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ON IGNORANT AND INSIGHTFUL CHICKENS: WHY  
ŽIŽEKIAN POST SECULARITY NEEDS HALBERSTAM'S  
SHADOW FEMINISM

If, as the introduction to this special issue suggests, the postsecular has been understood as both a mode of liberation from narratives of the past (religious and secular) *and* as a re-inscription of the very same triumphalism it had hoped to flee, then philosophers and theologians concerned with postsecularity must grapple with how our writing either resists triumphalism or serves to strengthen its postmodern incarnation. In this essay I affirm the promise of the postsecular to resist, while illuminating some of the ways it currently falls short of such promise. In particular, I look to issues of gender and sexual difference both as ciphers that reveal cracks in the promise of the postsecular, and as identity markers that shape communities from within which we might find some hope. Thinking with Foucault's *History of Madness*, Lynn Huffer surmises that "Madness is the 'ransom' paid by the 'other' for the historical rise of the rational moral subject."<sup>1</sup> If postsecularity serves as a break from the triumphalism of the rational moral subject then, one might hope, it would mark a refutation of precisely these acts of hostage taking—the confinement of those on whose effacement secular man was built. To be a space of radical resistance to such capture, postsecularity would need to demand a paying of attention to all those who were ransomed for this rise—the woman, the queer, the black, the indigenious, the disabled, the religious, and the mad. These identities represent those confined to spheres marked as "nonrational," and hence inappropriate for political work. Yet, often, we find in those philosophies and theologies written within a postsecular frame—whether they be undertaken by death of God, radical orthodox, or political theologians—the very same effacements, the very same demands for ransom, the very same deployment of discourses on faith to viscerally discount non-white men.

This essay grapples with postsecular theologies' and philosophies' resistance to such an accounting, in particular their dismissal of gender difference as key for postsecular thinking. To do so I look most explicitly to the work of Slavoj Žižek, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 92.

influence such work has had on postsecular thinkers, who often both refuse to take the violent erasures of secularism into account, *and* much worse, who have advocated a denial of attention, recognition, and recompense to the very subjects on whose erasure the secular thesis was built. To counter such violence, I engage queer and crip theories. These theories, I suggest, can open us to more radical pathways in which the postsecular might tread. Specifically I compare the politics of negativity in the works of Žižek with those of queer theorist Jack Halberstam. Halberstam's concept of "shadow feminism," a feminism resistant to traditional identity construction, resonates with Žižek's politics of refusal, in which refusing the capitalist process of subjectivization is crucial for legitimate class struggle. Yet, between the two, a significant gulf persists. This antagonism, I argue, is located in a series of divergences in each theorist's treatment of subjectivity, culture, and history. Ultimately, I suggest that political theology must be informed by a more nuanced feminism, one unafraid to travel in the shadows, to disrupt identity, and to refuse to become what capitalism demands. This is what is needed for any socio-historically-minded *and* radical postsecular political theology. More importantly, this is what is needed to face our current political landscape.

#### *A Tale of Two Chickens*

Followers of Slavoj Žižek's will know well the story of the Ignorant Chicken. It goes something like this: a man is hospitalized because he believes himself to be a grain of seed. When the doctors cure him of this belief the man leaves the hospital, but he immediately comes back trembling in fear. There is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid the chicken, mistaking him for a seed, will eat him. The doctor tries to reassure the man saying, "Dear fellow, you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man. "Of course I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?"<sup>2</sup> For Žižek this parable represents a proper reading of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. For Marx, the commodity holds an "uncanny" power over the human who fetishizes it and thereby grants it magical powers of attraction and control. The task is not, as often thought, to be convinced that there is nothing magical about commodities, but rather to convince the commodities of this. In other words, it is not enough to *explicitly* not believe, but rather one must implicitly not believe in the magic of the commodity, and so cease to *practice* such fetishism.

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<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Notes Towards a Politics of Bartleby: the ignorance of chicken," *Comparative American Studies: an international journal* Vol. 4 (4) (2006): 376-377.

Rejecting the magical powers of the commodity in one's theory still risks addressing the commodity as though it was magical. To say I refuse to believe in you, is to accede to the claim that there is something uncanny that is possible to believe in. Hence, it is not in the theoretical denial of the fetish, but rather in the refusal to practice such fetishism that Žižek's politics of Bartleby rests.

Žižek is interested not in what we say we believe, but in the material life that takes place within social exchanges dictated by ideologies: those that we eschew verbally, but in whose symbolic order we continue to participate. For instance, at a talk at Princeton University in 2005, Žižek argued that in fact it is our distance from outright belief in ideologies that allows for their perpetuation. During the talk, Žižek turned the Pascalian logic on its head moving from the suggestion that one can "do as if you believe, kneel down pray, and belief will come" to the formulation that we instead "kneel down and you make another agent believe for you."<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is the ritual that performs the belief so that you need not take seriously the structure or demands of such a belief; you can spend Sunday thinking about masturbation, because the order of the Church (its ideology) has taken care of faith *for* you through the act of kneeling. This analysis of how ideology functions through material action forms a rationale for Žižek's Bartlebyan politics.

In Herman Melville's character of Bartleby Žižek finds a politics that—through a posture of inaction or subtraction—starts to unravel ideological orders set up by those "disavowed" beliefs that continue to be practiced. The crux of Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener: a Story of Wall-Street" rests on Bartleby's repeated phrase of "I would prefer not to." In the story, Bartleby, a clerk in a law firm, begins to respond to all requests that he do work (and eventually also that he vacate the law office where he works, and ultimately that he eat food in order to stay alive) with the phrase, "I would prefer not to." Such a response is maddening to the lawyer for whom Bartleby works. The "I would prefer not to," is not an outright rejection of the work, but rather a mode of inaction that turns the question of work as a request versus work as a demand around on the lawyer. The lawyer must now face his own role in the boss/worker dynamic. This politics of refusal or inaction is so nonsensical to the lawyer that he must flee his own office, giving up the lease and relocating so as to get away from Bartleby. Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," therefore, is the embodiment of a politics of inaction or subtraction in the face of the demands

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Ignorance of Chickens" (talk given at Princeton University with Cornel West, October 10, 2005).

to play certain roles and fulfill certain social obligations.

While for other theorists, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the Bartlebyan “I would prefer not to,” should function as the first move, a distancing from the social universe which is needed before the work of constructing a new community, for Žižek the “I would prefer not to,” is the permanent foundation of such an alternative order. As an underlying principle of negation the “I would prefer not to” refuses what Žižek calls the “rumspringa of resistance” that, in its ideological rejection of the market, actually serves to legitimate the terms of the market.<sup>4</sup> In other words, to resist the market, Žižek might say, is to affirm the uncanny pull of the market; it is to fetishize the market in allowing the market to be the arbiter of meaning. To refuse the market à la Bartleby, on the other hand, is to look for meaning elsewhere; it is to reject the terms of social obligation on offer. A “rumspringa of resistance,” is a momentary push back against the current order and not the permanent distancing of oneself from hegemonic social obligations. In its refusal to give up the abyss of the negative, what Žižek names as the parallax gap, a Bartlebyan politics refuses to participate in acts of affirmative belief (even those undertaken while we are saying “No to the Empire”). Hence, Žižek argues (and argues in a tone that seems to embrace provocation for provocation’s sake) that a true Bartlebyan politics would include preferring not, “to give to charity to support a Black orphan in Africa, engage in the struggle to prevent oil-drilling in a wildlife swamp, or send books to educate our liberal-feminist –spirited women in Afghanistan.”<sup>5</sup>

For Žižek, to participate in these “liberal” activities would be to affirm the neoliberal system that impoverished the black orphan, that marked nature as something outside us in need of protection, and that profited from a belief that western feminism was best. He further sees these acts of “resistance” as naïve momentary affirmations that make the individual resisting feel better, while allowing her to return to the business of everyday life in which she participates in the market-system that created the very need for resistance in the first place. This framing of resistance has ruffled many feminist feathers.

Despite significant riffs between a Žižekian politics and many a feminist one, could this Bartlebyan politics also resonate with alternative feminist feathers? Perhaps those of the shadow feminism, which brings in Babs the chicken, from the claymation film “Chicken Run,” so well explicated by Jack Halberstam? In

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 383.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam critiques similar forms of active resistance, which in their very claims to be against the system, have actually affirmed the mechanisms of subjectivization they seek to resist. Instead of looking to triumphant historical and fictional heroes that overcome the damage done to them by heteropatriarchy, Halberstam creates an archive of queer failures that instead of overcoming damage in order to become successful subjects, refuse the definitions of damage and success on offer. This archive includes: figures from Pixar cartoons, feminist performance artists, and characters in postcolonial novels.<sup>6</sup> Instead of striving to succeed at a game that has been rigged against us, Halberstam urges us to fail more often, better, and together with all those that colonial and neocolonial projects (including those of heteronormativity and white supremacy) have marked as failures: queers, women, people of color, indigenous people, the impoverished, transgender and genderqueer folk, and the differently-abled. As an alternative to the successful feminist hero, Halberstam offers an archive of “shadow feminists” including a shadow feminist chicken that comes to life in “Chicken Run.”

Halberstam tells the story of varying feminisms in the film thusly: “the politically active and explicitly feminist bird Ginger is opposed in her struggle to rise up [against the farmer, who plans to turn them into pot pies] by two other ‘feminist subjects.’ One is the cynic Bunty, a hard-nosed fighter who rejects utopian dreams out of hand, and the other is Babs...who sometimes gives voice to feminine naïveté and sometimes points to the absurdity of the political terrain as it has been outlined by the activist Ginger.”<sup>7</sup> For instance, when Ginger says, “We either die free chickens or we die trying,” Babs asks naively, “Are those the only choices?”<sup>8</sup> For Halberstam, it is in this question that shadow feminism, which refuses the system of choices—either freedom in liberal terms, or death—takes shape. Shadow feminism, “does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing.”<sup>9</sup> For Halberstam, Babs is part of an archive of feminist and queer failures who, in their refusal to succeed at either the neoliberal game from which they were always already excluded, or a programmatic plan of active resistance which affirms the terms of subjectivization on offer by neoliberalism, open up spaces for a different way of being in the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Shadow feminists in this archive include (among several others): Xuela from Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*, who (through acts of self-evacuation) resists the narrative of the self that colonialism demands; Roderick Ferguson's critical race theories (which draws on the work of black feminist Hortense Spillers) that "circumvent an 'American' political grammar that insists on placing liberation struggles within the same logic as the normative regimes against which they struggle;"<sup>10</sup> and acts of sadomasochism, which mark (for Halberstam) how unbecoming can represent an "anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency."<sup>11</sup> These figures are failures at proper-identity construction. Xuela does not become the liberated revolutionary nor does she agree to be the colonial native-informant. Xuela refuses to succeed at embodying either of these two identity positions, those that ask Xuela to ignore her own fragmented experience of self, in order to fit comfortably in the narratives on offer by society. Similarly, the critical race theory of Ferguson and Spillers, as well as feminist acts of sadomasochism, reject the demand that we "overcome" the violence society has committed against black, female, queer, genderqueer, and disabled bodies. These "failures" recognize that such a demand is often made so that we might become healthy successful subjects ready to participate in a market-driven system built on individual success at the expense of others unwilling or unable to overcome such damage. These figures challenge not only the very states of being they as "failures" have been granted, but also the belief systems sanctioned by participation in the machineries of becoming and overcoming.

In other words, to fail at the rigged game of neoliberal capitalism in this queer way is to do so without succeeding at the liberationist struggles that can too easily be co-opted by the structures it seeks to resist; or those struggles for acceptance by mainstream society, which affirm that it is the State that can grant us our personhood. Queer failure and shadow feminism are not mere assertions that one does not believe in the game. Rather, they are performative refusals to play in the first place. It is not enough to just kneel at church so that one can think about masturbating: shadow feminism asks us to actually masturbate while the pews sit empty. In this way, the archive of shadow feminists can be read as a political and collective performance of *Bartleby's* "I would prefer not to." And yet, these performances take place in exactly the arenas Žižek refuses to acknowledge as capable of containing such revolutionary refusals.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011. 128.

It is not novel, and yet it is still crucial, to critique Žižek for too often dismissing what he derides as PC identity movements: those marked by feminist/antiracist/and antisexist struggles, postcolonial theories, and the work of cultural studies. Žižek understands the goals of these struggles to be the translation of antagonism into difference, and so remain nothing but peaceful coexistence. The class struggle seeks to ‘aggravate’ class difference into class antagonism: to bring on not peace but class warfare. Besides the false assumption that one can disentangle race and gender from issues of class, Žižek’s reading represents a gross misrecognition of today’s queer, anti-racist, feminist, and decolonial struggles. For instance, peaceful incorporation of difference is not what Sara Ahmed seeks when she writes that political freedom is the freedom to be unhappy, by which she means that the demand to go with the emotional flow made by neoliberal capitalism—to be happiness making objects for others—represents the need for a greater affectual antagonism.<sup>12</sup> This is an affectual and effectual antagonism we might find in the black, and more than black, rage felt in the wake of both the slaughtering of Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, and far too many others, *and* in the black and more than black melancholy felt in the midst of the making-quotidian of such slaughter. Happy inclusion is not on offer by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s theses on the university and what they name “the Undercommons.”<sup>13</sup> For Moten and Harney it will not be the critical academic who adequately addresses an ever-more corporatized academy. Indeed, we might say that the critical academic serves, for Moten and Harney, what kneeling in church serves for Žižek: the legitimization of professional education even as the critical academic says “no” to it. Instead, Moten and Harney urge us to look to a fugitive community who are within--but not of--the academy: a community that steals from it, and refuses demands for productivity, excellence, and seriousness (academics often already marooned to the fields of queer, gender, and critical race studies.)

These queer, feminist, and black actors—and their everyday acts of refusing to pacify antagonisms—are willfully ignored, problematically eschewed, or irresponsibly eclipsed by Žižek. For instance, Žižek writes, Today’s hegemonic attitude is that of ‘resistance’ –all the poetics of the dispersed marginal sexual, ethnic, life-style ‘multitudes’ (gays, mentally ill, prisoners) ‘resisting’ the mysterious central Power. Everyone ‘resists,’ from gays and lesbians to Rightist survivalists – so why not make the

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<sup>12</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2013).

logical conclusion that this discourse of ‘resistance’ is the norm today, and, as such, the main obstacle to the emergence of the discourse that would effectively question the dominant relations?”<sup>14</sup>

This “logical” conclusion relies on a number of illogical leaps. Is it really logical to assume that all modes of resistance are the same, or that no political analysis can be done to amplify the ways in which one form of resistance fortifies a Nationalist agenda, while others work toward intersectional justice? Ignoring the analytical tools (like that of intersectional methodology) that would help to form such ethical analyses is certainly a factor in Žižek’s refusal to engage with nuance the lessons learned from the “lifestyles” he dismisses. But perhaps most important is the illogical leap Žižek takes when he assumes those resisting find the central Power to be mysterious.

In response to the Ferguson shooting Carol Anderson, Associate Professor of African American studies and history at Emory University, noted that while the media has focused on black rage amongst the protestors, Ferguson is actually about white rage which:

Smolders in meetings where officials redraw precincts to dilute African American voting strength or seek to slash the government payrolls that have long served as sources of black employment. It goes virtually unnoticed, however, because white rage doesn’t have to take to the streets and face rubber bullets to be heard. Instead, white rage carries an aura of respectability and has access to the courts, police, legislatures and governors, who cast its efforts as noble, though they are actually driven by the most ignoble motivations.<sup>15</sup>

While the media may find the central power mysterious, many who participate in this so-called “hegemonic” mode of resistance know very well what and whom they are resisting. “Hands up Don’t Shoot,” was not an Obama Hope poster; as a slogan it did not go with the emotional flow, nor ask for peaceful

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<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, (London: Verso, 2012), 84.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Anderson, “Ferguson isn’t about black rage against cops. It’s white rage against progress.” *WashingtonPost.com*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ferguson-wasnt-black-rage-against-copsit-was-white-rage-against-progress/2014/08/29/3055e3f4-2d75-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ferguson-wasnt-black-rage-against-copsit-was-white-rage-against-progress/2014/08/29/3055e3f4-2d75-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33_story.html) (accessed September 1, 2014).

incorporation of difference. It was a raging lament that refused the systems of becoming on offer by white society, including (and consciously so) the white governmental and police officials who allow for the proliferation of white rage.

Halberstam knows very well that it is the very rhetoric of success, and the symbolic structure it upholds, that isolates and enchains us. Indeed he writes, "Let's leave success and its achievement to the Republicans, to the corporate managers of the world, to the winners of reality TV shows, to married couples, to SUV drivers."<sup>16</sup> These are not mysterious actors and figures, or mysterious structures and ideologies. The queer refusal of success advocated by Halberstam is not resistance for resistance sake or resistance as contemporary fashion, nor is it ambiguously directed. For Halberstam, failure is a way of life counter-to, not a vacation (a rumspringa if you will) from neoliberalism. Indeed, failure is a refusal of success more so than a resistance to it. And yet in the performance of refusal, Halberstam's failures *resist* being recycled back into capitalist machinery. This is not resistance that leads to acceptance; this is resistance that might lead to the expansion of communities of non-acceptance.

What these movements and theories seem not to know is what will come of such forms of refusal: what the end will look like. And this is, in part, the point. Žižek critiques the activist politics he finds in Hardt and Negri's reading of *Bartleby*, favoring instead the parallax gap, the continuous I would prefer not to. And yet, the actual performance of such gaps by the marginalized (unless they fit into Žižek's idea of proper revolution) go unacknowledged by Žižek in favor of a specific, if undertheorized, idea of where the real revolution, or in terms borrowed from Alain Badiou the "authentic truth-event," will take place, which Žižek claims will be the urban slums.<sup>17</sup> The authenticity of those whose lives have been authored through the lens of the negative—the not-white, not-male, not-straight, not-cis, not-rational, not-serious, not-enlightened, not-authentically eventive—is dismissed by Žižek as foolish at best, and as a dangerous impediment to *his* authored truth-event at worst.

When speaking at an Occupy Wall Street rally Žižek seemed to propose that one such measure of an event's verity is in its ability to project what will happen the morning after such an event. OWS itself is a movement—along with the water-protectors at Standing Rock, other climate activists, and the

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<sup>16</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, *Parallax View*, 168, 269.

Black Lives Matter movement—that has perhaps come closest to a politics of subtraction from active life. But one wonders if Žižek would recognize a movement like that of the water-protectors at Standing Rock in its verity, or if it would be read as merely another act of *resistance* to oil drilling that demanded our refusal. Either way, Žižek warned that we should not forget to ask what happens the morning after the occupations when we return to normal life. In a 2012 column in *make/shift* magazine Halberstam resisted this warning noting: “Like many anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements, these movements refuse to conjure an outcome, eschew Utopian or pragmatic conjurings of what happens on the ‘morning after’ because the outcome will be determined by the process. All we know for sure is that the protests announce a collective awareness of the end of a ‘normal life.’”<sup>18</sup> In this collective awareness of the end of a ‘normal life’—one that looks to the process and not to pragmatic conjurings of what happens on the ‘morning after’—we can hear the voice of Babs asking for another option. This Babsian feminism may not sit well with Žižek, but it should. It is exactly this not-knowing that I believe more fully lives into the parallax gap lauded by Žižek.

Indeed, in his search for *the authentic* truth-event, and even in his location of it in a future eruption from within urban slums, Žižek effaces the potency of the quotidian truth-events being performed within those slums, and within marginalized collectivities of other forms—including acts of queer failure and academic theft that help to shape local-collectives refusing the choices on offer. As affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich has argued in her work on depression key acts of impotency, impasse, and refusal (which, reading with Halberstam, we can say mark the fiction of ‘normal life’) are often less distinct than what we call events.<sup>19</sup> And yet, should we assume these acts are any less potent? Do they not better align with a Bartlebyan politics of inaction than would a traditional concept of revolution?

Everyday life, and its material and fleshy nature, which has long been theorized and never assumed to be merely private nor divorced from moody histories by feminists of all colors, critical race theorists, antiracist activists, cultural studies professors, queer organizers, and decolonial philosophers, is a fecund arena in which a Bartlebyan politics can flourish. The question remains whether theologians engaged in the postsecular will be willing to till such ground.

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Halberstam, “Riots and Occupations: the Fall of the United States,” *Make/Shift*, Spring/Summer, 2012, 14

<sup>19</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression a Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

*Radical Theology and the Problem of the Postsecular "Event"*

Theories of event, exodus, and eruption populate contemporary postsecular theology and philosophy engaged with and beyond that of a Žižekian politics.<sup>20</sup> But do these terms contain the potency of Babs's resistance both to capture *and* flight, obedience *and* liberation? Are these theologies written after the death of God still in too great a search of a resurrection, an in-breaking of the new over-and-against the importance of a persisting past?

The two most famous statements from Carl Schmitt's 1922 work, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, are inarguably the following: "The sovereign is he who decides on the exception..." and "All modern concepts of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>21</sup> The field of political theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has, in part, developed from these two statements. For Schmitt, liberal theorists had placed far too much faith in the people, and only a return to strong sovereignty could regulate the problems of liberalism. If all modern concepts of the state were theological anyway, then a reactivation of proper—non-democratic and theocratic— theology would be the solution.

This claim haunts contemporary theological debates around the concepts of the secular and the postsecular. Some theorists eschew the idea that the liberal secular state cannot remain neutral. For instance, Jürgen Habermas argues that the secular liberal state, to be liberal, must remain neutral in the sense that it must be nonreligious and non-metaphysical.<sup>22</sup> Others take Schmitt's assertion that the secular has an implicit theological aspect as a given, but debate Schmitt's conclusions on how to respond to these theological aspects. One such school, for whom the postsecular seems to mark the ways in which the immanent and supposedly "secular" world functions theologically, is that of self-described Radical Theology.

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<sup>20</sup> See for example: Slavoj Žižek's work on revolution and his deployment of the work of Badiou which spans across his work; Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* (2013), *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (2013), and *Philosophy and the Event* (2013); Crockett's *Deleuze Beyond Badiou* (2013) and *Radical Political Theology* (2011); Robbins's *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (2013); the collected volume *Theology and the Political: the new debate* (Davis, Milbank, and Žižek eds., (2005)); and John D. Caputo's *The Weakness of God: a Theology of the Event* (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "On Relations Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

The recent special journal issue of *Palgrave Communications* on radical theology describes the field thusly: "Radical theology as a field encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death-of-God theologies, political theologies, continental thought and contemporary culture. It expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice."<sup>23</sup> Radical theologians attempt to resist countering secularized theologies, like those undergirding capitalism, with other absolutist theologies. And yet, in their attempts to flee such absolutism or to participate in eventive ruptures with the past, have they risked creating the very same erasures enacted by the past narratives they hope we would overcome?

Finding theology within the immanent world is appealing, but only if such acts are undertaken with a finer attention to the histories that have shaped the immanent world as such. Sara Ahmed has queried, "How is it that we enter a room and pick up on some feelings and not others? I have implied that one enters not only *in* a mood, but *with* a history, which is how you come to lean this way or that. Attunement might itself be an affective history, of how subjects become attuned to others over and in time."<sup>24</sup> For Ahmed, attunement to the atmosphere can mean learning to not bring up certain topics. Such understanding of mood helps us to inquire after what it is about contemporary postsecular moods that impede the present moods of race, gender, ability, and sexuality in the current discourse of radical theology? What are the histories to which this theology wants us to attune, and which does it struggle to hear?

The question of history *matters*; whose mood gets picked up on, and to whose are we coerced to attune to, are not questions often enough asked by radical theologians. The overlooking of these questions has led to (if unintentionally so) dangerous consequences. Such consequences include: ignoring the voices of those ransomed for the rise of secular modern man; dismissing the importance of social justice movements built around issues of racial, sexual, and gender difference; and assuming that authentic revolution can only come when we focus on issues of class conceived as separate from issues of race and gender. All those working within a postsecular frame must grapple with the ways in which by ignoring or merely touching on issues of difference we shape whose mood is allowed in our rooms, and open the postsecular to participation in the very triumphalist narratives it had the potential to resist. Hence, while radical

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<sup>23</sup> Mike Grimshaw, *Palgrave Communications* Special Collection Introduction, <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/palcomms/article-collections/radical-theologies>, (accessed December 2, 2015)

<sup>24</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Not in the Mood," *New Formations* 82 (2014): 18.

theologians have offered critiques of the present and suggested inventive re-imaginings for the future, I am left desirous of alternative thinking about how we might more faithfully attend to the past in order to re-imagine our present. Might such re-imagining come from a better attention to, and not an overcoming of, difference?

*Willing Difference*

In both his refusal of the multiplicity of enfleshments of a Bartlebyan, or perhaps better Babsian, politics, *and* in his search to overcome (or awake from the fantasy of) the fragmentation he argues has been brought on by identity politics in favor of a universal in the particular of the common antagonism which would be made present by class-struggle, Žižek (and those that write in his wake) risks affirming the goodness of white straight cisgendered and able-bodied men, a goodness already held dear by the Neoliberal empire against which Žižek's refusals claim to revolt. Indeed, is there, not an eerie resonance between the call to overcome our differences through the shared fetishism of common desires cultivated by neoliberal capitalism and to sublimate them to the *real* issue, that of economic injustice? Could both, to a greater and lesser degree, fortify what Sara Ahmed has called the institution of "white men"? In a 2014 post on her *feministkilljoys* wordpress blog Ahmed wrote:

"When I am saying that 'white men' is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the *mechanisms* that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. 'White men' refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behaviour as bond."<sup>25</sup>

The bonding behavior of the Žižekian dismissal of antiracist and antisexist movements comes in the laughing at rape jokes, in the shared accusations that one who is not laughing is being a killjoy, and in the rewarding of a place at the table to those who can laugh at the joke. The eclipse of the mattering of queer failures and shadow feminists, of gender, sex, and race in general, is the experience of obscene joy in the big Other's demand that we all be happiness making objects—happy to go

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<sup>25</sup> Sara Ahmed, "White Men," *FeministKillJoys Blog*, November 4, 2014. Accessed October 1, 2016.  
<https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/11/04/white-men/>

along with the revolution without such silly matters, happy to be counted as one of the ones who get the joke, and so happy to be at the big boy's table, no matter how we are treated once we get there.

Additionally, as An Yountae powerfully explicates in *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins*, Žižek may too easily be evading or quickly passing over how the concept of abyss, so crucial to Žižek's parallax gap, comes not from the nothingness of a void, but rather from the real historical trauma of being in the position of the negation, the Real on which the symbolic order of society was built.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, might this eclipse of racial, gendered, sexual, and ability markers (what Žižek has mockingly referred to as lifestyle 'multitudes') in fact too quickly eclipse the abyss, the material negation of the negation that takes shape in bodies that are not and refuse to be (as though there were really an option) male, white, straight, and able?

The erasure of this flesh, the demand that we suspend our identities at the door (as though this were possible) is to re-traumatize those on whose negation the institution of white men has been built. To keep this gap fecund, to truly allow for a politics of subtraction that prefers not to participate in neoliberalism is to refuse the closure of the gap; it is to refuse the eclipse of difference.

What difference would it make to salvage difference within the wake of the refusal of identity proposed by Žižek and from within the prevailing moods of radical theology? Or rather what kinds of *subjects* remain in the spaces produced by these acts of overlooking, erasure, or violent dismissal? I propose that if postsecular theology and philosophy are to live up to any political potential that they have found in the rejection of the supremacy of rational modern secular *man*, we must face into the fleshiness of the abyss where those expelled from or willfully rejecting such supremacy live. We might look to those who have been refused in order for the institution of white men to remain collectively suspended, and so frozen in its supremacist throne.

The affect theory of Ahmed, the Foucauldian ethics of Huffer, and the crip theory of Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow bring to the fore the political stakes of this proposition. These theories amplify Halberstam's critiques of neoliberal concepts of success explicated in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Together they mark the historical and contemporary moods and embodiments of those

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<sup>26</sup> An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

who have been marked as “problems” in a society built on an ever-more productive and efficient citizenry, a citizenry happy to go along unquestioningly with the emotional flow of neoliberal capitalism. For instance, in *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed argues: “Perhaps some have ‘ways of life’ because others have lives: some have to find voices because others are given voice; some have to assert their particulars because others have their particulars given as a general expression.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, those that have charged with having mere “lifestyles” are those with lives counter to the norm. This norm resonates with the nonidentity on offer by Žižek’s refusals: the nonidentity par excellence of the able-bodied cisgendered white heterosexual male birthed from the captivity of all those denied a life (for instance, blacks, queer folk, and the most precariously disabled.)

In *Willful Subjects* Ahmed explores how certain forms of living are considered willful because they “pulse” with a desire directed away from the mainstream. Ahmed’s archive in *Willful Subjects* and previous work includes subjects like the feminist killjoy who, I have argued above, runs counter to Žižek. The feminist killjoy is she who does not laugh at his rape joke, who ruins the postsecular mood by reminding us that it was the effacement of women, people of color, the indigenous, the queer, the differently-abled, and the mad which allowed for the birth of all the following: *secular* man and his rational humanism, the male heads of religious orders, *and* (finally) their bastard child in the *postsecular* philosopher who demands the refusal, suspension, and subsuming of these subjects in the construction of *his* purportedly revolutionary politics. Instead of attuning to the current postsecular mood, willful subjects are those that come apart and wander away. Indeed, Ahmed reminds us that attunement shares etymological roots with atonement, suggesting that to attune might also mean to “make one” or to make that which was separate, now a part.<sup>28</sup> She assigns to processes of attunement words like, harmony, reconciliation, and a sense of peace. To become one with contemporary postsecular theology may be to attune ourselves to theologies built at the sites of our effacement.

These sites of effacement are those traced in Foucault’s *History of Madness*. The mad ransomed (through confinement and pathologization), include the queer, the differently-abled, hysterical women, prisoners, and the unreasoned. According to Huffer:

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<sup>27</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014) 160.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 50.

At stake in Foucault's tracing of these figures in their historical appearance and disappearance are ethical questions about subjectivity and alterity within a modern rationalist moral order. Faced with an objectifying language of reason for the telling of history, *History of Madness* refigures those sexual subjects transformed by science into objects of intelligibility—as homosexuals, onanists, perverts, and so on—by allowing them to hover as 'fantastical' ghosts. They haunt our present but we can't quite grasp them.<sup>29</sup>

Might it be these ghosts who have gone missing, and yet still haunt, those spaces constructed by the refusal, suspension, and collectivization of identity into class-identity and nothing more? Can we hear these ghosts despite demands for their continued effacement? Might we listen for their murmurings not so as to reconstruct stable identities available for confinement, but rather to take more seriously the historical machinations of power that grant some a life and others a lifestyle? Such historical machinations, I argue, should be the target of a postsecular turn in theology and philosophy, and yet in the postsecular turn's Žižekian form, such machinations are amplified.

To counter such amplification, we might follow Huffer's proposal that an archival listening can create pathways for different hearings, those that ask us to consider how we read; how we hear the one who has been effaced by the discursive violence of repetition *without* difference; how the other might reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement. In *Are the Lips a Grave*, Huffer surmises that, "If ethics is the site of inscriptional relation to an other within the genocidal logic of biopower, how we answer [these] question[s] will determine what we find at the site of inscription: the possibility of difference or the devastated plane of the Same."<sup>30</sup> The devastated plane of the same is where Žižek's own claims to refusal come unraveled in that they mimic the very structures of neoliberalism he asks us to refuse to perform. For instance, when Žižek mocks "lifestyle" groups and argues that identity politics is a distraction from authentic leftist movements, he is making a mockery of the importance of difference in similar ways to which neoliberalism marks certain differences acceptable and others degenerate and disposable.

Instead of erasure, I suggest a postsecular mode of philosophy

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>30</sup> Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 56.

and theology that would follow the cultural theory of Halberstam in its attention to those going queerly their own way. In particular, I suggest we might look to those bent on embracing their own sense of disability or crip-ness, so as not to be made *able* volunteers for neoliberal identity demands. Crip theory is a version of disability theory that rejects assimilation. To be crip is to be unwilling to come back together as part of a productive whole. It is to refuse to wear the prosthesis so that the non-crip need not rethink the wholeness of her body. A crip sensibility refuses to kneel, or perhaps embraces the inability to kneel, at all kinds of neoliberal altars—shrines to productivity, to action, and to heteronormative and ablest definitions of worth. According to crip theorists Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer the crip says, “fuck employability: I’m too sick to work.”<sup>31</sup> To embrace the stigma of sickness, of what Foucault might recognize as madness, is to question the demands of productive identities on offer by society, and to haunt those too willing to confine difference. This politics of refusal need not be the Žižekian refusal of identity. Rather it might be the queer killing of joy and the crip listening for the murmurings of the mad.

Yet isn’t refusing to come back together as a whole a Žižekian politics, a statement against an identity politics that classifies all women or all blacks as uniform (and, so, digestible by a neoliberal machine bent on making our fantasies, including those of stable identity, profitable)? If Žižek’s call were not a rejection of the very subcultural life where such refusals are nurtured *in* community, then yes perhaps it would be. The difference with a willfully crip subjectivity, however, is not that it wanders away from all senses of collectivity, but rather that it refuses to attune to the monotony engendered by the effacement of difference.

As Halberstam notes in the introduction to Moten and Harney’s *Undercommons*,

The disordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as ‘extra-musical,’ as Moten puts it, precisely because we hear something in them that reminds us that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible. Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us...And when we are called to this other place, the wild

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<sup>31</sup> Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow eds., *Sex and Disability*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012) 32.

beyond, 'beyond the beyond' in Moten and Harney's apt terminology, we have to give ourselves over to a certain kind of craziness.<sup>32</sup>

We can give ourselves over to this madness, to an archival listening for the cacophony of crazy murmured by those on whose effacement harmony was built. But this wild beyond is not the space of an "authentic" truth-event where we attune to our nonidentity in order to be granted dignity, to be recognized as equals. The Undercommons, a collectivity filled with "lifestyles", does not seek recognition. It seeks to tear down the systems of recognition on offer. Further, this "crazy we" is not a we that will come from a suppression of each individual maddening noise into a harmonious battle hymn (even if the we *will wage war*). This cacophony is the sound of Ahmed's willful politics, which, "[refuses] to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole."<sup>33</sup> This is no common battle hymn but, rather, as Ahmed puts it, "A queer army...that is not willing to reproduce the whole, an army of unserviceable parts. You can be assembled by what support you refuse to give. A queer army of parts without bodies, as well as bodies without parts, to evoke Audre Lorde's call for an army of one-breasted women."<sup>34</sup>

There is great potential for radical theological and postsecular thought that lives into a Babsian and Bartlebyan politics. Those of us interested in a postsecular mode of doing theology and philosophy will need to take seriously the enfleshed histories of those doing the refusing. If we wish to fully reject the violent effacements enacted in the perpetuation of neoliberalism, we must pay better attention to the eventful *and* quotidian acts of refusal undertaken by capitalism's failures *and* to the embodied and historical contexts from which the bodies that labor through such acts have been formed. To refuse to do so would be to uphold neoliberal capitalism even as we are saying "No to the Empire."

#### *Trumped-up Conclusions*

In dealing with the issue of difference and the secular from the position of race Jonathon Kahn has suggested that the following stakes, "of this contemporary moment, this age of high theory and conversation about the secular," rest in asking whether, "these conversations feed those fires that occlude the real and reinforce discourses of purity, or...help us see anew who is being denied the status of the real—as deserving attention,

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<sup>32</sup> Jack Halberstam, introduction to Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 184

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 199

recognition, resources, and recompense.”<sup>35</sup> In the months since the original drafting of this article, we have seen the tide of white supremacist heteropatriarchal “populism” overtake the country and Donald Trump anointed president. It seems to me, that along with this “secular” phenomenon, the wing of postsecular theologians and philosophers bent on a return to non-identity-centered politics (read whiteness), many fueled by Žižekian politics, have continued to beat the drums of the truly Real: purity at the expense of those being denied such status. “See,” they cheer: “It really was all about class after all! Brexit and Trump prove it!” Triumphantly grinning they proclaim: “You lifestyle identitarians believing you were seeds, how silly you must now feel.” Nevermind that what Trump and Brexit seem to actually prove is the importance of intersectionality, or the ways in which racism, xenophobia, and heteropatriarchy pulse within white bodies. Additionally, the “this was always all about class” argument seems to illuminate and perpetuate the ways in which the masses of working class people of color, immigrants, and women become easily erased in favor of simplistic and divisive narratives that pit an “elitist” liberal set against suffering white male laborers. The perversion in such tales rests not in believing in our difference, but rather in the fetishization of the “overcoming” of difference as the key to liberating us all from the pain brought on by neoliberalism. There is nothing authentically leftist about aligning with groups that mark certain bodies as disposable in the fight for justice. Rather, to find radical theological potential in white male “populism” is to mimic the logic of neoliberalism in which the very same people: the queer, the Muslim, the black, the impoverished, the disabled, and the woman become killable.

In the fall of 2016 I began teaching at Wesleyan College in Macon, GA. Wesleyan is an all-women’s college with a large international presence, a significant queer population, and a student body that is nearly a third African American. Every day the women of Wesleyan and we teachers who learn with them have to fight the discourses of purity that deny them the status of the Real. In the first week of February after Trump’s executive order banning immigration from seven primarily Muslim countries, someone wrote: “Go Home Immigrant! #Trump” on a Muslim student’s door and the N-word on the doors of several black students. Perhaps more disturbing than these hate crimes, was the reaction of some students and some members of the Macon community to the school’s response to the hate crimes. The school condemned these crimes and held a series of events

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathon Kahn, “Conclusion: James Baldwin and a Theology of Justice in a Secular Age,” in *Race and Secularism in America*, Kahn and Lloyd eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 254.

centered on the pain felt by the students of color. Community members accused the Wesleyan administration of catering to millennial whining. Conservative students claimed they were now being victimized. This false equivalency between the violence done to our students of color and the vulnerability of those who supported Trump in being forced to face such violence is not merely nurtured by right-wing propaganda; it is also fortified by left-leaning philosophers, theologians, and activists who assume that foci on race, gender, and sexuality are frivolous or dangerous. The violence of implying that the concerns of women and people of color are mere distractions, the violence of nostalgia for an imagined American common good, and the violence of deeming some bodies worthy of sacrifice for an “authentic truth-event” form a soul threatening tide that my students must resist on a quotidian basis. Every day, in and out of the classroom, together we fight the message that they are less than, that their voices don't matter, that their bodies are not their own, that their desires (sexually and otherwise) are degenerate, and that their cultures are inferior and in need of being brought into proper civilized order. For our fight to flourish we must affirm the *disordering* power of their and our difference. Postsecular dismissals of such power are justifications for the violence done to these students, and there is nothing radical about that.

In his conclusion to *Race and Secularism in America*, Kahn convincingly argues that, “the long arc of the twentieth century’s secularization thesis, with its claim that religion is irrational, on the wane, and inappropriate for political work in the public square, should be called for what it is: a version of whiteness, if not white supremacy, that served to question the right of political place of African American citizens.”<sup>36</sup> The rise of secular rationalism cannot be divorced from colonizing projects enacted by White Europeans against the global south, in which “nonrational” religiosity practiced by the colonized was justification for “civilizing missions” undertaken by rational men from the north. This rise was and continues to be nurtured by the dismissal or outright rejection of modes of knowing often associated with groups who, when denied access to certain public spheres, found political community in “privatized” and “domestic” spaces such as religious worship and the home. These groups include African Americans, Muslims, women, and queer folk. The blood of these groups, their history, courses through the veins of my students. There is something radical lurking in the shadows that birthed the women of Wesleyan and from within the communities and figures discussed by Halberstam, Ahmed, Huffer, and McRuer and Mollow. In

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<sup>36</sup> Kahn, “Conclusion,” 244.

listening better to these shadow feminists and crippled subjects, we might embrace a refusal of neoliberal order that comes not in overcoming difference, but rather from within embodied sensibilities nurtured through the concrete style of life that takes shape in all those places secularism deemed “inappropriate for political work.”

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Bray, Karen, “On Ignorant and Insightful Chickens: Why Žižekian Post Secularity Needs Halberstam’s Shadow Feminism,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 16 no. 2 (Spring 2017):