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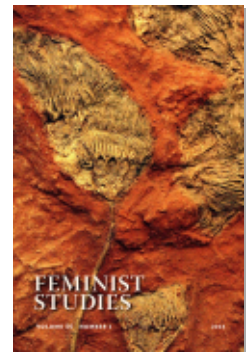
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Suicide-in-Relation: Sexuality and Space in *The Joy of Life* and *Mississippi Damned*

QUEER INDEPENDENT FILMS *The Joy of Life* (an experimental documentary by Jenni Olson, 2005) and *Mississippi Damned* (a narrative feature by Tina Mabry, 2009) offer critical imaginaries that significantly complicate renderings of sexuality, space, and suicide, though they do so in uneven ways. These films ask us to see suicide differently—to de-spectacularize suicide. At the same time, their critical imaginaries remain in incommensurable tension with one another. Olson’s film is an ambivalent meditation on butch identity, romance, and the beauty and horror of suicide via San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. Olson relays the affect of emptiness that suicide generates for those left behind. Mabry’s fictionalized memoir about the precarity of Black life in small-town Mississippi situates suicide amidst the multiple layers of violence that have seeped into a rural space over time; she portrays suicide as one possible response to violence that is endemic and structural.

Despite their differences in genre—documentary and narrative film—both *The Joy of Life* and *Mississippi Damned* mobilize their status as “queer” films not only to address the silences and taboos around suicide, but also to reflect on the forms of community from which suicide emerges. Each film engages aesthetic and representational strategies distinct to its respective genre to de-spectacularize suicide, challenging the specific modes through which suicide is rendered spectacular across genres. Considering both films together through a critical ethnic studies

lens enables us to understand suicide not as an isolated phenomenon but as relational and embedded in particular forms of structural violence. More pointedly, examining these two films in relation to each other allows us to understand that not all suicides are equivalent or commensurable with one another. The suicide of Olson's white gay friend Mark Finch, which she discusses in *The Joy of Life*, happens in a context of urban queer white mobility enabled by gentrification and settler colonization; it is distinct from the suicides of more precariously situated Black individuals in *Mississippi Damned*. Beyond the screen, *Mississippi Damned*, in particular, has created possibilities for alternate forms of community to emerge, as its screenings have generated spaces of care and healing for audiences.

Central to both Olson's and Mabry's projects are the aesthetic and formal choices they make with respect to space. In Olson's case, an empty San Francisco is metaphor and container for Olson's grief at the loss of Finch. Mabry unsettles the notion that the rural South is an exceptional site of violence. A relational analysis that foregrounds settler colonization and anti-Blackness makes clear that Olson's and Mabry's cinematic disruptions — within the film texts themselves, and within the contexts of their production and reception — are not equivalent to one another. Olson's focus on the urban pushes against the notion of the rural as the primary site of anti-LGBTQ violence and suicide, but she also implicitly reinforces the perception of San Francisco as a space of queer safety. By contrast, in its exploration of intergenerational violence, including suicide, *Mississippi Damned* de-exceptionalizes queer identity and suicide by foregrounding anti-Blackness in the rural South. Because it locates suicide within its broader contexts, Mabry's film offers a more critical cinematic imaginary that creates space for alternate forms of queer community to emerge.

Olson's and Mabry's interventions are usefully contrasted with documentary films such as *Out in the Silence* (Dean Hamer and Joe Wilson, 2009), which chronicles the challenges of combating anti-LGBT prejudice and bullying in a conservative rural Pennsylvania town. The film takes up the popular construction of rural spaces as exceptionalized spaces of homophobic violence. Following the highly publicized deaths by suicide of several white gay teenagers in 2010, Hamer and Wilson promoted their film as a pedagogic tool to address the dearth of support for queer youth in small towns. As filmmaker Joe Wilson noted, "The recent rash of teen suicides due to anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)

bigotry, bullying and harassment is a tragic reminder of how far we have to go to counter the intolerance and homophobia that are claiming young lives.”¹ The *New York Times* similarly noted the spatiality of homophobia in a 2017 article on “The Worst (and Best) Places to be Gay in America,” with most of the “worst” places identified as rural.² Popular films, from *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999) to *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), appear to corroborate the notion that the rural is a site of extreme and exceptional violence.

This framing of rural spaces as homophobic feeds a popular trope of queer identity: the utopian migration of LGBT individuals from rural to urban spaces, or what anthropologist Kath Weston terms the “gay imaginary.” The gay imaginary, Weston argues, is “a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between rural and urban life.”³ However, while statistical data noting increased suicidal risk for LGBT individuals in rural spaces may confirm the argument that cities are safer spaces for queer people, the conflation of rural spaces with homophobia, queer death, and suicide does little to tell us about the nuances of the relationships among space, violence, and sexuality.⁴ As Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* illuminates, the conflation of queer sexualities with urban spaces also potentially obscures the ways that queer lives may flourish in rural spaces as well as the horrific violence that happens across both urban and rural spaces.⁵ Commenting on the 2010 death by suicide of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi, Jasbir Puar likewise points out that the framing of “gay youth suicide” as a discrete phenomenon presumes the narrow singularity of the category “gay”

1. Joe Wilson quoted in Nina Wu, “Sparking Dialogue: The HIFF Film ‘Out in the Silence’ is Timely Following a Rash of Suicides By Gay Youth,” *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, October 20, 2010, <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2010/10/19/features/sparking-dialogue/>.

2. Frank Bruni, “The Worst (and Best) Places to be Gay in America,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/25/opinion/sunday/worst-and-best-places-to-be-gay.html>.

3. Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 274.

4. For example, see Jeffrey Fishberger, “Gay Suicide Risk in the U.S., By Region,” *Huffington Post Blog*, April 20, 2011 [updated December 6, 2017], https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gay-suicide_b_851107.

5. J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

while papering over the assemblage of social, political, and economic structures that generate someone's death by suicide.⁶

My analysis places film criticism in conversation with the comparative or relational frameworks that have emerged out of critical ethnic studies. Within ethnic studies, such frames have challenged scholars to work beyond siloed fields of study organized by racial formations in order to interrogate the interrelated logics of forms of structural violence: racial capitalism, anti-Blackness, colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, xenophobia, war/militarism, heteropatriarchy. As the gender and sexuality studies scholars Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson point out, this approach to comparative race study, which centers and dwells in difference, incommensurability, and tension, is indebted to women of color feminism and queer of color critique.⁷ Correspondingly, scholars Danika Medak-Saltzman and Antonio Tiongson Jr. suggest that critical ethnic studies might frame relation and connection through a focus on entanglements — rather than through comparison or analogy — across histories, epistemologies, aesthetics, narratives, social structures, arrangements, movements, and/or policies.⁸ Thus, rather than comparing representations of discrete groups, one way that a critical ethnic studies framework might translate to film analysis would be to ask what the filmmakers' aesthetic and representational strategies reveal about the operation and entanglements of structural violence, including (settler) colonization, heteronormativity, or anti-Blackness.

More significantly, as an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry, relational critique invites film criticism to consider epistemological questions concerning the category of "queer film" itself. What travels under this sign? How is it held together? Both *The Joy of Life* and *Mississippi Damned* have been classified as "queer" when circulating through film festivals and over streaming platforms. But what makes a film queer, particularly in the radical form? While "subjectless" critique has primarily

6. Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 11.

7. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, "Introduction," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 11.

8. See Danika Medak-Saltzman and Antonio Tiongson Jr., "Racial Comparativism Reconsidered," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–7.

translated into the strategy of turning “queer” into a verb (e.g., to queer film, to look and read queerly), I propose another strategy, which is to think about the queered forms of community or collectivity that film generates.⁹ Such an approach corresponds more closely to what Cathy Cohen asserts is the “radical potential” of queer politics.¹⁰ I thus analyze these two films alongside one another to highlight their shared critical potential and to emphasize the limits of universalized queer cinematic imaginaries.

QUEER FILM, RELATIONAL CRITIQUE, AND NORMATIVE WHITENESS

I will pause here to note that I deploy the term “queer film” fully cognizant that the category is fraught and contested. When the cultural critic B. Ruby Rich originally coined the phrase “new queer cinema” in her now-famous 1992 *Village Voice* essay—in reference to the emergent work of independent filmmakers at the time such as Derek Jarman, Todd Haynes, Greg Araki, and Tom Kalin—she acknowledged that although these films shared little in common in terms of content or visual language, “there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind...these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure.”¹¹ The racialized and gendered presumptions of Rich’s formulation were almost immediately noted by filmmakers Pratibha Parmar and Isaac Julien. While locating the work of queer filmmakers within the collective political and activist contexts from which they emerged, Parmar noted Rich’s marginalization of lesbian filmmaking and shared her own wariness “of talking about an overarching queer aesthetic, as my sensibility comes as much from my culture and race as from my queerness. In queer discourses generally there is a worrying tendency to create an essentialist, so called

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9. On queer subjectless critique, see David L. Eng with J. Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (2005): 1–17.
 10. Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (2007): 437–65.
 11. B. Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema,” *Sight & Sound Magazine* 2 (1992): 32.

authentic, queer gaze.”¹² Along similar lines, Julien noted that he was “nervous about terms like ‘lesbian and gay aesthetic’ and ‘black aesthetic’ because if you’re participating in film culture, then you’re involved in certain practices and cultural constructions such as the form and politics of representation, which cannot be reduced to a single aesthetic.”¹³

Indeed, in an incisive 1998 *GLQ* essay, performance studies scholar José Muñoz noted that if one were to consider a singular queer aesthetic, it would be one largely preoccupied with whiteness: a cinema of white normativity.¹⁴ In this vein of relational critique, queer film can be read simultaneously as a site of potential and violence, as queer of color filmmakers, for instance, feel the effects of a culture of normative whiteness.¹⁵ My approach to queer film thus takes seriously Muñoz’s eloquent formulation of queerness as that which is not-yet-here. He writes, “[Q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”¹⁶ In thinking of queer cinema as a kind of commons—a site for building and imagining futures—I am further moved by the provocations of trans/queer studies scholar Eric Stanley, who has observed that the utopian promise of the commons is only possible by minimizing or obscuring the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land.¹⁷ Put another way, queer cinematic futures are always already inflected by the forms of structural violence that underpin them. There is no simple division between “good” and “bad” queer politics. Rather, grappling with the not-yet-here-ness that Muñoz proposes requires an attunement to the vexed entanglements with violence and power evident in all iterations of queer political and aesthetic formations.

With this overarching understanding of queer film, I turn to *The Joy of Life* and *Mississippi Damned*, focusing particularly on how Olson and Mabry challenge popular imaginaries concerning the relationships

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12. Pratibha Parmar, in Derek Jarman, Pratibha Parmar, Constanine Giannaris, and Isaac Julien, “Queer Questions,” *Sight & Sound Magazine* 2 (1992): 35.
 13. Isaac Julien, “Queer Questions,” 35.
 14. José Esteban Muñoz, “Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema,” *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 1 (1998): 127–38.
 15. Roya Rastegar, “The De-Fusion of Good Intentions: Outfest’s Fusion Film Festival,” *GLQ* 15, no. 3 (2009): 481–97.
 16. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
 17. Eric Stanley, “The Affective Commons: Gay Shame, Queer Hate, and Other Collective Feelings,” *GLQ* 24, no. 4 (2018): 489.

among space, sexuality, and suicide. Whereas mainstream cinema's portrayals of suicide reveal less about the "truth" of suicide than they do about the constructions of race, gender, and nation underpinning them — a point made by film scholar Michele Aaron — Olson's and Mabry's films engage with the spatial and temporal disruptions posed by radical queer subcultures to critically reimagine how we conceive of suicide itself.¹⁸ Notably, the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders lists "suicidal behavior disorder" as a condition for further study, thereby isolating (and thus pathologizing) suicidal risk.¹⁹ By contrast, *Joy of Life* and *Mississippi Damned* each invite us — in uneven ways — to see suicide more expansively: in diffuse rather than spectacular terms.

(WHITE) QUEER SAN FRANCISCO AND GOLDEN GATE
SUICIDES: OLSON'S *THE JOY OF LIFE*

The Joy of Life is Olson's first feature film. Following its premiere at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, it went on to garner awards at the Los Angeles and New York Gay and Lesbian film festivals, among other venues. It also contributed to public advocacy efforts to erect a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. The film has a meditative and therapeutic quality. Olson attempts to make sense of the 1995 death of her friend, Mark Finch, who jumped off the Golden Gate. The film comes from a place of grief and mourning, of love and care. As Olson states in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, that Finch chose to die in such a grandiose and cinematic way was expected: "Of course, given his personality, I just thought, 'Oh, how Mark' that it would be so spectacular. He doesn't do anything in a small way."²⁰ With Olson, Finch was co-director of Frameline, San Francisco's LGBT film festival, and an instrumental

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18. Michele Aaron, "Cinema and Suicide: Necromantism, Dead-already-ness, and the Logic of the Vanishing Point," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 71–92. On the spatial and temporal disruptions of queer subcultures, see Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.
 19. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5-TR)* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2022).
 20. Jenni Olson, quoted in Edward Guthmann, "Lethal Beauty/The Allure: Beauty and an Easy Route to Death Have Long Made the Golden Gate Bridge a Magnet for Suicides," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 30, 2005, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Lethal-Beauty-The-Allure-Beauty-and-an-easy-3302966.php>.

figure in the establishment of the lesbian and gay film festival as a genre. The film is in this way entangled within the communities that queer film festivals foster and establish. As filmmaker Bill Basquin notes, "A queer festival serves a social need that doesn't disappear just because we can watch two men kissing at the multiplex." Queer film festivals have been a crucial site for LGBTQ filmmakers and queer community building.²¹

The film is organized into two halves, both of which feature long, quiet still takes of the San Francisco cityscape. In the first, a butch lesbian narrator, portrayed by white visual artist and writer Harry Dodge, free associatively describes her romantic and sexual encounters across the city. Whiteness is a silent marker in the narrator's musings: because most of her descriptions make no mention of race, the audience is left to assume that all the narrator's encounters are with whites. The exception is a conversation she has with "a big butch stud," a cocky self-described "hustler." "Stud" is a racially coded term that most often, but not exclusively, refers to Black masculine-of-center people assigned female at birth. The location of this encounter is notable: it takes place at the Mission District's Lexington Club, San Francisco's famous-but-now-shuttered lesbian dive bar. Though enthusiastically celebrated as a bastion of lesbian (and later, transmasculine) culture in the city, the Lexington opened in 1997 at the height of the early "dotcom" gentrification that displaced longtime working-class Latinx residents. Previously, in fact, the site belonged to The Sunset, a Latinx bar.²² Despite being a lesbian hub, the Lexington was not universally experienced as a welcoming space, particularly for queers of color.²³ Thus, the narrator's encounter with a

21. Bill Basquin, "A Site for Queer Reproduction," *GLQ* 14, no. 1 (2007): 124.

22. Ironically, when the Lexington closed in 2015, owner Lila Thirkield cited rising rents and challenges due to gentrification: <https://48hills.org/2014/10/lexington-club-closing-owner-says-higher-rent-gentrification-gender-in-equality-hurt-iconic-lesbian-bar/>. For more on the Lexington, see chapter one of Mairead Sullivan's *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger between Feminist and Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022). The detail concerning The Sunset comes from Michelle Tea's "Gay (And Not So Gay) Moments in San Francisco History," *The Bold Italic*, June 24, 2013. <https://thebolditalic.com/gay-and-not-so-gay-moments-in-san-francisco-history-the-bold-italic-san-francisco-f92c3a7bfb92>.

23. For example, see Savannah Jane Kilner's discussion of the Lexington in her dissertation, "Pride and Property: Queer Settler Colonialism, Blackness, and the Landed Politics of Accountability," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2021). Kilner cites a photo exhibit called *Femme Space* in which

(possible and very likely) Black person at the club would have been out of the ordinary.

But race is not the film's focus. Instead, the film prefaces the encounter with an account of the narrator's own insecurities around sex and dating, which are then juxtaposed with the stud's bravado: "She tells me about how she's fucked so many girls," recalls the narrator. Given the racial coding of the term "stud," this juxtaposition could be interpreted as a reiteration of white anxiety and fascination around the myth (and perceived threat) of Black masculine hypersexuality. The film's narrative subsequently contains this anxiety as the narrator relays that the stud is currently "a house boy" who "cleans and gives sex in exchange for room and board and is treated really well," recalling tropes of domestic servitude and slavery. Shortly thereafter, the narrator describes the stud's anecdotes as "superficial, insecure, macho bravado self-involved," assuaging the vulnerability and insecurity the narrator previously described feeling. This (possible) encounter with Blackness in the film, in other words, serves to relationally affirm the white narrator's sense of self.

The narrator's recollections of their sexual and romantic conquests and disappointments craft an alternative claim to the city, one that is white, queer, and butch. The bookstores, bars, workplaces, and other queer sites mentioned in Dodge's voiceover do not match the cityscapes captured on camera, suggesting that the localized experiences recounted by the narrator have a wider resonance and significance. Much of what is depicted is empty urban space. This is a visual echo of the narrator's melancholy affect, but it is also a visualization of *terra nullius*—the legal doctrine that declared Indigenous lands "empty" to legitimize claims to settlement. The empty landscapes of *Joy of Life*, echoing this doctrine, reflect historian Patrick Wolfe's argument that the "logic of Native elimination" has been central to transnational settler colonial projects, even as Indigeneity endures and survives against such attempts, as Kānaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui points out.²⁴ The silence, stillness,

Lexington patron Dulce Garcia describes multiple experiences of racism at the bar: "The Lex was where the white lesbians hanged out, and if you were not part of their clique, or a thin white-able bodied femme for them to hit on, you were not welcome" (125).

24. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event": Settler Colonialism and Enduring

and emptiness of the film's imagery creates audio-visual space for viewers to accept, even momentarily, the primacy of Dodge's voiceover. To "cut the noise," as it were, enables viewers to imagine a specific (presumably white) vision of queer community and experience into the empty urban space.

The second half of *Joy of Life* switches to a more standard documentary narration through which the audience learns about the history of suicide and suicide-prevention efforts at the Golden Gate Bridge. The two seemingly disparate halves of the film are fused together by its last lines, in which Olson links the feeling of falling in love to the feeling of jumping off a bridge, suggesting that both are reckless activities that we are drawn to because of the momentary freedom and clarity they offer:

There are times when you notice things, when you're acutely aware of the world around you, like after someone dies. Or sometimes coming out of a movie. You fall in love with a girl, with lots of girls. You fall in love with a city. You fall in love with falling in love and you dive. Over and over again you dive to experience the feeling of falling, willfully, intentionally, recklessly. You notice everything, the wind is blowing, the light is just so, the sadness in you is just so . . . In the moment of desiring and being desired you actually know that you're okay.

In this half of the film, Olson also examines this feeling of ambivalence around the simultaneous beauty and horror of the Golden Gate Bridge. Alternating between close, medium, and long shots, multiple camera angles capture its majestic grandeur, while the lighting emphasizes the contrast between its deep orange-red color, the blue of the bay, and the green of surrounding foliage on a bright day, versus its faded yet still remarkable beauty on a foggy day. Throughout this second half, Olson refers to film history's complicity in romanticizing the bridge, not just as a landmark but as a spectacular suicide destination. As the camera gives us a long shot of the bridge—one of many—a voiceover reflects on Alfred Hitchcock's iconic *Vertigo* scene when Madeleine, portrayed by Kim Novak, jumps into the San Francisco Bay from Fort Point, just underneath the bridge. I interpret Olson's ambivalence as neither a

romanticization of suicide nor an invitation to die by suicide, but as her attempt to depathologize her friend's desire to die and to make sense of the drive to die as something other than mental illness. It is an embrace of what Lee Edelman has described in *No Future* as a queer anti-futurity that unabashedly conflates significations of nonnormative sexualities with death in order to refuse and contest hegemonic social relations that privilege reproductive futurity.²⁵ Notably, Edelman's thesis has been thoroughly critiqued by theorists such as José Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, and Jack Halberstam, who point out that Edelman fails to remember that futurity is always already foreclosed for vulnerable populations for whom death is not a metaphor but a lived reality.²⁶

The film's narrative framing reveals this investment in an anti-futurity that invites sympathies with white queer subjectivities while foreclosing Indigenous, Black, and Latinx futurities. To offer but one example: Finch's death coincided with the dot-com boom that displaced longtime Latinx residents from San Francisco's Mission District in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many publicly celebrated this wave of gentrification (coded through whiteness) as a necessary and welcome shift from conditions of blight and decay (coded through non-whiteness and bodies of color).²⁷ This context is absent in the film; this is not the San Francisco the audience encounters. As historian Nancy Raquel Mirabel points out, the mainstream narrative around gentrification depends on forms of purposeful forgetting and erasure that amplify white settler memories of place while obscuring and minimizing those of working-class communities and communities of color.²⁸ Gentrification, like settler colonialism — which also depends on such forms of forgetting — thus appears natural and inevitable, the logical next stage in the course of history. Olson's decision to omit this context of gentrification from the film suggests that she felt it was irrelevant or superfluous to its central narrative. That decision,

25. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

26. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

27. Nancy Raquel Mirabel, "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and the Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District," *The Public Historian* 31, no. 2 (2009): 22–23.

28. Mirabel, "Geographies of Displacement," 29–30.

then, implicitly marks the white and middle-class social location of *The Joy of Life*. I make this observation not to minimize the love and care with which Olson crafts her film, but to point out that those loving and caring relations are embedded within a matrix of violence. If Mark Finch's ghost haunts this film, so, too, do these other presences.

Similarly, the film's visuals lament the loss of white queer histories at the expense of other racialized histories. High-tech gentrification was continuing full-force when the film was produced in 2005. Yet, we do not see evidence of the gentrification process in-progress. If anything, Olson overwhelmingly focuses on post-industrial remains. We see abandoned buildings, old factories and warehouses, shipping containers and crumbling facades: the lingering traces of an older San Francisco. The film's cinematography nostalgically emphasizes the beauty of such traces. No cell phones, computers, or other forms of digital technologies indicate that the film is set in the new millennium. In her second film, *The Royal Road* (Jenni Olson, 2009), which is similar in form to *The Joy of Life*, Olson explicitly professes her love of nostalgia: "By reconnecting us to our humanity, I believe nostalgia could be the very thing that saves us." In an interview with Tina Takemoto in *Millennium Film Journal*, Olson states, "I feel like I am trying to develop a radical re-definition of nostalgia."²⁹ Olson's longing for an analog past might be interpreted, on the one hand, as a longing for a pre-tech San Francisco that predated current waves of gentrification. On the other hand, the film's fixation on the analog/digital divide and erasure of human presence obscures the continuities of racial violence across the past and present, particularly given the film's consignment of the Ohlone to the long-finished past in the opening intertitles. Its fixation also aligns with a hipster aesthetic that fetishizes analog — and often colonial — practices such as homesteading, as popularized in the television show *Portlandia*. The film's final credit sequence, which features a vintage musical number by white poet and jazz pianist Weldon Kees, underscores Olson's attachment to the purportedly simpler time and place she wishes to recover.

The film's visual language echoes such erasure. *The Joy of Life* consists entirely of still takes, ranging from ten seconds to two minutes long.

29. Tina Takemoto, "Towards a Butch Poetics: A Conversation with Jenni Olson," *Millennium Film Journal* 63 (Spring 2016): 81.

As already noted, the takes in the film's first half do not appear to correlate with the voiceover, except insofar as they reflect some affective sense of being butch in the city. Olson's stated intention is to compel viewers to meditate more deeply on their everyday surroundings, to find joy in quietness. The slow, fragmented nature of these scenes disrupts audience expectations of linear time and space, echoing what Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt term "queer cinematic time."³⁰ The pacing of these shots cannot be separated, however, from their striking emptiness. San Francisco is a busy, densely populated city, yet the San Francisco depicted in *The Joy of Life* is quiet and abandoned. That quiet may mirror the affective loneliness and isolation felt by the film's narrator and by some suicidal individuals. But it also evokes the emptiness of iconic settler colonial cultural artifacts, including the infamous nineteenth-century landscape paintings by American and Canadian settler artists (such as the Group of Seven and the Hudson River School), or Monument Valley as depicted in John Ford's classic westerns. As cultural critics Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Janne Lahti point out, film has been integral to the development and continuity of settler colonization: its verisimilitude enables settler descendants to replay settler myths, "creating through its successive frames a version of reality that replaces (or attempts to) other versions of events" while also "[reminding] contemporary critics and viewers that settlement is far from accomplished."³¹ Though Hightower and Lahti presumably refer to the film genre of historical fiction here, one might also consider film's capacity to circulate more mundane and everyday settler aesthetics and affects. Echoing the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the empty landscapes of *Joy of Life* reflect the "logic of Native elimination" that has been central to transnational settler colonial projects even as Indigenous peoples have survived attempts at erasure.³²

The dual function of Olson's cinematography is not coincidental; settler colonial landscapes form the literal grounds from which "settler sexualities" emerge. As anthropologist Scott Morgensen argues, "Settler

30. Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World*, 261.

31. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Janne Lahti, "Introduction: Reel Settler Colonialism: Gazing, Reception, and the Production of Global Settler Cinemas," in *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film*, ed. Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2–3.

32. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"; Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event."

colonialism . . . conditioned the formation of modern sexuality in the United States, including modern queer subjects and politics.”³³ According to Morgensen, the formation of modern settler sexualities was predicated on the casting of Native sexualities as other, perverse, and savage. In other words, settler coloniality is not incidental to queer identities but constitutes them. Indeed, in the title cards of the film, Olson obliquely references this literal and figurative displacement of Indigenous peoples, which set in motion the violent chain of events that led to San Francisco’s establishment as a hub of queer identity. The intertitles euphemistically begin by stating, “European discovery and exploration of the San Francisco Bay Area began in 1542. . . . European settlers were preceded thousands of years earlier by the native inhabitants of California’s Central coast, the Ohlone.” The next title card reads: “The area began to develop as a city under the name of Yerba Buena. It was renamed San Francisco in 1846. During the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco grew up overnight to become one of the world’s most multicultural port cities.” Despite Olson’s intentions to perhaps offer a land acknowledgement of sorts, the misconstruction of Ohlone peoples as inhabitants of the area “thousands of years earlier” suggests that these Indigenous communities had been decimated, despite ongoing work by Ohlone peoples to reclaim land, as evidenced by the efforts of the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust.³⁴

Moreover, in depicting San Francisco’s emergence as multicultural port city and gay mecca, the film enacts a double erasure of the violence endured by third-gender Indigenous peoples. As Deborah Miranda (of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation) notes, this violence consisted both of their “gendercide” — or (attempts at) deliberate extermination by Spanish soldiers — and the social and cultural forms of disciplining used by Spanish priests through the California mission system.³⁵ Indigenous peoples are absent in the film’s present, as are the “multicultures” cited in the land acknowledgement. These structural forms of erasure, though unacknowledged, create the conditions of possibility for the narrator’s

33. Scott Morgensen, “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities,” *GLQ* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 106.

34. The Sogorea Te’ Land Trust “is an urban Indigenous women-led land trust that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people.” For more information, see <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org>.

35. Deborah Miranda, “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California,” *GLQ* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 253–84.

exploits in *The Joy of Life*. They allow Olson to meditate on San Francisco as an otherwise safe space for white queers, which is shattered by Finch's suicide.

To be clear, the documentary de-spectacularizes suicide insofar as it attunes us to the slow grief and ambivalent affects that it generates. But it also locates the tragedy of suicide at a spectacular site, the Golden Gate Bridge, thereby suggesting that the rest of the city is a space of safety, as depicted in the first half of the film. A critical ethnic studies lens that attends to the forms of structural violence underpinning the film's narrative reveals multiple forms of absence framing *The Joy of Life*. These absences are not only representational exclusions; they are constitutive of a specifically white queerness that is generally unmarked in the film. In other words, they are constitutive absences that enable white queers to experience a provisional kind of safety in San Francisco, thus reflecting the often under-examined fact that queer spaces, too, are sites of multifarious violence.

SUICIDE-IN-RELATION: MABRY'S *MISSISSIPPI DAMNED*

Also set at the close of the last millennium, Tina Mabry's *Mississippi Damned* is a contemporary-era period piece that takes us far from San Francisco to depict a violent time in the titular state. An independent narrative feature film, *Mississippi Damned* was released in 2009 through Morgan's Mark, the production company established by Mabry and her wife Morgan Stiff, to focus on "works that reflect the experiences of a variety of marginalized groups."³⁶ The film was critically acclaimed, collecting jury awards at the Chicago, Philadelphia, and Atlanta film festivals as well as the American Black Film Festival and Outfest Los Angeles. Six years later, in 2015, *Mississippi Damned* was picked up by Ava DuVernay's distribution company ARRAY and offered on Netflix until 2017.

Set in 1986 and 1998, *Mississippi Damned* follows a host of characters across one extended family, at the core of which are three sisters: Delores, Charlie, and Anna. Their lives, and the lives of their children, are beset by tragedy, violence, and intergenerational abuse: by the end of the film, Delores has been diagnosed with breast cancer, and her husband,

36. "Mission Statement," Morgan's Mark, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.morgansmark.com/mission-statement/#.YZajAb3MJJU> (site discontinued).

Junior, while an emotionally supportive partner, develops a gambling addiction that has serious consequences for the family's finances. Their younger daughter Kari is an aspiring pianist hoping to attend New York University. Their elder daughter Leigh is a butch lesbian who is outed in the film and whose inability to deal with the rejection of her ex-girlfriend also leads to her own gambling addiction. Leigh is ultimately institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. Notably, Leigh's predicament is not exceptionalized; it is merely one aspect of the differentiated but collective suffering experienced by the family. The second sister, Charlie, struggles with alcoholism and an unfaithful boyfriend as she raises her son Sammy, a talented basketball player who is sexually abused by a family friend. Later, Sammy rapes Kari and his son's underage babysitter. We also learn that Charlie herself was molested by her father when she was younger. The third sister, Anna, and her husband Tyrone have no children; she suffers multiple miscarriages, including one that is depicted in the film. In contrast to Kari's mother and grandmother, who both warn her of the dangers of the big city, Anna encourages Kari's musical aspirations and is a frequent source of emotional support for her.

Suicide in *Mississippi Damned* comes at the film's end. Anna, who is diabetic and was laid off from a unionized job, deliberately neglects to take her insulin doses so that Kari can take what remains of her pension and realize her dream of attending NYU. Anna's death is the film's first suicide. The second is Sammy, who shoots himself just as he is about to be apprehended by the police, after having been caught molesting his son's babysitter. Suicide is not the focus of the film's plot but the culmination of it; suicide is one choice on a continuum of skewed life chances. In this way, *Mississippi Damned* provides a response to Puar's provocation to consider "what kinds of 'slow deaths' have been ongoing that suicide might represent an escape from."³⁷ Slow death, as described by Lauren Berlant, refers to "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. The general emphasis of the phrase is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and

37. Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 11.

governmentality.”³⁸ Commenting on the nineteenth-century shift from perceiving suicide as crime to perceiving it as object of sociological study (exemplified by Emile Durkheim’s 1897 treatise, *On Suicide*), Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* that suicide exemplifies the shift to biopolitics: from the power to “make die or let live” to the power to “make live or let die.”³⁹ The pathologization of suicide and the rural aligns with the biopolitical imperative to make some subjects live, while passing over populations consigned to “let die” by the process of slow death.

The film did not initially achieve wide release because distributors were uncertain of how to market it. Although based on Mabry’s experiences of growing up as a Black lesbian in the small town of Tupelo, Mississippi, the film defied expectations of both “Black” and “lesbian” film. For example, although the film features a lesbian relationship, we never learn of the sexual orientation of the main character, Kari, who is based on Mabry. However, in its attention to incest, sexual abuse, and healing, *Mississippi Damned* arguably emerges from lesbian public cultures that, as Ann Cvetkovich observes, are embedded in therapeutic cultures.⁴⁰ Cvetkovich points out that while scholars have widely acknowledged and attended to the feminization of care work, they have paid far less attention to what she calls its “lesbianization”: the disproportionate numbers of lesbians in “helping professions.”⁴¹ For instance, one of the most popular self-help books on sexual abuse, *The Courage to Heal*, was written by two lesbians.⁴²

I also read the film’s queerness in its contextualization of queer suffering in terms of the structuring violence of anti-Blackness, or what Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* terms the “afterlife of slavery.” She writes:

38. Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754.

39. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert J. Hurley (New York: Vintage, [1978] 1990), 138–39. See also Emile Durkheim, *On Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin Books, [1897] 2006).

40. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 91.

41. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 91.

42. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 91; Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery — skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, impoverishment.⁴³

Mississippi Damned suggests that Black queer suffering is produced by the same calculus that produces poverty and sexual abuse, echoing Calvin Warren's argument about onticide.⁴⁴ If *Mississippi Damned* portrays some forms of "queer suffering," such forms of suffering cannot be neatly parceled out from the forms of suffering that are more legible as "Black" because they emerge from the same structures of violence.

In contrast to the monumental suicide that Olson investigates in *The Joy of Life*, the structural violence of anti-Blackness has seeped into place so thoroughly in *Mississippi Damned* that for Kari, the only way to confront it is through escape, whether through suicide or through departure to New York City. In this respect, if analyzed on the basis of plot alone, the film appears to pathologize the South as already belonging to the space of what Orlando Patterson has termed social death.⁴⁵ The film's title provokes this reflection on spatialized violence as well through its echoes of Nina Simone's 1964 protest song, *Mississippi Goddamn*, which urgently and provocatively laments the historically produced violence plaguing Mississippi. However, as cultural critic Marlon Rachquel Moore notes, while the "goddamn" of Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn" is an agentic curse, the "damned" of Mabry's film signals a more melancholic, condemned state of being that reflects its emphasis on the psychic effects of violence.⁴⁶ This focus on the psychic, Moore points out, as

43. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

44. Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ* 23, no. 3 (2017): 391–418.

45. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

46. Marlon Rachquel Moore, "From Rage to Resignation: Reading Tina Mabry's *Mississippi Damned* as a Post-Civil Rights Response to Nina Simone's 'Mississippi Goddamn,'" in *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, ed. Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 212.

well as the film's presentation of an individual success trajectory, reflects the neoliberal moment of the film, in contrast to the civil rights context of Simone's song.⁴⁷

Yet, the visual language of the film suggests a more complicated construction of spatialized violence. While we never learn the name or many details of the exact town or area where the film is set, Mabry visually suggests the links between violence and space in the film's opening, closing, and transitory shots, which contain and contextualize the action of the film.⁴⁸ The depictions of violence themselves, however, all take place in interiors: primarily in the shadows of homes (sometimes spilling onto front yards) and cars. The exterior shots have a faded hue and a gritty beauty: fields, river, and trees have an almost pastoral quality, while crumbling buildings and train tracks communicate the impoverished conditions of the area but also suggest the quiet simplicity and calm of rural life

This separation of the interiors and exteriors evokes a symbolic disconnect between the setting and structural conditions that produce violence, and the psychic experience of it. That is: the experience of violence is interiorized even as we can logically and theoretically locate it in terms of specific histories and contexts. This contradiction is related to *Mississippi Damned's* status as a narrative film based on memoir, a fact reinforced by the film's mise-en-scène, which pays close attention to details such as peeling paint and decorative objects. While many of the details of the film may be authentic, given that they are based on Mabry's life, the focus on psychic states is challenging when the very terms through which we understand the psyche are informed by the same structuring grammars of anti-Blackness that the film investigates. Frantz Fanon elucidates this paradox in his classic text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, when

47. Moore, "From Rage to Resignation," 219.

48. Mississippi sits on the original territories of over twenty Indigenous nations, many of which US authorities forcibly removed, most explicitly through the Indian Removal Act of 1830; the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations remain there. As in *The Joy of Life*, Indigenous histories and peoples are absent in *Mississippi Damned*. However, these erasures, and their effects, are not equivalent. Whereas *The Joy of Life* registers how settler colonial erasure creates the conditions of possibility for white queer mobility, *Mississippi Damned's* erasure obscures an opportunity for imagining the merging of Black and Indigenous futures — and, in particular, for Black-Indigenous possibility in rural spaces.

he notes that modern conceptions of ontology exclude Blackness and render it impossible to speak of Black subjectivity as subjectivity that is not overdetermined by Blackness.⁴⁹ For this reason, no matter how nuanced its representations of violence, *Mississippi Damned* risks being perceived by audiences — especially non-Black audiences — as a pathology of Blackness. As Michael Gillespie observes, this burden of representation placed on Black film results in “the belief in black film’s indexical tie to the black lifeworld,” which “forgoes a focus on nuance and occults the complexity of black film to interpret, render, incite, and speculate.”⁵⁰

However, as in *The Joy of Life*, landscape shots portray the simultaneous beauty and brutality of these spaces, thus foreclosing the complete pathologization of rural Mississippi. In their introduction to *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee suggest that cinematic imaginations of the American South, while diverse and wide-ranging, both “construct [and unsettle] national narratives.”⁵¹ For example, while the South does not constitute a recognizable genre like the western, films often signify the South through iconic architectures such as the plantation house, through figures like the southern belle, or through social relationships fractured by race and poverty. Unlike many of these films — *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Monster’s Ball* come to mind — *Mississippi Damned* includes few overt references to slavery and few white characters. Incest, physical abuse, homophobic slurs, emotional abuse, and addiction all take place among and in Black spaces, between Black family members and friends. Although the home is colloquially understood as a place of refuge or sanctuary, the violence that takes place in domestic spaces in the film suggests that the afterlife of slavery has permeated these interiors, raising questions about what might constitute safety and justice under such circumstances.

At the same time, we see traces of the presence of slavery and white supremacy lurking within these spaces: Sammy’s high school basketball

49. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008).

50. Michael B. Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

51. Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee, “Introduction: The Southern Imaginary,” in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Barker and McKee (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1.

coach invokes a master/slave relationship when he chides the young Black players about their performance; Anna's husband Tyrone attributes his inability to find work to the racism of the worker's union that has, presumably, become increasingly exclusionary in austere times. These subtle reminders alert the audience that the South of *Mississippi Damned* has been saturated by the structural violence of the afterlife of slavery, and that this violence is ongoing. Indeed, it is not incidental that Mississippi is a largely rural state with some of the greatest income disparities, highest poverty rates, and lowest rates of household income in the United States. In the early twentieth century, many Black farmers became sharecroppers after having lost land during the Reconstruction era due to falling cotton prices and exorbitant debts. From the 1930s onwards, this poverty led to waves of migration to urban centers northward and westward. In the 1980s — when the first half of the film is set — the era of neoliberalism weakened the social safety net thanks to Ronald Reagan's union-busting, tax cuts for the rich, and social welfare cuts for the poor. The characters in *Mississippi Damned* experience violence under these specific conditions — this is the afterlife of slavery.

Suicide is one point in this constellation of violence. It is one choice characters make to navigate the social institutions that narrow their "life chances": for Sammy, suicide is specifically about escaping the criminal legal system, as highlighted by the cop cars that appear in the moments before his death. At the same time, while the film contextualizes Sammy's choice, it does not exonerate him: the sound of his gunshot merges with the sound of Kari shutting her car trunk as she prepares to leave Mississippi, sonically suggesting that Sammy's death provides the closure the audience desires for Kari's narrative. For Anna, suicide is about creating an opportunity for Kari's futurity. It is only through Anna's death that Kari acquires the safety net she needs to pursue her future. The film begins to visually signal Kari's futurity in the scenes just prior to Anna's death. Kari receives her letter of acceptance to NYU and joyfully runs across the field and train tracks to her aunt's house. Notably, this is the first time since a much earlier moment in the film (when she is also running to her aunt's house) that we see her in a more expansive space. Then, after Kari discovers the check that Anna has left for her, the scene echoes the very first shot of the film, of sunshine filtered through tall trees, again symbolizing a return to a more hopeful time in Kari's life (and perhaps, a recuperation of the childhood lost to sexual abuse). Mabry emphasizes

this hopeful affect again through a lighting and color shift in the penultimate scene when Kari waves goodbye to her parents: the film has now shifted from muted, faded tones to brighter hues.

As noted earlier, Mabry's film is embedded in the therapeutic culture that Ann Cvetkovich suggests is intertwined with lesbian public cultures. If the film depicts anti-Black violence in the neoliberal era, when social safety nets have crumbled, it also serves a therapeutic function for Mabry and her audiences, during a time when shrinking state funding for health and welfare has systemically depleted therapeutic opportunities in impoverished communities. "During the question and answer portion of the screenings," Mabry says, "people have been standing up, thanking me and sharing their own personal stories. One woman just cried for ten minutes and talked about how she was molested. Another woman told us that after seeing the film, she was finally ready to talk to her mother about some of their issues, some 20 years after the fact."⁵² Mabry further states in an interview with *AfterEllen*:

I've learned to accept my past and myself because of *Mississippi Damned*. For a long time I felt so ashamed of my life and my experiences, which limited my growth as a person. Making this film brought taboo issues to the forefront. By publicly exposing them, I was reminded that I was far from being alone in my adversities. This has become especially evident at the screenings of the movie. The film seems to construct a safe environment for many audience members to confess their family secrets; it sometimes felt like a therapy session.⁵³

In this sense, screenings of *Mississippi Damned* have opened up space for the emergence of Black/queer relations of care that correspond

52. See Kellee Terrell, "A conversation with . . . Tina Mabry, director of 'Mississippi Damned,'" *GLAAD*, January 11, 2010, <https://www.glaad.org/2010/01/11/a-conversation-with%25e2%2580%25a6tina-mabry-director-of-%25e2%2580%259cmissippi-damned%25e2%2580%259d>.

53. See Karman Kregloe, "Interview with 'Mississippi Damned' Filmmakers Tina Mabry and Morgan Stiff," *AfterEllen*, August 10, 2009, <http://www.afterellen.com/movies/56451-interview-with-mississippi-damned-filmmakers-tina-mabry-and-morgan-stiff>.

with what Hi'ilei Hobart and Tamara Kneese describe as "radical care."⁵⁴ Although neither *Mississippi Damned* nor the conversations it inspires are necessarily oriented towards transformative change, the film has nonetheless generated significant spaces of care that are continuous with the kinds of care work that emerge from lesbian, feminist, and disability justice communities.⁵⁵

The screenings for *Mississippi Damned*, in other words, have undertaken important space-making work, which is continuous with the "kitchen table," or as activist scholar Jin Haritaworn explains it, the queer of color movement-making that takes place across a range of sites because of shrinking access to public spaces.⁵⁶ This space-making work supplements the film's critical representational and aesthetic politics, which also critically reflect on race, space, and sexuality: in Mabry's film, the rural is the site of multiple forms of violence, including suicide, which she situates in relation to the broader set of social conditions generated through the afterlife of slavery, thus de-exceptionalizing and de-spectacularizing suicide. At the same time, the rural is also a space of beauty, joy, and pleasure. It is a site of possibility. Set in relation to the emptiness and monumentality of Olson's urban space in *Joy of Life*, the nuanced entanglement of power structures depicted by Mabry offers another — and more critical — exploration of how queer film might engage with the violence, including suicide, beyond the urban-rural dichotomy.

54. Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text* 38 no. 1 (2020): 2. Whereas neoliberal forms of self-care constitute the reproductive labor that enables the continuing exploitation of workers in service of the accumulation of capital, radical (self) care is oriented towards creating alternate futures and possibilities. See Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988); also see Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk, "Reclaiming the Radical Politics of Self-Care: A Crip-of-Color Critique," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 325–42.

55. For example, see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

56. See "Introduction: Queer Regenerations," in Jin Haritaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 1–35.

CODA: RELATIONAL CRITIQUE AND INCOMMENSURABLE
QUEER CINEMATIC IMAGINARIES

In her now-classic 1997 essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," political scientist Cathy Cohen argues that in order to achieve its radical potential, queer politics must be framed expansively to think about how projects of social regulation and normativity target not just sexual minorities but also the racialized populations that dominant ideologies and practices cast as perverse.⁵⁷ What Cohen's argument suggests, and what I have argued in this essay, is that no singular space of anti-LGBTQ violence exists, and, in fact, queer spaces may be spaces of multifarious violence themselves. Gentrification is a particular locus of such violence that brings into stark relief the ways in which white queer claims to space depend on the erasure of Indigenous peoples, places, and histories as well as the displacement of poor and working-class communities of color.

My relational reading of suicide in Jenni Olson's *The Joy of Life* and in Tina Mabry's *Mississippi Damned* reveals the queer cinematic imaginary as a fraught and fractured project reflecting divergent investments and attachments to the grammars of structural violence through which representational politics emerge. In Olson's film, the exploration of suicide at the monumental site of the Golden Gate Bridge depicts suicide as an exceptional form of violence amid white queer mobility in a gay urban hub. The racial and colonial violence of ongoing Indigenous dispossession and gentrification is a constitutive absence in the film. By contrast, Mabry's film emphasizes suicide's connections to slow death and enmeshment in place. *Mississippi Damned* does not deny that the rural is a site of violence but focuses on violence that is slow and structural. Viewing these films in relation to one another highlights that the rural-based violence portrayed in *Mississippi Damned* is continuous with — not isolated from — the violence that is absented in *The Joy of Life*'s depiction of white queer life in San Francisco. Whereas *The Joy of Life* became enfolded in advocacy efforts to prevent suicide by jumping off a major tourist site, screenings for *Mississippi Damned* have provided audiences a space through which to process and contend with the gaps of a social infrastructure that is crumbling because of structural racism. These

57. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens."

contrasts point not only to the differentiated character of queer cinematic gazes but to their incommensurable tensions with one another.