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"Follow the Bodies": (Re)Materializing Difference in the Era of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

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“FOLLOW THE BODIES”: (RE)MATERIALIZING DIFFERENCE IN THE ERA OF NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

by

BRIANA GRACE BRICKLEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
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Briana Grace Brickley

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

“FOLLOW THE BODIES”: (RE)MATERIALIZING DIFFERENCE IN THE ERA OF NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

by

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Adviser: Professor Kandice Chuh

This dissertation examines a transnational literary archive in addition to analyzing shifting U.S. American cultural and political landscapes, and shows how critically attending to the various terms, figures, and valences of corporeality opens generative avenues for addressing the contemporary historical conjuncture, often referred to as the neoliberal capitalist era. Neoliberal capitalism, understood here to be a complex, diffuse ideology that manifests in part as a number of broadsweeping economic changes—including widespread deregulation and privatization, the increasing influence of international financial organizations, governmental cuts in social spending, and structural adjustment programs for the formerly colonized nations of the global south—operates in part through processes of abstraction. We can see this abstractive quality pronouncedly in the evacuation of meaning from terms like “equality” and “diversity” in the multicultural politics that correlate with neoliberal capitalism. This project takes as its point of departure the observation that rampant material inequalities that may be indexed along the axes of race and gender are sustained alongside (or perhaps through) dominant rhetorics of equality, freedom (of the market), “colorblindness,” meritocracy, and a “post-racial” society.

As its title suggests, this dissertation traces the bodies (and at times the body parts) of individuals and characters, the bodies (or canons) of literature, the institutional bodies, and the bodies politic that populate and contextualize a group of contemporary texts marked and
marketed as postcolonial or “global.” By doing so, I argue that a return to the figure of the body affords critical address of abstraction by focusing attention concertedly on materiality, and that embodiment may be mobilized as a critical analysis that re-centers not only the lived experience of women and people of color in the neoliberal era, but also illuminates the material dimensions implicit in a range of debates, from judicial politics over affirmative action to institutionalized disciplinary disputes over the territory of “world literature.” Analyzing works by Karen Tei Yamashita, Arundhati Roy, and Zadie Smith, I create an archive of the neoliberal present that indexes a matrix of material conditions and reflects on the very rubrics of transnationality and the global that circumscribe such texts.
# Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................................iv

Acknowledgments.....................................................................................................................................vii

Chapter One Introduction  
(In)Equality Matters..........................................................................................................................1

Chapter Two Temporalities of Crisis, Crises of Temporality  
Organ Trafficking, the Literary, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s  
*Tropic of Orange* ..................................................................................................................................42

Chapter Three “Too thin for jelly, too thick for jam”  
Unruly Bodies and Radical (Mis)Readings in Arundhati Roy’s  
*The God of Small Things* ...................................................................................................................90

Chapter Four *On Beauty* and the Politics of Academic Institutionality  
The Aesthetics of Multiculturalism in Zadie Smith ..............................................................................145

Works Cited ...........................................................................................................................................193
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kandice Chuh, my advisor, is an incredible mentor and a tireless advocate who has taught me what engaged teaching looks like and how to inhabit a Foucauldian universe in the most generous (and generative) sense. The lively discussions in her course at the University of Maryland not only sparked the idea for this dissertation, but also led me to follow her to New York. I’m so glad I did. Her voice has become the critical interlocutor in my head, and I am eternally grateful that it is a kind yet firm, endlessly thoughtful voice that speaks gently, asks questions first, and is quick to laugh.

My wonderful committee members from the Graduate Center, Robert Reid-Pharr and Peter Hitchcock, have shaped this project for the better every step of the way. Their provocative questions never failed to add new layers to my thinking, while their humor at times kept this work—and my mental state—from unraveling. Crystal Parikh, my outside reader and the director of my master’s thesis, has been instrumental from the beginning in shaping the way I approach questions of racial formation, embodiment, aesthetics, and literary studies. I feel incredibly lucky to have benefitted from her brilliance and guidance two times around.

The generous support and thoughtful feedback I received from my dissertation group at the Graduate Center is unparalleled. Thank you in particular to Chris Eng, Frances Tran, Melissa Phruksachart, and Nick Gamso for creating a vibrant space that was at once safe and challenging, and for showing me by your example what good intellectual work looks like. Thanks to Becky Fullan, Danica Savonick, and Lynne Beckenstein for jumping in and engaging this work in its later stages, and for helping me see it through to the end.

Various sources of support made this project possible, including a Millenium Dissertation Year Fellowship from the English Department at the CUNY Graduate Center, a yearlong
Dissertation Fellowship from the Graduate Center, a fellowship from CUNY’s Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, and a Writing Fellowship from Hunter College. Massive thanks are owed to the people of these various spaces, many of whom served as mentors and critical interlocutors as well: Mario DiGangi and Nancy Silverman, of the GC English Department; Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Peter Hitchcock, of the CPCP; and Trudy Smoke and Dennis Paoli, of the English Department and Writing Center at Hunter College. I will be forever grateful to Mark Bobrow, who taught me how to teach and was a constant source of encouragement, advice, and support during my time at Hunter.

Thank you especially to my family: you are the very best part of me. For my brother, Ben Brickley, whose loyalty, kindness, and constant puns keep me on my toes but remind me that you always have my back; Michaela Vedra, who is the best sister anyone could ask for; Kati DeBolt, who has been teaching me what generosity means since age ten; and my mom, Lori Brickley, whose enthusiasm and unconditional love make my life possible and livable, and whose unfaltering passion for teaching continues to inspire me—I am so grateful to know you all. And for dad, who always told me he was proud of me. I miss you so much.

Finally, for Sasha Laundy: thank you for making this world—and mine especially—a better place. I love you.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

(IN)EQUALITY MATTERS

“Knowing how to assess what’s unraveling . . . is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment”—Lauren Berlant

If Lauren Berlant’s words urge us in the direction of locating material evidence—cold, hard facts to be “measured” and “assessed”—in order to ultimately diagnose our contemporary conjuncture or “impasse,” we might look to “what’s unraveling,” but also to what endures. This “overwhelmingly present moment” unfolds as the top one percent of the world’s population has recently amassed over fifty percent of global wealth (Hardoon). Numbers like these take on an even more sinister complexion given the continuing racial disparities in wealth accumulation and the factors that contribute to it, including not only income but education and access to health services, housing, and jobs. Inequality, in other words, might function as a master term that gets at the thickness of experience and the undeniability of the statistics while still capturing the paradox—the “double bind,” as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would have it—of contemporary life in its ongoing-unraveling. The global financial crisis produced a mass movement centered on income and wealth inequality whose aftermath has sparked heightened awareness of a growing economic gap that is baked into the very fabric of finance capitalism and contemporary state politics. While the formal Occupy Wall Street movement proved relatively short lived, with some arguing that its influence on mainstream politics and legislation was minimal, most acknowledge that it changed the common discourse by popularizing terms like “the one percent” and “the ninety-nine percent” (Cillizza); others insist that the movement actually subtly worked its way into other political causes such as organized labor and the fight for a higher minimum
wage (Levitin). Inequality has likewise become a lens through which to examine the kinds of ecological crises that have become routine in an era of decreased environmental regulations and protections. The 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the earthquake in the same year that killed a quarter of a million people in Haiti, the 2011 tsunami off the coast of Japan that led to the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl, 2012’s Hurricane Sandy that decimated the east coast of the United States, and many, many more natural and human-caused environmental disasters across the world—these events devastated the most vulnerable populations and so highlight the undeniably unequal ways precarity is doled out in our current moment. While clearly there is nothing new about a stratified society divvied up by class, race, gender, sexuality, and geography—even as that society has in some senses become a global one—and the literal terms of such divisions have changed or, perhaps, become more fraught, “inequality” has become a fulcrum that marks an important political moment in the timeline of racial capitalism.

I open this dissertation by invoking two current events that, I argue, pivot on the way inequality is framed in popular discourse today: one is a political movement organized against institutional racism and state violence, the other a U.S. Supreme Court case deciding the fate of affirmative action policies in university admissions. Together, I use these examples as a point of entry for parsing how inequality is corporealized through, paradoxically, modes of abstraction that have become the tropes with which we approach what is material and, ultimately, structural. The first event—the emergence of “Black Lives Matter” as hashtag, battle cry, and movement—has undoubtedly reshaped the discursive terrain of antiracist politics in the twenty-first century. Created in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s murder and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman, in 2013, the #blacklivesmatter hashtag that exploded on Twitter drew national and international attention, and had the effect of spotlighting other cases of violence against Black
In July 2014, Eric Garner was killed when NYPD officers, arresting him for illegally selling loose cigarettes, wrestled him to the ground and placed him in a chokehold despite his repeated claims of—and this became another battle cry of the Black Lives Matter movement—“I can’t breath.” Three weeks later, unarmed Michael Brown was gunned down by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson, and demonstrations erupted in the city and across the country. Other names—Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland—became further flashpoints for a movement that continues to channel growing frustration with the ongoing ways in which Black lives—and Black bodies—are routinely subject to state violence. Using a shifting array of strategies, including formal political protests, marches, social media saturation, and other disruptive tactics,1 Black Lives Matter burst onto the political scene not simply to call attention to specific deaths at the hands of the police or the particular failures of a criminal justice system rooted in white supremacy. Rather, “[w]hen we say Black Lives Matter,” the movement’s official site reads,

we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. (Cullors, Tometi, and Garza)

By widening the scope of what we talk about when we use the term “violence”—that is, expanding it to include systematic disenfranchisement, widespread poverty and downward

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1 In August 2015, Marissa Janae Johnson and Mara Jacqueline Willaford, leading a group of Black Lives Matter activists, made national headlines when they interrupted a Seattle campaign rally for democratic presidential nominee Bernie Sanders. Holding a banner reading “Smash Racism,” the group jumped the event’s barricades and Johnson gained possession of Sanders’s microphone, using it to urge the Vermont senator to take action regarding racism and police violence, and demanding an extended moment of silence for Michael Brown that effectively ended the Sanders rally. See Friedersdorf, Merica.
mobility, and disproportionate rates of incarceration—the Black Lives Matter movement
powerfully reinvigorated the popular discourse on inequality and rooted it to the material stakes
of racism.

This intervention has clear roots in the black radical tradition, defined by Cedric Robinson as “an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle,” beginning with the experience of slavery. For Robinson, the historical experiences of extreme racial violence and theft produced the racially-inflected Marxism of intellectuals like C.L.R. James, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. DuBois, and “lent themselves to a means of preparation for more epic resistance movements” (Robinson 31). Others, like Jodi Melamed, expand the notion of race radicalism to include a range of “materialist antiracisms” that critique the unevenness of racial capitalism, including woman of color feminism and the Black Power/Black Arts movement.² Some, like Nikhil Pal Singh, include the later thinking of Martin Luther King Jr. in this history of the black radical tradition. Singh acknowledges that today, “King’s most cited rhetoric tied the fortunes of blacks to the status of the U.S. nation-state and to its dominant and defining systems of belief: Christianity, liberal-individualism, and democratic-capitalism” (3). However in the late 1960s, with the intensification of the Vietnam War, King increasingly adopted

a ‘world perspective’ on violence and inequality . . . [and] consciously
deconstructed the unifying term—‘United States citizens’—emphasizing that
‘Negroes’ had a separate existence within, and a tortured relationship to, the

² While Melamed argues that calling all of these movements “race radical risks missing their antagonisms and reducing their complexity,” such a rubric nevertheless “enables an examination of them together in aspect as materialist antiracisms pitched against the dematerializations of official antiracisms” (48).
United States as a nation. This ‘singular’ history he implied, made other sorts of allegiances and affiliations possible, even necessary” (Singh 2-3).

Echoing Robinson here, King’s words highlight the way in which the history of American slavery creates a different political imperative for thinking equality, and this materialist stance opens up unique potential for building coalitions and affiliations in this struggle. However, Singh traces how King’s strong anti-war stance, paired with a critique of the U.S. nation state and by extension its liberal democratic and capitalist foundations, fashions a race radicalism that gets lost in—or more accurately is disavowed by—the “mythic nationalist discourse that claims his antiracist imperatives as its own” (Singh 3). This discrepancy between the King of popular Civil Rights narratives and the anti-war, internationalist radical makes visible a dematerializing shift in the U.S. political imaginary: the fact that “King has come to stand for the idea of an America in which racial equality has already been achieved,” Singh points out, has “legitimized the withdrawal of public commitment to laws and social policies designed to promote racial equality” (5). In other words, as King has been appropriated as a celebratory public figure through which the nation congratulates itself on racial progress, he has also been used to justify the rollbacks in material gains made by the very social movements in which he participated.

As a descendant of these and other black radical movements, Black Lives Matter does not only powerfully reiterate the materialist antiracisms of King and others like the Black Panther Party and Frantz Fanon, though; it also highlights the way in which such race radicalism has been coopted and effectively dematerialized. Attuned to the backlash and baggage that typically accompanies calling out systematic oppression in a nuanced way, Black Lives Matter anticipates

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the misguided responses—many uttered by mainstream pundits and politicians—insisting that “all lives matter.” Deploying the universal rhetoric of liberal humanism, this attempted corrective, as the movement’s founders point out, misses “the ways in which the state apparatus has built a program of genocide and repression mostly on the backs of Black people—beginning with the theft of millions of people for free labor—and then adapted it to control, murder, and profit off of other communities of color and immigrant communities.” Here, the traces of the radical antiracism of the 1960s and 70s are clear, as Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi “link . . . the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives” to outline a historical trajectory, flesh out nuances of racial formation, and locate the economic stakes through which U.S. American black lives are routinely made to not matter (Butler, “Wrong”). Having framed this complicated context, the authors of the Black Lives Matter movement argue further that the reactionary “all lives matter” slogan works to “perpetuate a level of White supremacist domination by reproducing a tired trope that we are all the same” (Cullors, Tometi, and Garza). In other words, what Black Lives Matter accomplishes is a twofold intervention: on the one hand disrupting liberal antiracist narratives that celebrate racial progress the way that Martin Luther King Jr. and other race radicals did, and on the other hand, making visible the discursive apparatus by which the persistence of those narratives actively accomplishes a dematerializing, an unraveling of the meaning and force of equality in our current moment.

Judith Butler, who long ago raised the question of “bodies that matter,” recently asked of Black Lives Matter’s central phrase: “What is implied by this statement, a statement that should

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4 In addition, after the December 2014 murder of two New York City Police officers, the slogan of Black Lives Matter was further coopted in a moment of outrage and backlash, becoming “#bluelives matter” as a gesture of solidarity with police. In fact, this slogan has been adopted and adapted by a number of movements.
be obviously true, but apparently is not?” (Butler, “Wrong”). In other words, what is at stake in insisting on the importance of particular lives, when life itself is by definition something that is supposed to matter? Essentially, “black lives matter” is an ontological statement that exploits this contradiction, making clear with eloquent simplicity that black lives “are not really regarded as lives” (Butler, “Wrong”). By extension, black bodies—the matter of black lives—do not represent “a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities,” as Butler defines the body in another essay (“Performative Acts” 525), but instead signify as posing an always-imminent “threat” that must be gunned down, choked, and left to die. Butler continues:

those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life. That can only happen when a recurrent and institutionalized form of racism has become a way of seeing, entering into the presentation of visual evidence to justify hateful and unjustified and heartbreaking murder. (“Wrong”)

Stating that “black lives matter,” and organizing to publicly grieve the black bodies subjected to brutal, state-sponsored violence, is a means not only of taking up the mantle of race radicalism, but of resisting the “way of seeing” that institutional racism has become or come to dictate. If the emergence of “all lives matter” means that “intelligent forms of collective outrage have become obligatory,” as Butler insists, then Black Lives Matter, critically attuned to the multivalent dilemma of dematerialization, fulfills a crucial political obligation.

The trope of “all lives” manifests as a potent polemic that may be “tired,” as the Black Lives Matter site asserts, but it nonetheless endures. Its logic surfaces in 2013-14’s Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), the second of two landmark affirmative action cases that
were brought in quick succession to the U.S. Supreme court. The first of such cases to be heard in a decade, *Schuette* and the more well known *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* unfolded in a climate charged by the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter, and arguably long after the pinnacle of culture wars debates over educational access, admissions criteria, “leveling the playing field” and institutional quotas. While both cases, separated by only ten months, concerned the context of university admissions, *Fisher*—the first case—was remanded to the lower courts, with the ruling that strict scrutiny had not been applied in the appellate court.\(^5\) Thus, amidst controversy and with anxious anticipation, *Schuette* was heard and decided the very next term. Its ruling upheld a 2006 state voter initiative that banned the Michigan public university system from using race-based criteria in the admissions process. In a 6-2 decision,\(^6\) with a majority opinion written by Justice Kennedy and joined by Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Alito, the Court ruled that Michigan’s Proposal 2 did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection clause. The ruling overturned the decision of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, which had maintained that because racially-based affirmative action programs remain constitutional—in whatever limited scope—the voters’ decision to ban affirmative action and pass Proposal 2 placed a disproportionate burden on racial minorities (Fullman). The Supreme Court’s majority disagreed.

*Schuette* comes out of a long and contentious tradition of affirmative action rulings, and more generally, an ongoing debate about the use of racial criteria in education and employment, the means of addressing structural and historical inequality, the level of legal scrutiny that should be applied to discrimination cases, and, finally, who—voters, state legislatures, courts—has the

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\(^5\) The *Fisher* case eventually reached the Supreme Court once again, and was argued on December 9, 2015. As of the completion of this dissertation, the Court has yet to rule.

\(^6\) Joining in the majority opinion were Justices Scalia, Thomas, and Breyer. Justice Kagan recused herself for having been involved with the case as Solicitor General. Justice Sotomayor wrote—and delivered from the bench—a dissent, and was joined by Justice Ginsberg.
authority to determine the answers to such questions. In contrast to cases like Bakke v. University of California (1977), Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), and Fisher (2013), all of which featured white plaintiffs suing on the basis of what has popularly been termed “reverse discrimination,” Schuette centered around a university policy put in place to help minority student candidates, and the statewide law passed to stop it. Those affirmative action advocates hoping for the Court to uphold the Sixth Circuit’s ruling to overturn the ban pointed to the decisions in Bakke and Grutter, which cited the requirement that although the use of race must be narrowly tailored in the admissions process, it could nonetheless be used as one factor in a myriad of criteria.

BAMN’s argument before the High Court, drawing from the language of the Sixth Circuit’s decision, however relied most heavily on the 1982 case of Washington v. Seattle School District No. 1, arguably the precedent case most similar to the circumstances of Schuette. In Seattle, the Supreme Court overturned a Washington statewide voting initiative to end the school districts’ practice of busing for purposes of integration, finding that the legislation made “it more difficult for certain racial . . . minorities than for other members of the community to achieve legislation that is in their interest.”

Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion in Schuette therefore spends a good deal of time on the Seattle case and its precedents, citing two earlier cases—Reitman v. Mulkey (1967) and Hunter v. Erickson (1969)—in which “there was a demonstrated injury on the basis of race that, by reasons of state encouragement or participation, became more aggravated” (Schuette 14). Schuette’s decision claims that “Seattle is best understood as a case in which the state action in question (the ban on busing enacted by the State’s voters) had the serious risk, if not purpose, of causing specific injuries on account of race, just as had been the case in Mulkey and Hunter” (15). In this sense, Schuette aligns itself with the earlier cases. However, Kennedy marks out
Schuette’s clear divergence from the “broad rationale” of Seattle’s reading of Hunter. The Seattle Court concluded that where state policy “inures primarily to the benefit of the minority,” and minorities find such a policy to be “in their interest,” then the governmental decision-making authority in place to manage the policy must be reviewed under strict scrutiny (qtd. Schuette 16). This “far-reaching rationale,” Kennedy argues thirty-two years later in Schuette, “must be rejected” (16). His opinion goes on to cast about in radically far-reaching terms of its own, essentially arguing that the reliance on concepts such as “racial minorities” in effect embraces “impermissible racial stereotypes” by fallaciously assuming that “members of the same racial group . . . think alike, share the same political interests, and will prefer the same candidates in the polls” (17). What’s more, Kennedy writes, “still another beginning point would be to define individuals according to race,” an increasingly difficult process “in a society in which those lines are becoming more blurred” (18). Schuette’s majority opinion thus reads all use of race-based categories with suspicion, rhetorically accomplishing a dangerous conflation of any mention of race with racism.

Much was made after the ruling of Justice Sotomayor’s impassioned dissent, longer than the other four opinions combined, which she uncharacteristically (for the Court) summarized and delivered from the bench. Citing our nation’s legacy of slavery and racism, Sotomayor’s opinion states that this “is a history that still informs the society we live in, and so it is one we must address with candor” (56). She also takes aim at the rhetoric of “colorblindness” espoused by the majority opinions, asserting that “a facially neutral law may deny equal protection solely because it has a disparate racial impact” (41). Quoting directly from Chief Justice Roberts in an earlier opinion that the “way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1),
Sotomayor argues that this stale reasoning is “a sentiment out of touch with reality, one not required by our Constitution” (*Schuette* 95). “Race matters,” Sotomayor concludes, “because of the long history of racial minorities’ being denied access to the political process,” and “because of persistent racial inequality in society—inequality that cannot be ignored and that has produced stark socioeconomic disparities” (95). In contrast to Justices Roberts, Kennedy, Alito, Scalia, Thomas and Breyer, Sotomayor highlights the importance of racial *effects or outcomes* in the antiracist work affirmative action is supposed to accomplish, as opposed to the superficial reliance on racial neutrality at the outset.

Despite the powerfully eloquent case Sotomayor makes for the continued relevance of racial categories across the spectrum of American life, and her astute observation that such categories are central to the case at hand, Kennedy’s majority opinion at one point claims that the “principle of race in admissions” is not being challenged in the *Schuette* decision, but rather “whether, and in what manner, voters in the States may choose to prohibit the consideration of such racial preferences.” Here, a shift occurs whereby the concerns and benefits of the voters in such matters as racial “preferences” in admissions become central (*Schuette* 2); forgotten are the benefits for minorities (or lack thereof, according to Proposal 2). In this way, Kennedy is able to acknowledge the case’s similarities with its *Seattle* precedent and even tendentiously support its outcome. In other words, it becomes clear that his decision is influenced more by the way in which integration is framed as being in the *best interest of the public school districts*. When Kennedy writes that “[b]y approving Proposal 2 . . . Michigan voters exercised their privilege to enact laws as a basic exercise of their democratic power,” the ironic specter of voting-as-
“privilege”—and whose privilege—is obstinately ignored (21). Instead, the initiative supposedly represents the neutral, democratic “bypassing [of] public officials [whom voters] deemed not responsive to their concerns about a policy of granting race-based preferences,” Kennedy writes (4). Moving beyond the clearly loaded language of “preference,” we can see here that what seems to be a swing away from support for affirmative action-like policies is, in a cynical reading, simply another manifestation of the state/institution acting in its own best interest (which is alternately determined by the Court or the voters). Conveniently omitted is any reference to protecting the rights (and gains) of minorities, or to the more abstract interests of “the minority,” which the Equal Protection clause is supposed to ensure against the whims of the majority. As Sotomayor notes—and supports with statistical evidence—in her dissent, “without checks, democratically approved legislation can oppress minority groups. For that reason, our Constitution places limits on what a majority of the people may do” (51).

Schuette’s decision fits in with a trend of court cases and legal initiatives in higher education that constellate around the de-materialization of equality, or, in other words, the de-linking of the rubric of “equality” from actual educational (as well as legal, economic, and health) equity. Unpacking the implications of the landmark 2003 affirmative action case, Bakke v. U.C. Regents, in which the Court ruled against the UC Davis medical school admissions policy that reserved a number of spots in its incoming class for students of color, Christopher Newfield makes a point that could easily be made about Schuette:

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7 Thinking through voting as “privilege” becomes particularly alarming after June 2014, when the Supreme Court overturned a key component of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in Shelby County v. Holder, finding that states with a history of racial discrimination no longer needed to receive federal permission before changing voting laws.

8 see Christopher Newfield, Unmaking the Public University, especially chapter 3 and the conclusion, on how affirmative action polled well when linked to “equality” and “fairness,” but poorly when framed around “preferences,” quotas, or anything seen as obfuscating individuality.
elite groups such as medical school admissions committees were not required to act on behalf of members of racialized groups who had engaged in popular struggles for racial equality. These elite groups *could* act in their own self-interest, which lay in pursuing a racial diversity that enhanced their own quality and influence. (Newfield 112)

Newfield crystallizes the court’s seemingly contradictory logic behind using the *Seattle School District* decision to underpin *Schuette*; in fact, the connection turns on the self-interest of the institution, and whether or not—and how—that interest lies in “racial diversity.” In *Schuette*, *Bakke* and *Seattle*, what is protected is the institution’s pursuit of “academic freedom,” “diversity,” and educational “excellence,” all of which are distinguished from and privileged over the “legal pursuit of racial equality” (Newfield 112).

Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University* (2008) is a massive materialist intervention in these educational trends. Ultimately, his three-pronged argument is practical and concise: (1) to restore and increase public funding to public universities and, consequently, to end reliance on private, philanthropic funding, which nearly always fails to support the humanities and social sciences and general instruction; (2) to reaffirm the notion of the university’s role in collective or “general development,” which lies outside an economic scope; and, most importantly for my purposes, (3) to prioritize racial equality as a goal and value, not simply in terms of equal opportunity, but in “equality of outcome among racial groups” (Newfield 272). Newfield and others like Jodi Melamed and Roderick Ferguson have thus identified a shift whereby the material gains of minoritized subjects in higher education have been covertly rolled back, all while the rhetoric of “diversity” has continued to gain traction in arenas where its brand of

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9 For a more detailed discussion on the complexities of academic “excellence” and its role in the neoliberal university, see Readings, *The University in Ruins*. 
superficial difference benefits the institutions of higher education. In addition, the representational agenda of “multicultural diversity” has increasingly covered over material equality with its emphasis on curriculum, resulting in the teaching of texts from different cultures over prioritizing the educational needs of (potential) students of various cultures, racial groups, and socioeconomic classes. Evacuated of meaning in terms of material stakes on the one hand, and flattening significant cultural and historical differences on the other, neoliberal multiculturalism’s brand of equality is ultimately a vehement defender of “severe and permanent racialized economic inequality” that appears as the “natural” result of “fair competition” (Melamed 31).

While the opening to this dissertation rehearses a familiar political argument—that perpetually being hashed out between the right and the left over how to rectify previous discrimination and address current inequality, particularly in the context of education—the intent of my examination of Black Lives Matter and the Schuette case is to tease out the logic that underpins this debate, recasting it explicitly in terms of materiality. I therefore begin with the question of how such rhetoric that “we are all the same” can continue to have currency even as rampant, ongoing inequality—as blatant as the widely unpunished murders of black Americans by the police that sparked Black Lives Matter, or as subtle as the legal argument in the Abigail Fisher court case—everywhere pervades our current reality. In other words, why do narratives

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10 The Fisher case rests on the same logic Newfield discusses regarding the 1978 Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case. That is, while the vestiges of affirmative action remain in place, granting institutions the right to use race-based criteria in admissions (in order for institutions to utilize diversity to their benefit), access to the most prestigious institutional sites remains tied to the privileges of whiteness. Abigail Fisher sued the University of Texas when she was rejected by the flagship University of Texas campus in Austin (in accordance with UT’s GPA-based automatic-acceptance policy for students in the top ten percent of their graduating classes—Fisher was in the top twelve percent). Fisher was, however, accepted to other, less
of justice and freedom, central components to the global export that is the “American Dream,” retain such a powerful foothold in our collective imaginary? How do these persistent narratives not simply obscure inequality, but justify and even naturalize it? How has “equality of outcome” become recoded as “equality of opportunity,” and where does difference feature in this schema? Finally, if a rational understanding of the fact of inequality is not enough to at least begin to address it, how do we start the revolutionary work of thinking about—much less making—real political change? When will the erasure performed by “all lives matter” cede to the widespread recognition that some lives, some bodies, matter more than others, and that vague slogans will never be enough to will away this reality?

The Logic of Neoliberalism

While the specific language of “all lives matter” emerged under particular historical and political circumstances, its premise mobilizes broader themes of multicultural diversity, “colorblindness,” “post-identity,” and “post-race” politics that align with discursive trends of the past forty years under the rise of neoliberalism. A phase of racial capitalism beginning in the 1970s, neoliberalism is defined by Jodi Melamed as “a set of economic policies that include financial [and] market liberalization . . . privatization, deregulation, and global economic management through international institutions and multilateral agreements” (146). A “configuration of governance and biological and social life” (Melamed 39), neoliberalism articulates itself in macro-material ways through a shrinking of the welfare state, the rise of austerity measures, structural adjustment programs for the formerly colonized nations of the Global South, the concentration of power in financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank,
and the consequent diminished role and power of national governments. Described by critics alternately as a “world-historical formation” (Melamed x), “a theory of political economic practices” (Harvey 2), a “governing rationality” (Brown 35), an “ethos (Wilkerson 64), “a mode of polemic” and a “new vision” (Duggan x-xi), neoliberalism extends beyond the realm of policies and practice to capture an expansive logic about capital, subjectivity, citizenship, and governance.11

Aihwa Ong in *Neoliberalism as Exception* asserts that neoliberalism is “a new mode of political optimization” that is “reconfiguring relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality” (3). Ong’s text is known in particular for offering up the formulation of “differentiated citizenship” to articulate the wide ranging effects neoliberal trends have on individuals, depending on their usefulness to capital. Similarly, David Harvey highlights how neoliberal governance is not only increasingly relegated to collective private entities—corporations—but is in fact turned over to individuals themselves who then become responsible for harnessing their own entrepreneurial skills and technical abilities (Harvey 2). The arguments of Ong and Harvey reference the biopolitical valence of neoliberalism, and along with others like Roderick Ferguson and Lisa Duggan, they employ Foucault’s concept of “biopower” to describe how power—the name for a complex set of relations in which “the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them”—can be affirmative, particularly under the conditions fostered by neoliberalism (Foucault 95).12 Biopower, the ability to “foster life or disallow it to

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12 For a useful discussion of affirmative power in the context of neoliberal institutions and racial formation, see Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 6-8.
the point of death,” according to Foucault “exerts a positive influence on life” and “endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” in a markedly different mode than a sovereign right to “take life or let live (Foucault 259-61). Power’s realignment—its capacity to “make live and let die”—therefore represents modernity’s paradigm shift, one I trace into the neoliberal era of the post-national in which the rights of citizenship become disarticulated from the official state formations and unofficially tied to the ability and mobility to optimize one’s body for capital’s purposes.

However, this is not to insist that neoliberalism represents a unified field or a “world-homogenizing system”; as Lauren Berlant asserts, “the differences matter, as do the continuities” (9). In Cruel Optimism, Berlant employs “terms like ‘neoliberal’ or ‘transnational’ as heuristics for pointing to a set of delocalized processes that have played a huge role in transforming postwar political and economic norms of reciprocity and meritocracy since the 1970s,” but is careful “to read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what’s collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival” (9). Attending to “patterns of adjustment” in this way has the effect not only of highlighting the particularities of living in and living on under an economic and political regime with far-reaching effects, but it also acknowledges the agency that endures under such formations, even if that agency does not always achieve the kind of heroic self-determination associated with the term. Berlant’s model of focusing on the specific moments, acts, contradictions, and, especially, “modes of sensual activity” that unfold and acquire meaning under neoliberal multiculturalism also has the benefit of pushing back against what Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins call “neoliberalism fatigue.” In their introduction to a special issue of Social Text on “Genres of Neoliberalism,” they state:
Neoliberalism has become such a cross-disciplinary buzzword in recent years that some scholars suggest “neoliberalism fatigue” may be setting in academically. From this perspective, neoliberalism is in danger of becoming an evacuated term—like postmodernism and globalization before it—whose use now signals the absence of a specific political economic, historical, or cultural critique rather than a precise engagement with the conditions of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (2)

Calling out the faulty logic that assumes analyses of neoliberalism are no longer useful because they are no longer novel, Elliott and Harkins argue that critical interventions in this area remain important so long as we continue to problematize the term and “situate it within a genealogy of periodizing concepts” (2). Their particular deployment of “neoliberalism,” for instance, clarifies “the way in which explicitly political economic terms are used to define and delimit the significance of cultural and literary production, circulation, and reception” (2).

This dissertation, fundamentally concerned with the shifts, practices, processes, systems, and “patterns of adjustment” that characterize biopolitics in the neoliberal era, begins mindful of these caveats. I do find that “neoliberalism” has become a catch-all for describing our current moment, and am myself guilty of at times failing to complicate my analysis—or at least my grammar—of the way neoliberalism “does things,” is a coherent force in the world that makes things happen, or operates as a “world-homogenizing system.” But I also want to challenge the knee-jerk reaction—at least in part a product of “neoliberalism fatigue”—that makes it nearly impossible to say anything about neoliberalism as an epoch and a formation of globalized, racial capitalism that “discipline[s] specific arrangements of desires” (Spivak 10), re-patterns global migration and diaspora, re-designates territories of the commons that opens up new claims to
property and ownership, aligns labor power and skills in accordance with new technological requirements, alters notions of contemporary citizenship, and promotes the rhetoric of race neutrality that promises equality and fairness but instead, as in the Schuette case, authorizes stark rollbacks in affirmative action or, in the case of “all lives matter,” produces disingenuous language that actually stifles the material dimension and overall the political potential of antiracist work. While the manifestations and effects of, and responses to, these processes vary widely, a common thread my opening examples illustrate is how neoliberal multiculturalism operates in specific ways through logics of abstraction and dematerialization.\textsuperscript{13} We see this de-materializing quality pronouncedly in the evacuation of meaning from terms like “equality” and “racism,” such that they become disarticulated from their real-world effects. My project therefore takes as its point of departure the observation—one I sketch through Black Lives Matter and the Schuette case—that rampant material inequalities that may be indexed along the axes of race and gender are sustained alongside and through dominant, abstracting rhetorics of equality, freedom (of the market), “colorblindness,” meritocracy, and a “post-racial” society.

Catalyzed by the discordant tone of diversity discourse and the reactionary policies it cloaks—perfectly captured in the language of “all lives matter”—this dissertation attends to the call issued by Black Lives Matter activists as well as scholars working across such fields as minority discourse, transnational American studies, postcolonial studies, and queer of color critique, to undertake work that is re-materializing. Keeping in mind Berlant’s refrain that “the

\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization}, Gayatri Spivak often refers to the various scenes of abstraction as “transcendentalizing” processes. This term has the effect of referencing the model of Western philosophical rationality on which abstraction is carried out, and also gestures toward the unfolding logic of by which massive, historical formations—such as the nation—achieve coherence and retain power. Spivak argues in a chapter on “Nationalism and the Imagination” for “imaginative de-transcendentalization,” a mode of thinking that can be trained in engaging the literary, in order to combat the violent erasures of history that enduring nationalism authorizes (76).
differences matter,” my project in some senses zooms in to take a step back from questions of discourse, subjectivity, and representation, seeking rather to investigate the matters and matter—as in the materials—of difference under neoliberalism. Attending to the biopolitical slant of power in the neoliberal era, I ask: what kinds of bodies get produced, called up, and organized into coherent, recognizable units in our contemporary world? Whose bodies—and which differences—are allowed to matter in the various landscapes neoliberal economies shape? And what are the differences—embedded in flesh or radiating outward from the corporeal acts of particular subjects—that achieve political legibility in this “thick moment of ongoingness” that Lauren Berlant aptly describes as our present? In other words, this dissertation examines what gets covered over in our current moment of U.S.-led global capitalism: the materiality of differentiated citizenship, the literal—and often black and brown, female, queer, and disabled—bodies of the people who bear the disproportionate weight of precarity, disenfranchisement, poverty, and violence, and, alternately, the bodies of those who stand to gain from neoliberal policies and practices. If putting pressure on embodiment in this way has the effect of making visible the dematerializing effects of neoliberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism, corporeal critique might not only provide a sharper tool but a better language for how to talk about unequal access to achieving a livable life in the present.

**Embodiment: Performance meets Flesh**

Using the forensic metaphor of investigation suggested by every police procedural on television, this project undertakes an explicitly materialist critique that “follows the bodies” to reflect on and critically resist the dematerializing effects of neoliberal multiculturalism. The phrase itself—from which I draw my title—appears verbatim in the anthropological work of
Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the leading expert on the global black market organ trade, with whom I engage at length in this dissertation’s second chapter. Scheper-Hughes writes:

My basic ethnographic method—‘follow the bodies!’—brought me to police morgues, hospital mortuaries, medical-legal institutes, intensive care units, emergency rooms, dialysis units, surgical units, operating rooms, as well as to police stations, jails and prisons, mental institutions, orphanages and court rooms in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. (32)

While clearly I employ a different methodology from the journalistic ethnography of Scheper-Hughes, the investigative model is similar. Beginning from the raw, corporeal evidence, this dissertation follows its trail to unique and often surprising sites—geographically, generically, and theoretically—in order to comment on the diverse material effects of neoliberalism.

Attending to embodiment—and in this case, to its literary manifestations, which may count as an initial surprising turn—allows for a multi-level approach that speaks to the individual bodies of neoliberal subjects, as well as to institutional bodies, academic and disciplinary bodies, bodies politic, and bodies of literature. Like Scheper-Hughes, then, following the bodies leads me from organ trafficking and contemporary discourses of crisis, to theories of performativity, to canonicity and global literature, to multiculturalism and the university. Therefore, conceptualizing this re-materializing project as one that operates in multiple registers, this dissertation examines connections within the subtle workings of neoliberal power, the intersecting forces that underwrite and animate at once the curriculum for undergraduate world literature and “Great Works” courses, for example, as well as the system of debt peonage that forces some slum-dwellers in the urban centers of the Global South to sell their kidneys on the growing black market in human organs.
Throughout this project, I understand “matter” to be the raw materials, resources, and bodies that center (but do not necessarily produce) our experience of the world. But I also use a semantic wedge—one glimpsed in the central phrase that is “Black Lives Matter”—to gesture toward materializing, the way matter is never static but always in flux, organized and re-organized, called up by particular formations of power, and made intelligible, socially legible, or not. How matter is activated, then, or how it comes to matter, has everything to do with a particular set of conditions of possibility—and it is through this activation that we might trace out such conditions in order to better sketch our present impasse. In one sense, then, this project emerges out of a historical materialist tradition that analyzes how material conditions shape the cultural processes of a society and fundamentally affect its social relations and modes of reproduction. This genealogy also necessarily includes interventions by thinkers such as Cedric Robinson and Stuart Hall, who nuance Marxist theory with questions of racialization and histories of slavery and colonialism. Robinson’s massively influential Black Marxism not only details the long history of race in Europe and Africa beginning in ancient times, but traces the roots of the “Black Radical Tradition” (Robinson 31). For Robinson, because “[t]he development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions,” it is no surprise “that racism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism (Robinson 43). Therefore, capitalism as a historical-economic formation and a logic is, Robinson argues, indistinguishable from racial capitalism. Hall more explicitly takes on totalizing Marxist narratives that are unable to incorporate the “unfree labor” on which slave and colonial economies are based, making clear that different modes of production coexist and are structured in hierarchical as well as lateral relations, and that such articulations often turn on “race” as a modality of interpellation and ideological representation.
Historical materialism complicated by race, as we see in the thinking of Robinson and Hall, and with the example of Black Lives Matter, therefore serves as a key theoretical node in a project that attempts to center materiality without naturalizing it, to keep an eye on discourse without losing sight of (its) bodies, and to attend to power without writing into it a sense of inevitability.

Other critical genealogies that incite this study include theories of embodiment that take the question of materiality to its limits, in particular through formations of gender and sexuality. In *Assuming a Body*, Gayl Salamon locates the body somewhere between felt sense—the sensible experience of embodiment—and the body’s “corporeal contours,” an intersection that is also the disjuncture that produces normative gender (Salamon 2). This interplay between proprioception and perception, drawing from the field of phenomenology and, in particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is significant for thinking through questions of subjectivity, identity, and difference, all of which hinge on a unified body. As Salamon points out, the coherence of the body is always marked by a becoming, the permanent potentiality borne from psychic representation and the relationality of identification. Quoting Paul Schilder’s early work on body image that insists the body “is not a shape” but, in fact, “the production of a shape” (qtd. Salamon 30), Salamon’s point about “assuming a body” is ultimately similar to Judith Butler’s argument in *Bodies that Matter*. For these critics, the vague materiality of the unmediated body is not buried beneath the layers of the symbolic, but produced simultaneously with them. Access to the raw, anatomical body therefore necessarily entails a resignification of that body, a discursive process that is always subject to matrices of regulatory power like gender and sexuality. However, the body is never simply reducible to the structures that govern and produce it. For Salamon, sexuality is the site of relationality and radical particularity: “embodied response to desire is . . . unpredictable and impossible to map onto the morphology of the body”
(49), and therefore represents a potential avenue for critiquing social norms that (attempt to) discipline desire. On the other hand, Butler’s emphasis on performativity highlights the possible ruptures that open up under the sedimented, naturalized discourse of sex/gender. Using as a parallel the J.L. Austin model of performative language—that is, language that does not merely describe but actively makes things happen in the world—Butler outlines the process of citationality and repetition whereby sex/gender is first uttered by an interpellating figure and then “accumulates the force of authority” through compulsory, ritualistic performance (Butler 226-27). The risk of this repetitive performance, Butler argues, lies in moments of slippage and the inevitable crises that occur when the performativity—and thus, the non-naturalness—of sex/gender is laid bare. In these ways the corporeal embodies the potential to interrupt the stale tropes of subjectivity we have relied upon in contemporary politics. This dissertation therefore purposely attempts to keep its picture of the body muddy, sometimes taking this as a premise from which to embark and other times facing the muddiness head on; as a project intent on “following the bodies,” it demonstrates the productive difficulty of always knowing what it is, exactly, we are following. Placing these critical discussions about embodiment into conversation with recent work on neoliberalism, however, casts into relief the ways that the economies, socialities, political formations, and particular patterns of desire that mark our present moment unfold specific logics of dematerialization and inequality. As knowledge continues to be organized such that the racial, gendered, and geopolitical lines along which inequality plays out increasingly appear natural, fair, and rational, the interventions of feminist and queer theory regarding the production—and ultimately the precarity—of the body remain crucial for a rematerializing effort.¹⁴

¹⁴ Theorizing embodiment indeed has a much more extensive history than I have indicated or
Tracking the philosophical roots of embodiment is a similarly useful exercise. In an entry for *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Eva Cherniavsky traces the etymology and historiography of “the body” through such discourses as theology, classical political economy, Marxism, and U.S. law and political theory, turning at the end of the essay to how “embodiment” takes on new meaning through critical projects like feminism, critical race studies, and postcolonial theory. While citizenship and the tenets of modern political philosophy rely on abstract and markedly un-physical corpora, certain human subjects, Cherniavsky writes, have been historically associated with the discredited life of the material body and so constituted as marginal to the arenas of cultural production and political representation: women, Africans and their New World descendants, indigenous peoples, mestizos, and Asians, among other categories of ‘overembodied’ ethnic, sexual and classed identity.

How this discursive “discrediting” occurs to become a fleshy burden on the lives of minoritized subjects is a thick and weighty question, one that is intimately linked to power and representation. Elaine Scarry argues that the experience of being “intensely embodied . . . is the equivalent of being represented,” which in turn “is almost always the condition of those without power” (“Pain” 207). While the language of “equivalence” may be misleading here, what Scarry points to is a multidirectional process whereby the discursive tool that is “race” writes corporeality onto/into bodies, but is neither the origin nor the result of bodily difference. Rather,

have time for fully rehashing here. See, for example, the phenomenology of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Sartre; the early feminism of de Beauvoir; the psychoanalytic feminisms of Cixous and Irigaray; the work on sexual difference theory by Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti; and the theories of materiality and new materialisms by critics such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad.
as Roderick Ferguson argues, race is productive, a formation that “render[s] the body into a text on which histories of racial differentiation, exclusion, and violence are inscribed” (“Race”).

Hortense Spillers’s foundational “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” productively tests the limits of this idea. Investigating American chattel slavery and the middle passage as world-altering events of both meaning-making and epistemological rupture, Spillers turns theoretical attention to the “flesh”—distinct from the body in its context of abject captivity—as a “zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (206). Stripped of any vestige of subjectivity that lingers with social embodiment, the slave body is utterly reduced to a thing, a physical representation of otherness that “embodies sheer physical powerlessness”; and yet, Spillers argues, as flesh the slave body is also the “source of irresistible, destructive sensuality” (206). Disarticulating the corporeal, subjectivity, desire, and discourse, the flesh represents a radical thought project for conceiving contemporary legacies of race and other bodily inscriptions—what Spillers names “hieroglyphics of the flesh”—that get “transferred” from one generation to the next through cultural reproduction (207).

**Racialization and the Aesthetics of Subjectivity**

As these theorists of racial formation and historiography show, race—alongside sexuality and gender—is central to this project not merely as a point of departure for thinking through various circuits of identity and modalities of embodiment, but as the very grounds upon which the terms of rationality, subjecthood, and citizenship are cast to begin with. In “Race Under Representation,” David Lloyd makes the case that western philosophical ideas about civilization and human development are intimately linked to the question of aesthetic subjectivity. Hinging
on Kantian philosophy and its two-step process of aesthetic experience, Lloyd’s intervention resides in the disconnect between the individual, specific instance of sense perception—one’s unique and raw encounter with an aesthetic object—and the secondary, rational application of disinterested, artistic judgment to make sense (or, more precisely, meaning) of that encounter. While it is the secondary aspect of “taste” that marks the universalizing legacy of Enlightenment aesthetics, the initial moment of aesthetic experience—what Kant calls an “ethics of domicilium—is immensely important for thinking through the histories of racialization and colonialism that Aesthetics-with-a-capital-“A” justifies. This is because the question of which subjects are able to reign in that unwieldy sensory experience of the untamed aesthetic in the first place has to do with who is endowed with sufficient rationality and can therefore access the universal well of judgment. In other words, aesthetic subjectivity is reliant on the ability to tap into what Leela Gandhi calls—in fitting language—the “colonizing imperative of disinterest.” Highlighting how the rational disciplining of sensible encounter through disinterested rationality effectively remedies the subject’s “perilous cohabitation with difference,” Gandhi argues that the radically individual and unique potential of aesthetic experience gets lost in the distancing move of sublimation (156). However, difference is also produced in this process, and the “radical, constitutive comparison that sorts humans into different kinds based on their abilities to reason through aesthetic experience” is, again, linked to embodiment (Chuh 13).

In yoking corporeality and sensible experience to particularity—that which is antithetical to the disinterested universal of reason—Kant’s aesthetic schema invokes a long, fraught historical narrative that firmly entrenches western metaphysics’ dialectic of the mind/body,

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15 Chuh goes on to point out the meta-aesthetic quality of this foundational division of subjectivity. That is, this sorting process through the aesthetic is itself aesthetic, an important layer for the way Chuh—through Rancière—understands the aesthetic foundation of politics.
positioning the latter as “the subordinated term in the opposition” and metonymically linking it to irrationality, passion, particularity, and individual, sensible experience (Grosz 381). Furthermore, this dichotomy unfolds the grammar of subjectivity: those designated by the terms of Kantian rationality as appropriate social (and, as we learn, political) subjects “suffer least from the intrusions of the body” (Gatens 50). Due to “the association of the body with gross, unthinking physicality,” the state of embodiment is seamlessly mapped onto those subjects that are always already corporeally marked—by race, gender, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability (Price and Shildrick 2). Moira Gatens argues there are material privileges bound up in this as well, as subjects able to transcend the body are rewarded with the political spoils of citizenship and the cultural benefits of intelligibility:

Those who are not capable of the appropriate political forfeit are excluded from political and ethical relations. Rather they are defined by mere nature, mere corporeality and they have no place in the semi-divine political body except to serve it at its most basic and material level. (24)

Such individuals are rendered marginal at best, and in other cases become invisible, abject, wholly unintelligible objects of power due to their rootedness in the body. In this way bodies—differently raced, sexed, and sexualized—are key to an aesthetic hierarchy that not only authorizes certain, select modes of judgment, but also determines who is able to experience the aesthetic at all. Those subjects capable of sublimation and therefore of answering the interpellative call of Kantian disinterest are endowed with expansive privilege—cultural intelligibility, citizenship, social inclusion, and political coherence—and the moral claims to conquer the world.
Part of why I rehash this particular genealogy in this project’s introduction has to do with the question of “the politics of aesthetics” that Jacques Rancière raises. For Rancière, politics is what results in the moment of exclusion, revolving “around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (13). The grounds of inclusion and exclusion on which politics is based, though, relies on a more fundamental “distribution of the sensible,” that “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc.” (13). The rules about subjectivity, citizenship, and even the very rubric of “the political” therefore have everything to do with the terms set by a particular aesthetic regime. Casting the aesthetic in this way adds a complexity to the neoliberal biopolitics at the center of this project, implicating art in the foundational sorting process that renders certain bodies legible in particular ways—here, having to do with usefulness to capital. But my other intent in offering up this detailed narrative of aesthetics is linked to what exists within but gets covered over in Kant’s theorization of the sensible encounter. This is essentially Leela Gandhi’s goal of performing a theoretical “surgery” in *Affective Communities*, delicately amputating the disinterested politics of aesthetic judgment by removing and rescuing the radical particularity of corporeal experience lodged in the ethics of domicilium. Using the model of Oscar Wilde, whose queer performance and dandy aesthetics unexpectedly translated to a politics of antiracism and anticolonialism that was radically progressive for his time, Gandhi argues a case for an

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16 Rancière defines aesthetic regimes as organizing and conceptualizing formations that encompass forms of visibility and ways of doing and making. He identifies three basic regimes, outlining a historical sequence that is not strictly linear, as the regimes can and often do exist alongside one another. The “ethical regime” encapsulates the Platonic sense of “true art” in which art is measured in relation to its ethical value to the community. The “representative regime,” corresponding with the Aristotelian critique of Plato, frees the arts from their previous moral and political obligations and results in the bourgeois elevation of the artist. Finally the “aesthetic regime,” in which nineteenth century hierarchies of art are done away with, witnesses the expansion of artistic objects, a new interest in subject matters of everyday life, and the marked complexity of the role of the artist.
“interested aesthetics” that relishes the unpredictability, particularity, and difference of the sensible and in turn prompts us “to live among foreigners, aliens, and strangers” (156). In other words, Gandhi’s rematerializing move that grounds itself in bodily experience mirrors the theoretical orientation of this dissertation, even as my project is tied to the particular context of neoliberalism. However, rather than centering on those subjects, like Wilde, that are able to answer the call of disinterested judgment but choose not to, my work locates itself in the experience of the very “foreigners, aliens, and strangers”—marginalized figures—who never have the choice to begin with and are therefore written out of aesthetic subjectivity’s very terms of (im)possibility. Thus, my earlier invocation of David Lloyd has as much to do with the stakes of minority discourse as it does with Lloyd’s explication of the aesthetic foundations of a modern teleology of civilization and development. What happens when we attempt to take seriously unmediated sensible experience and the corporeality that coheres from it, a fleshiness that does not in all cases disappear “under the brush of discourse,” according to Spillers? What results from tracing aesthetic development backwards, according to the temporal narrative of Western philosophy, to locate a critique centered on the foreigners, aliens, and strangers cast outside the disembodied logic of dominant aesthetic subjectivity? And finally, acknowledging that accessing the realm of the purely sensory is always a compromised epistemological project, what sorts of political interventions might be made in keeping our sights on the distribution of the sensible? In this vein, working through the history of aesthetics to work around it, Kandice Chuh distinguishes the potential of “the aesthetic” by its emphasis “on becoming . . . rather than identity,” such that it “registers the non-inevitability of modern subjectivity” (15).
Affective Interventions: Feeling Out the Present

If the recent “aesthetic turn” hinges on opening up this kind of potentiality and departing from the rationalist agenda that has informed so much work in contemporary political theory, then it aligns in many ways with the “affective turn.” According to Chuh, work in affect theory “has enabled us to ask about our affiliative attachments to our objects of inquiry, as well as highlighting the limitations of rationalist critique in accounting for the complexities of lives and histories, subjectivities and politics” (11). Through its emphasis on embodiment, this dissertation seeks to exploit the inadequacies of a rationalist critique that fails to account for the nuances and contradictions that mark living in the neoliberal present, often turning to the field of affect to do so. In other words, I employ affect theory in the tradition of Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Sianne Ngai, where affect serves as a different index of the body, one that might allow us to think through the relationship between materiality, materialization, and ways of being in and experiencing the world outside of normativizing narratives of rational modernity.

Lauren Berlant argues that reproducing life in our contemporary moment is literally the experience of being worn out (by it). Offering up the concept of “slow death,” Berlant complicates our sense of crisis under capitalism, reflecting on how “the liberal-democratic state’s continuing breaking of its promises of job security, upward mobility, and political and social equality” represents “crisis ordinariness” rather than the timeline of traditional crisis (Ngai, “Cruel”). Berlant’s work thus prompts us to ask why we continue to operate under “cruel optimism,” an “aesthetic of attachment” that upholds our collective investments in the “meritocracy,” “equality,” and various versions of the good life that are formally structured by
our fantasies of rationality and coherent, autonomous subjectivity.\textsuperscript{17} What is truly cruel about cruel optimism, though, lies not in the distance between “fantasy” and “reality,” but in the way collective fantasies like the densely symbolic “American Dream” shape reality, remaining elusive if concrete objects even as their pursuit harms us and impedes our flourishing. The corollary to this is, of course, why the universal ideal that gets bound up with these fantasies in a particular way through hyper-rationalizing discourse serves as such an effective alibi for injustice and inequality. In other words, while this project must attend to the obviously material manifestations of neoliberalism (the actual, material, and corporeal crises of life and death), it must also explore the more subtle, affective qualities that register the varying scales and shifting valences of neoliberal aesthetics: bodies but also bodies of sense, feeling, and affect that add texture to how we understand agency, and to the various lifeworlds that exist under contemporary racial capitalism. To use Berlant’s words once again, “as the very material of historical embeddedness,” affect might be a generative entry point for getting to know the present (66).

While the affect theory of Cruel Optimism—balancing the material and the psychic, de-emphasizing rationality, and reconfiguring the terms of agency\textsuperscript{18}—functions as a key interlocutor

\textsuperscript{17} Here I should make brief mention of what Berlant, in her blog titled “Supervalent Thought,” refers to as the “Combover Subject,” indicating that we have all “styled our own hair to conceal our flaws,” including, in this case, the fact that we are incomplete. REMARKING on the way in which being and subjectivity are, in effect, performative, Berlant’s point is about the “self-inflated organization,” or the “inflated stabilization” of the subject. Again, this fits with Berlant’s interest in the form—literally, the structure—of our attachments. What holds us together as “loosely-knotted cluster[s] of impulses, reflections, apprehensions” might then be our very fantasy of coherence in the first place. This has important implications for thinking through the patterns of adjustment we are forced to undergo in our neoliberal era of wearing out, and for asking questions about who has access to the privilege of incoherence—of experimentation and failure—under this regime.

\textsuperscript{18} Berlant argues in a chapter of Cruel Optimism titled “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” that agency shifts under the stilted conditions of the present in which
for a project focused around embodiment, so too do the “ugly feelings” offered up in Sianne Ngai’s text. Arguing that “[s]caled-down affects are the ones that best register this only seemingly paradoxical becoming-ordinary of social, political, and environmental crisis” (“Cruel”), Ngai zeroes in on feelings that are “minor”—both in the sense of “less-grand” and as most often attached to minority subjects—in order to locate a subtle political critique of contemporary conditions of existence. Ngai echoes Sara Ahmed in outlining how various affects get “stuck” to certain kinds of bodies, and Ahmed in particular shows how this stickiness often has the effect of rearranging the temporality of cause and effect. The figures that populate Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*, including the “melancholic migrant,” the “feminist killjoy,” and the “unhappy queer,” therefore are often themselves taken to be the source of bad feeling rather than the symptoms of broader social violence or injustice. As a possible diagnostic to short-circuit the stale identity tropes, agential heroics of the subject, and harmful collective fantasies of neoliberal multiculturalism that are mobilized by the rationalist discourse of Kant’s legacy, affect has the potential to powerfully anchor a corporeal critique that seeks different kinds of knowledges and new ways of knowing—or, rather, of “feeling out”—the present.

**The Literary and the Literature**

Lisa Lowe argues “that it has become difficult to write or imagine alternative knowledges, to act on behalf of alternative projects or communities” in a “contemporary moment [that] is so replete with assumptions that freedom is made universal through liberal political enfranchisement and the globalization of capitalism” (208). Because the object of this particular subjects and populations experience “wearing out” as the very condition of reproducing life. “Practical sovereignty,” or “lateral agency,” is less about purposeful acts of positioning and thriving and more about thwarting exhaustion and navigating the possibilities for survival under global capitalism. I will return to these ideas in chapter two.
dissertation is to engage alternative knowledge projects and accomplish de-materializing and antiracist work, I turn to the multivalent space of the literary—and, in particular, three main texts marked and marketed as “global”—for a number of reasons. Ato Quayson argues that “[l]iterature does not merely reflect an already socially interpreted reality, but adds another tier of interpretation that is comprehensible within the terms set by the literary-aesthetic domain” (15). In other words, literary texts tangle with how we experience our own conditions of possibility in the neoliberal present, and with our apparatus for understanding that experience in ways that are non-representative (in a political sense) and non-equivalent (in an aesthetic sense). Encompassing both the aesthetic and the materially situated site of the text, then, literature provides an opening for a potential redistribution of the sensible, and is therefore crucial to a project about the politics and aesthetics of embodiment. But literature takes on particular significance in a neoliberal moment marked by “diversity,” dematerialized equality, and economic patterns that exacerbate wide scale inequality. On the one hand, literature is framed through multiculturalism as a kind of privileged information retrieval tool by which new global citizens “get to know” other cultures, peoples, traditions, and languages. Indeed, literature as a category has come to frame a highly contested set of social and political questions that ultimately have to do with managing difference—and therefore, bodies—on a global scale. Relatedly, the tame differences (and the differences tamed in the teaching) of literature give political gravity to neoliberal institutions in doling out social privilege. On the other hand though, as Jodi Melamed points out, literary texts themselves often resist such mining and operationalizing efforts, offering glimpses of radical and (re-)materializing politics from, ironically, “the same institutional complexes” that churn out official neoliberal policies (Melamed xviii).
As I aim to show, literature, perhaps because it is untethered by the imperative to represent reality objectively, truthfully, or toward a particular political end, manages to emerge from the same bastions of neoliberal ideology—the increasingly corporatized university, for instance—while still embodying or materializing the potential for imagining something new. I argue that, in this way, literature may at once counter the abstractive qualities of neoliberalism and offer up a radically alternate vision of the future, a possible utopia that can house both justice and difference at the same time. Finally, the “tensions and unintelligibilities” of literature enable us to glimpse an ethical potential as well. According to Crystal Parikh, these small ruptures “provide openings for justice and democracy—for, that is, the arrival of the Other ‘to come’—while discerning the social orders and discourses where this otherness will be encountered in its historical-political forms” (27). Gayatri Spivak refers to fiction as a central “task” of the “aesthetic education” at the heart of learning the “double bind” of global capitalism: “the effort of reading is to taste the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other” (Spivak 18).¹⁹ This ethical project is, for Spivak, always already a political one as well, as it is the task of literature to translate histories of imperialism and the unended/unending colonial past to our present of globalization.

¹⁹ Spivak’s “double bind” is the complex, multilayered contradiction that underpins the ethico-politics of global capitalism, itself defined as “the implications . . . of the financialization of the globe, the establishment of a uniform system of exchange” (Spivak 105). The “founding gap” in the ethical is about incommensurability, the imperative necessity of orienting oneself toward the other, despite the impossibility of ever quite achieving a satisfactory recognition (Spivak 98). In terms of the political, the double bind exists in “the universalizability of the singular” (Spivak 4), in other words, in the space between “the problems of representational politics” and “non-representation,” a non-option as Kandice Chuh points out that “these are politics tethered to a vast array of material conditions and consequences (Chuh 26). More specifically in terms of globalization, Spivak defines the double bind as the mass circulation of information in relation to the transcendentalizing logic of nations, races, and classes, a kind of “damage control” in which the violences of history are erased (Spivak 3). Finally, literature, Spivak argues, can help promote the “habit of mind” for “learning to live with contradictory instructions,” globalization’s condition, or the double bind (Spivak 3).
“Follow the Bodies” analyzes works by Karen Tei Yamashita, Arundhati Roy, and Zadie Smith, drawing on a global Anglophone literary archive of the neoliberal present that indexes a matrix of corporealities and self-consciously takes up—even as it questions—rubrics of globality and transnationalism. Obeying the directive of its title by tracing the bodies (and at times the body parts) of characters, the bodies (or canons) of literature, the institutional bodies, and the bodies politic that populate and contextualize this group of texts, my project operates in and through the multiple registers that illustrate the complexity of embodied life in our current moment. At the level of narrative, I look at how the characters in these texts negotiate the contemporary pitfalls of multiculturalism and global capitalism. Jumping scale, I also track how the texts themselves are objects located within a set of particular material conditions—a situatedness that is self-consciously taken up in each of these respective narratives. Finally, there are the institutional and disciplinary frameworks in which these texts are received and achieve specific kinds of readership, legibility (as “literature”) and political saliency (as global/world, American or British literature). The body, then, is a generative entry point for thinking through the complex, multivalent question of contemporary neoliberalism.

Chapter two uses organ trafficking as a point of entry for thinking through neoliberalism’s conditions of survival and existence, and the altered formations of sovereignty and embodiment that are produced in the interstices of a globalized economy, new biomedical technologies, and increasingly hegemonic logics of finance capital and debt. Taking note of how organ trafficking manifests these various neoliberal processes and practices, I argue that what this case—perhaps extreme, perhaps not—makes clear are the multiple temporalities through which neoliberalism unfolds. Using journalistic accounts of the trade, social science work by the organ trafficking expert, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and zeroing in on an organ trafficking subplot
in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, I sketch a picture of a growing phenomenon that dates back to the 1980s and has exploded since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. As a densely symbolic event, “anatomical exchange” signifies in myriad ways. It can represent life-giving, an ethical gift that gives time or bestows a future on the recipient. But, under the conditions of a debt economy rather than a gift economy, organ trafficking is more often inflected with the exploitation baked into contemporary realities of massive, global wealth inequality. Organ trafficking therefore has the potential to demonstrate the ideological—and temporal—dilemma of contemporary life. On the one hand, it captures the structural nature of violence and inequality that Berlant articulates as “slow death.” In other words, if neoliberalism patterns a gradual wearing out of particular subjects and populations, organ trafficking materializes this process, effecting a siphoning of life that literally results in a slow death, for some. But on the other hand, the black market for human parts is a more traditional crisis in many ways—faster than the plodding pace of climate change or the gradual disenfranchisement of a global precariat, it demands urgency and requires the kind of “heroic agency” that crises produce and reproduce (Berlant 760). These multiple temporalities of neoliberalism, outlined by the case of organ trafficking, are increasingly difficult to trace, however. Narratives of “crisis” are themselves partly to blame, but in general I argue that this massively complex problem—the problem of knowing the present, which is, of course, not unique to our current moment—is something that can be addressed through the space, or the time, of the literary. Yamashita’s multi-vocal, time-compressing, hemisphere-shifting, genre-defying novel makes visible—and ultimately holds in tension—the multiple temporalities of neoliberalism. This kind of “chronotopic critique” (Hitchcock 9) is a temporal intervention directly made possible by the
corporeal example of organ trafficking, locating the literal body—its rhythms, cadences, histories and futures—at the center of my analysis of neoliberalism.

If chapter two attends to the mess of bodies splayed on the figurative table of a neoliberal debt economy, my third chapter registers the critically generative valence of this corporeal messiness and reads in the stubborn, material fact of unruly bodies a methodology for reading against the grain of dominant discourses and knowledge formations like “world literature.” Examining the way Arundhati Roy’s 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*, paints a picture of the neoliberal-neocolonial present, I track how the text theorizes the complicated experience of embodiment through its characters. What the Kochamma family at the narrative’s center demonstrates, I argue, are imperfect processes of subjectivization and discipline that result when the body stumbles into the gaps, fissures, and ruptures in neoliberal (bio)power. In these moments, the hybridity and unruliness of the body is not only exposed but produced. Therefore, even before the scene of conscious rebellion, a foundationally material critique of racist, neoimperial regimes—borne alternately of the warped echoes of colonial encounter, the nuances of racialization, or the unpredictability of desire—exists to be tapped into. However, rather than trace a teleology of resistance through critical (specifically postcolonial) theory moving from this nebulous, productive potential to more active critique and opposition, I follow the novel to short-circuit such a narrative. Taking the cue of the text’s seven-year-old main characters, Estha and Rahel, who perform dazzling linguistic feats of backwards reading, word play, and literary mimicry, I draw out the performativity of hermeneutics to find how interpretation itself can serve as a powerfully productive intervention in hegemonic social scripts contained within the broader narratives of neoliberalism and colonialism. Directly linked to the fundamental unruliness of the minoritized, postcolonial body, performative reading offers a flexible tactics by which characters
in the novel are able to read outside the violent narratives in which they might otherwise be trapped. From this I draw a model for thinking through how we read hegemonic knowledge formations like world literature, or even institutional spaces (like the university) and their discourses (like multiculturalism). Seizing on the opportunities afforded by the “messy” bodies that are not quite oriented in the right way—or, as Sara Ahmed would argue, are facing the wrong direction—I suggest that we can read back(wards) against diversity rhetoric that flattens difference and dematerializes inequality.

I continue with this thread in my fourth and final chapter, which more directly centers on questions of multiculturalism and institutions of higher learning by exploring Zadie Smith’s On Beauty (2005). Set in a fictional college town in the northeastern United States, the novel thematizes the university, its disciplines (particularly Art History), politics, and the processes of institutionalization to such an extent that many critics refer to it as a “campus novel.” However, as a rich site of intertextuality, On Beauty employs the figure of the university to pursue a far-reaching set of questions not only in relation to multiculturalism and affirmative action politics, but, as its title suggests, to beauty and aesthetics as well. As a contemporary re-writing of—or update to—E.M. Forster’s Howards End (1910), a satirical response to the surface multicultural readings of Smith’s first novel, White Teeth (2000), and a thoughtful engagement with Elaine Scarry’s academic essay, “On Beauty and Being Just” (1999), Smith’s On Beauty expands aesthetics, demonstrating how it spills over from philosophical and historical discourses to mark the intimate, everyday, embodied, and sensible experiences of a multicultural cast of characters circulating the institution and navigating its politics. Tracking the various ways On Beauty’s minoritized characters are forced to negotiate the spaces in and around the university, this chapter highlights how those routinely excluded from the sites of institutional power deploy
aesthetic strategies as resistance. This “intersectional aesthetics” prompts a reconsideration of the foundations of aesthetic judgment rooted in Enlightenment notions of disinterest and universality, which ultimately prove to be thinly veiled racist and patriarchal requirements for subjectivity and citizenship. Finally, such tactics serve as the means by which On Beauty’s critique becomes not an indictment of the contemporary university, but a glimpse at its potential for fostering new ways of engaging beauty that embrace difference, spark vital, often unpredictable attachments and collectivities, and open up the opportunity for us to undertake real reflection, to re-think ossified epistemologies, to acknowledge being wrong.

Throughout this dissertation, not only the thematics of embodiment but actual bodies get tangled up with a constant casting about for resistant strategies in a way that highlights the overall goal of a rematerializing project. In other words, a re-centering of the corporeal, I suggest, might just have the effect of combatting neoliberal processes that abstract, de-materialize, evacuate meaning from terms like equality, and covertly roll back the progress hard won by radical social movements of the past sixty years. But following the bodies in this intensified way does not only reorient scrutiny regarding the subtle tricks of neoliberal logic in various arenas, from university politics and the juridical rhetoric of race neutrality, to discourses of crisis that captivate the contemporary mass media and frame complex phenomena like the organ trade. As chapter one shows, examining embodiment under neoliberalism first involves recognizing the ways in which mutually constitutive new technologies and a global debt economy often effect, more than a gradual wearing out, a literal tearing apart of certain bodies, and that this is not a perversion of racial capitalism but its logical conclusion (or, frighteningly, merely its extension). Beginning with this scene of bodily breakdown, though, I move throughout this dissertation to attend to other sorts of unravelings as well, tracing how the body
as coherent object of study and critique crumbles under the pressure of power and authority issued by our present’s dominant (and vast, diverse) institutions. Walking the tightrope of addressing the discursive, the affective, and the outright symbolic (for this is, in the end, a literary study), while attempting to avoid the lure of abstraction, this project dwells on what Sara Ahmed calls “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and . . . ‘the drama of contingency’” (Happiness 22) without—I hope—fetishizing the Deleuze and Guattari “body without organs,” literalized. From the unruly bodies in The God of Small Things that result in character-subjects with a dangerous potential to read outside neocolonialism’s scripts, to the scattered body parts depicted in the organ trade of Tropic of Orange that effectively flesh out the multiple temporalities of neoliberal multiculturalism, to the maladjusted minoritized bodies in On Beauty that cannot be incorporated into the dominant discourse of aesthetics or its institutional corollaries (the Art History department and the university at large) and so fashion an intersectional aesthetics—throughout, bodies themselves, produced by power, are shown nevertheless to be irrepressible, uncontainable. What this project attempts to harness from this fundamental, material disobedience is a grounds for tracing power’s weak points, threadbare patches in the fabric of racial capitalism as it exists now, gaps and openings for conducting a forceful intervention that calls out neoliberal practices of diversity for what they are: reactionary, de-materializing, racist, patriarchal violences that feed inequality in a globalized world.
CHAPTER 2

TEMPORALITIES OF CRISIS, CRISES OF TEMPORALITY

ORGAN TRAFFICKING, THE LITERARY, AND KAREN TEI YAMASHITA’S
TROPIC OF ORANGE

“I pursued my hunches into Central America. . . . Figures appeared out of shadows and suggested directions to pursue. . . their directions got me through a series of loops only to land me at a family planning clinic. I did the loops several times over and found myself at an adoption agency, an orphanage, and a miserable shantytown of abandoned children on the edges of a vast dump. If I took one lead down one road, it brought me around to the same road again. Impoverished kids, orphaned kids, street kids, dead kids, disappeared kids. . . . I read my cryptic scribble: ‘Body parts. Kidneys for a two-year-old. Do you think?’ The revelation made me gag.”—Gabriel Balboa, from Karen Tei Yamashita’s Tropic of Orange

In “following the bodies,” I turn first to Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel, Tropic of Orange (1997), an experimental blend of magical realism, film noir-style detective fiction, Los Angeles disaster literature, political satire, and postmodern metafiction that is most often analyzed for the ways it explicitly thematizes neoliberalism and globalization (Wallace 148). Plotted via a network of “Hypercontexts,” a kind of table of contents that operates on a grid rather than in typical linear fashion, Tropic follows seven characters over seven fantastic days in a postmodern-capitalist revision of Genesis-style worldmaking. In the course of the novel the Tropic of Cancer, an imaginary geographical line but also a natural “border made plain by the sun itself” (Yamashita 71), materializes to become embedded in an “Aztlán orange” that then gets exported—physically transported by Latino migrants seeking work—north, resulting in a geographic (and accordant temporal) shift whereby the entire Global South literally travels to the

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20 Yamashita’s use of the name “Aztlán” here exemplifies the novel’s hemispheric orientation by making a historical gesture toward the legendary homeland of the Aztec people rather than the post-Spanish colonial name “Mexico” would indicate.
multicultural metropole and global city, Los Angeles. The diverse characters, scattered across the hemisphere and yet all in some way connected, include Gabriel Balboa, a journalist who, as we see in the epigraph, pursues a conspiracy theory from North to South America to discover that organ trafficking is not only a horrific reality in today’s globalized world, but one that has crossed into the territory of infants: “Body parts. Kidneys for a two-year-old.” Gabriel’s narration, taking on the film noir tone of a Raymond Chandler novel, is firmly located in the first-person, unique among the novel’s other six characters. His investigation takes him through “a series of loops” that thoroughly acquaint him with scenes of precarity and deprivation, and the bodies that have been ravaged by a new global economy. Amidst dumps, shantytowns, and orphanages—the detritus of neoliberalism—Gabriel’s discovery of infant heart and kidney trafficking is, however, a strikingly unexceptional plot in the novel, only one of many fantastic or horrifying threads. As a symptom of the current world-historical formation, rather than a cause, trafficking becomes just another element in a terrible, elegant patchwork that is the neoliberal world order. The “cryptic scribble” with which he captures this revelation about “dead kids, disappeared kids” as well as the hacked up body parts of kids, ends with a question—“Do you think?”—that prompts a bodily response: Gabriel literally gags on the knowledge of what this brave new world is all about.

Compare Gabriel’s quote to the following, from an academic work by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, UC Berkeley anthropologist and co-founder of the human rights organization “Organs Watch”:

So, take the ethnographer. She has chosen to investigate a hidden and taboo subject, as forbidden a topic as witchcraft, incest or pedophilia. . . . [S]he begins to uncover a string of clues that will eventually take her from Brazil to Argentina and Cuba, and from South Africa to Israel, the West Bank and Turkey, and from
Moldova in Eastern Europe to the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Finally, the clues lead her back to transplant units in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City. What she discovers is an extensive and illicit traffic in human organs and tissues procured from the bodies of vulnerable populations – some very dead, some in that ‘dead/not quite dead’ status known as brain death and a great many of them still very much alive. (“Parts” 31)

Scheper-Hughes, who literally compiled the book on organ trafficking (Commodifying Bodies, 2002), weaves together journalism (much of it undercover), ethnography, policy, activism, and bioethics. As we see here, her work verges at times on a literary quality. There are the facts and figures of the trade: which populations are most vulnerable to organ traffickers, where the trade flourishes, how the World Health Organization has attempted to regulate this black market.21 But, perhaps more compellingly, there is also the cast of characters that includes the desperate, the impoverished, the mentally ill who supply organs to the market, the traffickers who broker their deals, and those on the privileged receiving end of organ and tissue exchange, who manage to beat the system (the international transplant list) and prolong their life. In addition, as the quote above shows, there are the stylistics of Scheper-Hughes’s work: here, the ethnographer becomes a visible subject in her own text, appearing in a way that does more than pay lip service like the journalistic “we” of news stories does. With a presence even in the occasional pictures included in her work—as in one where she appears “in surgical ‘drag’” talking to a patient waiting to have a kidney harvested in a hospital (“Parts” 40)—Scheper-Hughes gives us a sense

of her personal experience in choosing “to investigate a hidden and taboo subject.” Shifting between first-person (singular) account and third person observation, this “personal experience” is bounded yet flexible, a rhetorical flourish that is actually a shrewd recognition that the way of telling a narrative unavoidably affects how we understand it. Unlike the coverage we tend to see in the mainstream media, the narratives in Scheper-Hughes’s work chart a long, meandering route across the globe as we trail the embodied researcher-subject following a “string of clues” that leads us from Global North to South, metropole to antipode, city to country, slum to rural village, sleazy hotel to sterile surgical center, and back again. Shifting between the particular stories of individuals with experience in organ trafficking and analyses of the impact of sweeping economic changes in the last thirty years, Scheper-Hughes raises important bioethical questions that are bound up with issues of structural precarity, corporeal autonomy, and legal compensation and regulation of anatomical exchange. What we get through her work, then, is an idea of the expansiveness of organ trafficking, how it spreads out geographically but also temporally, as the logical extension of a racial capitalism in which, as she argues with a literary flourish, “poor bodies are on the market in the service of rich bodies” (“Human”).

What are the differences between these (literary and ethnographic) narratives of organ trafficking, and representations of the trade we get through mainstream media journalism? A CNN.com article is typical of such reports, and in fact the language recalls both the sparse journalistic style of Gabriel’s prose and the investigative tone of Scheper-Hughes: “We traveled to Kavre,” reporter Sugam Pokharel writes, “a tiny district close to Kathmandu, and what activists and authorities say is ground zero for the black market organ trade in Nepal.” In this area, “kidney trafficking rackets—well organized and well funded—dupe the poor and uneducated into giving away a piece of themselves.” While the article acknowledges broader
social and economic issues that have made this extreme form of bodily labor a viable option for survival—here, in the particular space of Nepal—its scope is ultimately limited. The predictable villains, or traffickers, who “dupe” the unsuspecting and most precarious poor absorb the blame for what are ultimately massive problems and lengthy historical processes. In other words, while organ trafficking does in fact invite a particular kind of structural analysis that other modes of crisis may not—for example, environmental catastrophe—narrations such as these nevertheless lack the crucial nuances to both explain the explosion of the trade since the 1980s and texture that explanation with the slow suffering of populations on its giving end.

“Follow the Bodies,” Follow the Body Parts

I begin this chapter with three different narrative techniques used to tell the story—and the individual stories—of organ trafficking, not to make mainstream journalism a straw man that cedes to the more nuanced articulations of scholarship and, perhaps ironically, of literature, but in the first place to foreground the problem of representation, at once practical and ideological, that resides at the center of how we come to know our current moment of neoliberal globalization and its (sometimes terrifying) effects. If narrative is literally a formal structuring of time, and affectively the patterning of our experience (of time), then the ways in which this particular story of the trade unfolds might generate a productive meta-narrative through which to “read” neoliberalism differently. In the second place, then, I employ the case of organ trafficking as a particular kind of example, one that magnifies the temporalities of crisis and debt.

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22 I should add the disclaimer that I will not follow a narrative theory route to explore the two stories of organ trafficking at the center of this chapter. Ultimately, I am more interested in the temporal effects of crisis, the global aftereffects of empire, and the cadence—the “speed”—of the theory that emerges in the literary/ethnographic texts themselves.
and demonstrates the new agencies and subjectivities that have come to exist in—and perhaps overdetermine—the experience of twenty-first century life.

Rather than serving as some contemporary anomaly or technological vision-gone-wrong, the “shadow economy” that is the organ trade represents a triumph of contemporary racial capitalism, and in many ways an extension (or expansion) of its logic (Roos 52). Statistics on revenue generated by illegal organ trafficking are understandably scarce, but it is thought to have grown to a multi-million or even a billion dollar industry in the past thirty years, with over 100,000 organs donated per year worldwide and (by extremely conservative estimates) ten percent of those occurring illegally.23 Interestingly enough, World Health Organization officials have reported that illegal organ transplants were decreasing in 2006-07, but that after the financial crisis in 2008 they have witnessed a sharp rise. Different reports estimate that between 10,000 and 20,000 illegal kidney transplants are performed every year since 2010,24 leading Jonathan Ratel, special prosecutor for the European Union, to call the illegal organ trade a “growth industry” (Heymann). Nancy Scheper-Hughes cites the increased demand for transplantable organs, especially kidneys, the recent accessibility of commercialized medical transplant technologies, and vast global and national discrepancies in wealth as the factors that have “allowed global society to be divided into two decidedly unequal populations—organ givers and organ receivers” (“Bodies” 4). While organ trafficking occurs in countries across the globe and affects wide—and sometimes unexpected—swathes of populations, hotbeds of activity have been traced to eastern Europe and southern India, which has been nicknamed “the kidney

belt” (McBroom). This global divide has led some, like anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, to label organ trafficking “a new form of imperialism,” as the “First World” participates literally in “siphoning off the essence” of poor, racialized bodies, many of which originate or are located in the Global South (282). However, as organ trafficking has unfolded in some predictable ways, along the lines of class, race, gender, and region, in other ways its growth has opened up ways of mapping the new routes of global precarity.

The work of Scheper-Hughes and “Organs Watch,” a group of anthropology and medical scholars that tracks human rights abuses in organ trafficking and raises issues about the ethics of transplant practices, reveals that the organ trade has encroached even into the most privileged sites of global capital (McBroom). As the ethnographer obeys her own directive and proceeds with “following the bodies,” or in this case the body parts, she is lead around the world—to “exotic” sites like Brazil, the West Bank, Moldova, and the Philippines, but also to major U.S. cities like New York and Philadelphia. Indeed, Scheper-Hughes herself became the organ trafficking authority that she is today when she was featured in a 2009 Newsweek article about her (mostly undercover) research that led to the FBI arrest of a group of rabbis from New York and New Jersey charged with organ trafficking. That article also uses an anecdote of Scheper-Hughes’s about a Kentucky woman who was unable to afford dentures and so was attempting to sell one of her kidneys on Craigslist. Where Scheper-Hughes’s investigations end up, then—in what are imagined to be privileged spaces far removed from the ignorant terrain of taboo and superstition that propel “shadow economies” and “black” or “red” markets—implicates the Global North and the United States in particular as the source of violence, the dirty well at the heart of the global collective imaginary that has conjured the trade into existence. The reality of

human organ trafficking not only highlights the glaring gap of inequality in this narrative, but suggests that in fact what actually binds us is the very inequality embedded in neoliberalism itself, and the forms of violence it produces. Thus, organ trafficking nuances the way bodily inequality gets doled out in our current moment, and complicates the way we understand the economic formations of which it is a symptom. Its example, neither ordinary nor extraordinary, moves us toward thinking about, on the one hand, knotty structural issues like public health care, austerity, the feminization of poverty, postcoloniality and transnational politics, and, on the other, the question not only of time but of times—the temporalities and rhythms that unfold the “thick moment of ongoingness” and mark the impasse of contemporary life with which I opened this dissertation.

If organ trafficking represents the triumph of a certain kind of market-driven logic, then Yamashita’s genre-defying literary work (which, coincidentally—or not—features an organ trafficking subplot) not only captures this neoliberal moment, but thematizes the questions of representation and time this “triumph” raises. At first literalizing the movement of globalization with its orange-driven hemispheric shift, the text plays out a familiar scene in which poor, Latin American migrants travel north seeking work, the products of the Global North move in the opposite direction to permeate the South with Coca Cola and McDonald’s, and the world generally gets “smaller” through technology. Yet Tropic does not halt at merely materializing the metaphor: the exchange of people and goods gives way to a full-scale global catastrophe in which the entire Global South is dragged to Los Angeles and time is literally compressed. However, the text never fully crosses over into uniform disaster territory either, and amidst an undeniable aura of crisis are slower, quieter, less-frenzied moments of stark realism. The novel’s diverse characters, scattered across the hemisphere and yet all in some way connected, include
Gabriel, the journalist whose seedy investigation opened the chapter; Buzzworm, a “big black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet” who roams the streets as an “Angel of Mercy,” a kind of “walking social services” in the ‘hood (27); Bobby Ngu, a “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown,” a streetsmart, hardworking owner of a janitorial company (15); Rafaela Cortes, Bobby’s wife and the mother of their son (Sol), a smart and politically conscious Chicana, who talks about “solidarity” and joins—to Bobby’s dismay—“Justice for Janitors”; Emi, a loud-mouthed Asian American news anchor who in one scene calls out the racist multiculturalism of a pair of white diners in a Japanese restaurant; Arcangel, a mythical figure representing the Latin American people and their colonial (and neocolonial) history, who is directly responsible for carrying the orange north and who, at the novel’s close, transforms into a masked wrestling character who battles SUPERNAFTA at Los Angeles’s “Pacific Rim Auditorium” (262-3); and, finally, Manzanar Murakami, a former Japanese internee and retired surgeon, who sits aloft an I-5 freeway overpass watching the humming network of Los Angeles and conducting a grand symphony only he can hear.

Driven by these wildly unique characters, Tropic engages in a range of topics—from migration and diaspora, to multiculturalism, to the media, to NAFTA, to human (and organ) trafficking—and ultimately represents a dynamic attempt to plot the space-time of neoliberalism, both its broad effects and personal incursions in the lives, and the bodies, of its subjects. As a literary example—a fictional narrative that incorporates organ trafficking in particular and confronts the economic, social, and political lifeworlds of neoliberal globalization in general—the text at once represents and reflects on the epistemological problems that erupt in our current moment. How do we come to know a present that appears to alternate between slow-moving processes, continuities between the colonial (modern, liberal) and the postcolonial (postmodern,
neoliberal), and jarring shifts that are neither predictable nor readily ethically or politically categorizable? If the question seems to demand a flexible answer, *Tropic* provides one. Through the fantastic, the magical, the bizarre, juxtaposed with blunt realism and punctuated by scenes of quiet or the grandiose verse of epic poetry, the novel is a masterful narration of the contradictions, inconsistencies, ruptures and discontinuities of neoliberal life. Ultimately, then, my argument is that *Tropic* makes powerfully visible the multiple temporalities through which neoliberalism unfolds (and this, incidentally, is the kind of literary potential that the genre-defying work of Scheper-Hughes harnesses, at times, as well).

Before turning to the novel’s specific organ trafficking plot, I want to show how part of what *Tropic* brings to a broader argument about the temporality of neoliberalism is a specificity regarding a particular historical moment. The 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was certainly a dominant political presence in the 1990s, and it consequently becomes a central figure (both an element of the setting and a character) in the novel. On the one hand, as Molly Wallace notes, NAFTA stands for the regional trade agreement upon which broader free trade and globalization itself is styled. Despite claims, like William A. Orme’s in *Understanding NAFTA* (1993) that the Mexico-US-Canada agreement “isn’t a metaphor,” nor a political ideology, Wallace points out how NAFTA is in fact often mapped onto symbolic terrain. Orme himself, she notes, cannot help but introduce a NAFTA metaphor in his own first chapter: “To be ‘for’ or ‘against’ greater North American trade,” he contends, “is much like being for or against the weather. Like it or not, the continent’s economic integration is fast becoming a reality” (qtd. Wallace 1). Orme’s words have the effect of both naturalizing and universalizing capitalism, and efface how NAFTA served as a potent metaphor—or a symbol, or a synecdoche—for global free

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trade at a critical historical juncture. Examining these heated rhetorical battles over the language of NAFTA, Wallace argues for employing literary analysis to track the narrative on globalization taking place in the U.S., turning to *Tropic of Orange* in the process, and ultimately asserts that this kind of literary (and literary critical) intervention is a necessary political move.

But while Wallace does a convincing job of proving that literary analysis has the capacity to intervene in this way, *Tropic* demonstrates that literature itself can do such work as well. NAFTA, already a symbol of globalization and a prelude to the kinds of economic exploitation that are produced through “free trade,” is further metaphorized in Yamashita’s novel: it becomes literally embodied in the text as the figure of SUPERNAFTA, the allegorical wrestling opponent of Arcangel. A mythic figure with wings, Arcangel is part performance artist, part prophet, who represents the Latin American people and their particular histories of racialization, colonialism, and migration. Unbound by reality or realism, the figure of Arcangel links past and present while literally collapsing space—it is he who travels north on the back of a truck full of Mexican migrants carrying the orange that drags the Tropic of Cancer with it. Arcangel’s sections are formally unique: marked by magical realist elements and interspersed with long passages of italicized verse, they are the most straightforwardly metaphorical moments in the text. But these formal elements of Arcangel’s sections only serve to highlight the real conditions of existence that mark the neoliberal moment that *Tropic* manifests. Indeed, Arcangel is not the only embodiment of a history here: the orange, a fruit introduced to North America by Christopher Columbus himself, explicitly recalls a legacy of violence and colonialism (Wallace 155). The irony of this orange is manifold, not least because as it travels northward with illegal Mexican
migrants it moves through Orange County,²⁷ Anaheim, and finally Los Angeles, all territory that was wrested from indigenous peoples and claimed by New Spain in the early seventeenth century, becoming Mexico after 1821 and finally, in 1848, being incorporated into the U.S. as part of California. Arcangel’s migration with the orange in tow recites this shifting narrative of conquest, naming Ferdinand Magellan, Pedro Alvares Cabral, Giovanni da Verrazano, Jacques Cartier, and others, along with Brazil, Patagonia, North Carolina and Quebec, names and places incorporated into a rhythmic incantation about colonial history and the prophetic “doom” of the future that will come in 2012—or, according to which date of “discovery” you look to, “2044, 2048, 2054, 2062, 2070, 2078, or 2087” (Yamashita 51). This tongue-in-cheek summary of various apocalyptic prophecies cuts directly into the difficulty of locating an “origin” in civilization narratives and exposes their hidden colonial roots. Furthermore, in the present Arcangel’s journey represents a common one in the neoliberal 1990s, with NAFTA’s elimination of North American tariffs wreaking havoc on local Mexican economies and, in particular, its small farmers, thus forcing individuals from the Global South to travel northward to fill labor demands, exchanging places with the commodities—and the global brands they embody—that are shipped south. When Arcangel stops for food on the southern side of the U.S.-Mexico border, he is offered a hamburger with Fritos and a Budweiser. “But we are in México, are we not?” he asks. It is here that Arcangel transforms himself into “El Gran Mojado,” a “motley personage” meaning “the Big Wetback,” who is “part superhero, part professional wrestler, part

²⁷ Orange County has its own interesting story of the 1990s. Coastal, extremely populous, a bastion of wealth for corporations and individuals, and California’s well-known conservative hub, Orange County went bankrupt in 1994 when residents voted against a proposal to raise taxes, making it the largest county in the United States at the time to declare bankruptcy.
Subcomandante Marcos,“28 with a cape and a ski mask (Yamashita 132). He takes on SUPERNAFTA in an epic, hemispheric wrestling match—a kind of non-nostalgic battle with history, culture, and memory pitted against the commoditization, Americanization and rampant inequality of neoliberal globalization cloaked in the guise of “free trade”—that, even at the novel’s close, never gets adequately resolved. In this clash of “the same world / with itself” that closes the narrative, we are invited to assume that no one wins.

Neoliberalism, Biopower, the Gift, and Debt

*Tropic*, therefore, is a self-conscious and pointed glimpse of a particular moment in the long neoliberal present. In the Introduction, I defined neoliberalism as an economic formation and an extra-national mode of governance characterized in particular by trends of privatization and deregulation, structural adjustment, and the growing prominence of international financial institutions. I also briefly touched on the biopolitical aspects of neoliberalism, highlighting the affirmative manifestations of power—over sovereign spectacles of violence and discipline—that more subtly encourage certain forms of life over others in the interest of capital, shaping those lives while simultaneously designating the populations picked for “wearing out.” Critics like David Harvey, Aihwa Ong, and Rosi Braidotti offer up “biotechnological power” in this vein, yoking biopower to current technology in a “biopolitical mode of governing that centers on the capacity and potential of individuals and the population as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes” (Ong 6). In other words, the imbrication of technology and labor has increasingly shaped the way in which subjects of capital optimize their skills in the global economy.

28 This is the psuedonym of the legendary Zapatista leader of the guerilla rebel movement, who fought for the rights of the indigenous peoples of Mexico.
Harvey, citing Marx, notes that capitalism has long overseen “the skilling, deskilling, and reskilling of the powers of labor in accord with technological requirements,” and has therefore historically dictated the “frequent subordinations of bodily rhythms and desires ‘as an appendage of the machine’” (103-4).29 However, as Jodi Kim points out, what Marx could not have known in writing about individuals selling their labor, is “how developments in the life sciences would one day make it possible for people to sell their literal biological selves” (Kim 222). Braidotti makes a similar argument that bodily discipline is not simply about labor any longer, as bodies under neoliberalism must become “raw material” (44-5). Today, labor remains important: in the manufacture of cheap goods and the outsourcing of wide swathes of technology and service jobs to the Global South, and in the ongoing migration of people from such sites to the centers of capital in the Global North. But the notion of “labor” itself has expanded, moving even beyond the affective labor implicit in the power dynamics of caretaking or reproductive labor and onto the terrain of the body itself. Transnational adoption, for instance, or the phenomenon of poor migrant women serving as nannies to the children of elites in Europe and the U.S. (often leaving their own children behind in the process), or even the movement of laborers who flee limited economic opportunities in the Global South to work as lab technicians, nurses, and doctors in the Global North—the symbolic register of these forms of labor is clear. But if these examples represent the social relationships and subjectivities produced by neoliberalism, their

29 Harvey’s particular deployment of Marx is fitting here: the individual body discursively becomes a “part”—significantly, an “appendage”—of the “body” that is the capitalist “machine.” In fact, capitalism is often marked by this subtle corporeal metaphor, which Matthew G. Hannah sketches through the history of the modern corporation. “Corporation,” from the Latin corpora, meaning to embody, can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to indicate “a number of persons united” or “a body of persons” (my emphasis, “Corporation”). Hannah notes that, in the United States, the corporation solidified its juridical identity in the nineteenth century when it became officially deemed an “individual,” a “legal person” with the same rights afforded ordinary citizens, including rights of contracts and protections under the Fourteenth Amendment (Hannah 9).
extensions—transnational surrogacy and the legal and illegal exchange of organs and tissues—
literalize and solidify these networks.

Ong adds an important layer by cautioning against “sweeping claims about a unified
landscape of labor regulation” that are often made in discussions about economic globalization,
arguing instead that “different vectors of capital . . . coordinate different axes of labor regulation
and of labor disciplining” (8). This ultimately produces “a shifting and flexible ensemble of
heterogeneous calculations, choices, and exceptions that constitute security, life, and ethics”
(10). However, despite (or in fact because of) this foundational unevenness—the “exception” on
which modern citizenship is premised à la Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, pushed further to
encompass the “exceptions to neoliberalism” that are baked into the very fabric of this global
formation—neoliberalism is an ethos built on individualism and a totalizing market-driven logic
that shapes the way we imagine our material conditions of existence and then manufactures
collective consent and self-discipline.30 The benign, universal rhetoric through which
neoliberalism as an ideological formation narrates its own alibi belies the pernicious effects of
economic processes and practices which exacerbate material inequalities and access to resources,
exploit pre-existing formations of racism, misogyny and homophobia, and produce
“differentiated citizenship,” doling out state protection unevenly to subjects based on their value
to capital. The results include a wide range of contemporary crises that disproportionately affect
the lives and bodies of a transnational underclass, including toxic chemical exposure, military
conflicts, (lack of) healthcare, hunger, obesity, malnutrition, ecological catastrophe, increased

30 William Wilkerson, in a discussion on reprodogenetics, or the various technologies that can be
used to manipulate the genetic makeup of offspring, shows that the terrain of self-discipline, too,
has shifted. Wilkerson argues that “reprodogenetics functions as a free market eugenics,” and that
the “state need merely provide that competition in the form of scarcity and free markets exist,
and we will practice eugenics upon ourselves” (64).
vulnerability to new and old diseases, and—the focus of this chapter as a whole—“coerced
gifting,” the risk of organ theft during routine surgeries, and the inequalities embedded in the
exchange of human body parts more broadly (Scheper-Hughes, “Bodies” 35). Lisa Duggan
argues that neoliberalism mobilizes categories—“public vs. private, . . . the state, the economy,
civil society, and the family”—that “actively obscure the connections among these organizing
terms” (3). In other words, this economic formation and its cultural corollary, multiculturalism,
manifest as a particular ideology, one that determines the massively complex question of who
gains access to capital and who is excluded. At the same time, we might trace a disavowal of this
process, one that materializes so forcefully that it mobilizes powerful narratives about equality,
“freedom” and wealth that directly negate the present reality.

Therefore, it is not simply the economic and technological conditions that frame the
growth of the trade, but also the biotechnological, the biopolitical, and the classically ideological.
Interestingly enough, the exchange of human organs and tissues is regulated somewhat
nationally, in accordance with the World Health Organization’s system of “legal gifting” and
“anatomical gift acts.”31 Iran is currently the only country in which organ buying and selling is
legal, although other countries have sought legalization, and in many the trade is effectively
decriminalized.32 Classifying human body parts as not-for-sale, goods that can only exchange

31 In the United States, this falls under the Uniform Anatomical Gift Acts of 1968 and 1987,
which were revised and standardized in 2006. See United States, Uniform Law Commission, The
32 Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, working in the adjacent field of reproductive labor
and the oocyte tissue trade, make an excellent point about “the complicity of beleaguered, debt-
burdened national governments in competing for, promoting or at least ignoring the development
of markets in biomedical . . . labour in their countries” (64). The reality of structural adjustment
and the hardships of postcoloniality more generally ensure that, in some countries, there will be a
less rigid enforcement of national laws and international regulations regarding the organ and
reproductive tissue trades. Additionally, Rosi Braidotti points out that “the fresh supply of living
hands as “gifts,” raises an interesting set of questions in terms of ethics and temporality. Thinking through the “gift of life” and the future it connotes becomes especially compelling in light of Derrida’s discussion of the “gift economy” at the heart of his ethics. For Derrida, “the gift only gives to the extent it gives time” (41). Offered unexpectedly, the gift resides—if only briefly—outside of the economy of return, epitomizing delay in its deferral of exchange. While this idealized, excessive gift economy is impossible to sustain—return is in fact inevitable—Derrida argues that the gift represents the ethical imperative to the other, the always-ungraspable justice that we must continue to seek in the face of failure. If the international regulations for anatomical gifting align with Derrida’s gift economy, and are perhaps even exemplary of it considering the literal and symbolic future embedded in such body parts, organ and tissue trafficking, driven by the market into new, illicit avenues of production and consumption, emerges as particularly disturbing. Yet the realities of “compensated” and “coerced gifting” demonstrate the extent to which anatomical gift laws themselves are non-performatives, empty rhetoric meant to obscure a commitment to doing nothing. In this way, such laws align with how neoliberalism traverses the state with market politics, rather than with Derrida’s ethics and temporality of the gift.

A related but perhaps more fruitful point of entry into organ trafficking is not through the gift economy, but through the concept of debt that has become a major site of critical inquiry in recent scholarship. In The Making of the Indebted Man (2012), Maurizio Lazzarato argues that the “‘new economy,’ the information and knowledge societies, have all been absorbed by the

cells and organs relies on the developing countries: frozen fetuses from Korea or India; kidneys from Brazil; corneas from Columbia, etc. etc.” (51-2).

33 For a working definition of “non-performative” see Sara Ahmed, On Being Included, which I discussed in the Introduction. Ahmed locates non-performatives in the particular context of the contemporary university, where formal commitments to diversity—mission statements, diversity offices—often stand in for actual policies that would promote diversity.
debt economy [that] now occupies the entirety of public space” (8). For Lazzarato, neoliberalism defines a sociality that is based not in exchange, but in credit, a logic of debt that produces a universal subjectivity of “the debtor” who is always “accountable to and guilty before capital” (7). As the entrepreneurial directives and discourses surrounding the management and care of the self have shifted into “an injunction to take upon oneself the costs and risks of the economic and financial disaster,” more and more the burden of debt falls to the population, rather than to the (increasingly shrinking) welfare state (Lazzarato 9). In the debt economy, individuals are forced to mine—no matter the risk—whatever sources of accumulation (or mere survival) are at their disposal. Organ trafficking, in this context, brings a new dimension to a notion of resource extraction already conceptually stretched by human trafficking, sex work, and surrogacy. The literal, often highly visible links between debt and organ trafficking in this way not only manifest but reflect the structure of a debt economy, and the reality of vast wealth (and health) inequality means that simply cracking down on trafficking will only foreclose another means of survival for the world’s most precarious and vulnerable.

As with the gift economy, the debt economy also has an important temporal valence—finance capitalism roots us to the past and future in particular ways. Lazzarato finds that debt “appropriates and exploits both chronological labor time and action, non-chronological time, time as choice, decision, a wager on what will happen and on the forces (trust, desire, courage, etc.) that make choice, decision, and action possible” (55). If credit represents a way of inhabiting the present, the debt taken on works to both orient one toward a kind of severely circumscribed future and bind one to the past and its particular histories of inequality. Jodi Kim attends to the temporality of debt in an article on Manjula Padmanabhan’s Harvest (1997), a speculative drama on organ harvesting and selling. Mobilizing Hortense Spillers’s “American
grammar” and Saidiya Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery,” Kim argues that debt both relies upon and invents a “longue durée of the ‘nonevent’ of emancipation from a range of distinct yet related forms of unfreedom experienced disproportionately by gendered racial subjects throughout the globe” (Kim 224). In other words, debt might be a critical tool to help us understand the particular ways in which our present moment is bound to the past, and Kim uses the not-too-distant future of Harvest to show that identifying historical continuities (the enduring metaphors of enslavement upon which our very language is based, in Spillers, or the liberal individualism that structured slavery and continues to animate its afterlife, in Hartman) can constitute a radical discursive intervention. But examining debt not only attunes us to the echoes of the past that persist; as organ trafficking shows, “new biomedical technologies have made possible a shifting of the grammar of life to the future tense, or the chance at the indefinite extension of life, for those who can afford it.” (Kim 220). Kim’s caveat here demonstrates how “debt works . . . to vacate or evict the substantive meaning of freedom and to forestall the event and temporality of freedom as a ‘not yet’” (217). Unlike the gift’s promise of the future and its opening up of ethical possibilities outside the realm of economy, what the reality of organ trafficking offers up is not so much “a speculative bet on something that might be produced or invented in the future but,” instead, “the commodification of the very material, organic matter of . . . life itself as it exists now” (Kim 222). As Kim suggests in her analysis of Harvest, the multiple temporalities called up out of and produced by neoliberalism require the unique critical tools of the literary in order to be teased out.
Black/Red Markets

*Tropic of Orange* performs this literary intervention. The narrative locates organ trafficking at the intersection of new technologies, the economics of globalization, and logics of debt and the gift to ultimately show how its phenomenon manifests unique modes of neoliberal governance and sovereignty. Capturing the historical moment in which organ trafficking becomes a reality that nonetheless maintains an aura of the unreal, the fantastic, its plot, however, is actually buttressed by a scene that gestures toward organ trafficking’s conceptual precursor: human trafficking. The character of Bobby Ngu is a kind of unofficial refugee who fled Singapore with his younger brother in the 1970s and was allowed entry to the U.S. after being mistaken for one of the Vietnamese boat people. The various histories of violence, war, and (neo)imperialism Bobby’s character references are compounded and brought starkly into the present when Bobby finds that his young cousin from Singapore has attempted to immigrate illegally, and he is forced to pay a “Chinatown snakehead” smuggler an exorbitant amount to release her (97). Using trafficking to thematize capitalism’s touted global exchange, *Tropic* blurs the line between black market and free market, demonstrating how the former is simply a shining example of the latter.

The slippage—from free market to black market, economy to shadow economy—is taken up again by the organ trafficking plot when Gabriel, following a tip from a source, tracks down a woman and her baby at the airport, where they have just arrived, baggage-less, on an international flight from Mexico City. Following her to the hospital, Gabe hears that the woman “pumps her breast milk and brings it here every day.” At first he assumes that he has not stumbled on any illegal activity but rather one of the strange outcomes of neoliberal globalization: “International breast milk. Who’d a thought!,” Gabe remarks to himself (90-91).
However, this is a misrecognition, as Gabriel initially mistakes what is actually participation in the black market infant organ trade for a more acceptable form of reproductive trafficking. He soon learns, though, from Rafaela, who has discovered an infant heart in a cooler and overheard her neighbor’s son discussing sale and transplant on the phone, that this is indeed part of a greater underworld scheme. Thus throughout Tropic, the black market occupies a prominent position as an alternate economy in which the laws of capitalism are stretched to their logical ends, dictating the movement and exchange not only of commodities like drugs and oranges, but also of commodified body parts (organs) and even whole bodies. The human trafficking plot is unsatisfactorily concluded: while Bobby manages to rescue the girl, we are left with a sense of futility about what it has cost him individually, and a sense of inevitability about the endurance of human trafficking in general. The organ trafficking plot, on the other hand, is left completely unresolved. Gabriel sets up an online newsgroup in which a chatroom serves as a forum for “people claiming to have received illegally farmed organs” to discuss their ethical dilemmas, discovering only that the phenomenon is more widespread— and cheaper, as Emi reports that “Baby hearts are going for a mere $30 thou”— than he had guessed (247-48). He also receives the infant heart in the cooler, stolen and shipped by a reckless Rafaela, but, following the trail down to Mexico in hopes of uncovering someone named C. Juarez’s international crime syndicate, Gabriel leaves the cooler with Buzzworm and leaves the narrative as well.

Because the conceit of the trafficked infant heart is, of course, hyperbolic—in the real world, adult kidneys are the organ par excellence for buying and selling— this plot in Tropic returns us to the broader themes of embodied labor and accumulated value discussed above and embedded in the very real phenomenon of anatomical exchange. Calling the kidney “the blood diamond of our time,” Schep-Hughes explicitly links organ trafficking and its cast of
characters—sellers, buyers, brokers, in addition to surgeons and members of organized crime—to other forms of capitalist resource extraction, giving new meaning to terms like “commodity,” “labor” and “flexibility” in the process, and recalling Braidotti’s earlier words about bodies becoming “raw material.” Shital Pravinchandra extends this thinking and references Marx’s discussion of land as a commodity *par excellence*, noting that as a departure from understanding the body as reifiable labor, organ trafficking restyles the body not as a product of labor but as possessing value through its potential for the extraction of resources (4-5). Kalindi Vora articulates the temporal complexity of this reality, linking organ trafficking and labor and reproductive migration to make the case that an “excessiveness of certain parts, like the kidney, of particular family members, or even of certain arenas of existence, is produced in conversation with the production of need within the market.” In this way, Vora argues, one’s “second kidney and ‘spare’ family members are actually necessities that are made surplus and then commodified.” What *Tropic* and these critical texts ultimately show, then, is how the hyper-corporeal case of organ trafficking tugs at the seams of a neoliberal *temporal* fabric built upon the causal logic of supply and demand, a narrative that is at once an alibi for long histories of (always shifting and reconfigured) structural violence and the groundwork for unquestioned and prevailing logics of debt.

That organ trafficking encapsulates the paradoxical temporality of neoliberalism is something *Tropic* demonstrates throughout its hurtling narrative. Filled with mysterious villains, cyber-marketplaces for body parts, conspiracy theories, and trafficking in its various forms, the novel takes any warnings about the dangers of crisis rhetoric and throws them out the window. But in its feverish pace and fantastic elements, the text stretches the concept of “crisis” itself to its breaking point, drawing out its own time-space to the extent that the outlines of histories
emerge, broad structures of power and violence lose their inscrutability, and connections between various experiences of neoliberalism might be made across various sites of the globe. In this way, Tropic performs what Kim mentions above, in the context of Harvest, in terms of sketching out historical continuities. Perhaps the clearest example of this begins midway through the text, when a driver on a Los Angeles freeway bites into a cocaine-laced “spiked orange” and crashes his Porsche, causing a chain of accidents that leave the freeway gridlocked and boxed between two off-ramps that have become gasoline-fed infernos. The owners of the cars flee and a mass of homeless people, smoked out of the “dense hidden community living on the no-man’s-land of public property,” descend on the lot of empty vehicles, taking up residence in Cadillacs, setting up food stands in Volvos, fashioning gardens in the hoods of Mercedes, even shooting the news—featuring a cast of homeless anchors, reporters, and special correspondents—out of a van stranded in the diamond lane (120). A spectacular disaster recalling those that have been airing on Emi’s cable channel’s “disaster week,” the narration of this event is wrested from the network and broadcasted by the people themselves. An entirely new human ecosystem emerges, “life fill[ing] a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways” in an unidentifiable span of minutes, hours, or days. The reaction to this emergence, though, is solely predictable, manifesting the reinsertion of neoliberalism’s bureaucratic language of optimization and risk: as the citizens of L.A. “watched on TV sets or from the edges of the freeway canyon, there were the usual questions of police protection, insurance coverage, and acts of God” (121-22). The “coordinated might” of the country’s collective military and police forces respond to the citizens’ concerns over private property with a merciless airborne attack, a response, Tropic’s sometimes-omniscient narrator informs us, akin to the historical ways the U.S., that “most militaristic of nations,” has approached disputes with “tiny islands and puny countries the size of San
Bernardino” (239). Contained within the microcosmic space of greater Los Angeles, then, are the ghosts of former U.S. conquests, a whole timescape of colonialism stretching from the past to the future.

The extraordinary scene on the freeway—the creation of a new world between the lanes on a section of the I-5, and then its spectacular destruction—closes in a way that highlights what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness” (101). The scene ends with a concluding crescendo, as all the airbags in all the cars stalled on the freeway burst at the same moment. Here, the event-ness of a crisis exists alongside its slow, lengthy process. The real “natural disaster,” we might infer in the wake of this devastation, is human-made, a reaction to perceived threats to racial capitalism’s order and logic, a result of infrastructure and organized abandonment rather than nature. As Caroline Rody notes, this scene represents a shift in tone from the fantastic to stark political realism (143). The exceptional and the spectacular are punctuated with banality, and the pace of the text changes as well: “Somethin’ about all those airbags burstin’ on some kinda cue freaked out the population. The event had a spiritual quality,” Buzzworm thinks as he walks through the aftermath (263). While the TV stations replay the scene over and over in slow motion, their portrayal for once follows rather than dictates the perception of the direct observers, who hug and kiss strangers and co-survivors in relief. The moment does unfurl slowly, but it extends beyond the synchronized explosion captured on camera, moving through the mental lens of Buzzworm from the utopian to the horrific. The killing stops, but only “for a while,” we are told, signaling a merely temporary respite. And as Buzzworm continues to pick his way through the masses, he witnesses a group of homeless addicts barbecuing what he recognizes—but does not name for us—as illegally harvested infant organs. The baby hearts that Gabriel has been tracking

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along vast international networks have wound up in Los Angeles, like the rest of the hemisphere, to be literally consumed by the starving victims of this catastrophe. The scene thus presents a deeply cynical cycle whereby the slow death experienced under neoliberalism, accumulated to the point at which it becomes the material, corporeal commodity that is the harvested infant heart, is recycled through—even cannibalized by—the bodies picked for wearing out under a neoliberal regime. In this disturbing moment, realism and fantasy recede; the frenzied pace of crisis and the plodding pace of slow death are left in tension, irreconcilable, and yet both pointing toward the reality that something has gone horribly wrong. Thus ends Tropic’s organ trafficking plot and, in a few pages, the novel itself draws to a close, signaling to us that the exchange of human beings and their parts is not a horrific anomaly under capitalism’s new regime but a predictable result—and just one among many.

Policing the (Term) “Crisis”

Part of my interest in the formal style of Tropic has to do with what gets highlighted by its mode of juxtaposing the spectacularity of a hemispheric wrestling match or an explosive freeway disaster with the banality of U.S. American products moving to the Global South or the repeated rehearsing the history of colonial conquest. I follow the novel, therefore, to link the question of representation and narration to the difficulty of representing various crisis-events in our current era, where “crisis” is understood in the abstract as an urgent predicament demanding immediate attention, but in practice spans everything from healthcare to student loans, natural disasters, teen suicide and even, considered by some, the inevitable end of accumulation that will signal the ultimate collapse of global capitalism. Unbound by requirements of scale, cause, population, money, casualties, or speed, “crisis” might best be defined as, at heart, a rhetorical
weapon to be deployed, or as Lauren Berlant argues, “a redefinitional tactic, a distorting or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event” (760). Whether, as a tactic, the rhetoric of crisis succeeds in the misdirection of temporal shortening is less interesting than what makes it potentially aspirational to begin with. What, for example, does naming the global financial collapse of 2007-2008 a “crisis” do to our understanding of it? Does it spark political action? Obscure histories of racist, predatory lending practices? Initiate an investigation of its causes, or turn us myopically toward a future that leaves the current structure of finance capital in tact? Is the financial crisis a sign of continuity, the extension of longstanding economic traditions and broader formations of modern governance, or discontinuity, the eruption of something new? Furthermore, what is the significance of this particular event, one that crystallized the unequal impact of and consequences for existing in a debt/credit economy, in terms of temporality? If debt is now a dominant mode of inhabiting an utterly financialized world and structuring our relation to the future (or not), whose future was mortgaged in the subprime mortgage crisis and the subsequent massive governmental bailout and global recession?

Examining organ trafficking as “crisis,” then, I ask: aside from the necessary progress in medical transplant technologies, what economic and political conditions of the last thirty years have enabled the transnational exchange of human body parts? What ideological structures have made such exchange imaginable? I look to critical theory that attends to questions of temporality, debt, crisis, and the gift, alongside an examination of the novel to explore how organ trafficking might not simply be a test case, but a limit case, the exemplary example that stretches theory to its most productive ends. Using organ trafficking as a materialized polemic regarding temporality recalls Deleuze and Guattari on the “dislocation of spatiotemporal
continuity” and the consequent “schizophrenic time sequences” that characterize late capitalism, but maps this time in more material terms, onto and even into the literal bodies of capitalism’s human subjects. This move to address temporality also has the intended effect of raising multiple (related) issues about representation. If narrative is about progression and teleology, how do we tell the “story” of something like the organ trade, which magnifies the chaotic causality of contemporary life? What kind of a story does the trade itself tell us about neoliberal globalization, the changing routes of capital and labor, patterns of accumulation and dispossession, structural adjustment, and the new international division of labor?

The questions that circumscribe the predicament of “crisis,” swirling throughout Tropic’s narrative at varying speeds, highlight a problem of temporality and, in particular, the scope permitted under a neoliberal temporality of crisis. For instance, in the oft-discussed case of ecological crisis, the magnitude of the problem makes it difficult to conceptualize and, thus, act on. But on a discursive level, the way in which the notion of “crisis” itself has come to be represented already precludes the possibility of understanding something like slow-moving climate change as a crisis. Berlant articulates this difficulty, finding that the use of “crisis” essentially “aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis seems already to have called for” (760). The deployment of the term definitionally shortens the event in an attempt to enable us to wrap our minds around it (and then spring into action), but ironically, it masks our ability to comprehend the bigger,

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longer, and slower processes that have produced the event in the first place. Berlant’s syntax is revealing here: the absence of “heroic agency” thought to emerge from a crisis is shown to be a necessary condition for understanding a crisis as such, and therefore in a sense heroic agency is what produces the crisis after the fact. An apathetic response, by this logic, indicates that an event was never very important to begin with. Berlant’s analysis suggests that the temporality of crisis, coming into view in moments of causal confusion like this, or in the inability to recognize the dire circumstances that increasingly characterize ordinary life in our current moment, is what enables massive structural problems to persist—and even expand—under neoliberalism.

Looking at our current “time of crisis” takes on new significance when we follow the lead of *Tropic*, locating our analysis outside of World Systems Theory’s “center” and rather in the world’s “peripheral” spaces with the “crisis in time” opened up by the “material contradictions . . . embedded in the unfinished business of ending empire” (Hitchcock 2). Berlant argues that the “structurally motivated attrition” of our contemporary moment, which she terms “slow death,” restructures life such that it becomes not a movement of growth and reproduction but a belaboring activity of “maintenance, not making” (761). If, for Berlant, slow death “is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality” (761), for Achille Mbembe the very notion of a “state of exception” is premised on a modernity in which all subjects are considered equal and a corresponding normative democracy that is centered on reason, neither of which extends to what he calls “the postcolony.” Denied access to this privileged temporality, postcolonial bodies are written out of history’s progress and instead relegated to the dark, irrational sites of the “necropolitical.” Mbembe’s work challenges us to confront the existence of lifeworlds in which the banality of the everyday is not set against spectacular scenes of life and death, but intertwined with them—something that, of course, is vibrantly envisioned in literary
texts like *Tropic*. This reality “result[s] in new and unique forms of social existence,” Mbembe argues, “in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40). What “slow death” and “living dead” attempt to capture, then, are the temporal paradoxes of contemporary life, where life is not a measure of progress or worldmaking but an index of other means of maintenance and survival.

In this chapter, I examine the neoliberal phenomenon of the black market organ trade as a means of fleshing out concepts like “slow death” and “living dead” in order to sketch a temporal critique of neoliberalism and its attendant “crises.” Echoing Peter Hitchcock’s interest, in *The Long Space*, in the potential of the literary to examine *Tropic of Orange*, a work of global literature that incorporates various thematics of colonialism, I have attempted to tease out the long processes, historical continuities, and markedly non-teleological aspects of contemporary life that make it so hard to know, to talk and tell stories about, and to act on. My choice of organ trafficking as the center of gravity for exploring questions of time and narration—both in “the real world” and in the world of the novel—does not simply take up notions of slowness, longness, or non-teleological time and the altered politics and agency this kind of analysis unearths. The work of Berlant, Hitchcock, and Mbembe are all, in some senses, interventions that slow and lengthen in order to show how neoliberalism (1) reproduces its own conditions of production, and (2) obscures how its dominant temporal logic of crisis actively hides the

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36 While “global literature” is an entirely unsatisfactory label for Yamashita’s work, other rubrics fail to do justice to it as well. *Tropic of Orange* has been referred to as a “hemispheric” novel, taking place from South America to Los Angeles. This and other of Yamashita’s texts are clearly conscious of issues of colonialism and postcolonialism—but also of neoliberalism, gender, immigration, racism and multiculturalism. Yamashita herself is of Japanese descent, grew up in California, studied abroad in Japan, and spent nearly a decade living Brazil before returning to the United States (Wahlund and Zavilova). Due to its expansive scope and concern with questions of ecological crisis that recall the rubric of the “globe” that is used by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, I use “global” rather than “transnational” in describing *Tropic*. 
underpinning structures and processes that work to secure its future (one marked by vast disparities in wealth, failed structural adjustment, etc.). I ask, on the other hand, if we can use these temporal critiques and route them back through the more traditional scenes of crisis and the frenzied pace of contemporary global capitalism captured by the black market organ trade. Can we think through “slow death” in the context of speedy (or speedier) processes and crises? Can we articulate “the long space” that exists in short and small spaces as well? Can we mobilize these ideas not only to capture the slow deterioration of bodies under neoliberalism, but to theorize how bodies are being literally—and sometimes willfully, from both sides—cut open and taken apart? Can we use temporal critique not only in the service of capturing the “unending business of empire,” but the many small, unsatisfying endings, breaks, ruptures, and discontinuities of empire and racial capitalism? I suggest that this exercise might help maintain a sense of particularity that can get lost in looking at massive, slow-moving structures (and their crises) like racial capitalism.

While using one’s kidney as collateral for a loan, or selling one’s eggs or a child’s heart to alleviate massive debt might not technically serve as examples of slow death, I think the concept, particularly as it erupts in the pages of Yamashita’s text, might be usefully employed as a (slow-motion) lens through which to view such cases, as a means of articulating what kind of agency is at work, as well as what kind of purchase on the future such acts denote. Indeed, compensated organ “donation” may be simply an extreme form of these activities: while taxing on one’s body, it does not, in most cases, result in immediate death. And on the other side, receiving an organ can be a schizophrenic process as well, from finding a matching “donor” to waiting for signs that the organ has been incorporated into or rejected by one’s body, it can also rapidly improve the quality of life and lifespan of an individual. Whether organ buying and
selling verges too closely on the exceptional—although, the work of Scheper-Hughes and others suggests that it does not—is less important here than the stubborn dilemmas its example raises over temporality (and, hence, representation) within neoliberal aesthetics and biopolitics. I therefore examine how organ trafficking generatively reconfigures the expansive scopic tools of “slow death” and “the long space,” while in fact demanding literary techniques of narration to capture particular nuances as well as the difficulty of articulating a devastating material reality newly built into the experience of living (and dying, and everything in between) in the present.

This complex issue of representation raised by organ trafficking begs the question: if neoliberalism marks a crisis in time as well as a time of crisis, an expanding moment that makes it increasingly difficult to recognize inequality and its causes, what does intervention look like? Lauren Berlant’s “crisis ordinary,” underpinning the concept of slow death, gestures toward an answer. Registering along a series of stress points, slow death captures Foucault’s biopolitical notion of how certain populations under racial capitalism are targeted, “marked out for wearing out.” Berlant argues that rather than simply foreclosing agency, though, our new conditions of existence shift the very terms on which “choice” and “freedom” operate. Looking at the “obesity epidemic” in particular, Berlant notes that unhealthy behaviors like eating fast food, smoking, or failing to exercise are not unconscious habits, but rather modes of survival. Such choices do not quite register as active forms of resistance, but instead as evidence of what Berlant, echoing Mbembe’s “new and unique forms of social existence,” calls “lateral agency.” Eating—and eating badly—Berlant suggests, may be a way, under the increasingly exhausting regime of neoliberalism, to get through the day, to extend one’s body into the world in the most accessible means possible. The case of eating and obesity suggests that we “choose”—but peripherally, “laterally,” and with severely circumscribed options to begin with—slow death as a way of life.
The discourse of “crisis” can serve as a useful rallying cry for political movements that aim to address the structural inequalities mapped out by slow death. But, as Berlant shows, as a rubric that transforms process into event, “crisis” not only misses the nuances of agency and worldmaking that can be captured through slowness, it definitionally—and detrimentally—excludes them. Therefore, such theoretical work has the effect of subtly exposing what at first appears to be a problem of scope or scale as also a problem of time.

*Tropic of Orange*, with its various characters and, consequently, the radically differing speeds of narration through which it unfolds, manifests the multiple temporalities and the spectrum of agency this theory articulates in a way that, I argue, is critical for the kind of intervention neoliberalism’s massiveness and complexities demand. Bobby Ngu’s sections are in some ways the most frenetic and fast-paced, giving us flashing glimpses of the precarious life of an illegal immigrant working to support his family while existing outside the legal and linguistic frameworks of dominant U.S. culture. His character at once clearly highlights particular histories of imperialism, U.S. militarism and Asian/American racialization, and points to the neoliberal present such histories collude to produce. For this streetsmart, hardworking owner of a janitorial company, this present means labor. Since entering the U.S. as a child, Bobby, we learn, has “never stopped working”:


Cleaning up. Keeping up. (79)

This tediously repetitive passage mimics the monotony of a laboring life under capitalism. The list of manual jobs references commodities—especially clothes—as the products of labor, but also the result for the worker. Bobby himself gets reified by the end of the section: the objects of the verbs, at first things like “floors,” “hamburgers” and “brick,” disappear, signaling that it is Bobby himself who becomes built, torn, fixed, cleaned and kept up. Labor gets displaced through the syntax here in such a way that Bobby’s body becomes its object, allowing the very notion of work to expand in frightening and unpredictable ways, broaching even the terrain of survival itself, as “keeping up” becomes simply one more job. Through his labor, Bobby gradually builds for himself and his family an image of the good life: eventually in a position to start his own janitorial business, Bobby is able to buy a Camaro for his wife and fancy clothes for his son, and to furnish their home with expensive electronics. Bobby even takes out life insurance, noting at one point that “pretty soon he’ll be worth more dead than alive” (160). Molly Wallace argues that Bobby’s story, which is also an immigrant narrative, presents the way in which “becoming American” blurs with “becoming an American consumer.” Playing on the “visa” and the “Visa card,” she makes an excellent case for how “Yamashita’s United States is a landscape thoroughly mortgaged to global capital,” with “consumerism replacing nationalism” (Wallace 155).

Paralleling the wearing out through labor that Bobby’s plot narrates is his slow death through smoking—“Never stops smoking either. Gonna die from smoking. He can’t stop. Daytime, works the mailroom at a big-time newspaper. Sorts mail nonstop. Tons of it. Never

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37 Interestingly, three of the jobs mentioned cite recycling, indicating—in light of Tropic’s underlying ecological themes—that the circulation of commodities under capitalism is to a certain extent invested in activities that appear environmentally conscious, but in fact promote consumerism and waste.
stops” (16). These lines, highlighting the word “stop,” produce an interesting slippage between smoking, dying, the objects of labor (the mail), and labor itself. The mail—and his sorting of it—“Never stops,” but neither does Bobby’s smoking, nor the reality of death that hangs over this ceaselessly laboring life. However, like work, Bobby has a choice in the matter: “Gonna lose that smoking urge,” he decides when Rafaela leaves him (Yamashita 102). Yet, what we witness is not the overcoming of an addiction but its replacement, as Bobby takes up drinking pure ginseng instead. Slow death, marking a means of getting by and extending one’s body into the world—and the future—in any small way possible or imaginable, unfolds through Berlant’s “lateral agency.” Bobby knows cigarettes and excessive amounts of ginseng are unhealthy the way he knows that he is in effect working himself to death (which is the explicit reason Rafaela leaves him). While “Bobby got time to kill,” it is clear that time—slow time, the time of labor and of smoking—is really killing Bobby (Yamashita 97). Yet, American (consumer) identity and the good life remain an irresistible lure to him, as do the small pleasures of tobacco and caffeine that break up the monotonous workday. Through labor and a gradual, corporeal wearing out, then, Bobby’s plot parallels the themes of organ trafficking, an echo that is underscored by the multiple temporalities of his fast-paced sections capturing a slow, slow death.

While Bobby’s scenes capitalize on narrative speed and tedious repetition to produce a crisis in the neoliberal conceptualization of “crisis,” other plots—namely, Arcangel’s and Rafaela’s—use different formal techniques to rupture neoliberal timescapes. Rafaela’s storyline begins in Mexico on Gabriel’s peaceful, secluded estate where Rafaela has retreated with her toddler, Sol, to find some space for thinking about her marriage to Bobby and their frantic, exhausted life together in Los Angeles. It is here that Rafaela stumbles upon an organ trafficking ring specializing in the trade of infant hearts, and discovers that they may be targeting Sol.
Fleeing north, Rafaela and Sol encounter on their way a “villain,” a shadowy figure in a Jaguar, seemingly in concert with the mysterious “C. Juarez” who is rumored to be at the center of both the infant organ trafficking and the spiked orange conspiracies. The man captures Rafaela, whose screams “traveled south but not north.” Throwing her into his Jaguar there is a slippage between human and car as the man seems to transform into a jaguar, highlighting not only the shrinking distance between us and machines but also the absurdity—the insult added to injury—of naming ecologically destructive commodities like cars after animals and natural elements. In the midst of this violent struggle Rafaela herself transforms into “a muscular serpent—sinuous and suddenly powerful,” and the two “beasts” engage in a battle that recalls a flood of other battles:

Massacred men and women, their bloated and twisted bodies black with blood, stacked in ruined buildings and floating in canals; one million more decaying with smallpox; kings and revolutionaries betrayed, hacked to pieces in a Plaza of Tears, ambushed and shot on lonesome roads, executed in stadiums, in presidential palaces, discarded in ditches, tossed into the sea. And there was the passage of 5,000 women of Cochibamba resisting with tin guns an entire army of Spaniards . . . of one hundred mothers pacing day after day the Plaza de Mayo with the photos of their disappeared children . . . But that was only the human massacre; what of the ravaged thousands of birds once cultivated to garnish the tress of a plumed potentate . . . the scorched land that followed the sweet stuff called white gold and the crude stuff called black gold, and the coffee, cacao and bananas, and the human slavery that dug and slashed and pushed and jammed it all out and away, forever. (220-21)
This is a moment in which the magical erupts, signaling a narrative performativity of crisis that functions quite specifically: confronted with the familiar fantasy of the faceless, nameless “villain” who is responsible for the vast misfortunes of humanity, we recognize a familiar trope that is in fact a pillar of the neoliberal narrative. Forcing this dissonance upon us, then, Yamashita invites us to reflect on the ways in which the subtle, structural workings of power—not villainous men in Jaguars—drive a complex capitalist machine that triggers widespread poverty, ecological destruction, and (as this particular textual example shows) gender violence. The magic of this scene, therefore, allows us to see multiple things—or multiple times—at once: the particular moment of conflict, and its whole legacy, the “afterlife” of colonialism’s brutal project that extends even beyond the landscape of human drama to include the ravaging of the earth itself.

The temporal valences of Yamashita’s novel echo what Hitchcock calls “chronotopic critique.” Theorizing a “long space” that is at once a symptom and an aesthetic strategy wielded by postcolonial writers as a way of grappling with the constitutive problem of postcolonial narration, Hitchcock locates a refusal of the foreshortening logic of contemporary racial capitalism in postcolonial serial novels and epics. Because neoliberalism sutures together—albeit imperfectly—the history of the colonial past and the postcolonial present, literature can be a space in which to exploit this disjunction, counter “the historical inscription of the colonial and its attendant meanings,” and inject local history “into the truncated temporalities of globalization and transnationalism in their hegemonic formations” (Hitchcock 9). The long space, as it is performed through particular postcolonial narrative forms, is evidence of a strong yet versatile literary resistance to the universalizing goals of capital. The postcolonial-literary, Hitchcock argues, is not simply a symptom of or response to current conditions of globalization, but it
actively “concretizes the social” to produce a material spatial landscape out of an aesthetic strategy. Following Hitchcock’s argument, I hold up *Tropic* to capture this potential of literariness, a rhetorical move that has the consequence of doubling up on the issue of temporality as I gesture toward the ways the literary itself might provide a time-space in which to both see the structural *and* act with urgency to address a “crisis.” I suggest that *Tropic of Orange* offers tactics for finding something “truer” than the cold, hard facts of organ trafficking, finding that the literary becomes a way of grappling with how neoliberalism demands a particular relationship to temporality that prevents us from recognizing slow(er) violences or acting on urgent structural crises by making other temporalities visible and coeval. *Tropic*, like all literature, is free of the imperative to represent objective truth; it is therefore not only able to engage in a critical discourse of the very structures and institutions that circumscribe it, but, erupting with the magical, bursting with the excesses of science fiction and fantasy while nevertheless referencing the stark reality of poverty, immigrant precarity, gender inequality, and institutionalized racism, I suggest that this novel in particular represents the capacity for literature to play with time in a world-changing way.

**The Warm, Soft Facts of Organ Trafficking**

If *Tropic* embodies the fictional freedoms and linguistic play that enable the temporal contradictions and lateral agency of organ trafficking to be drawn out and held in tension, then the ethnographic work of anthropologist Nancy Schepet-Hughes is notable for its literariness: its story-like quality, rich metaphors and stylistic elements. Approaching the end of this chapter, then, I turn briefly and, perhaps surprisingly, to *non-*fictional work in order to recapitulate my argument about the value of literature in articulating the multiple temporalities of neoliberalism.
My goal is to mobilize the notion of “literariness” in a slightly different context, and thus to show how the temporal intervention such a discursive move performs can be activated across a range of representational fields. One of the opening quotes in the chapter by Scheper-Hughes—the one about the ethnographer following “a string of clues” across the globe, that so directly echoes the language of Tropic’s Gabriel in pursuing the baby heart conspiracy—perfectly captures the narrative literariness of this ethnographic work. In her more strictly journalistic articles, this tone remains: “The man sitting next to me, a Hindu surgeon in white robes, reminiscent of Hippocrates, was moved,” writes Scheper-Hughes of one encounter at the “Istanbul Summit of 2008, the defining moment in the global recognition of human trafficking for ‘fresh’ kidneys” (“Human”). “When I asked what he was thinking,” she continues with perfect delivery, “he replied: ‘... We in the South can agree that it is a tragic turn of events, but the demand comes from outside’” (“Human”). Recounting her experiences at the Summit, Scheper-Hughes uses dialogue, moves back in forth in time to add context and aftermath to the story, traverses various geographies affected by organ trafficking, and even intersperses statistics and charts to capture which organs are in highest demand, globally. The array of generic techniques recalls literature in addition to journalism and ethnography; indeed, the work of Scheper-Hughes often appears to invite a kind of literary analysis as well. How do we read the “surgeon in white robes” and his shrewd words? What do we make of the “character” of Scheper-Hughes who appears throughout as our first-person narrator?

Unlike many mainstream media articles, the work of Scheper-Hughes jumps scale from the particular stories of the beneficiaries and the victims of organ trafficking, to the massive networks of power that constellate the trade itself. In one case Scheper-Hughes writes of Vladimir, a young Moldovan man who was lured from his village with prospects of a job in
Turkey by a former well-known prostitute, now a “local kidney hunter” working for an “international organs mafia.” Once in Istanbul, Vladimir was coerced into selling one of his kidneys for $2700 to a wealthy Israeli who was waiting across town in a five-star hotel (“Parts”). Like many victims of organ and tissue trafficking without access to ongoing medical care, he died a year later from a post-surgical infection and kidney failure (Scheper-Hughes, “Human”). Vladimir’s story, like others told in and through Scheper-Hughes’s work, raises perhaps more questions than it answers, questions that are at the heart of debates on organ trafficking specifically, and neoliberalism more generally. While the Vladimir case is not one of organ theft—something that can and does occur to the dead and most vulnerable living bodies alike, according to Scheper-Hughes—the power dynamics in Vladimir’s situation are clearly troubling, and his compensation inadequate. And yet, the fact of choice is clear here, first in his pursuing employment in Istanbul, and then in his selling a kidney for money. Scheper-Hughes prompts us to ask: what does the language of agency authorize in this discussion, and what does it miss? Where do we assign (ethical or legal) blame? Do we prosecute the sick, wealthy Israeli staying in the fancy hotel, or the organ broker and her organization? And what would be the charge, in any case? While the removal of a kidney clearly contributed to Vladimir’s death, he lived for nearly a year after the surgery, and could presumably have been saved if he had access to post-op medical treatment: this was certainly a slow death in the most literal sense. The details in this story seem significant as well: the prostitute-turned-kidney-hunter, who re-styles herself as an “employment broker” when nearly half the Moldovan labor force began working overseas in the 1990s; the wealthy Israeli “waiting downtown in Istanbul’s most famous five-star hotel”; the fallout in the village in Moldova when men like Vladimir return with shame to their community’s disgust and the insistence that they “are no better than whores” (“Parts” 49). Small facts like these raise the
specter of broader structures that contribute to organ trafficking—migration, neocolonialism, new circuits of labor and capital, and shifting sites of accumulation—and also the particularities of gendered violence and survival, Israeli profiteering through the occupation of Palestine, and the violent impact of globalization on culture and community formations.

A dominant trope in Scheper-Hughes’s work is the shrinking world, a sense of space collapsing, throwing “strangers from different ethnic groups, classes, regions, religious backgrounds, political affiliations and nations into intimate contact for the procurement and transfer of tissues and organs” (“Parts” 33). This violent intimacy marks the dark side of globalization: the world has become smaller, not through the technology that enables instant travel and communication or a universal consumer-subject, but as disparate people are brought together in increasingly exploitative scenarios, the ultimate case being one in which the human body itself becomes a commodity, a natural resource to be “harvested” and exchanged. When Scheper-Hughes introduces us to one famous organs broker, Ray Arcella, in a small bayside village outside Manila, the sense of physical closeness is palpable: Ray, we learn, can “often be seen with his arm slung loosely around the shoulders of his young recruits.” Ironically, though, Ray’s metaphorical grip is not only a threatening stranglehold but also one of familiarity. He is part of a community that has limited labor options, since, Scheper-Hughes informs us, mechanization has eliminated the dock work that was formerly a major source of income, and his organ-selling advocacy is viewed as a viable option for helping to support one’s family (Scheper-Hughes, “Human”). If the particular form of capitalism glimpsed here represents a crisis in space that is the result of global economic patterns, it also, perhaps less obviously, reveals a crisis in time. The figure of Ray, a smiling stand-in for the massive networks of power and wealth that cannot be named, possesses an easy stranglehold on what is ultimately the future of the village.
Technologies of immediacy and various medical advances, enabling international organ trafficking as well as transnational surrogacy and adoption, shorten time for some while stretching it for others, even expanding certain temporal horizons into future generations. The case of organ trafficking goes beyond simply literalizing the multi-directional crisis of time, though—it also forces us to confront and conceptualize the time of crisis.

On the one hand, Schepere-Hughes presents narrations like Ray’s or Vladimir’s as continuities, located firmly within a longue durée and extending outward (and forward) the cultural patterns and economic trends of history. Teasing out a sense of duration has the effect, also, of providing affective texture to the actions of the characters in these vignettes. In other words, the desperation of individuals like Vladimir, or even the unnamed prostitute/broker, takes on a different significance in light of the drastically limited options for survival in contemporary Moldova, and so their decisions become imaginable through the narration of Scheper-Hughes. On the other hand, though, the anthropologist nuances organ trafficking as not exactly like the “slow violence” of ecological catastrophe or global hunger.38 It is this temporal tension—a lengthiness, a slowness that invites structural analysis alongside the rapidity of what is a quintessentially neoliberal predicament—that Schepere-Hughes gestures toward with the literary quality of her ethnographic narration. These complexities, and the ethical questions raised with them are, I would argue, only accessible through the freedom of literary space-time and the nuances of agency it opens up.

While the pace of Tropic of Orange is often frantic and the shifts between realist and magical registers confer upon each storyline a pervasive atmosphere of crisis, juxtaposed with these sections are moments in which the slowness of Berlant’s “slow death” unmistakably

appears, when the structural nature of neoliberal inequality stretches out. For example, the opening chapter is calm, quiet, and devoid of the obviously magical, as it follows Rafaela through her calm, domestic activities in Mazatlán, at Gabriel’s hacienda-in-progress. Rafaela plants cactus and peppers, oversees the workers building a wall along the property (and, it turns out, along the invisible Tropic of Cancer), visits her neighbor’s house to use the telephone, and cleans Gabriel’s property, sweeping up a “mound of dead and wiggling things” that include an iguana, a mouse, and, strangely—the house is located hundreds of miles from the sea—a crab.

From the opening page, then, Tropic hints at a crisis that is not flashy like the freeway disaster—there are no explosions or helicopters, for instance, and no twenty-four-hours-a-day news coverage—nor is it a particularly fantastic instance, but one equally disconcerting. The specter of ecological crisis thus haunts the text from its inception, framing the other, action-packed disaster sections with a slow-moving, less visible catastrophe.39

This environmental consciousness gets taken up by the character of Buzzworm, who, we learn, has “a thing for palm trees.” A kind of informal social worker/drug counselor/gang violence outreach worker, Buzzworm treks through the rough sections of East L.A. where he grew up, listening to the radio (his walkman headphones are a permanent fixture on him), chatting with street vendors, collecting a vast array of useless watches, and helping those in need. The palm trees are the only greenery to be found in this landscape. Buzzworm, astoundingly

knowledgeable about the history and species names of the “Family Palmaceae,” will lecture to anyone who listens:

I just want to let you know the age of these fine specimens. Been standin’ here a long time and will continue to long after you and I are gone. These trees’re like my watches here, markin’ time. Palm tree’s smart, knows the time for everything. Knows to put out flowers and fruit when the time’s right, even though out here don’t seem like there’s any seasons to speak of. Suppose we could learn something from a palm tree that knows the seasons better than us. (31)

Palm trees, for Buzzworm, represent natural harmony, something humans—who, for instance, ship and consume produce (like oranges) without regard to season—should “learn something from.” The trees also stand as figures of an ecological deep time or, perhaps more accurately, an alternate temporality, something Buzzworm with his armful of watches is uniquely sensitive to. Buzz, who explicitly draws this comparison between the trees and his watches, has a vast collection of time pieces that he freely admits are “[w]orth nothing to nobody but me.” But if we are led to assume that such watches—which include a “Seiko just-shake-me-up-no-winding” specimen, “a genuine 1961 Mickey Mouse original,” and “a square LCDer with big half-inch numbers”—represent a naturalizing of time in *Tropic*, the opposite proves true. Less time-pieces than conversation pieces, Buzzworm’s watches tell tales: “Every watch had a story. And with Buzzworm, just about every story had a watch or time or the philosophy which was as aforementioned: Time for everything” (29). Here, time becomes symbolic, something “marked” out by trees and watches that becomes meaningful through the narrative produced. Watches tell stories, like the long, twisted one Buzz tells about a man named Cisco; the tale, which features a
ghost who has come back to life to buy his pawned watch, ends with a clear lesson about time:

“Point is,” Buzzworm says, “Dead come back.”

Trees tell a story too, and not only about the southern California seasons. Buzzworm’s narration brings a kind of perspective into focus through the palm trees. For the most part, the trees go unnoticed by the busy residents living out their lives on the ground—for palm trees, Buzz admits, do not look like much more than “gray-brown poles” leading “up to the sky.” The trees themselves, though, mark out the unnoticed human lifeworlds below them:

you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever. Only thing you could see that anybody might take notice of were the palm trees. That was what the palm trees were there for. To make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed. And the palm trees were like the eyes of his neighborhood, watching the rest of the city, watching it sleep and eat and play and die. There was a beauty about those palm trees, a beauty neither he nor anybody down there next to them could appreciate, a beauty you could only notice if you were far away. Everything going on down under those palm trees might be poor and crazy, ugly or beautiful, honest or shameful—all sorts of life that could only be imagined from far away. (33)

Reflecting first on the urban reality of a contemporary city, Buzzworm articulates how the poor are routinely spatially cut off from the rest of the population, barricaded by freeways and stranded without public transportation in desolate, depressed sections of town. The palm trees signal this inequality: they “make sure that people noticed.” Marking out the often unrecognized

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40 For more on urban planning and poverty, see Sudhir Venkatesh, American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), and Mike Davis, City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (New York: Verso, 1992), which is actually cited in Tropic (80).
but vibrant lifeworlds that exist in those neighborhoods that are often rendered socially un-representable in the aesthetic regime of our current neoliberal moment, the palm trees not only tell the untold stories of the city—they also gesture outward, reversing the gaze onto the “rest of the city” in a way that signifies an agency for the most precarious subjects of capital. Caroline Rody argues along these lines in discussing the natural border—the Tropic of Cancer—that animates the action (and literal movement) of the narrative: she discerns throughout the novel “an ethical politics derived from a vision of human subsumption in a wider ecology” (Rody 140). But beyond—or perhaps in addition to—an ecological or planetary perspective that de-centers the agency of human actors and the temporality of capitalism, Tropic performs a radical intervention by taking seriously the lives that get skipped over and ignored by all but the palm trees. In other words, the novel embraces the literary to narrate multiple temporalities that coincide. Captured in the quote above is at once the space-time perspective of the palm trees, which enjoy an expansive view that renders the human drama below as only imaginable because so far away, and that drama itself, “poor and crazy, ugly or beautiful,” which, ironically enough, becomes part of the narrative that gives the palm trees meaning in the first place: “That was what the palm trees were there for. To make out the place where he lived.” This does not demonstrate an archaic view about the centrality of post-Enlightenment humanity, but rather the mutually constitutive nature of the planet and its inhabitants, and thus the necessity of maintaining focus on the ongoing issues of global inequality and identity politics. Therefore, what Tropic ultimately articulates in fantastic, often magical literary fashion, are the various temporalities that weave together our current moment, offering up in this way an intervention at the level of representation. Wrestling control of the narrative and telling multiple, jumbled, often incoherent and unending stories about watches and trees, baby hearts and natural disasters, families, loss,
life, and death, *Tropic of Orange* allows us a bird’s eye (or palm tree’s) view of the long histories
and broad structures of power that facilitate a slow death for wide swathes of the world’s
population today, while also glimpsing particular moments—past and present—that register the
significance of such global processes, and dictate our commitment to their eradication.

I have argued in this chapter that the literary has a unique ability to short circuit the
representational problems posed by neoliberal globalization by holding up multiple,
nonequivalent temporalities for us to see/read. As an exemplary example, organ trafficking
demonstrates this condition of multi-temporality, capturing the urgency and speed of a global
危机 and also the slowness of structural attrition and the “wearing out” of slow death. What the
case of organ trafficking demands, then, is a literary space-time that is flexible and expansive,
able to jump scale and shift between past, present, and future seamlessly, and to hold these
various times in tension. This is why the ethnographic work of Scheper-Hughes so often departs
from the typical conventions of social science genres to embrace elements of the literary:
employing a less dynamic (or, in a Bakhtinian sense, “dialogic”) lens would fail to capture the
multiple temporalities of neoliberalism that organ trafficking ultimately diagnoses.

I end this chapter, finally, with a device in *Tropic of Orange* that perfectly plays out the
dynamism and potentiality of the literary: “the grid.” We first glimpse the grid in one of
Manzanar Murakami’s music-inflected sections. The character of Manzanar, Rody has
suggested, is a possible stand-in for the author: Yamashita is “a writer who seems, like her alter
go Manzanar, to view our collective life from a position of unusually expansive vistas” (Rody
131). Manzanar’s gift, alongside his remarkable ability to hear and “conduct” all the sounds of
the city in a vast symphony, lies in seeing his surroundings as a series of maps: “The uncanny
thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent
windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial
discernment, body politic” (Yamashita 56). This “grid” is made up of countless layers, including
underground civil utilities like gas and water pipes, sewage, and electrical and telephone wires;
above those, the layers of sidewalks and roadways; houses and vehicles; and finally, people, the
mass of humanity that carries out its existence on and within this grid, for the most part
unwittingly. This human component of the grid includes “which police departments covered
which beats; which local, state and federal politicians claimed which constituents; which kind of
colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where; . . . which schools got which kids” (81).41
Furthermore, the grid stretches out temporally, a sedimented history both geologic and
anthropologic, as well as the root system that will propagate the future. Ultimately, the grid is,
for Manzanar, an “organic living entity. It was nothing more than a great writhing concrete
dinosaur and nothing less than the greatest orchestra on Earth” (37). On the one hand, the grid
pulses with the harmonious significance of this “orchestra.” Tropic, in other words, literally
bursts with the literary to the extent that it performs an aesthetic crossing, spilling over—in
Manzanar’s sections—into the musical and, thus, an alternate way of knowing (the city, the
crisis, neoliberalism, etc.). On the other hand, though, as a former surgeon, the grid’s analogy to
an “organic living entity” is also compelling for thinking about Manzanar’s character as
possessing a unique capacity to diagnose the literally collapsing world around him, and to

41 This quote actually comes from one of Buzzworm’s sections, and is therefore filtered through
his perception, not Manzanar’s. In some ways Buzzworm’s view is opposite from Manzanar’s:
his is a view from the ground rather than a bird’s eye view of the city. However, I would argue
that this actually gives his character an equally important—if different—take on the world-
altering events that unfold through the course of Tropic. In fact, while Manzanar may indeed
represent a kind of “alter ego” of the author, as Rody argues, Yamashita consistently refuses to
bestow any (single) viewpoint with “the truth” or the ability to perceive all. Rather, as the novel
itself demonstrates and performs in various ways, the complexities of contemporary life demand
many views, voices, and understandings.
identify the problem as being in some way tied to the human body. *Tropic’s* grid is, therefore, a metaphor for the time-space of the literary itself.

As a meta-literary device, the grid gestures toward the strategies required for cutting through the difficulties posed by representation in the neoliberal era. The rhetorical framing of crisis rhetoric, the altered conditions of possibility and of agency in our current moment of “structurally motivated attrition,” and dominant logics of credit, risk management, and debt hail a conceptual-temporal shift that increasingly cloaks ongoing inequalities and violences. Ultimately, I find that the literary has the potential to intervene in this multivalent discursive problem, making visible the multiple temporalities through which neoliberalism unfolds. I turn, in the next chapter, to what the literary—reconfigured as a verb to indicate processes and practices of reading—can enable in terms of productive, performative strategies that resist normative cultural scripts. By extension, this shift looks to the disciplinary regimes that structure our canons, disciplines, and very modes of reading, asking what critique the dynamic space of the literary, as theorized here, might offer against hegemonic formations like “literature,” “world literature,” or the institutional site of the neoliberal university.
CHAPTER 3

“TOO THIN FOR JELLY, TOO THICK FOR JAM”

UNRULY BODIES AND RADICAL (MIS)READINGS IN ARUNDHATI ROY’S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

“even the very differences which have always been read as symptoms of inadequacy are capable of being re-read transformatively as indications and figurations of values radically opposed to those of the dominant culture”
—David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed

The previous chapter traced the bodies and body parts caught up in the anatomical black market, examining how the organ trade represents a triumph of racial capitalism and its logic of crisis and debt, and consequently presents a challenge to particular modes of representation. With Tropic of Orange, I argued that the literary provides an opening for confronting this problem, creating a space that enables multiple temporalities to unfold such that the discursive force of crisis rhetoric can be managed, slow-moving structural processes discerned, and swift political action imagined. After examining the literal body parts that get circulated in today’s global economy, I move in this chapter to investigate how bodies as subjects of various and overlapping disciplinary formations betray a fundamental messiness from which a kind of emergent or resistant potential might be seized upon. With Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, I argue that such potential can, once again, be realized in literary fashion: the unruly bodies conjured by the text possess a latent ability to read against the grain, to apprehend dominant social scripts differently, and to “write” their own narratives outside the bounds of severely circumscribed possibilities that mark the neoliberal present. In other words, this project’s overarching argument about the potentiality of literature to mobilize an analytic of embodiment and therefore intervene in the dematerializing logic of neoliberal multiculturalism
not only gets taken up in this chapter but complicated by broader questions about the organization of knowledge, disciplinary formation, and institutionality.

*The God of Small Things* follows the story of twins, Estha and Rahel Kochamma, who grow up in Ayemenem, a small fictional town set in India’s southwestern province of Kerala. Shifting between the 1970s, when the twins are seven years old, and the 1990s, when a grown Estha and Rahel reunite after being estranged for twenty years, the narrative uses the upper-class and upper-caste Kochamma family’s personal dramas to stage broader (national and global) crises. The lingering presence of caste ideology in India, slotted easily into the biopolitics of neoliberalism that determine the value of particular subjects and populations for capital, the devastation of certain spaces in the wake of globalization, the continuing effects of empire and its racial violences—these are the larger contexts that circumscribe the intimate, family plotline.42 When Estha and Rahel’s nine-year-old cousin, Sophie Mol—the half-white, British

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42 Caste in contemporary India is extremely complex, made up of interlocking formations of social and political stratification, and resulting from long, complicated histories involving the intersections of religion, colonialism, race/racialization, geopolitics, etc., that I do not have sufficient time to fully unpack here; rather, I offer some preliminary notes. Jāti, or “birth,” is made up of thousands of social groups, a social hierarchy that is endogamous, based on occupation, and often region-specific. On the other hand *Varna*, which translates as “color,” is the broad system of class that divides Hindu society, made up of *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaisyas*, and *Shudras*. Falling outside this hierarchy altogether—or, rather, below it—is the class of “untouchables,” “outcastes,” or “depressed classes,” the historically abject group marked by “impurity” or “pollution.” Since the 1930s, when reservation laws were enacted to curb class discrimination and establish affirmative action quotas in education and employment, untouchables have also been referred to as “scheduled castes.” Despite such legal protections, today Dalits (a re-appropriated term used by members of scheduled castes to describe themselves) continue to face discrimination, exclusion, and violence in various forms. The U.S. State Department’s 2001 annual report to Congress on human rights world-wide stated: “Dalits are among the poorest of citizens, generally do not own land, and often are illiterate. They face significant discrimination despite the laws that exist to protect them, and often are prohibited from using the same wells and from attending the same temples as higher caste Hindus, and from marrying persons from higher castes. In addition they face segregation in housing, in land ownership, on roads, and on buses. Dalits tend to be malnourished, lack access to health care, work in poor conditions . . . , and face continuing and severe social ostracism.” See Department
daughter of their Uncle Chacko—comes to visit them in Ayemenem, there are predictable consequences to this (neo)colonial encounter, reconfigured and re-staged. For the first time, the twins come face-to-face with whiteness, something that they recognize from cultural productions exported to India (their favorite movie is *The Sound of Music*), but that takes on new meaning in the face of their entitled cousin. But there are more material consequences as well. Shortly after Sophie Mol and her mother, Margaret, arrive at the Kochamma home—where Estha and Rahel live with their mother (Ammu), uncle Chacko, grandmother (Mammachi), grandfather (Pappachi), and great-aunt (Baby Kochamma)—the twins decide to run away. When Sophie Mol learns of their plan she demands to come along, but is a weaker swimmer than Estha and Rahel, and drowns in the river. Her death sets off a series of events that conspire to doom the twins and their fierce, socially outcast mother. Chacko’s grief, alongside Baby Kochamma’s spite and the deep prejudice of Mammachi, lead to a false accusation of Velutha, a Dalit employee of the

of State, U.S.A., Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2001, (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 2002), [http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/sa/8230.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/sa/8230.htm). I rehearse this history to say that Roy’s novel emerges out of and references a very specific set of historical, political, and social circumstances that are neither equivalent to nor removed from the other contexts that frame the chapters in this dissertation. For instance, India is considered a hub for violations stemming from the illegal organ trade, and predictably people from Dalit and other marginalized communities are the most at risk (see Dalit Freedom Network’s site at [https://dfn.org.uk/](https://dfn.org.uk/) ). Chapter 4, which will look at how the neoliberal university in the U.S. registers a specific history and patterns subjectivities and collectivities through its political debates, for instance, over affirmative action, invites an engagement with this examination of caste in India—in particular, the system of reservation put in place to address caste—which raises many similar questions about the saliency of quotas, although the hierarchies and groups are quite different. In other words, both the divergences and the overlaps matter in this project of tracing out the material effects of neoliberalism as a world-historical formation. For more on caste, class, and contemporary India, see Gerald D. Berreman, “Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification,” *Race & Class* 13.4 (1972): 385-414; Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001); André Béteille, “Varna and Jati,” *Sociological Bulletin* 45.1 (1996): 15-27; Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss, and Craig Jeffrey, *India Today: Economy, Politics, and Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009); Frank de Zwart, “The Logic of Affirmative Action: Caste, Class, and Quotas in India,” *Acta Sociologica* 43.3 (2000): 235-49.
family’s factory who is the twins’ surrogate father figure and Ammu’s secret lover. In the end, Velutha is murdered by the police, Ammu is exiled by her family (and eventually goes mad), Estha is “Re-returned” to his father in Calcutta (he is so traumatized that he eventually goes mute), and Rahel is left with her toxic extended family to become a vacant, haunted young woman who emigrates to the United States.

Affect, the senses, and the body play a significant role in *The God of Small Things*, not only giving texture to the violent material effects of colonialism and racial capitalism, but fundamentally shaping the narrative style itself. Focalized through two seven-year-olds, Roy’s novel takes on a kinesthetic, tactile quality: the texture and pigmentation of skin, moles, stretchmarks, and birthmarks; the fascinating experience of vomiting; the “bottomless-bottomful” feeling of loneliness and the “angry feeling” that radiates from one’s toes; and the “sourmetal smell” the children learn to associate with police handcuffs—all these are catalogued throughout the text. Alternately, what might be considered the “Big Things” in this book—the intimate drama of the adults, circumscribed within the greater politics and “History” (always with a capital “H”) of postcolonial India—“lurk unsaid inside” (Roy 136), or in other words are left to haunt the margins of the story. Ultimately the novel is intensely interested in these “Big Things,” and yet it is only through the titular “Small Things”—not so much in the sense of banal conversational exchanges but rather the small, material things that are observed, felt, tasted, heard, touched, and smelled—that we come to understand the real significance, and often the human cost, of these larger narratives. A particularly compelling example of this occurs in the affective response of Baby Kochamma, the twins’ great-aunt, when she first learns of the affair between her neice and Velutha, and Untouchable:
she shuddered her schoolgirl shudder. That was when she said: *How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans.* With that olfactory observation, that specific little detail, the Terror unspooled. (233-34)

The “Terror,” a term that stands in for the horrific series of events that unfolds after Ammu and Velutha are discovered and Sophie Mol drowns in the river, is catalyzed by Baby’s sensorial judgment, one that is accompanied by the childish glee of a “schoolgirl shudder.” Significantly, this “particular smell” is a “little detail” that nonetheless conjures up all the baggage of India’s caste system and its legacy of colonialism. However, Baby’s loaded observation is more than simply a portrayal of the ways in which prejudice gets routed through and mapped onto particular bodies: she raises a legitimate if, unbeknownst to her, somewhat ironic question. In light of the general agreement among the “Touchables” that “these Paravans” “have a particular smell,” how can Ammu stand to be with Velutha? Why has she not been steeped in the “Touchable logic” (72) of the rest of her family, a logic that has in fact become illogical, affective and visceral—something that is “real” not because it can be argued for, but precisely because it can be smelled?

As with Baby’s observation of Ammu’s olfactory noncompliance, *The God of Small Things* turns on small, potentially radical failures in the network of power that is supposed to produce good subjects whose bodies neatly conform to its sensory regime. Referred to as the “Love Laws” throughout the text, a term that highlights the potent combination of colonialism grafted on to the caste system and enduring into the post-colonial era of neoliberal globalization,

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43 Baby’s response is, furthermore, highlighted formally with italics, a conspicuous lack of quotation marks, and repetition: these lines are repeated twice, verbatim, as if they signify not only an important moment but a turning point in the narrative.
this is the hegemonic cultural script that, we are reminded again and again, continues to “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.” Early on, we learn that this is a novel about a family of “transgressors”—in ways that go beyond smell to encapsulate other, at times more complex, bodily transgressions. Reflecting back, Rahel notes:

They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly. (31)

While this passage at first seems to describe a kind of collective nonconformity to normative familial roles, by the end it becomes clear that what is actually being transgressed are proper modes of embodiment and the relational positions that are supposed to follow from them. Like the banana jam at the Kochamma’s pickle factory, deemed illegal by the Food Products Organization because of its consistency (“[t]oo thin for jelly and too thick for jam” [31]), Ammu, Estha and Rahel are punished for failing to inhabit their bodies properly—for literally failing to “smell” (an untouchable, Velutha) correctly—and ultimately for using their bodies to love the wrong people, in the wrong ways. This chapter asks: what might such forms of embodiment, and the kinds of unruly affects and intractable bodies that accompany them, enable or activate? What kind of potential might be glimpsed in wrong-smelling, rogue feelings, dreams, willful misreadings and scandalous, unsanctioned sex—in other words, in all the ways in which bodies do not simply bend to discipline, in the moments when power is not total, and in scenes where individuals are affectively propelled against being good, obedient subjects? And what do the patterns of these ruptures tell us about our current moment of rapidly increasing structural
inequality, and about the ways we organize knowledges (and literatures) in the service of learning that moment, its histories and futures?

**World-Literary Scandal**

I open this chapter with a moment of olfactory rebellion to sketch the corporeal contours and frame the material stakes of a multi-faceted debate about reading, “world literature,” and the very rubric of the “literary” in which Roy’s work found itself upon its publication in 1997. That year, the Booker Prize, a prestigious award accompanying fifty thousand pounds and incalculable literary prestige on a single novel from the British Commonwealth, was presented amidst controversy to *The God of Small Things*. The novel had already become a bestseller as well as the object of substantial yet mixed media attention and reviews. Arundhati Roy, quickly catapulted to the status of celebrity, was hailed as the first Indian citizen—and the first woman of Indian origins—to win the prize. Some critics raved about the book, finding her unflinching treatment of contemporary Indian life beautiful and compelling. Many celebrated the novel’s unique play with language; Alice Truax of the *New York Times Book Review* commended its “rogue capital letters, nonsense rhymes and unexpected elaborations” (qtd. Aldama 54). Some critiques, though, were less favorable for a range of reasons. Despite a generally positive review, John Updike called Roy’s style “overwrought” in the tradition of Faulkner, noting that this was another example of the classic American novelist’s “powerful influence upon Third World writers, his method of torturing a story, mangling it, coming at it roundabout after pretentious detours and delays” (qtd. Aldama 54). Indeed, many critics took up this theme, not only

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expressing frustration with the novel’s style and language but calling it derivative. Paul Rutman wrote that he wished “some kind soul had confiscated all copies of James Joyce when Ms. Roy was a little girl” (qtd. Aldama 54). Of course, comparisons to Salman Rushdie, who had won the Booker in 1981 for Midnight’s Children, were abundant as well; Lisa Jardine noted sarcastically that The God of Small Things was charged with unoriginality “because it was about India (and hadn’t Salman Rushdie already ‘done’ India?).” The response of lay readers was mixed as well. While the novel became an international bestseller, in India crowds protested in an attempt to ban its sale in bookstores across the country. Even a legal suit was filed against Roy, charging her with obscenity and calling for a removal of the novel’s last chapter which depicts an affair between a Syrian Christian woman and an untouchable. On the other side of the political spectrum, some took issue with the way in which Roy portrayed communism, arguing that this, rather than any kind of aesthetic merit, was the reason the book became so popular in the west.\textsuperscript{45} Amidst this fervent literary storm the Booker Prize ceremony garnered widespread attention, erupting into controversy when Carmen Callil, chair of the award’s judging panel from the previous year, on television just minutes before the announcement of the winner called The God of Small Things an “execrable” book that should not have even been shortlisted (Glaister).

Beyond the telling whiff of corporeal repulsion lurking behind Callil’s words, the underlying issues that fueled this debate are as varied as the opinions of the novel. The Booker itself, a literary accolade awarded to authors from the Commonwealth, is unambiguously tied to the remnants of British colonialism, and questions about national origin, authenticity, and fair representation are frequently raised in the aftermath of the yearly ceremony. The God of Small Things in particular raises the related issue of language, not only in terms of its unique style

\textsuperscript{45} See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad’s article, “Reading Arundhati Roy Politically,” Frontline, August 8, 1997. 103-08.
(commented on in nearly every critical write-up and review), but of Roy’s controversial choice to write in English. In an interview, the author explains her linguistic decision:

There are more people in India that speak English than there are in England. And the only common language that we have throughout India is English. And it’s odd that English is a language that, for somebody like me, is a choice that is made for me before I’m old enough to choose. It is the only language that you can speak if you want to get a good job or you want to go to a university. All the big newspapers are in English. And then every one of us will speak at least two or three—I speak three—languages. (Twain)

The way in which Roy discusses English here mirrors how it appears in the novel: ambivalently, with a clear sense of the stakes and power underpinning a “choice” that is already “made for me before I’m old enough to choose.” Ultimately, the debate about language choice that gets taken up both in and by the novel represents the larger dilemma about how to deal with literary history as it has been influenced by colonialism. Beyond the question of language or the knotty predicaments of shifting borders and national name changes, even the generic labels that the Booker relies on—“novels,” “short stories,” “magical realism,” “fiction”—are tied to culture, in particular, the culture of European literature. This in turn raises more questions, less anchored to the narrow confines of a multi-national literary award than gesturing toward the ways in which all literature—especially that which emerges from the Global South—gets organized, institutionalized, taught, and ultimately produced and encountered as literature.

Indeed, much recent academic scholarship refers to “world” literature as a “problem.” Critical work in literary studies has long consumed itself not only with the ethics of comparison, but also the question of the politics—and methodology—of textual selection, the discursive
Brickley 99

grouping and material gathering (resulting, in the most obvious case, in the world literature anthology textbook) that occurs even before the act of comparison. A fierce interrogation of both “world” and the “literary” has manifested in myriad approaches to this problem and its host of related issues, not limited to questions of geography, scale, disciplinarity, theory, economics, globalization, postcoloniality, and history. David Damrosch pragmatically calls for a definition of the literary as “whatever a given community of readers takes as literature,” and uses this focus on actual readers to characterize world literature as “encompass[ing] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation, or in their original language” (Damrosch 14, 4). Pascale Casanova, on the other hand, articulates a “world republic of letters” through economic metaphors, sketching the realm of the literary through the movement of competition and the spatial contours of stratification, or the “opposition between a capital . . . and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to this center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it” (Casanova 12). Franco Moretti uses World Systems theory to outline a similarly spatialized configuration of world literature that is dependent on notions of “center” and “periphery,” but employs a methodology of “distant reading”—a kind of macro-approach that represents both a literal and figurative stepping-back from the myopia of close-reading—to better capture the global “literary system” (Moretti 57-8). All of these approaches raise as many problems as they address—an issue that perhaps comes with the worldly territory. Who gets included in these particular iterations of “world literature?” What is the linkage here between “world” and the Global South, and between these loaded signifiers and those such as “center” and “periphery” offered up by the scholarly participants in this critical conversation? Why do the very terms of this debate often employ economic metaphors and take for granted the imagined
geographies of neoliberalism, or fail to question the uniformity and one-way-ness of globalization?

In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak weighs in on the aesthetic politics of this debate, arguing not only that a certain kind of world is *produced* through the designation of “world literature,” but also that the label of “literariness” is reserved as a form of European access to a world that forecloses the possibility for the non-European world to be literary (11-13). Literatures of the world’s marginalized people, therefore, often bear the burden of portraying history or sociological glimpses of its peoples, and therefore of teaching the global elite about cultural difference. *The God of Small Things*, emerging out of its complicated reception as a conflicted classic to be both placed on “banned books” lists and taught in “postcolonial” and “world” literature classes across the globe, and furthermore with its author now occupying a(n) (in)famous position as an anti-globalization activist and writer of mostly nonfiction works, is uniquely positioned to address these issues. While Spivak proposes an “aesthetic education” as the seat of imaginative thinking that might refuse the uniform uncritical (she often calls it “transcendent”) economic logic of neoliberal globalization and its modes of organizing and disciplining knowledge, I find that the novel also offers an approach, one originating in the ruptures caused by corporeal or affective unruliness, that I call *performative reading*. In effect, both texts imagine a set of tactics that mobilize (or “ab-use,” which Spivak means to “use from below” [11]) play, (mis)reading, undisciplined learning and creative resistance to critique disciplinary frameworks of “world literature,” the system of knowledge production that determines what formations like “world” and “literature” might mean, and the logic that frames getting to know cultural difference as a neoliberal knowledge
project in the first place. It is thus through its intervention into standard ways of reading, conceived in the broadest sense as the interpretation of language, bodies of literature, and even neoliberal narratives about equality within various institutions, that I examine *The God of Small Things*. The novel, I argue, offers up performative reading as a potential refusal tactic that originates in the gaps, ruptures, and fissures of overlapping systems of power—formations like neoliberalism and neocolonialism, but also the international division of labor and reproductive heteronormativity—and its consequent production of unruly bodies that do not fit smoothly into their disciplinary regimes. In other words, if this dissertation as a whole investigates embodiment as a kind of hermeneutic for reading the processes, patterns, “crises,” and events of the neoliberal present, this chapter in particular locates the body at the center of discourse and finds it “messy,” uncontained and uncontainable, then draws out this quality to anchor resistant reading practices that might not only face down specific instances of violence, but productively disrupt and disorganize accepted knowledge formations like “world literature.” *The God of Small Things* ultimately refuses the logics of literary “circulation” and resists being fixed as a knowable (literary) body of difference, instead reading back(wards) against the broad systems of power that dictate hierarchies of both bodies and literature.

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46 I use “tactics” here following Michel de Certeau, to indicate the ordinary practices by which individuals make their way through the world and “manipulate the mechanisms of discipline”—from which they are never outside of or removed from—“and conform to them only in order to evade them. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: California UP, 1984).

47 “Performative reading,” as an active form of embodied engagement, recalls José Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification,” the flexible process by which minoritarian subjects respond to, identify, and resist the phobic majoritarian culture of the public sphere. For Muñoz, disidentification is “a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance” that is also “a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production” that always “require[s] an active kernel of utopian possibility” (25). In other words, as a mode of performance that produces a certain orientation (toward the dominant), performative reading draws heavily from disidentification in framing such performance through the interpretive.
Unruly Bodies, Sensible Revolts

The unruly bodies in Roy’s text are animated by a set of conditions of possibility, and therefore *The God of Small Things* sketches a particular picture of our current moment and, specifically, contemporary India. Its opening chapter gives us a literal walk-through of this setting as we follow the thirty-two-year-old Estha around his old hometown of Ayemenem. We are introduced through his character’s eyes to “the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans”; “new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks, who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places”; “the village school that [Estha’s] great-grandfather built for Untouchable children”; “the Tender Buds Nursery School (for Touchables)”; and the “Office of the Communist Party,” its flag “grown limp and old” with the red all “bled away” (Roy 14-15). Revealed here in the vivid language of “shit smelling” rivers and “freshly-baked” houses are both the fictional setting and the novel’s historical conditions as a material object. While today India is considered a rising global power, boasting the world’s tenth-largest economy and largest democracy, its history of the 1980s and 1990s is fraught, leading various scholars to trace many of the country’s persistent problems of social inequality to this period. Waquar Ahmed argues that “the coercive power of global governance institutions has worked in tandem with the interest of the local elite to produce neoliberal changes in India,” and that such economic changes have manifested as a polarization of power, wealth, and education in Indian society (37). We see this clearly in Estha’s description, as the narrator describes economic as well as ecological devastation in Ayemenem, and a continuing divide between the scheduled castes and the privileged upper classes and castes. References to “Gulf money” and “World Bank loans” are also significant here. 1980s India witnessed a growing support for privatization and a capital-friendly government, and legislation...
was enacted that paved the way for big business to expand as state involvement was increasingly limited. During this time, business elites had led the charge against—and ultimately weakened—the reservation system that benefitted the nation’s scheduled castes and tribes in both the public and private sectors. The end of the decade and the beginning of the 1990s, however, which saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of Hindu nationalism, the Gulf War, and surging global oil prices, produced a geopolitical crisis in India that rapidly manifested the economic and social trends of the 1980s. Borrowing from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, India was forced to undergo a program of structural adjustment, adopting neoliberal policies that shifted its economy away from agriculture, making “trade policy ‘reforms,’” and cutting “budgetary deficits by reducing expenditures, even if such expenditures [were] geared to producing local development or promoting strategic and vital industries” (W. Ahmed 48). Ahmed and others have analyzed these effects to argue that “neoliberalism has been accompanied by a disproportionate rise in the political and economic power of the urban elite,” and that “neoliberal policies benefit only this small segment of the Indian society and neglects the poor, vast majority of whom continue to live in villages” or in massive, urban slums (W. Ahmed 49). Thus from the outset The God of Small Things announces its investment in sketching the complex contours of its own historical moment and position, defined by the particulars of ecological crisis, structural adjustment, war and its corresponding international flows of labor, ongoing conflicts of race, class, and caste, and politics in contemporary India; in other words, its moment is one of lingering colonialism and neoliberal globalization.

This chapter locates such material conditions at the animating center of the novel’s unruly bodies, and traces in the potential embedded in these bodies the roots (or perhaps Deleuze and Guatarri’s “rhizome”) of resistance I label “performative reading.” Again, returning to the
opening example: how does Ammu’s basic inability to smell in the appropriate “Touchable” way signal a kind of productive failure from which other forms of critique might be launched? How does this affective “failure” materialize in the first place? It is striking how the members of the Kochamma family—most notably the vulnerable four-person, non-traditional family at the heart of the story—are defined by their bodies, and in particular the corporeal messiness and boundary crossings they perform. Most obvious is the case of the novel’s main focalizers, seven-year-olds Estha and Rahel. They are “two-egg” (dizygotic) twins who are “physically separate” but strangely have a “single Siamese soul,” allowing them to share memories and other sensations. We learn that, although they do not resemble one another physically, their “confusion lay in a deeper, more secret place,” and that they think “of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us” (Roy 4-5). Their mother Ammu is described as an “unmixable mix” of “reckless rage” and motherly “tenderness.” She is literally a walking contradiction that is revealed when her “safe mother-walk” transforms into “another wilder sort of walk,” hinting at her deep-seated “Unsafe Edge” (Roy 43). Velutha, who has joined the Communist-Marxist party, is an adept carpenter and a skilled fixer of machines. Mammachi, with “impenetrable Touchable logic,” remarks that, “if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (Roy 72). Velutha’s defiance lies in his “lack of hesitation,” “unwarranted assurance” and, like Ammu, “the way he walk[s],” all of which defy his caste (Roy 73). His boundary-crossings are not only social but linguistic: “He was called Velutha—which means White in Malayalam—because he was so black” (70).

This last example in particular gestures toward the way in which this corporeal messiness might in fact be produced by the very institutional and disciplinary structures that are meant to police difference and bodies. Achille Mbembe uses this language in *On the Postcolony*, casting
colonialism as a mode of disciplining bodies with the aim of making them more productive, and the colony as a place where the experience of violence was built into a society’s structures and institutions (Postcolony 115). For Mbembe, the postcolony, then, is “chaotically pluralistic” (108), an “emerging time” or a palimpsestic “period of embedding” in which instants, moments, and events are lived on top of and inside one another (6, 115). Because of this, the postcolony is a site of real and continued violence, a location “par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization’” (“Necropolitics” 24). The picture Mbembe sketches of the postcolonial here, therefore, involves thinking through imperialism as an Enlightenment project rife with the discourses of rationality that coincide with these ongoing politics of civilization. In the Introduction, I summed up a general critical argument about how aesthetic philosophy is a constitutive sorting that produces a hierarchy of modern subjectivity, with those deemed not sufficiently rational through this aesthetic encounter—those unable to access the disinterested realm of judgment—excluded from the privileged space of reason itself. Indeed, this thwarted sublimation that gets lodged in and performed by the bodies of racialized and colonized subjects materializes in the raucous, full-body laughter that takes hold of Mbembe’s postcolonial subject: laughter “mobilizes the whole body and all its parts. One does not simply howl with laughter. Every organ is seized with trembling” (Postcolony 203). Instances of corporeal messiness like these—in the novel and Mbembe’s theory—might then be eruptions of a kind of basic bio-resistance, a refusal of bodies marked by neoliberal (post)colonialism to fit neatly within its disciplinary logic. As Mbembe states, laughter can provide a refuge or even an amorphous form of critique, as “individuals, by their laughter, kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to examine its own vulgarity” (109).
However, the potential for agential critique glimpsed in Mbembe’s raucous postcolonial body is fundamentally unsettled by its own unpredictability, as the forceful reflection of power’s “own vulgarity” is only “by accident.” Baby Kochamma, one of the most reactionary characters in *The God of Small Things*, demonstrates this. Baby’s nose, conditioned to “smell” (and to be disgusted by) lower caste bodies like Velutha’s, hints at the ways in which affect is produced and the viscera trained by various and overlapping institutions, and gestures toward the olfactory’s long history of being bound up with questions of politics and power. Hotly contested during the period of rapid industrialization in the Victorian era, for instance, sense of smell was viewed alternately as non-rational and therefore untrustworthy, but also by some as “a self-evident truth, a deeply-embedded common ‘sense’ that could offer a reliable because instinctive form of knowledge” (Parkins). Victorianists like Wendy Parkins, Janice Carlisle and William Cohen argue along these lines that the shifting sensorium of the time requires a new, affective hermeneutic by which to unpack its changing social formations and material spaces. Specifically smell, linked more intimately with the body and physical proximity and thus considered one of the “lower” senses, might allow particular insight into the experience of everyday life and the ways in which inequality was registered by the Victorians. Putting pressure on the body by highlighting affect and smell in particular de-emphasizes a model of subjectivity structured around agency and rationality, opening up new ways of interpreting ordinary practices, everyday attachments and, ultimately, the personal and political negotiations of individuals navigating the complex and shifting sensorial terrain of a particular present. While Baby Kochamma’s sense of smell adheres to the affective framework of neoliberal

postcolonialism, then, Ammu’s rebellious senses signal the gaps and failures of such a framework. Discarding with traditional “lenses” and, indeed, with the metaphorics of vision the very term “lens” connotes, *The God of Small Things* feels out—or smells out, as it were—the tenuous spaces in which power might fail and new affects and identities materialize.

However, Baby Kochamma does not escape the corporeal messiness experienced by the other, more sympathetic characters in *The God of Small Things*, a fact that highlights the complexities of agency—and the dominance of unpredictability or Mbembe’s accidental—in such a discussion. An old, fearful woman addicted to television and the western products she buys from its shopping channels, Baby dyes her hair black and starts wearing lipstick in her old age. When Rahel returns from the U.S. after twenty-three years away, she finds her aunt with “a shadowy second hairline” from the dye and a “lipstick mouth” that has “shifted slightly off her real mouth” (22). John Lutz argues that Baby’s “entire appearance bespeaks duality” and “call[s] attention to a . . . discrepancy that registers the difference between Baby’s seemingly innocuous appearance and the ruthless self-interest that enables her to inherit the family’s wealth” (Lutz 62). However, I find that this “discrepancy” or “duality” begins to move us toward how *The God of Small Things* figures the body itself—before the agency of active resistance or conscious scheming—as fundamentally uncontainable, a feature that might be seized on to “laugh” in the face of power or, in Baby’s case, left simply to remain smudged traces on skin. Berlant’s theory of slow death becomes useful in this context, as it centers on the question of agency. Drawing not on old models of sovereign power and rational choice, Berlant’s “lateral agency” is about survival and maintenance under severely circumscribed conditions of life. Spilling out and over, crossing fleshy boundaries, experiencing the wrong sense perceptions or walking in the wrong way, none of the bodies in *The God of Small Things* adhere perfectly to the rules that are meant
to govern them, including Baby’s. The way these characters perceive their world, though—what, exactly, they smell—can tell us about the overlapping systems of power that pattern the viscera of their everyday lives. Injecting a staunchly material element into lateral agency, then, I read scenes like these as the accidental ruptures produced by formations of power that are far from uniform.

The messiness of Baby Kochamma’s body and the rebelliousness of Ammu’s sense of smell recall what Hardt and Negri, mobilizing a less-discussed aspect of Foucault’s biopower, call “biopolitics.” Their ethico-political project in Commonwealth is to recover the body and its potential in order to stage a multivalent, revolutionary shift that at once reconfigures subjectivity and identity, and reframes collectivity through the figure of “the multitude.” A “counterpower” (rather than an outright opposition) to biopower, Hardt and Negri define biopolitics as “the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity” (57). This resistance is the kind of complex response theorized in Roy’s novel, particularly through the characters of Estha, Rahel, and especially Ammu and Velutha. As Hardt and Negri state, the biopolitical’s

first axiom is that bodies are the constitutive components of the biopolitical fabric of being. . . . [T]he second axiom [is that] where powers are continually made and unmade, bodies resist. They have to resist in order to exist. . . . history is determined by the biopolitical antagonisms and resistances to biopower. The third axiom . . . is that corporeal resistance produces subjectivity . . . in the complex dynamic with the resistance of bodies. (31)

Pointing out that bodies are produced in the interstices of power, Hardt and Negri argue that, similarly, bodily resistance—the biopolitical—forms out of the ruptures within the network of
biopower. The body that takes shape is an articulation of the biopolitical. In other words, the stubbornly material body represents a kind of resistance on its own, and it is within this struggle that subjectivity is fashioned. Finally, the body and resistance occupy a dialectic similar to that of the body and desire: the body articulates resistance, but resistance produces the body. Indeed, it is this dialectic that propels the movement of history. Putting pressure on this reversal, Hardt and Negri are able to imagine a biopolitics that occurs before conscious revolt, at the level of the body itself, and to employ this mode of resistance for the purposes of driving a wedge into the cracks of subjectivity, to theorize a possible “de-subjectification” (Hardt and Negri 59) that might prove useful in more traditional political arenas.

Hardt and Negri provide a useful language with which to understand how the bodies that populate The God of Small Things “resist in order to exist.” It is clear, in other words, that the bodies of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, Rahel, and even Baby Kochamma are produced by the network of social and material conditions that surround them: for instance, Ammu’s “seven silver stretchmarks” and long hair, or Velutha’s labor-wrought muscles, or Baby’s beauty product-induced doubleness—some of which are examples I will return to. However, power—productive and affirmative as well as punitive, disciplinary and necropolitical—is never fully able to reign in the potential of this messiness, this corporeal uncontainability. The novel therefore not only foregrounds the body in its sophisticated treatment of neoliberal globalization, it also offers up what this potentially subversive body might do, how it might be seized on to achieve a position marginally outside of History and its fiercely enforced “Touchable Logic,” and ultimately how it wields the unique political potential of radical critique.
Hybridity and Performative Apprehension

Homi Bhabha offers a generative point of entry with “hybridity” for thinking through such messy bodies. The potentiality of the “two-egg twins” or the olfactorily-deficient body of Ammu find parallels in the postcolonial theory of *The Location of Culture*, which turns on performativity to sketch the rituals—and the surprises—embedded in the colonial encounter. Bhabha frames this argument with the symbolic figure of the “English book,” which stands in metonymically for an imperialist epistemology in a number of colonial texts. This figure, Bhabha claims, only becomes intelligible through its use in the civilizing mission, revealing colonial authority as a product—rather than a pre-existing force—of the cultural encounter with the other. The English book is therefore an “enunciation”—a kind of performative utterance—that articulates itself into existence and must continue to do so repeatedly, in order to maintain the illusion of its own authority. While each iteration serves to sediment this authority, a tenuous discursive space (what Bhabha calls a “Third Space”) also opens up within the différance of colonial power/presence, which is revealed as “neither original nor identical” through repetition (Bhabha 150). Thus, the violence of the colonial encounter is twofold: on the one hand positive, literal and physical, and on the other, negative, realized in the excessive disavowal at the heart of the colonizer’s fantasy of his own presence.

Bhabha argues that this ambivalent violence—embodying both subjugation and denial—produces a unique subjectivity of the colonized, distinct from that formed out of the self/other dichotomy in phenomenology or the Marxist master/slave dialectic. Because colonialism is engaged in this elaborate disavowal—because, in effect, it is always (repeatedly) caught up in a performance of denying its own performativity—it operates not simply via domination but interpellation and cultural hegemony. Unlike the master/slave relationship, which signals the
mutually-constituting opposition rooted in a particular hierarchy, the colonizer/colonized
dynamic outlines a more complex set of ideological requirements. Thus, not only does the
colonizer rely on the colonized for its authority and presence, it demands a kind of compulsory
performance from the colonized. Keeping with Bhabha’s scenario, imperial power is not content
with military domination: it must too fashion the colonized other into an always-inadequate
colonized (cultural and political) subject. The ambivalence of colonial violence allows Bhabha to
theorize the hybrid subject: “the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as
something different—a mutation, a hybrid” (153). Taking up the performance of hybrid
subjectivity more explicitly in other chapters of The Location of Culture, Bhabha names this
affect “mimicry,” the “representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (86).
Mimicry, then, is a tool wielding “resemblance and menace” at the same time; by “continually
produc[ing] its slippage, its excess, its difference,” mimicry thus subtly acts out an embedded
structural critique of colonial authority (Bhabha 86). However, while mimicry represents a
resistance that employs the body, hybridity marks a prior resistance of the body: before agency
and resistance, hybridity demonstrates an inherent corporeal messiness. The hybrid subject of
Bhabha’s text is, therefore, “almost but not quite” and “almost but not white.” Such a
classification contains within it a refusal on the part of the always-intractable body to accept
these terms and the regulatory colonial apparatus they stand for. In other words, the broad
critique undertaken by Bhabha’s mimicry points back to this earlier instance of corporeal
resistance and the inability of the postcolonial regime to contain/control the body, or to produce
uniformly obedient social bodies (and subjectivities) in the first place. Configured as an
“almost,” the hybrid body of the colonized—before agential subjectivity, before the performance
of identity—signifies a perpetual state of becoming and thus possesses a powerful potential for resistance.

In the context of the novel, then, how do the characters of Ammu and Velutha seize on the potential of their own uncontainable or “hybrid” bodies, enabling them to ultimately conduct a love affair that is so risky it proves punishable by exile and death? This chapter is therefore concerned with not only the accidental but generative unruliness of hybrid bodies like those in *The God of Small Things*; it is also interested in the tipping point, the moment at which messy bodies become bodies in dissent, capable of wielding rebellious readings of dominant neoliberal and neocolonial narratives. Unsurprisingly, this turning point originates with a scene that portrays a literal meditation on the body. Standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom on the day of Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma’s arrival, Ammu examines her naked image. She observes the “seven silver stretch marks” on her stomach, resulting from her pregnancy with the twins and serving as a metonym for motherhood in general, and has “that cold feeling on a hot afternoon that Life had been Lived . . . [she] gathered up her heavy hair, wrapped it around her face, and peered down the road to Age and Death through its parted strands” (Roy 211). This is a significant point in the text for Ammu: a break in the action with the English in-laws and a rare moment alone, this scene in the bathroom witnesses a double-sided epiphany. On the one hand, as the narrator notes, “it wasn’t what lay at the end of her road that frightened Ammu as much as the nature of the road itself. No milestones marked its progress. No trees grew along it. No dappled shadows shaded it” (Roy 213). The life that is marked out through the lines on her body is dutiful and predictable.

However, this realization comes at the moment Ammu’s character ceases to be dutiful. In hindsight, we can see that the confrontation with her body in the bathroom and the fear “that Life
had been Lived” comes after the significant dream-sequence in which Ammu’s desire for Velutha—who is cast in her “afternoon-mare” as “the God of Small Things”—is belatedly realized. In the dream, Ammu yearns for a one-armed man whom she does not touch, and who cannot touch her. However, the two “just stood together. Still. Skin to skin.” While neither can actively touch the other—a result of the shadowy and menacing circle of observers that surround them—in the end we find that they are already standing “Skin to skin.” Significantly, then, the social codes that bar Ammu from physical contact with Velutha—he is literally (an) untouchable—materialize in the dream and yet fail to matter: their bodies have already pressed themselves together. “Skin to skin,” then, appears to come prior to the act of reaching out to touch. Haunted by this dream, Ammu’s enlightening encounter in the mirror takes on new meaning, becoming the turning point of perhaps the entire novel, but certainly for her character. Alongside the lines of “Age and Death,” Ammu discovers other writings on her flesh, tracing her body’s refusal to be contained, its demand to be “read” and to embrace pleasure outside the confines of the “Love Laws.” This alternate corporeal reading must remain a subtext, though: while “the Air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say . . . at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside” (136). Ammu’s initial moment of bodily resistance—before action, in the instant desire emerges—escapes representation and is instead articulated through silence. “By not mentioning his name, she sensed that a pact had been forged between her Dream and the World. . . . She knew who he was—the God of Loss, the God of Small Things. Of course she did” (210). Here, the God of Small Things captures intimacy, the state of two lovers standing “Skin to skin” just outside of History and the Love Laws that are the domain of the God of Big Things.
While the corporeal unruliness of hybridity is in some senses woven into the very fabric of neoliberal and neocolonial biopower, some bodies—those that pose a threat to the logic of the rules themselves—unwittingly poke holes in its ideology, fundamentally challenging what *The God of Small Things* names the “Love Laws,” or the intimate regime that designates “who should be loved, and how. And how much.” The violent disciplining of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, like the outlawing of the unclassifiable banana jam/jelly, reveals the limits of which kinds of, and how much, corporeal play will be tolerated. However, in contrast to Baby Kochamma’s made-up countenance, it is the less-acceptable corporeal unruliness of the novel’s central four that actually affords them a degree of critical distance; because their bodies are not easily incorporated into the neoliberal/neocolonial regime, they achieve marginal freedom in a way Baby does not. This distance opens up the possibility for what I call performative reading, a kind of interpretive refusal that does not quite achieve the active opposition or degree of agency of Bhabha’s mimicry, but that might well come first. Indeed, Ammu’s silence regarding her dream—Velutha indicates not an announcement of desire but rather its discernment, a prior recognition of what her body senses as already there. In other words, performative reading is produced out of and capitalizes on hybrid, corporeal unruliness, mobilizing a non-rational, affective mode of hermeneutics that builds on—or really, backwards from—Bhabha’s theory of mimicry to potentially open up alternate readings of dominant social scripts. The text is indeed rife with literal and thematic scenes of reading: English literary and cultural references abound to become complex sites of intertextual engagement, and—quite literally—the novel stages a number of performances of backwards reading.

*The God of Small Things* offers up this transgressive hermeneutics as a mode of reading against different “scripts,” from the repressive Love Laws to broader knowledge formations.
Performativity, as I will track it in the novel, represents a pushing back against not only the discourses of world literature that framed the opening of this chapter, but also the neoliberal move toward abstraction that gets played out in narratives of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” with which this dissertation as a whole is concerned. More than simply “offering up,” then, the novel subtly demands a performative meta-reading, refusing to let its reader maintain her reliance on stale neoliberal tropes that might, for example, obscure the implications of Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol’s white, English bodies traveling to post-independence India to meet their brown-skinned relatives, or miss the neoliberal politics embedded in the inter-caste romance plot of Ammu and Velutha. If my argument is that The God of Small Things performs a (meta-)reading project in this way, such a claim weighs the reflective and diagnostic valences of hermeneutics heavily, offering the text’s scenes of resistant apprehension as powerful political acts borne of the generative uncontainability of the body. As I sketched hybridity through Bhabha to name the corporeal unruliness that appears in The God of Small Things, I turn now to the theory of Antonio Benitez-Rojo in order to similarly anchor the performative reading I trace throughout Roy’s novel.

Repeating Island is centered around representations of the Caribbean, which Benitez-Rojo defines as a kind of “meta-archipelago” that “has the virtue of neither a boundary nor a center . . . [and] flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance” (4). This project—to analyze the Caribbean as “processes, dynamics, and rhythms that show themselves within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent, the heterogeneous, or, if you like, the unpredictable that coexists with us in our everyday world” (3)—is, like Mbembe’s, enormously helpful in sketching the ways in which the postcolony is a particularly fraught neoliberal site of
negotiation and conflict over who controls meaning.\textsuperscript{49} The history of colonialism is an important presence within these “dynamics” and “rhythms,” and Benitez-Rojo reminds us that framing the unfolding of history as a repetitive process works to obscure the originary encounter and distort narratives of continuity that are often mapped onto the Caribbean. Postindustrial society, he notes, gets “into the habit of defining the Caribbean in terms of its resistance to the different methodologies summoned to investigate it.” Using a compelling textual metaphor, Benitez-Rojo argues that this is a kind of “first reading” in which one only reads oneself in the text, as opposed to the “kind of reading in which every text begins to reveal its own textuality” (2). Thus, the quality of the Caribbean is itself “textual,” a layered geographical imaginary that strikingly resembles Mbembe’s conception of the palimpsestic postcolony as a dynamic narrative (\textit{Postcolony} 115).

\textit{Repeating Island} therefore dodges the essentialist trap of defining a particular (Caribbean) cultural aesthetic the way \textit{On the Postcolony} does with Africa: it opts to trace how that aesthetic operates, what kind of critical work it accomplishes, rather than what an essential Caribbean aesthetic might look like. It is in outlining this critical work that Benitez-Rojo locates the overtly political dimension of Caribbean cultural performance: what might be considered a (post)colonial theatrics of resistance. Using the refrain of performing “in a certain kind of way” to articulate the indefinable particularity of a Caribbean aesthetic, he goes on to acknowledge that “[t]he only useful thing about dancing or playing an instrument ‘in a certain kind of way’

\textsuperscript{49} My promiscuous use of theory in this chapter is not meant to conflate or equate postcolonial spaces like the India of Bhabha’s \textit{Location of Culture}, the Africa featured in Mbembe, or the Caribbean at the center of Benitez-Rojo’s \textit{Repeating Island}. And while I acknowledge—and attempt to flesh out—the particular context of \textit{The God of Small Things}, I track in the novel thematic threads that weave together elements from these theoretical interventions. I also aim to texture neoliberalism as a world-historical formation with particular iterations of “the postcolonial,” and to inject broad issues of empire into the specific social and economic processes, practices, and effects of neoliberal multiculturalism.
lies in the attempt to move an audience into a realm where the tensions that lead to confrontation are inoperative” (20). Thus, cultural (and, in this scenario, explicitly artistic) performance most obviously functions in community formation and, perhaps ironically, in neutralizing “confrontation.” Later, Benitez-Rojo unequivocally states that “to do something ‘in a certain kind of way’ . . . is an attempt to sublimate violence” (21). This refrain also shows up in Benitez-Rojo’s description of observing “two Negro women” who capture the Caribbean by walking “in a certain kind of way.” While on the one hand this is about history and syncretism—the “loam of the civilizations that contributed to the formation of Caribbean culture”—on the other hand the ethos described with the two women is about performativity (Benitez-Rojo 11). The Negro women literally act out the Caribbean with their walk, a kind of citation that recalls Bhabha in echoing the colonial encounters of the past, and also references the gender performativity theory of Judith Butler in how subjects are interpellated as social beings through and by gender. But not only do the Negro women act out the Caribbean, they “conjure . . . away the apocalypse” with their steps (11). A kind of pacifism underpins the performance of this postcolonial aesthetic, marking out a nonviolent theatrics that animates a subtle, shifting critique. Like mimicry, Caribbean cultural performance embodies the possibility of resistance without relying on opposition. Acting “in a certain kind of way,” Benitez-Rojo argues, thus enables a progressive cultural politics with the potential to neutralize the (echoes of the) violent and traumatic colonial encounter.

While *Repeating Island* articulates many of the nuances of Caribbean textual aesthetics and performance, moving on to describe Carnival and its incorporation of the masquerade, I am actually interested in its point of departure, the initial step of cultural performance that is a kind
of performative apprehension. Presenting his definition of “the culture of the Caribbean,”

Benitez-Rojo writes:

If I were to have to put it in one word I would say: performance. But performance

*not only in terms of scenic interpretation* but also in terms of the execution of a

ritual, that is, that “certain way” in which the two Negro women who conjured

away the apocalypse were walking. (11, italics added)

Briefly mentioning the provocative notion of a “performance” of “interpretation,” why does

Benitez-Rojo not give a more in-depth treatment of *his* experience of the Caribbean aesthetic

(for, after all, *he* is the observer of the two Negro women)? In privileging the active, Benitez-

Rojo constructs a gendering of cultural performance that passes over the enormous potential

embedded in the performance of hermeneutics. Indeed, while celebrating the “more reflexive

forms of aesthetic experience” of irony and improvisation, Benitez-Rojo ignores perhaps the

most reflexive experience of all: reading (21). Shifting the focus from *acting to interpreting*—

and perhaps unsettling this distinction altogether—*The God of Small Things* restores a sense of

performativity to the act of reading. In other words, the novel draws attention to the productive

potential of reading in a cultural context—a potential that is, like gender performance,

circumscribed but also possessing a degree of freedom often left untapped.

Reading is a trope that is hard to miss in *The God of Small Things*, and it is often

performed in a hyper-ironic, reflexive way. The twins are avid readers who consume texts far

above their age level and quote Rudyard Kipling and Shakespeare to one another. And yet their

readings are often tinged with mischief. More than ignoring the rules of grammar, Estha and

Rahel dismantle the English language: they read and write backwards, shift letters, delight in the

sounds—the *physical* experience—of words rather than their meanings, disrupt the system of
signification by re-naming the objects around them, and repeat words and phrases to the point at which language becomes meaningless, or, on the other hand, more meaningful. Perhaps the most subversive aspect of their reading practice has to do with Estha and Rahel’s penchant for reading backwards. This activity is introduced early in the novel, in a passage laden with irony:

A yellow hoarding said BE INDIAN, BUY INDIAN in red.

“NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB,” Estha said.

The twins were precocious in their reading. They had raced through Old Dog Tom, Janet and John and their Ronald Rideout Workbooks. (57)

On the one hand, the “precocious[ness]” of the twins’ reading is revealed as a product of their somewhat startling ability to read backwards off the cuff. Showing off linguistic skills in this way is linked, on the other hand, to the twins’ overall superior reading comprehension: they read at a much higher level than the children’s books of their age range. However, embedded in the twins’ backwards and advanced reading practices is another valence of critique, hinting at the ways in which the kinds of performative reading demonstrated here undermine broad structures of power symbolized by language. Thus, Estha’s backwards-reading of the sign destabilizes its ontology of neoliberal consumer-nationalism without ever directly confronting its message. The list of traditional English children’s books that is quickly listed and then dismissed as below the

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50 Bhabha is useful again here in offering up the useful concept of mimicry. Bhabha describes the colonial subject’s identification with the colonizer as performed through imitation, which results, intentionally or unintentionally, in “a flawed colonial mimesis” (87). In other words, the (individual or collective) colonized subject may mimic the actions of the colonizer, but such a performance will never bridge the implicit gap—between being English and being Anglicized, to use Bhabha’s example. Thus, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (86), and the colonial subject is famously relegated to the frustrated, ambivalent status of “almost but not quite/almost but not white.” Interestingly enough, because mimicry contains within it both sameness and difference, “resemblance and menace,” Bhabha suggests that it can become an effective tool if it “continually produce[s] its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86).
twins’ level is highlighted, and not only in its juxtaposition with the Indian context established by the sign.

These transgressive reading practices are highlighted again a few paragraphs later, when Baby Kochamma’s Australian missionary friend visits, bringing for the twins yet another children’s book that falls far below their reading aptitude:

First they read it forwards. Miss Mitten, who belonged to a sect of Born-Again Christians, said that she was a Little Disappointed in them when they read it aloud to her, backwards.

“ehT serutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS.
enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerriuqS ekow pu.”

They showed Miss Mitten how it was possible to read both Malayalam and Madam I’m Adam backwards as well as forwards. She wasn’t amused . . . .

Miss Mitten complained to Baby Kochamma about . . . their reading backwards.

She told Baby Kochamma that she had seen Satan in their eyes. nataS ni rieht seye.

They were made to write—In future we will not read backwards. In future we will not read backwards. A hundred times. Forwards. (58)

Here, the cultural and political undertones are more explicit. It is significant that Miss Mitten is a westerner, a “Born-Again Christian” who does not even know what the Malayalam language is, nor is she amused at the second palindrome’s playful comment on the story of Genesis. For her, the English language represents a cultural system to be preserved and respected—“English,” clearly meant to be read only one way (“Forwards”), does not embody any of the reflexivity of Malayalam or the twins’ backward code—and Miss Mitten therefore understands their linguistic
play as a threat to be extinguished. Seeing “Satan in their eyes,” Miss Mitten even unwittingly gestures toward the corporeal roots of such rebellious acts, in the process missing that the twins’ radically unique mode of reading is a gift, a performative talent with the potential to open up alternate interpretations—of linguistic texts but also cultural performances and social scripts. Indeed, Miss Mitten’s limited capacity for reading actually prompts her demise: she is killed a few months later by a milk van pulling out in reverse, an irony that Estha and Rahel, clearly more adept readers, do not fail to miss.

This scene with Miss Mitten is extremely dense in terms of its own content, but also in the critical work it accomplishes for the text as a whole. The various moments and methods of reading in/of *The God of Small Things*, perfectly captured in this early passage, take place in a kind of neocolonial conceptual space, framed by the cross-cultural experience that uncannily evokes Bhabha’s colonial encounter. Roy thus bypasses Benitez-Rojo’s “repeating” postcolonial echoes, mapping onto her narrative the world-shrinking, time-compressing reality of globalization in which the discursively violent colonial confrontation is *materially* (re)staged. Miss Mitten, a white woman impelled by the “civilizing mission” and wielding—almost literally—Bhabha’s “English Book,” is a powerful living symbol of the colonial system of education and ideological interpellation, (re-)repeated (but with a difference) in a neocolonial setting that is marked by new flows of capital (“World Bank loans” and “Gulf-money”) and overseen by the new slogans of cultural hegemony (“THINGS GO BETTER WITH COCA-COLA,” for example [60]).

Other moments of significant misreading occur in the novel in other contexts, pointing to how overlapping neoliberal disciplinary regimes include cultural as well as educational institutions. In one scene, Estha, Rahel, their mother, and Baby Kochamma attend a showing of
The Sound of Music at the Abhilash Talkies. As minoritarian spectators, the twins affectively rather than rationally engage with the film, humming along to the music and making lists of Julie Andrews’s “favorite things” as she sings them. Their reading is also a misreading, revealing ruptures in the film that open up when this active engagement is pushed too far and the gap between the hegemonic Anglo representation and the postcolonial viewer becomes visible.

During the film, “in the minds of certain two-egg twin members of the audience in the Abhilash Talkies, some questions arose that needed answers.” At first, these questions are playful, articulating Estha and Rahel’s childish concerns about acting out in the immature (and lower-class) ways that Ammu and their uncle Chacko scold them for. They wonder, “Did Baron von Clapp-Trapp [the novel’s playful nickname for The Sound of Music’s leading man] shiver his leg?” The answer: “He did not.” “Did Baron von Clapp-Trapp blow spit bubbles? Did he? He did most certainly not” (101). Here, the misreading is prompted by the difference of age—the twins cannot seamlessly identify with The Sound of Music because, rather comically, no one in the film shivers their legs or blows spit bubbles. This disidentificatory gap or split is, as always, also captured in the text’s unique linguistic format—the actual list of questions mimics a deposition in which the voice of authority (italicized for emphasis) contrasts with the meek voice(s) of the youthful subjects it interrogates.

However, as is the case throughout Roy’s text, this quaint scene is juxtaposed with another, much more traumatic and significant one that immediately follows. Another list is presented: “Baron von Trapp had some questions of his own,” we are told. These questions, though, which are still the products of Estha and Rahel’s performative engagement with the film, evoke more than an incidental misreading:
(a) *Are they clean white children?*

No. *(But Sophie Mol is.)*

(b) *Do they blow spit bubbles?*

Yes. *(But Sophie Mol doesn’t.)*

(c) *Do they shiver their legs? Like clerks?*

Yes. *(But Sophie Mol doesn’t.)* (101)

The arrival of the white, English in-laws, echoing the encounters of the past between those of metropole and antipode, fundamentally disrupts the lives of the twins and Ammu. However, as this scene—which occurs before the twins have ever even met their cousin Sophie Mol—demonstrates, this central encounter is as much a conceptual as a literal event. Sophie Mol’s impending entry into their lives catalyzes an anxiety for the twins that is cultural and historical rather than simply a byproduct of youthful rivalry. In other words, in the contrast between these two lines of questioning, the novel shows that more is at stake in the second passage due to the broader (neo)colonial implications of Sophie Mol’s haunting presence.

In *The Sound of Music* scene, Estha and Rahel do more than read against the grain of the film’s text. Indeed, with their very first question and answer—“*Are they clean white children? / No. (But Sophie Mol is.)*”—Bhabha’s “almost but not quite, almost but not white” is evoked, throwing into contrast not only the non-whiteness of the twins, but their closeness—their literal relation, as Sophie Mol is their cousin—to whiteness. For the twins, then, the identificatory objects in the movie—the “clean white children” who do not blow spit bubbles or shiver their legs—incite more than a failed process of emulation and a corresponding disidentificatory reading. Indeed, they reveal the rigid cultural script that demands—literally, as the forcefully interrogative voice—this closeness that is also distance. Thus, Sophie Mol invokes a specific
relationality, serving as a dense identificatory site signifying not only whiteness but also Englishness, civilization, and proper (children’s) etiquette.

Estha and Rahel’s reading of *The Sound of Music*, in which they invoke Sophie Mol as the metonymic figure of whiteness, perfectly captures the idea of performative reading. A mode of affective, potentially transgressive interpretation, performative reading is a kind of tool—turning on the bodily unruliness produced in the fissures of neoliberal biopower—with which to expose embedded cultural scripts that invisibly dictate the subject’s compulsory repetitive performance in a particular context. Embodying the possibilities of Bhabha’s mimicry in its performative excess, gesturing toward the reflexivity captured in Benitez-Rojo, and wielding the creative improvisation necessary for living on under conditions of extreme violence and even death within Mbembe’s necropolitical postcolony, the kind of reading the twins enact represents a strategic interpretive performance that can harness the potential of “seeing” (or smelling, or feeling) differently. Performative reading is, in other words, an intervention at the level of the script itself, a potentially shrewd disruption of historical common sense, with the power to catalyze counterpublic spheres and instigate more overt performances of oppositional politics.

**Going Off Script: Interpretive Interventions and Rebellious Acts**

The twins conduct performative readings because their bodies provide an interpretive model that enables them to defy boundaries. Throughout the novel, they are able to read against their limited conditions in explicitly textual ways, or in language that recalls performance and the interpretive role of the spectator. This is nowhere more apparent than in the section on “the Play,” which features the climactic arrival of the English relatives: “The rehearsals had been rehearsed. It was the Day of the Play. The culmination of the *What Will Sophie Mol Think?*
week” (130). The satirical language, which casts “the Play” as “the Indo-British Behavior Competition,” comically highlights the fact that the meeting between Margaret and Sophie Mol, and Chacko, Ammu and the twins, is in fact a recycled version of the colonial encounter, with all the same hierarchical implications and cultural tropes that Bhabha discusses (139). Presided over by “History,” the Play captures the pervasive colonial script that dictates the roles of the characters: “Rahel looked around her and saw that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree. A face in the crowd. A Townspeople” (164). Sophie Mol is clearly the star of this performance in which Estha and Rahel are compulsory—yet minor—players: “A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. . . . Unable, somehow, to change plays” (182). Yet, although the twins are barred from changing the script, their interpretive skills allow them to step outside the Play and witness the cultural encounter from a distance.

This seemingly innocuous act of rebellion on the part of such minor actors in fact sets off a chain of other, more significant acts of resistance including, as I will demonstrate, Ammu and Velutha’s crime. However, less clear is the twins’ success at channeling this hermeneutic potential into something positive for themselves. In other words, as children, Estha and Rahel don’t know exactly how to harness or direct their critical reading skills toward imagining the kind of utopia in the way the adult lovers do. They are separated at age seven when Ammu is exiled: Estha is sent to live with his father and Rahel is shipped off to Catholic boarding school. They are not reunited until fourteen years later, long after Ammu has died and the Kochamma family has disbanded, scattered across the globe, leaving only Baby Kochamma and the cook, Kochu Maria, in the Ayemenem house. The reunion of the twins, captured in an ambiguously intimate and perhaps sexual scene, is strikingly understated—a subtlety that is entirely
appropriate, as Rahel and Estha have come to embody the qualities of “Emptiness” and “Quietness” as adults. I quote the passage at length:

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi’s book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings. . . . Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-colored shoulder had a semicircle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. . . . Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (310-11)

The ambiguous incestuous act that occurs between Estha and Rahel is presented as muddled, as confused as their “two-egg twin” bodies are. What we witness here is “Sex” but also “Love,” beauty but at the same time “hideous grief.” The irony is evoked by the repetition of “Only,” highlighting the paradox of a scene in which “very little” can be said while so much can be going on, while “the Big Things lurk unsaid, inside.” Here, we glimpse a moment in which the “Love Laws” are unequivocally transgressed. Despite its somewhat disquieting content, the passage traces a kind of healing on and through the bodies of the twins. The traumatic events of their childhood have imposed “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits” upon these characters who, at age seven, shared something like “a single soul” (5). This act of physical (re)union therefore represents a return, a reclaiming of the singular, shared body in all its messiness and the “confusion” that resides “in a deeper, more secret place” (4). In the end, what “lurks unsaid”—what escapes representation because, indeed, representation is its own symbolic system governed
by the rules of power, a power perfectly metaphorized by “Mammachi’s book”—is the affective process unfolding between the twins: “Love,” both of self and other. Stunningly, Roy narrativizes what Hardt and Negri call the “biopolitical event”: always a “queer event,” it is “a subversive process of subjectivization that, shattering ruling identities and norms, reveals the link between power and freedom, and thereby inaugurates an alternative production of subjectivity” (Hardt and Negri 62-3). If sex, and more importantly, love, between members of different classes/castes registers as a queer event in the context of Ammu and Velutha, then the intimate act shared by the adult twins near the end of the narrative stretches the limits and pushes the boundaries of what queerness as a positive, anti-normative descriptor signifies. Ultimately, this moment represents an even more radical (or more queer) biopolitical event, one which possesses the potential to rattle our own sensibilities as readers, forcing us to confront the ways in which we, too, are implicated within, and complicit with the networks of power that lay down “who should be loved and how.”

As children the twins play a much clearer role in furnishing their mother and Velutha with the literal and symbolic tools to stage their own “biopolitical event.” On the day of the arrival of their English relatives, Estha and Rahel “slip out of the Play” upon seeing Velutha, going to greet him “offstage” (166). Ammu, already a volatile “unmixable mix,” watches her children escape the Play and go to Veltha, performing with him the rituals of love in curtsies and secret handshakes. Described as the “twin midwives of [Ammu’s] dream”—the dream she has about the one-armed “God of Small Things”—Estha and Rahel literally train their mother’s gaze on Velutha (214). However, it is Ammu’s own messy, postcolonial body that nurtures the flame of her desire, sparked in the instant she witnesses Velutha’s interactions with her children outside the Play, to grow into a fiery, passionate sexual affair: it is the “unmixable mix” she has “battling
inside her . . . [that] eventually lead her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (44). When Ammu looks at Velutha, really seeing him for the first time, she experiences the radical, de-centering force of desire that lies outside the script, outside History and the Love Laws. In the same moment Velutha catches Ammu’s gaze, seeing her clearly for the first time as well and experiencing the same desire:

Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars . . . all fell away. In its absence it left an aura, a palpable shimmering that was as plain to see as the water in a river or the sun in the sky . . . So obvious that no one noticed. (168)

In this striking passage, a kind of hope bursts forth in the transcendent instant that History, materialized with all its baggage, “marks” and “scars,” falls away. A potential for healing, almost inarticulable as “an aura,” and a “shimmering,” emerges in the moment that a new kind of affective formation—“love” or something like it—is able to be imagined. Although we are not aware that Ammu has left the Play when she undergoes this experience, at the end of this passage the narrator notes that “She looked away. He did too. History’s fiends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. . . . Ammu walked up to the verandah, back into the Play. Shaking” (168).

If the cause originates with the body, the effect on the characters is corporeal as well: while Ammu shakes, Velutha begins to feel a tightening in his chest each time he sees her. We begin to see that this shared moment—the beginning of what many critics read as the triumphant heterosexual romance plot—is actually about the reconfiguration of bodies that is possible even amidst conditions laden with the “marks” and “scars” of History. If this kind of unsanctioned
desire is the result of the tenuous distance opened up through performative reading, that performative reading—the initial moment of going off script—is activated in the first place by the corporeal unruliness that fundamentally marks the complex, embodied experience of these characters. What *The God of Small Things* so eloquently describes, then, is the way in which corporeality doubles back on itself, affectively shaping discourse that patterns modes of interpretation and representation that, as we see in this visceral moment of love’s revelation, in turn play out in hair-raising, goosebumpy, shiver-inducing fashion.

Acting on this “love” reveals Ammu as more than simply a bad neo-colonial subject or a participant in a cliché romantic trope. Her ensuing affair with Velutha, which I read against the grain of both celebratory, apolitical criticism that describes this event as simply a triumph of romance, as well as readings that view the affair as a narrow indictment of the ongoing strictures of caste in India, demonstrates how Ammu is able to channel her own corporeal penchant for disobedience to read—and ultimately act—against the social script that dictates so many of her circumstances. By breaking the “Love Laws” with her own “God of Small Things,” she stages a resistance of the flesh that registers as a powerful biopolitical event. Because what is at stake in this act is not only freedom but a particular kind of liberated subjectivity, Ammu’s affair carries with it all the potential Hardt and Negri imagine for fashioning alternate forms of subjectivity. This subjectivity, pointing the way toward “new forms of the relation of self and others” (Hardt and Negri 58-9), is a fragile, fleeting thing, residing in the “Small Things” that “lurk unsaid.” Occupying a marginal space outside History and its various Plays, the subjectivity realized by Ammu and Velutha takes shape in and on the body, embracing pleasure and love in ways unsanctioned—and unimagined—by the regime of the Love Laws. Defying the history of capital
and colonialism, the lovers recuperate the body as a site of revolutionary power—power not as force, opposition or domination, but as an articulation of freedom.

On a narrative level, Estha and Rahel enable Ammu to step outside the Play, directing her gaze to Velutha and allowing her to experience a distance that opens up the possibility glimpsed in this moment of desire. However, they catalyze this experience on a symbolic level as well: the twins bestow upon their mother the language with which she can achieve this distancing. It is this space that incites Ammu’s own performative reading. Although we know that Ammu is already a strong, intelligent, independent woman with an “Unsafe Edge,” “An unmixable mix” of “tenderness” and “reckless rage,” it is only after the moment outside the Play that her fierceness is directed toward History, the Love Laws, and the (neo)colonial encounter itself, unfolding before her. This is sparked when Margaret Kochamma makes an offensive comment, asking if Indian men and women “sniff” each other in greeting. Smell shows up here again, as a blunderingly unwitting, ironic reminder that discipline is divvied up affectively, and that the social codes governing the exchange here have as much (or more) to do with how bodies (are permitted to) interact as with cross-cultural misunderstanding. Ammu’s sarcastic response—“Oh, all the time! . . . That’s how we make babies”—gets right to the humor in this by riffing on the unnamed but implicit focus of Margaret’s comment, that is, sexuality (Roy 170). Furthermore, Ammu refuses, despite Chacko’s demand, to apologize, instead asking exasperatedly, “Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that’s just been discovered?” (171). Ammu’s intense experience outside the Play fashions her into more than a woman with an “Unsafe Edge”—it makes her a bad neoliberal subject and instills in her the ability to execute an oppositional, performative reading of her own circumstances. When Ammu steps “offstage” and uses this distance to read the Play, she performs an elaborate disidentification. She also, though, exposes
the underlying colonial script—dictating that she and the children must “behave like some damn godforsaken tribe”—using the language of mimicry. Her speech, we see throughout the novel, becomes decidedly more English when she is “really angry”—for instance, when she tells the twins that they had better “jolly well learn to behave” (141). Consciously employing an exaggerated, repetitive linguistic performance, but in the mode of reading rather than acting, Ammu stages an interpretive intervention in the Play, making visible and therefore disrupting its oppressive, racist script in a subtle way that, nevertheless, makes everyone around her uncomfortable.

Finally, it is this performance of misreading that opens up the potential for other kinds of performances, personal and political, that not only disrupt but actively oppose the neoliberalism’s regime and its History. Ammu and Velutha, after their moment outside the Play, choose to break the Love Laws, embracing a desire that is considered so transgressive, it results in the arrest, beating, and ultimately the death of Velutha upon discovery. In this sense, the novel offers a somewhat cynical view, and reveals which kinds of rebellions—corporeal or hermeneutical—will be tolerated, and which will not. Those who dare to capitalize on their own corporeal messiness and perform oppositional readings are punished by the postcolonial cultural regime—they are killed (Velutha), banished (Ammu), silenced (Estha) and generally traumatized (Rahel) by the violence of the repressive forces intent on upholding the Love Laws. The power of the colonial authority is unmasked and shown to be at times an ideological regime that haunts the bodies of its subjects, and at times a literal disciplinary punishment that violently visits the bodies of its transgressors. The former is perfectly captured with Ammu who, on her deathbed, suffers
from a familiar, recurrent dream in which policemen approached her with snicking scissors, wanting to hack off her hair. They did that in Kottayam to prostitutes whom they’d caught in the bazaar—branded them so that everybody would know them for what they were. . . . Ammu always noticed them in the market, the women with vacant eyes and forcibly shaved heads in the land where long, oiled hair was only for the morally upright. (154)

Here, Ammu observes and internalizes power in its punitive manifestation, as it acts upon the marginal female bodies of the Kottayam prostitutes. More significant, though, are the ways this corporal punishment serves as a productive mechanism of bodily order as well as a disciplinary warning. Not only are Indian women produced along a kind of moral continuum made visible through hair, but like Ammu, they are menacingly cautioned through the example these prostitutes pose. Indeed, such a warning serves as a kind of specifically gendered terrorism, and we can see that Ammu is clearly haunted, even in her dreams, by the image of these short-haired women who stand as living metaphors for immorality. No doubt, such a strong resonance occurs as a result of Ammu’s own sexual transgression (with Velutha), classifying her as a different, upper-class brand of whore. Finally, this terroristic tactic reveals a generational dimension as well: the “vacant eyes” of the prostitutes recall Rahel’s own “emptiness” in her eyes. Rahel’s American husband, Larry McCaslin, is “offended by her eyes” because they appear “as though they belonged to someone else” when they make love (Roy 20). This warning for Ammu thus becomes a kind of possession for Rahel—the gendered sexual code visits both mother and daughter and takes hold of their bodies in different ways. In other words, the power that acts upon the bodies of the prostitutes, and that indirectly disciplines (and directly punishes) Ammu, quietly reproduces itself as it visits the diasporic body of Rahel, collaborating with the other
elements of the “Love Laws” to unspool a global History of domination and trauma, written on the flesh of women and other marginalized neoliberal subjects. However, as eyes prove a potent metaphor for the insidious manifestation of disciplinary power, so too do they reveal glimpses of resistance. It is important to note that Ammu is nonetheless hopefully described as “carrying magic secrets in her eyes” (43), and, somewhat more cryptically, as having “eyes that were always somewhere else” (315). Perhaps this elsewhere gestures toward the kind of utopia that exists tenuously outside of History’s Love Laws that dictate who is “morally upright,” who may have long hair, and who may love whom.

The colonial authority also materializes as literal and brutally violent punishment in the novel, harnessing more than the affirmative power that Ammu’s case seems to indicate. The scenes in which we encounter the Ayemenem Police force—described as a “posse of Touchable Policemen,” “Servants of the State” who are “Dark of Heart” and “Deadlypurposed” (Roy 288-89)—point to something more like Mbembe’s “necropolitics.” Taking account of contemporary neoliberal realities and the unique site of the postcolony, Mbembe offers up the concept of necropolitics to account for the return to sovereign power over “who may live and who must die” (“Necropolitics” 11). This is powerfully staged by the encounter between the policemen and Velutha in the novel’s devastating climax. In brief, terse language that stands out strikingly from the rest of the text, Roy describes the fatal beating of Velutha: Estha and Rahel “heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. . . . The gurgle of blood on a man’s breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib” (Roy 292). What occurs here appears at first as a kind of (re)reversal—from biopower’s insidious, disciplinary regime to an earlier system of corporal punishment. However, a few
paragraphs later, this confusion is clarified, and the necropolitical nature of Velutha’s death
sentence is crystallized:

What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn’t know it
then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war after
all, or genocide) of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order.
Complete monopoly. It was human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose,
revealing herself to an under-age audience. . . . Unlike the custom of rampaging
religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of
Darkness the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy.
Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn’t tear out his hair
or burn him alive. They didn’t hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth.
They didn’t rape him. Or behead him. After all they were not battling an
epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (292-93)

This passage, dripping with irony in light of the Ayemenem Police’s official acronym
the necropolitical authority of the neocolonial regime. This is “not war after all, or genocide” we
are told, and yet, as Lutz argues, “the unthinking, rigid policemen exhibit precisely the kind of
mentality capable of monstrous acts, and under conditions of war or genocide, they would surely
be the ideal agents of such violence” (70). However, beyond the “mentality” of the individual
policemen lies a non-rational, large scale affective disciplinary formation: the beating is viewed
as an inoculation, preventing members of the community from committing further transgressive
acts, rather than a battle against “an epidemic” that has already spread. This is an extension of
the colonial “civilizing mission”; the public health metaphor thus collaborates with the passage’s language of reason and restraint (“economy,” “Efficiency,” “Responsibility”) to demonstrate that the violence here is calculated rather than borne from chaos. Roy subtly reveals that the neoliberal condition of permanent war (something that, Mbembe points out, is the literal experience of those living in the postcolony), necessary to the smooth operation of this brand of bloody domination, recalls not the passion or religious “hysteria” of actual war or genocide, but the cold rationality behind the rhetorical logic of the state of exception. Necropolitics, then, is like a murderous manifestation of biopower—a system (a “Structure,” an “Order”) erected and maintained for the discipline and regulation of bodies, it employs the use of force alongside a dominant ideology. It is a necropolitical colonial authority that authorizes the killing of Velutha, exacting his life as payment for the crime of breaking the Love Laws, for locating his body as a site of pleasure and a medium for expressing love, and for daring to imagine a subjectivity that exists through resistance, outside the bounds of History.

However, on the broader level of the meta-textual project, *The God of Small Things* is, perhaps, more hopeful. The novel’s final section returns us to before the various events of “the Terror,” on the first night that Ammu and Velutha make love at the twins’ hideout by the river. This scene, un-narrated in the body of the text although we are aware of the two-week affair between the lovers, returns the story to that first de-centering moment of desire, which we experience through the characters. The last chapter is brief, consisting of only a few pages that describe the subtle intimacies exchanged between Ammu and Velutha: “They stood there. Skin to skin. . . . Slowly his arms came up behind her. . . . She could feel how soft she felt to him. She could feel herself through him. . . . The way her body existed only where he touched her. The rest of her was smoke” (317). Echoing Ammu’s earlier dream about standing “Skin to skin”
with “the God of Small Things,” Roy beautifully returns us to the way in which the kind of
desire that is unscripted, unsanctioned, and called forth by the sideways (or backwards) reading I
have cast as “performative,” conjures up a new body out of “smoke.” The desire realized by
Ammu and Velutha that first night by the river is a deterritorializing force, occupying an outside
to the discourse of rationality and turning on the messiness and uncontainability of their bodies.
Ammu “feel[s] herself through” Velutha, now getting her senses crossed in a way that resembles
her twins’ corporeal confusion and brings us, full circle, back to the unruliness that enables the
whole process of performative reading in the first place. Their physical encounter literally em-
body the revolutionary potential of the lovers to find refuge within the brutal regime of
necropolitical/neoliberal power, to exist in stubborn defiance of the Love Laws. Bracketing the
violence of the rest of the text, this final scene—deliberately imported from somewhere in the
middle of the narrative—reminds us that desire borne from the body’s intrinsic messiness is the
literally life-changing manifestation of a “Love” (with a capital “L,” in defiance of the “Love
Laws”) with the potential to catch History “off guard.”

The desire in this closing scene registers, finally, as an affective, embodied event: “He
took her face in his hands and drew it towards his. He closed his eyes and smelled her skin.
Ammu laughed. Yes Margaret, she thought. We do it to each other too” (321). This final line
brings us back to the affective site of smell once again. On one hand, this is a clear citation of
Ammu’s first truly rebellious act—her first use of an oppositional, performative reading—in the
exchange with Margaret Kochamma after she briefly steps outside the Play. But it is also a nod
to Baby Kochamma’s remark cited at the opening of this chapter, reframed through Velutha’s
affective sensibility. “How could she stand the smell?” thus gets its corollary: How can he stand
the smell?, in this case of a member of the oppressive upper-caste. This works to register the
gravity of their mutual overcoming; impossibly, Ammu and Velutha are both able to tap into their bodies’ potential for smelling otherwise. The narrative thus closes with an elegant return, bringing us back to the moment in which the potential for an oppositional performance—borne of a performative mis-reading (that is actually a mis-smelling)—still exists. In the end, the Love Laws fail to perfectly discipline Ammu’s sense of smell, and she is able to mobilize this small instance of corporeal irrepressibility in the service of pursuing a desire that calls forth its own, small utopia. The freedom glimpsed in the last scene with Velutha and Ammu thus closes with a humble yet clear nod toward the future, ending with the single word, “Tomorrow.” As Ammu leaves her lover near the river, she utters this—significantly, she uses the Malayalam word—as a kind of “small promise,” a modest gesture that acknowledges the “fragility” of their affair, in full recognition of the reality that “things could change in a day” (another phrase that gets repeated throughout the text). Ending with this “Tomorrow,” *The God of Small Things* sets its project—the articulation of a theory of potentially radical performative reading—at the feet of the reader. Supplying us with a language of resistance—in the same way that the twins provide Ammu and Velutha with the symbolic tools to break the Love Laws—the text in fact achieves our complicity by its close. By the end, we have become adept readers ourselves, competent in the novel’s grammatically transgressive language, and prepared to employ this powerful interpretive strategy in other contexts, toward other ends, in the construction of our own “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow” Today: Reading World Literature Backwards, Reading Against Diversity

I want to read this “Tomorrow” as, in part, a call to co-opt tactics of performative reading for other purposes, in particular those having to do with institutionality and disciplinary formations. Taking my cue from the novel, which is able to toggle between the affective
experience of the individual, the broader implications for collective, radical (or lateral) politics, and the context of knowledge formations in which categories like “world literature” get circulated and acquire meaning, I return in this chapter’s conclusion to the critical debate that always already frames the stakes of reading texts like *The God of Small Things*. The literary scandal of the Booker Prize and the center-periphery models of academic debates sketch a milieu already anticipated in the pages of the text: like the “Play” that casts the racialized bodies (the un-“clean white children”) of Estha and Rahel as “minor characters,” or the dynamic by which the Kochamma’s English relatives “discover” them like “some damn godforsaken tribe,” the meta-context of the novel locates it in the margins of (world) literature. However, the margins become a center of gravity for a text that thematizes the minor, in addition to language play, reading processes and practices, and even corporeality and the “execrable” that it would be labeled by some. Highlighting the messiness of affective experience, *The God of Small Things* conjures hybrid, postcolonial characters and theorizes a mode of resistance not dependent on the agency of mimicry, lodged instead in what is ultimately a performative act of apprehension. Drawing its force from the material and playing out in ways that harness the potential of unpredictability and corporeality of difference, this performative reading—from the twins’ playful backwards reading to Ammu’s willful misreading of the neocolonial script—has the potential to register powerful new forms of discontent, refusal, and resistance in the very scene in which knowledge (and power) is produced. As an interpretive strategy that is resistant but non-oppositional, therefore, performative reading becomes a generative model with the potential to critique not only specific readings, but modes of reading patterned by the ideological trends of neoliberal multiculturalism.
If the performative reading staged in *The God of Small Things* serves as a valuable strategy for interpretive intervention at the level of the narrative, in other words, I am suggesting on one level that its model can also be adapted to the meta-context of world literature as a knowledge formation. Such a move replaces Damrosch’s readers from the beginning—the ones who determine what constitutes “literature” in the first place, before textual circulation—with meta-readers and transforms the circulating text into the discourse of “world literature” itself. Through performative reading, Roy’s novel gestures toward a conscious reversal: not mapping the periphery through its relationship to the center, but instead locating the central animating figure of “world” through the peripheral position(s) of the neoliberal postcolony. Theorizing world literature from the margins in this way provides a rather obvious corrective to the approaches of Moretti and Casanova by way of an abrupt, polemical shift, discarding with the lip service to reverse the “traffic of influence” by simply doing so and observing the results. This shift, then, represents a change in direction, as characters like Estha and Rahel draw on the gaps in neoliberal (bio)power to literally read back(wards) against narratives of center and periphery, while Ammu employs the language of such narratives only to mock them. *The God of Small Things* therefore routes a trajectory in which “world literature” (and, in many senses, its material counterpart, global capitalism) emerges from the periphery, ironically, through its modes of interpretation. In other words, the text defines “world literature” not only through the triangulation of “world” via the spaces of the periphery, but also through the admittedly tautological approach whereby “world” and the “literary” take shape as coherent symbolic sites through acts of resistance to them, performed by those literally marginalized or categorically excluded from Moretti’s world literary system.
However, while we might read the dynamic backwards reading of *The God of Small Things* as a model for navigating the rocky terrain of institutionalized knowledge formations like world literature, on another level performative hermeneutics might similarly be employed as a strategy for reading neoliberal institutions themselves. In the next chapter, I turn to the explicitly institutionalized space of the neoliberal university in Zadie Smith’s novel, *On Beauty* (2005), but here I gesture toward the way in which Roy’s novel might begin the work of injecting race and gender back in to the abstracting and dematerializing rhetoric that pervades neoliberal institutions of higher education. Because in many ways performative reading is about a recuperation of the body and its fundamental uncontainability, it represents the kind of re-materializing tactic that might call forth new ways of reading—and reading back *against*—inequality. Indeed, some of the discussion in this chapter about disciplinary processes that fail to perfectly reign in the racialized, gendered, or postcolonial body might be framed in terms of education. When Ammu lashes out at the ignorance of her English ex-sister-in-law, Margaret, she walks away “[l]eaving everybody to wonder where she had learned her effrontery from,” for in fact, “it was no small wondering matter. Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think the way she did. She was just that sort of animal” (171). Ammu, we assume, as a wealthy, upper-caste Indian woman, has not been trained to display this kind of bad behavior. The narrator’s subtle suggestion here, with the emphasis on “education” and “books,” is that Ammu has been taught to perform in particular, culturally appropriate ways—a teaching she ignores. But she has also *not* been steeped in the education of resistance. In fact, education has failed for her in both a positive, productive sense *as well as* in negative, disciplinary ways. Ultimately, we learn, Ammu acts the part of bad neocolonial subject for more basic, visceral reasons: she is “just that sort of
animal.” The fact that this “animal” can endure at all means that a radical potential exists in the stubborn—and messy—existence of the body.

Again executing a kind of backwards reading, then, I ask at this chapter’s close what the novel’s unruly bodies can model for us, not only in terms of performatively reading discourses of world literature, but for thinking difference differently in the spaces of dominant institutions and for framing equality as a real, material problem in such contexts. In other words, I think the novel serves as both a knowledge project that might be mobilized to think through (and perhaps think around) traditional bodies of knowledge (“literature” or “English”), and a re-materializing reminder about actual bodies in real institutional spaces—like universities—and about institutions themselves as bodies. What the example of Ammu’s corporeal unruliness activates, then, is a small-scale refusal of large-scale processes of managing difference that “education” itself represents. Such questions and negotiations become particularly important—especially as located in the specific institutional spaces of universities—in our current moment because these are the sites at which equality in the form race reform today is measured, quite literally. Roderick Ferguson, employing Stuart Hall’s language of the way in which hegemonic power “get[s] hold of” and “neutralize[s] difference,” points to how the university in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism similarly “unmarks and reabsorbs difference” (Ferguson 165). Like Jodi Melamed, who scrutinizes the means by which “racism appears as disappearing” under the institutionalized, antiracist metanarratives of neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 14), Ferguson similarly unpacks how affirmative power—power that is inclusive, that is productive, that says “yes” rather than “no”—nonetheless maintains the capacity to discipline, shape and dictate the reality of institutional spaces. Together, these critics shed light on how the productive power of neoliberalism has managed to co-opt difference in the form of minoritized subjects and
knowledges—particularly through enlisting sites like the university “as conduits for conveying unprecedented forms of political economy to state and capital” (Ferguson 8).

This co-opting crystallizes with the example of antiracist, queer, and feminist social movements, all of which initially posed radical visions of change to the contemporary academy, but in their inclusion within the educational apparatus actually signal certain failures. On the one hand, the presence of female, queer, and nonwhite bodies within universities has clearly not eliminated sexism, homophobia or racism within such spaces. On the other hand, the establishment of various kinds of interdisciplinary studies—programs like Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, Black Studies, and Asian American Studies, which were central demands for many of the student movements—has not led to a full-scale attack on dominant knowledges, disciplinarity or the centrality of the Euro-American literary canon. Thus, the question remains: how is power able to “get hold of and neutralize difference”? Furthermore, what emergent potential is shuffled aside when difference—posed by the bodies of minoritized subjects or the bodies of alternative epistemologies—gets institutionalized?

Part of the answer to these questions lies in how “difference” itself gets cast. Ultimately, critics of the neoliberal university chart a shift in which we can see difference becoming increasingly divested of its materiality. “Diversity” becomes a term evacuated of meaning, the radical politics of Queer Studies (or Black Studies, or Women’s Studies) gets dulled as it adheres to the protocols of institutional life, and commitments to equality get reconstituted as commitments to the representation of equality. Thus, a common thread throughout the new scholarly works on institutions and universities specifically is, thus, the channeling of the (material) redistributive potential of difference into an empty celebration of (multicultural) difference as a gesture of progress that is an alibi to increasing structural inequality. Sara Ahmed,
in On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (2012), is particularly interested in this notion of the alibi, although she does not use the term. She analyzes official university “statements of commitment” to institutional diversity, finding that such documents often “come to stand in for the effects” of actually effecting change (Ahmed 117). Mobilizing J.L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances and the way Judith Butler takes up the idea to describe social subjectivization, Ahmed argues that diversity statements are actually “non-performative”: an example of “‘reiterative and citational practice by which discourse’ does not produce ‘the effects that it names’” (117). Ahmed’s text is highly useful for conceptualizing the multiple scales through which the neutralizing of difference plays out, as Ahmed herself uses the metaphor of the body to capture the directedness of the institution. Using the language of phenomenology, she notes: “A commitment is about how a body is directed such that it cannot pull back from an action” (128). Examining the body of the university and the various ways that implementing its diversity initiatives “get stuck,” according to the diversity workers she interviews, Ahmed argues that “Thinking about commitment gives us a new language to describe what gets stuck. It is not simply somewhere in the organization that things get stuck. Stuckness is an expression of what an institution is already committed to” (128). Thus, the neoliberal discourse of diversity literally replaces difference and its resonances with radical, redistributive politics; but also, in something like a meta-ideological sense, it is a powerful reconfiguration of not only our relationship to the material world, but our very understanding of what materiality means.

The God of Small Things productively engages this problematic of difference because, with its persistent emphasis on affect and corporeality, it reanimates the material on multiple levels. From the gateway resistance of corporeal unruliness or hybridity, to the performative apprehension opened up by this bodily rebellion, to the eruption of active opposition harnessed
by the act of going off script, the novel offers itself up as a powerful model for reclaiming the performativity Ahmed describes as getting lost or “stuck.” Ultimately, the bodies in *The God of Small Things* refuse to be organized, smoothed out, or covered over in the interest of good neoliberal subjecthood. Noting this potential for affective resistance, I attempt to draw out a lateral politics that is not propelled by rationality or pure agency but nonetheless critiques the matrix of intersecting technologies of dominance in which the characters find themselves. Thus, Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel do not set out to unsettle History or break the Love Laws; rather, they manage to seize on the moments of ideological rupture within which their very bodies are produced, and in this way achieve a kind of (literally) marginal freedom from which to launch strategic, performative readings. Finally, this hermeneutical practice allows characters to reverse the interpretive gaze and read back(wards) into the colonial encounter—and, as it happens in the novel, its neocolonial echoes—the various erasures and alibis of power. In this way, *The God of Small Things* not only does the critical work of relocating the body within neoliberal discourse, it also reads its own location within world literature, offering us a constitutive view of literary and disciplinary “bodies” that is literally and metaphorically from the margins. The next chapter, which examines the very different context set up in and by Zadie Smith’s novel, *On Beauty* (2005), uses as a point of departure the corporeal unruliness theorized here. Tracing the ways in which hybrid, intersectional subjects use the terms of dominant aesthetics against itself and the disciplinary structures its logic perpetuates, the next section returns to the institutional site of the university through the slightly alternate route of art and beauty, therefore, but nonetheless extends this thinking in the spirit of corporeal critique.
CHAPTER 4

ON BEAUTY AND THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONALITY

THE AESTHETICS OF MULTICULTURALISM IN ZADIE SMITH

“beauty, far from contributing to social injustice in either of the two ways it stands accused, or even remaining neutral to injustice as an innocent bystander, actually assists us in the work of addressing injustice”—Elaine Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just”

“I mean, isn’t it a depoliticized reification, all this beauty stuff . . . ?”—Zora Belsey in Zadie Smith’s On Beauty

So far in this dissertation, I have argued that using the body as an analytical framework gives us insight into the particular formations, affects, politics, and experiences of the contemporary conjuncture. Examining neoliberalism and multiculturalism through the lens of the corporeal has the effect, I maintain, of making materiality central at a moment when equality is increasingly disarticulated from material conditions and actual outcomes, and is instead attached to superficial configurations of difference and vague notions of opportunity. The previous two chapters traced how bodies under critical—and, ultimately, literary—scrutiny break down, a productive unraveling that opens up the potential to analyze various outcomes and effects of the neoliberal present, such as its multiple temporalities and the dominant but hidden cultural scripts that narrate the politicized social encounters that unfold as the aftereffects of colonialism. Chapter three in particular zoomed out from this corporeal instability, using The God of Small Things to turn at its conclusion toward how such processes play out in the meta-contexts of bodies of knowledge and institutional formations. The current chapter uses this broader framework as its point of entry, looking at how the always-politicized field of aesthetics maps the contours of social embodiment and exclusion in the setting of the neoliberal university. Here,
I explicitly attend to the material stakes—the institutionalization, tokenization, and alienation that occurs in and around the university—of multiculturalism, and locate a potentiality lodged in aesthetic experience to unsettle its narrative. In this way, then, my project returns to its opening invocation and recurrent refrain, gesturing toward the impossible possibilities that might be glimpsed in and through the space of the literary.

Halfway through Zadie Smith’s well-received and commercially successful 2005 novel, *On Beauty,* a significant moment occurs between the text’s two central female characters as they stand looking together at a painting by a Haitian artist that depicts Erzulie, the great Voodoo goddess. Carlene Kipps, the painting’s owner, describes the work to her new friend, Kiki Belsey:

> It’s a Hyppolite. It’s worth a great deal, I believe, but that’s not why I love it. I got it in Haiti itself on my very first visit, before I met my husband. . . . She’s a great Voodoo goddess, Erzulie. She’s called the Black Virgin—also, the Violent Venus. . . . She represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon . . . and she’s the mystère of jealousy, vengeance and discord, and, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune. (Smith 175)

Beyond the symbolic chaos of Erzulie herself, the ekphrastic passage and the section that surrounds it represent the unpredictable attachments that are made possible through art, and provide a generative point of entry with which to discuss *On Beauty*’s complex engagement with aesthetics, one that ultimately bears on the more obviously political questions of multiculturalism and equality at the center of the novel and this dissertation as a whole. At the point of this scene, we already know Kiki Belsey to be the irreverent matriarch of the multiracial Belsey family: witty, beautiful, African American, large in personality and stature, and extremely kind. Carlene

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*On Beauty* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and Commonwealth Writer’s prize, and winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Somerset Maugham award.
Kipps is, in some ways, Kiki’s foil: frail and sickly, also Black but Afro-British, she is the demure wife and mother of the conservative Kipps family. Aside from their most visible identity markers, the two women of color are set up to have little in common. On the surface, then, the scene of Carlene and Kiki looking together at the painting of a naked Black woman is unremarkable, if surprising: it depicts the blossoming affection between two women who, due to their obvious personal differences and to the very public scholarly dispute between their art historian husbands, might be indifferent neighbors or even rivals by association, but become friends instead.

One might be tempted to read this initial scene of unlikely friendship as a celebratory moment indicative of art’s capacity to transcend social and material differences, but as it unfolds in the presence of an artwork that comes to signify in multiple and often contradictory ways throughout the novel, this scene actually gestures toward a more nuanced aesthetics, tied not to disinterested judgment or taste but instead to materiality, difference, and embodiment. While the Erzulie piece is beautiful it is also, as Carlene says, “worth a great deal,” and not only economically. Located at the symbolic center of a Haitian national movement taking place in the novel’s northeastern U.S. college town setting, the painting’s ownership is contested, raising issues about the fetishization and appropriation of “primitive” and “exotic” art from the global south. Its possession is further complicated by the fact that Carlene acquired the work before her marriage, a seemingly minor point about gender that takes on greater significance after Carlene’s death, when it is revealed that she has left the painting to Kiki. This lateral (as opposed to generational) transfer of property between women of color proves a highly scandalous act of friendship. Defying the dominant logics of ownership, property, and the nuclear family, it is a move catalyzed by the shared experience of sensing beauty—notably, a beauty that reflects the
two women’s own gendered and racialized bodies—that represents the potential of collective aesthetic encounter to produce meaningful and often unpredictable attachments across lines of difference, while nonetheless remaining firmly rooted in the politics, social interactions, identity categories, literal bodies—generally, the materialities—of everyday life.

This chapter examines how such a unique aesthetics plays out in—and ultimately comes to bear on—the specific material context that lies at the center of the novel: the site of the academic institution. Indeed, the university with its disciplines, bureaucracies, rivalries and politics plays such an important role in the text that critics often refer to On Beauty as a “campus novel.”52 We see this when Kiki first lays eyes on the painting of Erzulie. Her initial response is “She’s fabulous,” but self-consciousness prompts her to quickly revise this claim, with her second comment awkwardly employing the academic language of her husband, Howard. Calling Erzulie “interesting,” Kiki goes on to timidly remark how the goddess seems to defy the structure of dominant Judeo-Christian philosophy because “we’re so binary, of course, in the way we think” (Smith 175). Despite the fact that this scene occurs outside the sites of official knowledge that permeate the text, taking place not between the art history scholars but their non-expert wives, the institutional language of aesthetic judgment nevertheless creeps into Carlene and Kiki’s friendly conversation. While Kiki’s particular observation is arguably accurate, its dogmatic academicism is alienating, inhibiting rather than promoting collective reflection. A central thematic in On Beauty firmly locates aesthetics—defined by Jacques Rancière as “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts” that broadly “defines what is visible or not in a common space”—at or in relation to the site of the neoliberal academy. Playing on how designations of beauty are routed through and subjected to the disciplinary regimes of

52 For a more detailed discussion of genre beyond the label of “campus novel,” see Batra and Lopez-Ropero.
institutionalized knowledge, the novel insists on the pervasiveness of academic discourse that affects even aesthetic experience that occurs outside the institution, or away from the traditional sphere of art (Rancière 10, 13). Yet Carlene’s reaction to Kiki’s uncomfortable academic mimicry reveals the limits of institutionalized aesthetic authority: “That’s a clever way to put it,” she gently tells Kiki, then simply “I like her parrots.” While the modest act of finding pleasure in the painted parrots is not in itself indicative of an aesthetic intervention, the scenario in which the two women model an encounter that is to some extent left open-ended and undecided, immune to the imperative to fix meaning through interpretation, gestures toward the way On Beauty invites a reconsideration of the grounds of aesthetic judgment. Beyond Carlene’s statement, the scene itself recalls that there are as many aesthetic judgments as individuals, and that reactions to art are neither prescriptive nor predictable. Prompting us to reflect on how the institution elevates and sanctions particular aesthetic judgments, the novel asks how we might—and, in Carlene’s case, do—escape this restrictive discursive regime, even if only fleetingly, to be struck by the beauty of parrots.

On Beauty tells the story of the Belseys, a quirky, educated, progressive, multiracial and multinational family living in the fictional college town of Wellington, outside Boston. Kiki’s husband Howard, a white Englishman, is an adjunct professor of art history at the college. The butt of many of the novel’s satirical jabs at the jargon-laden language of high theory and the misguided political struggles that can occur within academic institutions, Howard is a radical poststructuralist who hates all representational art and teaches his students that beauty is “the mask that power wears.” He is also a vocal champion of Wellington’s unofficial affirmative action policies, and in general a staunch leftist whose politics nevertheless do not always align with his personal actions. Howard and Kiki’s oldest son, Jerome, is an undergraduate at Brown,
an earnest and sensitive nerd whose recent forays into Christianity are perplexing to his mother and alarming to his father. Their daughter, Zora, on the other hand, is a parrot of Howard. An insecure college freshman at Wellington, Zora’s aspirations to become an intellectual make her a cringe-worthy cliché, the kind who references Foucault in casual conversation. The youngest Belsey is Levi, a hip-hop-loving teenager engaged in understanding his black identity and, somewhat comically, cultivating a persona he boasts as being “street.” The novel begins amidst a comedic Belsey family crisis: Jerome, who is studying abroad in England, writes home about his engagement to the daughter of Howard’s longtime academic arch-nemesis, Monty Kipps. Although the romantic entanglement between Jerome and Victoria Kipps is short-lived, it sets in motion a family rivalry that is intensified when the Kipps family shortly thereafter moves to Wellington, where Monty has taken a job as distinguished professor of art history and will continue his tenure as neoconservative public intellectual.

This feuding families plotline, as many critics have pointed out, is based on E.M. Forster’s 1910 classic, *Howards End*, with which Smith’s novel is constantly—often cheekily—in dialogue. I read particular scenes and characters in Smith’s novel alongside their Forsterian precursors in order to more fully draw out the significance of this intertextuality. Situated in a transitional moment between the Victorian era and the shift into modernism that bore witness to ongoing colonial expansion and rising global tensions that would eventually lead to the First World War, *Howards End* is a significant interlocutor for thinking through the updates *On Beauty*—more of a re-writing than a “writing back”—makes to its storyline. How do we read the move from England to the U.S., or the shift from the hazy backdrop of British imperialism and the white man’s burden in *Howards End* to the ill-defined Haitian national movement and international neoliberal politics that frame *On Beauty*? What changes with the transformation of
Forster’s romanticist Schlegel family into Smith’s multicultural Belseys, or the substitution of
the neoconservative Black British Kippses for the practical barons of industry in *Howards End*,
the Wilcoxes? How do we read the academic setting of *On Beauty* in this light, or take the
conversion of the Howards End house into a literal aesthetic object (the painting of Erzulie)?
Such an intertextual engagement becomes even more significant beyond the twists and turns of
plot, however. Through the lens of *On Beauty*, Forster’s novel about the ideological fight over
the Howards End property—and, symbolically, English national destiny—takes on a strikingly
aesthetic tone.

If *On Beauty*’s “literary motto” (Carbajal 53) is “There is such a shelter in each other”—a
phrase taken from a poem by the novel’s Claire Malcolm (but actually from a real piece by Zadie
Smith’s husband, Nick Laird)—its corollary in *Howards End*, Margaret Schlegel’s personal
motto, would certainly be “Only connect!” The greatest danger in the new “Age of Property” that
marks the twentieth century, Forster’s narrator discloses, is that “the modern ownership . . . is
reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage and
historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root
in the earth” (Forster 139). This rootlessness has to do with how new movements of capital and
changes in structures of labor affect older models of ownership and inheritance, and with how
such economic shifts crystallize as cultural change as well. While the liberal-minded Schlegel
siblings, lovers of art and music and walking through London at night, who are not wealthy but
nonetheless of the upper class, are forced out of their quaint flat on Wickham Place to make way
for new skyscrapers to be built, the Wilcox family, fiscally conservative and practical in the
extreme, acquires more and more properties while their business-minded members continue to
make money investing in enterprises domestic and foreign.\textsuperscript{53} The rootlessness that characterizes the Wilcoxes’ experience, articulated as kind of blindness to the beauty of the English countryside in general, and Ruth Wilcox’s picturesque home, Howards End, in particular, is the result of an aesthetic problem, and it is what keeps men like Henry Wilcox from being able to connect: “Only connect! That was the whole of [Margaret’s] sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer” (Forster 174-75). The real danger of the “commercial age,” then, is not simply rootlessness but an “inner darkness”—an inability, ultimately, to appreciate life- and connection-affirming beauty—that potentially comes with it and threatens the future of England by corrupting its inheritors (Forster 309).

Howards End therefore sets the aesthetic tone for On Beauty—ironically through its unique orientation toward property and nation building—and, in a way that critics fail to mention, serves as scaffolding for the latter novel’s interwoven aesthetic and political threads. Dorothy Hale notes that “the lives of Smith’s socially diverse characters are filled with aesthetic experience, and their individual attempts to understand that experience . . . highlight the power relations and social alliances that give meaning to even the most embodied sensory perceptions” (815). This points toward the way On Beauty widens the scope of its own context, toggling between moments of personal (aesthetic) experience and shared intimacy, historical and intertextual valences, and broader institutional (and global) politics through which conflicts over affirmative action, diversity, and multiculturalism are constantly being played out. Hale’s comment points to the fact that the text’s scales are multiple and deeply imbricated. In other

\textsuperscript{53} Throughout Howards End are scattered references to the colonial enterprises of the patriarch, Henry Wilcox whose main business is the “Imperial and West African Rubber Company,” 182-3, 188, 190, 261.
words, the embodied experience at the core of aesthetics achieves legibility through social, cultural and historical valences. But the corollary to Hale’s point is that grappling with the aesthetic—particularly for the “socially diverse” characters in the novel—has the potential to shed light on the very politics and institutions that circumscribe this experience. In this way, *On Beauty*’s minoritized characters offer a unique aesthetic insight, one that is not necessarily tied to the purely sensible or bound up with the longstanding, institutionalized traditions of Western philosophy and Art-with-a-capital-A. In fact, this is a subtle resistance that turns its gaze back on the dominant aesthetic regime, and opens up the possibility for forming personal attachments—finding “shelter in each other”—as with that between Carlene and Kiki.\(^{54}\) The unique aesthetics realized here is an *intersectional* aesthetics, tied to the material particularities (and often the burden) of social embodiment and indicating access to a kind of critique of the organizing logics of dominant aesthetics and, it turns out, of its primary institution—the neoliberal university—as well. This creative intervention proves relevant in an ongoing way, as the twenty-first century continues to see an emphasis on “equality” and “diversity” even as cuts to education, the rise of for-profit colleges, the transfer of power from faculty to administration, and the various rollbacks in affirmative action demonstrate a marked lack of commitment to actual diversity or material equality. A mobile, non-oppositional orientation that is able to negotiate beauty and power simultaneously, intersectional aesthetics emerges out of *On Beauty* as a kind of strategy for living in and living on under our current conditions of existence which appear so hostile to difference and material equality. Opening up the possibility for seeing different kinds of beauty,

\(^{54}\) Nunius, using the rubric of “sameness,” also touches on the ineffable connection produced out of such moments in the novel, arguing that they are attempts at forming community beyond traditional identity politics. For Nunius, these shared aesthetic experiences mark the “temporary suppression of all divisive elements in favour of one differential category or, respectively, a specific value to which the power of bridging fundamental differences is attributed” (110).
for seeing beauty differently, and for seeing the beauty of real, material difference, it is on a smaller scale an aesthetics that can not only prompt reflection on one’s own judgments, but spark the capacity for changing one’s mind.

*On Beauty*, steeped in the language of high theory and aesthetic philosophy, derives its satirical tone from contrasting official knowledges—their histories, hierarchies, and assumptions about subjectivity and civilization—with, as Hale noted, everyday sensible experience. At times, this contrast even occurs within a single character. Howard Belsey’s self-serving “academic pyrotechnics” at a social gathering demonstrate this: “what I meant was that Rembrandt is part of the seventeenth-century European movement to . . . well, let’s shorthand it—essentially invent the idea of the human,” Howard rehearses to a group of colleagues and non-academics. “And of course,” he continues, “the corollary to that is the fallacy that we as human beings are central, and that our aesthetic sense in some way makes us central” (Smith 117-118). What has the potential to be lost in Howard’s alienating delivery is the perceptiveness of his statement. Indeed, the aesthetic tradition to which modern western philosophy is indebted concatenates Enlightenment notions of interiority and artistic judgment (or taste) with those of the public sphere and civilization, considered the “ethical end of humanity itself” (Lloyd 64). In other words, the modern notion of humanity, as Howard highlights, is produced out of the Enlightenment aesthetic project. Thus, what we might term Kantian philosophy, centered on a self-consciousness borne of the capacity for aesthetic judgment, is the result of social and cultural shifts in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, including “the rapid expansion of capitalism, the emergence of modern individualism, the growing success of scientific method in manipulating nature for human ends . . . and the appearance . . . of ‘aesthetic autonomy’” (Bowie 2). In Kant’s writing the aesthetic experience is a two-step process,
involving both the individual, specific instance of sense perception provoked by the beautiful artwork or scene in nature, and the consequent rational application of artistic judgment or “taste.” Shaping the sensible experience retrospectively by routing it through the dominating logic of rationality and judgment, taste disciplines in the name of the disinterested “universal.”

Howard, of course, completely misses how he himself participates in the hierarchy that the regulatory function of aesthetic taste produces. When one of his undergraduate students, Katie, is brought to tears by Rembrandt’s *Seated Nude*, which Howard has assigned his class for homework, she experiences a complicated emotional response that is more about the dynamism of the painting’s female subject and Katie’s own subject position than the fact that experts like Monty Kipps find the piece “technically good but visually disgusting” (Smith 251). However, Howard’s authoritative reading of the work—that it is an unoriginal “confirmation of the ideality of the vulgar”—effectively silences and discounts Katie’s emotional response through a different political agenda (Smith 252). Her reaction, which she is understandably unable to voice in Howard’s class, hints at the unpredictability of aesthetic response and its complex relationship with bodily formations like gender and race. It also reveals Howard’s visual reading as an unwitting acceptance of stale misogynist tropes that already determine the parameters of “vulgarity”—here, as clearly working class and female. Oblivious to the ways in which he literally performs the narcissism of Enlightenment humanism and to the patriarchal and class-based foundations of his faux-radical aesthetic sensibility, Howard is essentially blind to the fact

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55 For a thorough description and analysis of Kantian aesthetics, see Leela Gandhi, especially chapter 6. In particular, Gandhi examines the “colonizing imperative of disinterest” at the heart of Kant’s universal aesthetic judgment (156), and makes an intervention by pointing out how taste is only the secondary response to an aesthetic object. Because sensible experience—irrational, embodied, and unpredictable—is primary, Gandhi theorizes what she calls an “interested aesthetics” at the unacknowledged center of Kantian philosophy that closely relates to the intersectional aesthetics I detect in *On Beauty*. 
that his own particular judgments bear the stamp of institutional authority. In other words, even in his contrariness, Howard’s aesthetic stance is privileged with a kind of universality, and as the gatekeeper of culture his judgment is endowed with the power to discipline others whose sensible/sensual experiences are not aligned with the dominant aesthetic regime he represents.

Access to universal beauty, then, as Howard shows, both grounds and is based on a privileged form of subjectivity. In aesthetic philosophy, this in turn underpins the formation of the “public sphere” and its twin concept, “common sense.” Aesthetics, as I defined in chapter one through Rancière, is therefore “at the core of politics,” producing a “distribution of the sensible” that “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc” (12-13). Here, the visible and the verbal connote cultural legibility and the ability to actively engage in systems of signification and representation, and that are therefore the crucial preconditions for political inclusion, as “politics revolves around what is seen and”—as Katie experiences—“what can be said about it” (Rancière 13). Ultimately, the capacity to tap into appropriate aesthetic taste serves as a “radical, constitutive comparison that sorts humans into different kinds based on their abilities to reason through aesthetic experience” (Chuh 13). Furthermore, this political division rests on the question of embodiment that proves central to Smith’s novel and to this dissertation as a whole: who gets to transcend the flesh and occupy the ethereal space of reason, judgment, and the universal?

On Beauty therefore stages how aesthetics, already a complicated discourse burdened by the baggage of history and philosophy, plays out for minoritized individuals who are also navigating the complex terrain of embodiment. Here, “beauty” escapes the confines of philosophy and spills over onto the social world and the bodies that populate it. For characters like Claire, Carlene, and Kiki, different relationships to beauty are not only the result of
inhabiting bodies that are female and/or nonwhite, they are also tactics for dealing with a hostile aesthetic regime. Sara Ahmed, in an argument about how bodies themselves are required to adjust to conform to cultural scripts regarding everything from queerness to happiness, makes a claim that might easily apply to these aesthetic dynamics: “Those unable to ‘adjust’ are positioned as best able to mobilize critique,” Ahmed writes (Happiness 80-81). Furthermore, Ahmed argues, “[w]hat lies behind this adjustment is the loss of other possible ways of living, a loss that must remain unmourned if you are to stay well-adjusted” (Happiness 79). Those unable to “adjust” in On Beauty—the characters inhabiting black bodies, female bodies, multiracial bodies, fat bodies, and bodies that display multiple of these qualities—are not only excluded in certain ways from beauty, then. They are spurred by their own maladjustment to find something new: in art, in beauty, in each other, and even in the spaces they collectively inhabit, such as the university.

**The Critic**

Carl Thomas is one such figure whose social positionality impedes his adjustment to the privileged white spaces of Wellington. Like his Howards End predecessor, Leonard Bast, Carl moves from social outsider to a tenuous position of token inclusion (or institutionalization), to being abruptly expelled from the narrative altogether. A bright young Black man with little formal education, from a rough neighborhood in Boston, Carl possesses an unparalleled intellectual curiosity. His knowledge of hip-hop is extensive, and he demonstrates a real talent for spoken word poetry, as well as an interest in questions of musical genius and artistic production. However, inhabiting a body of color fundamentally limits Carl’s relation to the inner-circle of knowledge production and cultural authority that Wellington University
represents to him. Throughout the text, Carl is reduced to the body in ways that shrewdly point to the idiosyncrasies of liberal racism; in particular, his beauty is remarked on constantly, to the extent that Carl’s presence has a distracting effect on many of the other characters. When Howard Belsey first meets him, he thinks Carl resembles one of the four African heads in a Rubens painting (77), but does not recognize him upon their second encounter. Carl’s blackness and classic(al) good looks therefore result in fashioning him into an aesthetic object available for fetishistic consumption by the text’s race- and class-privileged subjects.

However, Carl’s desire to learn and to immerse himself in creative culture keeps him returning to events in Wellington, such as the Mozart in the Park concert where first meets the Belsey family, despite his out-of-place-ness there. In this scene an awkward introduction takes place when Zora accidentally takes Carl’s discman instead of her own. The passage, an interesting revision of the Howards End umbrella swap that significantly transforms the mistaken object into a literal aesthetic (in this case, musical) device, is most important for what it sets up. Later in the novel, we retrospectively hear about Carl’s experience of listening to Mozart and, more specifically, what that encounter prompts him to do:

I found out about it a little more—‘cos I’ve been reading about classical music. . . it turns out that the main business of the Lacrimosa was by this guy Süßmayr—which is the shit, man, ‘cos it’s like the best thing in the Requiem, and it made me think, damn . . . all these people be trying to prove that it’s Mozart ‘cos that fits in with their idea of who can and who can’t make music like this, but the deal is that this amazing sound was just by this guy Süßmayr, this average Joe Shmo guy. (Smith 137)
Neither Carl’s position of relative ignorance nor his status as a cultural outsider detracts from his ability to be transported by the power of music, nor to discern, specifically, that Mozart’s Requiem “is the shit.” He figures out on his own that the Lacrimosa is one of the most famous, most “genius” sections of the piece, and hearing it prompts Carl to do his own research, after which he comes to an incredibly smart conclusion: that “genius” is a kind of construction that has everything to do with our collective “idea of who can and who can’t make music like this.” In other words, Carl’s realization is that aesthetic sensibilities themselves are cultivated, that art itself is always already a politicized field that has to do with race, gender, and class. History is always participating in re-writing the field of aesthetics, and writing out the “Joe Shmos” who trouble narratives of greatness. This realization is a good deal more perceptive than we might imagine Monty Kipps’s would be, with his unfaltering belief in the concept of genius and sense that “Equality [is] a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatuous dream” (Smith 44). Nor does it succumb to the pitfalls of Howard’s stance, which, in its utter, blinding rejection of all art deemed “masterful,” actually reifies the very existence of mastery and misses what might actually be beautiful, moving, or simply outside the reach of a dominant aesthetic narrative. Indeed, Carl models from the figurative and literal outside what the best version of an academic critic might look like: moved by genuine aesthetic experience and driven by intellectual curiosity, the critic can discern beauty while nevertheless interrogating histories of racism and colonialism, mobilizing class- and gender-based critique, and residing in the contradictions that mark intellectual labor in the neoliberal present. If Carl’s race and class cast him as an outsider—to Wellington, to events like Mozart in the park, and to aesthetic philosophy itself—it is this status that allows him to glimpse a different, intersectional version of aesthetics, both as critic and a dynamic spoken word poet.
The Poet

*On Beauty*’s Claire Malcolm also possesses a tenuous access to this aesthetic mode as a character likewise—but quite differently—marked by embodiment. In some ways, Claire’s corporeality has to do with the illicit affair she has with Howard, and therefore with her participation in the novel’s interracial love triangle. “Could you have found anybody less like me if you’d *scoured* the earth?” Kiki, who is Black and weighs close to three hundred pounds, asks Howard when she learns of the affair between him and his tiny, white, English department colleague. Kiki continues, emphasizing the racial power dynamics at the heart of such a betrayal: “You married a big black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?” (206). This is a complex situation in which the intersections of race, gender, and sex/sexuality collide and shift in messy ways, and not one that is easily resolved in the novel. Claire, despite her often misguided, apolitical liberalism, and the privilege of her whiteness that gets unwittingly attached to designations of beauty by men, is undeniably reduced to an embodied object here—but by Howard rather than Kiki. When Howard haltingly attempts to explain his actions to Kiki, he confirms this: “It’s true that men—they respond to beauty . . . it doesn’t end for them, this . . . this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world—and that’s clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes . . . but it’s *true* and . . . I don’t know how else to explain” (207). Claire’s subjectivity is erased in Howard’s timid academic jargon: she becomes simply a “physical actuality” through which one might pursue the privileged aesthetic realm of beauty. Furthermore, Howard’s failure to question the rubric of beauty at all here leads to a recycling of old aesthetic hierarchies that rank bodies by race and shape.

Like Carl, who is a masterful spoken word artist, this corporeal marking of Claire is ironic. A creative writing professor and formerly famous poet of 1970s second-wave feminism,
Claire is a pursuer of beauty with a powerful artistic voice and an aesthetic vision of her own. However, gender marks her creative status and complicates the way in which she inhabits the role of poet. Asked by her students what her experience was like in her heyday, Claire’s answer is informative of this complexity:

God . . . it was ’73 and it was a very strange time to be a woman poet . . . I was meeting all these amazing people—Ginsberg, and Ferlinghetti, and then finding myself in these insane situations . . . meeting, I don’t know, Mick Jagger or whoever, and I just felt very examined, very picked over, not just mentally but also personally and physically . . . and I suppose I felt somewhat . . . disembodied from myself. (Smith 218)

Immediately marking herself as a “woman poet,” Claire goes on to name some of the famous men—poets and otherwise—of the period, highlighting the difference and alienation she endured. These men—Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Mick Jagger—are not only poets and rockstars without a prefix (they are not male poets or male rockstars), but they are also, interestingly enough, interchangeable. When Claire notes that she was “meeting, I don’t know, Mick Jagger or whoever,” she diminishes the Rolling Stones star’s celebrity while simultaneously undermining his singularity—he could just as easily be Steven Tyler for Claire to tell her story and prove her point. Painting a picture of herself as outsider against a sea of famous men, Claire describes the experience of creative evaluation through the lens of gender as both hyperembodying and disembodying. Her words here sketch an aesthetic subjectivity in its relationship to the body, highlighting as a fundamental reality for non-canonical identity the ironic alienation—articulated in Claire’s paradoxical feeling of being “disembodied from myself”—produced by a constant
association with physicality. Reduced to her body in this way, Claire is observed, “examined” and “picked over” rather than read, discussed, or understood.

However, the result of these complex, ironic alienations is that Claire is also bestowed with glimpses of privileged aesthetic insight—like Carl, she approaches something like the intersectional aesthetics I read in *On Beauty* as a whole. A particularly powerful scene is when Claire reflects on Kiki Belsey, thinking to herself that Howard’s wife “radiated an essential female nature Claire had already imagined in her poetry—natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire. A goddess of the everyday” (Smith 227). If Erzulie is the object that prompts this kind of reflection “on beauty” for Carlene and Kiki, Kiki herself is such an object for Claire; it is therefore no accident that Claire imagines Kiki to be another kind of goddess, a “goddess of the everyday.” This capacity to recognize power and beauty in other women—but also in the banal moments and figures of the “everyday”—indicates Claire’s potential to tap into the intersectional aesthetics imagined in the novel, offering up a sort of redistribution of the sensible tied to difference, the particularities of bodies and the social codes that govern them. However, the potential of this moment is also complicated by the underlying violence in this script. Here, Claire turns Kiki into an aesthetic object and even elevates her as a kind of fetish, an art piece akin to Carl’s association with a Rubens painting in Howards mind. The “essential female nature” Kiki represents for Claire might be expansive and radical, but the gazing of a white woman on the body of a Black woman invites a more cynical reading in which blackness is employed as a metonym for the “unmediated” and the natural, and “essential female” hints at the sexual essentializing of the bad 1970s white feminism that honed Claire’s art. Nevertheless, the fact that Claire’s suspect reflection on Kiki is filtered through her poetry indicates that a stubborn potential for an emergent aesthetics might endure. What do we make of
the final part of Claire’s analysis, beyond “natural, honest, powerful, unmediated” descriptions of Kiki and their unmistakably racist undertones, when she notes that the woman whose husband she has been sleeping with has always struck her as being “full of something like genuine desire”? Creatively rewriting the female body—particularly Kiki’s and, by extension, Claire’s own—as desiring subject, Claire’s poetics break her out of the feminine rivalry role of home-wrecking mistress that the narrative might otherwise suggest. While this moment does not free the poet from the pitfalls of racial violence and essentialism, it does, I suggest, complicate Claire’s position in the narrative in a generative way.

In addition, Claire’s status as hyper-embodied “woman poet”—something that does not exempt her from moments of racist thinking but does enable her moments of seeing marginally outside of the hegemonic tropes of American beauty standards such as when the fat, black body of Kiki Belsey prompts her to reflect on “genuine desire”—ultimately results in a kind of generosity that fuels what the narrator calls a kind of “unassailable magic of Claire.” The beauty she is able to imagine through the creative exercise of her poetry gets spread around, as is the case with her students. On a class field trip to the Bus Stop, a Moroccan restaurant and performance space near the college, Claire gushes to someone about her students, and “[e]veryone warmed themselves in the generous communal glow”:

she made you feel that just being in this moment, doing this thing, was the most important and marvelous possibility for you. Claire spoke often in her poetry of the idea of ‘fittingness’: that is, when your chosen pursuit and your ability to achieve it—no matter how small or insignificant both might be—are matched exactly, are fitting. This, Claire argued, is when we become truly human, fully ourselves, beautiful. (Smith 214)
While Claire is a deeply flawed and complicated character, and this is a conflicted event in terms of the interaction that will play out later between Claire and Carl in this scene (an encounter I will return to), the radically democratic notion of beauty offered here approaches the most concise articulation of the intersectional aesthetics modestly envisioned in *On Beauty*. Fleeting, potentially small or even “insignificant,” and changeable, this beauty does not privilege any particular movements, outcomes, formations or even politics; it is not tied to the visual; it does not utilize neoliberal logic about hard work or, alternately, pure talent; it does not rest on stale tropes of achievement or capitalistic conceptions of “success”; and it embraces difference and particularity while also promoting the concept of collectivity, gesturing toward a greater formation in to which we might “fit.” Thus, while this section is framed in the hyperbolic language of an artist/poet, the idea of becoming more “fully ourselves,” examined in the context of Claire’s experience of feeling “disembodied from myself,” takes on meaning beyond the logic of authenticity or the privileges of static subjectivity. Finally, this eloquent notion of beauty-as-“fittingness,” springing forth from the explicitly corporeal experience of Claire as a female-bodied poet, is ultimately expressed as a positive affective force; Claire’s “magic,” in other words, is the power to make others feel inspired, worthy, *good*.

However—and perhaps as importantly—this is again not a utopian aesthetic vision free of the material realities or historical baggage that always already patterns sensible experience in the present; *On Beauty* refuses such a narrative. Claire’s poetry-fueled generosity and the democratic vision of fittingness it propels does not get spread around to her class at the Bus Stop. Claire’s creative writing students openly mock the spoken word performance of a Black woman on stage weaving simple rhymes about her “womb” being “the TOMB” and “HEAR[ing] the Nubian spirit behind the whitewash” (220-21). The consensus is that the poet is “not good,” but
while the politics of aesthetic judgment are assumed neutral by the class and Claire alike, the context for this bad poetry points to the racially—or the intersectionally—coded ways in which the concept of “good art” is constructed to begin with. One student—a gay, white man—starts parodying the artist with “feisty head movements and sing-song intonation,” spouting lines like “My vagina / In Carolina / Is much finer / Than yours” (221). This shows how Claire’s potentially emergent poetics fails to shape the sensible field around her in generous or generative ways, as her class slides down the slippery slope of neutral aesthetic judgment to racist critique. But again, on the other hand, what Claire’s version of beauty does demonstrate is that embodied subjectivity, or inhabiting the body of a minoritized subject, might possibly create a small wedge with which to carve out a refuge that is hospitable to difference, and that facilitates the formation of personal connections. In Claire’s own poetry—more than in her actions—we see this kind of negotiation and, at times, an intersectional aesthetics that, for instance, prompts a friendship between Carlene and Kiki through its imagining of finding “shelter in each other,” or conjures a vividly conflicted image of “the beautiful” in the full-length poem reproduced halfway through the novel, significantly titled “On Beauty.”

**Beauty and Institutionality**

The complicated interplay and overlapping scales of material contexts, sketched out through the characters of Carl and Claire, results in a novel that turns on the animating, central figure of the university. Swapping the *Howards End* setting of a rapidly transforming English

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56 The poem is introduced as one of Claire’s from her first poetry collection, and she uses it in her class as an example of a pantoum. In the “author’s note,” Smith states that the poem comes from an actual collection by her husband, Irish poet Nick Laird. I will return to the implications of this literary borrowing, but it is important to note the significance of the fact that Claire’s work exists in the real world outside the novel, independently of her character.
national landscape for the very specific scene of an American liberal arts university, _On Beauty_ interrogates how the neoliberal institution and its official knowledges affect the possibility for realizing an emergent aesthetics, shape the terrain on which aesthetic subjectivity unfolds across lines of race and gender, and ultimately comes to bear on the potential for living out and thinking through the kind of difference an intersectional aesthetics demands. The novel in fact reflects the reality that the role of the university has undergone a shift in terms of social reproduction and cultural authority. In _The University in Ruins_, Bill Readings catalogues how as an institution the university no longer serves a cultural function as an ideological state apparatus, becoming—especially in the past three decades—a bureaucratic corporation serving consumer-students and operating under a banner of meaningless “excellence” (Readings 5-6). _On Beauty_ depicts this current neoliberal moment marked by deregulation and privatization, where higher education remains hotly contested on the political landscape. On the one hand, with the decrease in public funding and subsequent hikes in tuition and fees, moves championed by conservatives like Monty Kipps, the reality is that college today has become increasingly less affordable for lower- and middle-class Americans. A new generation of college graduates—from private, public, and for-profit universities and colleges alike—are entering the workforce buried under massive student loan debt that many of them will never pay off. On the other hand, debates over educational equality and who even has access to such sites in the first place continue to be waged. Consequent rollbacks in affirmative action have had significant effects on minority acceptance and graduation rates.

This all plays out in the text with the controversy over Wellington’s unofficial enrollment policy, which allows professors to admit non-college students from the community into their classes at their discretion. The result—a kind of piecemeal affirmative action in which students
like Carl are able to attend classes like Claire’s creative writing course—is vehemently opposed by Monty Kipps, who argues with perfect conservative flair:

[this] policy . . . is a blatant corruption of the Affirmative Action bill (which, by the way, is itself a corruption) – whereby students who are NOT enrolled at this college are yet taught in classes here, by professors who, at their own ‘discretion’ (as it is so disingenuously put), allow these ‘students’ into their classes, choosing them over actual students better qualified than they—NOT because these young people meet the academic standards of Wellington, no, but because they are considered needy cases—as if it helps minorities to be pushed through an elite environment to which they are not yet suited.” (328-29)

The way Monty frames the increasingly futile attempts of the institution to promote diversity—as a “corruption” that bucks “academic standards” for the misguided benefit of “needy” minority students—perfectly captures the racist undertones of the supposedly race-neutral language gaining traction in various institutional settings. In other words, what Monty’s blustering speech demonstrates is how at the site of the university, an increasingly corporatized space that privileges equality of opportunity over equality of outcome, the benefit of “diversity” is being detached from the minority groups who fought in social justice movements and reattached to the interests of the institution.\(^5\) Monty’s “academic standards” become a euphemistic symbol for means of blocking the advancement, or even the entry, of minority students who are deemed less “qualified” by decidedly non-neutral measures, and a way of shoring up the power and privilege of the institution. The result is that “equality”—subordinated to the ultimately bureaucratic

\(^5\) See Christopher Newfield 51-56, and the conclusion, where he discusses the distinction between “equality of outcome” versus “equality of opportunity.” For more on the interplay of diversity, difference, and institutionalization, see Melamed, especially chapter 3; Ferguson chapter 7.
language of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” Readings’s “excellence,” and Kipps’s “standards”—as a term has become evacuated of meaning, and as a concept has been effectively dematerialized, no longer rooted in tangible reality. As Jodi Melamed argues, “racism appears as disappearing” under the institutionalized, antiracist metanarratives of neoliberal multiculturalism such as those spouted by Monty (14). But such a disappearance is a farce, and racism—along with sexism—simply gets rerouted, expressed in new ways.  

Another of these ways, which On Beauty captures brilliantly, is the process of institutionalization itself (Batra 1079). After the mix-up at Mozart in the park, we encounter Carl once again at the Bus Stop, performing spoken word to an audience that happens to include Claire’s class. Unlike the first artist, Carl brings down the house with his flawless rhymes and thoughtful lines on growing up poor and black. “He’s like Keats with a knapsack!” a student—the one who parodied the other performer—proclaims in an effort to grasp the ineffable that Carl’s performance exudes. Afterwards, Claire stops Carl exiting the stage, asking: “Are you interested in refining what you have?” (Smith 232). This is a moment of interpellation—employing the language of a commodity to be mined and commercialized—that hails Carl’s gradual incorporation into the institutional space of Wellington University and, significantly, further complicates Claire’s character and her aesthetics. The result of this encounter is that Carl becomes one of the unofficial students in Claire’s poetry class, where he learns about sonnets and meter and, to Carl’s chagrin, is excessively praised by his fellow classmates. Later, after the unofficial affirmative action policies that have gained Carl entry to the course have disintegrated

58 This is powerfully underscored in the narrative when we learn that Monty, as he has been advocating against Wellington’s unofficial students, has also been sleeping with one of them. The student, Chantelle, who, like Carl, has been attending Claire’s creative writing class, is clearly taken advantage of by Monty—she gets enlisted by him to work for a church charity the Kippses are involved with—and then completely abandoned by him once the scandal breaks.
thanks to the efforts of Monty, Carl becomes an employee of the Black Studies department. This latter development is a particularly illustrative example of the dangers and pitfalls of institutionalization for minoritized subjects. When Claire approaches Erskine Jegede, a professor-administrator in the Black Studies department, asking him for help regarding Carl’s situation, his response in this case and others like it is to use the “ace up his sleeve”: “in situations like this, Erskine, in his capacity as Assistant Director of the Black Studies Department, simply gave them a job. He created a job where before there had been only floor space.” The post he invents for Carl—“Hip-Hop Archivist”—has the dual benefit of quieting the affirmative action debate being waged between the Belseys (Howard has been joined by his daughter, Zora) and Monty Kipps, while benignly shuffling Carl out of the way and presumably keeping him content, intellectually stimulated, and well paid (Smith 371-2). Erskine’s act is not the result of a misguided (or savvy) individual, but a strategic move representative of a disciplinary formation that has learned to play by the rules of the institution, defending its territory, quelling controversy, and promoting its interests. This is what Stuart Hall refers to in an essay titled “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” when he articulates how power in the age of globalization “get[s] hold of, and neutralize[s] . . . differences”—a statement that could be made here, alternately, about Carl and about the Wellington Black Studies department itself (182). This scene creatively raises a central question for academic disciplines like Black Studies, Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, and various manifestations of Ethnic Studies—that is, the question of how to sustain effective critique in line with the activist roots of such formations, while maintaining a position inside the institution.  

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59 See Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, especially chapters 1 and 7, for a nuanced discussion of the history of the interdisciplines that also raises this question of institutionalization.
The politics that circumscribe Carl are set against an even broader set of international politics in the novel, marking an explicit connection between “the local and the global” and recalling the British colonial contexts hinted at in *Howards End*. In *On Beauty*, this has to do with the Haitian nationalist movement that repeatedly pops up on the periphery of the narrative, and throughout Wellington. Haitians in the college town drive cabs, man booths at street fairs, clean houses, serve as custodians at the university, and illegally sell merchandise on the sidewalks and in public squares. Critics clash in their readings of Smith’s mass of Haitian characters. Carbajal points to their presence as a kind of narrative breakdown, evidence of a “failed social commentary.” Conversely, Jackson argues that “[j]ust when readers are ready to celebrate the triumphs of diversity, Haitians reveal the layers of racialized stratification in Wellington” in addition to “enduring inequality, complex black diasporan relations, and the ironies of America’s much-celebrated post-civil rights movement/post-11 September/post-racial society” (865, 859). On the one hand, unlike Carl, whose story is culturally legible in the multicultural context of ongoing tropes of oppression and the American dream, the Haitians are cast as a kind of unified collective with no individuality, no personality, and no unique, minoritarian aesthetic potential. But, as Jackson astutely points out, on the other hand their characters appear to serve a clear, symbolic function, signaling the broader global conflicts that circulate the politics at the center of debate in and around Wellington. The pervasive presence of Haitians in the novel materializes most forcefully in explicitly political ways—as they assemble in protests, marches, and even spoken word performances at the Bus Stop. However, Carbajal’s point about “failure” warrants some merit as well: the Haitian message about the violence and inequality perpetuated by the forces of globalization and the neo-imperial policies of the United States reach the ears of the novel’s other characters—and its readers—but only as
indistinguishable “noise.” At the Bus Stop, the college kids in Claire’s class cannot understand the frantic French that is rapped onstage by the Haitian crew; Claire’s attempt to translate—
“They seem to be angry about America’s involvement in Haiti. The rhymes are very . . . crude”—is weak, and the performance is quickly outshone by Carl’s masterful piece (Smith 228). That Carl’s message resonates so resoundingly with the educated liberals in the crowd is indicative of the continued geographical narrowness of U.S. leftist critique. As in Howards End, progressive politics have a legibility limit. Opposition to the conservativism and “imaginative poverty” of the Wilcoxes is leveled, in Forster’s novel, through the liberal romanticism of the Schlegel sisters and textured by the class struggle of Leondard Bast. However, what haunt the margins of the 1910 novel are the colonial endeavors—for instance, the fact that Henry Wilcox’s business and fortune is made through the “Imperial and West African Rubber Company”—that scaffold the text’s entire political debate about the future of England.

Howards End also serves as a useful counterpoint through which to frame the institutionalization that gets taken up in the context of the university in On Beauty. If Forster’s Wilcoxes struggle with “imaginative poverty” because commerce stunts their already disconnected relationship to the material world (Forster 139), Carl’s precursor, Leonard, is caught in the opposite situation with a similar result. Scraping the bottom of the middle class—or standing “at the extreme verge of gentility,” as it were—Leonard has an artistic sensibility and a nebulous thirst for adventure that resonates with the Schlegel sisters (Forster 43). In their first meeting, precipitated by the accidental umbrella swap, Leonard impresses Margaret and Helen by telling them of his previous Saturday night, which he spent meditatively wandering the London streets. Hearing his tale, “a thrill of approval ran through the sisters” (110), because to them, Leonard, unlike a Wilcox man, understands something about the “unseen,” that “inner
life” that is able to mobilize theory, idealism and beauty without being mired in the politics of the everyday, the “telegrams and anger” that are the property of the “outer life.” However, Leonard is unable to entirely sustain this romantic hold on the Schlegels. When he mistakes their aesthetic interest for academic curiosity and begins to name drop famous authors, Margaret quickly shuts him down. “No disrespect to these sign-posts, and are not to blame if, in our weakness, we mistake the sign-post for the destination” (112). The hint of class distinctions in terms of access to the romantic aesthetic of the Schlegels becomes even more explicit in a conversation about Leonard between Margaret and her Aunt: “He seems interesting, in some ways very. . . . He likes books, and what one may roughly call adventure, and if he had a chance—But he is so poor. He lives a life where all the money is apt to go on nonsense and clothes” (123). In the new social order, the age of “Democracy” in which “All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas” (43), Leonard does not stand a chance of becoming “very” interesting: he simply cannot afford to. Under the new capitalist regime—powered by men like the Wilcoxes—Leonard is unable to find the time or energy to truly access the realm of the unseen or escape a fragmented, impoverished living: there is “always something that distracted him in the pursuit of beauty” (38). In a sense, Leonard experiences the industrial precursor to the slow death I discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. Doomed to live out his life toiling away at an insurance firm and supporting his tragically boorish wife, Leonard, though, is also at risk of being taken advantage of by well-meaning liberals like the Shlegels. In *Howards End*, the Scylla of slow death-by-capitalism, it seems, is accompanied by the Charibdis of being incorporated into a kind of dangerous elite cultural formation—a pithy dilemma that gets updated with the post-culture wars debates in *On Beauty*. In the end, Leonard, worked to the bone and carelessly betrayed by the Wilcoxes of the world, is literally crushed beneath the
weight of a falling bookcase at Howards End, now in possession of Margaret. Killed off by the oppressive symbol of genteel knowledge that Margaret and Helen Schlegel possess but are privileged enough to ignore (and thus bear the “weight” of), Leonard, like Henry Wilcox, is left unable “to connect.”

On Beauty’s Carl, on other hand, lives to leave the narrative, in perhaps another interesting departure executed by Smith’s intertextual plot. When Carl has become firmly entrenched at Wellington in his role as the Black Studies Department’s hip-hop archivist, like the audience at the Bus Stop he becomes deaf to the sounds of Haitian protest. Their literal chanting in the streets of Wellington, which fails to get through to him or the other characters, is thus unable to puncture the political vacuum of the institution, which has become mired in the small-scale affirmative action debate. “I’m having trouble concentrating,” Carl tells Zora when she comes to visit his office. “I keep on getting a lot of noise from outside. People hollering for an hour. You happen to know what’s going on out there?” Zora’s reply—“Some kind of Haitian protest thing . . . . Minimum wage, getting shit on by everybody all the time . . . a lot of stuff, I guess”—doesn’t faze Carl or pique his interest at all (Smith 376). This scene is a multivalent illustration of the way On Beauty “implicate[s] the university as one of the sites for the propagation of economic and racial disparities, thus calling into question its left-liberal academic discourse on racial and economic justice” (Batra 1086). Once Carl has become part of the institution, he demonstrates a kind of willful deafness in terms of leftist politics: he literally gets up to close the window on the Haitian chanting, symbolically also closing the window on internationally expanding his own political scope. Carl’s transformation into respectable member of the college thereby represents the foreclosing of potential for coalition building, in addition to the end of his own unique, vibrant aesthetics, as he stops writing and performing spoken word
once he takes the job. But it also highlights the complexity of ongoing “economic and racial disparities,” marking which minoritized subjects are provisionally allowed in to the institution, and which ones are to remain locked outside protesting in the streets. However, Carl’s insider position is soon revealed as precarious as the teetering bookcase in *Howards End*, and before long he completely drops out of the narrative. Caught in the middle of a dramatic confrontation between Zora Belsey and Victoria Kipps—a complicated scenario in which the daughters of two academics use him disingenuously to push their personal agendas—Carl’s departure expands on Leonard’s. Carl is not killed by the weight of institutionalized knowledge but rather, so alienated and smothered by the petty dramas sparked in the dysfunctionality of academic life, gets absorbed only to ultimately choose to leave. These two characters are incorporated by dominant institutions only to later be radically excluded by them, while their tragic yet well-defined plotlines are cast in sharp relief against the metaphorical murmurs of those who are unable even to breach the narrative’s scope: *Howards End’s* colonial subjects and *On Beauty’s* Haitian protestors.

**Reading Multiculturalism: White Teeth**

Some of the critique of the multicultural institution and its mechanisms for inclusion and exclusion in *On Beauty* takes shape not in the intertextual engagement with Forster’s novel, however, but through the context of the reception of Smith’s first novel, *White Teeth*. Published

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Carbajal reads Carl’s departure quite differently, arguing that “*On Beauty* forfeits its chance to appropriate Carl and allows him to leave the privileged streets of Wellington, his unsettled but unbroken black working-class identity allowed to veer out of Zora’s range of vision and influence” (43). This stems from Carbajal’s reading of Carl as indicative of the novel’s “celebration of multicultural societies and their fostering of cultural difference” (40), an interpretation I find does not fully square with the novel’s ambivalence about neoliberal multiculturalism.
in 2000 when the author was just twenty-four, *White Teeth* was extremely well-received, hailing the emergence of a new global literary talent, overwhelmingly lauded for its masterful comic-realist style, and in particular praised as a witty and realistic representation of “modern, multicultural Britain” (“Reception”). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Zadie Smith wryly admitted, “I was expected to be some expert on multicultural affairs, as if multiculturalism is a genre of fiction or something” (“White”). Anne Chisholm’s review for *The Sunday Telegraph* was typical of such a response:

> [Smith’s] attitude to the complications and conflicts, loves and hates that inevitably result from living in a cultural melting pot is not only post-imperial but post-racial . . . One of the endearing qualities of her sharp-eyed but warm-hearted book is that it makes racism appear not only ugly and stupid but ludicrously out of date.” (qtd. Moss)

Aside from the suspect rhetoric of “melting pots” and “post-racism” (and also perhaps the diminutive language of “endearment” and “warm-heartedness”), any reading that finds *White Teeth* an unequivocal or rosy tome on the anachronistic quality of racism is at best incomplete, and at worst seriously misguided.

It is the hilarious scene of hyperbolic racism from which the novel draws its title that produces this kind of multicultural (mis)interpretation. When Irie, Magid and Millat, the novel’s three young, “dun-colored” main characters stop by the home of an old, white Englishman on a service assignment for school, they are confronted by naked, but literally toothless racism: “like all things, the business has two sides. Clean white teeth are not always wise now are they?” Mr. J. P. Hamilton asks his visitors while displaying to them his pearly-white dentures. “Par exemplum: when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the
whiteness of his teeth” (Smith White 144). In some ways, White Teeth provocatively invites its own misreading with this scene. Racism here is represented as “ugly and stupid” and, most importantly, confined to the malignant personal sentiments of an individual who not only uses racist epithets, but is mean, petty, and constantly condescending to the young characters of color. However, for critics who spend their energy locating the text’s antiracist critique in the Mr. J. P. Hamilton scene, the joke is on them—they miss the more insidious and indeed realistic liberal racism that pervades the narrative, and in turn, White Teeth’s ultimate critique of the very celebratory neoliberal buzzwords like “diversity” or “multiculturalism” that, ironically, have often since been used to describe the novel itself. Smith clearly comments on the structures of institutionalized racism—as well as its increasingly bureaucratic language—when high school-aged Irie and Millat are caught smoking marijuana and enrolled in an alternative program “in line with the school policy move away from behavior chastisement and toward constructive conduct management” (251). Such a program brings “children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds into contact with kids who might have something to offer them,” and sets them up with a family of positive (read: white, middle-class) role models (256). When the two “exotic-looking” teenagers are introduced to the Chalfens, they encounter the kind of racism that asks them where they are from “originally,” and then proceeds to seduce the alienated kids with the seemingly rational, race-neutral and future-oriented language of neoliberal multiculturalism (265). For Irie and Millat, the products of a tumultuous history of colonialism and diaspora, the perfect Englishness of the Chalfens—encapsulated by the family tree that dates back to the seventeenth century, with concrete “[d]ates of birth and death,” “marriages . . . singular and long-lasting,” and “a normal number of children”—is irresistible (280).
Only the youngest Chalfen son, not yet versed in the pleasantries of multicultural rhetoric, indicates what is beneath the benign collective face of liberal tolerance:

“You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you?” pleaded Joyce. “Oscar really wants you to stay. Oscar loves having strangers in the house, he finds it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers! Don’t you, Oscar?”

“No, I don’t,” confided Oscar, spitting in Irie’s ear. “I hate brown strangers.”

Ironically, many reviewed and responded to White Teeth in a “Chalfenist” manner—something Smith seems to be both anticipating and mocking in a style she refines in On Beauty. Indeed, the very act of word play on the Chalfen name is something the Chalfens themselves participate in and encourage: “They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs, and occasionally adjectives: It’s the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He’s Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this” (261). But what Chalfenism means here is celebrating the novel’s “diversity” without looking critically at the real xenophobia articulated by Oscar, thus completely missing the bite to the scene’s humor. On Beauty, shifting its focus to twenty-first century life in and around the neoliberal American university—importantly life that does not simply include but is fundamentally defined by globalization and postcolonial diasporic patterns, racial multiplicity, gender politics and the complexities of ongoing economic disparity amidst a superficial cultural ethos of multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity—responds quite clearly to such Chalfenist readings of its own narrative. Mocking not only the dog whistling rhetoric of neoconservatives like Monty Kipps, but the flabbiness of the antiracism espoused by leftist liberals like Howard and Claire, On Beauty offers up a subtle critique of neoliberal multiculturalism’s recasting of difference as diversity and the institutionalizing role of the
university in this dangerous political shift. Ultimately, the text uses the framework of aesthetics—the various encounters with beauty, reflections on poetry and criticism, and difficult engagements between bodies and art that take place throughout the narrative—to recast the political terms of this debate, and finally to imagine new modes of seeing and ways of being (collectively), that might be used to push back against neoliberal discourses of diversity.

**Emergent Aesthetics, Intersectional Aesthetics**

Again, it is through its intertextuality with *Howards End* that *On Beauty* outlines its emergent aesthetics. In Forster’s novel, when Ruth Wilcox meets Margaret Schlegel the two are able—unlike the novel’s various men—to bond over the beauty of land that has been in Ruth’s family for generations. Remarkably, the Howards End house remains under her name even after she marries, and so there is something uniquely gendered about even its very existence. As women, neither Ruth nor Margaret is burdened by work. Unlike their men, who are either driven to pioneer industries and shoulder the white man’s burden across the globe, or are simply forced to labor and earn enough to stave off poverty, Forster’s female characters are free—at least in a practical, if not socially acceptable sense—to “walk at night,” ponder the “unseen,” and, generally, to contemplate beauty. Indeed, the joint experience in which the novel’s two central women are able to set aside their differences and the loyalties of their separate families and “only connect” through the transformative landscape of Howards End precipitates the most scandalous event in the text: when Ruth Wilcox proves “treacherous to the family [and] to the laws of property” by leaving the house to Margaret in her will (93). She does this because, to her family, “Howards End was a house; they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir” (93).
However, the transfer of capital between women—highly politically symbolic on its own—is also remarkable because of the unlikely friendship it solidifies between two very different characters. Forster’s famous quote from a 1938 speech titled “What I Believe” is illustrative here: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.” Espousing antinational sentiments like this were considered radical, at the time, and thus the concept of “friendship” takes on an unanticipated significance. In *Affective Communities*, a project about “individuals and groups that have renounced the privileges of imperialism and elected affinity with victims of their own expansionist cultures,” Leela Gandhi turns to figures like Forster and Oscar Wilde to examine friendship as one such “minor” anti-colonial political orientation (Gandhi 1). This is because friendship is a voluntary formation, the forging of an attachment that seeks collectivity without collapsing—and in fact relying on and celebrating—difference. Gandhi, co-opting the language of Jean-Luc Nancy, calls this the “co-belonging of non-identical singularities” (26). And when friendship is chosen despite national(ist) ties and their imperialist corollaries, it can be a brave anti-colonial act. The politics of friendship between Margaret and Ruth is constituted somewhat differently—both women are upper-class, British, and enormously privileged—and yet their relationship still resonates with this resistance to dominant structures of power. Ultimately, this friendship manifests as an inheritance/gift that flies in the face of capitalist logic regarding property, and totally undermines gender norms: “[Margaret] discerned that Mrs. Wilcox, though a loving wife and mother, had only one passion in life—her house—and that the moment was solemn when she invited a friend to share this passion with her” (81). Ruth chooses her friend over her family, so privileging affective over normative social attachments. Again, thinking back through the house as metaphor for England, Ruth Wilcox’s choice of a “spiritual” rather than a
traditional, familial heir is a more radical decision than it first appears: it mobilizes a politics of “co-belonging” and difference, outside capitalist economies and interruptive of dominant nationalist tropes of progress and, by extension, racial exclusion and empire.

While “shelter” (or finding it “in each other”) becomes the expressed motto of On Beauty, with the object of inheritance passed between women transformed from a house into a painting, to a large extent Forster’s novel is able to imagine this affective politics by treating Howards End itself as an aesthetic object, or what the narrator vaguely calls a “spirit.” Amidst the solidifying trends of globalized industrialism, it locates an alternate version of property that resists pure commodification and approaches something like freedom, or the material conditions necessary for achieving some kind of human connection under capitalism’s new frenetic pace.

When Margaret Schlegel contemplates the grounding quality of Howards End—its ability to help her forget “the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little”—she is able to “recapture . . . the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty” (191). The landscape enables her to transcend a disciplinary regime marked by the sped-up time and literal weight—the “luggage”—of modernity. And it is from this space that Margaret is able to get down to the messy business of thorough (and, it turns out, nationalistic) reflection:

starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England. She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. But an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable. . . . It had certainly come through the house . . . the notion of ‘through’ persisted; her mind trembled towards a conclusion which only the unwise have put into words. Then, veering back into
warmth, it dwelt on ruddy bricks, flowering plumtrees, and all the tangible joys of spring. (191)

For Margaret, Ruth’s house is the avenue—not straight but crooked as the majestic figure of the property’s great wych-elm tree—through which she is able to begin to think about the big questions that concern the novel overall. But *Howards End* does not directly lead to conclusions about England and its future—the house is not a didactic device. Instead, Margaret can only tap into something in the house and its land that enables her to travel “towards a conclusion.” She is directed away from firm answers couched in definitive and ultimately reductive words and instead led back toward the “inconceivable” that is inarticulable but marked by “warmth” and the “tangible joys of spring.” Ultimately, Margaret experiences Howards End as an aesthetic encounter. It is unpredictable, awakening in her an “unexpected love” of the nation, as well as non-rational, neither a narratable experience nor one that comes at the moment of mental labor, as the immediate recognizable product of formalized learning. The experience also prompts in her a connection to “the joys of the flesh” in addition to “the inconceivable,” pointing to the material underpinnings that accompany the unnamable elsewhere—outside the realm of reason but rooted in pleasurable sensible experience—of aesthetics. Finally, after routing her through the important questions about nation and history, Margaret’s reflection on Howards End causes a “trembling” in her mind that ultimately directs her back to the scene of natural beauty—the “tangible joys of spring”—that materially grounds such questions. This return to context, the objective narrator chimes in, is wise indeed, as “only the unwise have put into words” such aesthetic experience.

If collective aesthetic encounter in *Howards End* is what propels its significant plot twist—the unexpected friendship between Ruth Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel that leads to a
scandalous transfer of property—then *On Beauty* updates that plot twist and folds it back in on itself, not only complicating the very terms of “art” and “property” with the central painting of Erzulie, but casting light on the aesthetics of shared experience, collectivity, or, in other words, *politics* as well. The aesthetic experiences of its various characters point toward the ways in which the philosophical and disciplinary rubrics of “aesthetics” in some senses produce bodies—and produce some of them for exclusion. However, as the complicated embodiment of Carl and Claire show, aesthetic exclusion is a complex terrain filled with both overlappings and ruptures. Both of these characters achieve provisional access to an aesthetics outside the hackneyed culture wars positions of Howard and Monty: Claire with her poetry, and Carl in his position of (non-)academic critic. Yet neither is able to experience the emergent potential of the aesthetic in a way that approaches the scene of encounter with the painting shared by Carlene and Kiki. This brief narrative moment is in fact a significant update to the *Howards End* plot as well: totally altering the dynamic whereby Margaret belatedly experiences the transcendent landscape of the countryside cottage after Ruth’s death, *On Beauty* punctuates a plot filled with decidedly non-transformative aesthetic experience and the frustrating dramas of institutional diversity politics with a fleeting scene where two Black women look *together* at a striking painting of a Black woman subject, sedimenting a personal attachment that prompts perhaps an even more shocking gesture in signifying beyond property to connote not simply friendship, but beauty. While Ruth literally passes down an abode, a shelter, to Margaret, and so figuratively interrupts capitalism’s hold on the national (and also imperial and patriarchal) narrative of England, Carlene and Kiki together find “shelter in each other” through an aesthetics that disrupts tropes of weak multicultural politics and privileges the corporeal experience of intersectional subjects.
On the University, Beauty, and Being Wrong

*On Beauty* is not, though, a uniform indictment of the contemporary university; rather, it characteristically depicts spaces of higher learning as varied and complicated, rife with the bad politics of Howard and Monty, the scenes of benign racism and tokenism in Claire’s poetry class, and the insidiousness of institutionalization we see with Carl, but also unequivocally redeemed in certain moments, directed against charges “that academic debate is itself meaningless” (Hale 824). Rather, as Hale argues, “*On Beauty* shows how the ideas formulated and the values theorized in universities become incorporated into the thoughts of other types of social subjects” (824). Hale cites Carlene’s steadfast belief in the wisdom of poetry as an example. The dying woman first recites *On Beauty*’s central poetic phrase—“There is such a shelter in each other”—in the initial conversation with Kiki that occurs in front of the Erzulie painting. While this deployment of poetry comes off more genuinely than does Kiki’s awkward use of the language of high theory, it is, as Hale points out, a similar borrowing from the discourses of the academy. However, significantly, this line is also lifted from another of Nick Laird’s poems, and therefore it embodies a kind of double-connection to the site of the university.⁶¹ Because Laird’s poetry consistently becomes Claire Malcolm’s throughout *On Beauty*, in the world of the novel Carlene actually adopts Claire’s language to form the bond with Kiki that works to cement their friendship and culminates in the flagrant act of defiance to neoliberal laws of property, family, and propriety. The line shows up for the last time on the back of the Erzulie painting: Carlene has written it out for Kiki, to whom she has bequeathed the priceless work. This circulation of poetic language—between women—is no accident; it represents the intersectional aesthetics they

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⁶¹ The poem, titled “Pedigree,” comes from Nick Laird’s collection *To a Fault* (New York: Norton, 2007).
all glimpse but, ultimately, is only fleetingly realized in the shared moment between Carlene and Kiki.

Other scenes similarly draw out the quieter ways in which the discourses of the academy might be redeemed in the experience of everyday life. This shows up in the example of Levi Belsey, who is grappling with his own minoritization by embracing—at times in comically misguided ways—hip-hop culture and his own blackness. In one section, Levi, faced with the scene of boisterous Haitian men hawking their wares along a Boston sidewalk, is struck by “a sudden rush of beauty.” Unable to translate or make sense of this aesthetic moment, Hale notes (824, footnote), Levi co-opts the language of his professor-father’s lecture, thinking to himself: “Situationists transform the urban landscape” (Smith 193-4). In such moments, the terms of critical theory and the ideas, rhetoric, and discourses of the university become not impediments to recognizing beauty but valuable structures of knowledge that enable the characters to make sense of the ins and outs of their everyday lives: to articulate sensible moments of pleasure, forge intimate connections, and even resist normative modes of being under the weight of neoliberal multiculturalism. In fact, this moving aesthetic experience spurs Levi’s process of politicization, leading to him quit his job at a local record store when he tries to organize the employees against unjust management practices, and then to start associating with the Haitians, who acquaint Levi with their struggle. Ultimately, Levi’s involvement with this group prompts him to steal the painting of Erzulie from Monty Kipps’s office—the institutional setting to which it has been moved after Carlene’s death—and stash it under his own bed for the purpose, he tells his mom, of “redistribut[ing] the funds” to the Haitian people (429). This surprising turn of events is the only way Kiki eventually finds out that the painting is legally hers, for when she finds the painting in Levi’s room, she also discovers Carlene’s note on the back: “Kiki—please enjoy this
painting. It needs to be loved by someone like you. Your friend, Carlene . . . . There is such a shelter in each other” (430-31). Ironically, academic discourse circulating through the novel’s non-institutionalized sites opens up the hybrid space, marked by poetry and the beauty of the everyday, in which the text’s most radical friendship is realized, one that in turn catalyzes an intersectional aesthetics.

Scenes like these evoke On Beauty’s other key intertext, a long essay written in 1999 titled “On Beauty and Being Just” by Elaine Scarry, Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value in the department of English at Harvard University. Scarry’s piece is a strikingly optimistic treatise aimed at recuperating beauty in our contemporary lives and—significantly—our schools, and defending it from the “political complaints against it” (Scarry, “Beauty” 39). Insisting that sites of official learning can have a positive impact on aesthetic life, expanding beauty and therefore our ethical relationship to difference, Scarry is particularly critical of academic and theoretical discourses that dismiss beauty, while nevertheless remaining committed to the potential of the university itself. She argues that “[t]o misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed” (7). The quote, which serves as the epigraph for the middle section of Smith’s novel, reveals an ethical dimension to the aesthetic and often overtly political battles being waged in On Beauty. Stressing the connection between the university and beauty, particularly after redefining beauty in constant and positively imaginative ways (through Claire, briefly through Howard’s student Katie, and through the friendship of Carlene and Kiki, among others) that have to do with difference, individual and collective attachments, and embodiment, Smith’s deployment of Scarry does some critical work to offset the satirical image of academia prominent in much of the text—a
nuance many critics of the text miss. *On Beauty* gently insists that an intersectional aesthetics—an aesthetic potentiality built upon the structural maladjustment of minoritized subjects—*can* survive, and even flourish, in the suffocating, at times excessively doctrinaire space of the academy.

“On Beauty and Being Just” is more than a simple redemption of the aesthetics in/of the university, though, and in its defense of beauty against key political charges the essay provides another opening for the novel’s intersectional aesthetics. This “set of political complaints,” emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, are (1) “that when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object,” and (2) “that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements” (39-40). This disagreement hinges on the question of the gaze, locating visuality, and the issues of power and authority at stake it connotes, as central to the debate. On one hand, Scarry attempts to disprove each charge on its own, arguing that on the first count, the gaze is actually positive and life-giving (47), and, on the second count, that beholding beauty is an inclusive and democratic experience, necessarily prompting one to generously seek out beauty in other, ordinary places rather than encouraging exclusion, or “lateral disregard” (39). On the other hand, Scarry’s recuperative project points out how the two arguments “fundamentally contradict one another”: in one case the gaze is considered reifying and harmful to the object, and in the other case it is viewed as beneficial, only misdirected (40). However, *On Beauty* raises some doubt about the seemingly tidy logic of a transcendent beauty, questioning whether the gaze cannot be reifying and still simultaneously result in lateral disregard. This dilemma intersects, at times, with the complex issue of institutionalization in the novel, as when Carl’s talent, good looks, and overall legibility to the white liberal institution of Wellington combine to attain for him the mixed
success of entering the college and getting a job there—in particular, over the various Haitian characters who nonetheless participate in the same sorts of aesthetic practices (spoken word and rap). However, as I have addressed, Carl’s inclusion is enormously complicated, riddled with negative multicultural affect and resulting in his curious departure from the narrative. Problematized in a different way, Scarry’s aesthetic schema similarly avoids the messiness of Howard’s sexual desire and all the unpleasant baggage that comes with it. With the affair, Howard turns his metaphorical gaze from Kiki to Claire, so while Kiki struggles with the repercussions of lateral disregard, Claire is forced to deal with the mixed consequences of feeling “examined” and “picked over” by Howard and other men. Rather than allying with “On Beauty and Being Just” against the material charges leveled at this apolitical formulation of beauty, Smith’s novel incorporates them in a kind of meta-performance of the complexities of inclusion itself. In other words, On Beauty uses questions of minoritization, racial and gender violence, and the pitfalls of multiculturalism to take seriously these political critiques, and then uses such critiques to—always messily, never perfectly—offer up a more realistic, less transcendent view of beauty that nevertheless maintains the emergent potential Scarry insists on.

The complex aspects of beauty that Scarry’s essay articulates go beyond combatting the political incursions into aesthetics, though, to highlight ethics, in particular how beauty prompts us to justice and attunes us to morality (42) and, most significantly, “brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors” (22). For Scarry, to “be wrong” about beauty means on the one hand making an incorrect judgment about an object—finding it beautiful in the first instance, only to see that beauty fade over time, or, alternatively, withholding aesthetic admiration only to discover later that an object indeed possesses beauty. But Scarry also examines “being wrong” in terms of inappropriate reactions—not simply responses—to beauty. The desire to replicate a
beautiful object may at times manifest as fads, styles, or clichéd artistic trends, “but this is just an imperfect version of a deeply beneficent momentum toward replication” (5). Similarly, the impulse to hoard beautiful objects is, according to Scarry, “simply . . . an imperfect instance of an otherwise positive outcome”—that is, to pursue, shore up, or dwell in beauty in more ethical and just ways (6). As beauty incites its own ongoing pursuit, it exudes an expansiveness even as—or perhaps because—it anticipates such mistakes.

In this reflective modality, as a formation teeming with “errors” made in, around, and about it, there is something of this beauty that resonates with the imperfect, messy, and often unpredictable aesthetics of Smith’s novel. The final pages of On Beauty gesture toward something altogether optimistic, a positive prognosis for intersectional aesthetics in the particular site of the neoliberal university. This is indicated in part by the title of the novel’s closing section, “On Beauty and Being Wrong,” which is, incidentally, the title of the first section of Elaine Scarry’s essay. On Beauty’s final pages leave us with Howard Belsey, who has so often been “wrong” about beauty, experiencing a realization as he undergoes a moving aesthetic encounter—perhaps his first of the novel. The scene is set sometime in the near future. We see the Belsey family readjusting to Howard and Kiki’s separation, and hear of Kiki’s court case with the Kippses over the Erzulie painting. The Belsey children, who still live with Howard at the house, banter with their father and clearly still begrudge him his horrible behavior (they have learned not only about his affair with Claire, but also his sexual escapades with Victoria Kipps). However, the worst has come to pass and the family clearly maintains their closeness and affection. Howard, we are led to believe, is the only one still struggling to adjust: he is basically “already a dead man walking” professionally, “with no book coming any time soon, surely heading for a messy divorce and on a sabbatical that looked suspiciously like the first step.
towards retirement” (Smith 441). In the last pages, we see this picture of Howard clearly: embarrassingly late to his own public lecture on Rembrandt, he scrambles in and begins the powerpoint presentation only to realize he has left his notes behind. He freezes, simply clicking through the slideshow until it reaches the end and settles on Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje Bathing*. This closing scene is beautiful and enigmatic, devoid of annoying academic-speak, leaving the reader with a sense that Howard has been unsettled—or re-adjusted—in the position of aesthetic authority that he previously occupied. The final words end with hope, and an “intimation of what is to come.”

What is perhaps most striking about this passage, though, is the thematic chiasmus that occurs between the subject of Rembrandt’s painting, his beloved Hendrickje, and Kiki. As Howard glances around the auditorium in terror, his experience is fragmented and significantly sensible: “He could hear people moving in their seats. He could smell the tang of himself strongly. What did he look like to these people? He pressed the red button. The lights began to go down” (Smith 442). Amidst the smells, sounds, and visible discomfort of the audience and himself, Howard passes through a rare moment in which he is able to take on the perspective of others, to imagine how he looks to them. And for perhaps the first time in the text, he is the one forced to experience the discomfort of embodiment, of becoming for a brief moment an aesthetic object rather than a subject. It is this shift, this de-centering of Howard’s authoritative position, that literally sets the stage and dims the lights for the next moment in which he spots Kiki in the audience “looking up with interest at the image behind him” (Smith 442). Howard looks at Kiki looking at Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje Bathing* and experiences perhaps his first aesthetic encounter of the novel. In fact, seeing Kiki with her “bare and gleaming” shoulders and a scarlet ribbon in her hair jolts Howard into an uncharacteristic engagement with the art before him. While in the
past he has held to a rigidly political stance on the art he teaches, considering Rembrandt an
unoriginal hired hand, at this moment he responds viscerally to the “pretty, blousy Dutch
woman” who is the painting’s subject. Howard imagines that she is looking away coyly, as if
“considering whether to wade deeper,” and notes that the “surface of the water was dark,
reflective—a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath.” The narration, filtered
through Howard’s focalization, recalls earlier moments in the text in which characters—those
marked by their bodies as outside the institutionalized spaces of official knowledge—discern a
kind of beauty that de-centers the dominant aesthetic regime, and that consequently sets them on
a path of possibility to forging new and often unpredictable attachments, to dwell in the moments
of radical particularity produced out of sensible aesthetic experience, to see beauty in new ways
and to use new ways of seeing to imagine (beauty) differently. This particular complicated
moment prompts Howard to (re)see the beauty of Kiki, reflected ironically in the image of the
Dutch master’s love, Hendrickje, and to realize that he has not only made an error about his wife,
but possibly other aspects of his life, and maybe even about beauty itself.

*On Beauty* ultimately theorizes a complicated, intersectional aesthetics not to indict the
neoliberal university as a cultural hegemon that limits beauty and difference, but to reflect on
how the institution itself is a space of tension, discontinuity and contradiction. As such, the
university can in fact serve as the site at which intersectional aesthetics more than survives, even
flourishes. From this perspective *On Beauty* is a critical (re)consideration of what in and about
the institution might be salvaged in order to promote difference, equality, and beauty. Carl’s
alternate history of Mozart’s *Requiem*, which departs from a genealogy of great (white, upper-
class, male) geniuses to recover the regular “Joe Schmos” whose intellectual labor is often
forgotten, recalls real efforts by scholars to queer the canon and highlight the subaltern voices
that have been silenced through dominant historiography. Claire’s sense of “fittingness” on the other hand acts as a subtle redefinitional strategy that discursively dismantles the privilege of particular disciplines to determine what is beautiful and, therefore, good. Unlike the dominant aesthetics of Howard and Monty, Claire creatively reimagines beauty as a truly democratic project, one that is not only a kind of redistribution of the sensible but a needed intervention that extends “critical” beyond the scope of the negative. Howard’s student, Katie, does not make an active intervention, but in her experience of finding beauty where the institution’s key players cannot, she reminds us that aesthetics is deeply connected to histories of sexism and racism, and that even those supposedly “radical” scholars are in danger of forgetting this. Finally, Carlene and Kiki find a mode of being through aesthetics—in proximity to the institution, and using its polyvocal discourses—that is collaborative, opposed to the divisive, culture wars politics that have come to mark the neoliberal university and obfuscate its harmful effects on difference and material equality. The various ways in which Smith’s characters inhabit this conflicted relationality to the university are therefore clues to the novel’s aesthetic politics. The modest potential glimpsed in Howard’s change of mind at the end, then, takes on deeper significance when we realize that an intersectional aesthetics might not simply carve out a space for difference in the university—it might deeply unsettle the institution and its dominant aesthetic regime.

Finally, as a political strategy intersectional aesthetics adds a particular layer to this dissertation’s overall rematerializing project. If critical theory’s recent turn shows us that the field of aesthetics is always already about a fundamental sorting of humanity and a foundational shaping of the political optics of everyday life, then looking to ways in which particular subjects are excluded from the aesthetic—and at what results from this exclusion—gets at this project’s
central theme of embodiment. Sketching the ways in which our “thick moment of ongoingness” maps itself unequally onto the bodies we inhabit, often in paradoxically dematerializing ways, I have sought to locate the gaps, fissures, and small moments of refusal and resistance opened up in the complex and overwhelming unfolding of the present. Intersectional aesthetics, performative reading, and the multi-temporal potential I trace through the space of the literary, therefore, represent a possible triangulation of tactics, a mobile means for thinking about how difference and equality matter at this important historical juncture.


“The Reception of White Teeth.” *Cambridge Authors.*


