

INTERLUDE

THRESHOLDS OF ACCOMMODATION

Not all parasites are equally equipped for survival, just as not all subjects are charged with the same potential for resistance. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to address more systematically the privilege or capital that is presupposed by parasitical resistance in this book. Which parasitical subjects can play the system or afford to resist in spaces of domination? Why are some minoritarian subjects granted the accommodation necessary for acts of resistance and others are not? To answer these questions, we must first define more clearly the conditions of the host's hospitality.

Hospitality, as I advance it in this book, is a paternalistic logic of administration that distributes and controls access under the guise of care. The host presides over an economy of dependency—*oikonomia* deriving from the Greek οἰκονομία, designating the rules by which a household is managed. The host carves up and allocates resources at its pleasure within the symbolic economy of the home, setting the terms of belonging for all who enter. The host's regulation of access has the effect of making less powerful subjects reliant on it for their survival. Digital platforms are key to understanding the consolidation of this logic under neoliberal networked capitalism (what I call *coercive hospitality*), as there have become ever sharper distinctions between those with capital and those shut out from it with the rise of leviathan-like monopolies and the concentration of individual capital in the winner-take-all postcrisis economy. In this contemporary political economy, the inviting rhetoric of openness, access, and sharing has been used as a strategy of domination, harnessed to secure and further the dominion of already powerful entities, while such entities efface the authority that confers

power upon them. This book starts from the example of digital corporate platforms' wide-scale privatization of access and proceeds to trace how this infrastructural logic of privatization works across a range of other relationships and milieus also founded on the principles of ownership (private capital, private property, personal privacy, patronage, and legacy). It explores how the *host-parasite* relation plays out in the dependent relations of the *digital platform-user* (chapter 1), *state-immigrant* (chapter 2), *man-woman* (chapter 3), and *institution-contingent laborer* (chapter 4). As these various iterations of dependent relations attest, there is a substantial gradient within the category of the parasite: the category includes those relatively privileged minoritarian subjects who can afford to test the host's generosity and those who, by doing so, risk their very survival.

It is crucial, then, to examine more closely the thresholds of accommodation that determine the differential risk faced by minoritarian subjects who are not all equally equipped to gain access to and resist the host system. In this interlude I differentiate three logics that demarcate the provisional limits of the host system: the *threshold of detection*, *threshold of tolerance*, and *threshold of care* (table Interlude.1). Minoritarian subjects are not all precarious in the same way, either in degree or kind; these thresholds help elaborate the differential tactics and frequency of risk by which the conditions of dependency are enforced, survived, and negotiated. The threshold of accommodation is not a strict line of demarcation but a margin below which something is not perceived. Like a line, a threshold has a discriminating function, but by virtue of its spatial logic it has slightly more allowance—it is something that can be played. It is by working these thresholds, by staying below the limen of detection (or, if detected, by dissimulating their presence or appealing to the host's interests or sense of its own magnanimity), that parasites are accommodated by a system that claims neither to want nor need them.

UNACCOMMODATED PARASITES: THE THRESHOLD OF DETECTION

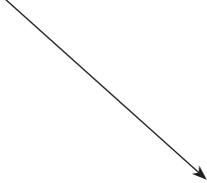
The threshold of detection speaks to the disruptive or dissident possibilities of the parasite that has not yet been detected by the host. We find an illustration of this in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, in which the unnamed black protagonist describes finding ways of leveraging "the advantages of being invisible," such as stealing electricity and living rent-free in the forgotten basement of a building rented only to whites.¹ Within the threshold of detection, the parasite temporarily harnesses a mode of social invisibility

TABLE INTERLUDE 1 THREE THRESHOLDS OF ACCOMMODATION

THRESHOLD OF DETECTION Not yet detected as a parasite; either alterity passes as similarity or has effect of social invisibility.

*High-risk tactic

REPRESENTATIVE FIGURE
The so-called stranger or foreigner unknown to the host.



LIMEN OF DETECTION

*If detected and perceived as an *outside threat*, the parasite is subject to violent expulsion from host system.

THRESHOLD OF TOLERANCE Parasite detected but perceived as so minor a threat as not to warrant the expenditure it would take for the host to expel it.

Parasite is barely accommodated. Calculus of accommodation is predominantly (but not exclusively) economic, and parasite is subject to regular scrutiny; parasite construed as *outsider-guest*.

REPRESENTATIVE FIGURES

Those nonintimate dependents deemed necessary to host: servants, foreigners known to the host (those of a lower social order).

THRESHOLD OF CARE

Parasite detected; difference is perceptible, and even potentially harmful, but parasite performs function of propping the host's self-image as compassionate and caring.

Calculus of accommodation is predominantly social, one of keeping up appearances; parasite construed as *insider-guest*.

REPRESENTATIVE FIGURES

Intimates, dependents on the host: women, children, friends (those of the same social order).

(in this case, a mode that is a paradoxical consequence of the black body's hypervisibility) as a tactical advantage. Ellison's novel, *Hortense J. Spillers* argues, transfigures blackness from "a condition of physiognomy" into a symbolic strategy ("Under the 'laws' of this novel, the game of 'blackness' . . . came home, as it were, right between the ears, as the glittering weapon of an 'invisible' field of choice").² "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived," claims the Invisible Man. "Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility. . . . But to whom can I be responsible and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement."³ With the undercommons, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney update this black aesthetic practice of invisibility to theorize the hidden underground, "the downlow low-down maroon community," of minoritarian collectivity and resource sharing through which marginalized subjects defy the systemic violence of institutional life.⁴ Ellison's articulation further resonates with Simone Browne's account of how the ineluctable glare of mass surveillance and biometric technologies operates on and through black bodies.⁵ It also speaks to minoritarian, black, queer, and/or trans politico-aesthetic projects of invisibility, undetectability, and counter-surveillance, such as Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum have described as "obfuscation," Shaka McGlotten as "black data," Zach Blas as "informatic opacity," and Toby Beauchamp as "going stealth."⁶

Playing the threshold of detection is a particularly risky operation for black, brown, trans, queer, indigenous, and/or migrant subjects for whom the system's sanctions are disproportionately higher: for those perceived as outside threats and who if detected are vulnerable to violent expulsion from the host system, for the threshold of detection presents that subject as a *stranger*.⁷ This representation of the parasite is deeply racialized and ethnicized.⁸ Typically such a parasite is perceived as having infiltrated the host system by crossing a border. For parasites that are called "terrorist" or "illegal alien," this border is a national one, while the Invisible Man's "intrusion" into a building rented only to whites conjures instead the crossing of a racial border. The parasite represented as a stranger is construed as a threat to the "purity" and coherence of the body politic, "a hostile invader of the host nation or group." As a structure of speech, the epithet *parasite*, which connotes an excess or supplement, attempts to establish a strict partition demarcating inside from outside.⁹ This immunological trope is taken up in racist and xenophobic discourses to call for the securing of borders (the borders of the body, the family, the community, or the nation) by vanquishing what is supposedly other to it. A trope of nationalist propaganda,

the language of parasitism exacerbates lines of fracture (job insecurity, anti-immigrant sentiment) to stoke social antagonisms for political gain. In its extreme expression in totalitarian propaganda, the discourse of parasitism represents certain groups as less than human (“vermin,” “pests”) and thus as susceptible to extermination—a rhetoric that, as Roberto Esposito has argued, was part of the Nazis’ “epidemiological repertoire,” which referred to Jews as “bacteria,” “viruses,” and “microbes” that must be eradicated for the health of the nation.¹⁰

The ability to be perceivable as socially unmarked within the host system is thus less accessible to visible minoritarian subjects: dark-skinned racial and ethnic minorities, non-gender-conforming and visible religious minorities, among others, who necessarily operate at a different threshold of visibility and identification in relation to power. But even those minoritarian subjects who hold “the dubious honor of being largely invisible or unreadable” (light-skinned racial and ethnic minorities, gender-conforming homosexuals, certain religious minorities, etc.) are rarely at home in spaces of passing.¹¹ Indeed, for many racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, the strategy of performing complicity, even when it is possible, holds little appeal. “With their commitments to conflict and antagonism as consciousness-raising and revolutionary ideals,” Rachel C. Lee has shown, “postcolonial and race studies often regard as suspect an ethics that endorses hospitality (alternately, care-taking) across conditions where parties refuse to or cannot recognize their reciprocity and interdependence.”¹²

ACCOMMODATED PARASITES: THE THRESHOLD OF TOLERANCE AND THE THRESHOLD OF CARE

Unlike the threshold of detection, which construes the parasite as a stranger, the threshold of tolerance and the threshold of care construe the parasite as a *guest*. Both of these thresholds speak to the conditions under which the host will knowingly accommodate certain parasites. These accounts explicitly highlight how the terms of accommodation are shaped by those of paternalistic domination. In her feminist account of hospitality, Tracy McNulty explains:

Potis names the master of the home, the one who makes the law in the house—the *casa*. As master of the house, he is also master of all of the subordinates who make up the household (servants, slaves, and dependent women), as well as the livestock or chattel that form his personal

property. The Greek *despotes* (lord, despot) and its Latin equivalent, *dominus*, represent the extension of domestic authority into the field of social and symbolic power; both terms designate the “head of the clan,” as well as the “lord” or “possessor”—the one who has power over and is able to dispose of his subjects.¹³

In this schema (one that is based on a heteropatriarchal slave economy), servants, slaves, and dependent women (not to mention cattle) are lumped together into a generalized minoritarian class of “dependents.” Compared to those subjects without freedom (“marked” with a ring around the neck), the wife, children, friends, and other loved ones of the head of the household enjoy a form of protection in ownership as “unmarked” subjects. But even their limited or provisional agency can at any moment be taken away at the behest of the master. They are both inside and out, equal and not. “As a model of social order, the patriarchal family depended upon duty, status, and protection rather than consent, equality, and civil freedom,” Saidiya Hartman affirms. “Subjection was not only naturalized but also consonant with the sentimental equality of reciprocity, inasmuch as the power of affection licensed the strength of weakness. Essentially, ‘the strength of weakness’ prevailed due to the goodness of the father, ‘The armor of affection and benevolence.’”¹⁴ Within this plantation logic, dependents’ access to resources for survival varies greatly according to the logic of their possession by the master of the house. The two categories of dependents—*protected* and *unprotected*—signal a divergence in the paternalistic logics of hospitality. Some dependents (nonintimates or foreigners) are barely accommodated or accommodated according to a calculus based on economic or other strategic factors (*threshold of tolerance*), while others—intimates such as dependent women, children, friends—are accommodated to the extent that they prop up the host’s need to be regarded as generous (*threshold of care*).

Whereas Ellison’s *Invisible Man* attests to the cost of detection for some racialized subjects, the films *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993) and *Get Out* (2017) explore how some hosts occasionally accommodate racial difference (and the perceived dangers represented to both parties by such an alliance of strategic inclusion). In both of these films, a young black male protagonist gets in the door by fulfilling a white liberal fantasy of assimilated blackness. By incorporating the figure of the young black male into the white traditional family home, the white liberal host is able to rationalize their self-image as inclusive and progressive. Riding the line of the thresholds of tolerance and care, these examples speak to the selective, tokenistic inclusion

of certain racial and ethnic minorities—for example, the so-called model minority, endowed with a preferred status, and other exceptional subjects who are allotted a seat at the table while others are left outside the room.¹⁵

A POINT OF VULNERABILITY: THE THRESHOLD OF CARE

As these thresholds show, there are a number of stories that can be told about the parasite-host relation; I am telling only one of these. The parasitical performances I explore in this book fall under the threshold of care. The artists I examine, almost all of whom have been threatened with legal action that was ultimately not pursued, dodge culpability by tapping into the plausible deniability that is afforded by the ambiguous legal, ethical, and moral status of digital technology, art, and performance.¹⁶

But more crucially, parasites locate a point of vulnerability in the host's (disavowed) need of its parasites: the host's need to believe it is magnanimous, or to be perceived as magnanimous by those dependents it cares or professes to care about. Given the contingency of the host's authority, the parasite can play on the host's need to be reassured that it has the affection and approval of those it dominates: the master who wants to be a "good guy," the boss who wants his jokes to be laughed at, the patron who expects his beneficiaries to kiss the proverbial ring. Following Michel Feher, who traces neoliberalism's paternalistic and patriarchal logic back to chivalry and the gift economy built into the feudal relation, I argue that the parasite takes advantage of the host's investment in maintaining *the public appearance* of equal footing; this is particularly true in an era when state and corporate largesse (strategic diversity, corporate responsibility, state diplomacy) are calibrated according to the optics of risk and brand reputation management.¹⁷ The parasite effectively traps the host in the contradiction between the host's public values and private actions. The parasite compels the host to accommodate it by harnessing the host's desire not to appear hypocritical.

Some artists in the book play the threshold of care by seizing the advantage afforded by their technical expertise or know-how (Ubermorgen, Robin Hood Cooperative) and others by leveraging the intimate access to power provided by citizenship (Güell) or social standing within the affluent queer community (Pietrobono). Still others (Kraus, Calle) weaponize the dubious privilege and chivalrous protection afforded to femininity, as Byrne does with Hendricks. By performing heterosexual white femininity as a means of lateral access, a kind of Trojan horse, these artists reanimate fierce historical debates about complicity in feminist and antiracist criticism. The com-

plicit status of white femininity, long an integral and complex site for proping up the project of white supremacist patriarchy, is raised in particular by these works.¹⁸ White women's "assumed delicacy and helplessness" has been a favorite alibi of white supremacy, serving as the historical justification for centuries of antiblack violence.¹⁹ Femininity benefits from the economic and social protection of patriarchal structures, much as, Frank B. Wilderson has shown, whiteness necessarily feeds on the spoils of white supremacy. "Whiteness is parasitic," Wilderson writes, "because it monumentalizes its subjective capacity, its lush cartography, in direct proportion to the wasteland of Black incapacity."²⁰

However, these artists wield whiteness and/or femininity, positioned at the nexus of straightness and middle-class-ness, not as identities but as performative tools and tactics of complicity that afford them access to and protections within the inner sanctums of power. Roisin Byrne, Núria Güell, Chris Kraus, and Sophie Calle embrace feminine archetypes of the clingy female admirer, the plus one, the vampiristic hanger-on. Under the threshold of care, these parasitical intimates of the host operate a kind of counterpassing. While passing is typically understood as moving from stranger to guest, they invert that dynamic, shifting from guest to stranger. In this move, those subjects who are most perceived as docile and nonthreatening, and who are most likely to be welcomed as guests, are instead (slowly) revealed to be strangers—parasites. This tactic of parasitism hinges in part on the gradual character of this estrangement and the strategic possibilities opened up by its delayed recognition.

As a tactic of the more privileged, parasitism can represent a means of owning and subverting one's complicity; it can represent an alternative to what can often amount to the platitudes and false innocence of allyship. By mobilizing whiteness and femininity not as fixed identities but as complicit modalities, these artists hold out the possibility for a strategic disidentification with their own privilege—one that might be used to forge a kind of solidarity with those who, by virtue of their positions in relation to the host, must mobilize their parasitism differently.

While my discussions of the artworks depart from the thresholds of accommodation I set up here, this framework remains an essential analytic for conceptualizing the social politics of interventionism that in discussions of tactical art and media too often relies on the notion of a universal subject of capitalism, ignoring or leaving undeveloped the gendered, raced, sexualized dimensions of the subject and the system under discussion. One of the book's organizing questions—What does one's position allow one to get away

with and what forms of resistance can that latitude facilitate?—examines how the parasite's accommodation is conditioned by the racial, gender, and class privilege that subtends the very possibility of parasitical resistance, for these axes of visibility and identification determine the amount of play that is possible in systems of white heteropatriarchal neoliberal control.