Resonances of Slavery in Race/Gender Relations
SHADOW AT THE HEART OF AMERICAN POLITICS

Jane Flax
For the last twenty years, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves. This picture has had the effect of deemphasizing the diversity of past scholarship as well as constraining the way we understand and frame new work. The aim of this series is to attract original scholars who will offer unique interpretations of past scholarship and unearth neglected contributions to feminist theory. By breaking free from the constraints of the image of waves, this series will be able to provide a wider forum for dialogue and engage historical and interdisciplinary work to open up feminist theory to new audiences and markets.

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The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism
by Ya-Chen Chen
This book is dedicated to the memory of Peter Lyman: a much loved and much missed friend.
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**Series Foreword**

*Breaking Feminist Waves* is a series designed to rethink the conventional models of what feminism is today, its past and future trajectories. For more than a quarter of a century, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves, and this has come to represent generational divides and differences of political orientation as well as different formulations of goals. The imagery of waves, while connoting continuous movement, implies a singular trajectory with an inevitably progressive teleology. As such, it constrains the way we understand what feminism has been and where feminist thought has appeared, while simplifying the rich and nuanced political and philosophical diversity that has been characteristic of feminism throughout. Most disturbingly, it restricts the way we understand and frame new work.

This series provides a forum to reassess established constructions of feminism and of feminist theory. It provides a starting point to redefine feminism as a configuration of intersecting movements and concerns; with political commitment but, perhaps, without a singular centre or primary track. The generational divisions among women do not actually correlate to common interpretive frameworks shaped by shared historical circumstances, but rather to a diverse set of arguments, problems, and interests affected by differing historical contexts and locations. Often excluded from cultural access to dominant modes of communication and dissemination, feminisms have never been uniform nor yet in a comprehensive conversation. The generational division, then, cannot represent the dominant divide within feminism, nor a division between essentially coherent moments; there are always multiple conflicts and contradictions, as well as differences about the goals, strategies, founding concepts, and starting premises.

Nonetheless; the problems facing women, feminists, and feminisms are as acute and pressing today as ever. Featuring a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, *Breaking Feminist Waves* provides a forum for comparative, historical, and interdisciplinary
work, with special attention to the problems of cultural differences, language and representation, embodiment, rights, violence, sexual economies, and political action. By rethinking feminisms’ history as well as its present, and by unearthing neglected contributions to feminist theory, this series intends to unlock conversations between feminists and feminisms and to open up feminist theory and practice to new audiences.

—Linda Martín Alcoff and Gillian Howie
Acknowledgments

This book gestated slowly. What evolved into the analysis of John Rawls’s work in Chapter Four first emerged during a fall 1999 residency as a fellow at the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna. I am indebted to the staff and audiences there and also at the Freud Museum in Vienna for their inspiring attention. The Beatrice Bain Center at UC Berkeley provided six months of free time during which my thinking about unconscious process progressed. My “vertical community” compatriots, Barrie Thorne and Peter Lyman, provided many forms of sustenance. Responses to subsequent invited lectures at the following institutions and conferences were most helpful in refining my arguments: the Department of Political Science, UC Santa Cruz; the Department of Political Science, the University of Toronto; the Conference on Social and Political Thought (Canada); the McDowell Conference on Ethics, American University; the Annual Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association; the Annual Meeting, Psychology of Women, British Psychological Society; the International Conference on “Narratives for a New Millennium,” Adelaide, Australia; the Conference on “Revisiting Dorothy Dinnerstein’s The Mermaid and the Minotaur,” the New School University; the Biannual Conference on Gender Studies, the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil; the Conference on “The American Dilemma Revisited,” New York University; the 10th Biannual Conference, International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Istanbul; the Conference on “Deconstructing Feminist Mental Health Care: A South African Discussion,” University of Stellenbosch, South Africa; AHRB Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History, Leeds University; Institute for Gender and Development Studies, Nita Barrow Unit, University of the West Indies; and the “leaky pipe” project funded by the European Social Foundation Grant (European Union) and conducted at the University of Lund, Sweden. I am also grateful to the challenges and care provided by many people, often at just the right moment, without which this project would have died. These include Elisabeth Young-Bruehl,
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During a speech given in Philadelphia, on March 18, 2008, Barack Obama stated:

Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naive as to believe we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.1

Quoting William Faulkner, he reminded his audience that the “past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.”2 He told his listeners it is important to remember that “many of the disparities that exist in the African American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.”3 The “legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds.”4 He characterized the relationship between the races as at a stalemate, with a “chasm of misunderstanding”5 existing between them and delineated major differences in the narratives regarding race matters that black and white people tend to espouse. Referring to the nation’s “original sin of slavery,”6 he also suggested that if America is to move toward a more perfect union, major shifts in public discourse and policy are necessary.

In his autobiography, Dreams from My Father, Obama describes in more personal terms some of the effects on him of the legacy of America’s original sin.7 He weaves a narrative of his often painful attempts to negotiate the race/gender etiquette still pervasive within the United States. As a son of a white mother and a mostly absent black African father, with his mother’s white parents often serving as his primary caretakers, he was forced to undergo a process of identity construction bounded by the simultaneously rigid and
complexly fluid grammar of race/gender identities. “Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself as a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant.” Tormented throughout adolescence and early adulthood by the question of where he belonged, he slowly began to realize that the only solution to this American dilemma is to build a community in and through which America could redefine itself. By redeeming the American promise of a more perfect union, a community truly inclusive of all, Obama could finally answer the question, “where do I belong?” By the time he finished law school Obama came to believe that only such a community could “admit the uniqueness of my own life.”

Adhering to such a vision is not the same as believing the dream has been realized. In his *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama denies that “we have arrived at a ‘postracial politics’ or that we already live in a color-blind society…To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters—that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country today are largely self-inflicted.” Furthermore, he warns, that while more “minorities may be living the American dream…their hold on that dream remains tenuous.”

Obama’s election to the presidency evoked a tremendous surge of hope, legitimation, inclusion, and even redemption among many, perhaps especially, in the African American community. Despite Obama’s disclaimer, some Americans are eager to insist that his election means we have finally achieved the dream as Dr. Martin Luther King so eloquently articulated it—that people will be judged on the content of their character, not their skin color. The realization of this dream means America is finally a “color-blind” society, and has thus entered a “postracial” state. However, as Obama himself suggests, there are ample reasons for caution in interpreting what his election means and might augur, particularly in regard to race/gender domination. American history is full of instances of raised hopes that at last the effects of our original sin of slavery will be expiated (e.g., the Reconstruction Era, passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, post-Katrina) followed by profound disillusionment as the legacy of race/gender domination reasserts its power. To investigate the possible meanings of his election, we must place it within the context of narratives and practices that deeply structure American political life. These include a particular version of individualism, complex grids of race/gender positioning, and what I call race/gender melancholia.
These processes undermine our ability to productively confront the effects of what Toni Morrison calls the “shadow at the heart” of the American dream—slavery. Under the influence of our faith in individualism, Americans tend to overestimate the import of the singular instance and its representative power. Predominant race/gender grids were very apparent during the primaries, when the contest between Hilary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama was categorized as a choice between an African American and a woman. This categorization reflects several dimensions of contemporary American practices of race/gendering, including the continuing effect of the “one drop rule” and the conflating of woman and white and black and male. The erasure of black women is noticeable in some of these practices.

Perhaps most worrying to me is that Obama’s election will strengthen the processes of denial, devaluation, and projection intrinsic to race/gender melancholia. Melancholia is a pathological response to loss. Rather than acknowledge the loss of a valued object (relationship, dream, etc.) the loss is either denied or the object is devalued so that the impact of its loss is minimized. Melancholic subjects are gripped by sometimes paralyzing wishes to magically erase the living past rather than engage in the arduous processes of realistically facing its effects and constructing practices to ameliorate them. I argue that as a society, America has never properly mourned the losses that would follow a serious grappling with the centrality of slavery in the development of our polity. There are at least two losses that such grappling would entail—a preferred narrative about the exceptional nature of American history and practices and a sense among dominant groups that their positioning is earned solely through individual effort and merit. As I will argue in chapter 6, proper mourning would entail numerous deeds, including publicly acknowledging and honoring the sacrifices enslaved persons made in the construction of a nation “dedicated” to freedom; initiating public and private discourse among and between members of various race/gender positions regarding the ongoing effects of the past’s legacy; finding ways to reconstitute social relations so that existing practices of denigration, distrust, and ignorance are altered; and redistributing social goods and burdens to address contemporary, unearned asymmetries of wealth, power, and social respect and honor. Managing all this will require massive changes in the constituting practices of subjectivity, politics, and economics.

What would be sufficient evidence that America has shifted into a postracial state? I will argue that making such a case requires evidence that it is reasonable to anticipate that a person’s life chances in areas deemed of value by that subject or their society will not be
significantly affected by their race/gender location. Based on this criterion, it is premature for Americans to shout “free at last.” I am certainly not claiming that, especially since the civil rights movements and legislation of the 1960s, no positive changes have occurred in our race/gender arrangements. Achievements such as ending legal segregation, enfranchising blacks so that they can register to vote without fearing for their lives, dismantling formal barriers to those in subordinate race/gender positions entering professions, and broadening access to important resources such as university education or buying real estate improve the lives of African Americans and all other citizens who care about justice. Reducing the horrible harms of the daily humiliations and fear inflicted on subordinates by white dominance is unambiguously good. Enjoyment of unearned privilege enables the dominant to organize themselves and the ways we live unjustly. Thus, any diminishing of dominance potentially enlarges the space for better practices that can generate more freedom and justice.

However, assuming that we have attained “postracial” nirvana is mistaken. It is reasonable to worry about the permanence of any improvement. There is little evidence for believing that history is unilinear and only moves in a progressive direction. As the unequal effects of the current recession illustrate, positive changes are fragile and subject to reversal. Instead, the post-Obama election flurry of discussion of achieving a “postracial” society turns out to be another manifestation of melancholic fantasy. Since he took office, a predictable repetition of the idealization/devaluation dynamic endemic to melancholia is manifest. What is unusual is that one person—Obama—is the object of both. Bestowing the Nobel Prize reflects, among other factors, an expression of idealization. The “birthers” who deny Obama is an American citizen and “Tea Party” members who by an overwhelmingly majority believe that Mr. Obama “does not share the values most Americans live by,” express devaluation. Most importantly, I think that the typically American fantasy about the past, that it disappears without a trace and that therefore we can always start over again from scratch, has particularly pernicious effects on our ability to understand race/gender and its various dynamics and processes. As I will illustrate in various ways throughout this book, in regard to race/gender the effects of the past indeed are not past; instead its traces shape the distribution of valued goods, American political institutions, patterns of social relations, and what I call the political unconscious—powerful, culturally infused dynamics of fantasy and denial that structure American subjects. Understanding the operations of this political unconscious is not easy. As I will discuss more fully in the following
chapters, it functions in and as that strange field anthropologists call the liminal. Liminal phenomena incorporate processes and material that a culture’s practices treat as necessarily distinct and opposing. These phenomena transgress the normative boundaries and exclusionary categories cultures establish in organizing themselves. Their transgressive qualities enable liminal practices to do work cultures need to maintain the appearance of stability and coherence but also cannot acknowledge. The work cannot be acknowledged, because to do so would reveal how arbitrary and fragile cultures’ modes of organization are and their practices’ dependency on material they officially exclude or pronounce deviant, impossible, or nonexistent.

Despite the important work it does in American life, the operations and effects of the political unconscious are rarely explored. I hope that one of the major contributions of this book will be to highlight and address this malignant absence. As I will argue, failure to attend to unconscious processes and material is especially unfortunate in that it blinds us to many of the ways race/gender melancholia shapes our practices of subjectivity, citizenship, politics, and the distribution of valued resources. In contemporary American culture, the political unconscious transgresses boundaries of categories often treated as radically separate and distinct. These categories include psychic, material, personal, political, power, individual, social, thought, and feeling. The political unconscious is simultaneously idiosyncratic and widely shared. It is constituted through, as well as shapes and reflects, power relations, cultural and political practices, and affective states. It makes use of culturally available material to manage uniquely felt subjective dilemmas and so is deployed, experienced, and expressed differently by each subject. However, it also helps each subject carry out cultural demands (e.g., to locate oneself in particular race/gender grids) and in doing so makes use of widely available cultural and political information. Its processes are both limited and empowered by what is available for its use in any particular context, but it can remake practices of subjectivity and power relations in unpredictable and unexpected ways.16

In the rest of the book, I will develop and defend my claims regarding the existence, power, and effects of race/gender melancholia in contemporary American politics. In chapter 1, I will elaborate what I mean by race/gender melancholia and the political unconscious. I will also discuss the relationships between race/gender melancholia and race/gender domination. In chapter 2, I will introduce other concepts, especially race/gender, and discuss current distributions of valued goods to support the claim that Obama’s election has not and
cannot in the absence of profound changes signify the dawn of a post-race/gender era. Chapter 3 delves into the political unconscious, paying special attention to one of its most important modes, fantasy. I use three movies—*Monster’s Ball*, *The Deep End*, and *Crash*—to explore some of the American political unconscious’ contemporary content. I analyze the ways in which race/gender positioning and race/gender melancholia structure these movies’ characters and plots. Each movie articulates different aspects of race/gender positioning and racial melancholia. Reading these enactments enables us to pay attention to dimensions of social practice and unconscious processes that we might consciously deny.

Individualism is the primary focus of chapter 4. Many variants of individualism exist, but I think it is fair to say that dominant American political culture has rarely strayed far from allegiance to some form of it. I will use the work of John Rawls to explore the work a particular kind of abstract individualism does to defend ourselves against race/gender melancholia. Rawls makes the best possible argument for a version of political liberalism grounded in such individualism, and thus I use his ideas as a case study to explore an important strand of American thought/practice. I will argue that, like all defensive processes, abstract individualism generates unintended and self-defeating effects. Tragically, in this case, it undermines the possibility of bringing about the result to which Rawls and so many others are deeply committed—the institution of a more just political framework. Therefore, generating more just political practices will require exploring alternatives.

I investigate alternatives in the last two chapters of the book. While chapter 4 focuses on rational constructions to reveal underlying fantasies, in the last two chapters I grapple with questions about how to weaken race/gender melancholia’s grip. Chapter 5 is more abstract, considering different ways to think about subjectivity and congruent practices of citizenship. Chapter 6 suggests some public policies that offer leverage against the paralyzing and repetitive effects of race/gender melancholia and might reduce domination.

Initial discourses about the 2008 presidential election revealed a desire for the washing away of sin, a restoration of purity or the end of our enmeshment in history—longings that are understandable and recurring motifs in American thought and politics. However, as subsequent events suggest, unless we actively confront the race/gender melancholia that continually infuses the unmourned past into the present, wishes for a “more perfect union” will remain unrealizable for actual, socially constituted American subjects.
Equality and freedom are central themes in the preferred narrative of America’s founding and also our defining values. In this context, the pervasive presence of the unfree—of slavery—is an irreconcilable paradox. David Brion Davis claims that “racial slavery became an intrinsic and indispensable part of New World settlement, not an accident or a marginal shortcoming of the American experience,” and that we “must face the ultimate contradiction that our free and democratic society was made possible by massive slave labor.” While I agree with both these claims, I do not think that we have adequately confronted the consequences of this contradiction. The legalized practice of slavery, with its permanent relationships of domination and submission, as well as its creation of an utterly involuntary and fixed status, cannot be assimilated into the narrative of American exceptionalism—of a state uniquely born into and from freedom, destined to spread its essence beyond its own borders. We cannot resolve this contradiction, but we can devise better ways to deal with it, and proper mourning is one of the tools that can help us do that.
However, as Americans, we have not adequately confronted our history’s contradictions and properly mourned their consequences. Instead, American politics and subjects suffer from untreated race/gender melancholia. In the ordinary process of mourning, we confront the loss of a valued object (a person, an ideal, an aspiration, etc.) and work it through. Going through this process enables the mourner to regain the lost object by creating a new relationship with it. In contrast, melancholia is a pathological form of mourning in which the subject does not acknowledge the loss of the object and hence remains unable to rework and reclaim his or her relationship with it. Race/gender melancholia stems from our collective failure as Americans to adequately mourn the centrality of slavery in the development of our nation’s polity. This absence of mourning contributes to our persistent incapacity to constructively deal with slavery’s legacy and its ongoing social, economic, and psychological effects. Instead, the influences of slavery on the constitution of American politics and citizenship and its profound effects on our current subjective practices remain insufficiently understood and acknowledged. The dominant attitude among most Americans, including academic writers is, as Paul Gilroy puts it, “If perceived as relevant at all, the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole.”

Or, even worse, in the periods of our history in which some people recognize slavery as “the dark side of the American dream” or the single sin marring national perfection, a “subtle psychological inversion” occurs, and the victims of slavery become the embodiments of the sin. The failings and flaws of black people become the problem, the irresolvable American dilemma: “For two hundred years [with mixed success] African Americans have struggled against accepting or above all internalizing this prescribed identity, this psychological curse.”

Imagining themselves outside this heritage, white Americans too often remain color-blind—that is, blind to our locations within race/gender dynamics and to the unearned benefits and advantages these locations generate.

Freud describes melancholia as a mental state in which “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.” Toni Morrison describes “the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment as its shadow.” Although it remains unacknowledged, this shadow has profoundly structured and continues to affect the heart of American subjects, institutions, and practices. Acknowledging this shadow is resisted because it would expose the gap between what many citizens would like the American polity to be and its actual practices. Of
course, this gap is not unique to the United States; it is hard to identify any state in which ideals and practices perfectly coincide. However, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4, this gap is particularly problematic in the American context. States are complex social constructions. Their heterogeneous elements are rendered coherent through retrospective narratives about conscious intentions, founding moments and heroes, and a unique cultural identity. In turn, such narratives become legitimating grounds, validating the state’s claim to sovereignty and its citizens’ loyalty. In the United States, these processes of social construction and narrative are unusually transparent. According to its dominant narrative, the United States originated in a particular discursive act—the writing and ratification of the Constitution. The fundamental ethical and political commitments of its soon-to-be citizens, especially freedom and equality, both necessitated and are reflected in this mode of origin. Given the freedom and equality of each individual, to be legitimate, any government must originate in and sustain the consent of its otherwise sovereign subjects. This founding of freedom and consent distinguished the United States from the Old World, mired as it was in relationships of status, ancestry, and caste.

Despite attempts to quarantine or marginalize them, the past and current effects of slavery are widespread: their traces exist in the Constitution; in the organization of labor and production of goods; in laws regulating subjectivity, property, citizenship, education, social interaction and marriage; and in patterns of child rearing and in sexual relationships. Slavery had been practiced prior to the founding of the United States, and it was not formally abolished for more than 200 years. Furthermore, while slavery in the United States was formally abolished in 1863, legalized race/gender domination was reinstated by post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws. Even after formal emancipation, practices of peonage, psychological and physical terrorism (such as lynching and rape), political and economic exclusion, and cultural and social denigration and disrespect produced the functional equivalent of slavery. Children born today can still have grandparents who grew up in the reign of terror, deprivation, and entitlement that the Jim Crow laws enforced. Not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did this formal legitimation end. However, actual practices, feelings, and unconscious fantasies have been even more resistant to change.

The existence of the unfree is inextricably interwoven with race/gender. In addition to their status, slaves in the United States differed from most slave holders by their skin color. As I will discuss later, a
complex discourse of race/gender developed to justify slavery or at least make it appear less incongruous with the stated principles of the free. White/male, free, and American emerged as mutually constituting terms. As Morrison claims, “deep within the word ‘American’ is its association with race…American means white.” However, requires its reciprocal but degraded twin—“blackness”—to acquire meaning and effect. This interdependence produces an always potentially destabilizing paradox at the heart of American life:

The Afro-American lies at the heart of Euro-America’s conception of itself as a “race,” as a culture, as a people, and as a nation. “Blackness” is the canvas against which “whiteness” paints itself, the mirror in which the collective eye sees itself.

While it may no longer be politically correct to voice such feelings, even to oneself, legislation alone has not abolished them. It may even be the case, as Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, that the abolition of legal segregation increases “the repugnance for blacks felt by the white population.” Despite abolishing slavery, we have not destroyed three prejudices de Tocqueville describes as being “much more intangible and more tenacious than it: the prejudice of the master, the prejudice of race, and finally the prejudice of the white.” Instead, as Loury claims:

Awareness of the racial “otherness” of blacks is embedded in the social consciousness of the American nation owing to the historical fact of slavery and its aftermath. This stigma even today exerts an inhibiting effect on the extent to which African Americans can realize their full potential.

The reciprocal partner of the stigma, as I will discuss, is what Cheryl I. Harris calls a property in whiteness—an undeserved and often unconscious sense of entitlement that blinds some white people to the extent and effects of their undeserved advantages.

As de Tocqueville predicted, the “remembrance of slavery dishonors the race, and race perpetuates the remembrance of slavery.” Intrinsic to race/gender melancholia is an inability to acknowledge and work through these memories. Instead, I will argue that denial and the splitting of responsibility shape dominant American political ideologies and ordinary practices of liberal citizenship. Admitting the constituting role of race/gender domination as enacted in slavery and in contemporary social relations disrupts dominant political-
biographic narratives. Hence, it is either denied or its causes and effects are shifted to the raced/gendered other. Nonetheless, the “nation as a whole, and Afro-Americans in particular, are still paying the ethnocidal price of slavery and neo-dulotic Jim Crow system.”}\textsuperscript{18}

The silence, splitting of responsibility, and denial concerning such central practices defeat the possibility of better approximating the values of freedom, equality, and justice to which Americans pledge allegiance.}\textsuperscript{19} Denial poisons interracial relations and American politics. Domination and subordination are persistently reenacted, often in the very public and subjective practices and ideas that are said to be their opposite or remedy.

Facing this past and its enduring effects would inflict loss—loss of an idealized image that enables citizens to imagine that their ancestors constructed a shining “city on a hill,” a city in which they now dwell. On an individual level, citizens would have to rework the dominant individualist narrative in which rewards or disadvantages are objectively determined solely by personal effort. We would confront our locations in complex networks of often unearned privilege and subordination and their distorting effects on all subjects. Instead, our failures to acknowledge and mourn the gaps between an idealized view of past and present America and the deep wounds inflicted by slavery and its ongoing consequences within our culture, political practices, social relations and subjectivities have left us in a suspended melancholic state. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Americans are “living with the ghost of the alien other within and living as the ghost in the gaze of another.”}\textsuperscript{20} We cannot or do not face the enduring yet constantly mutating effects of our pasts. Instead, the power of the disavowed loss is endlessly renewed. American subjects are thus driven by a kind of compulsion to repeat in which they reiterate political narratives and practices and enactments of subjectivity that renew a melancholic attachment/denial of this shadow on its heart. Until we move from the pathological state of melancholia into more productive mourning, a sustained movement toward realizing usable American ideals such as freedom eludes us.

Race/gender melancholia serves as a way of simultaneously dealing with and defending against the acknowledgement of the effects of race/gender domination. Race/gender domination remains a structuring force in many aspects of American society and its subjects.}\textsuperscript{21} I purposely use the term race/gender domination rather than inequality. Domination signifies an illegitimate distribution of power in which neither the privileged nor subordinate positions are deserved. Exactly this sort of power generates and sustains our
current race/gender arrangements. In chapter 2, I will support this claim with two kinds of arguments, one theoretical and the other empirical. The theoretical dimension is a “fabrication” approach to the construction of race/gender and the empirical is an interpretation of an array of depressing facts regarding persisting patterns in the distribution of socially valued resources (wealth, power, social esteem) in the United States. These dimensions are connected because race/gender is fabricated partially through such differential distribution, and in turn race/gender functions to “naturalize” and sustain relations of privilege and subordination. The systematic asymmetries we can observe are a consequence of social relations and are therefore arbitrary since any subject’s race/gender assignment (and its consequences) is a matter of luck or misfortune. As Loury says, the “enduring and pronounced social disadvantage of African Americans is not the result of any purportedly unequal innate human capacities of the ‘races.’ Rather, this disparity is a social artifact—a product of the peculiar history, culture, and political economy of American society.” Neither the privileges of dominance nor the burdens of subordination are earned.

Many insightful works on race/gender dynamics within American politics are available. However, most lack consideration of the psychic processes—melancholia, fantasy, projection, identification, and abjection—that I will discuss here. I am confident that the problem of race/gender domination persists and that part of the reason for this lies in the powerful effects of mostly unconscious processes, including race/gender melancholia, prevalent within contemporary American subjects. However, I believe it is wrong to claim that unconscious processes can provide a complete explanation for persistent social, political, and economic asymmetries. Nor do I think that shifting from melancholia to mourning is a sufficient remedy for race/gender domination.

In tracking race/gender melancholia I will make use of ideas such as fantasy, transitional space, and internalization. These are obviously tools taken from psychoanalytic discourses. In using them, I do not mean to imply that psychoanalysis is an unproblematic discourse for analyzing race/gender. Many of its bedrock assumptions would have to be undone for it to be fully useful to such a project. Psychoanalysis still remains primarily a narrative of white Western subjectivity, and its notions of subjectivity remain rooted in problematic notions of “sexual difference.” Divorced from race, gendering is its privileged category of subjective development and embodiment. These narratives would look quite different if the denial and repression of racialization