood through proximity to the black male other:\footnote{In Dreisinger’s view, even white passing narratives written by white women are centered on proximity to the black male other. In her analysis of Grace Halsell’s \textit{Soul Sister} (1960), a text in which a white woman replicates Griffin’s skin-dying experiment, Dreisinger convincingly illustrates that it is proximity to black men that is represented as having transformative effect. Dreisinger argues: “male bonding plays a vital role in white passing narratives about men. But for female white passers, the homosocial becomes irrelevant; instead the heterosexual is crucial” (73). According to Dreisinger, “white women acquire their ‘blackness’ from the black men in their beds” (73). Halsell, for example, achieves “a closeness” with the racial other through “a sexual inhabiting of black others” (78): Halsell seeks out the ‘authentic’ black experience, the one that will teach her how it truly feels to be black; and she does so through sexual encounters with black men. Because white women can take in the black man—the ‘true site’ of blackness—narratives about them are almost always centered on sexual exchanges (80).}

If black men are often presented as possessing the penis without the phallus—an excessively physical masculinity stripped of traditional patriarchal privilege—the white man who passes as black get the best of both worlds: the penis and the phallus […] [The] experience of wearing black skin provides him with the former, and when he returns to a privileged position of whiteness, he acquires the latter (48).

In sum, Dreisinger and Lott both argue, as Cheng does, that the privileged white male subject attempts to position or lock the racialized other into a dynamic in which the other can be used as a screen for the subject’s abjected qualities, as well as continuing to function as a source of revivification, of nourishment, for the privileged subject. Lott emphasizes that the other functions as a source of pleasure, a rejuvenating ‘life-force’; Dreisinger suggests that the racialized other can also have a transformative effect, when the other takes on idealized qualities that the white subject can incorporate as its own. Dreisinger aligns this specifically with masculinity: the black male other is associated with the penis, with nature and a kind of ‘real’ potency. In passing fantasies, the white male subject may incorporate these idealized quality and potency from the safety of white heterosexual masculinity, from the place of ‘having’ the phallus. However, while incorporative proximity to the black male other allow the white male subject to ‘safely’

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have, as Dreisinger suggests, the phallus and the penis, nevertheless, as Lott suggests, the fantasy of passing also always reveals this subject’s “‘compromising desire’” (475). His identification with “potent male heterosexuality” is not only a matter of “sexual envy” or “masculinity rivalry” but also a way to experience a “homoerotic charge” while deflecting “homosexual desire” and disavowing the erotic and desire-filled nature of this exchange (480-481).

According to Cheng, the privileged subject secures this dynamic through the attempted domination of modes of representation and oppressive economic practices, followed by a “denial” of these attempts at exclusion. However, I suggest that a compensatory belief in “Whiteness”, which functions as a God-term, also underpins this dynamic. By this I mean that the white melancholic subject has recourse to an investment, a belief, in Whiteness that functions as a compensation for loss, and as a guarantee of narcissism, in the same way that Freud suggested the creation of Gods functions for the helpless child: as an illusion that fulfills the subject’s wish. If we recall Freud’s discussion of the phylogenetic ‘birth’ of Gods, as outlined in *Future of An Illusion*, we find similarities between the infant’s wishful investment in God and the melancholic subject’s belief in Whiteness: a helpless infant, faced with wholly external forces outside of his control and the knowledge that he is subject to the same fate as all the rest, creates a God that can “exorcize the terrors of nature; […] reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and […] compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them” (18). In the same way, a wishful belief in Whiteness as an essential quality, an ‘organizing’ term ‘outside’ of the symbolic order, allows the privileged subject to avoid facing an education to the ‘reality’
of his implication in the racial oppression that secures his privilege. A belief in Whiteness
defensively shields the subject and functions as a compensation for any loss, a guarantee
of justice and the God-given order to things.

Can the experience of ‘acquiring blackness’, then, displace a belief in Whiteness? Or does it always produce a melancholic attachment? While Lott rejects white passing as a form of “racial liberation”, Dreisinger is less absolute. She argues that passing may be done for various reasons and in various ways: “via self-identification”, or by an individual “taken for black by a given community”, or choosing to be seen as black as a “fleeting and deliberate experiment” (3). According to Dreisinger, there are a number of ways of ‘acquiring’ blackness, a number of motivations and effects, some more or less politically progressive. There are those that “actively claim a black identity”; others that “merely disavow a white one” (3). Dreisinger argues that “white passing is at once a liberal and conservative enterprise, driven alternately by anxiety and fantasy, fear and hope” (7). She suggests that while “certain instances of white passing are anchored in essentialist notions of whiteness and blackness, others destabilize racial identity altogether”, and these are potentially transformative acts (3). In other words, in so far as these narratives and experiences destabilize racial identity, and reveal the subject’s racial hybridity, putting the white subject on trial and revealing its unity, its whiteness, to be an illusion, they are potentially transformative.

If, as I suggest, whiteness enters the scene as a belief, it becomes entangled with the process of primary identification, and functions as a wishful imaginary compensation, while becoming associated with a symbolic structure (partially because of the visible nature of ‘whiteness’ as a physical characteristic). ‘Whiteness’ is an available securing
term in the process by which the white privileged subject moves through abjection, and is therefore bound up with the archaic process of subject formation. This accounts in part for the difficulty of overthrowing its power. It must be dislodged via the process that returns to and ‘turns over’ these early phases of subject formation; what Kristeva calls “intimate revolt”, based on a profound logic of “return/ turning back/ displacement/ change” that repeats, interrogates, and re-elaborates the most archaic phases of subject formation, and in this ruptures and re-articulates the dynamic between the semiotic and symbolic (IR 6). Overthrowing whiteness requires what Khanna describes as “an undoing of self” that leads to an education to reality and a critical identification with the other—a transformation of the melancholic attachment into a critical melancholia. Thus conversion, also associated with the process of primary identification and a relative of intimate revolt, is interestingly positioned in the discussion of representations of transformations of the white subject’s relationship to the racialized other.

Black Like Me as Racial Conversion

Griffin begins Black Like Me with the declaration of his belief that the “only way…to bridge the gap between us [black and white Americans] was to become a Negro” (2). With the help of Adelle Jackson, the editorial director of a popular African-American magazine based in Fort Worth Texas called Sepia, Griffin, (a white man from Mansfield, Texas) used Oxsoralen (a drug to treat vitiligo) and extended exposure to a sun lamp to darken his skin in order to attempt to pass as a black man as he traveled by bus and foot for six weeks. He was to document his experiences in a six-part account entitled “Journey Into Shame”, serialized in Sepia between April and September of 1960 (MM 37).
On November 7th, 1959, Griffin has his final ‘treatments’ and is left to finish the transformation with coats of pigment stain. After his doctor leaves, Griffin enters a dark bathroom, stands in front of a mirror, and turns on the light. In this moment, Griffin encounters his reflection, the face of a stranger, the abject other, “a fierce, bald, very dark Negro” who in “no way resembled me” (11). He describes the scene:

The transformation was total and shocking. I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship […]. I looked into the mirror and saw reflected nothing of the white John Griffin’s past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness. Suddenly, almost with no mental preparation, no advance hint, it became clear and permeated my whole being. My inclination was to fight against it. I had gone too far. I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won’t rub off. The black man is wholly Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me. The completeness of the transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything I had imagined. I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depth of his entrails (11-12).

As Gayle Wald suggests, this scene represents “Griffin’s initial traumatic confrontation with his own stereotypes of blackness, and hence with a truer and less idealized reflection of himself” (165). In this encounter Griffin “identifies blackness with chaos and upheaval, shadow and blemish, poverty and disgrace”: the abject, ‘the absolute stranger’ with whom he feels no kinship (165). According to Wald, “speaking and writing from the white subject-position, Griffin takes no pride or pleasure in his reflection, but only feels self-loathing” (165). In response to this, Griffin defensively splits in two. As Wald comments:

Rather than submit to an identification with an ‘utter stranger’, one who so profoundly assails his sense of his own humanity, Griffin splits in two, becoming simultaneously Dr. Frankenstein and the aberrant, half-human monster of his own mad creation (165).
According to Wald, Griffin internalizes something “akin to DuBoisian double-consciousness” (166). However, “whereas DuBois describes a condition of ‘twoness’, of internalized self-contradiction and self-striving, Griffin, in his contempt for the ‘Negroid’ face, relates a more literalized splitting of the self in two” (166). He splits into the self who panics and the “observer” who “watches and records” (166). While Wald’s analysis of Griffin’s defensive splitting in this scene is convincing, instead of a DuBoisian doubleness, I would suggest that this scene recalls Fanon’s prototypical scene of the white child’s encounter with the “Negro”, in Black Skin, White Masks (1967), in which the white child declares: “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened” (112). In Fanon’s analysis of the scene of the encounter, the white child marks the black other as a phobic object and projects all that is fearsome onto this other, while the black man experiences the soul-shriveling effect of epidermalization (112). Griffin, like the white child, encounters the face of the black other, whom he reads as “fierce” and absolutely foreign. The reflection, the image of the black other, conjures in Griffin a series of associations linked to racial stereotypes of blackness. Griffin attempts to relegate this other “back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto”, but this distancing technique is interrupted by the physical resemblance—the reflection is his own.

Here, the white male subject, imagined as a unified, essential subject, is put on trial. Griffin returns to what Wald calls “the primal mirror scene”, and is faced with the ‘other as/in the self’, an uncanny double of the self, the abject other, the other who is abjected to secure the façade of this subject (165). In this case, as Wald notes, Griffin defensively splits: he attempts to re-inscribe the difference and distance ‘between’
himself and this stranger by dividing his own perspective into two, the white observer and the observed racial other.

Griffin’s description of entering the black ghetto, now passing as black, illustrates particularly well how he constructs entering ‘blackness’ as an encounter with the abject. His ‘observing self’ narrates:

It was the ghetto. I had seen them before from the high altitude of one who could look down and pity. Now I belonged here and the view was different. A first glance told it all. Here it was pennies and clutter and spittle on the curb. Here people walked fast to juggle the dimes, to make a deal, to find a cheap liver or a tomato that was overripe. Here was the indefinable stink of despair […]. A young, slick-haired man screamed loud obscenities to an older woman on the sidewalk. She laughed and threw them back in his face. They raged. Others passed them, hearing, looking down, pursing lips, struggling not to notice. Here sensuality was escape, proof of manhood for people who could prove it no other way […]. Here at noon, jazz blared from juke boxes and dark holes issued forth the cool odors of beer, wine and flesh into the sunlight […]. Here I saw a young man, who carried in his body the substance of a saint, stagger, glassy-eyed unconscious from the dark hole, sit down on the curb and vomit between his feet (19).

On entering the ghetto, Griffin enters the ‘space’ of the abject. This is space ‘outside’ of the symbolic order. The streets are covered with abject waste: spittle and garbage discarded and decaying. Pennies, the currency of abject poverty, the failed promise of capitalistic logic, are discarded alongside the human waste. The space and inhabitants are associated with decay, overripe food, blaring sounds, raging emotions, stench, unconscious drunkenness, and sexuality. In the final moments, Griffin renders a remarkable scene of an abject ‘birth’—a kind of stillbirth. Griffin ends his description of the scene with a young man staggering forth from a “dark hole” recalling the maternal container, the female sex organ. He is a potential saint, carrying “the substance of a saint”, but abjected, “glassy-eyed”, barely alive, “unconscious”, falling on the curb, into the gutter, vomiting. Here we see that the “wine and flesh” Griffin refers to, those
materials of the sacrament which produce communion, joining body and spirit, are absolutely perverted. In a failed rite, the son vomits the sacraments onto the curb simply adding to the rot. As Lott argues, it is clear that Griffin’s representation associates the racialized other with the abject and a kind of excess evoked by “exotic food, strange and noisy music, outlandish bodily exhibitions, or unremitting sexual appetite” (482). In this scene, Griffin remains an observer, moving closer but still able to safely “look down and pity” (19).

Griffin’s ventures initially take on the kind of suspenseful, romantic tone audible in his early description of the ghetto scene. We might say that the defensive split holds. In these early scenes there is a feeling of exhilaration at passing, a fascination with the other, and a sense of freedom in being ‘invisible’. When there is a threat of being overwhelmed by the abject, particularly a sense of loneliness, or a feeling that he is “suffocating”, this is remedied through a casual proximity to other black men (18).

Griffin’s extended description of sharing a cigarette with several unclothed black men in the shower, his “first prolonged contact as a Negro with other Negroes” is a particularly good example of this (17). As Lott suggests, when interacting with the black men, Griffin ‘feeds’ on the pleasure of what I call an “incorporative proximity”. When the abject threatens, he seeks out the fascination of the other in order to fend this off. His passing, in this way, functions as an example of what Lotts calls “blackface” (482). While Griffin’s desire to be close to these men is not inherently problematic, in fact it represents his pull toward the other, he ‘takes’ this pleasure without allowing for the same kind of penetration on their part, so to speak. He ‘feeds’ from this fascination, and disavows his own voyeuristic and homoerotic interest.
This defensive split functions for Griffin in his interactions within the ghetto, specifically those with the black community. However, it breaks down in his interactions with white individuals, particularly his experiences with the “white hate stare” (54). It is these interactions that lead to a crisis and his ‘conviction’—the full awareness of sin, of what he describes as the “evil” that has “taken” white racists (70). More specifically, Griffin first experiences the “hate stare” in a train station when he enters a waiting lounge unaware of the unwritten rule that the absence of any sign means “whites only”. As he enters, a young woman “glared at him” with “such loathing” that he is taken off guard (53). Because of his “surprise,” the overly performative quality of her look, that it “was so exaggeratedly hateful”, and her age and gender, the stare does not have its intended effect (53). He feels “sorry for her” and manages to raise her face to a “high pink” by what he imagines as his “supreme insolence” to “dare feel sorry for her” (53). He is able to use a kind of defensive pity to shield himself because of the sexual difference, which he takes to be an intrinsic power difference, between himself and the young woman. His second experience, from a white man of his age and class, however, pierces his defenses:

[The hate stare] came from a middle-aged, heavy-set, well-dressed white man. He sat a few yards away, fixing his eyes on me. Nothing can describe the withering horror of this. You feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it show humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you. It was so new I could not take my eyes from the man’s face. I felt like saying: ‘What in God’s name are you doing to yourself?’ (54).

This scene functions as a repetition of the earlier mirror scene after the initial transformation, but has a different effect. In this encounter, Griffin is again transfixed, faced with horror. However, this time he is fixed under the gaze of a white man who functions as a mirror of Griffin himself. Instead of responding with a kind of defensive
pity, available to him in the earlier instance, or protective anger, the gaze pierces him.

Whereas in the earlier mirror scene Griffin’s shame, his outrage, is projected onto the abject other, “the fierce bald Negro”, and he splits in order to protect this distance, here the mark of ‘blackness’ reflected in this white man’s open hatred not only reflects back on him, but is transfused into him. He experiences the withering horror, what he later calls “the sudden soul shriveling” moment, of being in the “presence of such human degradation” (MM 146). This disrupts his easy split defense, because he experiences, as Wald suggests, a “simultaneous identification with and revulsion from the white stranger” (167). According to Wald, this is “reflected in the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘you’” (167):

Whereas the stranger’s hate stare is intended to provoke feelings of shame in the black (observed) Griffin, in the white (observing) Griffin the expression kindles both shame (at the obvious brutality of the act) and guilt (at his own complicity in the act). The narrator’s use of the word ‘you’—in phrases such as ‘you see a kind of insanity’—reiterates this doubleness, at once depersonalizing and universalizing his response; in such cases, ‘you’ both includes and excludes the speaker’s ‘I’. Out of this sense of doubleness, Griffin is able to experience the withering effects of racism on black self-realization as well as the shattering effects of the realization of racism on his own self-esteem (167).

Before this experience Griffin’s psychic investment, his belief in Whiteness, had remained intact, untouched. When threatened by the abject racialized other, he could maintain his distance by identifying with the ‘observing’ Griffin associated with his ‘white’ identity; he could absorb the abject in the form of the fascinating other whose threat was mitigated by a power difference. In this encounter, however, Griffin’s ‘easy’ identification with the white stranger, his belief in Whiteness, is shaken; identification and revulsion, once easily split, become entangled and associated in this instance with the white stranger, who is like the ‘White’ Griffin. In this instance, as Wald suggests, there is
a destabilizing doubling in which Griffin’s defensive split structure does not hold up. His reaction conveys the most archaic aspects of the subject: he feels “lost”, “sick at heart”, and glimpses “an insanity” at the center, at the very ‘heart’ of the social or symbolic order. He represents himself as both taking in the experience of being abject, and recognizing, or being forced to ‘face’, his complicity in racist culture through his psychic investment in Whiteness.

This destabilizing doubleness culminates in a scene at a hotel in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Griffin has taken a bus into the city and finds the streets filled with a palpable tension, the community members enraged and reeling over the federal grand jury’s failure to hand down an indictment in the lynching of Mack Parker, a young black truck driver who was held in a nearby city on a trumped-up charge of rape. In his description of the Mississippi streets, Griffin’s relationship to the scene has shifted. No longer able to “look down and pity”, Griffin is now directly implicated in the scene. Whiteness is no longer a source of protection, but associated with threat:

As I walked down Mobile Street, a car full of white men and boys sped past. They yelled obscenities at me. A Satsuma [tangerine] flew past my head and broke against a building. The street was loud and raw with tension as thick as fog. I felt the insane terror of it (68).

The “amplified wails of the juke-box rock-and-roll music” sound as a warning, as the distance and pity of his previous description are replaced by a growing tension within him, now experienced as “an insane terror” (68).

Griffin takes refuge in a hotel room, where he stands in front of the mirror for a second time:

I switched on the light and looked into a cracked piece of mirror braided with bent nails into the wall. The bald Negro stared back at me from its mottled sheen. I
knew I was in hell. Hell could be no more lonely or hopeless, no more agonizingly estranged from the world of order and harmony.
I heard my voice, as though it belonged to someone else, hollow in the empty room, detached, say: ‘Nigger, what you standing up there crying for?’.
I saw tears slick on his cheeks in the yellow light.
Then I heard myself say what I have heard them say so many times. ‘It’s not right. It’s just not right’ (70).

In this repetition of Griffin’s first encounter with the “bald Negro” in the mirror, he is no longer “fierce” but broken and crying. In this encounter, two voices emerge: on the one hand, the “hollow” “detached” voice of white power who sees and speaks to the “Nigger” in the mirror, who stares without mercy at his tears, and on the other, the voice Griffin identifies as “myself”, who echoes ‘their’ words, the words of the black community, declaring “it’s not right” (70). In this moment, Griffin experiences the uncanny voice of white power speaking through him: this voice is ‘detached’ from his own voice, as it articulates the structure of power that surrounds him and makes this structure apparent. This internalized voice of white power speaks alongside his echo of ‘black’ calls for justice, allowing him a momentary critical distance from these structures and processes. However, he cannot maintain this position. He experiences the “onrush of revulsion, the momentary flash of blind hatred against the whites who were somehow responsible”, followed by an intense “grief,” until he could not stand it and “turned away from the mirror” (70).

In a desperate attempt to hold onto meaning, Griffin picks up film negatives he finds on the floor and holds them “before the light with strange excitement” (70). He attempts to escape from his anxiety, to rest by imaging the life of the “prior occupant”, another black man “like himself” (70). However, he finds “each negative was blank” and is filled with horror as he imagines that the owner of the film “sat here holding blank
negatives, masterpieces of human ingenuity, wasted” (70). In this moment Griffin holds the negatives to the light and glimpses the image of the other’s existence, without the shielding distance of his observer stance. There is a reversal here suggested by the negatives. He is faced with the reversal of the white vs. black distinction that he has secured his subjectivity against, with his own ‘blackness’ and ‘blankness’. Because the meaning of black and white only have significance in relation to each other like the sounds in language, at this point, Griffin’s narrative appears to dissolve as his grasp on symbolic meaning slips away. The text on the page literally breaks up, forming a series of letters spelling out, in a rhythm, “harangity, hangity, hangity, hangity, oomp, oomp, oomp” (71). Griffin tries to latch onto language, to write to his wife, to reach out to her as a stabilizing object:

I […] attempted to write—anything to escape the death dance out there in the Mississippi night […]. I tried to write my wife—I needed to write to her […]. No words would come […]. It was maddening. All my instincts struggled against the estrangement. I began to understand Lionel Trilling’s remarks that culture—learned behavior patterns so deeply engrained they produce unconscious, involuntary reaction—is a prison. My conditioning as a Negro, and the immense sexual implications with which the racists in our culture bombarded us, cut me off, even in my intimate self, from any connection with my wife (71).

In these moments, Griffin is faced with the ‘return’ of the archaic processes of subject formation: symbolic meaning breaks up and he is faced with the abject, here entangled with his imaginary ideas of the racialized other. In this return, his securing attachment to ‘Whiteness’, his melancholic attachment structure built on a splitting of the object, is in crisis. He is faced with the prospect of relinquishing this attachment. He struggles against this, slipping into the imaginary register where he attempts to create an alternative scenario, to imagine the world of the (racialized) other who once stood in his place, but finds the negatives are blank—the life of the other can only be “oblivion” for
Griffin (10). He can imagine no other possibility. He reaches out to his wife as a securing object, and to the act of writing to separate himself from the dreadful experience of abjection, but neither respond, neither stabilize him. He cannot address his wife, who is a white woman, because he is unable to break the racial sexual prohibition. As a final recourse, he tries to fill his stomach, to fill the void with the literal ‘food’ of the other. Unable to ‘face’ the “mottled mirror […] dead light bulb and […] blank negatives’, Griffin “escapes” by calling P.D East, “the only white man in Hattiesburg to whom I might call for help”, to ask him to come to take him out of this “hell” (74).

In the scenes in the hotel, Griffin reaches what we might consider “conviction”, but does not experience racial conversion. He re-stabilizes his identity by consciously distancing himself from his experience. Griffin spends a few days in seclusion with East and his family, recovering and reading East’s autobiography documenting his own conversion to an anti-segregationist position. Griffin is able to regain perspective by intellectually engaging with racial politics, and decides to hitchhike through Alabama. During this trip, he encounters a series of characters each representing potential ‘white’ positions in relation to race, from very negative, abject racists who are “merciless” (110), to those with “a morbid curiosity about the sexuality of the Negro” (91), to what finally is represented as a positive experience with a young man, whom Griffin presents as an ideal figure of a loving white father:

I wondered how he had escaped the habit of guarded fencing that goes on constantly between whites and Negroes in the South wherever they meet. He was the first man of either color who did not confuse the popular image of the thing with the thing itself […]. I could only conclude that his attitude came from an overwhelming love for his child, so profound it spilled over to all humanity. I knew that he was totally unaware of its ability to cure men; of the blessing it could be to someone like me after having been exhausted and scraped raw in my heart by others this rainy Alabama night (101).
While East functioned as an intellectual equal with whom Griffin could identify in order to restore his critical distance and provide a symbolic framework and male role model, this uneducated young man of working-class status allows for a different kind of attachment. He serves as an intermediary between the racialized other, whom Griffin associates with the terror of oblivion as well as a revitalizing ‘Real’, and his symbolic ideal of a ‘good whiteness’. He provides the possibility of identification with a whiteness that is not associated with the violence of the hate-stare. Griffin imagines this man to be “unaware” of his “ability to cure man”, and emphasizes that he is not educated and not particularly religious. Griffin associates the young man with the natural, with an untouched or ‘primitive’ goodness.

In their exchange, it appears that the man’s class difference stands in for racial difference, and allows him to function as an intermediary. In my view, Griffin, who is unable to identify directly with the black male or the blackness in himself because of their terrifying association with the abject and oblivion, transfers what was idealized about the black subject as a source of revivification to this white subject with whom he is able to identify. The power difference, the class difference, and this man’s simple goodness, appear to allow for the attachment to form not only as an intellectual identification, as with East, but more like an incorporative primary identification. This man plays the part of the fantasy good son, but also takes on the role of the good loving father whose “blessing” saves Griffin from the others who have injured him and threatened his belief in Whiteness. This young man, like Christ, loved his son so much that this love spread to the world. He becomes an imaginary father figure who holds Griffin’s belief in the possibility of a re-born white subject. In this encounter, it is the
young man’s love for his son that is marked as the route to the possibility of good
whiteness, to a love profound enough to spill over all of humanity. It is the father’s love
for the child that becomes the route to racial conversion for Griffin. The loving father
figure is a recurring theme throughout the text, however it is only the loving father who is
white who becomes the recognized and recognizable conduit for his primary
identification. Griffin’s relationship with his older black male friend Sterling, as well as
another unnamed elderly black man who takes him into his home and with whom he
shares a bed, appear to deeply affect him. It may be that the shared intimacy and the trust
these men show him by allowing physical proximity, by welcoming him into their homes
and sharing meals with him while aware of his experiment, that is life-changing for
Griffin. Nevertheless, it is only the exchange with the white loving father that is depicted
as having transformative effect on what might be described as Griffin’s symbolic white
self. The white father figure is positioned as the proper ‘positive’ site of identification.

After Griffin leaves this young man he is unable to find a guesthouse, but meets a
black man who takes him to his cabin in the swamp, where he spends the evening
enjoying his time with this man’s wife and children. The romantic tone of the early
section of his text returns, but now paints a sentimental domestic scene with a pastoral
quality:

Odors of the night and autumn and the swamp entered to mingle with the inside
odors of children, kerosene, cold beans, urine and the dead incense of pine ashes. The
rots and the freshness combined into a strange fragrance—the smell of
poverty. For a moment I knew the intimate and subtle joys of misery (120).

Many of the elements found in Griffin’s earlier description of the ghetto (bodily fluids,
rot, etc.) combine here with elements of nature (pine, night, freshness, and the smell of
children) to create a “strange fragrance” of romanticized poverty and an idealized rustic domestic life of noble struggle.

This domestic idyll becomes the backdrop for Griffin’s conversion experience. In a scene that is reminiscent of Augustine’s conversion, Griffin, the long-suffering seeker, is suddenly overwhelmed. He leaves his companions to go out into the swamp and has an experience described as follows:

Thinking about these things, the bravery of these people attempting to bring up family decently [...] their willingness to share their food and shelter with a stranger—the whole thing overwhelmed me. I got up from bed, half-frozen anyway, and stepped outside [...]. I thought about my daughter [...] and of my sons [...]. They slept now in clean beds in a warm house while their father, a bald-headed Negro, sat in the swamps and wept [...]. I felt again the Negro children’s lips soft against mine, so like the feel of my own children’s goodnight kisses. I saw again their large eyes, guileless, not yet aware that doors into wonderlands of security, opportunity, and hope were closed to them. It was thrown fully in my face. I saw it not as a white man, and not as a Negro, but as a human parent [...]. I realized if my skin were permanently black, they would unhesitatingly consign my own children to this bean future [...]. It was too much. Though I was experiencing it, I could not believe it [...]. I searched for some other answer and found none. I had spent a day without food and water for no other reason than my skin was black. I was sitting on a tub in the swamp for no other reason (120-122).

The scene in the swamp represents the final moment of Griffin’s racial conversion. He has struggled against the ‘truth’ of racism, but his defenses do not hold, and are finally broken in this interaction with the family. He experiences the ‘flood of tears’ and the realization that the only difference between the racialized other and himself is color—that there is a “sameness under the skin” (MM 4). His conversion is represented through an apparent identification with the racialized other, coupled with an intense affective experience. Griffin describes it as the “the emotional experience of perceiving the Other is not Other at all, the Other is me”, but insight only emerges within the sentimentalized
context of the nuclear family and a paternalistic frame that allows for the maintenance of
a class divide (MM 48).

However, in the scene of his conversion Griffin does not directly identify with the
racialized other, but as a human parent. It is the helpless child’s right to life that causes
this change of heart, and as a corollary his own anxiety that his children’s narcissism may
have been thwarted, and as an extension, his own. Griffin could only glimpse oblivion in
the space of the other; here he does not fill the space of oblivion with the reality of the
other’s existence, instead, he flattens the space and collapses any differences into
pigmentation—a kind of white liberal epidermalization. His initial belief in Whiteness
simply shifts, or is transferred, into a belief in what he calls the “We”, in the idea of
human “sameness” (48).

Nowhere does Griffin’s narrative and characterization feel more contrived than in
the scenes with this family, which frame the climax of his racial conversion. While
Griffin’s narrative is always sentimental to some extent, there is a noticeable
fictionalization in these scenes. While Griffin may experience this as a moment of
profound change, the sentimental tone betrays something more than a weakness in his
skill as a writer. Griffin’s display of overwhelming emotion, coupled as it is with a
distancing sentimentalization of the family scene recalls James Baldwin’s (1949) claim
that “sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive or spurious emotion, is the
mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his
aversion to experience” (14). The shift to the sentimental tone functions as “a
prophylactic against the reproduction of a shocking and numbing mass violence”, to use
Lauren Berlant’s terms (657). In the scene of his conversion Griffin performs
overwhelming grief and repentance (weeping), but also builds in a distancing technique (sentimental framing). Griffin falls back on a common technique at the time, both in white racial conversion narratives and Southern fiction more generally, that uses African-Americans as “the conscience of the South” (161). It conveys the views that they have endured “precisely through the ‘nobility’ of black suffering” to use Wald’s phrasing (161). Griffin creates an idealized space around this domestic nuclear family, suffering nobly and, importantly, silently. He calls upon what Wald describes as “a pathos that depends on passivity” (171). The difference in power between Griffin and this impoverished black family allows him to play out the fantasy of taking the place of the father whose love for his son extends to the world without any real threat to his social position.

In other words, Griffin’s encounter with abjection and experience of proximity to the racialized other allows for the transfusion of the imagined ‘Real’ of blackness, the “subtle misery of poverty” that produces an experience of “reconciliation of humanity” which he desires (xii). Having touched blackness, having been touched by blackness, he is now complete, “half black, half white” (MM 165). Griffin’s conversion scene functions as a “reconciliation”, the realization of his desire and determination, with Martin Buber, “I-thou […] must finally dissolve into the We concept” (48). In this, there is an envelopment of the Other, an incorporation that amounts to a shifting of the belief in Whiteness as a God-term and melancholic attachment to the racial other into a belief in a mythic “We” that allows for the experience of “revivification” yet maintains his position of power. This supposedly inclusive “We” clearly breaks in the concluding moments of Black Like Me, to reveal that the autonomous racial other and women are not included.
Griffin’s racial conversion experience disrupts his ability to identify easily with whiteness. For example, he cannot accept the Southern hospitality he is given: “smiles, benign faces, courtesies—a side of white man I had not seen in weeks, but I remembered too well the other side. The miracle was sour” (130). Griffin feels the pull of this white “us”, but no longer believes in its reality. However, in the concluding moments of the text, he is still unable to support calls from the black community for Black Power, or imagine black autonomy:

The Negro who turns now, in the moment of near-realization of his liberties, and bares his fangs at a man’s whiteness, makes the same tragic error the white racist has made […]. Too many militant leaders are preaching Negro superiority. I pray that the Negro will not miss his chance to rise to greatness, to build from the strength gained through his past suffering and, above all, to rise above vengeance (176).

I would suggest, following Hobson, that Griffin, like many white southerners, “felt so keenly and regretted so deeply the break up of the spirit of interracial community—of blacks and whites together—in the latter days of the Civil Rights movement”, because “the movement had always been, for participating whites, in part about saving their souls” (17). According to Hobson, they were deeply affected and resistant to the turn toward Black Power, because it aroused “feelings of rejection” and “suggested they were not worthy after all” (17). In other words, as Wald points out, “Griffin’s compassion for the plight of black people under Jim Crow is inseparable […] from a corresponding concern for his own spiritual wellbeing” (160). The experience of rejection may be part of Griffin’s reaction, as Hobson suggests, but so is the threat of black anger, which here takes on the mythical and monstrous form of a “Negro who turns […] and bares his fangs at […] whiteness” (176). For Griffin, Black autonomy can only be imagined as “superiority”, because he never conceived of the other as external to himself. Griffin’s
personal racial salvation was built on a “We”, a communion with the other who was the same. Therefore, Black Power, black autonomy, must be rejected because it threatens to disrupt Griffin’s belief in the mythic, non-threatening, “We”.

**Ideal White Maternity and the Limits to Racial Salvation**

Griffin’s conversion process does not include a reconfiguration of his relationship to the differently gendered other. While Griffin represents himself as able to identify with this male racialized other, the gendered other remains a split figure held in a melancholic bind. In fact, in the text the white woman as wife functions as a ‘place’ of safety that frames the narrative as an invisible structural support. It is her absent-presence that tethers his subjectivity to his white reality, and it is “her love” that draws him back (*MM* 124). The white woman who enters the text outside of the domestic sphere represents the other side of the white well-mannered woman who appears “so sweet, so decent, so fine” (124). The ‘public’ white woman is represented without fail as the vicious woman (54). Black women, on the other hand, when present, are viewed as sexualized threats, objects of desire (an undercurrent of the text which becomes explicit in the film version), or in need of paternalistic care. Young black women enter the text as the invisible objects of the sex trade: represented in their absence in the telephone numbers of pimps carved into bathroom walls, and postings by perverse white men offering cash rewards for sex with black women. The long-suffering black maternal figure that emerges during the scene of conversion is represented as the only acceptable figure of black femininity. However, she functions solely in relation to her children, who stand as proxies for Griffin’s own threatened narcissism.
Griffin’s mother and wife are both represented as idealized maternal figures. In a parallel to Griffin’s rendering of the black maternal figure, these women are depicted as stoic and loving. They steadfastly support Griffin without reservation or concern about the risk or cost to the family, because of their shared (but silent) belief in his project. The labour (both emotional and physical) of these women serves as the invisible foundation of Griffin’s experiment. Griffin’s wife cares for their children while Griffin is passing in the South, and later when he chooses to live by himself in a Trappist monastery for long stretches of time. During the aftermath of the initial publication of the text she takes their children to Mexico while Griffin finishes his monograph, cares for their family during his extensive speaking tours, and later cares for him at home through an extended grave illness (MM 190). While Griffin claims to have discovered in his passing experiment that his “view of the Southern white lady had been formed by the same cultural influences that had formed his rationalized racism” and that “both views needed shattering”, in fact his idealized vision of maternity remains untouched (124). When his ideal of the Southern lady is shattered in his realization of her viciousness, he simply links this abject femininity with the public woman and the white racist women. The good Southern woman becomes associated with maternity, the home, and (silent) support of Civil Rights. The idealized maternal figure continues to be represented as being quiet in her Christian continence and complete in her devotion to his principles.

In sum, in Griffin’s racial conversion the ‘black’ other functions in a comparable way to the maternal object in Augustine’s religious conversion. Augustine masculinized the idealized qualities associated with the maternal and transferred them to the figure of the father God. This allowed him to feed from the rejuvenating force of the semiotic
without requiring him to fully recognize the mother in the symbolic. In Griffin’s
conversion, it is the relationship with the racialized other that is ‘fed’ from and then
denied full recognition. Proximity to the black male other is constructed as transferring
potency, as Dreisinger suggests, however, the relationship to the black male father figure
becomes submerged in the process of the conversion. It is the idealized white male father
figure that is positioned as the proper site of identification, both for Griffin who identifies
with the young working-class father, and for the reader who is meant to identify with the
good white father figure of Griffin himself.

In other words, the revitalizing aspect projected by the white subject onto the
racialized other, onto ‘blackness’, is incorporated via identification with an idealized
white intermediary figure (a lower-class white male). This allowed the privileged white
male subject to achieve what was experienced as a reconciliation, framed as achieving a
higher ethical positioning via a racial conversion experience. However, this is in fact a
kind of melancholic compromise that allows the privileged white subject to avoid facing
the reality of the fully externalized other’s existence. The imaginary space of the other
remains ultimately associated with oblivion and the self-same other was required to
function as an intermediary site of identification. He never fully achieves a herethical
relation to the other, because the other is never perceived as a fully autonomous subject.

While Griffin purports in a 1975 interview to realize that “it is absurd for a white
man to presume to speak for black people when they have superlative voices of their
own”, nevertheless, the white loving father as site of identification is built into the
structure of his racial conversion (cited in MM xi). Black Like Me positions the proper
site for identification as the loving, good, white father. He imagines his role to be that of
“‘a bridge to reconcile the tremendous duality of information and viewpoint which whites and blacks have on which they make judgments’” as well the “‘misinformation whites believe that leads them to make judgments that are ethnic rather than human’” (xi). However, it is clearly the white male subject that is the center of that human “We” and who remains in control of deciding who is fully part of it.

As a text that is used to diagnose the fears and fantasies of the white male subject, Black Like Me functions particularly well. However, without critical framing Black Like Me is dangerous in its centering of a white man as a saviour-figure. Without sufficient critical analysis, it allows the white reader a kind of voyeuristic experience, an imagined encounter with ‘the real’ of racism, positioned safely in the past, followed by social salvation through identification with the ‘good whiteness’ of the loving father.

In the next chapter, I turn to the ‘other’ side of this racial divide, to what Cheng calls the “melancholic object”, the racialized subject, through an analysis of Ceasare L. Willis’ Hip-Hop conversion narrative Rude Awakening (2005), and ministry, “The Kingdom,” built on his social practice of krumping, a call-and-response Hip-Hop dance form (164). I ask whether his text and ministry might productively challenge dominant conversion discourse as well as psychoanalytic discussion of conversion, and analyze the limits of this challenge.
4. Krump King’s *Rude Awakening*: Social Melancholy, Masculinity, and Revolt

In her discussion of conversion, Kristeva suggests that hallucination, or “hallucinatory psychosis,” is the fulcrum of the conflict reflected in an experience that offers an imaginary coherence, a compromise solution that can “temporarily help” the subject “go on living” (*IBL* 13). The practice of krumping is represented in *Rude Awakening* (2005) as emerging from gestures of anger and despair in response to a profound crisis, before a moment of spiritual conversion. These gestures were then transformed into a group dance practice that offers an imaginary coherence allowing for the elaboration of trauma. This practice works against the debilitating alienation of what Oliver (2001) calls “social melancholy” (3). The effect of this experience-practice cannot, however, be contained by Kristeva’s notion of a compromise, since it also allows for revolt, and a reconnection of drives and affects with the symbolic and sociality. The “krump circle” opens what Oliver describes as “a social space of sublimation”, one that I argue allows dancers to expose, (re)present, and creatively engage with the painful and angry affects associated with the traumatic legacies of slavery and the everyday experiences of racialization and oppression (129). I suggest that krumping offers an opportunity to have these affective-experiences recognized and responded to, in a social context that offers support and the possibility for idealization through the creation of personalized style and virtuosity. This potentially opens up “psychic space” and renews agency.

While I posit that the krump circle constitutes a kind of imaginary space, I see its function as not only catharsis, or imaginary compensation, but rather as what Thomas
DeFrantz (2004) calls “corporeal orature”, a term he uses to align movement with speech (67). In this practice affect is stabilized and translated into symbolic terms through its structuring by the krump community and the Krump King’s ministry. However, while this practice may offer a renewal of agency, the ways in which hegemonic ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality are reified in its structuring must be considered, as well as its association with a gendered concept of Christianity. Here, I will examine the specifically gendered configuration of the krump circle and look at how gender relations become codified in the krump ministry and in the mainstream version of this practice. I seek to ascertain whether the primarily male krump practioners are simply battling for a melancholic masculine subject position. By this I mean a subject position based on a masculinity secured and sustained through melancholic attachments: such attachments are built on a relationship to an idealized, imaginary male father-God, and a split feminine other, who becomes the disparaged object associated with the abject feminine on one side, and a maternal object who functions as a support, but is denied active participation, on the other.

**Internalization, Agency, and Social Melancholia**

In this section, I consider the implications in terms of agency of the discussion of the racialized subject as a melancholic object, through a brief comparison of Cheng’s model of “racial melancholia” with Rey Chow’s argument that the racialized or ethnically mixed-raced subject does not even achieve the status of an object that is incorporated and held in suspension, but is in fact an “ethnic abject”. I also bring in Oliver’s model of “social melancholy”, because it allows for a spatialization of this dynamic and focuses on sublimation, which offers possibilities for psychic and social change.
According to Cheng, in contemporary culture in the United States racialized others are subject to a “double loss” (175):

The racially melancholic minority is doubly versed in the art of losing. The racially denigrated person has to forfeit the full security of his/her imaginary integrity (a process that, in psychoanalytic terms, is necessary for anyone entering the symbolic) but then is forced to take in (rather than project that lack to another) and reidentify with that loss: a double loss. These layered losses for the racialized subject are then sanctioned, both legally and culturally (175).

The racialized subject, then, must incorporate rather than project “lack”, which radically affects the possibility for “fully security” of “imaginary integrity” that marks Lacan’s “mirror stage” and successful movement into the symbolic. For the racialized individual in this scenario, the possibility for idealization is dramatically limited or potentially “foreclosed” (in a Lacanian sense), which radically limits possibilities for what Oliver calls a “robust subjectivity”, as well as access to sublimation, leaving the subject in “melancholic suspension” psychically—a position that is reified and sanctioned legally and culturally (150). To reframe this slightly: the racialized subject encounters and internalizes, “encrypts”, both an idealized image that represents what Cheng calls “an impossible perfection,” an ideal image that is unattainable for the racial other, as well as denigrated representations of their ‘likeness’, “a denigrated self”, leading to a form of “racial melancholia” (72).

While Cheng’s formulation of racial melancholia offers a convincing diagnosis of several foundational tenets and structural tendencies in racial dynamics, particularly in relation to the construction of the privileged subject’s identity and the American nation, there are a number of risks attached to her discussion of “melancholic suspension” and the racialized other as “melancholic object.” She acknowledges the risks:
It may appear tremendously difficult to talk about the ‘melancholia’ of racialized people especially since it seems to re-inscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain (14).

According to Cheng, the risk lies in the potential and “very brief” path “connecting injury to pity and then to contempt,” as well as “the quick jump from psychical injury to inherent disability” (14). Claiming to understand these risks and the elisions of past uses of psychology in racial analyses, Cheng suggests that while it may be tremendously difficult and potentially dangerous to talk about the melancholia of a racialized person, “it is surely equally harmful not to talk about his history of sorrow” (14). She argues:

the ontological and psychical social subject who has been made into an ‘object,’ a ‘loss,’ an ‘invisibility,’ or a ‘phantom’ has never been fully explored, since the implications of such a study are on the one hand inconvenient to a racist culture and on the other potentially threatening to the project of advocacy—or at least advocacy as it is traditionally conceived (14).

What Cheng calls for in this respect is “a serious effort at rethinking agency in relation to forms of racial grief”, as well as a more complicated notion of internalization that moves beyond “simplistic and prescriptive pronouncement of black self-hatred” (15). In order to raise some of the issues associated with the use of models of racial melancholia, with their links to ideas of racial wounding, injury and internalization, I will read Cheng’s concept of “melancholic suspension” in relationship to Chow’s discussion of “ethnic abjection.” Placing these models in juxtaposition to each other helps clarify both the productive and potentially dangerous aspects of both in terms of agency, internalization, and possibilities for resistance and revolt.

In The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2002), Chow offers a diagnosis of the situation of marginalized minorities, or ethnic others, in terms of “thwarted” or “forsworn” narcissism:
What is known as marginalization—the lack of proper societal representation, the absence of societal approval—can [...] be redefined in terms of a narcissistic relation that cannot be developed or, as Freud put it, has to be forsworn early on. Because of this need (imposed by mainstream society) to abandon one’s narcissism, because the love of oneself, a love that is vital, is thus thwarted, every interaction with the social order at large by necessity turns into a painful reminder of this process of suppression and wounding (141).

What seems to mark the difference between the models offered by Chow and Cheng hinges on the relationship between “forsworn” and “foreclosed,” and the implications for issues of agency when Chow’s somewhat idiosyncratic use of the concept of “narcissism” becomes entwined with the notion of “internment” and Kristeva’s formulation of “abjection.” In Lacanian terms “foreclosure” is at the heart of the distinction between neurosis and psychosis. As Lacan suggests in his Seminar Book III: The Psychoses (1993), while neurosis is marked by repression, psychosis is marked by repudiation and “foreclosure” (321)\(^\text{15}\). Dylan Evans (1996) writes of the effect of foreclosure for the subject:

When the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed for a particular subject, it leaves a hole in the symbolic order which can never be filled; the subject can then be said to have a psychotic structure [...]. Sooner or later, when the foreclosed Name-of-the-Father reappears in the real, the subject is unable to assimilate it, and the result of this ‘collision with the inassimilable signifier’ is the ‘entry into psychosis proper’ (65).

\(^{15}\) According to Alphonse de Waelhens, Lacan saw Freud’s “intention to find a specific mechanism for explaining psychosis” and chose the term Verwerfung, which Freud used to mean “repudiation” (28). Lacan replaced it with withdrawal and then finally translated it into foreclosure or ‘foreclosure’. (28). Laplanche and Pontalis (1974) define Lacan’s concept of foreclosure thus:

[... ] specific mechanism which would be at the origin of the psychotic phenomenon: it would consist of a primordial rejection of a fundamental ‘signifier’ from the symbolic universe of the subject (for example: the phallus as signifier of the castration complex). Foreclosure differs from repression in two ways: 1) the foreclosed signifiers are not integrated into the unconscious of the subject; 2) they do not return into the interior, but into the midst of the real, particularly in the hallucinatory phenomenon (160).
This notion of “foreclosure” may be contrasted with the term “foresworn”, which implies to ‘give up’ or to lose that which one has been in possession of. This begs the question of whether Chow is suggesting, in terms of subject formation, that racial wounding causes access to what she calls “narcissism” to be “abandoned,” implying a past relationship that is forsworn. Or does she suggest a relationship “that cannot be developed”, and is therefore foreclosed? Similarly, in painful interactions with the social order, is the relationship to narcissism “thwarted” for the marginalized subject, defined as “obstructed” or “frustrated,” or “thwarted” defined as “defeated” (OED)?

In order to attempt to answer these questions, Chow’s argument must be contextualized. She produces her discussion of “ethnic abjection” as an antidote for what she calls the “closet idealism” of “the difference revolution” (131) and “poststructuralist theories of hybridity”, and claims that these are “quite inadequate in accounting for how the purportedly liberating movements of difference and hybridity can and do become hierarchically organized” (134). Using the experiences of racially hybrid writers, as represented in personal essays “about the experience of actually living as cultural hybrids,” Cheng claims that what one discovers is “ambivalence, anger, pain, melancholy, shame, and abjection” (138). In these narratives, “hybridity itself, as the cultural given, becomes for these ethnically marked writers a form of existential entrapment; some […] would go so far as to compare it to internment” (146). Chow attaches this notion of the “internment” of ethnic hybrids to Kristeva’s notion of “abjection,” and suggests that “ethnic hybridity itself is a form of abjection” (148). She illustrates her use of ethnic abjection through John Yau’s short story “A Little Memento
from the Boys” (1995), that follows the experience of three men Chow considers to be ethnic abjects:

If these men are what was ‘dropped on the floor’ by their parents after their collision, they are neither objects nor subjects of their environment; rather, they exist as abjects, along the fluid line of demarcation, undecidedly both inside and outside, precariously inerasable yet vulnerable (148).

According to her argument, these men exist as abjects, functioning as the abject functions in subject formation. Following Chow, “although ‘the subject must expel these abjects to establish the ‘clean and proper’ body of oedipalization,” this is impossible because they “can never be expelled, for they remain the preconditions of corporeal, material existence” (148). In this case these men, as ethnic hybrid others, “are neither objects or subjects” in relation to the ‘clean and proper body’ of the properly oedipalized, dominant, white male subject and nation. In this reading, Chow’s model resembles Cheng’s emphasis on “melancholic ambivalence”, the melancholic bind between rejection and incorporation. One could argue that “melancholic suspension” runs parallel to “ethnic abjection” in this respect. Having said this, however, one must ask what the implications are of bringing this logic, as Kristeva does, inside the body, and the body into the symbolic. In other words, how does this formulation affect agency and the complexity of internalization that Cheng is concerned with?

In her analysis of Yau’s story, Chow plays on the relation between “secrete” and “secret” to produce a structure of ‘the secret that secretes.’ She explains:

[...] a secret is not unlike what I have been describing as narcissism, a condition whose reality lies both inside and outside in that it is liminally between the need for self-preservation and the need for others’ attention, recognition, and respect. Insofar as the details about these men’s existences are unknown and ignored by most people, they are secrets; at the same time, because no one cares, their secrets take on the status of precisely that thwarted narcissism which is deprived of self-regard (149).
According to Chow, it is “in this manner, narcissism, the secret of the self, turns poisonous: the only defense (self-preservation) of which the men are capable is “characterizing [themselves] in derogatory terms” (149). In other words, “the inaccessibility of narcissism stands here both as a secret, a hidden inner wound, and as a kind of foul secretion or discharge outward” (149). In this case, the inner wound that Chow evocatively renders seems to assume no constitution of subjectivity before the wounding, i.e., no lost narcissism to mourn. This constitutes the foreclosure, not forsaking, of a relationship to the sustaining, “vital” aspect of narcissism. This also seems to imply the identification of the racialized subject with the abjected object pre-verbally. It is here that the ambiguity in Chow’s use of narcissism becomes clear, as well as its implications in terms of agency and subject formation. There is an oscillation in how Chow defines narcissism: following Freud, she sees it as “the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature,” but her use seems also to imply a kind of healthy secondary narcissism necessary for robust subjectivity (139). She seems to suggest that for racialized people there is a choking-off of the primary life force (in the form of the libidinal force that ensures an investment in one’s own self-preservation), as well as denial of access to secondary narcissism. While one may accept this, Chow’s model does not seem to imagine a relationship between these two kinds of narcissism, in the sense that secondary narcissistic structures (which could theoretically be constructed) might shift or help repair the original wound to the life force of self-preservation (which she calls narcissism).
Returning to her analysis of Yau’s text, what options does Chow give to her ethnic abjects in terms of agency and access to protest? In Yau’s story, the abject men act-out a remarkably vile act of violence against a woman, by painting her house with paint containing their ejaculate and leaving photographic evidence for her to find. According to Chow, this depicts the radically limited nature of the abjects’ ability to protest or symbolize their position as abject. Chow emphasizes that in this “desperate cry for self-regard” (152), “what remains startling is the utter destitution of their collective narcissistic act” (151). According to Chow, these men are “affectively stuck in their secretive condition” (152). This further strengthens the association of Chow’s model with a preverbal wounding. In terms of the effectiveness of the possibility for working through this via autobiographical attempts at constructing collective ‘self-regard,’ Chow argues:

The self-mimicry encouraged by their society […] turns out to be a vicious circle in which the reward of social recognition, if and when it comes, is likely to bring about further humiliation and self-loathing (152).

In other words, Chow does not imagine that access to narcissistic self-regard will be restored in this scenario.

Chow’s model of abjection has a rhetorical strength that cannot help but move the reader to contemplate the experience of finding oneself psychically “interned.” It may even be argued that her rendering (via Yau) allows for a kind of “vicarious trauma” for the reader, which may or may not be politically effective. Importantly, Chow’s model illustrates how the body is present in this racial wounding which gestures to the affects of racial injury. However, Chow’s use of abjection, if not read rhetorically, radically limits, or arguably forecloses, the agency of her subjects, as well as the possibilities of working
through the original loss of a positive self-image, and the effect of continuing traumatic encounters. If generalized, it would follow from Chow’s argument that because their relationship to the force of self-preservation is severely limited, or foreclosed, racialized others exist in a state of psychosis marked by suicidal tendencies. This seems to disregard both theoretical discussions of “double consciousness” and possibilities for disidentification that imply a limit to the internalization of the positioning of the racialized subject as object. Without discounting the fact that there are not only ‘cases’ of ethnic abjection, and simultaneously that race plays an active part in the process of abjection (and rites of defilement) that reproduce the clean and proper nation and dominant subject, Chow’s analysis flattens the reality of internalization that Cheng argues against:

At the very least […]it is clear] that social relationships live at the heart of psychical dynamics and that the complexity of those dynamic bespeaks a wide range of complicated, conflictual, interlocking emotions: desire and doubt, affirmation and rejection, projection and identification (15).

In other words, ideally, Cheng’s model of racial melancholia “does not give us information about the psyche of black children per se”, rather it gives us “a dramatization of the education of black children” (18). Following from this, “internalization, far from denoting a condition of surrender, embodies a web of negotiation that expresses agency as well as abjection”—a claim that may be attached to all subjects (17). While Cheng’s model of melancholic suspension may risk being naturalized, it can also resist this possibility because it can be spatialized—mapped on a topography, and therefore detached from specific bodies if need be—and abstracted, made into a process that is not necessarily identical for all subjects. However, if Cheng’s model of racial melancholia, based on a divide between the privileged melancholic subject and the denigrated
racialized other, becomes too closely conflated with racial difference alone, without considering other intersecting categories of power including gender difference, sexuality and class, then it leaves out important ways in which internalization is mediated and resisted.

Oliver’s notion of “social melancholy” allows for a discussion of these mediating factors. In her discussion of the “colonization of psychic space” she follows analyses such as Cheng’s to claim that limited access to idealization for marginalized individuals has detrimental effects and leads to “debilitating alienation” (3). What differentiates Oliver’s work from that of others is her focus on what she calls “affects of oppression”, including depression, shame, and anger, and discussion of how the lack of spaces of sublimation for marginalized people leads to “social melancholy”. This allows for discussion of the links between affective realities and the material social realities of oppression. Oliver’s focus on sublimation rather than simply internalization allows for the debilitating effects of oppression and domination to be made visible, while emphasizing the necessity for creative resistance as well as its possibility.

According to Oliver, the colonization of psychic space is a key aspect of the process of colonization and oppression:

The colonization of psychic space inherent in oppression operates in large part by denying access to the operations of meaning making, of confining those othered to a world of meaning not of their own making, and moreover, confining them to there as incapable of making meaning […]. Without an open psychic space, the movement of drives and affects into language becomes impossible, and depression and repression [social melancholy] is the result (128).

The process of colonization/ imperialism, and the colonial logic more generally, locks those “othered” into a “world of meaning not of their own making” and “outside” of meaning making. As Fanon describes it, the othered subject has “arrived too late” and
finds his access to meaning making radically impaired, since a symbolic system that he is negatively implicated in is already formed (122). In other words, systems of oppression limit possibilities for idealization insofar as they produce and circulate positive, supportive, and therefore nourishing images of specific individuals, communities, and categories of being, and produce negative, stereotypical, and often crippling images of all those outside the dominant group. These representations reflect and construct “a white world” that is held in place by structural (as well as affective) means of control that allow cultural and financial capital to accrue in specific locations associated with privileged subject positions, namely the ruling class who are most often, in North America, privileged white people. At the level of language, while the privileged subject is alienated by his or her inevitable symbolic castration, and in this respect experiences lack, Oliver distinguishes this from the alienation of the oppressed subject who is forced into “crushing objecthood”, calling this “debilitating alienation” (15). In a system where othered subjects, including racialized others and women are installed as objects, as “brutes” and “irrational”, their relationship with signification, with meaning and meaning making, will be estranged (109).

However, Oliver moves beyond issues of idealization, moving into an analysis of the effect of colonial relations on sublimation as she has redefined it. In contrast to most traditional models of subjectivity that retain Freud’s model of the drive as singular and contained within the subject, and address intersubjectivity as a matter of projection of the subject onto (usually) one other, Oliver socializes Freud’s model of the drive to produce a model of the transmission of affect among many. This model of the circulation of affect
(its transferring and transformation) takes on specific form and function within systems of oppression and colonization:

Affects move between bodies; colonization and oppression operate through depositing the unwanted affects of the dominant group onto those othered by that group in order to sustain its privileged position (xix).

Unwanted affects, then, according to Oliver, are not so much projected onto another person as “transferred onto or injected into another person such that the recipient’s own affects are transformed” (48). Oliver emphasizes the role of shame and anger in her formulation of social melancholy as “the affects of oppression”, because of their formative relationship to depression (xix). This transmission is then made invisible through the disavowal, or foreclosure, of affect by the privileged subject. The marginalized subject’s ability to discharge these affects by sublimation is radically limited by a system of oppression and domination that “withholds or forecloses the possibility of articulating and thereby discharging bodily drives and affects” (xix). According to Oliver, this leads to “diminished psychic space” (the opposite of the ideal “robust psychic space”), and further, these affects become directed toward the self and can effectively ‘poison’ the subject. She explains:

Diminished psychic space results in bodily drives and affects turned inward, which ultimately leads to depression and self-hatred unless these very affects can be turned or returned into resistance and fortifying strategies (43).

According to Oliver’s discussion, then, the limited possibility for idealization, the transferring of “unwanted affects” and the limiting effect of this on possibilities for sublimation, lead to, or can be associated with, what she calls “social melancholy”: a state of being she distinguishes from the psychoanalytic concept of “melancholy” which she terms “classic melancholy” (89):
Unlike classic melancholy, as described in psychoanalytic theory, which is the incorporation of a lost loved other to avoid losing her or him, what I call *social melancholy* is the loss of a positive or lovable image of oneself and the incorporation of abject or denigrated self-images widely circulating in mainstream culture (89).

In contrast to classic melancholy, social melancholy involves the incorporation of a denigrated self-image, and the loss of a positive image of oneself that this would entail. When faced with the mirror stage, which is a social register for Oliver, the othered or racially denigrated person, confronts a community of meaning that he or she is ‘locked out of’ as one constructed as “unable” and “incapable of making meaning” (128). This encounter leaves the socially melancholic subject sealed in a psychically suffocating place, because a “robust psychic space”, as defined by Oliver (via Kristeva), is not available (217). Since these racist structures are sanctioned by the dominant community, both culturally and legally, what Oliver calls “the loving third” as “a loving social agency” is not made available in the same way to the racialized other within dominant cultural structures (153). The lack of social support limits possibilities for marginalized people to experience what Oliver calls “social forgiveness”, which is required for individuation and revolt (91). According to Oliver (who draws on the work of Hannah Arendt 1959 in her formulation), “individuation requires trespassing social codes to assert one’s singularity”, however this “trespass is possible only with the presupposition of forgiveness”: the individual may trespass the social order “and thereby possess it and yet be accepted back into the order as one who belongs” (91). The lack of “social forgiveness” offered to marginalized individuals is reflected in (and compounded by) the lack of “social support for sublimation” for these othered subjects that is held in place by “a taboo […] on speaking about race [and] racism” (129). Limited access to and support
for sublimation, as well as direct (sometimes violent) attempts by dominant culture to contain the expression of these taboo affects, particularly shame and rage, can lead to debilitating alienation. The experience of having limited opportunity to discharge drives and affects into language, and to have a transformative effect on the community around you, to experience “social forgiveness”, can lead to depression (due to the disconnection of affects from language and meaning), somatic symptoms, and eruptions of these affects including rage, which can often be self-directed or ultimately self-destructive (128).

Because Oliver’s model emphasizes sublimation, and not only internalization or idealization, it can account for differential access to spaces of sublimation for racialized subjects, depending on class, gender, location, and other social markers. The concept of social melancholy allows for discussion of varying defenses against what Cheng describes as the incorporation and encryption of lack as well as the effects of this dynamic to be discussed, and allows for the effects of gender difference and the gendered nature of these effects to be drawn out (72). For example, in Chow’s discussion of Yau’s narrative, the male ethnic abjects she speaks about act out specifically against a woman. Through their violent acts they attempt to literally discharge their anger and shame in order to reverse what is perceived as their positions. She becomes the denigrated object, even less than object, the abject, in so far as they may take the role of active subject and punish the stand-in for their maternal object; through sexual violence they take the ‘place’ of the white male subject. In this way, via active violence against femininity, whether in a female-bodied individual or whatever stand-in, the masculine ethnic abject individual can project or transmit his experience of abjection to the other and stake a
claim on a subject position, gaining a kind of psychic relief through a cathartic acting out of his abjection.

However, is this violent acting out the only means available to so-called ethnic abjects? I suggest that in some cases, the route to idealization (to sublimation and a kind of self-regard, what Chow calls narcissism, a will to go on living) can be thwarted and even foreclosed, but that there are activities, creative actions, that work to open up the psychic space necessary to begin the process of idealization/ sublimation. In some cases, acting out through a physical activity plays a key role, because it can circumvent the strictures and negative associations of a symbolic system (including language) that has preceded the individual, not offered social forgiveness, and often been violent. Such an activity may work around, or rebuild, a relationship with the symbolic, with expression, sublimation and sociality. This kind of activity, then, would not simply be a form of acting out in the Freudian sense, because it helps to open up the psychic space necessary to combat the experience of debilitating alienation resulting from the constant pressure of epidermalization and trauma of racial oppression. I suggest that the practice of krumping offers just this possibility.

**Ceasare L. Willis’s *Rude Awakening and the Practice of Krump***

The social phenomenon of “krump”, a social dance-practice marked by explosive energy in the body of the dancer and the call-and-response interaction between dancers, emerged in South Los Angeles in the 1990s. While the first widely distributed documentation of krump, Mark St Juste’s 2003 documentary film *Shake City 101*, went almost completely unnoticed, famed fashion photographer David LaChappelle’s 2005 documentary *Rize*, which follows many of the same dancers,
moved krump into the international spotlight. Since the release of *Rize*, krump, or a version of it, has moved into the mainstream. In the last several years krumping has been featured in a large number of North American reality shows, popular films, and music videos, including some by industry heavyweights. At the same time, krump has taken on a virtual life of its own, with individual krumpers and krump crews using social networking websites such as youtube.com and krumpkings.com to communicate, battle, and promote events, styles, and products related to Hip-Hop and krump culture.

While krump has been circulating in the popular arena as a particular *style* of dance, the *practice* of krumping continues to evolve and has become more internally complex and diverse. Krump sessions continue to be held in homes and community-centres, or on the street, in Los Angeles and increasingly in other places around North America and all over the world. The success of krump dance in the mainstream is associated primarily with the choreography of Lil C (Christopher Toler) and the dancing of Miss Prissy (Marquisa Gardner), both of whom are featured in LaChappelle’s film; the success of community-based krump is most visible in the work of the Krump Kings, a crew of dancers loosely centered around Tight Eyez (Ceasare Willis), a dancer featured in both *Rize* and *Shake-City* and generally recognized as one of the originators of krump.

Since 2005, Tight Eyez and the Krump Kings have had successful international tours, and independently produced a series of krump DVDs as well as several recordings of their own Hip-Hop music, including Tight Eyez’s audio hip-hop conversion testimony *Rude Awakening*. This 2005 recording, in which Tight Eyez
describes his conversion experience and how his practice of krumping helped him to become a “new man”, serves as a cornerstone for the Krump Kings’ spiritual ministry, known as the Kingdom. In late 2008, the Krump Kings re-launched their website www.krumpkings.com as “The Kingdom”, to reflect their use of krump as a social and spiritual/religious ministry. Over the last few years the Krump Kings have explicitly reformulated/reformed krump to be an expression of “praise” and a practice of “spiritual warfare”. This change is conceptualized through the acronym “K.R.U.M.P: Kingdom, Radically, Uplifted, Mighty, Praise”. The Kingdom continues to function as an important web-based resource, not only for the sale of the merchandise but also as a community forum to discuss issues related to krump culture. It promotes the Krump Kings’ mandate to use krumping and “the krump movement” to show that “issues can be resolved through non-violence”, to “support […] talent”, both materially and through the encouragement of individual expression in an urban context where individuals “never received the recognition they deserved”, and to foster the “creative arts” as a means to work against racism.

In his oral Hip-Hop testimony, *Rude Awakening*, Willis describes an early traumatic experience that ‘returns’ later in his life, and how his conversion, which includes a “voice of love […] and comfort” experienced as the loving presence of “God”, stopped him from committing suicide (“The Voice”). Through a close reading of his conversion scene, I argue that the deep structure of this conversion experience is then ‘acted out’ in his practice of krumping. This not only allows for an “imaginary identity” to evolve, as Kristeva suggests, but is also a way to elaborate and work through an experience of trauma (*IBL* 13).
The early, pre-conversion section of Willis’ conversion narrative is marked by descriptions of physical and psychic constriction. Willis describes the feeling of physical containment in his neighbourhood and the lack of personal space in his household, which is often filled beyond capacity. This section of his narrative is filled with images of suffocation, of “being choked out”, a sense of constant pressure, on one hand, and intense isolation, on the other. To defend himself against these feelings, he describes turning to anger in order to try to “break out”, and attempt to create a protective persona, a “mask”. He describes this in a track entitled “Danger Zone”:

As I sit back and watch these cars go by, my block, a set of tears roll down my eyez […]. Backed into a corner that’s why I always blast and lash out […]. So we pull my mask out and hide. Brick walls built up nobody gets inside this. If I can’t be reached and I guess I’m striving by myself. Nobody besides myself. Can’t give advice. I can’t confide myself. [sic] Steady thinking I’m worthless, so I bribe myself.

Here Willis describes the feeling of being “backed into a corner”, isolated, and having to produce a defensive “mask” in order to hide his feelings, particularly his “tears”. He feels “worthless” because he is unable to help himself or be of use to others. Even language fails him: there is no one to confide in, and he expresses his anger in shouts and physical aggression in order to help secure his narcissism.

In another track, “Fight Night”, he elaborates on this. He describes an increasing alienation from his feelings and his attempts to “get past [his] pain with a phony smile”. He finds his “emotions [are] running wild” and breaks into violent rages where he strikes out “with [his] temper flaring”. He begins to physically fight in order to deliver what he describes as “pain on pain” and “hurt on hurt”—to keep some feeling of aliveness or agency from being “choked out” of him. Here, Willis writes about trying to reverse his experiences of the hurtful and hateful gaze of others: “see hate in my eyez that’s why I’m
staring”. According to Willis’ narrative, however, this is unsuccessful. Taking on the “bad boy” persona fails to solve the problem, and he ends up depressed, “crying inside”, and “suicidal”.

In the track that immediately precedes his conversion experience, “Why?”, Willis describes a profoundly traumatic experience from his childhood which functions as the pinnacle of his pre-conversion crisis and a foundational moment for his practice of krumping. In his testimony, Willis describes being repeatedly left by his then drug-addicted mother, until desperate, terrified, and angry, he goes searching for her through Los Angeles’ streets. He writes:

I am walking through these streets torn. Thinking why would she do this to her firstborn […] Why do I have to be young and suicidal? […] I’m too stressed to be a little man. So I think I’ll come up with a little plan. I don’t care. I am throwing out all arm and limb. I got to find my mother some help because she’s my friend […]. I made a vow to God. I will see my mother again.

In this moment, a suicidal Willis acts out his desperation by “throwing out all arm and limbs”—a description that echoes many other descriptions of the practice of krumping used by the Krump Kings in their Hip-Hop recordings. He uses this action to gather the strength he needs to continue on in his search, while simultaneously making a vow to God that he will find and help his mother. Here, his physical acting out becomes linked to the moment of trauma as a response against terror and desperation, leading to a vow to God, as a stabilizing force, to continue on—a configuration that returns in his conversion experience. While these scenes of a desperate young man searching the Los Angeles streets for his mother may seem a far cry from the garden in Milan where St Augustine was converted, Tight Eyez’ physical expression in these moments of despair strongly recalls Augustine’s gesticulations at his moment of conversion. Augustine “made many
physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something and lack the strength” (Viii viii 147). He “tore [his] hair” and “stuck [his] forehead” in an attempt to align his body with his actions and his will (Viii viii 147). It was these physical expressions (which I associated with the Chora and a return of the semiotic) combined with Augustine’s desire to become a Catholic, that produced his conversion.

Willis eventually finds his mother “in a crack house sitting on the bathroom floor”, barely conscious. It is this scene that returns in his conversion moment. In the track that describes his conversion, “The Voice”, Willis evokes a scene in which he is out of control and contemplating suicide in a bathroom:

Question: do I want to live or die? If I choose life, then I ask myself “why”? If I choose death, then so be it, I’m gone. Maybe escape from torment and finally be home. ‘I can’t let you do that because your life is not yours’. Who is that voice in-between these bathroom walls? Who is that voice speaking to me? […] I’m scared. I can’t fake it […]. My body starts shaking […]. I must be light-headed, spazzed out, cracked out, on some type of drugs, crazy, sitting in a ‘glass’ house. Hearing voices talking when I’m by myself. Nobody’s there with me, besides myself. But I felt love and at peace for some reason. I don’t understand it. Why I am still breathing? Because God just told me that I had a purpose. So somebody lied when they said I was worthless.

This scene mirrors the earlier traumatic scene with his mother. Here, like his mother, he is alone and close to self-destruction on a bathroom floor. He further makes the association with the earlier scene by suggesting that he is “on drugs” and sitting in a “glass house,” which is slang for a crack or methamphetamine house. In this moment, he hears what he describes as a “small voice of love, of comfort” and claims, “immediately, I was changed”. In this experience he feels the presence and love of another, a reconnection with others, and a sense of purpose. This moment of “hallucinatory psychosis”, experienced as the presence of “God”, helps Willis to “momentarily […] go on living” as Kristeva suggests is sometimes the case with conversion and hallucinatory
psychosis more generally. This experience stabilizes his narcissism by presenting a “third term”—an imaginary father (God) who opens up the possibility of idealization and primary identification.

This moment of “hallucinatory psychosis” is also intrinsically associated with physical expression, the “throwing out all arms and limbs”, of the earlier scene. The bodily acting out of the earlier experience is mirrored in his description of his body shaking and being “spazzed out” during the conversion scene. While recourse to hallucinatory psychosis cannot be maintained as a stabilizing strategy, the structure of this experience becomes ritualized and reconstituted in the practice of krumping. For example, “spazzing out”, the words used to describe his conversion experience, is also an important term used by the Krump Kings to refer to a moment in krumping in which an “amped” dancer’s style “reaches its highest point and dance is transcended by emotion”, a kind of “out of body experience where the dancer and spectator become one” (Krumptionary). “Spazzing out” in a krump session, then, ritualizes this aspect of the experience of connection, presence, and loving support—the structure of this initial conversion experience. In Willis’ case, hallucination was experienced as religious conversion and given meaning through Christian discourse. This psychological experience of catharsis and stabilization via a primary identification with the figure of a loving God became intrinsically linked to the physical experience of acting out that helped him continue to struggle and released affects associated with his personal experience of trauma, as well as oppression more generally.

These elements came together in his practice of krumping, which is linked to Christian discourse through what was experienced as conversion. In the moment of
Augustine’s conversion, emotion or affect associated with the maternal semiotic breaks through the symbolic and this ‘excess’ is experienced and acted out by his body. However, Augustine re-instates a strict divide between the body and the Word, post-conversion. In his conversion it is his identification with the Word of the Bible and the injunction he finds in the passage of Romans read during his conversion (“make no provision for the flesh in its lusts”’) that stabilizes his newly converted self (VIII. Xii. 153). In Tight Eyez’ case, however, the end result is not the same splitting between language and the body. Tight Eyez associates access to the imaginary father God with the reconnection of affects and emotions with the body, and acquires a sense of purpose through the practice of krumping, and not through the doctrine of a specific Church denomination.

Anger, Aggression, and Psychic Space

The first impression that many viewers initially have, particularly those outside the practice, is that krumping represents, or is, an act of aggression. The gestures are read as “angry”, and often “hostile”, in that they appear to be directed toward other individuals, or the group of dancers present more generally. This association is reflected and refined in the comments made by dancers in Shake City and Rize, who repeatedly explain that when they krump they are not in fact angry in the traditional sense, and that this ‘anger’ is in itself not destructive, but cathartic and constructive, and not directed at specific individuals but instead to “no one in general” or at “the beat” of the music felt within the dance. As Dragon Slayer (Jason Green) explains in Rize: “people think krump is about anger. No. It’s the release of that […] It’s the only thing that makes us feel like we belong”. In approaching krumping in this way, it
becomes necessary to split in two the reading of these particular gesturing krumping bodies as “angry”: On the one hand there are the ways in which certain emotions become associated (or “stuck,” to use Sara Ahmed’s 2004 phrase) to specific kinds of bodies and practices in racist systems of domination and control; and on the other, there is the function of what might be read or experienced as anger or aggression in relation to an intervention in these structures and the effect on individuals and communities (13).

Starting from an outside perspective, krump was, and often still is, considered to be something that needs to be contained. Most overtly, the Krump Kings have documented a number of incidents of police interrupting and shutting down mostly street krump sessions held in their working-class (and in some cases impoverished) South Los Angeles neighbourhoods. In The Spiritual Warfare of Krump, the camera records police officers responding with two squad cars and a helicopter to a small gathering of primarily African-American male dancers. In this scene, the police officers (readable as white) approach the dancers and ‘ask’ them to leave the street because of the violence occurring in the area, specifically, “a number of shootings”. This ‘request’ is explicitly framed as being out of regard for the dancers’ own personal safety, but underlying this is a clear association of their presence with violence: either directly, through the imagined involvement of these particular individuals in specific incidents of violence, or more generally, through the belief that a group of African-American males on public streets will inevitably lead to or attract violence.
In this encounter, the gesticulating black male body is (mis)read by outsiders as a threat, as potentially a ‘source’ of violence, and the posturing of krump is interpreted as angry or explosively enraged. Within this (mis)reading there is the circulation of a racialized anxiety that contains both ‘white’ fear about retribution, or blacks taking revenge for past wrongs and current inequality, and unresolved guilt and shame over slavery and continuing structural racism. This interaction between the dancers and the Los Angeles police can be read as part of the attempt by the white subject to keep this affective reality at bay; it is this that underpins the work of the state apparatus, the police, and their attempts to keep the specifically black male body contained, to extinguish any unsanctioned expression of black anger as well as other taboo affects that are not in the realm of the spectacle. Such responses allow the white subject to retain both the integrity of the melancholic structures of a subjectivity that hinges on denial, as well a subject position built on a history of colonialism and imperialism and in many cases the continuation of racial and gender inequalities. In as much as this dynamic functions in this way, it also leaves the black body culturally marked as a “phobic object”, a “site of projection of all that is terrifying” as Fanon (1967) describes it (30). Within this scenario, which reflects a larger cultural logic, anger expressed by oppressed individuals and groups becomes especially taboo because of its association with fear, shame, and the possibility of revolt against the status quo.

Because of the power differential and possibility of real physical harm and incarceration for the dancers, they must relinquish the space and ‘accept’ (or at least perform some level of compliance with) an authority that associates their very
presence in a public space with potential violence and threat. In this case, these state-sanctioned forces work to drive ‘them’ (read as the potentially dangerous, threatening ‘other’) and their practice of krump into private spaces and what are considered sanctioned events in legitimate sites, such as community-centres, spaces that are very limited because of structural and material inequalities. In this interaction the dancers must therefore defend themselves against the projection/ transmission of the affects of that particular police officer, the structures of feeling he carries (fear/ anger) and represents, as well as the affective force of the failure of recognition this exchange involves. At the same time, the individual dancers are denied access to the physical public space they were using to krump and relegated to extremely restricted private spaces, which in effect radically limits their ability to work-through or sublimate the frustration and affects produced in this exchange and others like it.

Turning to the role of ‘anger’ in the practice of krumping, according to Diane Duggan (2006) in her analysis of the practice of krump in *The American Journal of Dance Therapy*, one of “the predominate themes” in krumping is “aggression” (1). Duggan discusses this in relation to two of the signature moves of the early practice of krump represented in LeChappelle’s *Rize*, more specifically, the characteristic large and powerful arm-swings and chest-pops that make up what might be considered krump dancing proper.

Duggan notes what she describes as the “striking belligerence” in the appearance of krumping and the relation of the practice with the emotion of anger. She argues that in the dance there is a conjuring of the emotion of anger as well as the transformation of other emotions, particularly what she describes as “pain and sorrow”, within and
through the dance, into externalized displays of anger or rage. She argues that through krumping “the dancers’ sorrow and pain, which make them vulnerable, are transformed into anger, a safer and more empowering emotion,” and that while “dancers flail in postures of intense rage and enact simulated beatings...the intensity of the movement is focused on creative expressive, vivid gestures rather than impacting the environment” (2). She explains:

The movement is initiated and largely maintained in the torso. The legs provide solid support or play with time with sudden syncopations and occasional sustainment. The arms move as appendages of the trunk, without clear spatial focus or strength in the hands. The force generated in the torso is not fully externalized. The intense movement creates a display rather than an outwardly directed action. The restriction of focus permits a circumscribed self-abandon which allows the dancers to vent their rage without actualizing the destructive potential of their emotions and wreaking havoc on the environment (2).

In other words, the movements of krump, the signature large arm swings discussed here in particular, allow for the dancer to conjure or raise what the author considers to be “rage”, that is then “outwardly directed” or “externalized” without “wreaking havoc” or having the full destructive force of this rage experienced or expressed. Importantly, the force generated is held in tension: it is an affect-laden “display” in which affect may be transmitted, but without full force. For example, as Duggan explains, “the dancers can push or slap each other without transmitting the full force of the blows” (2).

In general terms, according to Duggan, “the intense physical expression of emotion” during krumping “engenders feelings of strength and invincibility for the performers and awe in the audience” (2). Therefore, the practice of krumping offers “catharsis” as well as “empowerment” for the dancer. Importantly, Duggan’s formulation acknowledges both the cathartic venting of frustration and anger and a general build-up of tension, as well as a raising of affect that helps to restore feelings of
agency, of personal power, or healthy narcissism (linked to feelings of “strength and invincibility”). As a regular practice, then, according to Duggan, “krumping allows the practitioners to develop increasing control over the powerful impulses of aggression and sexuality”; combined with the social aspects of krumping that “provide […] a social system and a structured activity which engages [the dancers] with rules and an articulated, continually, evolving body of knowledge” the practice leads to “mastery” (2).

While “mastery”, framed by Duggan as a ‘strengthening’ of ego forces and ego-structures (i.e. “developing control over the powerful impulses of aggression and sexuality” via structured repetition), is a component of the practice of krump as a concept, it does not capture its complexity. While Duggan suggests that the audience experiences “awe” when watching krumping, and implicitly links this to the dancers’ experience of empowerment, this does not fully explain the critical function that the audience, particularly, the engaged audience, serves in this practice. While “mastery”, framed by Duggan as a ‘strengthening’ of ego forces and ego-structures (i.e. “developing control over the powerful impulses of aggression and sexuality” via structured repetition), is a component of the practice of krump as a concept, it does not capture its complexity. While Duggan suggests that the audience experiences “awe” when watching krumping, and implicitly links this to the dancers’ experience of empowerment, this does not fully explain the critical function that the audience, particularly, the engaged audience, serves in this practice.16 During a krump session, what is called “the krump circle”, made up of the individuals who have gathered, functions as a protective environment and opens up a space in which a person can enter and behave as an individual in the safety and context of community. In other words, during a krump session, the participants, usually familiar people, gather and

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16 Duggan’s emphasis on the experience of “awe” by the audience suggests a performance context with a strict distance between active participant (black dancer) and passive spectator (white audience). DeFrantz argues that it is necessary to distinguish between “immobile” observers, which he explicitly associates with “white” audiences that often consume black social dance as spectacle, and audiences of insiders who are more likely to actively engage in the black vernacular dance as a social practice (65). This engagement may include a feeding back of energy to the dancers by the ‘audience’ through vocal signs and gestures or the maintenance of active attention and presence in their bodies. “Awe” often defined as a combination of surprise and fear may be an important aspect to an active audience’s response, however its association with ‘petrification’ implies a distance between the viewer and performer that does not capture the importance of the energetic exchange between those dancing and the other participants during the practice of krumping.
enter into a “working alliance” in the sense that they agree on the framing of the scene, the implication or weighting of the gestures, and individuals are then offered the space to open up to the movements they are inclined to make, depending on their needs at the time and the atmosphere of the group. The group, functioning as a kind of community, offers ‘affective support’ as well as physical and affective limits (what might be called “affect regulating structures”). This opens what Oliver calls a “social space that supports sublimation”, that allows dancers to expose, (re)present, and creatively engage with painful and angry affects, including those associated with the everyday experiences of racialization and oppression and the traumatic legacies of slavery (35). In this way, within the krump session, there may be an angry gesture (anger is raised, and as Duggan suggests, “vividly displayed”), but it is also held, recognized, and witnessed by the group. Importantly, there is no retaliation for aggressive gestures or emotion, and there is no overwhelming fear that it will spill over into real, destructive rage, and therefore it can be creatively conveyed and elaborated.

Importantly, while anger is the emotion most often associated with krumping in the popular media, within the practice angry gestures might emerge alongside playful ones or open up to joy, or what Willis or Tight Eyez calls “praise.” It is also important to emphasize that krump is not only about the expression of emotion; it is not simply catharsis or even “empowerment” as Duggan suggests. While it is about having complex emotions ‘released’ and recognized, it is also a symbolic system. There are choreographies, a history of gestures, and a complex, well developed aesthetic system that the dancer takes part in and transforms, based on his or her own desire, skills, and personal life experiences, in order to produce his or her own style or character. Further,
within a krump session each dancer makes a particular ‘statement’ or symbolic gesture through dance that communicates a history, and the dancers’ relation to it, as well as their affective state.

As individual dancers develop they move from the core gestures of krump into their own ‘character’ or style, and within the session each dancer expresses an individual ‘statement’ through what DeFrantz (2004) calls “corporeal orature”, a term he uses to align movement with speech (67). More specifically, in his article “The Black Beat Made Visible” (2004), DeFrantz combines scholarship on black oral culture and black orality with Eve Sedgwick’s work on “performativity” in order to convey the way that “dance movements convey speech-like qualities that contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movements detailed by the body in motion” (66). He calls this “black performativity”:

Following Eve Sedgwick, I define black performativity here to be gestures of black performative culture, including music and dance that perform actionable assertions. In terms of black social dance, these performative assertions do not ‘describe’ dancing; rather, they are the physical building blocks of a system of communication we may term ‘corporeal orature’ (66-67).

DeFrantz defines his concept of “corporeal orature” thus:

Corporeal orature aligns movement with speech to describe the ability of black social dance to incite action. In this articulation, social dance may contain performative gestures that cite contexts beyond the dance. These citations are read and acknowledged by other dancers who respond in kind with actions and decisions about, at least, the efficacy of the dance gesture (67).

In a krump session each dancer’s enactment provokes improvised interaction and crowd response. In this way, the krump session offers an opportunity to have these affective-experiences recognized and responded to within a social context that offers the
possibility for idealization, or respect, through the creation of a personalized style and virtuosity.

Further, as each dancer produces his or her own style, they may transform the larger krump culture, the history of gestures, based on personal creativity, desire, skills, and life experiences. The individual krumper may make a mark on the ‘permanent’ symbolic system through the naming of particular dance innovations after the originators. This allows individuals to take their place within the community as an individual who belongs. They may transgress against the symbolic order and have the transgressions engaged with, celebrated, and incorporated into a larger shared symbolic system.

Christina Zanfagna (2008) describes the krump circle as a spiritual practice, “a locus of spirit possession—a ring shout-styled event” that helps the dancer “tap that vital flow coursing through the human veins, that divine spark within” (346). The experience of the ‘spirit’ within this circle allows for a profound repetition, a re-elaboration of the primary processes of subject-formation. The ‘spirit’ of the circle ‘holds’ the dancers as they elaborate, and articulate through movement, their experiences of trauma and loss as well as triumph and mastery. While these experiences are articulated ‘outside’ of language, they are represented in a coherent form, in a way that can be recognized and engaged with. While the dancers do not necessarily translate their experiences into language, into fully symbolic terms, the space of the krump circle functions as both an imaginary space and a space of sublimation. It allows the dancers to raise and transmit affect and potentially be fed-back, to receive what Zanfanga calls “that vital flow” needed for a reactivation of the active agency as well as the experience of joy, jouissance, and a
range of emotions. In this process, acting out, or working in the ‘imaginary’ register, while not fully symbolizing experiences does not necessarily function as a disavowal of reality in the way Freud or Kristeva suggest, but instead is a way to re-elaborate a process; it allows the reformation of a narcissism that is impaired by oppressive social structures and experiences of racialization. The gestural nature of the practice works as an intermediary ‘language’, an embodied “corporal orature”, which allows for the elaboration of trauma and the revolt of the subject. This is not only catharsis, or imaginary compensation, but instead is stabilized, translated into symbolic terms within the practice and by the structuring of the practice by the larger krump community and the Kingdom ministry.

**Krumping and Masculinity: The “Rude Session”**

While a variety of forms of krump sessions exist, each one with a different sentiment, atmosphere, and function, the core of krump culture is built on “battling”, or challenges between specific dancers or dance crews. These battles may be undertaken for a number of reasons including respect, names, status, or initiation into a crew. The structure of each battle is similar: the dancers are judged by senior dancers or the group in general, based on a set of criteria implicitly agreed upon by the group, with the winner “killing off” his or her opponent by outperforming him, or her, or overcoming through sheer intensity. If viewed from a particular distance, the practice of battling, in which most often male dancers attempt to “kill off” other men who are ideally senior in order to take their position, appears to function as a kind of oedipal (re)enactment. Following this line, ‘killing off’ the older men allows the dancer to take his place and claim what is his, i.e. his status, name, and the power and respect that he holds. In this sense, it
allows the victor to take the dominated man as his object. However, there are aspects within the experience of krump that exceed this structure.

In the second part of a series of scenes representing a “Rude Session” in the Krump Kings’ *The Spiritual Warfare of Krump*, Tight Eyez introduces the camera to his house in South Los Angeles, the site of many of the krump sessions documented throughout the series. The camera enters the front door into the living room which is overflowing with people who fill the furniture and floor space. The film cuts to a close-up in which Tight Eyez explains to the others in the room, in a frustrated and tired voice, what kind of krump session he needs to happen. He explains that he is “not for no sluggishness tonight,” that there needs to be energy in the room and the others have to be involved, because he is “not going to stand on my toe tonight”, meaning he will not perform his signature tricks for a passive audience. The scene then cuts to Young Eyez, a young dancer whom Tight Eyez mentors, who explains that “a lot of stuff has been going on” and “it needs to be handled […] in the right way”. The call to have a session is accepted by the other male dancers, who join Tight Eyez inside the house, and the session begins with Tight Eyez setting the atmosphere by krumping first.

While these scenes include moments in which Tight Eyez appears to use his size and status to intimidate the younger dancers, within the actual Rude Session another kind of exchange emerges. More specifically, it is not primarily the acting out, projection, or transmission of anger and frustration that characterize the circulation of affect here. While a frustrated Tight Eyez gets to exorcize his frustration and part of that is in his display, which contains aggressive elements, it is not built on his taking of the younger dancers as objects; instead it appears to be that an exhausted Tight Eyez is
‘fed’ by the energy of those around him, by the spirit of the group. After Tight Eyez performs, the dancers who understand the framing of the scene offer up their performance to him, a friend and mentor who has expressed his frustration and exhaustion. They appear, at least initially, to be performing in relation to him, if not specifically ‘for’ him. In this they show that they have ‘heard’ his call, as well as their ability to perform with intensity when he asks, and to resonate with his need to have a session that is highly charged and “rugged”. This eventually opens a space where frustration and aggressiveness may be transmitted, not to any particular individual in an ego battle or battle structure, but simply as part of the atmosphere of the space: it is sublimated. Importantly, in helping to produce this effect, Tight Eyez is able to see and feel his own impact on their dancing styles, to see his own effect on these individual men and on the symbolic system of krump culture and Hip-Hop. Ceasare Willis is able to begin to dance as “Tight Eyez”, or “Big Eyez”, in other words, in his persona as a technical dancer and mentor, then transform into what he calls “Rude Boy”, a stylized version of the “bad boy” mask he wore pre-conversion. Willis is able to frame his performance of “Big Rude” in a way that keeps him from fully identifying with, or falling totally into, this character. As he puts it in “The Session”, he is “Big Eyez when I start, but Big Rude when I end”. This performative transformation allows him to exorcize the anger and frustration he feels in a creative way. As the focus of the session shifts away from Tight Eyez’s affective state and energy builds more generally, all the dancers experience this flow and intensity, which the dancers describe as “buckness,” or when even more intense, as “being amped”. Tight Eyez calls this feeling “the full manifestation of the spirit”. Big Eyez functions as a father figure for the “lil homies”
who make up his Krump family. Through the practice of krump, in this Rude Session, they receive positive attention from a father figure, sanctioned by God, who is positioned as the larger, imaginary father figure for the entire group. The spirit of the Krump circle is interpreted as a manifestation of His presence.

While this energetic exchange, or ‘feeding’, between male dancers exceeds the Oedipal structure that the “killing off” structure initially suggests, it is also coupled with an extremely evident paranoia about homosexuality. There are numerous homophobic slurs in the music produced by the Krump Kings, and homophobic sentiment emerges consistently in scenes where the intensity of the relationship between male dancers is visible. When insults are hurled, even in play, they most often involve the putting into jeopardy of a particular dancer’s masculinity. Dancers, particularly those of great technical skill or some who follow Tight Eyez, are often accused of “dancing too pretty”. This is a taunt meant to produce a display of ‘real masculinity’ in the form of “rugged” dancing, marked by an amount of intensity that borders on the uncontrolled, with an emphasis on power moves and displays of sheer strength. Similarly, in moments where affection or embraces between men have occurred, a dancer might taunt by yelling, “look, they all kissing”. There is also evidence of anxiety about claiming a close relationship with a male God. In the Krump Kings’ song “Can’t Do It”, for example, Tight Eyez defensively states, “Yeah, I’m in love with a man, but I’m not gay”. In this way, it appears that the energetic exchange is compensated for by the repudiation of homosexuality, which is often conflated with femininity in their insults. While the practice produces an affective exchange between the male dancers, their
masculinity is secured, or shored up against, what is seen as a failed homosexual masculinity.

The Representation of Femininity in Krump Culture

In the Krump Kings’ DVD series, *The Golden Series of Krump*, three female figures emerge: the female krump spectator, the community-based female krumper, and the crew members’ mothers, particularly, “Mama Tight Eyez”, the biological mother of Tight Eyez and mother-figure for many of the dancers in the Krump Kings. Their work also includes the absent-presence of a mainstream female krump dancer known as “Miss Prissy”, who has taken on the status and name of “Queen of Krump” in popular culture. Brief examination of these figures shows that these male krumpers not only attempt to secure their masculine subject position against the failed masculinity of the homosexual, but also against the female krumping other, who is assigned the role of the disparaged object. Even community krumping females are associated with abject femininity, and feminine weakness in particular. On the other hand, there is a continued reliance on a maternal object who functions as a support, but is denied active participation. The only female krumper successful in the mainstream is denied recognition by the Krump Kings. Here, the relationship with the “psychic space”, and access to the possibility for revolt, or a social space of sublimation, is clearly gendered.

Contrary to the depiction of krumping in LeChappelle’s *Rize*, there are relatively few female krump dancers within the organized Krump world still centered in Los Angeles. Scenes of female krump dancers actively engaged in krumping are, unfortunately, overwhelmingly the exception, with the rule being female krump spectators. Even in mixed gender dance crews, in many cases female krumpers do not
share the same status or receive the same kind of material rewards. While there are increasing numbers of women interested in krump culture, there is currently no all-female or female-centred krump group with a level of community respect or financial success comparable to the Krump Kings.

In terms of the structure of krump culture immediately surrounding the Krump Kings, female krumpers are not given the same access to symbolic status. For example, in the krump naming system, which is key in the development of krump culture, names and styles continue to be passed down, in the vast majority of cases, through a male lineage. Female krump dancers are most often designated with the pre-fix “Girl”, “Lil”, or “Mama”, and the name of their male mentor. Female dancers who provide krump training generally only take on other female dancers (or very young male dancers) and these dancers may ‘graduate’ to work with male dancers. There are only a few female dancers who have their own names, and whose names have passed on to other dancers or have been become part of the symbolic system of krump through their transmutation into recognized style-forms.

For example, male forms, such as “Tight” or “Beastie” are recognized styles attributed to individual male dancers who often bear that name (i.e., Tight Eyez or Beastie). The style and name associated with the individual creator may then be passed on to other dancers (e.g., Lil Tight, or Beastie Boi), giving respect and acknowledgment to the originator or ‘master’ of that style. While specific new dance moves have been attributed to female krump dancers, the only form of krump dancing attributed to a female dancer in the Krump Kings New Styles of Krump is the “Lazy-Emotional” style associated with a female krumper called “Passion”. While the
possibility of a reclamation or subversion of the stereotypical idea of women as intrinsically “lazy and emotional” could be present in this name, the dancer’s response to questions about her style (“My style is emotional. Yeah, because I’m a girl”), reads more like a defensive essentialism.

The practice of krumping can, theoretically, offer female community krumpers the same possibility for renewing a sense of agency as male dancers. For example, female stamina battles, such as that between Rude Girl and Soldier Girl documented as part of the *Krump 3.0* DVD and circulated widely on-line, represents two women completely physically engaged, interacting with each other, and experiencing an intensity of emotion together. This engagement, while witnessed by men, cannot be associated solely with competition over male desire or be said to function simply as a spectacle for the consumption of others. However, while this stamina battle strongly resembles the initiation rites used to mark entrance into the Krump Kings crew, these women do not achieve member status. At the close of this scene, Tight Eyez explicitly minimizes the intensity of this battle by saying this was “good for girls”, because girls have “less wing span”. It is possible that women engaging with each other in this way raises (male) anxiety about a practice or circulation of affect/emotion that exceeds a hegemonic fantasy-logic that presumes male desire to be foundational. Here, it is coupled with an anxiety associated with the ‘unsanctioned’ expression of black female affect, particularly when it is read as aggressive or angry, that is ‘outside’ of, or not fully captured by, the realm of the spectacle. In a defensive reaction to this, female community krumpers are denied access to symbolic recognition within the krump social system. Structurally, they are
positioned by the predominately male dancers as objects that offer an idealizing gaze for active male dancers, or as objects whose secondary status, “less wing span”, can be used to secure the male dancer’s position as dominant.

It is important to note the different positions taken in relation to the two mainstream krump figures. The decision of both Lil C and Miss Prissy to focus their careers in a more mainstream way made them subject to criticism from the Krump Kings in various interviews and in the Krump Kings’ music. For example, on the Krump Kings’ album *K.r.u.m.p.o.l.o.g.y*, there is a specific reference made to Miss Prissy that attempts to limit her growing status. In a reference to Miss Prissy being named the “Queen of Krump” (at a large-scale clown-krump event called BattleZone hosted by clown dance originator Tommy-the-Clown), Tight Eyez says: “there ain’t no first lady of krump”. While Lil C and Miss Prissy have both at times incurred the ire of the Krump Kings, only Lil C has received public recognition from Tight Eyez. On the closing track of the same album, “Good-bye”, Tight Eyez says: “Let me just clear up one thing. Lil C is still my boy. Yeah, we got problems. But what brothers don’t fight”. There has never been similar recognition given to Miss Prissy.

**Meet Mama Tight Eyez: Social Melancholy and Paralysis**

While female community krumpers are positioned as objects, sites where male dancers may project feelings of inferiority or ‘feminine weakness’, the role of the maternal object is to serve primarily as a source of nourishment and support. “Mama Tight Eyez” is a figure present at the edge of the scene throughout the Krump Kings’ documentary series. She is often shown sitting on the couch while the many young, most often male, dancers populate the house she shares with her son, Tight Eyez. Mama Tight Eyez enters the
scene directly very rarely: two occasions are when she is compelled into the central action by a loud bang when a dancer’s hand goes through the wall, and at the sound of the cries of her young child when he is injured during a krump session.

In The Spiritual Warfare of Krump there are, however, two sections of the film devoted to Mama Tight Eyez: “Meet Mama Tight Eyez” and “Watch Mama Tight Eyez sleep”. In the first section, the viewer witnesses a power struggle between the mother and her son Tight Eyez and the many young men to whom she functions as a mother figure. The scene opens with her and Tight Eyez in a subdued struggle over control of the living room. A krump battle has been called between two dancers and they want to take over the space to hold the session. Mama Tight Eyez has challenged her son over the space, giving him an ultimatum that he cannot have the living room until the boys clean up the dishes. When Tight Eyez tries to claim the space, his mother reminds him, “Who was dancing a long time before you were born?”. In his reply, Tight Eyez distinguishes her style of “praise dancing” from what he considers the legitimate style of krump: “Not krumping”. However, he moves out of the scene. Following this, there is a physical ‘play’ struggle between Mama and a young dancer, Milk, who decides to physically challenge Mama’s authority over the space by attempting to hold her down on the couch. He pins her for a moment, but she breaks from his grip, whether by real physical force or the sheer intimidation of her presence (his need for her to retain power in order to maintain limits). Following this, the young men are shown washing the dishes.

The second scene that focuses on Mama Tight Eyez appears to be filmed some time following the first. It opens with her asleep on the couch in the same position as in the first scene. The boys enter the scene ready to begin the krump session. Tight Eyez
attempts to rouse his mother, using a childish voice, half-shouting, “Mama, wake up”. She does not stir even as he tugs on her, and the boys begin to eat donuts from the large box beside her. While it is possible that she is simply exhausted, it appears more likely that she is resisting the attempt to move her in a passive aggressive effort to claim the space. The two struggle: Tight Eyez whines and implores his silent mother to “go to the bedroom” so that he and his friends can have the space, while she continues to ‘play’ at being completely passive in a posture of paralysis and unconsciousness. Eventually she leaves the all-male dance group and they begin their krump session.

In these scenes, the living room, representative of the social space of sublimation, is a contested space, and the mother, while ever-present on the edges of the scene, does not gain direct access to it in an active way. Instead her presence appears to function as a part of the affect-regulating structures of the krump group. While the role of “Mama” is accorded a kind of symbolic respect, for example, in the annual Krump Awards recognition given to the mothers who have contributed to the krump movement, these scenes show the day-to-day struggle for Mama Tight Eyez to gain recognition, attention, and care. Throughout the *Golden Series*, Mama Tight Eyez is a presence that appears and disappears, seemingly at random because of the editing. If present in the krump sessions she appears as a spectator, mostly silent and still on the couch, but sometimes giving praise to the dancers or offering affection to the young children in the household. In many cases her unmoving shape on the couch visually anchors the scene, with her lack of affect or any expression of emotion contrasting with the intense movement and emotional gestures around her. Her unmoving presence appears almost to function psychically as the furniture in the living room functions physically: to offer limits to the scene, and a
comfortable, secure ‘place’ to rest. Her presence is in fact a key part of the affect-regulating structures of the krump practice. It is telling that in the scenes in which there are injuries Mama Tight Eyez is not present. Similarly, the lightning fast speed with which she appears when there are injuries, and the dancers’ reliance on this presence to enter the scene when there is a problem, is also significant.

Not always still and silent, Mama Tight Eyez is also an important source of affection, positive attention, the setting of limits in the house, and discipline. For example, she offers her young son affection and sets limits when he wants to eat donuts before bed, and pits her will against her older son Tight Eyez and the other dancers over washing the dishes. While Mama Tight Eyez is most often a still spectator in the scenes of krumping, when she does respond visibly to a particular dance move or performance this is always reflected in an increased intensity in the dancer, revealing the importance of her attention and recognition for them.

While Mama Tight Eyez is a source of a kind of authority, her access to ‘activity’ and symbolic recognition is primarily through her son Tight Eyez, and any attempts on her part to directly access active agency are shown to be primarily passive-aggressive or acting out. For example, “Mama Tight Eyez’s” first name is not made evident in the Krump King’s work. She, like the female community krumpers, is named only in relation to a male dancer. And while Mama Tight Eyez’ own dance ability, her “praise dancing”, is mentioned, is not recognized materially or culturally in the same way as his “krump” dancing. Tight Eyez does not recognize it as comparable to his style or as a ‘source’ of his own dance ability and interest. In her attempts to access the space of sublimation, his mother takes up a passive-aggressive posture to struggle over the use of the space. This
silent protest mutely ‘speaks’ her own need for consideration and drive to express of her own anger, despair, joy, and praise. Although Mama Tight Eyez has worked to ‘feed’ her son’s need for affection, and her two other children’s need for affective regulation, and has ‘battled’ the wills of six young males in an attempt to instill discipline, she is removed from the feedback cycle. Her access to the space of sublimation is denied and she is relegated to the private space of the bedroom. Mama Tight Eyez empties herself out, plays dead, and acts out her psychic exhaustion and immobility. The son’s relationship to the maternal object is marked by a melancholic attachment. She is a source of nourishment and inspiration in his practice, but this reliance is disavowed. She is denied full access to the symbolic sphere, the social space of sublimation, and is therefore left without a means to actively express her own experience of abjection, except through an incorporation and acting out of this emptiness.

In sum, the practice of krumping works against the debilitating alienation of what Oliver calls “social melancholy” when the “krump circle” opens a “social space that supports sublimation” that allows dancers to creatively engage with the painful and angry affects associated with everyday experiences of racialization and oppression (35). While the krump circle is a kind of imaginary space, it is not only catharsis or imaginary compensation that occurs because affect is stabilized and translated into symbolic terms. The marginalized black male subject who has received a blow to narcissism finds a way to help stabilize his position through this practice. It allows him to represent, communicate, and sublimate—to mourn—experiences of trauma and injury while helping to renew agency. Tight Eyez was able to transform his blind rage and the protective mask of anger that he felt forced to wear into a what I would describe
a “militant” stance that allowed him to psychically defend himself against the assault of racialization and everyday experiences of oppression.

However, while this practice allows for a renewal of agency there is also a reliance on hegemonic ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality in the krump circle to help shore up the predominantly male dancers’ narcissism. The practice of krumping allows for the exchange, transmission, and creative elaboration of affects that produces a sense of belonging, an experience of what Oliver calls “social forgiveness”, which renews agency (91). However, the ‘spirit’ of the krump circle and the exchanges within it, are embedded within larger relations of power. These male krumpers secure their masculine subject position against what they perceive as the failed masculinity of the homosexual male, and against the female krumping other, who is assigned the role of the disparaged object. The maternal object functions as a support, but is denied active participation. Tight Eyez’ conversion experience helped him “go on living”, but it is also used to sanction his position as ‘divine’ leader who is able to structure the practice of krump in a way that secures his subject position against an abject femininity, homosexuality, and melancholic attachment to the maternal object.
The Turn Away from ‘Reality’ and the Politics of Conversion:

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic discussions of conversion can be said to differ on the status and function attributed to the ‘imaginary’ quality associated with this experience. Freud argues that the type of conversion marked by “hallucinatory psychosis” represents a turning away from the reality of the human condition: a refusal to accept that there is no guarantee of justice, no god-given order of things, and no wishful defense against the “great necessities of Fate, against which there is no help” (FOI 16). Instead of facing this with stoic “resignation”, the convert disavows reality through a wish-fulfilling submission to the illusion that there is a stronger father-God (54). This means that he never reaches a post-oedipal autonomy and rationality, but instead remains under “the narcotic effect of religious compensation” (43). For Kristeva, conversion to faith represents a compromise solution that may offer an imaginary “coherence” that can help the subject “go on living” (IBL 13). For her the turn away from ‘reality’ evidenced by the paroxysm of hallucination may be because the “suffering due to burning desire or abandonment” may be too difficult to face as a threat to narcissism (13). This paroxysm of hallucination or an “imaginary identity” built on illusion can therefore offer both a protective position and a place from which to work through an experience of trauma and may therefore be part of the process of working toward her ideal of an open psyche. While Freud emphasizes the turn away from a reality as a failure of the son to enter and resolve the Oedipal conflict, a failure of the male child’s proper identification with the father and a reliance on a compensatory illusion, Kristeva argues that the break with the symbolic in conversion
represents a return to or irruption of the imaginary associated with the early processes of subject formation, whatever the child’s gender. For Kristeva, in contrast to Freud, illusion cannot and must not be overcome. Ideally the psyche is an open system in which fantasy is part of psychic life “but no longer cause for complaint or source of dogma”, balanced by analysis, the continual process of making the unconscious conscious in order to achieve and maintain ethical relations to others (*IEL* 9).

The conversion experiences I analyzed in this study all represent a return of the archaic processes of subject formation that hinge on the abjection of the maternal container and primary identification, as formulated by Kristeva. However, I would not suggest that these findings fully resolve the tension between the positions put forward by Freud and Kristeva in terms of the relation of conversion to illusion and ‘reality’. While I argue that conversion experiences involve the return of the archaic processes, these questions can still be posed for each individual conversion experience. Does this turning away from ‘reality’ mark a failure of a desirable “education to reality”, as Freud claims, allowing the subject to maintain a wishful, childish belief in a God that secures a privileged place in the divine order to things? Or does the return of the imaginary in the turn to faith represent, as Kristeva suggests, an imaginary coherence that helps the subject go on living? Does it represent a problematic disavowal, or a saving grace that can be stabilized if brought into the symbolic terrain?

An intermediate position is possible, since the function and implication of this turn away from reality depends on the context of the conversion and the individual subject’s position. While each subject ‘returns’ to the scene of abjection and primary identification, (the archaic processes) in the ‘scene’ of conversion, the emphasis is never
identical because all conversion experiences are embedded in relations of power.
Conversion experiences, like all narratives, are always mediated—they are shaped by the context, life-experiences, and desires of the subject/speaker. Generally, the form and function of conversion, and the role of the imaginary, depends on the subject’s relationship to narcissism and to the symbolic. While the very limited number of case studies presented here radically limits the generalizability of any “results,” based on the examples discussed, two patterns for conversion narratives emerged. On the one hand, there are conversions that put the apparently unified subject “on trial” and represent an undoing of self through an encounter with abjection (RPL 17). On the other hand, there are conversions that primarily address trauma through a return of the archaic processes, particularly primary identification, which help to secure and stabilize the subject’s wounded narcissism. In both of these conversion forms, because there is a return of the archaic process of subject formation, there is an experience of revitalization and the sense of the presence of a loving other. While these two aspects of conversion may be present in both of these case studies, one aspect is emphasized, particularly when conversion is analyzed in its relation to power: each convert’s experience is made sense of through structures of sexual, racial, and class difference as well as stage of life. Without suggesting a direct relationship, I argue that these two forms of conversion can be associated with what Cheng calls the “melancholic subject” and “melancholic object” (17). In the case studies analyzed here, the experience of conversion described by the dominant white male subject whose narcissism has traditionally been guaranteed and secured through the maintenance of the feminine and racialized other as a melancholic
object can be contrasted with the conversion described by a marginal racialized male subject who is positioned as an object and must fend against the threat of racial injury. Again, because of the limited number of case studies analyzed in this study I will avoid making overarching claims, but I suggest that these case studies effectively illustrate the necessity of including an analysis of the role of subject position and power relations when discussing conversion narratives.

I will conclude this study, then, with a summary discussion of the case studies I have presented with particular focus on the ethical status of the conversions, the role of maternal object, and the complex ways that Christian conversion becomes associated with racial difference in the texts I analyzed within the context of the American nation. Finally, I echo Kristeva’s call for a social and psychic system built on the possibility for intimate and social revolt through a brief analysis of the manipulation of the dynamics of conversion in North American media representations of Barrack Obama during his 2008 campaign and first year as American President.

**Conversion and Critical Melancholia**

In order to assess the effect and ethical status of the conversion experience, my analysis asks whether critical melancholia is achieved: whether melancholic attachments marked by “rejection of, yet reliance on” are transformed into herethical relations in which the other is recognized as autonomous as well as interrelated to the subject. In analyzing specific examples I argued that this requires the possibility of revolt, and will be different depending on the specific subject position of the convert. In other words, the marginalized subject who suffers from debilitating social melancholy will have a different route to critical melancholia than the dominant subject who takes the other as a
melancholic object; the turn away from the symbolic, the irruption of the imaginary, will have a different status depending on the situation of the individual. In the case of narcissistic injury, which is associated with the marginalized subject, critical melancholia requires the possibility of what Douglas Crimps (2003) describes as “militancy and mourning” (10). This depends on the recognition that certain objects must be guarded by taking a militant stance both psychically and politically, including a positive sense of one’s self, and acknowledging the ‘realities’ of living a life that is not recognized and may be forcibly ‘forgotten’ by the dominant culture. Achieving this balance requires the activation of a sense of agency and productive anger, and at the same time access to opportunities for sublimation and the creative elaboration of the effects of oppression.

Sublimation and elaboration do not imply a forgetting. Sublimation, as a kind of mourning, does not necessitate assimilation, as a critical distance; the echo must always remain. Sublimation can entail rather, the possibility of working through to attain relief, rest, belonging, and an open psychic system that is not fixated or locked simply into a militant or angry posture. In this scenario, the possibility for revolt as the return of the archaic can help reactivate agency and keeps the symbolic order as open system.

Critical melancholia, for the dominant subject, ideally requires that the supposedly unified subject be put “on trial” (IR 6). There must be a “critical identification with the lost object that cannot be assimilated”, as Khanna suggests (22): the other as the melancholic object must be relinquished and the subject must acquire a critical awareness, engaging in an “interrogation” of this process, to use Kristeva’s term (6). The other must be externalized as an autonomous subject, while at the same time understood as interrelated to the subject. This reconfiguration requires undoing the subject’s denial of
loss. The melancholic object must be relinquished, and can no longer be used as the site of projections of chaos, oblivion, weakness, fragility, and despair. The possibility of “reconciliation” as a return to a fusional state with the maternal object needs to be mourned (7). In this sense, achieving critical melancholia is similar to Freud’s idea of an “education to reality” (49). Like the religious believer in Freud’s discussion, dominant white male subjects must acknowledge that they “can no longer be the center of creation, no longer the object of tender care on the part of beneficent Providence” by relinquishing the belief in Whiteness and heterosexual masculinity as a god-given guarantee of narcissism (49). The white male subject must accept this blow to his narcissism, which may, as Khanna suggests, produce an interruption in narcissism and evoke the “echo” of critical melancholia (22).

The white male subject’s loss of an ideal image of himself in this scenario is related to, but different from, the process that Khanna discusses in regard to the melancholia of the colonial or racialized subject. Critical melancholia is possible in this scenario only if, when faced with the loss of an ideal self, the white male subject does not disavow the loss and turn to compensatory measures, but instead is able to critically analyze his melancholic attachments to feminine and racialized others. If he is able to ‘see’ (to revolvere, to “roll over” and “interrogate”, to use Kristeva’s terms) his belief in Whiteness and use of women and racialized others to secure his masculinity and privilege, the blow to his narcissism may be transformed from a defensive or violent anger against others who were seen as threats to his position, into a ‘militant’ anger mobilized to transform the oppressive social structures that once shored up his narcissism
This is only possible by developing relationships with others who are seen as autonomous subjects.

The case study of Griffin illustrates an incorporation by the dominant white male subject of a revitalizing aspect projected onto the racialized other, onto ‘blackness’, that allowed the privileged white male subject to achieve what was experienced as a “reconciliation” via a racial conversion experience. While it was framed as achieving a higher ethical positioning, it was in fact a kind of melancholic compromise that allowed the privileged white subject to avoid facing the reality of the fully externalized other’s existence. The imaginary space of the other remained absolutely associated with “oblivion”. While the conversion was experienced as a turning over, a ‘new’ relationship with the racialized other, the other remained a disavowed source of nourishment.

Conversion became a process in which there was an incorporative proximity that allowed for a kind of ingestion, a transfusion, of blackness. In this case, the dominant subject’s failure to face the reality of the other’s existence makes the conversion a “rite of defilement” in which the dominant white subject is converted into a ‘good liberal white’, a position that becomes dangerously underpinned by a kind of God-given righteousness. The subject may now believe that by having had a racial conversion he is free from the sin of racism. In this scenario, Griffin’s supposedly reconfigured relationship with the racialized other relies on the absent-presence of an idealized white maternity in the form of the ‘good’ wife and mother whose physical and emotional labour underpin his experiment. Griffin’s conversion ends in a split vision of femininity: the ideal of domestic white motherhood is contrasted with the abject image of the “vicious” public white female. Representations of black women are similarly split between an idealized long-
suffering and politically silent black maternity and a black femininity that is associated with excessive sexuality. His melancholic attachment to the maternal object and feminine other remains a blind spot in his vision of racial salvation.

Griffin’s narrative of racial conversion emerged at a moment in the history of the United States in which the color line was being challenged by the call for racial integration by the civil rights movement. This was a moment of anxiety for the white subject invested in and secured by a faith in Whiteness. Segregation, as I argued in the my analysis of Griffin’s text, following Cheng, represents a melancholic arrangement that literally separates out the racial other in order to clearly mark the distinction between the ‘proper’ United States, the center, and the margins as the space of the other. The other is maintained as a source of labour and as an abject object meant to shore up the boundary of the so-called ‘clean and proper’ subject and nation. I suggested in my analysis that Black Like Me’s popularity with white audiences can at least partially be attributed to the fact that it allowed the white reader to accept a new proximity to ‘blackness’ without destabilizing the centrality of the white father and the power of whiteness. While overtly arguing for the reader to accept racial integration as the only ethical choice because of the “sameness under the skin” Black Like Me also allows the white reader to imagine a form of racial integration in which the essence of whiteness will remain untouched.

In my analysis of the practice of krumping I showed that it offers an imaginary coherence that allows for the elaboration of trauma and works against the debilitating alienation of what Oliver calls “social melancholy” (3). The “krump circle” opens a “social space that supports sublimation” that allows dancers to creatively engage with the painful and angry affects associated with everyday experiences of racialization and
oppression (35). This practice represents revolt by reconnecting drives and affects with the symbolic and sociality. While I argue that the krump circle is a kind of imaginary space, it is not only catharsis, or imaginary compensation, but instead functions as “corporeal orature”, a term used by DeFrantz to align movement with speech (67). In this practice, affect is stabilized and translated into symbolic terms through the structuring of the practice by the krump community and the Krump Kings’ Kingdom ministry. The marginalized black, male subject who has received a blow to narcissism (who, to use Khanna’s terms, hears the echo and must carry this burden) finds a way to help stabilize his position. While krumping helps renew agency, there is also a reliance on hegemonic ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality in the krump circle to help shore up the predominantly male dancers’ narcissism. These male krumpers not only attempt to secure their masculine subject position against the failed masculinity of the homosexual male, but also against the female krumping other, who is assigned the role of the disparaged object. The maternal object functions as a support, but is denied active participation. In this scenario, Tight Eyez’s conversion experience helped him “go on living”, but it is also used to sanction and secure his position as divine leader who is able to structure the practice of krump in a way that secures his subject position against an abject femininity, homosexuality, and melancholic attachment to the maternal object.

The physical removal of dancers from public spaces by police documented by the Krump Kings, the initial fearful reaction to the practice of krump by some viewers, and the attempts by mainstream American culture to depoliticize and aestheticize the practice by flattening it into spectacle, clearly reveals the continuing efforts by ‘the center’, by white America, to keep the poor black subject safely relegated to the margins of the
American nation and contain any eruptions—to keep the “invisible Americans interred beneath the great national edifice” as invisible, to use Cheng’s phrase (13). Denied “social forgiveness” and locked out of the so-called “American Dream” as a marginalized poor black male living in South Los Angeles, the experience of conversion empowered Tight Eyez to spread his practice of krumping to the masses. Krumping has allowed for these particular individuals to travel internationally in order to teach their practice and draw attention to the difficulties of their everyday experiences of oppression.

As I discussed, Tight Eyez specifically uses his conversion experience as opposed to an affiliation to any specific Church or Christian denomination to authorize his dissemination of the practice of krumping as a spiritual practice and forward the mandate of the Kingdom of K.R.U.M.P: “Kingdom, Radically, Uplifted, Mighty, Praise.” Tight Eyez’s self-sanctification, interestingly, emphasizes the possibility of each individual or krump group to empower themselves over the power of the traditional church. However, as a self-sanctified divine leader, as I stated, he maintains deeply problematic melancholic attachments to others in order to secure his position.

While critical melancholia is a useful concept, it is helpful to consider it in relation to Kristeva’s notion of relations based on herethics, in order to ensure that any subject position is not taken at the cost of the maternal or the feminine object, who is forced to carry the burden of remaining the other/abject. In the case of both Griffin and krumping, women were not afforded the same position as men. The use of the maternal and feminine object to shore up their position continued as disavowed sources of nourishment and as sites of projection of their unwanted qualities and affects. These melancholic attachments were further secured in both cases by an association with divine
structures in the case of krumping—the father-God as the ideal—and the positioning of Griffin as a kind of ideal white son, a Jesus figure who bears the sins of all for the salvation of all.

**Conversion, Melancholia, and the Maternal Object**

Conversion, as an experience that represents and returns the archaic processes of subject formation, offers particular insight into the subject’s relationship to the maternal object. Freudian psychoanalytic models, as well as the Western patriarchal social order more generally, demand the son’s identification with the father as the proper site of identification. In order to achieve this, the son must relinquish the primary relationship with the mother. As Van der Herik suggests, after the introduction of the castration threat by the Oedipal father, the possibility of what she describes as the male child’s “incestuous mother complex” is no longer possible because the mother “represents wishes which must be surpassed for the child to enter culture at all” (88). In other words, after the entrance of the castration threat, the Oedipal father demands that the relationship to the mother be severed, and she “may return to the independent masculine psyche only as indifferent nature” (88). As feminist critics have argued, in this process the mother is locked out of the symbolic, with destructive effects for the mother and all feminine subjects, as well as for the son.

Conversion, often described as a rebirth, in a sense allows the son to give birth to himself, as seen in the analysis of St. Augustine. In this way conversion can be read as a way to psychically remove the mother entirely—to be ‘born’ of the father alone and be fed on his eternal milk, “the food that perisheth not”, to use Augustine’s terms, and to be born of no body, but to be entirely of the spirit (IBL 24). The fantasy of self-birth and
identification with an immortal Father allow the son to defeat the threat to narcissism, of abjection and death, by defensively projecting them onto the mother and the sinning flesh associated with her body. While this is a convincing reading, in another sense conversion also allows the son to re-turn to the maternal, to seek nourishment, and allows a transfusion of the semiotic into the symbolic. As a compromise solution to the demand of oedipalization, conversion allows the son to retain a relationship with the maternal. I suggest that this compromise, the return to the maternal for nourishment by the masculine subject, also shows his continual reliance on the maternal, his desire to maintain her as a loved object and to guard this object, this bond, against the extinction demanded by patriarchal structures. However, in order to achieve herethical relations with others the relationship with the maternal must be symbolized. More specifically, it must be transposed: the mother as container must be abjected and the original fusional relationship mourned. The subject’s relationship with the maternal object must survive the process of abjection and emerge in symbolic terms. This is the case for all subjects—dominant or marginalized, white or racialized, male or female. The maternal object cannot be maintained as an object simply to shore up the subject’s narcissism.

**Conversion and Politics**

While Freud and Kristeva may disagree on the therapeutic and epistemological value of illusion, both agree that the dependent relationship of the convert to religious doctrine is deeply problematic. For Freud, individual and cultural ‘progress’ depends on the use of reason to deal with real world issues, and a compensatory belief in divine intervention is the antithesis of this (54). For Kristeva, Christianity, or religion more generally, allows the “fundamental desires and traumas” of the subject, particularly the masculine subject,
to become translated into dogmas instead of productively analyzed (43). I will conclude this study with a consideration of the far-reaching consequences of issues related to conversion through a discussion of the intersection of conversion discourse with politics in the United States: What are the implications when the dynamics of conversion, built on faith in an omnipotent figure, intersects with politics?

In the following discussion I suggest that when conversion discourse becomes mobilized in political discourse as a call to faith that hinges on primary identification and does not transform this attachment in a critical way, it can lead to problematic effects. This is the case whether it is mobilized by the political right or left. Representations of Barack Obama in mainstream North American media during his 2008 electoral campaign and the first year of his presidency is interesting in this respect.

Generally, representations of Obama are marked by a split and sometimes vacillating desire to position him as a messiah figure or demonize him as abject evil. On one side high-profile images of Obama circulate that associate him with the divine and depict him as a super-human, super-hero figure. For example, Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 show a recurring tendency by major mainstream magazines, news agencies, and the official White House press to represent Obama with a halo, particularly during the late stages of his presidential campaign and the early part of his presidency. Fig.1 was circulated as part of the news coverage of a financial summit, and Fig. 2 released as part of the official White House blog. The first image literally transforms the seal of the office of the President into a saintly halo, directly associating the office of the President of the United States with religious institutions and the figure of the President with the divine, the sacred, and a history of images of Christ and other holy figures. Explicitly left-wing
political publications, including *Ms.*, an American feminist magazine, whose editors shied away from the association of a political figure with specifically religious iconography, chose to depict Obama as a super-human, super-hero figure. The cover for a special inaugural issue of *Ms.* shows Obama in a pose that evokes Marvel’s Superman character about to reveal himself as a feminist superhero, “feminism’s male saviour”, according to the publication’s article, come to ‘save’ feminism.

The association of Obama with divinity and a history of Christian iconography can be said to have at least partially evolved because of his own use of slogans, images, and a rhetorical style that borrows from evangelical and charismatic Christian traditions. Official and unofficial Obama campaign posters with slogans such as “Believe”, “Hope”, and “Change” were widely circulated and often depict Obama in poses that recall the conventions of evangelical preachers. For example, Fig. 3 shows a representation of Obama with his hand raised in a pose that conjures up such images particularly when coupled with the caption “Believe”.

On the other side, there is an attempted equation of Obama with abject evil. This includes associating him with the Antichrist, literally the devil, with the devastation of the Holocaust, and various dictatorial regimes and nefarious villains including Osama Bin Laden. These images are predominantly circulated by ‘extremist’ groups and websites that often include scriptural ‘evidence’ that Obama is the Antichrist. The North Iowa faction of the Tea Party, an American conservative political movement, recently erected a billboard in Mason City, Iowa, that compared Obama and his campaign slogan of “Change” to the devastating “change” wrought by Hitler and Lenin (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Although eventually removed, these posters brought these images into mainstream
view. In a political atmosphere structured as right vs. left, it is not surprising that negative images of a candidate appear, but the representations of Obama are unique. Other U.S. candidates and presidents have been named or characterized as crooks, womanizers, or inept, but Obama’s association with abject evil is specific to him. Even George W. Bush, who left office heavily criticized, is not subjected to the same intensity of negative representations. While Bush may be characterized as an incompetent ‘hillbilly’, or a hard-partying privileged white boy, playing on stereotypes of class and the regional tension between northern and southern American states, only Obama is associated with evil and represented as a threat to the very existence of the Christian world. Obama’s association with the Devil became sufficiently prevalent to be included in a Harris poll that claimed “14 percent of Americans think Obama may be the Antichrist” (Newsweek). While images of Bush and other political figures with horns have been known to circulate in the media, the notion of a poll being conducted to see how many citizens actually believe them to be the devil incarnate has certainly never before been deemed necessary, nor have discussions in Newsweek and Time attempting to debunk such a claim.

These attempts to associate a non-white man who is seen as gaining power with evil clearly reflect white fear and rage about loss of privilege. However, the specific association of Obama with the Antichrist emerged so strongly because of the intersection of his use of conversion rhetoric with already circulating right-wing evangelical narratives about the Antichrist. The latter include the extremely popular Left Behind series of books and films that popularized the notion of the coming of the Antichrist as a young and charismatic political figure. This combination of already existing discourse about the Antichrist and Obama’s reliance on the conventions of religious rhetoric came
together in one short internet advertisement film, “The One”, that John McCain used
during his campaign. This film became a springboard for the Obama as Antichrist
association. The advertisement uses clips from Obama’s speeches to suggest that he
considers himself “The One”, a messiah figure who has come to save the American
people. Obama’s half-serious use of conversion discourse and the conventions of a
conversion experience to describe how voters will come to realize they should vote for
him (“that a light will shine down […] from somewhere, it will light upon you, you will
experience an epiphany and you will say to yourself, I have to vote for Obama”) is de-
contextualized, and examples of his evangelistic speaking style are juxtaposed with
Charlton Heston playing Moses and parting the Red Sea in the film the *Ten
Commandments*. These juxtapositions work in several ways. McCain’s ad goes on from
this to question whether Obama has the experience to lead, and suggests that Obama’s
use of rhetoric, and Christian rhetoric in particular, is empty: that he is like an actor
playing the part of a Christian and a leader, and is, in fact, simply posing as one. This
message worked for many right-wing Christians who see Obama as a figure of idolatry,
or the Antichrist, as well as for some non-Christians who may suspect he is a spin-doctor
or charlatan.

I am not suggesting that notions of hope, imagination, or impassioned speech
have no value in inspiring others to make change, but in this case the use of conversion
discourse was not sufficiently critically framed to prevent Right-wing evangelicals from
diverting the political discussion to mythical concepts such as Good vs. Evil, Christ vs.
the Antichrist, instead of focusing on real-world issues. Perhaps the dichotomy would
have emerged anyway, but countering the notion of “Terror” circulated by the previous
administration with notions of “Hope” and “Change” is not in itself sufficient. If not tethered to real-world policy, these notions can be perceived as equally mythical and allow for political issues to be engaged solely in the realm of fantasy—in the mythical realm of Terror vs. Hope.

The idealizing of Obama and the association of him with saints, superheroes, and the sacred is complex. In a sense, as a political figure he appeared as ‘god sent’ to many Democrats after a Republican president whose presidency was associated with seemingly endless war, economic collapse, and regressive social policy. Obama represented the aspiration for many that the white dominance of the White House could come to an end. The hyper-idealizing of Obama reflects an intense need and desire to have non-white figures in recognized public positions, especially in the role of president, as the highest recognized office. The implications of a non-white person being in this role are profound, and not to be underestimated. Part of the hyper-idealizing of the figure of Obama can be attributed to the cathartic and joyful achievement of the election of a black president after so many years of struggle for civil rights by the African-American community. In this way, he functions as a larger-than-life figure of hope and change that allows for the imagining of new possibilities.

There may also be a cathartic element for some ‘liberal whites’ that functions differently. By supporting the campaign of a black president, these liberal whites may feel a release of shame and guilt. As Hobson suggested in regard to Civil Rights campaigners, these liberal whites may experience a kind of atonement and reconciliation with the election of a black president, and may claim status as ‘good’ whites who support ‘Change’. The hyper-idealizing in this scenario may partially be defensive, because for
white liberals it allows the figure of Obama to be separated from the reality of every other racialized person. He becomes the idealized aspect of blackness that offers an infusion of “pure experience”, of hope and change, through elevated, impassioned speech and the consumption of him as a figurehead.

One problem with the hyper-idealization of Obama and his association with the sacred as an omnipotent, superhuman figure, is that it encourages a primary identification with Obama as if he were an omnipotent God who should be able to relieve anxiety and satisfy desires simply through our consumption of, or identification with, him. This inevitably leads to a dangerous vacillation, because the hyper-idealized object cannot live up to expectations. Secondly, real-world issues that need to be analyzed and addressed become played out at the mythical level of Good vs. Evil, because these are the terms of engagement suggested. This is dangerous, because if the object initially offers narcissistic compensation, the loss of it represents narcissistic threat which if not mitigated can lead to aggressive rather than a reasoned responses.

I am not suggesting that conversion discourse as a call to faith is Obama’s sole rhetoric, or reason for voter support, nor do I underestimate the profound implications of a mixed-race individual in the position of idealized leader. However, Obama as a figure was clearly mobilized and taken up by his supporters as representing aspects of an omnipotent Messiah or God-term. This rhetoric drew on the notion that “Change has Come” in the shape of this figurehead, and that the public’s faith in, or consumption of this figure, would automatically produce social transformation (see the Official Whitehouse website on Inauguration Day). The focus is on the figure of Obama and not
the need for collective struggle, debate, and the reality-testing of political and social policy.

The association of “Change” with Obama as a \textit{figure}, as opposed to his actions as president, was illustrated in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to him in 2009. This award is given to the individual who has “done the most for peace”, and Obama had been in office for less than nine months. The premature nature of this award was not lost on the media. The \textit{Harvard Business Review} dubbed it a “Nobel Prize in Charisma” and suggested that it was “based on the promises and ambitions laid out in Obama's masterful oratory about his world vision”. Committee member Thorbjorn Jagland's “infatuation with that message and the charisma of the messenger” was said to explain “how he could interpret "done" so loosely and reward the promise of a performance not yet fulfilled”. This reflects how the figure of Obama, his presence as a kind of sacred object, is what was emphasized. While his image and rhetoric brought him to power, they may also in fact limit his ability to act, to make active change. If he is maintained as a sacred object, the reality of his limits can be disavowed, along with the reality of political change that may cost white subjects’ their privileged positions. His liberal white supporters have enjoyed the narcissistic boost of consuming the sacred object, while feeling responsible for his success through their active support. But are they ready to deal with the real-life sacrifices that may come from change to social policies that have shored up white privilege?

The hyper-idealized object cannot live up to unrealistic expectations. The inevitable disillusionment has been seen in Left-wing media reports that began to doubt their faith in Obama as he neared the one-year mark of his presidency. Mainstream
magazines, including *Rolling Stone* (Fig.6) and *Ms.*, replaced their superhero images of Obama with images of doubt. In Fig. 6, questions about Obama’s ability to deliver and about the ‘reality’ behind the rhetoric replace the glow of the original halo. The danger here is that disappointment may turn into despair or produce a reactive defensive swing, with the hyper-idealized object being transformed into a “bad object” that must be punished. What one can hope is that instead this disillusionment may function as an education to reality, as a call to action, to analysis, and for continued work for change. Disillusionment, as the relinquishing of the belief in the illusion of a Savior figure, can be a progressive step toward the realization that change cannot be achieved through simple identification or consumption of any kind of figure, but only through dialogue and action. From this perspective, Obama’s call for ‘Hope’, to imagine ‘Change’, may be understood not as emboldened by belief, by a religious kind of faith, but the collective investment in the reality that change is possible.

If change is understood as revolt then lasting change requires an open system in which the symbolic as well as fantasy structures can be interrogated, rolled over, and renewed. This form of ‘change’ is not possible when fundamental fantasies including ideal Virgin Mothers and ideal omnipotent Fathers are used to secure the male subject’s place in the universe. For herethical relations to be achieved “melancholic attachments” that use feminine and racialized others as well as the maternal object as sites for the projection or transmission of unwanted affects must be overturned. Women and racialized others cannot be maintained as disavowed sources of nourishment and revitalization for the privileged male subject. In so far as a conversion experience maintains these melancholic structures, it fails to offer the possibility for herethical
relations and therefore fails to offer the possibilities of revolt. While religious faith does not offer the political potential of revolt, this does not mean the end of illusion or fantasy, which Kristeva argues has important “therapeutic and epistemological value” (*IBL* 21). However, for Kristeva, the ideal way forward does require an education to the reality in the sense that faith must never eclipse analysis (21).

As I said before, perhaps the depression that may come with the disillusionment or loss of faith in a failed ideal figure may be a productive step forward. Kristeva’s description of the end of the psychoanalyst-client relationship at the termination of a successful analysis offers an interesting comparison to the end of dogmatic faith in either religious structures or in a super-hero political figure. Disillusionment can mark the end of dogmatic belief in the “omnipotence” of the leader whether that is the ideal Father God, the super-hero, or the analyst, and may offer another possibility:

Termination of the analysis signals the dissolution of certain fantasies as well as of the analyst, whose omnipotence is put to death. The depression that accompanies termination is a sign that this stage has come, which in the case of a successful analysis precedes the resumption of transitory, ludic illusions. Fantasy returns to our psychic life, but no longer as cause for complaint or source of dogma. Now it provides the energy for a kind of artifice, for the art of living (9).

Unlike Freud who put his hope that Reason would eventually redeem us, what Kristeva calls for is not the end of desire and illusion, but the analysis of these investments. She argues for the interrogation of desires, fantasies, and the overturning of dogmatic belief and closed structures that suffocate possibilities for revolt, creative play, and sublimation. According to Kristeva, “knowledge of my desires is at once my freedom and my safety net.” (52). It is this starting point that allows individuals to discover that there is “an other in me” and to understand that this “does not make me schizophrenic but enables me to
confront the risk of psychosis” by ‘facing’ this other (56). Rather than relying on compensatory beliefs, the subject who has knowledge of his or her desires, who discovers that there is “an other in me” as well as the fully autonomous other outside, finds new energy to be used for what Kristeva calls the “art of living” instead of in the denial of the reality of death and futile attempts to fend off the inevitable experience of helplessness.
Fig. 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of Obama’s profile in which the Seal of the President of the United States serves as a halo around his head. “Barack Obama at Close of Fiscal Responsibility Summit.” © A/P. Photo by Pablo Martinez. http://obamamessiah.blogspot.com. Accessed December 6 2010.

Fig. 3 was removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a stylized representation of Obama with a microphone in his right hand and his left arm raised in the air. The text of the poster reads “BELIEVE” and “Obama ‘08”. “Barack Obama ‘Believe’ 2008 Campaign Poster.” © www.barackobama.com, www.thisnext.com/tag/obama-poster. Accessed December 6 2010.
Fig. 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of Obama with devil horns, demonic eyes, and large grotesque teeth. Original Source: “Obama as AntiChrist.” © FreakingNews.com. www.FreakingNews.com/Obama-The-Demon-Pictures-40852.asp. Accessed December 6 2010.

Fig. 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of billboard that represented Hitler, Obama, and Lenin each with the word “Change” below their image. The billboard has the caption: “Radical Leaders Prey on the Fearful & Naïve”. Original Source: “Tea Party ‘Change’ Billboard.” © A/P. www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/are-tea-parties-racist-is-al-qaeda. Accessed December 6 2010.
Fig. 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was the cover image of *Rolling Stone Magazine Issue 1805*. It depicted a stylized representation of Obama with the seal of the President of the United States replaced the text: “Will he take bold action or compromise too easily?” Original Source: “Obama So Far.” *Rolling Stone Magazine Issue 1805* © Wenner Media. www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-new-issue-of-rolling-stone-barack-obama-so-far-20090805. Accessed December 2010.
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