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(In)distinct Sensation and Money that Loves You: Affect, Subjectification, and Machines in

Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*
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Desire’s sprouting in the fissures. A machine. Throughout Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust*, boundaries, territories, and archetypes block off the flows of affect and productive desire: what we are left with is the construction of unified subjectivities, bodies trapped in the regime of signification, categorized and coherent. To put this idea in the novel’s terms, I see the novel’s culture industry operating similarly to the key Tod Hackett uses to reinterpret incoherent sound: “words went behind each other instead of after… The same way several sentences were simultaneous and not a paragraph. Using this key, he was able to arrange part of what he had heard so that is made the usual kind of sense” (168). Hollywood, the territorializing apparatus, the culture machine, breaks up the chaos of desire (those intensities that fester in the darkness) and “arranges” it into the “usual kind of sense.” In its trail, the potential for sensory stimulation and bodily alteration goes down the drain and slips into the novel’s corners. The streets are lined with imitations, rendered facile and immobile, unable to operate outside of subjectification’s either/or constraints (you are either a man or a woman; you are either animal or human). However, on the other side of it all, the impersonal force of affective intensity—only diverted, not sterilized—spills up and over our organs in the novel’s sudden moments of bodily capacity.

Eschewing the Freudian psychoanalytic model of the id/ego/superego, wherein desire originates in the subject and operates based on a lack, I will be following an anti-humanist Deleuzean framework that flattens distinctions (between mind/body, between inside/outside, between subject/object) onto a singular immanent plane. In this ontology, the lens shifts from a focus on the human subject (or any object, animal, body, institution, and other nouns) as a strictly delineated and static unit. Rather, all things develop significance through their relations
to each other and through the productive interactions between them. Within a single context, those things and their relations come together and comprise an assemblage, a constellation of heterogenous elements: bodies, forces, objects, territories, memories. In other words, an assemblage is a gathered collection of discrete elements. Assemblages, however, are fleeting: continuously, they bring in new relations, elements, and territories, while ejecting others. In a Deleuzian vocabulary, assemblages are desiring machines: “there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire” (ATP 399). From this, Deleuze and Guattari offer a philosophy of “becoming,” rather than one of “being.” Where “becoming” constitutes the process of moving through an assemblage, of throwing off stable states and transgressing boundaries between static “objects,” “being” articulates a Platonic realm of “forms,” which are mapped out and distinct, like the human subject. While “becoming” is a philosophy of immanence, “being” belongs to transcendence. In this analysis, it is the culture machine—Hollywood, Los Angeles, mass media—that produces these fixed boundaries and territories that belong to “being.” Because in Deleuzian ontology the human subject is not a unified, bounded entity, there is no room for “human agency.” In its place, affect emerges. Put simply, affect is an impersonal and pre-conscious intensity that increases or decreases a body’s capacity. Affects drive action and non-action. Affect is being in the world, in its constant shifting, from one experience to another: not yet interpreted or linguistically placed, but a bodily resonance, a reaction on the skin. Because it underlies the whole of the world and exist on an asignifying register, affect’s circulation among all bodies and all materials ruptures the individuated subject and constitutes “becoming.” To demonstrate: a wasp attaches itself to the orchid, an orchid fastens its pollen to the wasp; two discrete materials merge together, transgressing boundaries, an “aparallel evolution,” a becoming-wasp and a becoming-orchid, creating a wasp-orchid assemblage (ATP 10). Through
the course of this paper, I will examine West’s *The Day of the Locust* as a machinic landscape of simulation, devoid of the Enlightenment’s human subject (the ego; the monad; the individual) and reeling in the post-structuralist conflict between the culture machine’s subjectification and those impulsive instances of affective becomings that threaten to throw it into upheaval.

This is a Hollywood where the “real” is marked with quotations.¹ These are “Spanish” living rooms and “Irish” cottages, scattered among movie sets and character props (80). These are brothels where you pop a coin in one hole and romance tumbles out another. These are dreams that you must thumb through like a pack of cards and pick out, because you won’t slip into one “naturally.” I understand *Locust*’s cast of characters as just that: characters, cut into instances of mimicry and miming, of stereotype and category. The culture industry of the novel—Hollywood, Los Angeles, media spectacle—“decenters the subject,” and grinds out beings as archetypes. Typically, analyses of this type mourn the loss of the interiority, the inaccessible *human* in an era of unfeeling machines and automatons. In her analysis, critic Diane Hoeveler reads the novel as a capitalist dystopia: all dehumanization and alienation. However, the simple reorientation towards an anti-humanistic perspective, the rejection of the Rational ego, does not necessarily translate to a no-exit dystopia where “the human” sits immobile, like an object: it’s what comes after this starting point that determines where vitality goes. To that end, I am interested in the novel’s instances of affective flow: this energy that battles against the organization of the culture machine. In a similar project, critic Francis McDonald claims that the

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¹ As the endlessly reproduced Baudrillard quote goes (substitute “Hollywood” for “Disneyland”): “Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”
“excess affective energies that the culture industry works to suppress and divert bubble to the surface … in moments of sudden affective instability and ontological precarity” (546).

McDonald, however, works through the novel’s instances of laughter in its dual function to subjectify the body (“self-reflective laughter”) and disarticulate it (“grotesque laughter”). My analysis, however, aims to cast a wider net in considering the diversions of affect: in spontaneity, in bodies, and in art.

Referencing Los Angeles’ amalgam of kitsch architecture, West writes: “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous” (61). This is a paper about the multiple and opposing needs for “beauty and romance,” in both the suffocating reorganization of desire into legible and “ideal” types (the good-good girl; the clown; the seductress; the cowboy) and in the anarchic overspill of desire that punctures the subject. It’s a tenuous line between totalizing signification and the asignifying black hole. Beauty and romance in constraint; beauty and romance in excess. Each instance erupts in violence (asphyxiation, disintegration) and enters the “truly monstrous,” tripping over the boundary between the sad and the downright horrific.

**Hollywood, the Culture Machine, and Typologies**

West’s novel opens with Tod Hackett, an artist plucked from the Yale School of Fine Arts to paint “The Burning of Los Angeles,” a work that’s set to prove his talent. While his body marks him as “doltish”—frankly, he looks sloppy, with a fleshy stomach and unruly smile: he lacks those clean, professional surfaces—the narrator assures us: “despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside of the other like a nest of Chinese boxes” (60). Of course, this formulation is already too reassuring, littered
with adverbs, spiked with insincerity. This language of nesting betrays Tod as a decentered subjectivity; rather, he’s a recursive series of boxes within boxes, the “inner” self eternally deferred. In his multiple layers, Tod contains no essence. Not the trusty observer he appears at first, the narrator outs Tod as equally participatory in the mechanization of persona as the rest of the novel’s residents. A passive body bound up in inertia, Tod doesn’t so much direct the narrative as let it direct him: he drifts, follows the targets of his artistic project, these persons of interest. As he considers, towards the end of the novel: “He began to wonder if he himself didn’t suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others. Maybe he could only be galvanized into sensibility” (141). An astute observation: I will call this galvanizing force affect—an increase in the body’s capacity to act. (Without it, the culture machine leaves subjectivities immovable.)

In fact, Tod breaks Hollywood residents into two types, categories that influence the composition of his art. The first group moves “rapidly,” darting “into stores and cocktail bars,” wearing “sports clothes which were not really sports clothes” (60). Caught in the culture machine, these people chase after social capital and consumption, seeking legibility and spectacular difference. The text describes this group as “masquerades,” referring to their lack of interiority or fundamental essences; instead, they are fixed as aesthetic objects. Still, Tod identifies “people of a different type,” pressed into the background of all this activity: “[t]heir clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses… they loitered on the

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2 See the epigraph: “I thought I was reading but suddenly I’m read.”

3 However different you can be when you dress like “[a] great many” people. But that’s not really what I mean. When I say differentiation, I mean that fashion signifies—it maps you to an identity (a social class, an archetype) and marks you as a coherent being. How you arrange your hat, fix your scarf, or (un)tuck your shirt, signals your participation in a (sub)culture. It is precisely because you dress like “[a] great many” people that you can become a type, distinct from other types. To dress completely outside the norm—if possible—would make you garbled, nonsensical, unclassifiable. In a parallel vein, to dress so generic—in poorly cut “ready-mades,” in drab colors—is to refuse (nearly all) signification—except the generalized deviance of the lower middle class. That’s all to say: defiance comes in degrees.
corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed” (60). This mass is never singled out or individuated; always, it is a collective, a scattered “they,” without borders, outlines, or demarcation. Rather, they exist undifferentiated, their clothing the same, “somber,” industrial copies from “mail-order houses,” signifying (almost) nothing (but lower middle-class deviant sameness). In blocking the shop windows, they ignore the allure of capital; in loitering, they block the flows of consumerist movement. Excluded from participation in the privileged and expensive task of commodity-capitalism, this mass slips under the signification that clothing, leisure, and consumerism—these functions of romance and beauty—affords. Though this other type may lie outside (in degrees) from the culture machine’s identity-splicing, this escape doesn’t function as a liberation. Tod continues in his description: “When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die” (60). In their first instance, this mass goes unacknowledged; once their “stare” is “returned,” they become recognized: located in space and singled out. The masquerades act as a reference point for the deviance of this “other type.” Their gaze, this act of recognition allows the other type’s eyes to fill with “hatred,” this conscious, signifying emotion which emerges only in the instant of the returned stare. It’s critical to note that deviance exists in degrees, rather than the binary logic of “Subject” and “the Other.” The text still registers those who came to California to die: they have stares, eyes, personal emotions, and spatial arrangements. Ultimately, the text constructs this mass as arranged within the dominant regime of Hollywood, but at its edges: feeble and apathetic, lying dormant with potential until the moment of bodily activation, of “death.”

This distinction informs Tod’s art and West’s narrative. The masquerades, always the center subjects of Tod’s paintings, mediate the story; following West’s lead, I will first direct my
lens to them: to their movements and to their stutters. 4 Harry Greener, a failed vaudeville act, embodies this life-as-performance, this masquerade, to an intense degree. He makes his living out of conning with the tricks he stole from the stage, and he imbeds his clowning into the everyday: his bar trips, his parenting, even his funeral. All this performance distorts his very body, as the text notes: “like most actors, [he] had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask … plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning” (119). Unable to ride through the miniscule and multiple intensities of affective flows, Harry expresses himself in fixed notches—his furrowed face permits only the “furthest degree” of feeling. Critically, Harry is a “complete failure” of a star, and his imitations don’t “intend to fool anyone” (77). Rather, Harry sticks to the safe falsity of gesture and pantomime, this fixed and totalizing role, as this prevents him from becoming the “becoming-clown.” In a typically obscure passage, Deleuze and Guattari write: “Do not imitate a dog, but make your organism enter into composition with something else in such a way that the particles emitted from the aggregate thus composed will be canine as a function of movement and rest, or of molecular proximity, into which they enter” (ATP 302). What Harry does it “imitate” a clown, signifying clownness through his dress and demeanor: a poor actor. Perhaps a “successful” actor would go the route of Deleuze and Guattari: rejecting the ease of mapping and simulation, intensifying the elements already “clown” within himself until he can cross the threshold into “becoming-clown” without the necessity of simile (“like a clown”).

However, not “fooling anyone” with his acting is a calculated decision on Harry’s part—it is the comfortable and socially coherent move. Crucially, “becoming” has political force—it

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4 Probably this means I’m participating in hegemony and, like, dominant regimes, but at least I’m making a footnote of it.
upsets the binaries that the state and capital are structured upon. To engage in this political project is to potently defy the dominant social structure. When Tod and two other characters visit the “Cinderella Bar,” expecting to watch a show of “female impersonators,” what they find instead is an on-stage act of “becoming” that defies the gender binary. Referring to the performer, the text states: “What he was doing was in no sense parody; it was too simple and too restrained. It wasn’t even theatrical. This dark young man … was really a woman” (146). Instead of “impersonating” a woman, this performer “was really” one, a transformation of the body, a becoming “becoming-woman.” There is no simile here: this “dark young man” crosses the threshold from one position to move through another: he both a “dark young man,” and a “woman,” and so on. Critically, this happens through the act of “doing,” feminine as a function of movement and rest, instead than dress or appearance. Yet West’s characters meet this moment with derision. Instead, the performer is called the pejorative “fairy,” fixed in a static, totalizing identity from the outside, and marked as deviant. Though this singer represents one of the few moments of relief from the sameness that Hollywood’s culture machine doles out, this “becoming” lasts only minutes. Once the singer walks off the stage, he is said to turn “actor again,” and his movements switch to “awkward and obscene.” Crossing the threshold has come at a cost. The singer outed himself and walked into a double-bind; though he may try to map back onto his socially permissible identity, his affectations no longer register. Deviance has been detected.

**The Case of Homer Simpson**

To escape from the regimes of signification, to throw off the mappings and the categories, to wade in the forward slash of either/or—all this risk in playing with becoming-other produces disorientation and anxiety. Of the many characters within the novel, Homer Simpson,
the sterile cuckold, sits closest to this risk of an unstable ontology. At first, Tod mistakes him for one of those outsiders—the perfect model of those who came to California to die—before reversing. No, he’s only physically the type, with his “fever eyes and unruly hands,” these body parts which teem with energy and intensity, removed from his body’s locus of control (79). In this way, the text distinguishes an ontological difference between Homer’s demeanor, his “shyness,” his inability to feel or sense, from the vibrating tendencies surging through his hands. Moreover, Tod’s initial mistaken remark aligns affective intensity with those who come to California to die; apparently, they are thrumming with untapped vitalism in the same way that Homer’s “unruly hands” erupt in trembles. Where Homer fails to experience affective sensation, his hands do the work for him. When a can-opener slices his thumb open, the “expression he usually wore did not change,” while his wounded hand “writhed about … until it was carried to the sink by its mate and bathed tenderly in hot water” (88). Moreover, in their autonomy, Homer’s hands work to undermine the notion that the human subject operates as a unified body. Rather, he becomes an assemblage of partial objects, a mass of relations and motions. Thus, Homer’s hands destabilize not only his mechanical assumption of (non)feeling, but also the physical demarcation of where “his” body begins and where it ends.

While the machine diverts affective potential to Homer’s hands, the rest of his body rests sterile, posed in aesthetic emptiness—“for all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile” (83). Though Homer can mimic the images of strength and fertility, he cannot become strong nor fertile: these things require drive, intensities, autonomy: they work in motion, rather than through resemblance. Throughout the years, labor has alienated Homer from his body and strained his ability to engage in sensory activity: “the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement. As a bookkeeper, he had worked mechanically” (88). In the
classical Marxist sense, the routine of capitalism has drained Homer of his capacity to act and left him empty, reified him and made him an object on an assembly line, like a “poorly made automaton” (West 83; Hoeveler 420). Even when Homer experiences a wave of emotion, the wave collapses, “leaving, at the most, only the refuse of feeling” (87). In another instance, Homer’s “intense” feelings cause his head to bob “stiffly on his neck like that of a toy Chinese dragon” (85). That the feelings—apparently “intense”—only move him to the point of mimicking the unnatural bobbing of an object, this “toy,” demonstrates Homer’s fundamental inability to let affect overcome him. This distinction between felt emotion and a force that leaves more than the “refuse of feeling” reveals the discrepancy between “emotion” and “affect,” as well as the peculiarities of this latter term. Importantly, emotion is cognitive and works to fix the subject. It is “a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Massumi 88). Affect, on the other hand, is affiliative, social, and unbounded, prior to the self-contained individuated subject. Affect is a bodily resonance, physical. Although Homer is not totally removed from the realm of intensity, it is only qualified (as emotion); it cannot affect him, cannot transform his body or its capacity to act.

That’s not to say, however, that Homer has never faced affective flows. On the contrary, through his obsession with Faye Greener, the seventeen-year-old aspiring actress and incidental femme fatale of the text, sexual desire⁵ threatens to rupture him. Though desire and affect are distinct from one another, the production of desire acts as a connection between two bodies, creating an assemblage through which affect can flow. In other words, desire increases the

⁵ A note: Deleuzian desire is impersonal and not necessarily sexual, but within Locust, sexual desire is a dominant force working to increase/decrease bodies’ capacities and galvanize affectual flows.
body’s capacity to be affected and to affect. Homer, in fact, recognizes that his experience of desire is one that is not object-oriented, but rather affects his body. The narrator states: “There are men who can lust with parts of themselves. Only their brain or their hearts burn and then not completely. … But in Homer’s case it would be like dropping a spark into a barn full of hay” (102). Lust is restrained for the men who only experience it in parts. It’s palatable: it’s directed in the partial and discrete regions of the “brain” and the “heart,” two spaces common to the rhetoric of sentimental romance, two areas where “lust” is mediated. The heart and the brain personalize lust, locating it in the discourse of romantic love and cognitively fixing it, respectively. It’s non-affectual: it fails to burn completely (as its intensity is qualified). Homer, however, allows desire to destroy him entirely—to consume his whole body. Desire’s power to totally disrupt of the self throws Homer into anxiety, and he attempts to keep himself constructed through a variety of techniques. He first attempts to fall asleep, to take himself out of the sensations of consciousness, and “habit[6] [comes] to his rescue” (102). Not long after he wakes up, he cries, not to relieve himself—it doesn’t “change” him—but instead to stabilize himself through the material expression of his cognitively-recognized, and “permanent” anguish (103).

In sobbing, Homer unifies his cognitive state with his body and keeps them both occupied: “Homer was lucky. He cried himself to sleep.” When he still finds himself thinking of Faye, Homer “courts” her, and ultimately assumes a paternal-like relationship with her (she climbs into bed with him and calls him “Daddy” [168]). In providing food and housing for Faye—without any sexual strings attached—Homer locks himself in a safe position: no flows of desire allowed here (unless it is deviant). As always, however, this only works as a temporary salve. Homer’s hands won’t leave him alone; the desire that he attempts to repress and divert instead flows

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6 That ready-made thing, a passive repetition.
through and affects them. While he watches Faye talk, for example, his “hands began to bother him,” and when he attempts to quell them, they become “stimulated,” “hot,” and “swollen,” conduits for his lust and desire (99). Although Homer’s body may consist of only imagist approximations of strength and fertility, desire opens him up to affective potential, as located in his segmented, vibrating hands.

‘Some Kind of Artist Then’

Throughout the novel, art offers another line of flight from the desensitizing culture industry, an entry-way into the realm of desire. Even what Tod seeks, after all, is to capture more than the “illustration or mere handsomeness” of his classmates’ works (61). McDonald understands Tod’s aesthetic project as one of freezing the kinetic energy that flows through the narrative and disrupts the characters’ subjectivities; it’s a stilling of movement, of eruption. I agree—to a certain extent—that Tod’s paintings freeze-frame these moments of ontological precarity, rendering subjectivity legible. Following McDonald, when Tod sets Abe and his friends into his lithograph (a mass-produced print), he depicts them as “leap[ing] into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout” (62). The slip of the simile—the “like”—reveals the lithograph’s failure to conjure the becoming-trout that affect produces. (The difference between imitation and transformation.) However, art within the text—whether porn, photograph, or mural—also functions to incite the spectator; it is not mere representation, not simply a display of technical skill. Rather, in this world of vital matter and immanence—that is, a world without the distinction between subjects and objects—an art object is simply a “body” that can have an effect on (in other words, affect) another body. I will refer to this dimension of art, wherein art operates as a body that alters the material, as an “art-event.” Simon O’Sullivan, in his piece “The Aesthetics of Affect,” asserts that art functions as “something much more dangerous: a portal, an
access point, to another world (our world experienced differently), a world of impermanence and interpenetration, a molecular world of becoming” (128). In this way, art is reconceptualized as an aid in casting off the regime of signification, a gateway to digging underneath the borders of archetypes and letting loose the intensities that lie within and beneath them. Of course, works can still be simply “read,” and art within the novel—following McDonald’s analysis—may not always accommodate the ontological precarity of “becoming” itself (such as Tod’s lithograph of dancers). But this flattening of art as simply two-dimensional representation discounts its disruptive potential, as in the cases of the Marie porn, the promotional photograph of Faye, and “The Burning of Los Angeles.”

To begin: Tod, Claude, and a group of men sit in Mrs. Jenning’s “theater” and witness Le Predicament de Marie ou La Bonne Distraite. The film features Marie, the titular “bonne” and server to a bourgeois family. Yet the typicality of this scene unravels with straight-forward assuredness: “It was evident that while the whole family desired Marie, she only desired the young girl” (75). Already, this perverse desire (critically never called out as such) disorients the mommy-daddy-me model, while playing on the norms of class dynamics. The desire circulates and flows from one body to another, in rapid, simultaneous succession: “the old man pinched Marie, the son tried to look down the neck of her dress and the mother patted her knee” (75). Though the characters are still positioned within the family (“the old man,” “the son,” “the woman”), their assembled desire works to interconnect them, as Marie fondles “the child”: a circulation working against the capitalist coding of desire. The film continues, and one by one, each family member enters Marie’s room, and just as two are “setting to work,” their bodies

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7 The norm: the patriarchal head desires the servant girl; yet in this formulation, the differentiation between homo/hetero desire is made indistinct, and Marie, in her desire for the young child, asserts her own agency within the matrix of the family.
embracing, heat and sensation flowing, she’s forced to stick them in different hiding spots as the next one knocks: “consternation and tableau.” With “tableau,” a stilling of movement, the film itself interrupts the potentially radical affiliation and reformulation of bodies through an assemblage (in other words, a becoming). In this way, the space of the room gathers their bodies in conjunction with the closet, the bed, the blanket chest, these new relations entering the assemblage, all spectating and participating. Every character collected in the bedroom, another knock sounds at the door. The title card asks: ‘Who can it be that wishes to enter now?’ The stage has been set: the assembled desire pulses through the bedroom, but with this newcomer comes the climax, the sex and (with it) the disarticulation of the familial positions through affective becomings. When a viewer watches it in conjunction with masturbation—hand-on-genitalia, a rubbing warmth—pornography, perversely, recalls Julia Kristeva’s assessment of the affective force of installation art, the merging of the virtual and the real: “it is the body in its entirety which is asked to participate through its sensations, through vision obviously, but also hearing, touch, on occasions smell. … a wish to make us feel, through the abstractions, the forms, the colours, the volumes, the sensations, a real experience” (quoted in O’Sullivan 130). Yet the stutters of mechanical production stifles this potentially affecting climax, this onanistic becoming: after the title card, “the machine struck” (75). No orgasm, no nervous excitement: the audience calls the showing a “frameup.” Just as the film’s narrative freeze-framed its own moments of precarity, settling them into tableaux, the projector’s mechanical failure cuts off the material movement of the film itself. After this, Tod quietly leaves the collective audience to wander off alone. The climax, the art-event, never unfolds: another interruption.

In another instance of art containing affective potential, Tod examines a still “from a two-reel farce” in which Faye acted (poorly) as an extra. In this photograph, Faye does not appear
naturally feminine, lacking organic curves and an earthy blush. Rather, she sits with “wide, straight shoulders,” a “columnar” neck, and a full “moon face” (67). In dividing her body into discrete parts, Tod experiences Faye not as a whole, but rather an assemblage of partial objects, an uncanny figure, both subject and object. Tod describes her pose as “inviting,” and the arrangement of her limbs affects him: as he considers her, he inhales with a “nervous gasp,” a bodily resonance (68). Rather than investing in a fantasy of Faye as a sexual object, the position of Faye brings Tod to imagine the potential violent disarticulation of his own body: “You would do it with a scream. You couldn’t expect to rise again … You … Your … your … You” (68). In his thread of masochism—he desires his teeth to be “driven into [his] skull like nails into a pine board,” among other bodily wounds—Tod surrenders his produced (masculine) agency as a subject. Suddenly self-aware of the danger that this virtual and masochistic desire incites, Tod snaps himself back into articulate subjectivity through laughter: “[h]e managed to laugh at his language, but it wasn’t a real laugh and nothing was destroyed by it” (68). In refusing to physiologically undergo the destruction of his body, Tod reconstitutes himself through what McDonald identifies as “self-reflexive laughter”: a laugh that destroys nothing, but cognitively qualifies affect as “emotion” and reassures the subject of his self-containment. This laughter interrupts the affective potential of the photograph in the same way that the machine breaks off the climax of the porno. Critically, after looking at this photograph, Tod switches erotic registers (in relation to Faye) from his own masochism to his violent rape of Faye, a fantasy of total control and domination. The threat of the art-object’s impersonal intensity is dampened and qualified through Tod’s laugh, and it never comes back: Tod channels his desire towards assault and violence after this. Parallel to the Marie film, Tod “hurries” out of the room to (physically) leave behind the (discomforting) event of the art-object.
Painting Fury and Anarchic Power

It is only with Tod’s “The Burning of Los Angeles” that the art-event unfolds and alters other bodies. Enough with interruptions. Throughout its chapters, the novel teases with dark passageways of becomings and the almost of affective art-events, always cutting off the possibility of bodily transformation with the anesthesia of the culture machine and its totalizing subjectification. With each instance, the diversion of desire accumulates\(^8\) and threatens to erupt in an overspill: poor Homer’s hands. I will, however, leave the novel’s final climactic “art-event” for the last portion of this paper. First, it is necessarily to turn towards the massive eruption that occurs among those who came to California to die. By the end of the text, Tod has directed his utmost artistic attention to them. He declares that they contain “awful, anarchic power” in their “fury,” and that “they had it in them to destroy civilization” (142). Again, it’s noted that the affectual force that disarticulates the subject has a political dimension; in this case, it’s reframed as a negative revolution, a burning of society-as-we-know-it to the ground. When Tod wanders through the city to examine this group, he finds them in endless religious scenes. Their pallid faces pressed into the mass of seats, Tod notes their “drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, distorted minds,” outlining a disconnect between the overfull mind and the capacity-less body. For Spinoza, affect—as an emotional awareness of the body, like when you register a sound in the mind and let it wash calm over your nerve endings—is a mode of communication between the mind and the body. In another congregation, Tod watches a man articulate a “crazy jumble” of words (142). However, the narrative states that: “[Tod] knew [the man’s rhetoric] was

\(^8\) I will note that this accumulation is not necessarily of Deleuze/Guattari’s philosophy, but rather an effect of the novel itself. Deleuze and Guattari may have no teleology, but *Locust* does: Tod is convinced his “Burning of Los Angeles” is prophetic, and the novel teases with interruption, setting up an expectation of “payoff” (or climax) for the reader.
unimportant. What mattered were his messianic rage and the emotional response of his hearers” (142). This statement reveals the affective capacity of those who came to California to die; signifiers (“the content”) no longer retain any import. Instead, “rage” and “emotional response,” these forces of bodily capacity—of affect, impersonally flowing from body to body, a “ messianic rage” inciting other affects among “the hearers”—overcome and disarticulate the signification of the rhetoric, galvanizing the congregants. With this affective unleashing, their “feeble bodies” reconnect and communicate with the wild capacity of their minds.

This sweeping force finds itself bubbling up at mass scale in the novel’s concluding chapter. At a movie premier, a crowd of people (those who came to California to die) gather into an assemblage: “Some little gesture, either too pleasing or offensive, would start [the crowd] moving and then nothing but machine guns would stop it. … [C]ollectively it would grab and rend” (176). The “police force” and their “machine guns,” apparatuses of the State, work to control and territorialize this great mass (which, apparently, contains a political threat). This mass moves and affiliates with others, always entering into new relations as other discrete elements merge with it: “New groups, whole families, kept arriving. He could see a change come over them as soon as they had become part of the crowd” (177). The crowd has its own affective energy, altering its constituent parts as they enter the assemblage (referring to the “change” that comes over these groups and families as they “become part of the crowd”). The “content” doesn’t matter: this is about the rage, the fury, the bodily capacity. As McDonald notes, this crowd moves through a series of dynamic “becomings”: West describes it in turns as “a tidal current, a torqueing machine, a spasmodic body” (562). Meanwhile, within the crowd, individuals coalesce and form “partial assemblages,” Tod’s legs knocking with another girl’s, a boy’s back digging into Tod’s shoulder. Yet the revolutionary potential of this jostling crowd is
stymied by the State’s barricades—it never expands beyond this block—and an ambulance extracts Tod. The State (the ambulance) intervenes and soothes his rupturing (his wounded leg⁹).

It is only with the novel’s final scene that the art-object achieves its affective potential—though it is not physically present in the moment. When Tod escapes the hysterical mass and clings desperately to an iron rail, he examines “The Burning of Los Angeles” in his memory and mind: the narrative moves through ekphrasis, the flames of city, the faces of the “cultists,” the caricatures of Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude, and Tod himself. The sensations of the painting capture him: he begins to forget “both his leg and his predicament” (185). Without qualifiers, the text states that he “stood on a chair and worked at the flames,” his imagination eliding physical reality, the divisions between the two collapsing: to quote O’Sullivan, “[art] transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our ourselves and our notion of our world” (128). Tod only returns to his “self” when a policeman—that representative of the territorializing State—calls in his ear. He gets lifted in the police car, and the siren goes off, but its origin is ambiguous: “at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then that it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could” (185). After this art-event, Tod loses entirely the sense of himself. His emotional and physical awareness of his body dissipates (nothing affectual here). His “imitation” of the siren recalls Faye’s imitation of femme fatales, Harry’s imitation of the clown, Abe’s imitation of the gangster—and so on—yet a crucial difference arises: the siren is a machinic sound, without signification. Deleuze and Guattari warn of the dangers involved in losing your face (your subjectivity, your signifiance) entirely: “you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality” (ATP 178). Becomings

⁹ “Affects are projectiles just like weapons” (ATP 441).
and affective ruptures may be revolutionary, but they remain fleeting and spontaneous. Tod passes through this portal, this gateway, this interstitial passageway, and emerges without any subjectivity. The novel’s end stages the totalizing violence of the culture machine: even when you try to escape, the line of flight through asignification renders you objectified, disembodied, unable to get up and reform each dawn. At the end of this tunnel lies a black hole.

**Concluding Organ(isms)**

In traversing through *Locust* with the influence of Deleuzian ontology, this analysis serves to complicate and reconsider the straight-forward post-structuralist reading of West’s work. Rather than simply depicting a world in which mass culture and mechanization has rendered the human subject an empty-out machine, a copy without any touches of “authenticity,” West lets loose the excess of affective flows: their heterogeneity, their breakages, and their flux. The novel’s culture machine works to render subjects socially legible and ontologically stable, and this territorialization (mapping, boundary-drawing) cuts off the possibilities of desire and decreases the body’s capacity to act (a bus-riding Tod, a sterile Homer, an egglike Faye). Yet the possibility for becoming, for disruption, for movement, still underlies the novel, threatening to throw the order and immobility into affiliative upheaval. The question of the novel, then, starts to take form—not as “how does late-stage capitalism mechanize our humanity?”—but rather: “if our contemporary subjectivities and significations are productions of Hollywood, and we were always-already machines—and that ‘we’ is a production, too—how can we move through the threshold of ourselves? And what happens when we do?” As I show, there are several answers to this first question. One: utterly spontaneous instances of becoming and disarticulation slip in the

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10 To continue: an Earle Shoop whose gambit of spontaneous anger is actually subsumed into his “type,” a trait of his caricature; an Abe Kusich whose garrulousness functions similarly; a Harry Greener with a mask for a face and the inability to express feeling; a whole mass of people who loiter in “morbid apathy.”

11 Or whatever entity you’d like to name. This is already a convoluted and incomplete question.
dark throughout *Locust*, from Abe’s introduction to the becoming-woman of the bar performer to the concluding riot. Two: in other places, the flow of sexual desire galvanizes the body. However, when the body cannot act out its sexual needs, this desire bubbles up in violence: desire in the sexuality-assemblage has a social coding. (In California, there’s only robotic girls who lick their lips and, when you can’t have them, there are smacks and rapes and burnings. Or: sex and violence.) Three: the art-object, this portal to sensation, reality at an angle, outside common sense. Don’t interpret: let the intensities warm the skin, a buzzing, buzzing. “Become capable of loving without remembering, without phantasm” (Deleuze 35). But this other world, with its asignifying fluxes and accelerating speeds, wrenches your face from you. In the mirror, a blank white wall, a dead subjectivity. The dominant reality—and all its apparatuses—won’t let you live like that. Walking down Vine Street, you burn your toes on sun-cooked asphalt. On the horizon sit Tudor cottages and Mediterranean roofs and Mexican ranch houses, rolling in light and shadow. Meanwhile, pollen and red watering eyes and cigarette smoke. In the distance, a siren sound. Sensation has its enemies.

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12 Without meaning: like music, in dog years.
Works Cited


