POOR FEELINGS:
CLASS, DESIRE, AND AFFECT IN THE WRITING OF MICHELLE TEA

by

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Abstract

This project seeks to centre class as a framework for analysis of queer and feminist literary texts. It examines select works of contemporary author Michelle Tea in relation to working-class literary criticism, feminist life-writing criticism, affect theory, and queer theory.

Insisting on queerness as a set of behaviors and orientations to objects of desire, I ask how a lack of class privilege may influence the desires, affects, and politics of the literary subject. I examine how a poor or a working-class identity emerges in connection to other forms of power and privilege in the writing of memoir. I question the connection of the affect shame to identity through a tracking of the moments of identification and disidentification that circulate around desire. I insist that the author sustains an ambivalent and ultimately productive relation to shame in her writing.

This project seeks to challenge notions of upward mobility, class transcendence, and the fantasy of “the good life” that are ascribed to poor and working-class subjects by developing a queer and feminist politics that thrives on and makes a home in the present. Drawing on anti-utopian feminist theory, queer negativity, and the prose of Michelle Tea, this politics of possibility asserts that through action and inaction, being and unbecoming, movement and stasis, a radical subjectivity can emerge from and live on in the current moment despite, through, and against oppressive conditions.
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Introduction

Political Investments

Is it possible—or even desirable—to ever really “know” a text? As feminist academics, we are often invested in a text achieving certain goals for us—be they literary, political, or ideological. Without approaching philosophical questions of this “why”, I will instead make explicit my investments in both the literature I explore and in the purpose of my critique. The initial intention of this project—to draw critical attention to the work of a poor and working-class female author—is more specifically the task of encountering and moving outwards the ethical, desiring, and political motives of a set of texts. It is what makes contact with my own set of affects, desires, and politics that will be drawn out in the analysis that follows. While this does not suggest an instance of either autobiographical criticism or a failure to make new, it does critically locate a set of performative relations between author/critic, reader/writer, and writer/reader. These relations are, through their investments in the production of certain kinds of knowledge, inherently political.

I claim, below and throughout, that the writing of contemporary American author Michelle Tea produces a radical feminist literary subject that demonstrates alternative ways of surviving and inhabiting this world. This is, significantly, a white, female, queer, poor and working-class artistic subject. Each of these clauses is constitutive of a complex range of identifications and disidentifications; these social locations can be read as central to the avowals and disavowals of hegemonic and sub-cultural norms and ideologies rendered within Tea’s writing. It is in these ways that Michelle Tea’s writing touches me,
and in this writing that I attempt to, if not touch back, at least reach outward for textual contact with another reader.

It is my contention that in accounting for the affects, desires, and politics of a text, a form of an intersectional approach to critical literary analysis is the most generative of insights on account of its broad range of interest. My projects draws on themes from the distinct genres of women’s life-writing criticism, working-class literary theory, queer theory, and affect theory in order to locate Michelle Tea’s writing as developing in relation to these traditions. I explicitly aim to locate Tea’s texts as inhabiting space not just within, but alongside these genres on account of their internal excess troubling any easy containment. The primary texts by Michelle Tea that I will examine here are her three memoirs: The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America (1998); Valencia (2000); and The Chelsea Whistle (2002). While Tea is a prolific writer of poetry, young adult fiction, and even a graphic novel, her memoirs offer a specificity of personal experience that is most analytically robust for my purposes here.

Theoretical Review

My theoretical approach is motivated by what I call a feminist and queer politics of the possible (c.f. Chapter 3), which is a reinvestment in the present as a space for politics through an interest in both the negative and positive structuring affects of subjectivity. Through an exploration of Tea’s memoirs, this project is about making space for excess, for abjection and refusals, beside existing knowledge—crucially not instead of or at the cost of other radical forms of knowledge. I prefer this notion of “beside” as another option to thinking with the notion of “beyond”. The word “beyond” is evocative of distance or of progress, two terms against which my writing specifically seeks to work.
“Beyond” can come to signify a moving above or transcending a particular object or way of being, whereas “beside” signals to an objective other, but one that is neither better nor worse. This “beside” is a concept that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) deploys in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* to counter binary or hierarchical thinking, emphasizing instead a relational dynamic between forms of knowledge and power (Sedgwick 8). One advantage I see to exploring the relations among economic class, sexuality, and embodiment may be quite simply about making what Sedgwick calls “space” in the present for other forms of being, knowing, and politics (Sedgwick 9). A similar sentiment is put forward by Sara Ahmed (2010) that specific kinds of “unhappiness” produce radical forms of subjectivity, suggesting that queer activism may actually only be about finding “the freedom to breathe” (Ahmed *The Promise of Happiness*, 120). Drawing from the breathless prose of Michelle Tea, this queer feminist project exhales toward these possibilities.

The central argument informing this project is that economic class impacts the affects, desires, and identifications of poor and working-class women. I apply the word “impact” here as a careful departure from “constrains” or “determines”, as both these concepts delimit the forms and modes of resistance that poor and working-class women may engage in the construction and deconstruction of their lives. I locate class—specifically a lack of class power—as central to my analysis in order to think through what the embodiment of *being* poor does and does not do. Throughout this analysis, I figure embodiment as the site where affective, material, and structural forces all inhabit in competing, and often contradictory, ways. As a corollary to my use of the term subjectivity, I offer embodiment as a distinctly felt incarnation of the self as it moves
through politically, economically, and affectively charged spaces. This particularly queer use of embodiment urges for an account of how desire is inhabited and inhabiting in relation to specific class dynamics. Thus, my project aims to disrupt assumptions around poverty and working-class subjectivity that try to contain the poor and working-class as always already powerless or resistant, and to read instead for the complexities that surround moments of actualized or suspended agency.

**Methodology**

In Chapter 1, I examine how Michelle Tea’s class position and her feminist and sexual politics situate her writing both within and beside categorical boundaries. I examine issues of genre, form, style, and subjectivity that are raised by feminist and working-class scholars against Tea’s personal discursive practices. Throughout, I remain attentive to how poor and working-class identity function in relation to other forms of power and privilege in Tea’s work, specifically in terms of style and content. In Chapter 2, I insist on an ambivalent relation to and an interdependency between positive and negative affects, and track the ways in which certain affective orientations happen in proximity to objects of desire. Sustaining a particular focus on the affect of shame, I explore how Tea’s subjectivity both resists and aligns itself with shame through performative and productive movements. In Chapter 3, I develop a theoretical counter-narrative to the fantasy of class transcendence in an effort to rethink notions of feminist and queer liberation. I question whether there are alternatives ways of being in the present that are resistant to the hegemonic norms of capital accumulation, success, and upward mobility. Through an examination of various directions and temporalities taken in feminist and queer theory, I argue that focusing on the present can—specifically for a
poor and working-class queer female writing subject like Tea—offer new strategies of ontological resistance.
Chapter 1. Outside Girlhood: Accounting for Class in the Misfit Memoirs of Michelle Tea

Introduction

What is at stake when poor and working-class queer women articulate themselves through life-writing? What kinds of claims to truth are made—or warded off—in the writing of the self through memoir? This chapter is primarily interested in critical issues surrounding the production of feminist subjectivity through the act of writing (for both the subject of a text and the subject-as-writer). In this chapter, I use the boundary-troubling texts of Michelle Tea to draw on and develop central questions about women’s life-writing, questions that concern genre, style, and subjectivity. I suggest that economic class and class-consciousness figure within the development of queer female subjectivity within Tea’s texts. Redressing some of the absences in feminist life writing criticism, I use scholarship on poor and working-class literature to broaden and specify these literary issues for an intersectional approach. My intention in this chapter is to locate Tea’s writing both within and beside a feminist literary tradition; I argue that accounting for class and sexuality within a literary text can trouble the discreteness of gender as the point of entry for a feminist analysis in an effort to both trouble boundaries and bring their legitimacy into question. In my analysis that follows, I claim that poor and working-class consciousness and queer sexuality affect the development of Tea’s subjective voice, and quite literally interrupt notions of a coherent or stable feminist writing subject. My discussion and close-readings will be drawn from Tea’s self-referential texts The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America (1998), Valencia (2000), and The Chelsea Whistle: A Memoir (2002).
The first section of my analysis is concerned with issues of genre and form raised by feminist literary critics. Drawing on the insights of working-class writers, I insist that class privilege can shape the framing and categorization of women’s self-narratives. I locate Tea’s writing within the genre of memoir and suggest that this genre provides Tea with an oppositional space within which to articulate a queer feminist working-class subjectivity. In the following section, I draw on Tea’s oppositional subjectivity to discuss her conformity to and innovation with style and structure, specifically in her use of grammar and dialogue. Focusing first on the vignette and then the litany, my analysis uses feminist and working-class literary theory to examine how these stylistic conventions afford flexibility for the feminist queer working-class writer. The final section of my discussion concentrates on issues surrounding subjectivity within feminist literary criticism and working-class literary theory, specifically issues of identification. Through a close reading of Tea’s vignette “Class” from The Chelsea Whistle, I examine how identification functions in relation to acute disidentification. It is in the overlaps of subjectivity, in the space where class, sexuality, race, and gender meet, that disruptions to social norms and new relations of being become possible. Tea’s subjective voice in “Class”, and throughout her three texts explored here, demonstrates a contemporary poor and working-class female perspective that defies norms, boundaries, and expectations.

Exploring Class as a Determinant of Genre and Form in Michelle Tea’s Writing

What genre particular works of life writing can be included within—and further, who claims them—are political questions, as they relate to implicit power relations within discursive fields. In their comprehensive text Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) argue that
despite the tendency to collapse many different forms of life writing under the heading “autobiography”, there are approximately fifty-two genres of life writing that convey a variety of narratives—of which autobiography is just one. At issue for Smith and Watson is the representation of autobiography—a very male-dominated canon—as the definitive Western genre of life-writing. Charting the development of the term “autobiography” from the Greek conjunction _autos-bios-graphe_, which signifies self-life-writing (Smith and Watson, _Reading Autobiography_ 1), Smith and Watson note that its application since the Enlightenment era has been overused to account for all writing that is self-interested and self-referential (Smith and Watson, _Reading Autobiography_ 2). Smith and Watson discuss a history of gendered exclusion in the nascent years of the genre, citing as a specific example the development of its nomenclature. Smith and Watson reflect that the term was first put to use in the eighteenth century by the English working-class female writer, Ann Yearsley, a process of naming which was shortly thereafter forgotten and eclipsed by the male writer Robert Southey’s use of the phrase in 1809 (Smith and Watson, _Reading Autobiography_ 2).

Shari Benstock echoes this concern in “The Female Self-Engendered: Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood”, arguing that from its inception as a genre and its subsequent struggles to be recognized as a legitimate field of academic inquiry, traditional autobiography has been fraught with tensions surrounding what it is and what it is not, issues that easily translate into anxieties over what type of subject may be included within the established boundaries of the genre (Benstock 5). Given that the function of traditional autobiography is to celebrate in literary form an often normative account of the achievements of an autonomous individual through a universalizing life
story (Smith and Watson 3), the kind of subject considered exemplary within the American tradition has been overwhelmingly white, middle to upper class, and more often than not, male (Benstock 4).

Feminist literary criticism has responded to this historical gendered bias in two distinct ways: by insisting on including women’s voices within the autobiographical literary canon, and by consciously disavowing the genre of autobiography altogether in exchange for a theorizing of other life writing forms. The bulk of these efforts have yielded transformative results within and beyond autobiographical boundaries, often by developing a more nuanced focus on other issues that affect gendered subjects, specifically race or ethnicity, as demonstrated in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s important volume De/Colonizing the Subject (1992). While retaining the usefulness of autobiography as a genre of women’s life writing, Smith and Watson broaden the focus of the genre to account for the complexity of the writing subject in relation to processes of Western imperialism and colonization. As they lucidly emphasize in their introduction, “[p]rivileging the oppression of gender over and above other oppressions effectively erases the complex and often contradictory positionings of the subject” (Smith and Watson, De/Colonizing the Subject xiv). Smith and Watson encourage autobiographical discourses that are historically specific and that resist reinscribing racial and ethnic hierarchies. Connecting gendered oppression to struggles for material and representational justice, they insist on the possibility for agency and resistance even within seemingly hegemonic discursive structures (Smith and Watson, De/Colonizing the Subject xx).
However, the expansion of autobiography as a genre inclusive of women has also come with the implicit inclusion of and yearnings for conservative norms of femininity, whiteness, and class. For example, in “Women’s Autobiographical Writings: New Forms”, Carolyn G. Heilbrun critiques what she sees as a failure of twentieth-century women’s autobiographical writing to participate fully in the genre of autobiography, asserting that prior to the women’s liberation movement, “narratives of self were strictly bound in by convention” and unlike their male peers were unable to express a “destiny” (Heilbrun 16). Heilbrun’s concern is that women autobiographers have historically been complicit in an “internalization of patriarchal standards” by excluding from their life narratives the desire for and struggles over power, as well as omitting from their narratives the presence of beneficial or significant relationships with other women (Heilbrun 19). Heilbrun advocates for an expansion of the genre of autobiography to include women’s stories of intimacy and success, while at the same time pushing to make room for a “new form” of feminist confession wherein women, especially middle-aged women reflecting back on their achievements, can create a feminist community of connection via an “uninhibited autobiographical impulse” (Heilbrun 23). Implicit in Heilbrun’s critique, however, is the assumption that women’s autobiographical life-writing should chart an upward trajectory demonstrating the accumulation of power, wealth, and success, a narrative that refuses to problematize the relations of class, race, and sexuality within any gendered narrative of progress. Heilbrun’s analysis expresses a feeling of loss not just for the exclusion of privileged women from the genre of autobiography, but a form of nostalgia aimed specifically at the claims to class and race privilege that their writings would have evoked.
A second strategy by feminist literary life writing critics involves establishing and recognizing suppressed genres or modes that exceed the conventional genre of autobiography and its norms of triumph, success, and power. Importantly, these interventions often recognize the presence of feminist politics as motivating the texts. It is to a discussion of these genres that I now turn, and wherein I locate the work of contemporary author Michelle Tea. The insights by theorists of poor and working-class literarture help inform this analysis, posing useful insights into the impact of class on literary forms.

In her foundational essay “On Confession”, Rita Felski describes the development of a feminist confessional mode in the later part of the twentieth century as the literary equivalent to the second-wave feminist movement’s use of Consciousness-Raising as a dialogic rhetorical strategy for connecting women’s invisible, private, and intimate experiences with one another, and with broader social structures (Felski 87). Felski insists that this bifurcated aim of the written feminist confession captures the core tension of feminist politics: the balance between the internal, the personal, and the experiential, and the political goals of social transformation, community development, and a communal identity (Felski 89). Thus, feminist confession immediately breaks from the tradition of autobiography in its written articulation of a feminist and therefore a politicized subject, laying bare the goals of the text to incite change in its reader. This lack of neutrality sidesteps the universalizing story of individual achievement that is endemic to autobiography, at the same time striving for a shared identity via similar yearnings for justice around gender inequality.
While drawing on the literary sub-genre of feminist confession in her articulation of an explicit feminist subjectivity, I suggest that Michelle Tea’s collection of writing rests, perhaps necessarily uncomfortably, beside both autobiography and feminist confessional genres on account of her texts’ concomitant engagement with and structuring by the politics of poor and working-class existence. Indeed, both the inclusion of class as a definitive structure of subjective identity within a text, and, subsequently, the insistence on class as a category of analysis are moves intended to produce discomfort. In her essay “Readerly/Writerly Relations and Social Change: The Maimie Papers as Literature” Carolyn Anne Taylor argues that “non-genres, mixed genres, and outlaw genres may effectively and artfully resist the differentials of power that characterize dominant genres” (Taylor 179). This notion of an “outlaw genre” captures the danger that poor and working-class writing can pose to established literary forms and their entrenched ideologies of progress and economic prowess, and what I argue throughout that Michelle Tea’s texts do. Literary critics of working-class writing Nicholas Cole and Janet Zandy draw on this necessary malleability of borders in their discussion of working-class writing, insisting that there isn’t a single or proscribed working-class literary form as working-class writers have “adopted” and “rewritten” mainstream forms (Coles and Zandy xxiv). Furthermore, in Class Definitions (2008), Michelle Tokarczyk’s critical reflections on intersectional identity within contemporary American women’s working-class writing acknowledges the need for pushing against generic boundaries to account for the overlapping complexities of content and form (Tokarczyk 35).

The genre of memoir can capture the political goals inherent to feminist confession while simultaneously foregrounding the presence of material forms of alterity,
including economic, sexual, and racial signifiers that exceed the bourgeois standard of subjectivity implicit in autobiography. Smith and Watson suggest that the strength of autobiography as the *sine qua non* of life writing genres has drawn strength from devaluing other narrative forms (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3), a way of constituting these genres as “other”. Lee Quinby declares that memoir is positioned outside the privileged boundaries of autobiography (Quinby 298), and that it functions as “a composite of several generic discourses” (Quinby 300). Quinby finds memoir a germane genre for writers who may be socially marginalized specifically because its content draws attention to the “twists and ties of knotted experiences” (Quinby 316). Quinby articulates how the form of memoir functions differently from the more controlled and linear style of autobiography by enabling women life-writers to access and produce an example of counter-memory (Quinby 299). Indeed, Quinby’s analysis suggests that as a liminal genre, memoir can provide an oppositional space for subjects deemed excessive by normative ideologies to portray their struggle against limits and towards freedom.

Claiming Michelle Tea’s texts within a particular genre can call for what Roxanne Rimstead (2001) has called “oppositional reading strategy” that demands “prying open both dominant and subversive representations of poverty in literary works and in everyday, popular discourses” (*Remnants of Nation* 4). This oppositional reading strategy is of particular value when encountering poor and working-class narratives, and it is important for my project here, as it strives for a consciousness of how literary representation has generally obscured, made invisible, or distorted poor and working-class subjects. Furthermore, reading oppositionally promotes an analysis that is
accountable to how poor and working-class writers may themselves be resistant or complacent with these representations. Carole Anne Taylor suggests that when class becomes visible, (what I suggest occurs vis a vis a recognition of a lack of class power), the text can become positioned as outside of literature, and its subject—both the writer and the subject of the text—becomes interpreted as a “victim” (Taylor 166). Of interest to Taylor, and to me here, is how a writer’s consciousness of what she can or cannot write about her life affects what kind of writing she produces (Taylor 168). I want to draw on these insights of classed absences to point to the generic issues implicit in the cataloging of Tea’s texts, specifically in relation to the label of memoir.

Michelle’s Tea’s first publication, The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America (1998), published through the independent publisher Semiotext(e), lacks any descriptors of what type of literature it is, either in the title or in its cataloging. The title, however, boldly asserts that it is a form of affective-driven confession, playing with ideas of both singularity and community in the assertion of “one girl” who is simultaneously “in America”. Thus the title promises that the text may be about one girl, but it may also be about many girls. The inclusion of the word “girl” explicitly draws attention to the gendered emphasis of the narrative, and thus conforms to the strategy in both feminist confession and memoir to make visible political orientations.

The second text Tea published with Seal Press, Valencia (2000), is catalogued as both “San-Francisco—Fiction” and “Lesbian—Fiction”. Its title references Valencia Street, a street in the Mission District of San Francisco, that, although traditionally Hispanic and working-class, has a growing predominantly white lesbian and queer female community, within which Tea’s text marks her as an explicit participant. However, the second edition
(2008) contains a new introduction by Tea which describes the text as a memoir (Tea, Valencia 6). Yet even in the absence of this foreword, there is ample evidence to claim Valencia as Tea’s second memoir, picking up right where The Passionate Mistakes leaves off. An immediate example is the disclosure of Tea’s ex-girlfriend’s final betrayal in Tucson, Arizona that occupies the closing passage of The Passionate Mistakes (Tea, The Passionate Mistakes 183), and then is cited in the early pages of Valencia as Tea’s catalyst for arriving in San Francisco (Tea, Valencia 20). Interestingly, Tea’s third full-length text explicitly claims her writing as memoir: embedded in the title of The Chelsea Whistle: A Memoir (2002) is an abstract reference to Chelsea, Massachusetts, Tea’s city of birth, and this distinctive claim to genre hints that what is to come will be powerfully shaped by the conventions of memoir.

I suggest that the significance of identifying a text as memoir has particular classed dimensions. As Margo Culley’s (1992) “What a Piece of Work is ‘Woman’!” insists, there is a marked disparity in the publication of life writing texts across gender, race, and class, suggesting that publishing rates—and literary critics—continue to favor affluent autobiographies (Culley 6). It is only after the successful publishing of two previous texts, and the critical acclaim for Valencia, (including securing the 2000 Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Fiction), that Tea’s work was signaled as memoir. Whether this is the result of decisions made by Tea or by her various publishers is unclear, but it is a question that I do not endeavor to answer here. Instead, I am more interested in what the process of publishing reveals about the representation of class at the level of the text itself. Taylor argues that poor and working-class authors may change their relationship to genre over time, significantly in relation to their imagined audiences.
(Taylor 168). Acquiring *symbolic* class power (through the material and cultural success of publishing) can in fact make visible the intricacies of class inequality. Thus, the lack of claiming *The Passionate Mistakes* generically speaks to an anxiety around representation that signals the content of *The Passionate Mistakes* as potentially too excessive, too disruptive, to risk being signified. Further, the misrepresentation of *Valencia* as fiction highlights an unwillingness to affirm its content as experiential, warding off any claims to the real in anticipation that the abject forms of class-consciousness and boundless queer sexuality it gestures to will be less threatening when encompassed by the depoliticized realm of imagination.

I am suggesting that there is a struggle for representation at play in this process of claiming a text within or outside of particular genres. As evidenced by my discussion of the politics of exclusion and inclusion within the formal genre of autobiography, and the genres of feminist confession and memoir, there are political stakes in shaping the interpretation of a text through its containment within a specific literary mode. The proximity of a subject’s position to gender, class, sexual, and race power implicate her or his incorporation or rejection from representational fields. As Tea’s memoirs might suggest, a text is deemed less antagonistic if its author is writing from a position of relative security; the threat of what a memoir may expose is buffered by the increased access to social power the established author may now possess. Thus, I propose that as a genre specifically designated for subjects that exceed cultural and literary normativity, memoir’s promise to perform dangerous or disruptive acts does indeed require some position of privilege prior to its articulation as such.
Accounting for Class in the Structure and Style of Michelle Tea’s Writing

The struggle over representation for poor and working-class female writers occurs not just in the generic form of their writing, but in the formal elements of structure and style as well. Tea’s memoirs are organized in three distinctly different ways, yet they all share a common feature of the vignette or the short stand-alone narrative. Each section or chapter contains a narrative arc with its own complete rising action, and some form of resolution. Akin to the short story, the vignette has an affective or narrative impact in the absence of any other context. Tocarczyk suggests that working-class writers “choose experimental styles that represent the everyday reality of working people’s lives…writing from and for a working-class life in which both reading and writing must be done in short snippets of time” (Tocarczyk, Class Definitions 35). This argument suggests that the life-writing modes of memoir or confession, with their de-emphasis on a unified narrative flow (Felski 99), can potentially provide a more accessible or malleable narrative structure for those poor and working-class writers whose life-styles may not support the production of singular, linear texts.

While the breadth of Tea’s work not discussed here demonstrates her ability to write within a variety of forms, Tea’s memoirs do maintain a faithfulness to this structuring element of vignettes, although each of the vignettes is unique. The Passionate Mistakes is composed of five sections marked by titles, places, and dates, and the second edition contains a prologue. These sections are linear, but they do not add up neatly; reflecting on the bulk of Tea’s mid-late adolescence and early adulthood, there are lapses of time, sometimes over two years, with the weight of the text centering on Tea’s recent past. Valencia is divided into twenty-one chapters marked only by numbers, and its focus
is quite evenly spread over Tea’s mid-twenties, with little reflection on the past. This text is linear in that it is primarily set in a present that moves forward, but the vignette style creates a thickness of stops, starts, and pauses across overlapping moments. The Chelsea Whistle pushes the potential for memoir to capture the breadth of a life to its greatest depth, slowly moving from Tea’s early childhood, lingering in adolescence, and culminating in her emotional break with her mother in early adulthood. Composed of thirty-four linear episodes captured by cleverly descriptive titles, this text makes use of the contained form of short vignettes to thoroughly examine power, desire, and emotions across multiple but not discrete experiences.

Tea’s writing style throughout her set of texts conforms to and troubles shared literary conventions performed in the genre of memoir and within some poor and working-class women’s writing. In her introduction to Calling Home: Working-Class Women’s Writings, An Anthology (1990), Janet Zandy describes working-class women’s texts as “accessible, straightforward, with a sense of immediate and direct revelation”, at the same time as she insists that they “def[y] easy categorization” (Zandy, Calling Home 12). While I contend that the sense of immediacy Zandy foregrounds is intrinsic to the breathless, almost stream-of-consciousness style that characterizes Tea’s prose, I suggest that there is a potentially limiting strand of thought in literary theory on poor and working-class writing that insists that poor and working-class texts be taken at face value. The issue, aptly articulated by in Rimstead’s essay “Between Theories and Anti-Theories: Moving Towards Marginal Women’s Subjectivity”, is that the struggle to render poor and working-class texts as subjects of knowledge risks their being collapsed into objects of knowledge if they are approached by literary critics using alienating or exclusionary
“Theory” (Rimstead, *Between Theories* 191-192). Thus, there is a circuitous concern over the use of language in and about texts written by and about poor and working-class subjects that assumes both must be invested in transparency; while this concern serves to maintain a closeness with the text itself, I caution that it can signify a refusal to register the potential for poor and working-class female writers to use abstract literary devices and language. As much as conditions of materiality are certainly central to many poor and working-class women’s texts, I challenge the critical desire to place an *a priori* limit on what these texts can do.

In her introduction to the edited volume *Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature* (2011), Tokarczyk puts forward a more flexible approach to this issue of (mis)representation, urging the critic of working-class literature to perform the role of a “bridge between working-class and academic sensibilities” (Tokarczyk, *Critical Approaches* 4). Rather than suggest that the experiences of being poor or working class may help equip some scholars more than others to incorporate the nuances of class into academia and literary criticism, I offer that it may be more fruitful to recognize that all critics have class knowledge—class is not only important for the poor or the working-class. The relevant issue is that academia is an institution with private interests wherein the critic of marginalized literature is responsible for translating community or cultural knowledge into academic, disciplinary language. Wary of the potential to elevate criticism over the literary text itself, I nonetheless consider the critical task of analysis to be an exciting and productive opportunity to combine theoretical texts with literary texts in an effort to expand representation, specifically within the realm of academic discourse.
For instance, while Tea’s prose captures a sense of immediacy through accessible language, the content of her writing is anything but simple. Rather, Tea’s writing style demonstrates a highly stylized and skilled mastery of the vignette. The excerpted passage below from Tea’s *The Chelsea Whistle* expresses what I argue is a profound material consciousness of poor white female embodiment alongside a highly developed literary style of metaphor and description. This scene is the first moment that Tea’s body comes into view in the memoir’s opening chapter, “Sicko”:

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We got to play dead…Playing dead was hard and took practice—you kept your eyes open and you didn’t blink, and your eyeballs got drier and drier until it seemed you’d go nuts if you couldn’t snap them shut, and everything blurred and the ball of your eye seemed to twist in its socket. And you held your body still, no breath coming and going like kids on a hot day dashing to and from the backyard while a mother is trying to clean or pay bills or just have one damn second of peace, just to think, and she says, You're in or you're out. That’s like your breath when you’re playing dead—it’s in or out. (Tea, *Chelsea Whistle* 2).
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At the outset of this paragraph, the phrase “we got to play dead” sets up the game of imitating death as pleasurable, the “we got” giving object status to the game as something desirable that can be accessed at will (Tea *Chelsea Whistle* 2). Tea is quick to elevate the game by attaching a value to it, something that was both “hard and took practice” (2). Tea locates both the difficulty and the pleasure of this activity within her body, in the tense strain of her eyes to remain open against their involuntary “twist” (2). The movement of a muscle spasm is contrasted to the overall sense of stillness that signifies being dead, the lack of inhaling or exhaling that dramatizes the routine of the game. Tea invigorates the simplicity of a childish pastime with metaphorical energy to unwind the political and sensual implications of what it can mean to inhabit the body of a poor, white, American girl.
In a swift move, Tea yokes this binary of breathing—“in or out”—to the idea of transgression, a theme that threads itself powerfully throughout Tea’s reflections on her girlhood (Tea 2). If her breath—or her lack of breath—is at once what defines her body as the object of the game in relationship to her friends, it is simultaneously what marks her body as temporally different but also linked to that of “a mother” through their shared gender (2). As the very thing that must pass repetitively through the boundary of home versus the street, this notion of “in or out” captures her feeling of embodiment (both pleasurable and practiced) as she moves through the spaces where the game and her body take on different, although not un paralleled, meanings (2). As she describes later, part of the fantasy of her body in this position is that it is “like a model”, inciting a state of feeling “cramped and proud” (3).

Significantly, the issue of poor and working-class anxiety over “bills” and its gendered dimension is foundational in this metaphor; it is the mother’s constrained relationship to financial worry and to caring for the inside of the poor and working-class home that are what can cast Tea “out” to the street or allow her to stay “in”. Thus, in signifying a moment of unbecoming (playing dead), Tea elucidates what other powerful disavowals this submissive action performs; to move “in or out” “like kids on a hot day” is what can interrupt the mother, what can disrupt the mother’s repetitious connection to a system of economic and gender inequality (Tea 2). It can, simultaneously, be what casts her “out” of her mother’s favor and “in” to the street with her friends. The ambiguity of producing pleasure or struggle in the either/or of “in or out” signifies Tea’s own recognition of and transgression of the power relations embedded in the unstable binaries between being/unbecoming, inside/outside, home/public space, and girl/mother. Thus,
against the notion that the poor and working-class writer and critic must serve a project of accessibility and transparency, my reading of Tea’s passage posits that her prose elucidates a complex layering of political and embodied consciousness that demands careful consideration and submission to her metaphorical density.

As shown in the above passage, Tea’s writing style also expresses innovation in the use of dialogue. Felski suggests that one of the adjustments made to traditional autobiography by contemporary life writing is the inclusion of dialogue (Felski 89), an addition that adds a fictive element to the text in its reproduction of spoken language. Supported by Coles and Zandy’s insistence on the diverse aesthetic approaches of multivocality within the working-class literary canon (Coles and Zandy xxiv), I suggest that throughout Tea’s memoirs she alters the conventions of dialogue in two distinct ways, and for two varying but connected political projects. The first intervention Tea performs is the refusal to use quotation marks; her reflections on the spoken language of others are marked instead by italics. This intervention refutes the formality of high literature in a bold move that refuses to elevate the speech of others above her own written language. It also grounds all forms of illocutions within Tea’s control, making transparent their utterance on the page as subject to her deliberate and conscious reinscription of them. This strategy increases both her narrative agency in the recollection of dialogue, and asserts her confidence in her own intellectual processes. The second innovation Tea performs with the grammar surrounding dialogue is the absence of possessive pronouns or nouns attached to illocutionary phrases. Rather than introducing or illuminating dialogue with a person’s name or descriptive phrases like “she says” or “I said”, the difference between each speaker is determined by the contrast to Tea’s own speech acts. 
which are signified through the capitalization of each word in Tea’s phrase. I suggest that this action is a provocative feminist reformation of language through an insistence on the autonomy and strength of Tea’s speech acts against those with whom she engages. These repetitions of chains of capitalized words effect a form of urgency, emphasis, and authority in Tea’s statements. These small, yet committed, transgressions of the conventions of grammar disrupt the rules of what dialogue “should” look like in literature, and particularly what kind of agency formally untrained poor and working-class queer female subjects possess (as writers and as written subjects).

One intention of working-class women writers, Tocarczyk emphasizes, is to describe power relations and experiences beyond the simple categorical imperative of “labor” (Tocarczyk, Critical Approaches 13). I suggest that the content of Tea’s prose explicitly grapples with the meaning of labor, specifically by linking embodiment with exteriority and an always self-reflexive consciousness of the self in intimate proximity to broader workings of gender and class power. The following three passages from Tea’s memoirs illustrate how Tea utilizes the aesthetic style of the list or litany to make connections between the mundane and powerful effects of particular forms of sexualized labor on her subjectivity. What is common to all three selections are an awareness of her female embodiment and her lack of class power as constitutive of her choice to be a sex-worker. Tea’s gender and class inequality become more visible to her during these relationships. While mitigating some of her class inequality by temporarily gaining access to money, prostitution doesn’t function to alleviate her overall class location, or help her to transcend it. Instead, like other forms of labor that are over-determined by class location, her participation in sex-work increases her class-consciousness.
Back when it was this surreal thing I had started doing, why, because my girlfriend was, our friends were, and then suddenly I had to move out of my parent’s house and tell me, how does a person support themselves. I was such a child right then, I understood nothing, how people paid bills, rent, bought food, how did they afford it. Whoring was the first and only way I had ever supported myself [... ] I mean, I couldn’t even think about the whole world stretched out there forever and me alone in the centre of it, having to take care of myself. (The Passionate Mistakes 131)

I could whore. I had done it, vowed I would never do it again because it was so gross and weird, and I had actually indulged in a New-Agey prayer to the cosmos, promising to never again participate in such a negative profession if it would please send me a job, and the universe did in fact get me a job, the one at the courier company that I was trying to get fired from [...] Was it ok for me to do this? When I thought back to what it’d been like, my memories were soaked in a hazy liquor of confusion and panic. I realized how much better I was now, my shit was really together, and if I had done a pretty good job of handling it back when I was such a mess, now I’d be a champ. (Valencia 46-47)

Steph had gotten me a job as a prostitute with her agency […] The cab dropped me off at a variety of men’s homes, I dashed inside, fucked them, left with money, and was delivered to another man. It was a whirlwind, a blur. A landscape of heaving chests, scribbled with hair and hung with belly, corrugated with ribs. Each man astounded me, again and again, with his complete obliviousness to my hate and my absence. I was not there, except when a spool of rage would suddenly unfurl itself and shake me. The men had rented the space between my legs for one hour, and that is what they occupied themselves with, nothing more (The Chelsea Whistle 316).

Within each selection above, the materiality of sex-work is described with a sense of intangibility: “surreal”, “hazy”, and “a blur” are Tea’s responses to a specific form of classed and gendered labor that has been culturally sanctioned as excessive and abject. Drawing on the form of the litany, Tea’s prose link together observations of both quotidian and traumatic experiences. What Tea’s reflections speak to is a kind of disembodiment, a kind of unbeing, a “not there” that is endemic to many forms of poor and working-class labor, and not prostitution alone. Further, simply coming into labor neither mitigates nor erases the type of inequality that led to that particular form of labor
in the first place. In these brief images of how struggles for class power take place within and across her body, Tea’s passages anchor sex-work within a poor and working-class literary model of labor, while they also insist on the over-determined gender inequality of women. As this discussion on style and form demonstrates, Tea’s prose draws strength from the conventions of memoir, feminist confession, and working-class women’s writing in her articulations of queer feminist working-class subjectivity.

**Reading Class into Subjectivity and Identification in Michelle Tea’s Writing**

What forms of subjectivity become possible for poor and working-class female subjects within the genre of memoir? Quinby posits that memoirs “construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous” and is simultaneously “externalized” (Quinby 299). In contrast to the subject of traditional autobiography, she suggests that the “I” of memoir draws on relationships with others in order to make sense of and locate an understanding of the self. Smith and Watson echo this assertion that memoir performs a very different type of function between the speaking subject and the external world than autobiography; instead of writing as an independent subject who has overcome the constraints of a context, the narrator of a memoir calls attention to her situatedness (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 4). Memoir can make visible the historical and social location of the narrator, and can expose the effects that context has on subjectivity (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 198). These claims theorize the “I” of memoir as a connected and interdependent “I”, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside the self, and between subject and object. Thus, Smith and Watson suggest that two kinds of lives emerge in the iteration of the subjective narrator of
memoir: the historical self that is observed by and connected to others, and the internal self to which only the narrator has access (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 5).

This framework for approaching subjectivity as a multifarious “I” rooted in a distinct historical moment has particular bearings on how a lack of class power can impact the self-articulations of poor and working-class female subjects. They at once suggest that poor and working-class female life-writers possess an awareness of the constraints of context on the development of their written subjectivity at the same time as they imply that these constraints serve as motivators to make visible these constraints through writing. The poor and working-class female subject of a memoir is thus doubly inscribed as poor and working-class by her own writing and by the historical and social conditions she brings to light in her text. While it may be desirable to then read poor and working-class female subjectivity as automatically transcending economic and gendered marginalization through articulating herself as a writing and written subject, the politics of representation—specifically the historical erasure of working-class female subjects as “subjects” of knowledge—are much more complicated. Rimstead reminds us that language is itself classed and gendered, and that to write within the language of the dominant culture requires both writing through and writing against cultural prohibitions about what the poor and working-class female subject can—and cannot—say (Rimstead, Remnants of Nation 225). As I have suggested throughout, there is a kind of ambivalence that both the writer and the reader of poor and working-class women’s writing must apply to the text. While the literary self-representation of poor and working-class women may achieve at least symbolic visibility, this act may also conjure up the “shame of being made visible and admitting powerlessness” as a poor or working-class woman (Rimstead,
Remnants of Nation 143). I will return to this specific relationship between poverty and shame in the next chapter.

The narrative voice that emerges in Michelle Tea’s memoirs is constrained by, resistant to, and conscious of her lack of class power, a lack that changes over time as Tea increases her proximity to forms of class power through writing. The act of writing memoir is a physical act that can illuminate the conditions of Tea’s embodied and felt experience through her inscription of her self within representations that mark her as poor and working-class. Janet Zandy proposes that it is specifically this working-class consciousness that urges the working-class writer to move her or his knowledge outward (Zandy, What We Hold In Common xiv). However, Tea’s consciousness is not limited to class, and her orientation to the world and to her texts is also structured by whiteness, queerness, and femaleness, all of which contribute to her particular feminist politics. The complexity of Tea’s subjectivity thus troubles an easy incorporation into a single ideological project, and urges forward a broadening of both feminist and working-class conceptions of subjectivity. As Tea’s subjective “I” traverses multiple social locations, the kind of work her texts perform is as disruptive as it is cohesive.

The question of whether a fluid or non-stable subjective “I” evokes an individual or community identity is a preoccupation in both feminist and working-class literary criticism. For example, Rita Felski suggests that feminist confession is “marked by a tension between a focus on subjectivity and a construction of identity which is communal rather than individualistic” (Felski 115). This issue is further taken up by the feminist critic Lori Saint-Martin, whose essay on feminist confession “Sexuality and Textuality Entwined: Sexual Proclamations in Women’s Confessional Fiction in Quebec” maintains
that “through the act of writing, which thus becomes a political act”, women’s self-writing can initiate a “move from individualism towards a conception of communal identity” (Saint-Martin 44). It is an assumption in feminist criticism that the broader relations of women’s sexual and gender oppression can create a process of identification wherein a female writer’s subjective “I” becomes de-personalized and therefore serves to connect women across a shared sense of gender inequality and/or a struggle for justice. While I maintain that Tea’s prose to a certain extent conforms to this feminist project of cross-identification between the reader and written subject via a shared understanding of gender inequality, I question the desirability of a concept that is too narrow to account for other aspects of being—specifically class, ethnicity, or sexuality—that interfere with this cohesive bond between the written subject and the reader. The notion of a communal female-gendered “I” ignores the ways in which poor and working-class female writers like Tea may specifically write against an assumption of a shared gendered experience that refuses to reconcile with class, race, and sexuality as determinants of oppression, resistance, and privilege.

In a similar vein, working-class literary criticism advocates for working-class writing to foreground the social and economic marginalization experienced by the poor and the working-class as a form of structural inequality. In “U.S. Working-Class Women’s Fiction”, Constance Coiner notes a preoccupation in working-class literary theory with the promotion of narratives of social change over those of individual determination or progress (Coiner 229). Coles and Zandy insist on valuing a text’s “agency and usefulness” for the community over the valorization of an individual (Coles and Zandy xxiv), arguing that working-class writing reflects being part of a community
with a specific history of solidarity and struggle (Coles and Zandy xxiii). While Coles and Zandy are careful to emphasize the diversity and heterogeneity of the working-class community, the working class as an implied community still figures as a monolith with a specific shape and form that invariably shapes and forms those whom it contains. This valuing of the group over the individual assumes that being poor or working-class immediately initiates a subject into a form of belonging, and that a working-class community is intrinsically inclusive. It posits that via writing oneself into a particular social history, one is invariably a part of that imagined social group. This notion fails to account for the power differentials that may continue to marginalize poor and working-class female subjects from either textual or community representation despite their self-articulations of being with or belonging to.

Analyses of Tea’s three memoirs can provide a necessary intervention into the reflections of both feminist and scholars of working-class writing that posit the act of writing as generative of a communal or shared identity and the implication that this writing of the self creates a kind of tangible community via these shared identifications. Drawing on both feminist and working-class literature, Tocarczyk observes that, “[g]iven the importance of solidarity in working-class communities and women’s desire for connection as evidenced in the work of many feminist theorists, it is not surprising that working-class women’s writing manifests a strong commitment to community” (Tocarczyk Class Definitions 20). However, there is a prescriptive element in these claims for inclusion that fails to specify what “community” may mean, and to whom it can give meaning. It also elides the possibility that feminist and/or poor and working-class women’s texts may challenge or resist notions of community, and that in so doing
they may reveal their membership to be exclusionary to poor and working-class women. Somewhat in this vein, Coiner surmises that the issue of exclusion and inclusion from dominant culture is a “fundamental tension” in working-class women’s writing (Coiner 225). However, I suggest that this same observation must be extended to include anxieties over belonging to sub-cultural groups as well, specifically communities of belonging around a shared sense of marginalization. Through a close reading, I take this issue up here to insist on the complexity of Tea’s subjectivity through and against what are assumed to be coherent feminist, queer, and working-class communities, and instead show how Tea’s work gestures to something other than an inclusive or communal feminist, queer, or working-class identity.

The vignette “Class” from The Chelsea Whistle perhaps best illustrates the terms of belonging across a complex range of contradictory loyalties to the politics of gender, class, race, and sexuality. “Class” is primarily occupied with the political and affective effects of the dissolution of Tea’s relationship with her mother following Tea’s double confession of her stepfather’s sexual abuse and of her lesbian sexuality. Tea evaluates the loss of intimacy with her mother against the increased intimacy of her new relationship with the upper-class, feminist, sex-worker Steph. Tea structures the vignette using four different scenarios through which to reinterpret the pain of her mother’s refusal to support her against her own mother’s fear that Tea will reject her “white-trash Chelsea upbringing” and “disown her” (Tea, The Chelsea Whistle 314). From the outset of “Class”, class privilege is positioned as outside the working-class family, as something that has the power not only to exclude, but destroy.
In the first part of the vignette, the desire for working-class solidarity is weighed against a desire for freedom from gendered and sexual violence. The family is cast as the site within which class identification and dis-identification occurs, and becomes the object that can be lost through the privileging of other forms of social bonding. Tea recalls Steph’s presence at “the confessional table” and how she had gauged Steph’s “steely, detached look” and “arrogance” as signs of strength to support Tea in their mutual feminist struggle against male violence (Tea, The Chelsea Whistle 314-315). Upon reflection, however, Tea is conscious that to her mother “it was the face of a rich girl sitting in a ramshackle kitchen…a voyeur to the shameful struggles of a dysfunctional working-class family” (315). In this moment, the threat of upper-class power to disrupt the cohesiveness of a working-class group is figured by the invasiveness of Steph’s gaze on the domestic scene between mother and daughter. In the following scene, a public meeting between Tea and her mother occurs in lieu of a Thanksgiving dinner Tea is attending with her new queer feminist friends. The figure of Steph haunts their interaction; as the arbiter of upper-class entitlement, Steph becomes a powerful metaphor for her mother of what has “damaged” Tea and her family (315). Steph’s class power enables Tea’s mother to distance herself from the sexual violence of her husband. Steph’s feminist politics and explicit lesbian sexuality are read by Tea’s mom in relation to Steph’s class power, thus positing a link between Tea’s new-found identity and her confession of sexual abuse. In this moment, heterosexual solidarity and class solidarity enact a form of defense against the threat induced by an outsider’s class power; Tea’s mother reinterprets Tea’s confessions of abuse and queerness as betrayals of her class and family structure. Concomitantly, Tea’s mother’s refusal to sympathize with Tea’s
confession constitutes another form of betrayal, which only further entrenches Tea’s intimacy with Steph.

In the third section of “Class”, Tea examines how membership within a queer feminist community requires an ongoing set of disavowals. Tea contrasts her own ambivalence towards Steph’s wealth with the critical view of her “white trash” identification that Steph and her rich queer feminist friends have (Tea, The Chelsea Whistle 317). To Tea, being “white trash” is equal to being “Polish” or “a dyke”, two other claims of being that create particular forms of belonging or exclusion across varied scales (317). For example, being Polish in Chelsea, Massachusetts is one form of a white working-class identity with specific ties to other white working-class ethnicities in a localized racial hierarchy that values whiteness over other racial identities (c.f. The Chelsea Whistle 52-54). Tea conveys how her desire to identify with her friends through a gesture of shared (if ironic) appreciation for her working-class identity instead distances her further from them. Tea performs a ritualistic act of identification with her mother that is simultaneously, in its longing for cohesion with her upper-class queer friends, an act of dis-identification that further fractures her sense of self. Tea throws a “white trash” party at her mother’s house by dressing up in her mother’s clothes and preparing traditional family food of macaroni and cheese and SPAM ham. Instead of “laughing with” Tea, Tea realizes they were “laughing at” her, a “difference” she “understands” (318). In their refusal to eat her food and Steph’s departure to go out dancing “with her friends” afterwards, Tea’s exclusion from the group is doubly insidious upon the recognition that she has betrayed her mother for a temporary state of inclusion (318, emphasis in original). This scenario highlights Tea’s retroactive consciousness that her membership
within this elite group of white wealthy queer feminists pivots both on her unequal relationship to Steph and on her denial of her class identity. Her acceptance in this elite group is temporary, suggesting that even the money she gains through prostitution affords her only a fleeting, and compartmentalized, participation in this community.

The final scene in “Class” again brings to light power differentials along class, race, sexuality, and gender lines. A trip to Steph’s friend’s Dinah’s “nouveau riche” family house in Connecticut for Thanksgiving demonstrates that acquiring class power and wealth late in life does not guarantee immunity from her friends’ classist critiques (Tea, The Chelsea Whistle 318). Tea’s inclusion in the home implicitly rests on her whiteness, a shared privilege between her and her peers that holds more cultural currency than her lack of economic and class privilege. Nonetheless, Tea is continually positioned as an outsider in her friend’s parents’ home, a sense of being “useless” in “their culture” (320). However, Tea’s refusal to coherently pass as one of them is symbolized in her decision to leave a menstrual bloodstain on their white couch-cushion (321). While Tea’s and Steph’s queer relationship threatens but ultimately fails to disrupt the neo-liberal sanctity of Dinah’s home, during Thanksgiving dinner Steph manages to accuse Dinah’s mom of being “oppressed” by her gendered servitude (320). Tea’s inclusion of Steph’s remark draws the vignette full circle to the original “confessional table” of Tea’s own house, wherein Steph sat in judgment of Tea’s mother. This looping across and between these parallel domestic settings highlights the family, and in particular the mother, as a conduit to class identification, but one that is complicated by her position as the gendered other within the family hierarchy. Connecting her mother’s “‘country’ aesthetic” to Dinah’s mother, Tea acknowledges the acquired class privilege that bestowed on another
“the money to really do it right” (320). In both identifying and dis-identifying with her mother, and, simultaneously with Dinah’s mother, Tea reveals a criss-crossing of gender and class allegiances that at the same time funnel through her sexual and political bond with Steph. Throughout “Class”, Tea demonstrates the unease with which identifications occur, and the losses and exclusions that are their result.

This vignette suggests that kinds of belonging to communities—in this case white, feminist, queer, and working-class communities—are purchased through avowals and disavowals that never fully link up into coherent or stable forms. As long as dominant or sub-cultural communities are ruled by an ethos of valuing the “group” over the “individual”, and as long as this “group” represents a binding kind of ideology, identification “with” or “as” will constitute a form of unfaithfulness toward other identities, experiences, and politics. In opposition to a story of class solidarity, this analysis of Tea’s vignette “Class” disturbs the image of drawing a positive identification from a positive relationship to an other. Instead, Tea highlights specifically how relations of inequality constitute forms of pleasure with and longings for both what is lost and what cannot be, and how the act of self-writing through memoir can gesture backwards towards past inequalities to articulate new political possibilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has not sought to simply “make visible” a marginalized woman’s voice but to interpret the complex ways in which she herself has dramatized her own complex class, gender, and sexual identifications and disidentifications through writing. I have argued that the genre of memoir is a particularly malleable genre of life-writing that allows poor and working-class women writers such as Tea to develop written
subjectivities that are necessarily contradictory, incoherent, and excessive. Through an analysis of the political stakes in writing articulated by both feminist life-writing critics and scholars of poor and working-class literature, I have argued for maintaining an attention to the intersectional aspects of identity—specifically that of class—when evaluating a text’s generic, formal, and artistic qualities.

Michelle Tea’s writing demonstrates the relevance of the effects of materiality on embodiment as a crucial component of artistic practice, forms of belonging, and the development of identity. Amidst complex avowals and disavowals of assumed categories, politics, and relationships, Tea offers narrative glimpses into the experience of growing up outside the realm of a socially viable form of girlhood. This is a girlhood where just being alive is a defiant act, where alternatives for what is possible take shape in the very moment of daring to write the self into discourse.
Chapter 2. Loving Shame/Shaming Love: Ambivalence, Desire, and Identification in Michelle Tea’s The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America

Introduction

How might a poor/working-class queer female writer make use of the affect of shame? Why might a working-through of shame, or a tracking of the work that shame does, enable a feminist, queer, and class-conscious narrative? The “writer” to which I refer here has a double signification: both I, as critic, and Michelle Tea, as author, are implicated in these questions; this chapter seeks to account for and propel further the political project of exploring shame’s attachment to poor and working-class subjectivity. This can be a negative and damaging association: shame can be ascribed to the poor and working-class subject (as in the performative injunction “Shame on you [for being poor, for failing to succeed, for living in that neighborhood, etc.]!”), and it can be internalized through what Patricia Hill Collins (1999) has called the power of “controlling images”, whereby marginalized people identify themselves with derogatory cultural stereotypes. Simultaneously, there can be positive and generative associations between shame and poverty, specifically in the defiant sense of pride that emerges from the self-naming of individuals associated with impoverished (and racialized) groups (for example: “white trash”, “refugee”, “hillbilly”, and “ghetto”), as well as the possibility for collective solidarity around these identifications. This is, then, an ambivalent relation. Roxanne Rimstead (2001) reflects on this connection in Remnants of Nation: “[T]he experiences of shame and resistance are often complexly intertwined, if not inseparable. Resistance often grows out of shame. Both emerge as powerful elements in subversions of negative constructions of identity” (Rimstead 26). Exploring this ambivalent connection of shame
to sites of identity-making and resistance—and the specifically queer and feminist politics that it can propel—is a motivation directing this chapter.

What is the connection between identity and shame, and how might this relation inform a reading of a queer feminist working-class memoir such as Michelle Tea’s The Passionate Mistakes? Given the attachment of shame to a diversity of abject identities including the poor and working-class, the preoccupation with shame within critical discourse is a logical corrective to its negative associations. Recent critical theory, specifically queer and anti-racist, has turned to affect theory to provide a lens through which to explore shame without moralizing or re-entrenching subjects in restrictive ideology. The discourse on shame as an affect in queer theory deconstructs the assumptive link between queerness and shame. Of particular value to this discourse is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on the subject, particularly in her text (2003) Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity. While containing a wealth of insights, there are two tenets of her argument—and their broader implications—that I use and develop in my analysis below. The first is the notion that shame is connected to identity; the second, to which I will return in the final section of my analysis, is that shame is productive.

Sedgwick claims that shame is the place “where the question of identity arises most originarily and most relationally” (Sedgwick 37, emphasis in original). In an effort to resist the totalizing and essentializing of identity as something that is stable, inherent, or even knowable, Sedgwick nonetheless advocates for an interpretation of shame as an affect with the potential to enrich the ways in which the political—and deeply personal—investments in identity are approached. She writes,
Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Blazons of shame, the “fallen face” with eyes down and head averted—and, to a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge. But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. (Sedgwick 36)

Shame performs what Sedgwick calls a “double movement” of creating an awareness of the self while simultaneously drawing the self toward another (Sedgwick 37). This emphasis on relationality as a determinant of identity in Sedgwick’s description is drawn from the work of the playwright-cum-psychologist Silvan Tomkins, particularly his analysis of the affect of shame. Tomkins’ writing is perhaps so appreciated by queer literary critics because of its rich language, dramatic descriptions of affects in an almost exhaustive range of possibility, and most importantly, what Sedgwick describes as a “resistance” to dualistic or “heterosexist teleologies” (Sedgwick 99). Tomkins’ discussions of shame, and affect more broadly, provide a provocative framework through which to examine how Tea works through shame in her text.

In a volume of his work edited by Sedgwick and Adam Frank, Tomkins describes shame as the affect that “strikes deepest into the heart of man [sic]”: he insists, “shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost” (Tomkins 136). This “phenomenological distinction” between the self and the other is the moment of “interrupting identification” to which Sedgwick refers above. Key to both Sedgwick’s and Tomkins’ description of shame is the idea that it is an instance where the difference
between the self and the other is accentuated. Shame forces an awareness of the boundary of the self specifically in relation to the boundary of an other.

Of crucial import for Tomkins and for my analysis of *The Passionate Mistakes* is the linkage between shame and the positive affect of interest, or, the link between shame and desire. Tomkins argues that “shame is an innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment. Like disgust, it operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both” (Tomkins 134). He continues, “[T]he innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy” (Tomkins 134). Significantly, this reduction of interest must be incomplete in order for shame to occur; shame is the self-debasing response to a desire to reconnect with the object or, as Sedgwick says, to “reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” (Sedgwick 36). Thus, shame “makes identity” in an interrupting moment between interpreting the self in a negative way in relation to an object of desire. This link between a negative interpretation of self and a sustained desire for the object is how shame seems to function so powerfully. Tomkins describes this as a “paradoxical consequence” of how “the same positive affect which ties the self to the object also ties the self to shame” (Tomkins 138).

This relationship between shame and desire is a structuring aspect of *The Passionate Mistakes* that I will track in my analysis below. Tea’s text is a catalogue of experience in which shame—both its fierce claiming and its disavowal—figures as central. That the feeling of shame is central to this text might be gestured to by the foregrounding of the sticky relation between desire and regret in the text’s title, which pronounces the text as an affectively loaded powerful turning back on a life to assess how
“I” happened. In this assertive link between “passion” and “mistakes”, Tea points to a connection between positive and negative emotional states, what I will argue is intrinsic to the experience of shame. Tomkins describes the shame response as “a deeply ambivalent act”, as a “turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self” (Tomkins 137). Sedgwick links the physicality of shame (eyes averted, head down) to reading (Sedgwick 40), and I would push that metaphor further here to include specific acts of writing that seek to make external experiences that would otherwise be felt as deeply private, significantly those experiences that involve the body. Tea’s text is a performance of this metaphor in its complex working through of shame. There is clearly a lot at stake when queer and poor and working-class women write memoir, specifically when their texts engage with desire, violence, abuse, prostitution, and poverty. This chapter is written against the notion that these elements are shameful in and of themselves; instead it attempts to examine Tea’s own grasp on them. That is, I seek to detach these experiences from a moralistic lens by thinking about shame not as a necessary condition of being but as an affect attached to objects and things that “happen”. Drawing on Rimstead’s claim that poor and working-class female authors can “move beyond shame to a place of resistance” (Rimstead 143), I suggest that the act of writing is in itself a performative act of transformation and resistance that moves shame outward and thus exposes the full range of its powerful—and sometimes productive—effects. With these preliminaries in mind, this chapter sets out to perform two critical moves: to insist on a class analysis that attends to how a classed social location is an embodied relation that influences the kinds of objects one may desire and the affects generated in relationship to those objects; and, to account for the ambivalent affect of shame in
proximity to desire, identification, and the production of feminist polemics, specifically within poor/working-class subjectivity.

**Loving Shame/Shaming Love**

Recalling Sedgwick’s assertion that the question of identity emerges in close proximity to shame, Rimstead suggests that poor and working-class women’s writing can articulate “previously unspoken questions of identity” that are intimately connected to shame in their admissions of powerlessness (Rimstead 143). *The Passionate Mistakes* is preoccupied with this question of identity, a question that emerges in complex avowals and disavowals closely tied to instances of shame. Tea’s sexual development—and the chain of identifications and disidentifications that result from it—gains prominence from the second section of *The Passionate Mistakes* onwards. These chapters will take up the majority of my analysis, but I will gesture to a few key moments in the first chapter as a foundation here. Tea’s growing sexuality is signaled in this first chapter of the text, “Goth-N-Roll High School”, in relationship with both boys and girls, but it distinctly lacks an object of desire, or, for that matter, a specific relationship to shame. For example, with her female best friend and eventual enemy, Joez, Tea describes her desire as an expansive feeling of awe that emerges from within but that is independent of anything or anyone:

> At night it was just me and Joez and bunches of spiders that spun webs all over the wood of the pier, you had to be careful not to lean your head against them. Me and Joez liked them, they were the pets of our little clubhouse where we would pull the corks from our bottles and drink. Don’t ask me what we talked about but we never shut up. We were death rock but we weren’t depressed, though Joez did have her moments and there were more and more as time progressed. I would smoke, Marlboro Lights, and Joez wouldn’t. The more I drank the more I smoked the more I talked. The more I drank the more in love I fell. With everything (Tea 37).
While examining her relationship with Joez is central to the driving force of this section of the memoir, their closeness—“just me and Joez”—supports and nourishes the wild experiences for which Tea yearns and describes in her early adolescence. Significantly, at this point in the text Tea actively disidentifies with depression, which provides an important index for what will eventually become her painful experience of overwhelming depression and anxiety. In response to Joez’s growing depression, Tea reiterates, “But I wasn’t sad. I was actually a little embarrassed at my cheerfulness” (Tea 53). Eventually, it is Joez’s “tormented” negativity that becomes “too much” for Tea (Tea 54), and their friendship dissolves as Tea moves on from their gothic friendship, literally figured by her decision to start wearing colors.

Again, with one of her many boyfriends, Lou, Tea confesses, “I was drunk and in love with him for about two weeks, the maximum time I could spend with a boy before the curious panic set in and I’d have to end it” (Tea 46). This “curious panic” and the reflection that Lou was “probably a fag” are the depths to which Tea describes their connection. Their failed attempt at sex doesn’t elicit any kind of emotional response save for the triumph of it qualifying as an experience: “we went and told everyone we had done it anyway cause we were sick of being virgins” (46). While these early relations of intimacy and desire certainly gesture toward what will later become Tea’s queer identification, I suggest that what is of the greatest significance is the fact that the gothic subculture to which she belongs shares a counter-cultural value system that sets the tone for a similar set of values surrounding class. This similarity, I argue, serves to negate feelings of class shame that could otherwise have emerged at this important time in Tea’s subjective development, and instead makes other connections possible.
In her essay, “U.S. Working-Class Women’s Fiction”, Constance Coiner argues that a “fundamental tension” emerges within working-class women’s writing about feelings of inclusion or exclusion from culture (Coiner 225). This tension captivates a central theme in *The Passionate Mistakes*, where Tea is located as an insider and an outsider in complicated ways. Alongside Tea’s youthful identification as poor and working-class, her adolescence is fueled by her positive identification as a death rocker. As both a cultivated and a marginalized identification, her membership in this punk group allows Tea a form of inclusion that works against other cultural sites from which her lack of class power excludes her, particularly mass consumption and the hegemonic norm of upward mobility. For example, Tea’s hometown Chelsea, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, is referred to as “poor, a bad city getting worse”, where the phrase “Getting Out Of Chelsea” is “a kind of sport” in which her family hopefully engages (Tea 51). But the Boston subculture that Tea travels to every weekend centers on Kenmore Square, the Public Gardens, and the Boston Common, free and public spaces where Tea and her friends and various other punks hang out and drink alcohol. While her friends live in various suburbs of Boston and are “hated by all the other Boston subcultures” because of the assumption that they come from “rich families”, Tea’s own participation in this group suggests otherwise. Employed by a variety of part-time “crappy jobs” (Tea 35), the costs of participating in their culture are relatively low for Tea: alcohol, occasional records and concert tickets, and old black clothing and jewelry purchased at Goodwill (Tea 47). The economic accessibility of being a goth punk enables Tea to purchase a form of belonging that is possible from a position of little class power, while simultaneously not exposing or reinforcing this lack. Tea’s adolescent identification as a marginalized and alternative
punk rocker demonstrates how the shame that could be attached to social and economic exclusion is subverted and reclaimed in a form of belonging.

The connection between desire and shame—and the forms of avowals and disavowals that emerge from this relation—distinctly develop in Tea’s relationship with her boyfriend, Ian, upon graduating high school. A focus on this relationship is central to the second chapter of the memoir, “Young Swingers”. Again, accounting for the class dimensions of their union is crucial to an analysis of how identification comes out of shame. Tea herself frames the initial moments of their relationship within an economy of work—not of desire. At the outset of their relationship, Tea is employed at a café, and Ian approaches Tea there as if she is an object, stating to his friend that he is “gonna get her, ‘cause I’m a pioneer” (Tea 55, emphasis in original). The none-too-thinly veiled metaphor of conquering Tea-as-land is sequentially linked to the assertion that he is “an art student” and “lived in a big house” in “an area he called “Stab-n-Kill”” (55). What is striking about Tea’s descriptions of the formation of her relationship with the commanding Ian is how profoundly cognitive and utilitarian it is. Tea “let him” touch her on their first date, culminating in the flat inevitability of “Ian was my boyfriend” (56). Tea “decided” to be in love with him in order to have sex with him, and while she hadn’t “expected” to have an orgasm, Tea then “pretended” to in order to satisfy Ian (56). In effect, Ian shames Tea with his statement “All my other girlfriends came that way”, disappearing the pleasure she did have (“I Still Had Fun”) into her forced identification with the other girls (as feeling pleasured) to cover up her difference from them (56, emphasis in original). The sterility through which she describes what is figured as sex is strangely conjoined to her subsequent reflection, “So I quit that café and I got a Good
Job, a job with benefits, a job that vaguely utilized the graphic arts training I had gotten in high school” (56). I suggest that this conceptual bracketing of the beginning of her relationship with Ian to a larger and more detailed description on work is the first instance of how Tea comes to figure her entire relationship with Ian as a form of sexual labor, eventually likening it to sex work itself. Furthermore, it immediately connects the issue of money, and therefore of class, to what is at this point the still spectral form of Tea’s desire.

Tea begins to conceive of herself as having a definitive role in relationship to Ian as a correlation to his desire for her and her shame of what she has to do to keep him satisfied. Tea states, “Ian wanted to have sex all the time…I would be expected to do something…I was his girlfriend” (Tea 67). She describes sex as a job wherein she has to “take care” of Ian’s needs and therefore settles on the quickest and easiest way to please him—through intercourse. Rather than a way of rerouting pleasure in response to her own desire, her sexual maneuvering to “simply lie there” is a method to avoid the “hurt”, “numbing”, “cramped”, and “weird” feelings that are often the result of sex with Ian (66-67). She admits that “sometimes it felt good”, but more often than not sex is doing what “he wanted” her to do, things she is “supposed to like”; she emphasizes, “there was a lot that I was supposed to like that I didn’t” (67). The negative affects she begins to attach to Ian, specifically a feeling of “hate” (66, 67, 71), “disgust” (70), “anger and revulsion” (79), are all associated with his sexual expectations of her and her lack of control in changing them.

It is of significance that her initial identification with sex work, specifically with prostitution, derives from an identification of herself in relationship to Ian. On a trip to
Montreal that she financed for herself and Ian, Tea describes herself as “miserable” (Tea 64), a combination of a negative reaction to birth control pills, the oversexed Ian, and an allusion to abuse, referred to as “other stuff that I’d worked out in my head” (Tea 66).

Sitting in a strip-club on the verge of an uncontrollable fit of tears, Tea identifies herself with the woman on stage through a feeling of shame for both of them:

I do not want to perpetuate the idea of Sex Worker as desperate and miserable, but this woman did not look like she was enjoying herself. I felt sick. I felt so f**ked up, I couldn’t look at the boy and I couldn’t look at the woman and I knew if I opened my mouth the crying would come…I thought about the woman leading the man into the hotel, and this woman here, unfolding her labia for me and my boyfriend and I thought if I had to choose I’d be a whore. (Tea 70)

This passage aptly demonstrates Tomkins’ argument that “shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness” (Tea 136). This moment is a complex working through of shame, as in it Tea makes a couple of powerful moves. Her first reaction is to be ashamed for the woman on stage through what Tomkins deems as “vicarious shame” (Tomkins 159), which is the empathic shame for another. In this case the other (who is like the self) is provocatively displaying herself for the assumed desire of Tea and Ian, a desire Tea does not return but instead twists into a feeling of self-consciousness around her own shameful experience of being watched.

The allusion of sexual abuse above resurfaces later in the text, (an issue to which I will return in my discussion below), when Tea’s experience of being watched by her stepfather through tiny holes drilled in her bedroom and bathroom walls comes to the fore (Tea 132). In this moment, however, Tea disidentifies with the woman on stage through a powerful disavowal that pivots on an avowal; envisioning herself as already in a relation of coerced sexual exhibition through her stepfathers gaze and engaged in unfulfilling
sexual labor with Ian, Tea elevates the role of the prostitute over that of the stripper in an effort to recuperate her own subjectivity and to distance herself from sexual shame.

Again, this identification through shame becomes protracted when Tea reports her association to Ian, whose shaming response further entrenches both Tea’s feelings of self-consciousness and her identification with prostitution. Ian interprets Tea’s idea that she is “capable” of prostitution as a desire to be a prostitute, regaling her with an “angry” and “disgusting” “descriptive tangent of exactly what it would entail” (Tea 70). Certainly, an element of his resistance to her feeling is connected to the stigma ascribed to prostitution as a distinctly classed and gendered relation, a relation that becomes increasingly obvious to Tea as she connects their sex to a form of unpaid gendered labor. Tea’s response to Ian is a shamed response, as she “couldn’t speak” and instead processes his reaction internally: “I was thinking about the millions of times he fucked me and how I always felt nothing and wanted it to be over and that’s probably how it was for those women on the street” (Tea 70). Against the purpose of the shaming tactic Ian employs with his angry description to encourage Tea to take back her identification with prostitution, the ambivalence Tea feels toward Ian increases. As they lie in bed following this confrontation and Tea cries, she reflects that she “hated him for not touching” her and that she would have “hated him if he had” (Tea 71). While claiming to feel “hate” toward Ian either way, the ambivalence with which Tea describes hate is more closely connected to the feeling of shame than of contempt. As Tomkins insists, “shame-humiliation is the affect linked with love and identification, and contempt-disgust the negative affect linked with individuation and hate” (Tomkins 139). The primary difference between the two is that the object of shame is not given up in an instance of shame, whereas in contempt-
disgust it is (Tomkins 139). In this scene, however, Ian is still installed as the desiring object (not the object of desire) that produces shame in her through her sustained interest in preserving their connection. This contributes to a deepening entrenchment of her ambivalent relationship to shame.

It is vis-à-vis her relationship with Ian that Tea begins to clarify the direction of her sexual desires. Through her desire, and out of intensifying heterosexual shame, Tea moves towards a series of new identifications, specifically “bisexual” (Tea 60), “gay” (67), and “lesbian” (84). Through casual triangulated sexual encounters with Ian and two other girls, Nadia and Tina, Tea articulates her sexual desire for women. From the outset of these encounters, Tea’s affective investment has markedly changed: she muses, “The feelings were intense, this ocean I was on the verge of plunging into” (59). Against the sterile and negative descriptors that characterize her relationship to Ian, Tea generates a wealth of positive and pleasurable associations around her new objects of desire. Women are described as “great” (59, 68), “incredible” (68), and “terrific” (68), inspiring a sense of awe that poses a new relation of ambivalence for Tea: “the idea was better than the reality. It was like if I want women I should want all women” (62). Through this bifurcated bond with Ian, Tea’s sexual experience of women lacks specificity in her inability to claim as her object of desire a woman on her own terms. As long as Ian remains her “reality” (79), preserved as the object that loves her and shames her with his love, her own desires are incapable of moving her desired object beyond the status of “symbol” (64).

Tea finds clarity in her identification as “lesbian” through initiating relationships with women separately from Ian. Each of these encounters emerges from a place of
desire and produce new sensations of shame that lead to intensifications of Tea’s sense of self. As Sedgwick insists, shame both “interrupts” and “makes identity” in a “dynamic” relation (Sedgwick 36). Tea’s first girlfriend Anya is the first lesbian she meets (Tea 71), a femme party-girl who is more of a “fag” than a lesbian, “a drag queen” (Tea 73). Employed as a live-in-nanny, Anya’s seemingly similar class location does not transcend their other differences. Anya’s obsession with the superficial immediately translates into a desire to get Tea to look more like her and to “wear something different” (Tea 74). This desire for Tea to be like her includes a desire for Tea to break up with Ian, something Tea is as yet unwilling to do: during an afternoon date where Anya’s friend paints her face “to look like Anya’s”, Tea is ridiculed and shamed by Anya and her friend for having a boyfriend (Tea 77). In order to identify with Anya, Tea is required to identify as Anya, and in the process to give up Ian. But Tea’s desire for Anya is “uncomfortable” and forced (Tea 73); she feels like she is “supposed” to like her and that to do so she requires “a script” (Tea 73). Thus, Tea’s identification with Anya is only temporary, as “the girls and the clubs felt good but good like an amusement park or a waterslide, something too exhilarating to live in” (Tea 79). Through her disavowal of Anya’s desire, a moment that pivots on her entrenched feelings of shame surrounding Ian, Tea intensifies her desire for a deeper and more stable connection with a woman.

Significantly, it is through her relationship with Kelly, a poor/working-class woman (Tea 79, 85), that Tea finds strength in her identification as lesbian and is able to relinquish her bond with Ian. I suggest that this shared class position forms the basis for both the surge of physical desire she directs towards Kelly and for what becomes a new and ambivalent relation to shame around class. It is Kelly who is the first person to tap
into Tea’s desire, a desire she “had no idea” she “wanted”, by kissing her in a way that is “perfect” and “like a dream remembered” (Tea 78). Tea confesses, “I was so attracted to her, I had never been so attracted to a person. It seemed to jump right off my chest” (Tea 86). This certainty of her object of desire makes Tea “happy” (Tea 84), an affective position that appears only twice throughout throughout *The Passionate Mistakes*, a happiness that enables her to disengage from Ian simultaneously with confirming her identification as a lesbian (Tea 84). However, this disidentification with the shame surrounding her connection to Ian, and this positive moment of identification as lesbian through an identification with Kelly as a lesbian, dissolves upon the knowledge that Kelly is not “out” and has a boyfriend herself, casting their affair into the realm of the “forbidden” and the “secret” (Tea 85). Specifically because Kelly is ashamed of being known as gay by her working-class family (Tea 85), their relationship takes on a layer of shame that blooms into a form of shame directed at Kelly, and, I argue, directed at Tea’s own poor and working-class subjectivity. This shame has a distinct relation to class, as it is a lack of class power—specifically the privilege to “be” what one “desires”—that shames Kelly into silence around her sexuality. As Michelle Tokarczyk (2008) reflects in the introduction to her book *Class Definitions*, shame functions to keep working-class and poor women in “their place, for it tells them they deserve no more” (Tokarczyk 22). Kelly’s inability or refusal to identify as an “out” lesbian is fueled by a shame that is linked to her class position. However, Tea’s desire to further externalize her new identity as a lesbian resists this connection between shame and sexuality, effectively trumping her own poor and working-class identification with Kelly.
It is in proximity to the class freedom and privilege of other lesbian and queer activists that Tea recognizes her growing shame about Kelly and reifies her identification as a politicized lesbian. She describes envying these “radical girls” who were “professional queer[s], they were loud about it, proudly obnoxious” (Tea 87). Demonstrating what Tomkins calls the “shame of an other” (Tomkins 155), Tea explains Kelly is “not out of the closet” and links this to her newfound Queer Nation ideology that “closeted queers were our worst enemy” (Tea 87). The lack of “respect” her “new friends” direct toward Kelly is combined with a recognition that “some of the girls” desire Tea, too (Tea 87). The value of her relationship with Kelly is rescaled in relation to the new standards of desire and identity that her politicized and privileged friends espouse. Tea feels “embarrassed”, “awful”, and “horrible” about “ignoring” and breaking up with Kelly, “who wasn’t quite my girlfriend, really, because she wasn’t a lesbian, really” (Tea 87). The feeling of shame Tea has in disidentifying with Kelly is less than the shame she experiences in identifying with her and identifying Kelly as the object of her desire. I argue that this is a pivotal experience in Tea’s development as a feminist, queer, and poor and working-class subject, as her class identity becomes compromised in order to accommodate her sexual identity. The moralistic dogma of Queer Nation, as a social group that privileges sexual identity over, for example, familial relations, is irrevocably classist (and arguably racist) in its assumption and requirement that a subject should forfeit other social ties in order to claim an individual and communal identity as a queer. Queer Nation—and the kind of politicized and non-normative queerness it espouses—offers Tea a new form of belonging and freedom through claiming power (the problematic power of a “nation”) in something that is socially abject. However, these
new relations and identifications come at the loss and expulsion of her poor and working-class girlfriend and the suppression of her class identity. This initiation into a group that is run by women with greater social and economic privilege marks an important turning point in Tea’s relationship to desire, identity, and politics that hinges on a deepening ambivalence to shame, particularly in relation to class.

Out of her participation in the activist circles of Queer Nation and abortion clinic-defense rallies, Tea meets Liz, a radical and confrontational third-wave feminist whose lesbianism has yet to move beyond the theoretical (Tea 89). In Tea’s relationship to Liz, identification and shame function in a new way that I argue is crucially linked to Liz’s upper-class social location and its marked difference from Tea’s poor and working-class background. Tomkins describes “a special type of shame which is evoked by barriers to interest or enjoyment” wherein a “barrier to identify with or act like” the other becomes “a major source of shame” (Tomkins 153). I suggest that class functions as one such “barrier” to Tea’s identification with Liz and sets the tone for Tea’s increasingly damaging relation to shame in proximity to Liz. Tea’s initial recognition that “they all had had different lives” is carefully negated through desire when Tea is invited to go away with Liz and Teri to Teri’s parent’s summer home (Tea 89). Tea can’t reconcile “the cost of maintaining all these things” against the knowledge that her own family “didn’t own their own home” let alone “an entire furnished home that sat vacant for most of the year” (Tea 89). However, Tea’s awareness that Liz is interested in her enables her not to “feel too uncomfortable” (Tea 89), and the “great” and “amazing” novelty of being Liz’s “first girl” trumps her skepticism and results in their immediate solidification as girlfriends (Tea 90). The prickle of class shame is temporarily warded off through Liz’s
interest in Tea, and Tea’s subsequent distancing of shame through an investment of positive affect in Liz through a focus on their mutual desire.

Tea’s attempts to identify with Liz are constantly challenged through her lack of class power, instigating a feeling of shame that is disavowed and forestalled through a negating of the issue of class. For example, marveling at the lushness and luxury of Liz and Teri’s downtown Boston apartment, Tea suppresses an impulse to “ask questions” about where their money comes from, reflecting that “some people had money and some people didn’t” and that she just “wouldn’t understand” (Tea 104). She stubbornly defends her lack of money and lack of class power by expressing a lack of “interest” in theirs (105), but her feelings of exclusion are evident in her admission that “it was like Liz and Teri were from another country and this was the stuff of their culture” (104). However, Tea’s awareness that her proximity to these new forms of upper-class leisure and pleasure is temporary and dependent on her connection to Liz is captured in her reflection, “tell me, what is the opposite of slumming? Vacationing. I was on vacation” (106).

Significantly, this statement demonstrates that, in order to be with Liz, Tea must be like Liz, which for Tea requires an abstraction from her own life and identity, a form of self-alienation that deepens as Tea struggles to maintain Liz’s interest in her and to ward off the harrowing effects of the shame circuit in which she is caught.

The class barriers to Tea’s identification with Liz are in some ways resolved through a yearning for the freedom that Liz represents rather than the objects she possesses. I suggest that this channeling of desire towards a way of being rather than the products that surround a form of being is dependent on Tea’s class consciousness and is a strategy of resistance Tea deploys to ward off shame. Discussing the role of affects as
motivational, Tomkins writes, “a human being thus becomes freer as his wants grow and his capacities to satisfy them grow. Restriction either of his wants or abilities to achieve them represents a loss of freedom” (Tomkins 36). If freedom can be conceptualized as participating in the multiple forms of belonging that characterize hegemonic culture through an ability to satisfy wants and desires (including the privileges to consume, to own property, and to be educated), I suggest then that being poor and working-class implies an “unfreedom” in the exclusion and alienation from these objects that appear as “wants”. In proximity to Liz, both Tea’s desires and her ability to fulfill them expand. As Donna Allegra argues in her essay “Inconspicuous Assumptions”, “[o]ne of the functions of class has to do with limiting what people believe they’re entitled to reach for” (Allegra 211). Against this limitation, Tea seeks to circumvent the restrictions of her class position through the investment of positive affect in Liz.

Tea’s desire for Liz is thus channeled into a desire to be like Liz, that is, to occupy the freedom that she possesses. Following Tea’s revelation that Liz works as a prostitute (Tea 106), their relationship to desire, sex, and money intensifies as Tea lives vicariously through Liz’s freedom. Tokarczyk’s suggestion that a “freedom from fear” is one of the benefits of being upper-class is demonstrated by Tea’s descriptions of Liz and the awe that her freedom inspires in Tea (Tokarczyk 19). Tea is “excited” and “thrilled” by Liz’s confession and her adoration for Liz “grows” into the “stature of myth”, designating Liz as “tough”, “fearless”, and “smart. All the things a whore should be” (Tea 106). Reflecting on the poor women who had worked as prostitutes in her own family, Tea shifts her perception of both these women and of prostitution to accommodate the esteem she ascribes to Liz (Tea 106). Tea’s awareness that Liz’s sense
of sexual and economic freedom is more clearly rooted in the privilege and entitlement of her upper-class Connecticut upbringing rather than her job as a prostitute does not interfere with her taking advantage of the experiences that freedom affords (Tea 144). The initial summer of their relationship is spent like “two rich daughters” (Tea 114), a “couple of goddesses down from the mountain for some fun in the slums” (Tea 115). Tea describes being “enchanted” with Liz’s obvious narcissism: identifying with and as Liz, “soon” Tea “started to act like” Liz and “believed it”, too (Tea 115). As Tea’s efforts to be as “fearless and desirable” as Liz direct them toward a triangulated sexual encounter with a man (Tea 117), Tea’s grip on Liz as her “lesbian” girlfriend becomes more precarious while her investment in her as her object of both desire and shame increases.

As Tomkins has warned, the irony of shame is its linking of the same positive affect with shame as with the object of desire (Tomkins 138). As Tea intensifies her investment of positive feelings in Liz (specifically, interest, excitement, love, and the desires for freedom), Liz increasingly disidentifies with Tea in acts of shaming disregard, neglect, and eventual abuse. Liz’s sense of feeling “unashamed” hinges on her ability to produce shame in Tea through exploiting the difference between them: “Liz would smile with all the happiness of not being me and say I’d rather suck a big dick for a hundred dollars and be done with it” (Tea 114, emphasis in original). One of the strategies in which Tea seeks to sustain Liz’s interest in her and to ward off the shame she feels in their differences is in her decision to start working as a prostitute. Against the stigma that circulates around prostitution is the potential for “cash” and “limitless free time, oceans of it” (Tea 123), the two classed barriers to Tea’s firm identification with Liz. Tea’s initiation into sex work involves “the beginning of a certain ritual” where through the
donning of Liz’s make-up, clothing, and perfume, she literally transforms herself into Liz: “I did not look like myself and it made sense” (Tea 124). In what becomes a steady subjugating of her own identity in a sustained effort to keep her object close, Tea’s identification with Liz extends to her entire subjectivity: “I felt like Liz’s life was mine” (Tea 141). However, the cruel shame-invoking ability of Liz’s love ensures that Tea is always aware that she is a “guest” in Liz’s life (Tea 141), and thus installs Tea in a vicious shame circuit wherein she feels like Liz has “created” her (Tea 140). Tomkins stresses that the peculiar “response to shame” is that “self consciousness is heightened by virtue of the unwillingness of the self to renounce the object” (Tomkins 138). Despite numerous self-preserving attempts to let go of Liz and the positive and damaging affects she inspires (Tea 139), Tea’s decision to be a prostitute thwarts these efforts. Becoming a prostitute enlarges her investment in Liz and enhances her identification with Liz while it simultaneously functions as an attempt to mitigate the specifically classed shame their differences evoke.

I want to be careful to stress that it is not prostitution in and of itself that inspires shame in Tea; Tea negate this assumption by linking prostitution to the feeling of shame induced by obligatory sex experienced in heterosexuality and with Ian. It is specifically the assumption of desire and love—“this thing” she was “supposed to love”—in relation to her “hate” and “loath[ing]” that constituted a form of “betrayal” for Tea (Tea 123). As I have discussed, this enforced form of sexual labor produces feelings of shame in Tea that lead to her disidentification with Ian and heterosexuality and her identification as lesbian. Of equal importance to my own trepidation around irrevocably linking sex work
with shame is Tea’s own resistance to this easy attachment. Following her first client, Tea writes,

I couldn’t believe I was having sex with this man. It was like a movie. Thinking of it like that made it kind of funny, and the more I thought about it the funnier it really was until it was hilarious, that a girl could sink to this, the ultimate depths of femininity right, the worst case scenario of womanhood, and that it meant absolutely nothing, this was funny. And strangely liberating, not in a I’ve-Reclaimed-My-Sexuality way because there was nothing of mine to be claimed here. It was the feeling of another societal myth shattering in my cunt, hitting bottom only to discover there was no bottom, only me. (126)

Tea’s recognition that the framing of prostitution as “the worst case scenario of womanhood” is “another societal myth” enables her to resist the shameful and stigmatizing insistence that transgression makes identity (126). Instead, Tea insists that at the “bottom” of her experience and the discourse of shame surrounding prostitution is “only” her self (126). This is a profoundly powerful refusal to be objectified as a particular thing and a recasting of the experience inwards; against the external rubric of what or how prostitution functions, Tea staunchly confesses there is “liberation” in the lack of meaning that having sex for money provides (126). In this moment, engaging in sex work does not constitute a new form of becoming or identification, but is rather a disavowal of shame and a disidentification with the archetype of the “fallen woman”.

However, Tea’s participation in prostitution does exacerbate her ambivalent relation with shame in significant ways. As Tea elucidates, “This is a hard story to tell, everything being tangled up in every other thing” (Tea 130). What I want to emphasize is that those “other things” are a lack of class power and the presence—or in the case of The Passionate Mistakes, the specter—of male abuse. Rather than increase the ease by which she can identify with Liz and her class freedom, Tea’s experience of prostitution
exacerbates her lack of class power. As Susan Raffo describes in her introduction to the anthology *Queerly Classed*, class is more than “a social system and a function of institutions” as it has an “actual affect on individual lives and individual methods of survival and interpretation” (Raffo 3). Being poor and working-class is about not simply a lack of money, but also a lack of social status (Tokarczyk 2008, 18). Thus, when Tea starts accumulating money as a prostitute she experiences shame in her inability to conceptualize how to use the money or to actually transcend her social location. Tea describes feeling “confused” and “terrified” by the mass of money, “afraid” to leave it anywhere and “guilty” about her own family’s continued economic lack (Tea 131). Unable to attach value to her labor because the compensation “came so quickly” (Tea 131), Tea is further alienated from her self. Significantly, the deepening inequality in her relationship to Liz signifies the reality that sex work functions differently for a poor and working-class woman than it does for an upper-class woman, specifically in that claims to power and privilege extend beyond an actual material accumulation of money. As Tea identifies with a woman arrested for prostitution whom she sees on television, Tea observes, “the less shame you have the less weapons people have against you” (Tea 126). Against this resistance to shame surrounding prostitution, Tea’s increased “panic” (Tea 129, 130), the “stress” of “living a double-life” (Tea 144), and the “hoard[ing]” of her economic gains to financially support Liz (Tea 144) demonstrate how her attempts at freedom through prostitution are constrained by her overall lack of class power.

It is in the context of prostitution that Tea first discloses her experience of sexual abuse. She describes how the “bad calls” became desirable because she “could freak out a little and it was justified’”(Tea 132). Referencing a client who tries to show her a home
video of peering through a window at a woman in the shower, Tea confesses that she was a “peepshow” to her stepfather (Tea 132). The specific forms of shame that this trauma provokes in the text are bifurcated through two different relations to objects: love and hate. Tomkins argues that as a response to shame, “the self remains somewhat committed to the investment of positive affect in the person, or activity, or circumstances, or that part of the self which has created an impediment to communication” (Tomkins 138).

Tea’s investment of positive affect works in two ways surrounding her abuse. The first is that she attempts to deal with it through her relationship with Liz, the most provocative object of her love and shame, and the second is through a substitution of the object of shame (her stepfather) with an object of hate (her father). Described as “psychopathic” (Tea 148) and “psychotically feminist” (Tea 176), Liz and Tea attempt to “get the violence” out of their bodies (Tea 156), specifically by reading the book The Courage To Heal and its implied doctrine that any suspicion of abuse is a sign of abuse. The insidiousness of Liz’s “obsession” with abuse is that her own confessions of rape are eventually disclosed as lies (Tea 142), thus exposing the vicariousness of living through Tea’s actual experiences. Caught up in a perilous relation of identifying with Liz in order to subsume the shame that loving Liz makes her feel, Tea is forced “to heal” as if it is her “duty” (Tea 156). Recalling Tomkins’ assertion that the shame response preserves the object, while the contempt response relinquishes it (Tomkins 150), Tea is unable and unwilling to perform the type of healing Liz demands in giving up—that is, hating—her stepfather.

While I do not want to imply that Tea sustains a form of love for her abusive stepfather that makes her want his love again per se, I suggest that his spectral presence
in the text in four short references signifies a specific relation of shame that is as yet too
damaging for Tea to fully disclose. His abuse is a shock to her sense of self that collapses
her identification as her stepfather’s daughter; the fact of his abuse—specifically in the
perversion of his gaze, not in the loss of it—is an identity disruption that through its
traumatic implications causes Tea shame. Yet, in an act of self-preservation that neatly
claims her stepfather as “properly confronted, depressed and suicidal” (Tea 156), Tea
redirects her anger towards her long-gone biological father, Dennis (155, 156, 159).
Through sheltering the object of shame from her anger, and then substituting it with an
object of hate, Tea preserves the possibility that some form of positive affect can remain
in proximity to the object of shame. Out of shame grows a new relation to anger, an
insistence that her anger is “the only thing keeping” her “on the earth” (161). When Liz’s
eventual admission that she is “letting go of her anger” constitutes to Tea a form of
“betray[al]” (161), Tea is left to bear her anger—and her shame—alone.

Conclusion

Tea’s substitution of her father, an object of hate whom she has already given up,
into the object of shame, allows her to remain attached to her anger and to simultaneously
retain a hold on her shame surrounding her abuse. In temporarily redirecting her anger
from her stepfather’s sexual abuse onto her biological father, Tea finds a way in which to
mobilize a resistance to the negative effects of trauma while maintaining for herself, for
the time being, some semblance of the positive affects she has attached to the relation
with her stepfather. Why might the attachment to shame, specifically in the case of class
or abuse, be a useful or a productive relation? And how could this inform a feminist,
queer, poor/working-class narrative? In The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed
(2004) argues that emotions can be “transformed” through their movement into the “public domain” (Ahmed 173). At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that the act of writing can evince a performative working through of shame. In *The Passionate Mistakes*, Tea reanimates herself in a queer and feminist performance of transforming shame through its movement from the internal to the external. I insist that transforming shame does not at all transcend it, but instead signifies the working through of new—and productive—relations to it. Sedgwick insists that in autobiographical writing “the speaking self…does not attempt to merge with the potentially shaming or shamed figurations of its younger self…its attempt is to love them. That love is shown to occur both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it” (Sedgwick 40). These insights suggest that the act of writing about shame offers some relief from it, while also shedding light on shame’s potential to be a precursor to—in this case artistic—production at all.

The possibility that Michelle Tea’s memoir *The Passionate Mistakes* is written as a gesture of self-love softens, if not incubates, the corollary of painful affects and experiences the memoir gives voice to, specifically her deeply ambivalent relationship to shame. Claiming the text as a performative and productive working through of shame encourages a reading of the text as possessing a conscious and critical sense of distance from its content. This distance breathes space into the possibility that the text’s urgency is not only emotionally but politically motivated, a complicated grappling with shame in the subjectivity and embodiment of a poor and working-class queer white woman. Rimstead has observed that in articulating “oppositional” or resistant subjectivities, poor and working-class female writers “frequently call on negative constructions of identity as markers of past selves in order to position themselves as subjects” (Rimstead 145). Tea’s
articulation of subjectivity in *The Passionate Mistakes* both resists and aligns itself with shame. Significantly, these articulations are neither negative nor positive in and of themselves. Instead, Tea’s ambivalent attachment to shame—and its connection to her lack of class power—provides a valuable index of the complex production of her desire, identifications, and politics.
Chapter 3. Here, or, Anywhere But Up: Notes Towards a Feminist and Queer Politics of the Possible

Introduction

Why might the current queer theoretical terrain be preoccupied with movements backwards, sideways, and down? What sorts of actions or inactions come to figure as signs of resistance in a feminist or queer model of being? What do forms of unhappiness show about the requirements of what it means to be happy? This chapter attempts to grapple with the relevance of the present as a site for politics against impulses to preserve the future as the inevitable realm of liberation. Drawing on insights by a broad range of feminist and queer theorists, this project shares a preoccupation with the inconsistencies and excesses of the present captured in Robyn Wiegman’s (2000) notion of “feminism in the meantime” (Wiegman 822). Through an articulation of what I deem a politics of the possible, this chapter is motivated by an insistence that opining for a future hinges on what Lauren Berlant (2011) in Cruel Optimism describes as a “confidence” in the present (Berlant 5). This confidence is linked not only to a belief in the future-driven fantasy of “the good life” (Berlant 2), but relies on a sense of entitlement to participation in and ownership of that fantasy—entitlements based on belonging to privileged race, class, gender, and sexual categories, to name but a few. In an analysis of the temporalities and directions approached in feminist and queer theory, I attempt to make space for an alternative way of thinking about poor and working-class queer subjectivity that resists the weight of the fantasy of “the good life”. Through an exploration of Michelle Tea’s radical narrative, The Chelsea Whistle, I argue that Tea’s text speaks from a position of extreme social marginalization to dramatize a queer and feminist politics of the possible,
specifically in its refusals to want the “right” things and to move in different directions than up.

**On Being Possible**

I am interested in what kinds of ways of being are possible for a subject who asks different questions about becoming. The word “possible” is defined as something “that is capable of being” and “that may or can exist, be done, or happen” (“Possible,” def. 1). It is also “that which can exist, happen, or be done” (“Possible,” def. C1a). Evident in both these definitions is temporal ambiguity, a movement between the present and the future. The possible is also described as “[e]xpressing the contingency of a state of affairs, object, etc.: that may be or may come to be; that may be conjectured to be (though not known not to be); that is perhaps true or a fact; that may exist” (“Possible,” def. 3a).

Thus, the possible can be, or it can become, or it can be gestured to as a potential for what may be or become, and it can either be certain or not. Adding to this expansive range of what the possible is or can be, there is yet another layer of meaning to the word, one rife with moral and ethical undertones: the possible is “able to be dealt with, understood, taken into consideration, etc.; suitable, tolerable; reasonable, worth considering. Opposed to impossible” (“Possible,” def. 6). These cursory definitions gesture toward the openness of “possible” as a term and the breadth of politics that can potentially take shape in and around enunciations of the possible.

I want to flag here the descriptors “understood”, “tolerable”, and “reasonable” as conservative terms that are often used to shore up or evacuate a subject’s value. To be “understood” is to be “worth considering”; to be understood is to have worth. Put another way, to have worth is to be understood; to not have worth, to be misunderstood, is to be
intolerable. Women (especially feminists), queers, the working and non-working poor, people of color, and migrants with and without civil status are frequently interpreted or charged with being unreasonable in mainstream and right-wing discourses: their desires, politics, or simply ways of being—ways of being alive—are deemed as impossible.

And yet, subjects who live outside of what Gayle Rubin (1984) has deemed “the charmed circle” do “exist” through and against the misunderstanding and lack of worth they are often assigned (Rubin 153). Tea’s text *The Chelsea Whistle* is one such testimony to this form of existence, and it is her text’s insistence on the possible, on possibility as a condition of being in the present, that I am interested in exploring here. I suggest that the definition of possible that is frequently used is future leaning: this orientation of the possible to the future, as something that “can happen” or “come to be” at a time other than now, is indelibly tied up within an ideology of capitalism and meritocracy. I argue that a notion of belated being or becoming is the favored version of what is possible when capitalist ideology dictates that the present be endured for the sake of the future. When desire and satisfaction are spun through the logic of productivity preceding consumption, “what is” is swept underneath of “what can be”. I want to insist on the first meaning of possible, as something that happens *now*, as a subject that is “capable of being” in the present. I don’t want to throw away the usefulness of imagining a possible for the future; I am not arguing for, or against, the desirability of a possible future. Rather, I suggest that through a reckoning with the notion of the possible in the present, the possible of the future may be easier to reconcile, less alienating, and potentially less devastating to those for whom the future is not even an available or accessible fantasy. For some, just being possible in the present—just being—is an
incredible act of continued arrival from a past that lacks the conditions of ever bringing the subject close to “the good life”.

**Possible Temporalities**

Feminist knowledge, theory, and activism are sites where questions of the possible have been articulated through diverse meditations on imagining feminist subjects across time and space. What kinds of life can be imagined for women—for feminists, women of color, survivors of trauma, the poor, and lesbians—is often at the crux of feminist thought. As I will discuss below, these claims vibrate with an intense yearning for freedom. Being free is one condition of being possible, of making the present possible. Freedom can also be imagined as a possibility for the future, when the present seems too much to endure, or too difficult to change. At the same time, the future may figure as a threat to being free, as imposing a limit on what is possible in the present. As Tea’s memoir is both a feminist and queer text, I want to think through the investments in the temporalities in which some feminisms imagine their subjects inhabiting in order to set up a foundation for my discussion of contemporary queer theory’s preoccupation with alternate directionalities of thought.

Robyn Wiegman’s (2000) article “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Future” is an astute guide to exploring tensions in feminist temporality and the effects of their political investments. Wiegman is fundamentally concerned with decoupling feminist subjectivity from feminist knowledge in the attempt to open up what kinds of feminism are possible in the present (Wiegman 820). Against what she sees as an “apocalyptic” anxiety that academic feminism in particular is “failing” to ensure its longevity and reproduction as a viable discipline in the future (Wiegman 808), Wiegman insists on the “value” of what
she calls feminisms’ “nonidenticality” (Wiegman 821). This nonidenticality is the way in which feminisms can and do emerge as politics that are non-citational and non-reproductive of themselves, therefore as necessarily unrecognizable in a future. It is specifically the failure of feminisms that are nonidentical to themselves—that is, nonidentical to the subjectivities of the women who develop them—that makes room for other forms of feminisms that are grounded in the present to take hold temporarily. Wiegman’s feminism “in the mean time” insists on detaching feminism from “any particular future” in allowing “‘our’ knowledge will have no necessarily productive relationship, no narrative that makes us live in the present of some future time” (Wiegman 822). What is at stake in Wiegman’s argument is that an attachment of feminist politics to an imagined future or an imagined past risks replicating the very same conditions of being feminist in the present when the conditions of being possible in the present are contingent. Such a politics seeks to secure concerns of the past in the taunting emptiness/fullness of the future, thus ignoring the fecundity of the present, and thereby reiterating the primacy of the same dominant feminisms (white, heterosexual, upwardly-mobile) as the loci of feminism across time and space. As Wiegman suggests, and I hope to propel further, feminisms that orient themselves as open to the contingent can dramatize the present as a temporary space of being that may yield new possibilities for the shape that politics can take.

In The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution, the radical second-wave feminist writer Shulamith Firestone (1970) describes women as subordinated by an “oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself” (Firestone 2). Drawing on Marx and Engels’ analyses of class stratification, Firestone
asserts that women, too, have been coerced into occupying a subordinated class in society, but one that is based on their reproductive power. Firestone advocates for a complete revolution in culture that liberates women from an unequal class system through securing women’s control over reproduction. The ultimate end goal of this reorganization of power is in the final dissolution of the family, achieved through “artificial births” and the eradication of gender difference altogether (Firestone 11). Significantly, I suggest that patriarchal oppression figures in Firestone’s analysis as an a historical a priori condition that can only be eradicated in a phantasmatic future when and if the present succeeds, that is, if the contingencies of the present repetitively reproduce themselves towards a fixed endpoint of feminist revolution. Firestone’s vision of a feminist movement that has survived a “fifty-year ridicule” (Firestone 25) and finds its origin in mid-nineteenth century America (Firestone 16) demonstrates what Wiegman terms a “generational model of feminism”: this model of feminism is figured as being passed down a matrilineal chain of women and securing itself in the future through evidence of its existence across time (Wiegman 811). Crucially, it is Firestone’s vision of herself as “like” the feminists who came before her and who she predicts will follow suit that makes latching on to these past-future temporalities viable. Recalling Berlant’s assertion that confidence and entitlement affect the ways in which subjects mediate their present moment (Berlant 5), I caution that Firestone’s self-assurance suggests a heightened level of social privilege that makes her desires for “the good life” seem possible.

The presence of the feminist subject across time and space takes on different dimensions and temporalities in Monique Wittig’s (1975) text *The Lesbian Body.*
wherein she imagines lesbian feminists as inhabiting the archetypal figure of the
Amazon, a state of being that is at once “fictional, symbolic, actual” (Wittig ix). Writing
out of the second-wave feminist movement in Paris, Wittig suggests that to be a lesbian
feminist is to be capable of “project[ing]” oneself into a “fiction” that is “already a
possible reality” (Wittig ix). The temporality of the lesbian feminist, in Wittig’s
imagination, is one that simultaneously straddles a utopic lesbian feminist other world
and a homophobic patriarchal culture (Wittig ix). In her essay “Imitation and Gender
Insubordination”, Judith Butler (1991) writes that even the notion of lesbian as a distinct
subject relies on locating her within an arena of “unviable (un)subjects”, a space of
“abjected” bodies that is outside of the normative yet also contained within it (Butler 20).
In Wittig’s analysis, this unviability of the lesbian and the feminist constitute two cultural
falsehoods, as the growing visibility of lesbian feminists in the mid-to-late twentieth
century attests. At the same time, those material effects and conditions that mark being a
lesbian feminist as impossible conjure up in Wittig the desirability of imagining an
alternative time and space wherein lesbian feminists can exist according to their own
logics and desires.

But how tangible—or usable—is this other world, and for whom, and what effects
can it have on the lesbian or queer feminist subject’s ability to be possible in the present?
As Annamarie Jagose (1994) proposes in Lesbian Utopics, lesbians and utopias both
occupy a position of exteriority and alterity to the present (Jagose 23). This alterity that
accompanies bodies marked or aligned with lesbian feminist politics can manifest as a
felt otherness, a feeling that cannot be pinned down but likewise cannot be escaped.
However, if it is only in the fantasy of a body unaffected by homophobia and misogyny
(among other things) that being a lesbian becomes possible and no longer a fiction, then the present remains inhospitable to lesbian feminists as long as it remains contingent on normativizing structures of power. This lesbian feminist fantasy of “the good life” relies on a future-reaching utopia that depends on—however temporarily—transcending the present through a fantasy that transcendence, that is, being unaffected, is possible.

While Firestone and Wittig have grappled with what is possible for the feminist subject across time by doubling back on the past and vying for utopic futures, textual excerpts from poor and working-class feminists suggest a preoccupation with the materiality of the present, a present which specifically conditions the marginalized feminist subject to correspond to demands of what “the good life” should be. I suggest that poor and working-class feminists like Michelle Tea speak back to these constraints and literally risk putting their feet down in a present as resistance to the precarity of a future they cannot opt into and an equally precarious past that doesn’t provide the “answers” to their complex ontological questions. Wiegman’s insistence that detaching feminist subjectivity from feminist knowledge will sidestep the essentializing of “difference” that serves to reinscribe and secure a heterogeneous and racially neutral feminist subject is valuable in that it attempts to broaden “who” the subject of feminist knowledge is (Wiegman 813), but I want to write against this stipulation to separate narrative from theory. Wiegman’s argument is that the nonidenticality of feminisms crucially demands giving an account of different movements, effects, and directions that present contingencies can affect, and by prying subjectivity away from theory broader and more dynamic versions of feminism will occur. However, I don’t want to let go of the opportunity that linking theory with subjectivity provides, an opportunity that
Michelle Tea’s deeply self-reflexive text provides. While I agree with Wiegman’s recommendation to broaden the scope of feminisms by not seeking theory that directly reflects one’s own experiences, this argument seems to be specific to how class and racial privilege may play out in the academy among professionals in positions of relative power, and not to feminist consciousness in general. Fortunately, due to arguments like Wiegman’s, the recent decades in feminist scholarship have demonstrated a rapid and rich proliferation in representations of what were once considered marginalized perspectives.

At the same time, there is still a need for identicality, for like seeking like, to continue to enrich the feminist academy with alternative theories and narratives. My own project is centered around a desire to incorporate the representation of poor and working-class queer perspectives into dominant feminist theory, precisely because that is my own subjective experience and I have witnessed the lack of this form of politics within academia. Like Wiegman, I want to insist that what are affected by the contingencies of the present are different bodies in different places in a given moment: what is possible for one may not be possible for another, and feminism ad hoc need not give an account of these possibilities. However, I maintain that it is precisely through subjective narratives that question or give an account of the possible that feminism as an anti-oppressive project can continue to reconcile with how embodiment—how being touched and affected by the effects of one’s social position—constitutes a condition for being in the present.

Embodiment can refer to how an individual experiences the emotional, material, and corporeal effects of occupying—however temporarily—particular social locations.
Embodiment has a particular relation to the possible and to freedom, as it is bodies that are deemed as free or unfree, legible or illegible. Prohibitions on freedom and privileges of freedom are relationships of power that mark classed, raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies as they move through politically charged time and space. As Sara Ahmed (2010) states in *The Promise of Happiness*, “[s]ome bodies more than others will bear the promise of happiness” (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 45). Ahmed describes happiness as something that is not internal to a subject (21), but rather is a promise located outside the subject in or around certain objects that come to represent good feeling and “the good life” (33). Happiness thus directs certain individuals toward certain objects and certain choices (54), making happiness either future-oriented or nostalgic, while evacuating its presence in the present (60). As Berlant has reminded us, this relationship to happiness therefore pivots on an individual’s relationship to embodied forms of privilege.

Like Wiegman, Ahmed, too, is interested in genealogies of feminism, but Ahmed’s argument is that feminist genealogies are encompassed by “women who do not place their hopes for happiness in the right things but who speak out about their unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things” (Ahmed 59). Feminism, then, is a form of unhappiness with the conditions of the present and a mode of resistance against prohibitions on female subjectivity. Ahmed develops an argument of “the feminist killjoy”, the feminist who is attributed with causing unhappiness by virtue of her drawing attention to forms of unhappiness in the world. Ahmed figures happiness as a loss (70), as something that requires both a covering up and a giving up of alternative ways of being in order to fit into a notion of what happiness is—a state of being that is
usually conditional on another person’s happiness (56). The feminist killjoy thus exposes
what “women are asked to give up for happiness” (70), and it is literally in this act of
“kill[ing] joy” that “alternatives” become possible (20). Rather than resist the negative
relation of the feminist to unhappiness, Ahmed specifically argues for feminist
unhappiness as a form of resistance against coercive models of being possible as women.

Ahmed attends to how the fantasy of happiness, and thus the fantasy of a future, is
more accessible to some subjects than to others. As I have insisted throughout, certain
forms of embodiment—of being possible in the present—affect a confidence and
entitlement to this fantasy. Ahmed crucially locates “black and working-class women” as
not “entitled to be proximate to the fantasy though they may be instrumental in enabling
others to approximate its form” (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 51). It is specifically
through forms of narrative, I argue, that women’s experiences of being “alienated” from
the future and its promises are visible (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 41); crucially,
these narratives provide a necessary glimpse into the ontological questions that emerge
from just surviving long enough to be in the present. I suggest that Michelle Tea’s text
The Chelsea Whistle demonstrates that survival as a poor and working-class female
requires discerning what kinds of futures are possible, and which are merely fantasies that
can distract her from attaining a livable existence in the present. In Tea’s narrative,
normative ideals of happiness are not achieved but are altered to suit her own orientation
to the world, expressing her attempts to define her own subjectivity while lacking
material forms of privilege.

Berlant describes the fantasy of “the good life” as losing traction in an accelerated
state of “attrition” that is increasingly visible in the “aesthetic” practices “derived from
embodied, affective rhythms of survival” (Berlant 11). One such aesthetic mode replete with hard-core punk rhythms is the lyricism and performance strategies of poor/working-class singer and composer Kathleen Hanna. Hanna’s feminist praxis, specifically within her band Bikini Bill (1990-1998), provides a useful corollary to Tea as both artists were impacted by and influential in what is now referred to as the North American third-wave feminist movement of the 1990’s. Sharing similar interests in forging a new feminist politic out of writing and performance practices, both Tea and Hanna detail the complexities of sex-work, incest, poverty, and female intimacy in their work. I suggest that Tea and Hanna convey a comparable sense of urgency that the present is the necessary space for a politics of the possible.

Encapsulated in Bikini Kill’s first record title, Revolution Girl Style Now (1991), the present figures for Hanna as a powerful space for the performance of being possible. Hanna directly resists what Ahmed deems an orientation to a future that promises happiness or liberation by insisting on the present as the ground upon which dynamics of power are negotiated (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 54). Hanna’s lyrics from the song “Resist Psychic Death”, from Bikini Kill’s 1993 record Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah, demonstrate what I argue is a structuring element in Tea’s The Chelsea Whistle. Both Tea and Hanna insist on the possibility of continued arrival in a hostile present and the alternative modes of being that directions other than forward or up can elicit. Like Tea, Hanna uses narrative to demonstrate how being possible is not a philosophical concept but an actual and embodied struggle for subjectivity. Hanna writes resistance into her recognition of her will to survive in a space of ideological and material violence: “your world/not mine/your world/not ours/I will resist with every inch and every breath/I will
resist this psychic death” (Bikini Kill, Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah). Against a “silence inside of me/silence inside”, Hanna’s act of narrative and performance gives an account of the different possibilities embedded in the now: “[t]here’s more than two ways of thinking/there’s more than one way of knowing/there’s more than two ways of being/there’s more than one way of going somewhere” (Bikini Kill, Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah). Hanna’s assertion is a disavowal of a world that demands of women complicity with a normative set of “social ideals”, a life path that links certain choices with the myth of certain futures (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 53-54). Against this certainty Hanna exposes the present and the future as vulnerable to divergence; by insisting on the viability of vulnerable bodies in the present, Hanna reveals that the contingency of the present is open to possibility. Indeed, the very act of saying “no” to the promised happiness of the future, to saying “yes” to the affirmed unhappiness of the present, is a radical act of the feminist killjoy. Simultaneously, Hanna’s polemics point to the usability of different—of “more than one”—ways of “being” and “going somewhere”. Hanna’s lyrics reveal a shared sense of urgency with Tea and other contemporary politics for a livable present that is not blind-folded by the upward-looking fantasy of the good life. It is to these different and alternative directions, specifically in the discursive realm of queer theory, that I now turn.

Possible Directions

I have suggested that the current trend in some feminist and queer theory is to think through how different “orientations” to objects or subjects of inquiry may yield new or better forms of knowledge (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion 4). Taking a different angle, a different view, can change both the impression the object makes and its
relation to the subject (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion 4). Central to these
different orientations are intellectual movements backwards (c.f., Love 2007), sideways
(c.f., Stockton 2009), and down (c.f., Halberstam 2011), movements motivated by a
concern for the present state of radical politics and a desire to root thought in the present
in order to harness the effects of changes in a now. As I have discussed above, at stake in
these desires is an awareness of the transparency of the future as a container for political
goals; this vacancy doesn’t imply that there is nothing in the future, but rather that the
malleability of the future as at once empty and therefore alternately full means that it is
repetitively loaded with ideals that sustain ties to the often normative ideologies of some
present. As if the future is a balloon constantly being emptied and refilled with
exhilarating and noxious gases, some queer and feminist theorists are untying themselves
from this promissory vector and seeking out alternative discursive horizons for thought,
specifically those that are not elevated, transcendent, or beckoning towards upward
mobility.

Why might a turn away from the future, to what Michael D. Snediker (2008) has
called a queer form of “optimism embedded in its own immanent present”, be useful at
this juncture in queer politics (Snediker 2)? Snediker’s project seeks to “think about
feeling good”, thus not promoting happiness per se but examining its intentions and
effects (Snediker 3). While Snediker admits that he finds “happiness interesting”
(Snediker 3, emphasis in original), he nonetheless seeks to correct the trend in queer
theory to elevate negative affects over positive ones in what he deems “queer pessimism”
(Snediker 3, emphasis in original). This is a useful insight, and supports my own
consternation that both negativity and positivity exist in constant relation to one another
(c.f. my discussion of shame in Chapter 2). However, Snediker’s interest in hope and optimism as enabling a politics of the present is limited by an insistence that queerness per se is enough to mobilize such possibilities. While insisting on the relevance of the “personhood” of literary subjects, he nonetheless has a narrow—if not conservative—view of the types of “persons” that can inscribe such a form of optimism. Rather than critique his method, however, I consider the range of normative (white, upper-class, canonized) subjects he examines as evidence that bolsters my claim that a politics of the possible, grounded in a present, is necessary for subjects deemed excessive by normativizing and canonizing practices, however “queer” these discursive practices are.

Berlant’s theoretical notion of “cruel optimism” can serve as a more materialist version of optimism than the queer optimism that Snediker desires. Berlant describes cruel optimism as a relation wherein an object or fantasy that promises happiness or sustenance to a subject in fact functions as a “barrier” to its achievement (Berlant 1). Echoing Ahmed’s thoughts on the relation of happiness to an unforeseeable future, Berlant sees this barrier as the crux through which optimism can function at all. This is a much more “interesting” evaluation of optimism than Snediker’s as it considers the central “ambivalence” of optimism as that which makes “life bearable” against a relation to what has been, is, or will become negative (Berlant 14). Of crucial significance to Berlant is how the present is “where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine” (Berlant 10). In Where We Stand: Class Matters, bell hooks describes the current state of North America under capitalism as “a world where some are bound and others are free, a world of extremes” (hooks 2). These different economic extremes in being alive—in being possible in the present—
impact how the “systemic crisis or “crisis ordinariness” of the everyday will be interpreted across different subjective embodiments (Berlant 10). Critically, the relation of the individual to the increasingly “precarious” present is refracted through their relation to the past and to the future, and whether or not they believe they are entitled to “be protected” (Berlant 20).

The increased emphasis on the effects of capitalism, neoliberalism, and geopolitics in modes of queer, feminist, and anti-racist critical politics is a necessary intervention into forms of queer politics that cluster around symbols and objects of “the good life”. One such politic is what Lisa Duggan (2002) has coined as “the new homonormativity” in her aptly titled essay “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism”. Homonormativity is described as a political orientation that refuses to “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 179). This form of politics, captured most neatly in the “equal marriage” campaign (versus the less assimilationist goal of increasing access to civil unions for people regardless of their gender, sexuality, or relationship status), attempts to gain access and acceptance for gay-and-lesbian identified men and women in all areas of national, public, and domestic life. A crucial component of this version of politics hinges on “tolerance”—which I have already discussed as a conservative evaluation of a subject already deemed unreasonable or unworthy—for gays and lesbians in the “free market” (Duggan 179). I suggest that the politics of homonormativity, or, assimilationist queer politics, seek to imagine being possible as an achievement (based on material gain)
located in the future, a future that hinges on the upward mobility of a select few. If “the
good life” could really contain “all” of “us”, then it would certainly cease to be “the good
life” at all, and would come to resemble life as many already know it.

In Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History, Heather Love
(2007) charges that the “rising tide of gay normalization” offers inclusion to some “on the
condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it” (Love 10). Love
counters the version of “the good life” as one of satisfaction and fulfillment by equating it
with a form of loss; the process of moving up and out of “the outrages and humiliations
of gay and lesbian history” and the “ongoing suffering” of the present in itself constitutes
a turning away from the negative as a potential index for the future (Love 10). Indeed,
Love offers the act of turning or “feeling backward” as an anti-progressive gesture
signifying a politicized literary mode of engagement with the “painful negotiations” of
the development of “modern” homosexuality, specifically “the experience of social
exclusion and the historical “impossibility” of same-sex desire” (Love 4). I suggest that it
is the assumption—and often the material reality—of this “impossibility” that remains
useful in imagining a possible way of being queer in the present. Attending to (again,
canonized) queer and queer-ish texts from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century,
Love gestures to the “material and structural continuities” between the past and the
present that both include narratives of loss, negativity, and defeat (Love 20). While Love
does not want to evacuate the political utility of thinking about the future for queers at all
(Love 21), her concern is how an attention to the negative affects of past narratives can
illuminate “the damage” that continues to live on in the contemporary moment (Love 29).

another “happily queer” orientation to negativity (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 115). In line with Love’s turn backward to probe the negative literary archive of the past in reconsidering the investment of positive and negative affect in the contemporary moment, Ahmed is interested in what unhappiness “allows us to do” (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 91). Ahmed claims that occupying the stance of the happily queer “might mean being happy to be the cause of unhappiness… as well as to be happy with where we get to go if we go beyond the straight lines of happiness scripts” (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 115). To be happily queer, Ahmed implies, is to mobilize forms of unhappiness that circulate around queerness and condition it as unhappy in an effort to expose how the purchase of happiness for some relies on the quantifiable unhappiness of others. Edelman’s text attempts to actualize this approach through his project that seeks to “embrace” and “accept” the negativity associated with the queer in order to “refuse the insistence of hope as affirmation” and to resist futurity altogether (Edelman 4). It is, however, Edelman’s lack of a feminist perspective that (happily?) makes his arguments infertile for my purposes here. Specifically uninterested in a politics of difference, the nuances of queer subjectivity, or embodiment and materiality, Edelman’s notion of arriving in the present as neither here nor there refuses to account for queer subjectivity beyond queerness itself. Immersing the figure of the queer (who is ostensibly white, male, and middle to upper-class) in the cleverly distancing rubric of psychoanalysis, Edelman claims “[T]he death drive names what the queer, in every order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (Edelman 9). Rather than lament this unviability as a form of loss, Edelman denies the possibility for any such future (or present) where being queer is not only possible but legitimated
(Edelman 30). Demonstrating what Snediker has called queer theory’s dependence “on abstraction, on metaphor” (Snediker 12), Edelman’s decisively anti-productive and anti-reproductive argument claims that all forms of politics are always already linked to a “fantasy of the future” and the future’s attachment to the “figure of The Child” as a metaphor for the hope of the future itself (Edelman 11). In Edelman’s polemics, “where we get to go” is a dead end, a refusal of possibility. In its insistence on rendering queerness as the lack, the negative, the thing that cannot and refuses to be redeemed, “no future” offers nothing to a queer politic interested in reinvigorating the present as the site for action, particularly for abjected or marginalized subjects.

Edelman’s sterile gesture of refusal loses traction when applied to a feminist narrative like Tea’s The Chelsea Whistle, which could simply not sustain itself without a belief that the present conditions of being may be malleable in some direction other than up. As Ahmed has demonstrated, the feminist polemic that the present is changeable emerges through a recognition of the unlivable or intolerable conditions of that present (Ahmed 70). I suggest that this recognition for change is not hope per se, nor is it an absence of hope altogether (arguing for a lack of desire for change for oppressed or marginalized subjects is a rather dangerous dictum). Rather, the politics of possibility that I am advocating for here is concerned with teasing apart how the potential for possibility has become fastened to particular notions of hope that circulate within North American culture, specifically those which are invested in and projected upward into uncertain futures or fantasies of triumph and transcendence. I am insistent that these types of forward-leaning manifestations of hope, optimism, or desire make strange bedfellows with subjects who perhaps lack all or some of the structural, material, and affective power
to actualize these possibilities. Instead, I am curious how imagining existence outside of “happiness scripts” can move a life horizontally, cyclically, or backwards towards encounters with previously denied or unseen ways of being that, when assimilated into the present, can provide new or alternative directions for being possible within the self and within an often overwhelming hostile world.

Kathryn Bond Stockton’s (2009) recent scholarship is a useful guide for mapping out Michelle Tea’s narrative of youthful self-discovery and survival in The Chelsea Whistle. Like Edelman, Stockton’s text also centers on “the child” as “an idea” (Stockton 5) or “a metaphor” in a non-reproductive affective register that nonetheless has significant contributions to make analytically (Stockton 15). In The Queer Child, Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century, Stockton offers the term “sideways growth” as “something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” (Stockton 13). Stockton is interested in how “children grow sideways as well as up” because the entrance to adulthood as a sphere of possibility is controlled by adults (Stockton 6). Importantly, the figure of the “ghostly gay child” emerges as an ideological container for all children who are “strange” (Stockton 3), particularly through an investment of heteronormative social structures in childhood as a state of heterosexual “innocence” (Stockton 12). This idealized state of innocence is based in an economic and disciplinary model of development from the mid-seventeenth century that defines childhood as belonging to those who are white and middle-class (Stockton 40); “it is a privilege to need to be protected—and to be sheltered—and thus to have a childhood” (Stockton 31). Thus it is necessary that poor/working-class narratives, like Tea’s The Chelsea Whistle, perform
discursive disruptions to this ideal of innocence in their documentations of unvalued forms of childhood.

To Stockton, notions of “deference” or “suspension”—ways of expanding or prolonging the present—become avenues for defining subjectivity against the normative time frame of growing up and out of a seemingly protected childhood into a predetermined heterosexual adult life (Stockton 52). In this imaginary, “growing sideways” can be located in what Judith Halberstam (2004) calls a “queer time and place”, that is, subjectivities which moves beyond the logics of heterosexual, bourgeois life plans (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 6). Stockton thus envisions sideways growth as an alternative mode of possibility for subjects who cannot—or refuse—to conform to an upward and outwards model of being and becoming. Imagining an alternative propels subjects to expand their horizons of the present: she argues that “our futures grow sideways whenever they can’t be envisioned as futures—due to forceful obstacles, forms of arrest, or our wish to be suspended in the amplitude of “more”” (Stockton 52). Stockton is aware that resistance to what a future can hold doesn’t exist in an apolitical vacuum, but rather occurs in relation to the conditions of being in the present—and the effects of a past that have led to a specific and embodied arrival in the now. I will demonstrate below how in Tea’s text to revel in the present, in a state of what could be “more pleasure” or “even more destruction” (Stockton 52), is an agentive act that horizontally expands what is possible in the now. Against and in lieu of a future that could or could not hold the contingencies of the now, I welcome Stockton’s notion of “growing sideways” as a productive gesture that develops the possibility of being queer or “strange” at this historical juncture.
Movement away from a future orientation through a form of ontological and disciplinary failure is central to Judith Halberstam’s (2012) text The Queer Art of Failure. At the outset of the text, Halberstam asks, “What is the alternative…to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?” (Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure 1). This interest in alternatives is at once “a political project”, a search for “a grammar of possibility”, and “a basic desire to live life otherwise” (2). Halberstam envisions the possibility for alternatives “in the realm of knowing and unknowing” (2): “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (3). Crucial for my purposes here, and in my evocation of Tea’s text as exemplifying a queer and feminist politics of possibility, Halberstam links these actions and inactions to forms of anti-racist, feminist, and queer politics and histories. Halberstam’s development of the concept of “shadow feminisms” as feminisms that forfeit “positivity, reform, and accommodation” to make use of “negativity, rejection, and transformation” aptly encapsulates Tea’s deeply politicized narrative struggle in The Chelsea Whistle to make claim to a life from within competing episodes of light and dark (4). In line with Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy”, Halberstam suggests “that feminists refuse the choices as offered” (152), and instead utilize failure to mark gestures of “passivity”, “unbecoming”, and “unbeing” as radical precisely in their refusal to move forward, up, or out (129).

Throughout this discussion, I have grappled with recent inroads in queer theory that contemplate new or alternative directions in epistemology and ontology. I have been careful throughout to critically distance my argument from the notion of “hope”, as hope
conveys an attachment to the future, to transcendence, and to the affirmation of positivity. Instead, I have opted to invigorate the present, as interesting and as value-ridden, with the intention to expand and mobilize being possible as a political caveat in and of itself. At risk of parodying the cliché “seize the day”, I am interested in how revaluing being possible as a condition of the now revalues different bodies and lives, specifically lives that do not—will not or cannot—conform to the stricture of upward mobility as the “be all” and “end all” of subjectivity. What happens if we let go of the script that liberation—economic, racial, sexual, or gender—exists in the future? Does relinquishing the promise of tomorrow free up the ways in which this moment can be reinterpreted as more hospitable, more livable, to some? Simultaneously, does redirecting investment from the unforeseeable future into the touchable present allow affects, politics, and lives to sustain themselves in the now? How much does a refusal of the present as a viable place for politics, for living, negate the lives and struggles of those bodies deemed unworthy or unremarkable by capitalism and the strategies of success via upward mobility? I have suggested that the fantasy of “the good life” interferes with moments of actual life—both of positivity and of negativity—by postponing being to a place that is only ever reached through projection. Is it a viable political option to reinvest survival in the now as a feminist and queer triumph, to explore the dynamic ways in which arrival in the present constitutes a resistance to, and a breaking from, forces of exclusion, oppression, and violence? With select theoretical support from the above theorists, I now turn to an exploration of Tea’s narrative that, I argue, animates very similar questions.
A Possible Life

In this final section, I offer Michelle Tea’s memoir The Chelsea Whistle as a text that mobilizes what I deem a feminist and queer politics of the possible. Conveying the complexities of a subjectivity that is marginalized through class, gender, and sexuality, Tea’s memoir offers a narrative glimpse into a form of being that is outside the normative realm of “the charmed circle”. Tea’s prose describes with stunning detail the formation of a life that grows against the strictures of upward mobility and the coercive assumption that those who fail to succeed economically must therefore fail to exist. As Berlant insists, “even those who you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it” (Berlant 10). I suggest that this attachment to life, to being possible, is a central aspect of Tea’s text as she reflects on developing strategies of identification, survival, and resistance from within moments of intense alienation, lack, and trauma. Rimstead (2001) advises to “disturb the taken-for-granted notion that poor subjects are constituted of despair and silence and an impossible site for radical knowledge by making room for more detailed testimonies and more resistant ideologies” (Rimstead 4). In this vein, I am insisting that Tea’s memoir provides one such possible “site for radical knowledge”, what Constance Coiner (2001) has described as a yearning for “a different social order” (Coiner 235). The Chelsea Whistle documents one possible alternative to the fantasy of “the good life” and one such desire “to live life otherwise” (Halberstam 2).

As a text, The Chelsea Whistle demonstrates what Love has called “feeling backward” (Love 2), and which I suggest offers an alternative to narratives of mobility and transcendence. Love describes the queer literary canon as “deeply committed to the
notion of progress” via “utopian desires” for “a better life for queer people” (Love 3). Performing a literal turning backward on a life, however, Tea’s text serves as a necessary disruption to this tendency and develops what Anne Cvetkovich (2003) has described as a personal “archive of feelings”. The affects in Tea’s textual archive are in many ways imbued with the effects of sustained trauma, demonstrating Cvetkovich’s description of trauma as a condition of being under capitalism that extends itself in specifically gendered and sexual ways to lesbians and queer women (Cvetkovich 17). Motivated by a similar interest in how subjects “navigate what’s overwhelming”, Berlant prefers the term “crisis” to trauma and describes it as “not exceptional” but “embedded in the ordinary” (Berlant 10). It is precisely in the gesture marked by the backwards turn of an ordinary life that an account of being possible emerges from these impasses of trauma and crisis to offer new critical insights into affectivity and subjectivity, insights that detour through the negative and positive to make a home in the ever-changing moment of the present.

Tea’s childhood in The Chelsea Whistle is marked by a felt sense of being at once “different” and “special” that is refracted through her awareness of being a girl whom lacks class power. Within the working-class suburb of Chelsea, Massachutses, a poor girlhood is an ordinary experience; to be and become exceptional is to cultivate a struggle through and against difference, which emerges in specific relations to Tea’s queerness, her artistic orientation to the world, her acute sense of empathy, and a developing feminist consciousness of social injustice. The childhood scenes of The Chelsea Whistle demonstrate how Tea’s early yearnings for belonging in an imagined future are stopped short by the barriers that a lack of material and economic power poses. I insist that Tea’s childhood desires for being and becoming are notably off-center, and convey a form of
“unbecoming” (Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure 3), already revealing an identification with the non-normative as a potential mode of being possible.

For example, in the vignette “Hard Knock Life”, Tea describes her desire at age eight to be a “pretend orphan” in Broadway’s Annie after seeing the girls on television (Tea 32). The image of the orphan as a form of identification will again be encountered in Tea’s early adulthood as she leaves her home and her severed parental ties behind her.

Recalling Ahmed’s reflection that “the expectation of happiness” is “promised through proximity to certain objects” (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 29), at this moment Tea imagines that to become a pretend orphan in the future will certainly make her “happy” (Tea 33). Tea “badly” longs to “dance and sing with those orphans on the stage” and for the “audience to love” her (Tea 33). But with “despair” and a stubborn realization that “It’s Too Late” and that “it wasn’t fair” (Tea 32-33), Tea details the complex ways in which class power accumulates into the sedimentation of privilege for some at the expense of the exclusion of privilege for others. Tea reflects that becoming a child star requires not only being “lucky” and getting “discovered” but “money” for acting classes, a portfolio, and an agent, as well as the requirement that “someone else had to have the desire for you” (Tea 33). This form of childhood success is thus governed by the privilege, confidence, and entitlement of one’s family, specifically an economically endowed “demanding stage mother” (Tea 35).

The desire to be “discovered”—a desire to be legitimated as viable from an external source—functions as a relation of “cruel optimism” in that it causes pain for Tea in the moment of her longing and thus is a “barrier” to her being happy in the present (Berlant 1). Tea describes being “kept awake with the dread” that she is unlovable and
will “never be a star” (Tea 35). When her family takes her to see the live production in Boston, Tea is riddled with “frantic” anxiety that their seats aren’t close enough to the stage for “someone who would notice how orphan” she is, for “someone to overhear” her rendition of the song (Tea 34-35). Against the disappointment of not making it “up” onto the stage at the theater, Tea develops a strategy of making-do, a way of harnessing her fantasy into a form of becoming in the present. At her school’s talent show, Tea performs a version of the song “Hard Knock Life” that in the moment of performance becomes “punk for kids” as she “scream[s]” and shout[s]” on stage “the plight of orphaned children” (Tea 37). Without letting go of her fantasy that “someone” will “know” she is “a star” (Tea 37), Tea’s ekes out a space for her identification as an orphan in the present that is both possible and actualized. Significantly, Tea’s identification with and as an orphan serves as a crucial index to the kinds of fantasies that seem attainable to poor/working-class girls; Tea emphasizes her inherited resistance to “dreaming too high” as a “noble lack of greed” (Tea 32). On the one hand Tea’s identification with the orphan as the symbol of childhood poverty, alienation, and suffering is troubling in so far as it suggests a lack of viable images available to a poor female child. Concomitantly, and what I want to insist on here, is the way in which Tea navigates the available options for projected being into a form of being possible in the present. While Tea’s childhood fantasy of “the good life” is contained in the symbol of the abjected and the oppressed orphan who is made valuable through her representation by the socially elite role of the child star, Tea shuttles across both of these fantasies through an act of mimicry that registers her in the moment as simultaneously neither and both. By evacuating the images of the orphan and the child star of their future potential, Tea is able to occupy a version of
being in the present that draws what energy it can from these otherwise uninhabitable forms.

Tea’s sense of being “different” as an intensifying condition of the present increases with her adolescence, and she develops new strategies for defining her subjectivity with few resources. One such strategy is her belief that she possesses a “Certain Something” (Tea 82-83), which Tea conceives of as “this angry bubbling restless shameful difference” (Tea 82). It is this “Something” that is “akin” to “Inner Beauty” that she hopes will make her stand out against the ordinariness of her environment, what she deems a “Certain Nothing” (Tea 82). Tea yearns to “appear both prettier and tougher” (Tea 100), reflecting that “tough is always the aesthetic in a poor town” (Tea 160). As Tea increasingly identifies her vision of herself as “dangerous” and “beautiful” and “wild” (Tea 119), music, MTV, and drugs support her in imagining a life that is different than her reality in Chelsea, Massachusetts. The vision of other possible worlds provides a counter to Tea’s sense that she “wasn’t like anyone” (Tea 128), serving as a survival strategy against increasing social alienation. Despite the private Catholic-school upbringing her mother has financially sacrificed to provide for her, by middle school Tea sees herself as moving in directions away from her peers and their futures. She would not “end up” like them, she would always just “watch and feel dirty” (Tea 124). Difference, then, is a felt otherness, an affective orientation that informs Tea’s developing political and feminist consciousness (Tea 151,164, 171), demonstrating what Stockton describes as “ways of growing that are not growing up” (Stockton 11).

Despite Tea’s consternation that she is not “like” the majority of people around her is a belief that she will find intimacy and belonging somewhere else. But the
strictures of early adolescence—of having little authoritative power over her own bodily
movements and subjectivity—are conceptualized as a thing to be endured. Tea writes,
“[T]here was nothing to do but grow up, and it took so long…where were my people? …
Could they tell that someone was coming, growing up slow as winter in a bleak town, my
heart churning toward them?” (Tea 133). Stockton describes this yearning as a form of
“sideways growth” that acts as a response to an inability to control passage into the realm
of being an adult—that is, to forms of power—that are circumscribed by adults (Stockton
6). Experiencing adolescence as restricting movement and possibility, Tea’s desire for
becoming other—for unbecoming a girl child—is arrested by the social, familial, and
ideological pressures surrounding her. While enduring the constraints on being “trapped”
in her “age” and “trapped” in her “town” (Tea 157), I suggest Tea fosters a new
orientation to possibility that allows her to survive in the present. Instead of through a
projection into the future via an upwards and outwards trajectory that may or may not be
viable, I argue that Tea develops an adolescent vision of “the good life” that animates
itself horizontally as well as down through the idea of “the runaway”.

Stockton’s notion of “sideways growth” provides a useful framework for thinking
through Tea’s adolescent identifications and her sense of what kinds of being are possible
(Stockton 13). In her assessment of “where” adolescents can go when they don’t relate to
their peers, Stockton suggests that they develop “substitute relations” for what is readily
available in their own reality (Stockton 52). The figure of the runaway is one such
nonidentical substitute that appears throughout The Chelsea Whistle and, like the figure
of the orphan, also represents downward mobility, a loss of economic security, and
increased social alienation. The runaway signifies to Tea an alternative way of being
actual, a form of possibility that defies normative constraints on girlhood. When Tea meets and befriends a girl she calls “Runaway Lydia” in the bathroom at the mall, Tea describes her as, “at once a grownup and a kid, like any other impossible combination of creatures, a unicorn, or a horse with wings” (Tea 147). The runaway occupies another form of reality that exists alongside Tea’s own, a reality that is simultaneously freeing and limited in what kinds of becoming and unbecoming it can provide; to be a runaway is an all-encompassing identification, conveyed in Runaway Lydia’s moniker. To be a runaway requires certain losses in the purchase of certain gains. Significantly, both the orphan and the runaway may offer escape from an environment of trauma or abuse, and as I will discuss below, when Tea’s own family dissolves under the weight of her stepfather’s sexual abuse in her late adolescence, these identifications elicit new forms of being and unbecoming.

Before her eventual capitulation into these forms of being, however, the runaway represents for Tea a kind of subjectivity that exists alongside—beside and around—normative adolescence. In one particular fantasy, Tea envisions the runaway as having access to all the things that are for her desirable and yet out of reach: the “dark streets” of New York, “sexy clothes”, “Mohawks”, hard drugs, and sexual attention from rock stars (Tea 137-138). The actual achievement of this ideal, however, hinges on having “tits”, turning “sixteen”, and being “braver”: crucially, the only way she can truly choose to become a runaway is if her parents are abusive (Tea 137-138). Thus, the logic for staying still in the present rests on a belief that another form of being is somehow possible alongside Tea’s own, a suspended form of being that is uninhabitable as long as Tea’s own sense of being possible remains cloaked in the not-knowing of her own abuse. Tea’s
temporary identifications with the figure of the runaway is an example of a “sideways relation” that allows her to remain possible without sacrificing or giving up the conditions of the present.

The “fact” of abuse is something that can be hard to determine, and as Tea gets older she struggles to maintain an attachment to her life despite the “crisis ordinariness” of her stepfather’s gaze on her while she is alone in her bedroom (Berlant 10). Halberstam’s suggestion that what counts as feminist agency becomes murky in the time between “knowing and unknowing” is a useful index for examining Tea’s process around her sexual abuse (Halberstam 2). Instead of finally inhabiting the longed for space of the runaway through the hypostatization of abuse, Tea is suspended in a realm of disbelief.

Recalling Halberstam’s insistence that “shadow feminisms” can “refuse the choices as offered” (Halberstam 129), one such refusal is rethinking the absurdity of the notion of choice in circumstances of coercive violence and oppression. The rubric of feminist agency delineates two options for women and girls dealing with abuse: to stay or to leave, with the latter signifying an action that emerges from feminist consciousness to launch the subject into freedom. Against this rigid dualism of what “counts” as agency, I offer Tea’s efforts to sustain her identification as a “daughter” through temporarily staying still as a way to push the notion of agency sideways or backwards against the liberatory language of up and out. While Tea’s suspicion of her stepfather’s unwelcome gaze is confirmed through her realization that there are holes drilled in her bedroom walls and door (Tea 252-253), the holes become yet another ambiguity to unravel. Inhabiting what Stockton deems the risk of “more destruction” through an act of “suspension” (Stockton 52), Tea submits to a prolonged state of unknowing in an effort to fully realize the truth
as she “wait[s] out” the “static progress” of her attempted communication with her stepfather (Tea 275). I interpret Tea’s strategy of staying still as an act of “radical passivity” (Halberstam 129), as both a desire to know and to postpone the deeper unknowns of forfeiting her current identification. Tea develops this fractured space of suspended being as a temporary alternative to the anticipated dissolution of her family by postulating the subjective forms of the runaway and the orphan to an as yet unknowable future; in this moment, staying still is an agentive act of survival.

Against the invisibility of the abuse and the initial lack of evidence is Tea’s felt sense that something is wrong, registered in the “creaks” outside her room (Tea 189). The suspicion of her stepfather’s presence “as sometimes there” and therefore always there functions to further alienate Tea, specifically from her own self and the ability to “be alone” with her “body” (Tea 191). Ahmed argues that “[C]onsciousness of alienation involves both recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering. To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one’s being has been stolen” (Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness 167). Tea’s ability to be possible—to continue to arrive in the present—is drastically endangered by the eyes of her stepfather on her body, and her embodied knowledge that enduring trauma is a condition of her present. She writes, “I think that when you doubt what you know so deeply, so importantly, when you take an axe to the delicate neck of intuition you go Crazy” (Tea 190). This knowledge enriches her feminist consciousness and comes to inform new strategies of being; out of Tea’s unhappiness emerges an awareness of her suffering as unnecessary and thus potentially mutable.
Going “Crazy” to Tea becomes a form of resistance against the invisible eyes behind the walls and the door: initially, this takes the form of a short “ritual” of making “lewd” faces and “rubbing” her body in sexual ways when she feels she is being watched (Tea 190). This ritual is meant to work as a “charm”, to make it mean that he “was not there” (Tea 190). I suggest that this ritual functions as a form of what Halberstam calls a performance of “masochistic passivity” (Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure 131). Tea’s act dramatizes “a self that comes undone for an audience” in “fragmentariness, submission, and sacrifice” (Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure 139). Performing this mode of “Crazy” is an act of letting go in a moment of staying still; whenever Tea sees herself “in the mirror and attempt[s] to enjoy” her body, her performance is a response to her own sexuality and to the sexualization she is experiencing in her stepfather’s gaze (Tea 191). This response is masochistic in the sense that it doesn’t extinguish her stepfather’s power over her through accusation or running away, but rather exposes the abuse as powerful and thus holds him accountable in her own dissolution. This act of temporary unbecoming is a distinctly feminist and queer strategy that enables a form of being possible in the present against the patriarchal constraints that serve to control Tea through fear and the specter of incestuous sexual aggression; through self-deprecating acts of letting go of her self in these incarnations of “Crazy”, Tea is able to ensure her survival.

Halberstam offers “the refusal quite simply to be” as an end in itself, as one kind of queer “shadow feminism” (Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure 130). While I value Halberstam’s concern that simply folding a feminist politics of refusal into a politics of productivity ends up elevating positivity and action over negativity and inaction, I want
to offer a different alternative altogether, which is that unbecoming may be a subjective maneuver on the way to broadening the options for being alive in new ways. While there are certainly feminist and queer narratives that can demonstrate the viability of unviability altogether, I am interested in reinvigorating the possible—being actual and real in the present—with queer and feminist political energy. I suggest that Tea’s text enunciates a grammar of refusal that articulates a form of being possible—of continued arrival in the present—against conditions of lack, oppression, and trauma. For example, the refusal to want the “right” things is central to Tea’s sense of identity and of being a survivor of the contingencies of the present. Tea describes her ability to be “okay with being poor” as centered on a refusal to “want” the kinds of “things” that money can buy (Tea 188). Embodying Ahmed’s notion of the “feminist killjoy”, Tea refuses the forms of future happiness that women are supposed to want through attaining careers and sacrificing other ways of being; exposing the class elitism and absurdity of becoming “like” the “imaginary women” in Cosmo Magazine, Tea asks, “I mean, what were these women actually doing?” (Tea 242) Rather than succumbing to the fantasy that belonging in this form of womanhood engenders ease, security, or happiness, Tea considers inhabiting the kinds of careers that are available to poor/working-class woman as “exhilarating, like suicide” (Tea 242). To Tea, the future is not a luxury she can direct her life toward, but a “daydream” for her “next life” captured in the “romance” of a postponed “running away” (Tea 286).

These images of the runaway and the orphan resurface at the end of The Chelsea Whistle as Tea demonstrates further refusals of becoming and a sustained urgency of remaining connected to the present. Against her sister Madeline’s insistent and
unrelenting desires for a happy and intact family, Tea confesses, “I had weaned myself off the very basics as if they were breast milk or drugs, things to grow out of, things dangerous to become dependent on” (Tea 298). As both Tea and her sister finally leave home after their mother’s painful denial of their sexual abuse (Tea 331), Tea’s practice of refusing desire applies not just to possessions, but to all forms of familial and heterosexual love, including her love for her mother that she “kicked” and “chewed down” to the place where “other forms of “beaten love go” (Tea 331). Through evacuating her roles as “daughter” and as “heterosexual” en route to claiming new identifications as an “orphan” and “queer”, Tea expands the horizon of her present subjectivity.

Instead of seeing refusal as a narrowing of options, however, I offer unbecoming here as a way of making space for inhabiting new forms of possibility. Connecting the private forms of oppression, violence, and trauma she has experienced to the workings of larger systems of male domination, heteronormativity, and capitalism, Tea opts out of an economy of desire in order to resist further injury to herself or to others (Tea 323-324). In a particularly affect-charged scene of refusing to eat the food her mother has cooked for her because it is “poison”, Tea admits: “I was perhaps dying and nobody seemed to care…If I ever wanted anyone to help me—and I needed help—then I had to help others. I had to care about the badness, all of it” (Tea 324). Survival in this moment is achieved through an empathetic gesture of aligning her self with all other forms of suffering, an act that demands a relinquishing of forms of pleasure and sustenance in an effort to be completely undone. It is through this act of dissolution that alternative and unforeseen forms of being in the present become possible. As Tea admits, the insistence of her will
to endure is articulated as the one “want” she can’t quash: “I wanted to live. That lousy desire inside me, wanting to live ruined everything” (Tea 328). In opposition to a reading that this “everything” is what Tea truly wants (that is, to die), I suggest that this “everything” is instead the material and structural forces that render Tea’s life as unviable. “Everything” is thus what Tea’s subjectivity is up against, what she must counter, disrupt, and challenge in order to be viable in the present. Just being alive—just being possible—is a tremendous form of resistance against the “everything” that has tried to shape and constrain what her life can come to mean. As she moves horizontally away from an attachment to her family and the specter of the future she has never imagined, Tea’s politicized and necessarily deprived body unfolds itself toward a new orientation of the possible embedded in the present: “I was someone else. I didn’t know who […] Some girl, some new girl, an orphan” (Tea 331).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has asked how feminist and queer politics make use of the present as a viable place for existence, and for whom. By tracking the temporalities in which varying feminisms imagine liberation as being attainable, I have shown how an attachment to the future is a utopic, elitist, and phantasmatic orientation that serves to obscure the labor, affects, and bodies of women deemed excessive or abject. Further, I have questioned why survival, or, the continued arrival in the current moment, has lost traction as a politically and theoretically useful concept. Through exploring recent moves in queer theory that articulate alternative directions for knowledge, I have examined what elements of queer theory are “useful” for developing a feminist and queer politics of the possible. I have offered close readings of Michelle Tea’s memoir *The Chelsea Whistle* as
a narrative account of this form of politics.

Against the demand that poor and working-class people move up and out of their lives in order to find happiness, I am arguing for a resistance to narratives of upward mobility in exchange for narratives of radical being and transformation that cling to their arrival in the present. To let go of the self or the family, to dream up or imagine an alternative way of being, is not simultaneously to transcend one’s particular form of embodiment. The belief that the same forms of happiness, wealth, and liberation are equally available for everyone is a damaging—and dangerous—orientation to the world. Why has the future become the horizon upon which we attach claims to “the good life”, instead of recognizing, more uncomfortably, that “the good life” is a fantasy and that the present contains moments for disruption, for unbecoming, and for arrival? For many, the future is a luxury we literally cannot afford, a place in which many of us may have no home if the contingencies of the present don’t line up in “our” favor, that is, in the favor of capital accumulation. In giving an account of the possible as being “actual or real” in the present, I have sought to reinvigorate a sense that arriving in the present is, for many, a triumphant act, whether or not that arrival is the site of further refusals, suspensions, or unbecomings. I have tried to emphasize the link between the negative and the positive by insisting that to surrender the notion of a future does not mean to give up the chance for a life; rather, by placing interest in the present I have tried to expand the notions of what a life—of what just being alive—can come to mean.
Conclusion

This project has struggled to make tangible the sorts of contradictions and complexities that circulate around poor and working-class subjectivity. Pushed further by my own poor, feminist, and queer orientations to the world, this project has tried to animate—through theory, narrative, and imagination—the ways in which excess, lack, and unviability nonetheless produce subjects who speak up, write back, and continue to arrive. I am, quite simply, interested in how poor and working-class female subjects develop for ourselves a grammar of possibility that enables us to survive on into the present, to reconcile our bifurcated desires for class solidarity and class transcendence, and to continue working hard when work for the poor has seldom been a step on the road to luxury or professionalization but merely a condition to endure.

I have offered up these meditations on genre, on shame, and on possibility in order to arrive at a place of revaluing. I am insistent that feminist and queer preoccupations with the future need to be accountable for the exclusions they reify, and that the future will never be the place for liberation if the contingencies of the present continue to promote narratives of domination, wealth accumulation, and upward mobility. The world is full of alternatives, and many of these alternatives can only be accessed through journeys backwards and sideways, through staying still or falling down, and through a willingness to surrender to the in-between, to the uncomfortable spaces between being and becoming. The present is one such space that continues to dramatize the ways in which, through our ongoing shades of vulnerability, we continue to survive “in the mean time”. I offer this project as a gesture of awe and solidarity to the poor and working-class women like Michelle Tea who have managed to eke out a moment in the
“crisis ordinarness” of the present in which to write, in which to document being possible. This is an insistence that the act of writing is a powerful act that can produce new connections, transform old relations, and enable identifications just between words—in the spaces between where words inhabit and ideas, images, possibilities take shape.
Works Cited


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