OCEANIC FEELING & COM-MUNIST AFFECT

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Oceanic Feeling and Communist Affect

Between 1923 and 1936 the French novelist and mystic Romain Rolland exchanged twenty letters with the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Inspired by his exchanges with Rolland, Freud elaborated the concept of "oceanic feeling" in his 1930 work *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In this work Freud describes "oceanic feeling" as a feeling of limitlessness that marks a return to the infantile, pre-Oedipal mode of being, whereby the infant cannot distinguish itself from its mother. Rolland, however, describes "oceanic feeling" as a mystical feeling that enables one to commune with the universe. For Rolland, the "oceanic" was the affective state underlying all religious experience.

This essay examines the concept of "oceanic feeling" in psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses. First, I trace psychoanalytic debates about oceanic feeling and mystical experiences in the work of Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. Next, I look at British psychoanalyst Marion Milner's playful avowal of oceanic states during the creative process. Then I examine Rolland's Spinozist conception of oceanic feeling and discuss some of its social implications, particularly the potential for oceanic states to serve as an affective foundation for social modes that are communistic. Lastly, I discuss how Fred Moten's theorization of blackness revises the psychoanalytic conceptions of the "oceanic," as he relates the "oceanic" to blackness and to the trauma of the Middle Passage.

This essay is about the creative, social, and political implication of oceanic feeling. It might be of interest to anyone interested in the psychoanalysis of mysticism, psychoanalytic debates about religion, Fred Moten, Spinoza, affect theory, and critical theory. There was so much more I wanted to write–about the oceanic experience H.D. wrote about in Tribute to Freud. About the psychoanalysis of creativity. About Wilfred Bion, Michael Eigen, and other psychoanalysts who have written about mysticism. About the relationships between trauma, ecstatic experience, and monstrosity. About the political dimensions of mysticism....

Alas, we cannot say everything in every essay.

Now, to dive....

There are two distinct notions of the oceanic operating in the work of Freud, Rolland, and Kristeva. On the one hand, we have a notion of the oceanic as defensive, infantile, and dissociative; on the other, we have a notion of the oceanic as joyful, connective, and integrative. I will take up the latter form of oceanic feeling in my essay for the purpose of elaborating a project of communist affect. In particular, I am interested in how the disintegration of the ego alters one's orientation to the world and others. Given that the oceanic has the potential to unsettle subjectivity, I argue that the oceanic can be a point of departure for new socialities and political models that do not rely on discrete selves. My analysis of the social implications of oceanic feeling will draw heavily on the performance studies and black studies scholar Fred Moten's discussion of blackness and paraontology. Though some psychoanalytic thinkers have disavowed the oceanic, at its best, oceanic feeling can, as Gérard de Nerval says, illuminate the "transparent network that covers the world" and sensitize us to the way that "everything lives, moves, everything corresponds" (quoted in Kristeva[1] 170).

1. Kristeva, Julia. Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. European Perspectives. Print.

Regression: Freud, Kristeva, and Lacan

In 1930 psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud[2] first popularized the term "oceanic feeling" in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In chapter 2 he notes that the text, like his 1927 text *The Future of an Illusion*, is a study of religion that is focused on the role of religion in the life of the "common man," rather than the "sources of religious feeling" for mystics and saints. For Freud "great men" of religious feeling are rare, but in the opening chapter of the book, he prefaces his analysis of religion with a discussion of the comments of one such "great man": the religious scholar, novelist and mystic Romain Rolland. Rolland had written to Freud after reading *The Future of an Illusion* expressing that he was sympathetic to Freud's critiques of religion, but noted that he overlooked that all religion is, in some sense, rooted in mystical experience or "oceanic feeling." Freud writes:

> *One of these exceptional few calls himself my friend in his letters to me. I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion, [The Future of an Illusion (1927c)] and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'. This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels,*

2. Freud, Sigmund, and Strachey, James. Civilization and Its Discontents. New York: Norton, 2005. Print.

> *and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion. (11)*

On Rolland's view (according to Freud's account), even if organized religion is an undesirable perversion of the subjective experience of eternity, it still derives its energy from this source. Freud then goes on to subtly dismiss "oceanic feeling" as a potential topic of psychoanalytic investigation by claiming that it is difficult to undertake a "scientific" study of feeling. He then goes on to deny the "primary nature of such a feeling;" however, his dismissal of Roland's claim seems to be based on his ignorance of the nature of the experience. He writes, "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself," but goes on to admit that he does not deny that the oceanic occurs in other people.

Freud describes Rolland's notion of oceanic feeling as "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (12). In psychoanalytic terms Freud understands this "feeling" (which he notes is not a pure feeling-tone but a projection of intellectual concept onto a feeling-tone) as an ego disturbance that unsettles the boundaries of the self. When the ego is functioning properly it produces a solid sense of the self as autonomous and unitary. However, on Freud's account, oceanic feeling harkens back to the time when the infant at the breast was not able to distinguish itself from its mother or the outside world. During this stage the ego included everything. Freud argues, by way of a strange digression about the (non-)traces left behind

by ancient cities such as Rome, that this archaic experience of non-differentiation may be preserved in the psyche, and that oceanic feeling is a regression to this stage.

In Freud's non-religious account of the psychic processes undergirding the experience of oceanic feelings, the oceanic (contrary to Rolland's claim) is not the source of the need for religion. Rather than being the cause, Freud argues that the oceanic is associated with religion later, when it is offered as a kind of consolation for a helpless subject in the face of infantile impotence. Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of "oceanic feeling" is similar to Freud's in that the "oceanic" state is considered an infantile regression. In *Black Sun* she describes the oceanic as a depressive denial, a form of symbolic suicide, and a "fantasy of untouchable fullness" that "leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration, as lethal as it is jubilatory, 'oceanic'" (19-20). However, while Freud did not characterize "oceanic feeling" as either feminine or masculine, Kristeva's description of the oceanic in Black Sun suggests that it emerges from a feminine psychic structure. Throughout the book Kristeva associates feminine melancholia with the "lethal ocean." Though Kristeva acknowledges the ecstatic aspects of "oceanic feeling" (*jouissance*), she ultimately dismisses it as a form of wounded narcissism which allows women to gain a kind of protective omnipotence by "limitlessly spreading her constrained sorrow" to achieve a "hallucinated completeness" (74). In a sense, Kristeva's oceanic is a kind of premature death that is paradoxically a preemptive defense against death.

Here, Kristeva's understanding of "oceanic" states is filtered through Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of *jouissance*. In Seminar XX (Lacan's lectures on feminine sexuality), Lacan[3] presents two distinct types of jouissance that are accessible to women (or to be more precise, those with feminine psychic structures): "phallic (sexual) jouissance and Other jouissance, the latter being related to the real or the 'God' face of the Other" (8). Though it would be analytically imprecise to conflate the 'Other jouissance' with oceanic feeling, in Lacan's lecture "God and ~~Woman's~~ jouissance," Lacan does say there is a feminine jouissance that is linked to mysticism, though Slavoj Zizek (perhaps out of envy?) claims that the Other jouissance is not mystical, but an alienated form of *enjoyment rooted in women's enjoyment of the Other's enjoyment*. This is contrasted with phallic jouissance, which, Lacan notes, "insofar as it is sexual...does not relate to the Other as such" (14).

For Zizek[4] its important to think of feminine jouissance in these terms because "it enables us to dispense with the standard misreading of Lacan, according to which jouissance feminine is a mystical beatitude beyond speech, exempted from the symbolic order" (60). This reading has some validity. Lacan concludes "God and ~~Woman's~~ jouissance" with a discussion of how "Kierkegaard discovered existence" through his Regine—a capital A *Autre* (Other). "This desire for a good at one remove (*au second degré*), a good that is not caused by a little a — perhaps it was through Régine that he [Kierkegaard] attained that dimension" (Lacan 77). However, though Lacan asserts that the mediation of the Other structures this feminine jouissance, he asks

3. Lacan, Jacques. On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. New York: Norton, 1998. Lacan, Jacques, 1901-1981. Séminaire De Jacques Lacan. English; Bk. 20. Y. Print.

4. Fink, Bruce, and Barnard, Suzanne. Reading Seminar XX Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 2002. Print.

the rhetorical questions, "Doesn't this jouissance one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-sistence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine jouissance?" (Lacan 77). *Ex-sistence* (hyphenated) is different from existence in that the former can be linked to the ecstatic (by why of the Greek *ek-*, meaning 'out' or 'outside'). As Bruce Fink writes:

> *To the best of my knowledge, the word "ex-sistence" was first introduced into French in translations of Heidegger (e.g., of Being and Time), as a translation for the Greek ekstasis and the German Ekstase. The root meaning of the term in Greek is "standing outside of" or "standing apart from" something. In Greek, it was generally used for the removal or displacement of something, but it also came to be applied to states of mind that we would now call "ecstatic." Thus a derivative meaning of the word is "ecstasy," hence its relation to the Other jouissance. Heidegger often played on the root meaning of the word, "standing outside" or "stepping outside" oneself, but also on its close connection in Greek with the root of the word for "existence." Lacan uses it to talk about "an existence which stands apart from," which insists as it were from the outside; something not included on the inside, something which, rather than being intimate, is "extimate." The Other jouissance is beyond the symbolic, standing apart from symbolic castration. It ex-sists. We can discern a place for it within our symbolic order, and even name it, but it nevertheless remains ineffable, unspeakable. (Fink 122)*

This reading of Lacan, which links the Other jouissance to ex-istence and ex-istence to the ecstatic, suggests that—contrary to Zizek's claim—feminine jouissance does have some relationship to mystical experiences that are beyond signification, but still within the realm of the signifier as an ex-istent thing

(its "signifierness"). Suzanne Barnard even goes so far as to claim that the Other jouissance has a privileged relationship to the real when she writes, "Ultimately, Lacan more explicitly suggests that the feminine subject's 'ex-sistent' relation to the symbolic allies her jouissance, not with the signifier as signifying, but instead with the signifier's ex-sistence. Thus she has a (potential) relation to the real face of the Other that he elaborates on in Seminar XX as the signifierness of the signifier" (Fink 181). According to Lacan, this feminine jouissance produces an extra or surplus (*en plus*): a signifier as ex-istent, which in his discussion of female mystics, Lacan refers to "mystical jaculations" (76). Mystical feminine jouissance is not wholly outside the realm of the symbolic; rather, it has a different relationship to the symbolic. The testimony of the mystics is a kind of trace or symbolic remainder of the experience. But what is being symbolized in these accounts is the unspeakability of the experience. As Lacan writes, "Saint Teresa—you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it. What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it" (76).

This detour through Lacan is necessary to unpack Kristeva's theories about the relationship between feminine melancholia and oceanic feeling. In some ways melancholia itself is a feminized experience insofar as Kristeva characterizes it as an inability to properly symbolize. Indeed, some Lacanians assert that a depressive state can be a kind of jouissance. Renata Salecl writes that:

> *In a woman, melancholy is especially linked to feminine jouissance. When Lacan tries to decipher this jouissance, he usually invokes the example of the mystics—women (and men) who find enjoyment in a total devotion to God, who immerse themselves in an ascetic stance and detach themselves from the world. This feminine jouissance,*

> *which language cannot decipher, is thus usually perceived as the highest "happiness" that the subject can experience. However, because this jouissance is foreclosed from language, it also is something that the unconscious does not know and thus cannot assimilate. If we invoke Lacan's thesis that the remedy for sadness is for the subject to find itself in the unconscious, then the question becomes, how is this indecipherable feminine jouissance related to female melancholy?*
>
> *One possible answer might be that the enjoyment a woman finds in melancholic seclusion from the world is precisely a form of feminine jouissance. In this case, an ecstatic mystic and a melancholic woman would not be very different in terms of their jouissance. (in Fink 95)*

In this passage, female melancholy is linked to feminine jouissance insofar as both are profoundly antisocial and entail a retreat from the world. The mystic opts for an acetic life that is "detached" from the world, and the female melancholic is cast outside the human community in her inability to symbolize and assimilate her subjective experience. For both Salecl and Kristeva, this melancholic jouissance and oceanic state is a kind of autism (in the psychoanalytic sense). As Kristeva writes, "In the midst of its lethal ocean, the melancholy woman is the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself and can never kill outside herself... Modest, silent, without verbal or desiring bonds with others, she wastes away by striking moral and physic blows against herself" (Black Sun, 30). When the melancholic woman is swallowed up by the lethal ocean she experiences a kind of death, for she no longer circulates in the symbolic economy. Furthermore, the capacity to signify using language is a precondition for entering

the social body, which is why, for Kristeva, it is the father figure who saves the melancholic from the lethal ocean. She writes that the "denial of the signifier is shored up by a denial of the father's function, which is precisely to guarantee the establishment of the signifier" (Black Sun 45). Kristeva[5] distinguishes between the Oedipal father (object of love-hate) and the loving father of prehistory (the pre-Oedipal maternal father). For her it is the loving pre-Oedipal father that rescues the subject from the oceanic void: "At the dawn of individuation a life raft thus appears on the horizon of the 'oceanic feeling': the loving father. An imaginary Surface who, through his loving authority, takes me from the engulfing container: he is the guarantor my being".

In both Kristeva and Freud oceanic feeling is threatening, infantile, and rooted in a pre-Oedipal (or perhaps even pre-natal) experience of non-differentiation. The oceanic is threatening because it has the potential to dissolve the individual's subjective boundaries. For both Kristeva and Lacan, oceanic feeling and the Other jouissance are linked to feminine psychic structures. When speculating on why Freud was dismissive of both music and mysticism, Kristeva writes that although Freud was a "courageous explorer into the 'black continent' of femininity," he—perhaps unconsciously?—was trying to ward off the threat of the maternal feminine (Need to Believe). Here the "feminine" is figured as a kind of *terra incognita* because, insofar as the feminine resists symbolization, it is unmappable.

Though darkness is used as a metaphor for oceanic feeling and the maternal throughout Kristeva's work,

5. This Incredible Need to Believe. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. European Perspectives. Ebook. Print

the "oceanic" is treated with more nuance in her later book *The Incredible Need to Believe*. In this work Kristeva attempts to take seriously the "prereligious need to believe" and thus distances herself from Freud's position on religion, mysticism and ocean feeling. Kristeva makes the bold assertion that belief is the cornerstone of the subject's capacity to speak. She writes, "Faith holds the key to the act of speech itself, even should it be plaintive (I am afflicted, men lie, etc.). Because I believe, I speak; I would not speak if I didn't believe; believing in what I say, and persisting in saying it, comes from the capacity to believe in the Other and not at all from existential experience, necessarily disappointing" (Need to Believe). Not only is it necessary to believe in the existence of the Other in order to speak, but for psychoanalysis to work it is necessary to believe that it is possible to know. For Kristeva knowledge is not limited to reason or "calculated consciousness" but also, knowledge of inner experience that is gained through the process of signification in a psychoanalytic context. Though oceanic feeling, without the life raft of the loving father's gift of the signifier, would obliterate the subject, the oceanic—insofar as it accompanied by a feeling or certainty and truth—can ground the subject by affirming the *possibility of knowing.*

While Kristeva treats the oceanic as lethal in *Black Sun*, in her later work the oceanic is an expression of the prereligious need to believe. Perhaps Kristeva did not so much change her position on the oceanic as she did merely emphasize the need for the paternal function and language to regulate the "destructivity" of the maternal oceanic and to "give meaning" to

what would otherwise be an "unspeakable trauma" (Need to Believe). The capacity to "name" the experience ensures that the oceanic does not become a "catastrophic" dissolution of the self (thus, writing can also be a way to manage the oceanic). Essentially what Kristeva is proposing is not so much a disavowal of the oceanic on the grounds that it is infantile (as Freud does), but a new orientation to the oceanic, one that insists that the oceanic can be a gift or source of artistic inspiration so long as it is mediated and managed by the (psychoanalytic) practice of signification.

For Kristeva it is important to affirm the prereligious need to believe—along with religion and the oceanic—because secularization and the abolition of faith has grave social consequences (Kristeva even goes so far as to say that secularization has a causal relationship to the holocaust). Perhaps, rather than trying to purge, disavow, avoid, or control, the "traumatic excitation" of ocean feeling, it makes more sense to dwell in it, to silence the repulsive dread of maternal suffocation, to inhabit the feeling (getting filled-up and blissed-out) knowing full well that on the other side of the experience lies an opportunity to assimilate the gift (of direct knowledge of the space beyond and outside the ego) by processing and naming it (in psychoanalysis or through artistic creation and other acts of sublimation). Perhaps it would be possible to alternate between these divergent affective spaces and use them to enrich each other.

Is it inherently bad to "regress" to a childlike state? Perhaps, rather than thinking of the oceanic as an infantile need to restore a sense of omnipotence in response to feeling helpless, the oceanic can be thought of as a stage in a cycle of creativity where a return to a state of infancy acts to wipe the mind clean (of a certain kind of knowledge) and represents the rebirth of the subject. In the psychoanalysis of creativity, the creative state is often described as a return to the immersive experience of child's play. Infantile states need not be thought of as immature, defensive, or representative of the subject's inability to cope with reality, but experimental, restorative, joyous, and enlivening.

In the work of British psychoanalyst Marion Milner,[6] creativity is a dialectical and cyclical process that includes periods when the subject descends into an "incommunicable world" punctuated by states of focused consciousness (156). Another way to put this is, there is a dynamic interplay between what Milner, drawing on the work of Ehrenzweig, refers to as the "depth mind" and the "surface mind." As she writes in her 1956 essay "Psychoanalysis and Art":

> *The state of mind which analysts describe as a repetition of the infant's feelings in its mother's arms, the state which Freud called oceanic, is thus being regarded by certain writers on art as an essential part of the creative process. But it is not the oceanic feeling by itself, for that would be the mystic's state; it is rather the oceanic state in a cyclic oscillation with the activity of what Ehrenzweig calls the surface mind, with that activity in which 'things' and the*

6. Milner, Marion. The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men : Forty-four Years of Exploring Psychoanalysis. London ; New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987. New Library of Psychoanalysis; 3. Print.

> *self, as Maritain puts it, are grasped separately, not together. And the cyclic oscillation is not just passively experienced but actively used, with the intent to make something, produce something. (159)*

Milner, like Kristeva, affirms the possibility of using the oceanic to "make something," but in order to transform the oceanic state into an aesthetic object the artist must oscillate between different modes of perception and awareness because the oceanic state, like dream states, resists signification.[7] In other words, the writer or artist must "submerge" and then come to the surface for air. I would also add that oceanic states animate writers and artists precisely *because they are inexpressible*. If we agree with Lacan's assertion that the subject's desire is animated by lack, then the impossibility of expressing the oceanic state may paradoxically incite the subject's desire to symbolize that state. The gap opened up by the oceanic state creates tension, frustration, and perhaps even sadness. When the oceanic state is over and the artist's cognitive faculties return, she has already lost it. However, artistic creation itself can become a way to mourn the lost state (and its attendant feeling of completeness) when the artist succeeds in finding a substitute for that which always eludes the subject. Anticipating Lacan and Kristiva's emphasis on the process of signification, Milner writes:

> *Analysts find that in their most deeply disturbed patients the process of symbol formation has been interfered with, or perhaps never properly established. And two ideas are emerging from this. First, that the achieving of a symbol (a symbol being seen as essentially a substitute) involves a mourning for the loss of that for which it is a substitute.*

7. Like Kristeva, Milner links these oceanic states to the feminine side of mental functioning, which she contrasts with a masculine, logical mode of thinking. If the formal logic of the conscious mind avoids contradictions, then, according to Milner, mystical thinking is dialectical, more suited to holding the ambivalence and contradictions of subjects who are partially opaque to themselves (insofar as the unconscious mind is always operant).

> *Second, that the process of finding the substitute requires a temporary merging of the idea of the original thing with the idea of the substitute. (175)*

Here, loss is the precondition for all symbolic processes. It is not surprising that many writers, especially poets, have an extremely fraught relationship to language itself. They know that no matter how many signifiers they spill they will never be able to fully capture the affective states that they pass through. Perhaps this is what Samuel Beckett[8] means when he writes that "To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail" (118). Milner's essay discursively enacts this "failure." Throughout "Psychoanalysis and Art" she writes about how difficult it was for her to write anything about creative and oceanic states. She opens the essay by acknowledging that when she approached the topic, her mind went blank. She notes, "I am trying to talk about a state of mind that does in a sense stop being that state of mind as soon as we separate ourselves from it sufficiently to talk about it in logical terms" (175). Separating from such states in order to attempt to symbolize them is often psychically painful; however, this torturous separation (which may resemble the initial maternal separation) is necessary in order to create a substitution for the lost thing. If one were to dwell in the oceanic state indefinitely than one would never experience the wrenching separation that paradoxically may animate signification.

8. Bloom, Harold. Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. New ed. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008. Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. Print.

Cosmic Connectedness: Rolland and Spinoza

Rolland noted in his letters to Freud that he derived the concept of "oceanic feeling" from the seventeenth century Dutch philosophy Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza[9] proposed that "existence belongs to the nature of substance" and that all of existence consists of a single infinite substance he refers to as God or Nature (160). In Rolland's terms oceanic feeling is not an infantile defense or regressive return to a pre-Oedipal state, but part of a mature process of becoming; an experience of ego loss that enables one to commune with the "substance" of existence in a way that radically alters one's orientation to the world.

In his letters to Freud, Rolland distinguished between organized religion and religious feeling. He writes, "I would have liked to see you doing an analysis of *spontaneous religious sentiment* or, more exactly, of religious feeling, which is wholly different from religions in the strict sense of the word, and much more durable" (172).[10] For Rolland, religious feeling could be accessed directly by people by way of the oceanic, which he described in a letter to Freud as "the simple and direct fact of the *feeling of the 'eternal'* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)" (Parsons 173).

Rolland was raised Catholic, but ultimately left the Catholic Church because he found it corrupt and oppressive. However, spirituality remained a central part of his life, and he was able to maintain a connection to religion through a direct contact

9. Spinoza, Benedictus De, and Curley, E. M. A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.

10. Parsons, William Barclay. The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

with the eternal afforded by his oceanic experiences. Vermorel,[11] quoting Rolland, notes that "Shortly after losing his Catholic faith, one day in 1887, alone at his desk, reading Spinoza's *Ethics*, he had an 'illumination', 'the white sun of the Substance' (34). He experienced it as an immersion in God, in the Universe, in the 'Ocean of Being', bringing him peace of mind" (1237). Thus, after Rolland "lost" his religion, he began to adopt a syncretic blend of Spinozism and Eastern religious traditions, which Jussi A. Saarinen[12] described as "a pantheistic monism derived, amongst others, from Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Tolstoy, Leibniz, and Spinoza, the 'European Krishna'" (201).

The influence of Spinoza on Rolland's development of the concept of the "oceanic" cannot be understated because Spinoza not only provided a philosophical framework through which to understand oceanic feeling, but also because the oceanic was inspired by a mystical experience Rolland had while reading Spinoza's Ethics. Rolland's Spinozist conception of oceanic feeling differs from the psychoanalytic conception most markedly in its characterization of the affective state undergirding the experience. While Kristeva relates oceanic feeling to melancholia (and feminine melancholia in particular), Rolland—perhaps drawing on Spinoza's affective philosophy—relates oceanic feeling to joy. This is a significant distinction because, for Spinoza, the 'sad passions' (what we might call depression or melancholia) decreases a body's capacity to act, whereas joy enhances it. Thus we might distinguish between Kristeva's morbid oceanic and Rolland's vitalist oceanic, which produces a "vital upsurge" in the person experiencing it (Parsons 174). I would

11. Vermorel, Henri. "The Presence of Spinoza in the Exchanges between Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland I." International Journal of Psychoanalysis 90.6 (2009): 1235-254. Web.

12. Saarinen, Jussi A. "The Oceanic Feeling A Case Study in Existential Feeling." Journal Of Consciousness Studies 21.5-6 (2014): 196-217. Web.

argue that a vitalist conception of the oceanic rooted in the thinking of Spinoza is more socially and politically enabling that certain antisocial psychoanalytic conceptions of the oceanic.

In recent years, Italian, French and American post-Marxists influenced by Gilles Deleuze's thought have also used Spinoza to theorize the nature of collective struggle and the politics of affect.[13] It is not surprising that post-Marxists who feel that communism is at an impasse have turned to Spinoza, both for his affective philosophy (which posits joy as the most empowering emotion) and his radically ecological thought.[14] For Spinoza, if God is infinity, then everything that exists is in God; therefore, all creatures and things are part of the single substance that is variously called Nature or God. Thus, Spinoza's philosophy, which is sometimes called a rational mysticism, reveals a kind of already-existing communism, even while on another level, we inhabit a historical milieu that is considered post-communist (insofar as the major communist political endeavors of the twentieth century have failed). But if we concede that communism failed, perhaps it is not due to a failure to figure out the best possible social and economic modes of organization, but because we didn't have the affective and imaginative resources to even begin to envision a mode of existence centered on connectedness over differentiation.

Indeed, contemporary post-Marxist deploy-ments of Spinoza were not the first attempts to articulate the social implications of Spinoza's metaphysics. Rolland felt that mythical experiences could move subjects toward the social. As Saarinen writes, "Rolland was

13. Most notably in the work of Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, and Tiqqun. See Negri, Antonio, and Murphy, Timothy S. Subversive Spinoza: (un)contemporary Variations. Manchester; New York: New York: Manchester UP.

14. Negri, Antonio, and Murphy, Timothy S. Subversive Spinoza: (un) contemporary Variations. Manchester; New York: New York: Manchester UP; Distributed Exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2004. Print.

notably wary of any sustained mystical disengagement from worldly affairs, and emphasized instead the energizing effect of the oceanic orientation on social and political action" (213).

> *". . . one instant's contact with the Infinite is sufficient to make the Illusion of all 'differentiated' egos, our own and other men's, disappear immediately."*
>
> Romain Rolland,
> *The Life of Ramakrishna*

As I have discussed so far, Rolland, unlike Freud and Kristeva, rejects the view of the oceanic as a "*regressive-defensive* withdrawal from the world" and instead asserts that the oceanic can enhance one's being toward the world by disappearing the boundaries of the ego (Saarinen 201). This perspective begs the question: Is our experience of ourselves as bounded, discrete selves just a trick of the ego? Is it an effect of language, which operates through differentiation and naming? Or is the self a construction or mode of perception conditioned by an idea of the "individual" articulated in the discourses of the Enlightenment, psychoanalysis, and liberalism (which locates freedom in individual choice and agency)? Whether psychic, discursive, linguistic, or ideological in origin, affective states that take us beyond the boundaries of the self and illuminate the "transparent network that covers the world" may be more than just personally formative experiences; they have the potential to open up new modes of relationality. On this view the oceanic cannot be reduced to mere egoic dysfunction or a delusional hallucination, but instead could be considered a revelation: the illumination of an already-existing communalism and the direct experience of our embeddedness in the world. To dismiss oceanic feeling on the grounds that it

is infantile tacitly locates "adult" subjectivity in the capacity to differentiate self from other rather than the capacity to conceptualize of the subject as connected: as part of an assemblage or node inscribed within a larger world or network. Framed this way, it becomes possible to see that the denigration of oceanic feeling by some psychoanalytic thinkers also reveals an attachment to a specific idea of the subject. In a sense, oceanic feeling as an affective state has the potential to open up the subject by temporarily dissolving its boundaries. While this has interesting implications for how we define and understand subjectivity (which I will get to in my discussion of Moten), it also has interesting social implications.

What would it mean to socialize (or communize) oceanic feeling? Could the oceanic act as a feeling-in-common that serves as the experiential basis for the co-construction of new worlds? If the experience of ego loss (and the attendant feeling of being cosmically connected to the universe) has the capacity to denaturalize the individual and undo the fiction of the bounded subject, then the oceanic has the potential to open up new socialites.

In the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari, the "rhizome"—a root system that grows laterally and puts out roots at intervals—is frequently used as a visual metaphor to imagine a networked form of social entanglement. With rhizomatic plants, what appears to be, say, a forest of bamboo consisting of discrete plants may actually be a cluster connected by a single root system. If we recalibrate our vision and filter our social worlds through the idea of the rhizome it would be difficult to clearly demarcate

where one "I" stops and another begins. In a 2013 Tarnac seminar on love, Le Love Gang[15] notes that in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, "'I' is not a monad surrounded by objects. I is a world, a mechinic assemblage, a certain nexus [*nouage*]. To love is not to project a closed ego towards another ego, hoping to make a two-part unity. It is to assemble [*agencer*], to destabilize and map out new lines of escape [*lignes de fuite*]" (*Friendship* 51).

In recent years a group of anonymous friendship theorists drawing on the work of Deleuze, Guattari, Tiqqun and Spinoza have used 'constellations' as a way to visualize their social mode: "We form constellations. Our bodies are never isolated, are always enmeshed in shifting patterns of relations. Scattered across space, our selves form patterns, trace connections ethical but unseen. They give us consistency and form outside of our solitude. When we make our connections material, our constellations take shape, become tactile, make worlds" (*Friendship* 62).

This use of constellations to imagine social relations emphasizes the need for both social imagination (to put things in relation and experiment with new forms) and material acts that make the constellation tangible. For instance, a constellation may be made palpable when a group of friends live together, care for each other, think together and create new forms of life. Affinity thus becomes not just a matter of shared personal or political beliefs, but the entwinement of our everyday lives. As the constellation becomes more material, it becomes more difficult to imagine that the self "can ever be understood in isolation"

15. Friendship as a Form of Life. Issue two. 2016. Print.

(*Friendship* 64). Furthermore, the creation of constellations enchants our social worlds by giving intention and meaning to our webs of relations.

The image of the constellation struck me because I had recently read Kristeva, quoting Nerval, describe the oceanic as the illumination of the "transparent network that covers the world." What is a constellation if not the illumination of possible lines of connection between scattered celestial bodies, such that they form a larger body? When forms become ossified, could the oceanic be a way to map out new constellations? Perhaps when the differentiating mind is silenced, during those moments one experiences the "oceanic," it becomes possible to imagine oneself as embedded in a constellation.

Collectivity and the Unbounded Self: Moten's Seaborne Sociality

> *"Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others. It's a feeling, if you ride with it, that produces a certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history. To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one."*
>
> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *Undercommons*

While oceanic feeling is a term that was popularized by Freud and subsequently taken up psychoanalytic thinkers, Fred Moten's theorization of blackness bears striking resemblance to both Freud and Rolland's take on oceanic feeling. For Moten, blackness is a paraontological mode of being that is literally connected to (and produced by) the ocean. In Freud and Moten's discourse black being and oceanic feeling are both connected with the maternal, though unlike Kristeva, Moten does not frame the maternal as threatening, nor does he describe the maternal as engulfing and in need of the intervention of the paternal function. For both Rolland and Moten, the sea is that which unsettles being. However, while Rolland used the ocean to illustrate Spinoza's conception of the single substance as a kind of metaphor for the experience of limitlessness, in Moten's writing the sea is linked to legacies of slavery, and in particular the dispersal of people of African descent around the world via

the slave ship. In Moten's work and the work of Afro-pessimist thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman the sea is also a passage that marks an ontological rupture.

The "unsettled" and uncoded way of being (which Moten calls 'blackness') is described by Moten in the essay "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" as the "unmappable zone of paraontological consent" (752).[16] The "paraontological" mode of being differs from ontological or intersubjective modes of being in that it does not presuppose discrete, self-contained subjects who interact or encounter each other. Moten's notion of paraontology comes from Nahum Chandler's reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's discussion of *the strange meaning of being black*. According to Moten, the idea that black being functions differently than other modes of being is elaborated in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* and through Jacques Derrida's work and theorization of *différance*. While the German philosopher Martin Heidegger makes a distinction between the *ontic* and the *ontological* as well as *being* and *beings* (a distinction that is analogous to Socrates distinction between *essence* and *instance*), Moten resists this distinction and argues that paraontological force of *black being* disrupts fundamental categories and even the idea of the category itself. Moten's paraontological subjects (perhaps "subjects" is a misnomer here) are without boundaries. They are oceanic. Not only are they affected by others, they spill over, into and are haptically undone and remade by each other.

This notion of paraontology dispenses with an idea of selfhood as a kind of property relation characterized by self-ownership. Being is not self-possession

16. Moten, Fred. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." South Atlantic Quarterly 4 (2013): 737-80. Print.

or even self-determination; it is movement and circulation. Another way Moten has formulated this notion of blackness is by describing it as both MORE and LESS than ONE. If "one" is the self, than blackness disrupts the very idea of the self as singular. Moten notes that the history of blackness is history of the imposition of this "less than one" (or notion of black selfhood as *not-full)* onto black people. This dual quality of blackness as, on the one hand, *nothing and less than one*, and on the other hand, as *multiple* and *excessive*, is why Moten insists on describing blackness as paraontological and not ontological. This is also why Moten refuses to define blackness as an identity, though he acknowledges that black people have a privileged relationship to blackness because of their intimate relationship to loss, pain, suffering and deprivation.

Furthermore, blackness is also oceanic insofar as it is not fixed to a particular land base. For Moten blackness unsettles the notion of home, for black being is marked by dislocation.[17] But unlike Afro-pessimists such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, Moten does not believe that blackness amounts to social death. For him blackness is irreducibly social. As he writes, "The zone of nonbeing is experimental, is a kind of experiment, this double edge of the experiment, this theater of like and unlike in which friendship's sociality overflows its political regulation" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 768).

For Moten blackness is also an ejection from the symbolics of legitimate personhood. Thus blackness is an uncoded zone of being that exist outside the arena of social recognition. Though Moten does not

17. Insofar as blackness is defined negatively in relation to self-possession and ownership, Moten says that anyone is free to claim the gift of blackness so long as they are willing to give up the idea of home or being ontologically settled.

downplay the brutality of this imposed banishment from subjectivity, he does see it as the condition of possibility for the creation of insurgent black social life, or what he sometimes calls undercommon sociality. When Moten writes about "the wailing that accompanies entrance into and expulsion from sociality," he does so in a lyrical register that captures both the terrible and the ecstatic dimensions of this violent expulsion-entrance ("Blackness and Nothingness" 746).

This expulsion from "human" sociality and entrance into black sociality is also constituted by the violence of the Middle Passage. He writes, "It's terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation. The absence of solidity seems to demand some other ceremony of hailing that will have been carried out on some more exalted frequency" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 744). Throughout Moten's work, the sea—as well as the experience of being shipped—is used to theorize the fluidity of blackness (the "absence of solidity"). To be a citizen of the sea is also to be stateless. In a breathtakingly beautiful passage that opens with an uncited reference Hart Crane's[18] poem "The Broken Tower," Moten writes:

> *And so it is that we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it. This contrapuntal island, where we are marooned in search of marronage, where we linger in stateless emergency, is our mobile, constant study, our lysed cell and held dislocation, our blown standpoint and lyred chapel. We study our seaborne variance, sent by its prehistory into arrivance without arrival, as a poetics*

18. Moten's use of Hart Crane in his discussion of what it means to be of the sea is moving and strangely fitting when one considers Crane committed suicide by jumping off a ship between Cuba and Florida. The "Broken Tower" (1932) was the last poem Crane published before ending his life. The exact wording of the lines referenced in this passage are as follows: "And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love, its voice."

> *of lore, of abnormal articulation, where the relation between joint and flesh is the pleated distance of a musical moment that is emphatically, palpably imperceptible and, therefore, exhausts description. ("Blackness and Nothingness" 743)*

The experience of existing "in the break"—of being blown, shipped, marooned, dislocated—produces an "abnormal articulation" because it is an experience that exhausts description. Given that these subterranean modes of being are outside the realm of social recognition, black social life registers as "nothing" to those who don't understand it. While Moten concedes to the Afro-pessimist analysis of blackness as a condition of bare life (read: flesh) that they characterize as a kind of nothingness, this nothingness has texture. Moten writes, "If the slave is, in the end and in essence, nothing, what remains is the necessity of an investigation of that nothingness" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 744). This investigation is only possible by way of an affirmation of negation and the introduction of a set of new terms to understand sociality outside of (white) notions of subjective self-possession. The uncontainability of blackness, like oceanic feeling, deconstructs notions of the subject as bounded.

Concluding Thoughts

In this essay I have analyzed psychoanalytic debates about oceanic feeling and discussed possible creative and social implications of this feeling state. Following Rolland and Milner (and departing with Freud and early Kristeva), I argue that oceanic feeling can be a source of creative and social inspiration. Given that this essay deals primarily with theoretical questions, perhaps the sections that discuss the ways in which oceanic feeling is enabling beg the question: Would it be possible to induce an oceanic experience? If not, why should we concern ourselves with an affective state that is only available to a few lucky (or unlucky) initiates?

In response to these questions I would argue that oceanic feeling, as described in psychoanalytic discourse, is largely involuntary; though my research on the topic suggests that it may be linked to trauma (in that people who have been traumatized may be more prone to having oceanic experiences). In trauma studies many scholars have noted that people who have experienced trauma do not experience themselves as *selves* at all. As Judith Herman[19] notes in *Trauma and Recovery*, "Survivors routinely describe themselves as outside the compact of ordinary human relations, as supernatural creatures or nonhuman life forms. They think of themselves as witches, vampires, whores, dogs, rats, or snakes. Some use the imagery of excrement or filth to describe their inner sense of self" (105). The linking of trauma to oceanic feeling might support the idea that oceanic feeling is a kind of manic defense against pain. However, even if this were the case, it still might (paradoxically) also

19. Herman, Judith Lewis. Trauma and Recovery. Rev. ed. New York: Basic, 1997. Print.

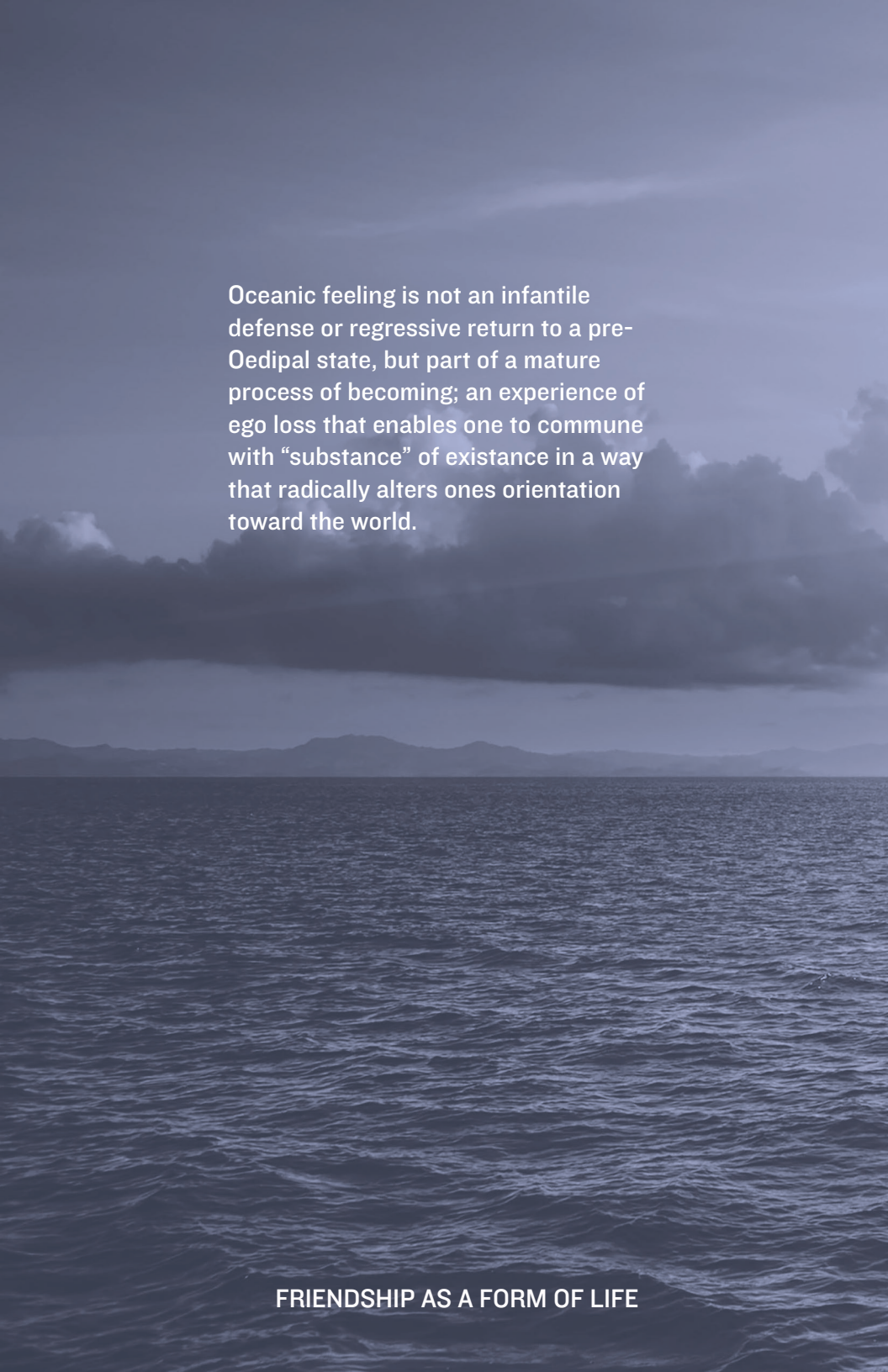
be true that the oceanic is a source of ecstatic joy: a kind of *terrible gift*.

Furthermore, though oceanic experiences may be an involuntary mystical experiences, it might be possible to induce (or cultivated) oceanic experiences through meditation, rhythmic breathing, psychedelic drugs, participating in a riot, fasting, sleep-deprivation, tantric sex, BDSM play, chanting, emotional pain and grief, physical pain, exercise, prayer, music, experiences of collective euphoria and any number of other activities that push one to a threshold state of consciousness. [Don't try this at home, kids!]

Lastly, since this essay deals mainly with theoretical discussions about the origins and nature of oceanic feeling, it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine empirical research that has been done on the effects of mystical experiences on how people relate to the world and others. There has been a renewed interest in research on psychedelic drugs that not only looks at how mystical experiences can help "treat" addiction, depression, and other disorders, but also how such chemically-induced experiences foster empathy and enrich social relationships.

Made in Montréal by an involuntarily-albeit-enjoyably expatriated criminal and an intentionally-albeit-anxious expatriated friend

20. Full text, audio and other zines can be found at http://friendship-as-a-form-of-life.tumblr.com or email a.un.ami@riseup.net



Oceanic feeling is not an infantile defense or regressive return to a pre-Oedipal state, but part of a mature process of becoming; an experience of ego loss that enables one to commune with “substance” of existance in a way that radically alters ones orientation toward the world.