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Windows on the World:
The Aesthetics of Difference in Neoliberal New York

by

Nicholas Gamso

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

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Abstract

Windows on the World:
The Aesthetics of Difference in Neoliberal New York

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Nicholas Gamso

Advisor: Professor Kandice Chuh

This dissertation seeks to refine critical methods for interpreting global cities and their cultures, charting an aesthetic history of neoliberal New York — from the 1929 regional plan to the present. Surveying a range of literature, art criticism, and planning discourse, I argue that the global has served as the dominant motif of spatial production and political power during this watershed era. I trace this argument through analyses of midcentury planning’s global spatial imaginings, gentrification and imperial metaphor, transnational encounter in World literature, and the city’s contemporary waste and recourse imaginaries. While I follow the Marxist account of the New York’s neoliberalization, I depart at the point of methodology by taking difference as a critical prism for interpreting urban space and conceiving political options. I make this case in light of writings by the urban ecologist Jane Jacobs, for whom differentiated experience served to problematize the certitudes of consensual planning, and follow it through analyses of objects and the publics they generate. I address the production and reception of works by Kara Walker, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Al Diaz; filmmakers Véréna Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki; and writers Teju Cole, Edwidge Danticat, and Joseph O’Neill.
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“The ‘meaning’ of life is not to be found in anything other than life itself.”

Henri Lefebvre
Prologue

KARA WALKER IN WILLIAMSBURG

The skeleton of Williamsburg's Domino Sugar Refining Plant looms over the East River, shrouded in an orange net. It will be converted to condos and an office park later this year. From the windows of an adjacent building reads the plea “Save Domino.” One of the most celebrated installations in recent memory — *A Subtlety*, or *The Marvelous Sugar Baby* — occupied the site during the Summer of 2014, but has since been cleared away. At the center of the installation was a massive polystyrene structure, a sphinx, to which the artist Kara Walker affixed some thirty tons of sugar. It stood thirty-five feet tall. The face of this sphinx, the eponymous “Sugar Baby,” was carved by Walker into a solemn death mask that was also a caricature — an enslaved woman with a broad nose and big lips, a scarf tied in a knot on her head, her eyes empty. The sphinx’s body was striking in its detail, her breasts and buttocks and vulva exposed before the public. Each day, hundreds of spectators had taken pictures, some laughing and aping, some in quiet contemplation, some whose faces were blank or ruddy with sweat and who made no expression at all. Around the sphinx, Walker had assembled fifteen figures, hard candy cast in the shape of enslaved boys carrying buckets in their arms, bales on their backs. During visiting hours, the space was lit by the summer’s hot, late-afternoon sun, which, in a surprise unremarked upon in most reviews of the piece, cascaded through the high windows of the factory’s western wall, illuminating the crystalline figures and precipitating their slow dissolution. Three were melted and ruined beyond recognition before the sphinx — itself eroded, yellowed, its skeleton showing beneath its sugar coating — was dismembered.¹

The piece was acclaimed in a number of major periodicals. *The New York Times* devoted several articles to its inception, its location, and to the biography of Walker herself, a figure whose early work — silhouette tableaux of black life in the US south, which exaggerate the racist iconography of reconstruction — elicited vitriol and ire from many. Some had claimed that Walker was a race traitor; others had accused her of seeking (and worse, achieving) notoriety by representing what they perceived to be a comic abjection. *A Subtlety*, too, has been criticized widely for catering to “gentrified Brooklyn” and eliciting ugly, indeed racist reactions from many members of the audience, “visitors pretending to ogle, lick, probe and fondle the central sculpture.”

Dozens of articles disparaged the reactions of the crowd and criticized what the authors perceived to be Walker’s failures to commemorate with dignity, or to communicate with clarity, a history of violence and humiliation. In one essay, circulated widely among art, activist, and scholarly publics, a critic describes his own visceral response to the behavior of spectators, which prompted him (supposedly) to yell, “You are creating the very racism this art is meant to critique.”

Yet *A Subtlety* is not a “critique” of anything so easily discernable or readily articulable. Rather, as Walker’s works have done in other contexts and with other materials, it offers critique through the laying bare of its own contradictions and limits, not least of which is the overbearing expectation that artists transmit a representation of slavery permitted by the consensus of popular historians and journalists who have been authorized to sentimentalize and sanctify the era. What I am suggesting is that the articles and protests that attended the work did not evince its failures but

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3 Some of the critiques issued in response to these problems sought to “remedy” the atmosphere through participatory actions: Ariana Allensworth, Salome Asega, Taja Cheek, Sable Elyse Smith, Nadia Williams, interview by Matthew Shen Goodman, “‘We Are Here’: People of Color Gather at Kara Walker Show,” *Art in America*. June 20, 2014.
rather fulfilled its weary approach toward meaning by evoking the conceptual problems of contradiction, ambivalence, and difference and the attempted act of *dissensus* — an act that serves also (and this is my primary concern) to engage a series of present, urban circumstances.

Among the many contradictions that characterized *A Subtlety*, the most prominent had to do with the complicity of the artist herself in the undisclosed but everywhere available object of the work — gentrification. As the legend on the wall outside the warehouse explained, the piece was “an homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.” This “artist statement,” which also comprises the full title of Walker’s installation, *evokes the continuity of empire and urban development*, referring in one breath to centrality of commodified human bodies in the instantiation of global modernity and to the “Occasion” of the refinery’s demolition, which is after all another way of describing the site’s conversion to condominiums and an office park, the overdevelopment of Williamsburg’s waterfront and the displacement of its communities. Given the even recent political past of the refinery, where some 300 workers staged a twenty-week strike in 2000⁶, and the brutal conditions under which sugar continues to be grown, chopped, shipped, and processed, the site’s conversion may seem to deny or efface a history of resistance and disagreement. Indeed, Walker’s commission, which was prompted by the protests that have for a decade attended the site’s planned conversion, seemed in the eyes of many to serve as a centerpiece for *a calculated aesthetics of denial, forgetting, overcoming, and commemoration*, and thus to interpolate *urban and world-historical narratives of progress*.⁷ Yet the irony was not lost on Walker, who as

⁷ *A Subtlety’s* principal sponsor, the arts organization Creative Time — run by the highly visible curator Nato Thompson and committed to artworks that “foster social progress” — is chaired by Jed Welentas, the well-known developer of Brooklyn’s DUMBO neighborhood, whose firm
I have suggested problematized the familiarity, indeed the predictability, of these narratives and expectations by rubbing raw the differences — in memory, in historical perspective — they mask.

The conspicuous status of the refinery is thus not just another passage for the “discomfort” characteristic of the artist’s oeuvre, but Walker’s central object of inquiry and mode of critique: Walker’s work exposes the interpolation of artists and art publics in the cultural and economic transformation of neighborhoods. And because in this exposition her principal referent is new world slavery, a central material apparatus of European colonialism, and especially the intimacy of confection and humiliation at the heart of this first and most enduring world system, Walker exposes also the aesthetic conditions under which gentrification and imperialism reproduce themselves to be continuous and self referential. The work, to be clear, is not concerned by the structural and historical similarities between imperialism and gentrification, but with the mobilization of imperial metaphor as the validating practice of neoliberal urbanism. Its object is nothing less than the prescriptive redundancy of the colonial encounter.

Walker’s A Subtlety attempts to arrest the themes of improvement, development, maturity, and the myth of liberal progress in their exemplary urban context, but not through standard modes of critique and sanctioned discourses of “resistance.” Instead, Walker invites her audience to collaborate in transforming that principal art world redundancy — the conscription of the artist and her public in her (their) own commodification — into a generative complex of aesthetic ambivalence. Dramatically and immodestly, without rebuffing its audience, the piece both elicits and withstands the disturbing reactions I have described from some of its spectators. It allows these hostilities, solidarities, and ambivalences alike to grow and comingle, and puts forward out of this

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strange composite of perspectives what is in essence an epistemological shift: a difference unauthorized, emerging from these relationships as each spectator discovers her own experience of the work and the histories it does (or does not) evoke, refusing in turn any single dominant narrative or interpretation. These uncertainties are consistent with Walker’s early work, silhouette tableaux that develop the themes of failure and dissatisfaction in a critique of historical or cultural authority — authority, that is, over history’s presence. They appear again in *A Subtlety*, and are joined by complicity and contradiction, the complicity of the artist and her public in gentrification and the contradiction between that naked, discomfiting fact and the potentialities of undertaking such an ethical and professional dilemma. Through this implicit critique of any authoritative posture — a critique materialized in contested urban space — the piece provokes a vital and refreshing disputation of the urban scene as we are used to imagining it.

That Walker’s work has proven so generative of commentary about and actions against this everywhere rampant curation of urban life in the global age — difference materialized through the rehearsal of (every) frontier — suggests to me that it has succeeded at alleviating some of the tensions it seems, simultaneously, to have aggravated. To open a space for a difference generated *differently*, generated by different ways of examining a work of art, is to do exactly the kind of work that representations privileged by consensus cannot, whether these are representations of slavery, of empire, or of gentrification. *A Subtlety* would not have succeeded, in other words, if it were merely representational. It would not have succeeded even as representation. For it would have made its central referent a static object of commemoration or a cliché, indeed fictitious, narrative of progress — a past endured and overcome, a city prepared for limitless growth, a future unfettered by calls for justice or expressions of need. Instead, Walker chose to surpass these confines and allow the work

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to proceed in the form of differentiated experience, burdened by but hardly determined by those forms of imperialism that register in a context seemingly divorced from the slave trade, a context materialized by Walker as decomposition — an instability revealed, an erosion imminent, molasses and resin spilling onto the floor.

This dissertation strives to put into words the operations exemplified by *A Subtlety*. Walker’s work succeeds in antagonizing the by now familiar ways with which the city and world are mapped onto each other and confused. There is a rich archive of such works, which instantiate moments of unexpected global becoming not only in the theaters of the United Nations or the World Trade Center, nor in the seminar rooms of the “global university,” but in bars, bookstores, tenements and tabernacles in Harlem and Brooklyn, in subway cars and vacant lots. Such expressions comprise and produce a number of worlds, and do so principally through their production of intimate encounters in and of New York — the production, that is, of relational urban space. Yet space in the writings of some prominent social theorists is imagined as an object controlled by elites, who are equipped, either through their ownership of the means of production or their cooptation of discourse, to make dramatic transformations visible. By refusing to consider differentiated conceptions of such spaces, these critics neglect forms of general and dissident participation that are recursive in their material effects and transformative of the urban experience — that are, in a word, productive.

In this dissertation, theorists are joined by other people — “countless numbers of people,” in the language of the urbanist Jane Jacobs, who “make and carry out countless plans”\(^\text{10}\) — to realize what I am calling the *aesthetics of difference*. The works of the everyday, limited and discontinuous aesthetics of the urban encounter, as expressed by Jacobs, instantiates an urban anonymity that obliges us neither to narrativize nor “belong.” Such an ethic appears too in the figures of the graffiti

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artist, who, armed with a can of spray paint, tags the ruining walls of the gentrifying city; of the exilic writer, lost but exposed, scrutinized on the stage of cosmopolitan anxiety; and of the undocumented migrant who works on the periphery of a transnational but local infrastructure to disassemble and to remake the objects of global mobility. Because the people I mention participate in what Henri Lefebvre calls the *imagination, perception,* and *experience* of urban space, they are in no sense marginal to, or ignorant of, the processes by which the city comes into being. Nor are they harbingers of “authenticity.” My effort is not to sentimentalize cities or to fetishize, as Michel de Certeau does, the “common man, who squats now at the center of our scientific stages,” but to acknowledge that the unaligned participation of countless people will never, itself, generate a reliable or coherent politics or mode of historical or social classification and order.\(^1\) For the “world” is ambivalent. It dwells within the a-historicity of the everyday and the surreal visions of dreams. It is not, in and of itself, an object of solidarity or unity, and cannot, thus, be evoked through enthusiastic discourses of destiny or togetherness; it appears instead out of the anxious interplay of singularity and mutuality, the effects of which are just as often withdrawal, solipsism, anxiety and strife. Yet in these reactions — in stepping away from the imperatives of sociality, from the unities of the global frame — a radical openness appears.

An openness to what? To experiences that follow neither the promises of advanced capitalism nor the certainties and determinisms of its critique; to concepts that suggest disavowal amid the contingencies of a time. A politics may indeed emerge, and may do so through an analysis of the triangulated relationship between the subject, the city, and the world. But it will be a politics of unraveling and of play, a politics not of coherence, continuity, relevance, and flow, but of *difference,* underived and everywhere becoming.

\(^1\) Michel de Certeau, Dedication (“To Ordinary Man”), *Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: UP of California, 1984).
Introduction

THE AESTHETICS OF DIFFERENCE

Cities serve as metaphors for the world. In their constitutive and functional diversities and inequities — their systems and grids, their uses of space and scale and representation — they reflect the world and refract the impressions it makes on individual subjects. Cities are (to be precise) metaphors for different interpretations and visions of the world: interpretations conceived from the distant remove of the planner, the “solar eye” from which so much of look of modernity has been contrived, as well as from within the very workings of the world itself, its infrastructures and frictions, the bureaucracies of its production and the intimacies it provokes. Cities (to be still more precise) serve so well as metaphors for the world because of the differences by which they, themselves, are imagined, perceived, and experienced. They stage the coming together and falling apart of countless communities, giving these communities shape and coherence through the sharing, among subjects, of sensory, aesthetic experiences, whether such experiences are sustained over the course of decades or in the fleetingness of a chance encounter.

Sometimes these communities appear around spaces and objects of global referentiality: the ceiling of Grand Central Terminal (1913), a great blue vault of constellations; the Unisphere (1964) in Queens’ Flushing Meadows, a polished steel globe, set on a tilt into a crown of orbital bands; Windows on the World (1976-2001), the restaurant on the 107th floor of World Trade Center’s north tower, its kitchen a hive of transnational migrants, its dining room a perch for compradors who witnessed in the afternoon sun to their own tall shadow stretching past the southern tip of Manhattan and beyond the archipelago. Yet such tributes are in every instance objects of dispute. They do not symbolize, and certainly do not confirm, the unities of the world or of the city, the synchronized motion of bodies and capital, or a collective historical narrative. They are, on the
contrary, openings and instantiations, entry points and nothing more. The labor that transforms them into aesthetic works occurs not within the objects themselves, but in the relational play between the people who engage them. It is the difference between and among these people — and the difference indeed between each person’s interpretation and the larger structures these objects evoke — that generate in such works unstable and contested meanings and that convert them, thus, into a ground for politics.

The prism of difference enables an honest but (because honest) *partial* articulation of all kinds of experiences, disparate and incommensurable as they may be, routed as they may be across classes and geographies and between aesthetic interfaces. But because such partialities cannot fulfill a *telos* or justify a governing social or cultural paradigm, they are roundly suppressed. The effort in New York, over forty years of neoliberal governing, has been to “fix” a unitary impression of the city in the minds of residents, mitigating the imaginative capacities through which social and cultural transformations appear. This has been achieved for the most part by contriving static, immutable forms of difference, shrinking to the legible measure of urban space the inequities, taxonomies, and the antimonies of planetary scale. Such myths of starkly legible difference — coded in the oppositions of “natives” and “settlers,” “primitives” and “moderns” — were of course generated in the first place in order to validate European power in the context of empire. They were proliferated globally, over centuries, through the geographic and social organizations of labor and knowledge, processes that have been intensified dramatically over the last several decades through the erection of vast telecommunications, information, and culture infrastructures. Even fields of literature, criticism, and scholarship, which do after all comprise a number of transnational industries and bureaucracies, are accomplice to the processes of neoliberalization, practiced as they are in deferring to its unifying premise: the notion that everything, everyone, is connected either through the sharing of a world market or its delivery of exploitation.
This dissertation joins a number of recent works in attempting to challenge this durable critical position, a position that capitulates to the easy politics of conquest (or despair). I propose to admit onto the scholarly agenda forms of difference that do not lead to a coherent globalist politics or to a rigid genealogy of sanctioned ideas, and to do this as a way of problematizing the ease with which we confuse the city and the world. Though I consider New York to be an exemplary site of the “friction” that characterizes so many of the processes we describe when discussing globalization — including financialization, transnational political formations, displacement and migration, and staggering transnational inequalities —, I make no effort to hold aloft any of these practices as evidence of defining or general principles.\footnote{Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP): “The metaphor of friction suggested itself because of the popularity of stories of a new era of global motion in the 1990s. The flow of goods, ideas, money, and people would henceforth be pervasive and unimpeded. In this imagined global era, motion would proceed entirely without friction. By getting rid of national barriers and autocratic or protective state policies, everyone would have the freedom to travel everywhere. Indeed, motion itself would be experienced as self-actualization, and self-actualization without restraint would oil the machinery of the economy, science, and society. In fact, motion does not proceed this way at all. How we run depends on what shoes we have to run in. […] Coercion and frustration join freedom as motion is socially informed.”} Definitive comments on the qualities and conditions of the global, or of the urban, do not appear on these pages. Nor does talk of an “imaginary.” Nor of “tradition.” The task is not (and has never been) to corroborate the prescient but distant writings of Karl Marx, but to realize the generativity (per Marx) of labor and expression, the human capacity to remake the world, and to reimagine our engagement with it — to participate in the disorderly and indeterminate dialectics of social change in whatever way we choose.

This introduction is a rehearsal and an assessment of these choices, options for unthinking the unities and totalities of the global. I consider an array of scholarly positions within the (recent) histories of critical urbanism, and about the very space of twentieth century New York, which has served as a lab for ways of living, of making art, of pursuing ideas that do not — cannot — be
gauged through even the cleverest theoretical paradigms. I review here the writing on New York from the field of Marxist geography, which describes the effects of neoliberalization on the city’s movements and its capacities for change. But I review as well the trenchant critiques this school of thought has sustained and absorbed, identifying key interventions in the writings on urban space and critical epistemology from the fields of race and sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, and the recent revival of aesthetic theory in political philosophy. My effort is not only to uncover the ways each of these genealogies propose to deal with the problems of totality and conceptual unity, but to register, in bringing these lessons into common cause, the centrality of difference in the organization — and indeed the undoing — of epistemology itself. I wish, in other words, to return to some themes germinated decades ago by postmodern theory, which reflected the discontinuities and aberrations of ruing urban space in expressing a politics of difference.

The aim of this project is thus to refine critical methods for interpreting global cities and their cultures by exploring the ways difference is provoked by art, literature, and the built environment. The appearances of discontinuity and disagreement, which are provoked in the many examples I marshal throughout this dissertation, complicate richly the life-world of contemporary cities and thus problematize the ease with which we refer to such cities when trying (sometimes naively) to make sense of global systems. The global city is not to be perceived as an affirmation of the governing premises of neoliberalism, such as interconnectedness, coherence, and coordination, nor of its critique; rather it may be perceived as an instantiation of what I term the aesthetics of difference. By the aesthetics of difference, I mean the experience of estrangement, and the destabilization of identities and communities, provoked by encounters with objects of art, literature, and the built environment. This experience, in the examples I identify throughout this dissertation, contradicts the categorical differences imposed, historically, from above, and thus complicates the ways race and sexuality are produced, narrativized, and represented by dominant cultural and social
I have already illustrated this concept by calling upon Kara Walker’s 2014 site-specific sculpture *A Subtlety*, which provoked debates about historical erasure and geographic displacement, the problems of artistic complicity and failure, and the myths post-racialism in contemporary US cultural politics. These topics are thematized loosely and self-consciously by the work’s scale, materials, and the site itself. Yet the work makes no effort to implicate directly a general or systemic process, proceeding instead wearily and indeterminately through the varied, erratic responses of its audiences. Walker’s practice thus extends beyond the work itself, bringing to light resonances but inviting the audience to participate in interpreting and reconceiving these resonances. *A Subtlety*, along with literary works by Teju Cole, Edwidge Danticat, and Joseph O’Neill; graffiti by artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz; and documentary cinema by the filmmakers Véréna Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki stage the aesthetics of difference in contexts whose meanings are presumed to have been determined in advance by planners, journalists, economists, curators, and academics.

To be clear, the aesthetics of difference is not a visual quality or representational mode, but an open-ended process of participation and exposure. I do not take art objects as primary artifacts, but as affective, experiential entry points to worlds of discourse that attend and produce urban space. In this sense, the aesthetics of difference may help us understand the processes by which the sustaining operations of neoliberalism — global investment, privatization, securitization, uneven development — appear in built space, attached as each new building is to a host of investments and interests and indeed to protests and contestations by communities and individuals. By emphasizing the constant reconceptualization of such processes, rather than their durability or fixity, the aesthetics of difference invites us each to imagine differently, and thus to conceive differently, the values of globalized urban space.

In literary studies (and here is my final proviso), such critical practices are common: we write
around an object order to make broader points about the attitudes that characterize its production and the many scenes of its reception. The returns of this work are not always aimed at the legacy of a specific object, person, period, or geography, but at making provocative connections across and beyond the limited taxonomies of a scholarly discipline, and thus to germinate new kinds of interdisciplinary formations. The fields of queer studies, critical race studies, and the “new” American studies, even as they are invested in empirical research practices, have always been animated by clever, if tendentious, forms of textual analysis and theoretical application. My interest in urban history, and other disciplines in which this dissertation has a stake, cannot dissuade me from employing what is basically a writerly approach to social and historical inquiry. Indeed, the prism of difference that I have called upon invites such an “undisciplined” method precisely because it undermines the notion of authoritative knowledge, whether on the page or in the streets.

TIMES SQUARE REDS, GLOBAL CITY BLUES

A word of context is in order. Over the last several decades, and commencing broadly at the moment of the global financial crisis of the mid 1970s, the cultural and physical geographies of cities have been transformed into sites of transnational capital exchange and investment. The emergences of finance, telecommunications, and creative industries — all attended by low-wage service economies — have come to define the global economy at the urban scale, where marketable sectors of cities have been gentrified and others bled of resources by developers and administrators. A new landscape of private investment, cultivated amid the ruins of the mid-century welfare state by a transnational comprador class — and enforced by global lending agencies like the IMF and World Bank —, has put into relief a stark but thick urban spatiality, characterized by staggering inequality, precariousness, and debt.

This is roughly the Marxist account of neoliberalism, and its account as well of cities in the
global era. New York’s 1975 bankruptcy and the subsequent transformations of the city are exemplary in this regard. The refusal by the “financial community” to support the programs won through social movements, organized labor, and grassroots politics, reflected the sentiment of ruling elites all over the world. Their communiqués — expressed variously by creditors and administrators — could not have been clearer: Let New York City, they suggested, refusing to roll over its growing debt, go to the federal government for its bail. When the government refuses, let the city ruin. Expose its dereliction before the nation as a warning against the wasteful expenditures of the welfare state. Install managerial administrators — Ed Koch, Rudolf Giuliani, and especially Michael Bloomberg — who will convert every public trust into ground for private investment. Transform poor and minority communities into outdoor malls for the children of the global ruling class. Most importantly, blame the victims; make them recompense for their afforances by demolishing their homes and re-peopling their neighborhoods. Praise by comparison the opportunities afforded by globalization, the influx of investments from abroad, the arrival as well of “talent,” of “creativity,” the promise of the “future.” Realize the immanence of a future comprised by the opening of markets, the untrammeled agency of the individual, worldly Subject, the withdrawal of all supports associated with the state; realize indeed, as Margaret Thatcher says, that “there is no alternative,” and in realizing this, raze the monuments of the past and impose in their place spaces without alternatives.

In this final imperative New York was not alone. The whole infrastructures of US cities have been delivered to the private sector by legislators and administrators, most often, as in New York in

1975, at the behest of creditors. Public services have disappeared everywhere. Charter schools and for-profit colleges have supplanted the great public urban university systems of the twentieth century and insurance firms and healthcare conglomerates, in concert with lending agencies and brokerage houses, have in the process of privatization converted risk and ruin into exchangeable commodities with “externalized” losses. Displacement in the forms of foreclosure, rent inflation, and eminent domain has worsened considerably conditions of poverty, homelessness rates having grown steadily since the 1980s. Economic inequality — measured by income disparity, ownership of property and assets, and indebtedness, to say nothing of social capital — has also worsened steadily during the neoliberal period, in most areas and regions of the US but especially in its global cities: when Mayor Michael Bloomberg left office in 2014, the wealth gap in New York was as high as it was at the time of the 1929 stock market crash; today’s wealthiest five per cent of New Yorkers make eighty-eight times more than the poorest twenty percent, the greatest disparity in the nation; rent now comprises more than 60% of New Yorkers’ annual incomes. Predictably, the burdens imposed by the decline of the welfare state and the novel investments of the private sector have fallen along the lines of race and ethnicity, and indeed through and by the practices of racialization that produce urban space. The astonishing reach of the penal state is merely the most spectacular example of the ways in which racial and cultural differences are exploited in such spaces, exploited indeed to sustain a permanent underclass and to mark as well the distinctions in value and marketability of cities.


These are of course the very aims and processes that comprise what we mean when we talk about “neoliberalism” and “late capital.” Yet (and here is the point) they are seldom what commentators refer to when they speak of “globalization” or a “borderless world.” In journalistic, corporate, and political discourse, on the contrary, the marvels of telecommunication and cosmopolitan mobility — calls to “mobilize your world,” urging you to “keep climbing,” to “never settle” — have achieved supreme purchase as aspirational ideals, displacing indeed some evocative tropes and prejudices of regional and national forms. The supposed dissolution of US national culture and the emergence of a world netted by financial technologies are thematized by all kinds of cultural industries and institutions as the coming of a “global village.” And often, in expressing such high praise, these bodies overlook the forms of violence and inequity constitutive of globalization’s local and distant manifestations. The central urban neoliberal processes of public disinvestment and private reinvestment by the transnational class go, for example, undisclosed in popular and journalistic accounts throughout the north. When these are admitted, as in the New York Times’ 2015 series on global real estate investment, they are dramatically untethered from what are imagined to be local and organic practices. Trade and flow, the accommodations of built space to capital, are conceived through cynically postmodern configurations of the colonial encounter — staged in New York in the gentrifying streets and parks of the Lower East Side or the penthouse at the Plaza Hotel, or as the source of a worldly, indeed airy cosmopolitan subjectivity, incubated in the “non-places” of airports and hotels, the new Times Square. Cities feature so centrally in this

16 These are the slogans of Verizon, Delta, and T-Mobile.
configuration not only because they serve as nodes in a vast network of regional and national economies, but because of their agglomerations of wealthy cosmopolitans and poor migrants and the thick, profitable forms of “cultural production” that take place around, within, and between these communities. Especially in the context of US (economic, military, cultural) hegemony, New York’s centrality in the infrastructures of both finance and media generates a productive complex of necessary, permanent relevancy. Sometimes it is difficult to say whether this relevancy has to do with the scale of the urban or the overbearing referentiality of the global, which is the protagonist of so much self-consciously neoliberal rhetoric — but maybe relevance itself is the protagonist, a social-facing antidote to the solipsism that Daniel Solomon terms “Global City Blues.” The global always seems to be with us, yet we are also necessarily and frequently in our (scholarly) articulations of the global left hopelessly alone, whether it is because we find ourselves, in our efforts to express concretely what the global is, in a kind of tractionless “nowhere” or because whatever place we thought we had at the start has been revealed as a frame erected in the interest of some animating (and nefarious) principal or power. The “global” will not go away, as illusory as it seems. Perhaps, then, there is no alternative.

From this thinking has appeared a curious tendency in academic writing: the propensity to describe every object of engagement as an ancillary (or direct) effect of the neoliberal paradigm. Recourse to the neoliberal thesis seems, paradoxically, to heed neoliberalism’s own emphasis on the primacy of economics, on calculation and rationality, on historical contingency, on the synthesis of parts in the form of a totality most legible in its undifferentiated or uniform wholeness — something

21 Daniel Solomon, *Global City Blues* (New York: Island Press, 2003), xviii: “Global City Blues accepts the inevitability of technological change with neither celebration nor despair. It is in part about the dogged and occasionally successful struggle of many to work in the conditions of the present to create places that satisfy the deepest longings that people have for the places they live.”
like what Literary Critic Emily Apter has called globalization’s “referential status as infrastructure.”

The governing idea seems to be that by bringing to light the relation of any object to this total-systemic thesis, the object is somehow rendered more historically or socially or materially contextualized, and thus realer or (again) more relevant. Yet, especially after the lessons of postmodernism, the turning of neoliberalism into a horizon or telos, the “master signifier” of critical inquiry, has forged a new and perhaps unwelcome ethic of wholeness, a mirror held up to the “globe” in mocking but complementary validation. Perhaps this speaks to the flexibility of epochs, both as objects of historiographic work and as hermeneutics for present thought. Or the purchase of contemporary “worldpictures” as prisms for apprehending the undisclosed and sometimes imaginary affinities and connections of the here and now. One thinks of the tired but still somewhat useful designations of the “modern” and the “American,” which like the term “neoliberal,” help us to make sense of present and everyday circumstances and their relatedness to the world “out there.”

The difference, and the reason why neoliberalism remains a virtually unquestioned critical metric, has to do (and here is an irony) with the apparent specificity conveyed by its highly rational framing. The term has, as a result of the validating discourse of economics, burdened as it is by “technics,” attained a scientific and indeed professional sheen, akin to that of the highly rationalized, industry-friendly fields — the STEM disciplines, in one formulation — that are driving the neoliberalization of the university.

How strange to confuse cause and effect. But this is paradoxically, and maddeningly for some critics, exactly the process by which neoliberalism reproduces itself and thus the process by

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which it appears both in built space and in academic writing. The term produces its own motor, invites referential discourse: it entered the University to describe a specific set of protocols issued in concert by embittered creditors of the 1970s but has “stayed around” as the most sturdy referent for the continuities of capitalism (including the continuities of its contradictions), into the spaces and scales of the present. Scholars are not wrong, then, to use the term to express both a specific process and a general sense of things. But they are perhaps wrong to presume always a continuity or a causal link. It is exactly this presumption — the assuredness of continuity or coherence, combined indeed with sovereign critical posture enjoined by Marx — that has produced both the shrewdest and most shortsighted discourses of globalization and neoliberalism, discourses that are at times recursively undone by the contradictory and discontinuous interfaces of urban life.

CITY-AS-SCHOOL (VARIATIONS ON THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE)

It’s true: neoliberal capitalism does seem to have inveigled (or to have invented) all the geographies, mobilities, networks, and routes that comprise the globalization of bodies and cultures across virtually every national and regional economy on the planet. In this respect, neoliberalism is roughly continuous with the expansion of capital to the global scale expressed in the writings of Marx himself, who famously described the circulation of capital between cities as the inaugural moment of global modernity — the abstraction of labor into quantifiable units, and the transformation of these units into a transnational network of trade. He calls the formation the global division of labor the “development of productive processes” which, he says, “implies the actual empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being.”

Herein is the production of space and time, expressed most explicitly by the Marxist-

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Poststructuralist geographer Henri Lefebvre in his writing on cities and urban semiotic systems and later in his general theory of spatial production. The critics who follow Marx by way of Lefebvre, including David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Neil Smith, test the conditions under which certain types of spaces, and especially those which reflect both global and urban scales, appear. They describe the coordinated productions of time and space as a vital “fix” for the perennial crises of capital. Their own students, including scholars of black and feminist geography such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Katherine McKittrick, whose work I discuss in this introduction’s next section, have complicated and enriched this strain of critique greatly, noting the extent to which differentiated experiences, and the expectations and political modalities of various social intersections marked by oppression and marginalization, generate complexes of spatial production, often spurred by the politics of refusal and not just crises of the market. Both generations of critique mark a break with other Marxist discourses of the global.\(^{25}\) For the suggestion of the geographers I mention is that the global shows itself not as a circuit, a concept-metaphor, or a myth, but as an *uneven and unfixed agglomeration of urban processes*, calcified by discourse and labor and reflective of — adoptive of and antagonistic to — global systems and their rhythms of crisis and expansion. Moreover, these processes are in their instability generative of social and spatial features characterized by resistance, which in turn provoke further (recently “revanchist”)\(^{26}\) efforts to stabilize the systems, and so on. It

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\(^{26}\) Smith of Revanchism, *Frontier*, 43-45: “Revanche in French means revenge, and the revanchists comprised a political movement that formed in France in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Angered by the increased liberalism of the Second Republic, the ignominious defeat to Bismark, and the last straw — the Paris commune, in which the parts working class vanquished the defeated government of Napoleon III and held the city for months — the revanchists organized a movement of revenge and reaction against both the working class and the discredited royalty...[Today] there is a broad, vengeful right-wing reaction against both the ‘liberalism’ of the 1960s and the 1970s and the predations of capital. This takes many forms, including fundamentalist..."
is in other words not just space, but the inherent indeterminacy of the productions of space and time (and the abstractions of these) that produces this instability, a sense that “nobody quite knows what ‘the right time and place’ for everything might be.”

The critical effort, then, expressed in the first place by Marx in the *German Ideology*, is not to identify inherent postulates but to witness the oscillation between *abstractions*, whether these come in the forms of discourse, culture, or aesthetics — variants what Lefebvre will call “experience” —, and *materializations*: “as individuals express their life, so they are,” writes Marx in a celebrated passage, “and what they are therefore coincides with their production, both in *what* they produce and in *how* they produce.”

It is through *expression* and *production*, in their generative dialectical exchange, that conceptual life appears in material form.

The city remains a point of primary concern in this discourse, a perfect crucible for the dialectics of production described by Lefebvre and derived from especially the early Marx.

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28 Marx, “Ideology,” 177: “The nature of individuals thus depends upon the material conditions determining their production. This production only makes its appearance with the increase of population. In its turn this presupposes the intercourse of individuals with one another. The form of intercourse is again determined by production.”

29 See Schmid, “Henri Lefebvre's Theory Of The Production Of Space: Towards A Three-Dimensional Dialectic,” *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Lefebvre*, ed. Kanishka Goondwarena et al (London: Routledge, 2008), 34: For Lefebvre, the traditional Marxist and Hegelian dialectics share horizon of historical change that is deterministic, if not critically naïve, failing to account for the ways time as well as space are produced; he suggests that “in historical time there have not been so many deep chasms, surprises, and unbridgeable gaps as there have been bifurcations, about-turns, and detours that this dialectic could not comprehend.” As Lefebvre asks of the very concept of “sublimation,” “What do we find at the origin of this essential concept? A word play, an untranslatable pun, nothing formal and perhaps also nothing that could be formalized in a perfectly coherent discourse … No proposition can simultaneously both be true and false … If we consider the content, if there is a content, an isolated proposition is neither true nor false; every isolated proposition must be transcended; every proposition with a real content is both true and false, true if it is transcended, false if it is asserted as absolute.”
Lefebvre pursued what he describes as an “interdisciplinary” inquiry into these processes. He insists, thus, that analysis of spatial dialectics must be similarly interdisciplinary, admitting the significance of cultural forms and phenomenological imaginaries, what he calls the perceived, imagined, and experienced dimension of space, which coalesce in a kind of dialectical triad. It is experience that completes the Lefebvrian dialectic, and which generates, as I will argue at various stages throughout this dissertation, forms of subjectivity commensurate with life in global and transnational urban contexts. It is also the condition that allows for a critical understanding of the production of difference and the aesthetic complexes of urban space as twinned forms, which, per Lefebvre, participate not only in production but in its analysis, and thus disobey or belie the determinism of production as it is sometimes imagined in orthodox Marxist writings. It is this conflict over production and emphasis on experience that grounds an urban methodology suited to criticizing transnational governmental and

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30 Interdisciplinarity is a term with far reaching implications for a variety of critical discourses and indeed political formations in and across the fields of state, law, business, academy, and so forth. Cities are central to the expressions of interdisciplinarity in its valences as a modernist effort, expressed by Corbusier, and as a method of post-modern intervention, expressed here by Lefebvre. The term will appear, deployed as it is perennially and correctly as a way of thinking against and, paradoxically thinking with, the unities of especially urban consensus. Here is Lefebvre’s gloss on interdisciplinarity and its inequities, in “Right to the City,” Writing on Cities, ed. Eleanor Kauffman (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 84: “Information and analytical knowledge coming from different sciences are oriented towards a synthetic finality. For all that, one should not conceive of urban life having at its disposal information provided by the sciences of society. These two aspects are confounded in the conception of centers of decision-making, a global vision, planning already unitary in its own way, linked to a philosophy, to a conception of society, a political strategy, that is, a global and total system.”

31 Schmid, 41: “When applied to the production of space this phenomenological approach leads to the following conclusion: a social space includes not only a concrete materiality but a thought concept and a feeling—an ‘experience.’ The materiality in itself or the material practice per se has no existence when viewed from a social perspective without the thought that directs and represents them, and without the lived- experienced element, the feelings that are invested in this materiality. The pure thought is pure fiction; it comes from the world, from Being, from material as well as from lived-experienced Being. And pure “experience” is in the last analysis pure mysticism: it has no real—that is, social—existence without the materiality of the body on which it is based and without the thought that structures and expresses it. These three dimensions of the production of space constitute a contradictory dialectical unity. It is a threefold determination: space emerges only in the interplay of all three.”
corporate collaboration and indeed suited to withstanding crises that comprise what Lefebvre calls the “critical zone” of urban development.\textsuperscript{32} The novel stakes of majoritarian urbanity, which Lefebvre correctly predicted would fall around the beginning of the twenty-first century, obliges such a methodology — especially if we are to push beyond the banalities offered by the consensual interdisciplinarity of the planning class. In the form of a dominant if not universal urbanism, the simultaneities and juxtapositions characteristic of cities serve as instruments for analysis and appropriation alike.

Although is in Lefebvre’s late writings that this dialectical mode is brought most explicitly and clearly to light, his method is both concretized and allegorized dramatically in a few of his early, overtly political or even positivist texts as well.\textsuperscript{33} In the \textit{Right to the City}, published in 1968, Lefebvre describes a spatio-visual metaphor for such dialectical play, directing us to the figure of the emergent urban Subject and the endless series of interfaces and stimuli that characterize her experience. It is here that Lefebvre analyzes the relations between scalar, discontinuous epistemologies, “orders,” that produce alternatives to the bearing social determinants. This urban struggle takes place between these “near” and “far” orders of urban modernity. These are cast in the real space of cities, manifest in distant and local views of planning, what I describe in Chapter 1 as the aerial and the intimate conceptions of urban space and characteristic indeed of the lateral and vertical dimensions of grids and of skylines. The city “is situated at an interface” between these, Lefebvre writes. Its “transformations are not the passive outcomes of changes in the social whole. The city also depends as essentially on relations of immediacy of direct relations between persons and groups which make up society (families, organized bodies, crafts and guilds, etc.).…”\textsuperscript{34} The point is not that these

\textsuperscript{32} Lefebvre, \textit{Urban Revolution} (Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 2003), 166.
\textsuperscript{34} Lefebvre, “Right to the City,” 100.
“orders” represent opposing sides in a perfect dialectical vacillation, but on the contrary that they constitute an ambivalent antagonism that comprises the *perception, imagination, and experience* of space Lefebvre will go on to describe in his later work. While iterations of the near and far order are reproduced in contemporary global cities through the cynical convergence of modernist aesthetics, “postmodern” a-politics, and global finance, there has remained countless histories of contestation and coping, of “tactics,” to use Michel de Certeau’s term, that reinvest in the power of the “near,” the intimate and at-hand. To realize that Lefebvre’s metaphor can be relayed into his later theory of experience-as-production brings to the fore space’s manifold operations and the ignition of these in the frame of the Subject, confirming the Marxist axiom with which we began.

These insights have been adopted and altered to accommodate many interests and political efforts, though less often than one would wish have they led to provocative conclusions. It is from the changing shape of cities, for example, that critics like Harvey educe a general theory of social change, a dialectics pulsed by a series of “moments” in the turbulent *durée* of spatial production. These moments, what Harvey calls “crises of accumulation,” oblige the financial class to inject stagnant fortunes in novel sites of investment, often in surprising places or through unexpected means. This flexibility and indeterminacy is characteristic of the “spatial fix,” which seems, given the crises and contradictions that must paradoxically be reproduced and overcome in order for capital’s continued growth, remarkably unfixed — except in so far as these crises occur with such frequency and in such density that time and space seem to be “compressed.” Experiential practices serve rather centrally, then, in the process by which compression and unfixity, crisis and renewal, appear to living subjects. But in the end, Harvey suggests, experience fails to affect much structural change. In the last instance it is *production*, having internalized many of the contradictions of capitalism in general,

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and money, which serves as an equalizing mediator of space-time, that both codify power and set into motion historical change. Experience is relegated to the a-historicity of habitus and custom or is swept up in “cultural production,” which Harvey interprets to be a one-one correlate to dominant social and historical categories: aesthetics are thus marginal, but “not irrelevant.” In another derivation of Lefebvre, Jameson, the eminent Marxist literary critic, mourns the capacity of modernist culture to generate social movements and historical change, warning of “postmodern” inversions and appropriations. For Jameson, postmodern spatiality (which he says is the “fundamental organizing concern” of neoliberalism) represents a mocking parody of modernist order, a “contrived depthlessness” spurred by deindustrialization in the 1960s and the appearance of the transnational cultural economy as the terrain for a conflict between productive forces. Here the dialectics of Lefebvrian urban theory adopt cultural and aesthetic faces; the prism of “production,” Jameson suggests, is not enough. Yet, attempts by practitioners of postmodern cultural politics to subvert or to transform earlier structures of political organization have roundly failed, provoking in this failure the “monotonous” quality of so much contemporary art, architecture, and literature. Virtually all forms of postmodern culture are thus, for Jameson, lures to larger and more enduring commodifications. Even Situationist tactics — juxtaposition, détourment — are today integrated into culture and media industries and economies, leaving the full demands of Lefebvrian lifework, and the generous interdisciplinarity to which Lefebvre urges us, conspicuously unsatisfied.

The generativity of Lefebvrian theory, both the telescoping lens of his dialectics-in-practice and his insistence that “every isolated proposition must be transcended,” enjoins us to think

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dialectically about the ways neoliberalism can be reimagined, if not subverted outright. The question is not only how to reimagine this system, but from what vantage point. Concern for individuated experience and its productive value what makes Lefebvre’s theories so resonant with other writings on semiotics, aesthetics, culture, and everyday life — writings which Jameson himself considers to be inaugural gestures of the post-modern turn, such as (in the New York context) Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, and, Michel de Certeau, all of which I discuss in Chapter 1. These figures did not advocate a vanguard politics, or as the Situationists did a program to subvert mass cultural malaise, but proceeded through the writerly practices of thick and yet indeterminate engagement, even when provoked by a profound sense of moral anguish. The authors wrote in opposition to modernist designs which imposed power through the aesthetic dimensions of planning — by which I do not just mean the materials and formal designs that constituted the creation of built space, but the processes by which these designs facilitated the organized circulations and restraints of bodies and sensations. The ordering of “life below” constituted a transnational, multi-decade geo-spatial project that reflected and produced several historical stages of neoliberal globalization. The relative uniformity of deindustrialization across transnational US geographies (which was underway before the neoliberal consensus in the mid 1970s) and the decline of certain midcentury social formations were enabled by the highways and communications infrastructures erected through the contrivance of an interdisciplinary consensus. Agents of the state, architects, social scientists, and planners, held in common theories cohered around the rational ordering of social life and built space and the narratives of US ascendency within a transnational network of interests and resources. Lefebvre’s critique — and with it Jacobs’ and Lynch’s — are thus concern with the organization of knowledge through the practice of urban governing and the reflection of this thickening complex in aesthetic

experience.

Neil Smith is an exemplary acolyte in this regard, thematizing the conceptual problems with Marxism — including its recourse to totality — and criticizing aesthetics and discourse as being principally generative and not merely reflective of social life and urban space. Though he remarks at length in his treatises on the centrality of production and capital in spaces of urban (under)development, arguing that “capital always leads,” he is also concerned by the *signification* of these processes. He is not, like Lefebvre, Jacobs, and Lynch, writing in resistance to the imposition of modernist architecture, but against the consensual partnerships — state, market, art and culture bureaucracies — that produce the current landscape of low-scale gentrified districts. These forms, as I suggest in Chapter 2, continue the rationalization of living subjects through the invitation to produce and participate in built space. Smith’s descriptions of the sedimentation of discourse in the visual transformation of New York’s Thompkins Square Park, for example, which was cleared after a 1991 riot and landscaped anew to prevent homeless people from installing themselves there, is among the hallmarks of his work. He describes the gentrification of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, criticizing what he calls the “frontier myth,” which pits urbanites against one another by assigning them fixed identification, imposing difference from above in the cliché language of “settler” and “native.”

I discuss these themes at length, deferring often to Smith’s writing on the productive interplay of aesthetics, representation, labor, and capital. But a few words more at this juncture are pertinent.

Discourse and aesthetics do not merely *reflect* the aims of neoliberal dogma, they are its main progenitors. The codification of discourse, of “scripts,” motivate and thus shape the economics of neoliberal urbanism, proceeding through the advanced integration of only apparently disparate

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39 Smith, *Frontier*, 11-16.
forms of power and representation. Structural processes such as strategic disinvestment are, for example, narrativized by administrators as the moral consequences of the mass squandering of social affordances and rehearsed as well by the press, by the art world, by even academics as a constitutive, natural, leitmotif of the global city. The blaming of the victims is one such effect of this widespread effort to “norm” experience and to contrive master-narratives of urban space. The “virtue of necessity” is quite another (“we’re going to keep changing,” said Michael Bloomberg “that’s what’s great about New York”). In each instance, an urban dialectics is manifest in a tension between (first) the imposition of difference, of borders and groupings between and among communities, by administrators and planners, and (second) the generation of alternatives from the social struggles of the street, from the intimacies and encounters across and between organic or circumstantial kinds of difference.

Thinking difference and its appearance — imposed from above and generated from below — will help us to understand the relationship between culture and capital, and to do so from positions usually unauthorized to comment on this relationship. “Starting” from the point of difference, as Ruth Gilmore advises, becomes a methodological imperative by which to assess the problems of scale and the myths indeed of capital’s determinism and ubiquity. We may thus pursue those urban-aesthetic experiences that accommodate the interests of global, neoliberal capitalism — including its myths — and those, as well, that do not. The economies of the everyday, even as they are clearly linked to economies of the global, generate spaces of immediate and urgent concern that, precisely because they are limited to the sphere of a (sometimes “failed”) intimacy, refuse the arrogant intrusions of neoliberal theory or its doctrinaire critique. While the systematic exploitation of such experiences is a scandal that shall be interrogated throughout these pages, it is hardly my

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contention that the parasitic forces of capital, even those which oblige the participation and labor of many people, lie at the core of urban life. The situation is both more and less complex than this durable but not very interesting thesis, as I will suggest shortly, but cannot be apprehended from the supposed objectivity of economic metrics or the presumption of a shared imaginary. For in order to access to these indifferent metrics, and the social positions from which such imaginaries are conceived, is to be lifted out of the space of the plural. It is thus to ignore the ways communities participate in their own kinds of social lifework, modalities of being and (un)belonging comprised not only by what is held in common but by the conflicts between these communities and the many subjectivities engaged within, among, and between them. It is not just the unities of the “global city” or the durability of the “frontier myth” as it is spoken in “official” discourse, or in the cliché scripts of the many joiners and promoters who are fashioned as “settlers” in this discourse, that becomes our object of critical attention. Rather, it is a whole complex of producing, perceiving, experiencing uniquely routed through and around social and cultural positions.

Indeed to speak of these urban problems (and here is the point) from a position of “objectivity” is to raise and raise conspicuously a critical white flag and thus to disclose a number of potential problems with the work itself. These have to do with the imposition of Europeanist modes of thought and genealogies, and the historical writing of a masculinist subject position into the very discipline of critical geography. These problems are bound up in a host of modernist aesthetic tendencies, which, even if they are in a sense dismissed by the Lefebvrian democratization of lifework, have not been held to account with any meaningful consequence in the academic fields I have so far discussed — or not until quite recently. With this in mind, I turn now to a set of provocative questions not only about the manifestation of difference in built space, but about the epistemologies of even nominally “radical” critique, questions asked by a school of black and feminist geographers and theorists of sexuality in the urban context. The greater stakes of such
questions are not merely about disciplinary formations but about how such formations affect the very *movement* between abstract and material worlds (epistemologies and cities, in this case) that characterizes the dialectics of social change.

(IN)DIFFERENCE AND TOTALITY

There is no shortage of accounts of urban and transnational creative practices. Through an emphasis on historicism and materialism many critical works have come to elucidate the relationships between these practices and bodies of textual or visual, or in this instance “spatial,” matter. The best of these works have uncovered the vital relationships between material and aesthetic production, much to the benefit of virtually all the fields I discuss, exhuming in some cases suppressed histories and archives and articulating the contradictions constitutive of this intersection.41 Such works demonstrate a basic and still largely applicable Marxist truism (expressed here by Raymond Williams): “social being determines consciousness.”42 Class relations, broadly speaking, do appear in cultural forms, not only in the production of cultural commodities or of spaces, but in the reification of an aesthetic mode and cultural frame. However, much of the literature remains invested in the varieties of economism that drive so much neoliberal critique, emphasizing the ways “material conditions” produce certain kinds of attitudes and forms, and thus directing the aesthetic problematic to a kind of prefigured political horizon: sanctioned genealogies of dissent and the prosaic concern for movement building, transnational solidarity, the cross-fertilization of disparate political interests — by way of their shared critique of neoliberalism — become the only acceptable (acceptable because perceivable) functions of aesthetics. Art and literary works are most “legible,”

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42 Raymond Williams, “Base & Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Criticism,” *NLR* 1, no. 82 (January-February 1973).
and thus by this litmus test most “radical,” if they rehearse the oppositions generated by economic and social inequalities, even in protest, often by inscribing the authenticity of a present other, characterizing from a place of historical and geographic distance the actions of another as “resistant” or as “capitulating” or as “irrational.”

This oppositional politics has been generated by critical recourse to a total and masterful critical remove. There is, from this point of view, one narrative of history, which identifies class struggle as the locus of its movement, and one methodology, dialectical materialism, the central tenets of which I have described above, and which is most often called upon to give credence to what Lefebvre terms, with some derision, a “synthetic finality.” Today this finality is most often expressed by social and critical theorists through monistic or all-inclusive discourses of the “neoliberal” and the “global,” which describe an “untotalizable totality” or enjoin a “metatheoretical” remove, presuming that “everything is connected.” Such expressions have of course been problematized by recent interventions, though as I suggest recourse to the neoliberal thesis remains de rigueur in humanities and social science discourses. What has perhaps changed (and here we get a bit closer to the aesthetic modalities at the heart of this dissertation) is the presumption that legibility matters. For the question may be asked, when the issues of representation and legibility are raised, legible to whom? And why? And, for that matter, is the knowledge supposedly produced by way of this basically empiricist mode of interpretation more or less stable than its exponents imagine? And the “values” produced by these forms of knowledge? In posing these kinds of questions, critics of black, feminist, and queer geographies and spatialities have complicated considerably the Marxist account, proceeding not (only) from a distant remove of global or world-historical theorization, but from marginalized and multiply oppressed subject

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positions. These positions have been in one sense produced through the epistemological premises of the Enlightenment and more contemporarily and resonantly in the US urban context, through what bell hooks suggests we start finally to call “neo-colonial white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” They are thus perfect vantage points for witnessing the vulnerabilities and failures of the current system and its infrastructures, the very paucity of liberal governing paradigms, and the effects of crude and reckless social programs.

There are herein lessons for all forms of critical work. For the effort expressed by those who have broached the matter of race in geography “involves demystifying the ways the current system fails to meet its own stated ideals,” whether this system is as vast and monolithic as neoliberalism or as seemingly benign as an academic discipline. The injunction, again, is to interrogate the ways that space is produced, but to do so through an analysis of the multiple scales of identification and practice, especially in spaces that are neglected or “despised” by traditional urbanist discourse. The spatial, indeed relational politics of intersectional subject positionality lie at the heart this intervention: the production of the experiences of back lives, and of the lives of black women in particular, are reconceived not as ancillary or secondary to the question of the production of space, as such, but as central, primary, first — and not only as an act of epistemological subversion, but as an act of historical, indeed factual, disclosure and recognition. More precisely, the effort is to “suggest that the relationship between black women and geography opens up a conceptual arena through which more humanly workable geographies can and are imagined.”

The question of “existing arrangements” that do or do not “work” proves thus another open entry point to the

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46 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2006), xii.
problem of urban life in the global context. “Black matters are spatial matters,” and they are, furthermore, aesthetic matters, which cannot be accounted for by empirical certitude or broad declarations of universal truth. This can be said for other groups marked or identified conspicuously in contemporary life, materialized as constitutive elements in a host of geographic positions even as their struggles remain unremarked upon in the dominant literature. As Gilmore observes, “starting from race and state yields, necessarily rather than additively, an analysis that cannot be complete at any level of abstraction without attending to gender, class, and culture in the simultaneous processes of abstracting and reconstructing geographies of liberation.” These intersections and affinities are of course objects of everyday practice and exposure in global cities — so vast and inequitable and diverse that the countless communities and constituencies they comprise may be interpreted as singular, as coordinated, as dis-coordinated, and, as Gilmore says, as constitutive intersectional elements in neoliberalism’s designs and operations. At the same time, they are likely to reveal the instabilities and vital indeterminacies that characterize capitalism and generate in the social field a host of otherwise undisclosed options. The implicit critique of epistemology is indeed one of the most generative effects of these interventions. As Katherine McKittrick recently put it, in an exemplary passage, “a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with.”

The stakes and indeed the politics of re-imaginings such as these are vital to a particular form of postmodernist critique as well. The works of Art Historians Rosalyn Deutsche and Craig Owens, to whose writings on gentrification, planning, and arts bureaucracies I refer many times throughout this dissertation, are exemplary in this regard. Their effort is to attend and to

48 McKittrick, ix.
appropriate, to “take back,” the postmodern critique of “master-narratives” expressed by Jean-Luc Lyotard and others, linking these not to a ruin of the (old) New Left, but to an array of counter-formations that employ this critique in an effort to transform spaces and engender dissenting modes of identification and relationality. This means criticizing some Marxists’ rueful writings on the “postmodern city” for their rash application of overlarge theories to any urban phenomena and work of art. Deutsche argues convincingly that the professed interest in “metatheory” from the “men in space” who comprise so much of the Marxist tradition serves as a particularly insidious form of mastery and exclusion: The “total vantage point,” she writes,

can be converted from fantasy into reality only by disavowing its contingent nature — its dependence on objects — and by relegating other view points or different subjectivities to invisible, subordinate, or competing positions [...] foundationalist totalizations are systems that try to immunize themselves against uncertainty and difference.49

Alternative intellectual formations, which admit difference into the creation of methodologies, are, in Deutsche’s preferred mode, “based on the premise that objects of study are the effect rather than the ground of disciplinary knowledge,” and thus allow onto research and critical writing agendas an array of concerns that are related, coordinated, if not starkly legible.

While the critique of master-narrative and point-of-view described by various exponents of postmodernism was of course ridiculed by many of the Marxist critics I have mentioned for its apparent capitulation to postindustrial or neoliberal capitalism’s political evasiveness, it is called upon here to productively differentiate and complicate the production of space as Harvey, Jameson, and even Smith have tended to express it — especially in their derisory interpretations of such postmodern artists as Cindy Sherman, whose work is described with the usual certitude as rehearsal

of depthless “masks.” Artwork, if it thematizes the outsized expectations, the rehearsals and performances of global modernity, is presumed to capitulate; monotony, fragmentation and cynicism, in interpretations by the Marxist critics I have named, comprise these works’ effects, which are apparently no richer than the systems that produce them. Nuance is denied, and so, more importantly, are the kinds of relational engagements covertly invited by such art. When one maps this logic onto a city — sites, in the Marxist account, of monotony, narcissism, and slavish consumerism — so are such spaces are denied the capacities to be perceived, and thus produced, differently. The works of postmodernist artists and critics alike allow alternative subject positions entry into the dialogue of what constitutes aesthetics, per se, and refuse the easy use of abstract economism or historical contingency as interpretative critical modes. The implicit rejoinder is quite similar to those issued by Gilmore and McKittrick, concerned as they are with space, difference, and epistemology, and indeed for the capacities of a truly interdisciplinary critical practice.

Much of this effort involves destabilizing the terms by which certain objects come under critical scrutiny. While I do not wish to insist that some objects are “categorically—” feminine or masculine, the ways they are indexed in the limited western aesthetic lexicon (indeed the ways these designations are and are only categorical) offers a sense of why denying discourses of gender and sexuality, and their intersections with race, limits considerable the quality of the orthodox Marxist account. The unrecognized preference in criticism generally for a categorically-masculine subject positionality has affected what kinds of works are allowed to be “objects” of concern at all. Consider

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50 Harvey, Postmodernity, 7-9, 101-103; Deutsche, Evictions, Owens, “Discourse of Others,” 229-244; Owens, “Others,” Beyond Recognition (UP of California, 1994), 183: “Sherman’s photographs themselves function as mirror-masks that reflect back at the viewer his own desire (and the spectator posited by this work is invariably male) — specifically, the masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and stabilizing identity. But this is precisely what Sherman’s work denies: for while her photographs are not always self-portraits in them the artists never appears to be the same, indeed, not even the same model; while we can presume to recognize the same person, we are forced at the same time to recognize a trembling around the edges of identity.”
the graffiti artist and painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, whom I discuss in Chapter 2: He and other neoexpressionist artists were made objects of contestation within some feminist critical discourse not only because of the artist’s extraordinary, indeed spectacular, commercial and financial successes, nor because the way his bravura was narrativized, sexualized, and interpreted in his art works. It was also because Basquiat and other figures who were (or who were insisted to be) categorically-masculine became ordained with exemplarity. Basquiat was “exemplary” of a number of modernist clichés, global in their orientation, and was exemplary as well in his anxious resistance to them (also a modernist trait). He was, moreover, exemplary as a black male artist of a whole host of expectations and suppositions and themes that were sanctioned by critical discourse; the very moniker “neo-expressionist” sounds contrived by postmodern parodists, so teeming is it with modernist masculine torment. So is the figure of the émigré intellectual (here Teju Cole), whom I discuss in Chapter 3, designated as categorically-masculine because of his masterful, indeed pedantic command of ideas, histories, and geographies and because of his encompassing, objectifying gaze; he is, as a result as well of being an African immigrant, burdened by several kinds of (personal, political, intellectual) scrutiny, just as Basquiat was. I explore these themes at great length in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, but mention them here to ground some of the remarks I have made about the masculinist point-of-view and is centrality to criticism generally and to Marxist, globalist varieties in particular. For the traits that appear most legibly in the works by these

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51 See a version of Owens’ “Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Chicago: Seagull Press, 1983), 76-77: “…when Barbara Kruger collages the words ‘Your gaze hits the side of my face’ over an image culled from a ‘50s photo-annual of a female bust, is she simply ‘making an equation … between aesthetic reflection and the alienation of the gaze: both reify’? Or is she not speaking instead of the masculinity of the look, the ways in which its objectifies and masters? Or a blown-up detail of the creation scene from the Sistine ceiling, is she simply parodying our reverence for works of art or is this not a commentary on artistic production as a contract between fathers and sons? The address of masculinity and femininity are fixed positions assigned in advance by the representational apparatus. Rather, Kruger uses a term with no fixed content, the linguistic shifter (‘I/you’), in order to
exemplars of the global are just the kind that critics are likely to see in themselves — not out of vanity but precisely out of the subjectivizing operations of doing scholarly work in the echo chambers of the academy and the art world. Globalist, urbanist, and especially Marxist critics and writers become, through their participation in scholarly discourses long composed of categorically-masculine authors, devoted to a masculine epistemology, almost obligated to identify as roving “beasts of no nation” — and to do so in the exemplary posture of “bemused and omniscient witness.” (This becomes a recurring point of contestation in postcolonial criticism, as I note in the next section of this introduction.) I make these points not only to contextualize the discussion that have appeared around the specific figures I have mentioned, and which I return to later in the dissertation, but to suggest that the interdisciplinary work enjoined by the kinds of criticism I have rehearsed requires reckoning with, if not rectifying outright, the ways interdisciplinary (as well as popular) criticism has been and continues to be shaped in relation to (categorical) difference.

While scholarly writings that employ the generative concepts of Marxist theory but admit into the discourse of oppression the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality are increasingly familiar in academic writing, their urgency has not gone away. It is regularly evinced in the recurring suggestion that sexual-political theory is a kind of critical compromise — the choice (in Harvey’s demonstrate that masculine and feminine themselves are not stable identities but subject to exchange. There is irony in the fact that all these practices, as well as the theoretical work that sustains them, have emerged in a historical situation supposedly characterized by its complete indifference. In the visual arts we have witnessed the gradual dissolution of once fundamental distinctions — original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, function/ornament. Each term now seems to contain its opposite, and this indeterminacy brings with it an impossibility of choice or, rather, the absolute equivalence and hence interchangeability of choices. Or so it is said. The existence of feminism, with its insistence on difference, forces us to reconsider. For in our country good-bye may look just like hello, but only from a masculine position. Women have learned — perhaps they have always known — to tell the difference.” In another vein, see Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory,” Cultural Critique 6 (Spring 1987), 72: “the prophets of this new literary orientation … did announce their dissatisfaction with some of the cornerstone ideas of their own tradition, a dissatisfaction with which I was born.”

words) of “narcissism,” the concern over “lifestyle,” of especially those queer and feminist theorists based in New York.\textsuperscript{53} Such comments presume western-patriarchal (empirical, total) epistemologies to govern all coextensive and even divergent ends of a plural and unfixed, living society, and propose that such epistemologies must also govern the aims, if not the strategies, of social change; the conditions of “others,” if they are not demonstrated through an ordained methodology to constitute terrains of properly Marxist, class-based concern, are thus declared to be appropriable by, if not generated by, flexible, neoliberal capitalism, and are declared also to be politically mute. Yet in this predictable culture clash what is lost is that most generative mode of Lefebvrian dialectics that admits experience into a differentiated cultural ecology without adopting the exclusionary posture characteristic of dominant Marxist discourse. This concern underwrites critiques by Jose Muñoz and other queer theorists, who’ve taken the resistance among some Marxists to sexuality studies as an injunction to think the relationships between the reproduction of economic inequality, the (international) division of labor, state violence, and sexual and racial difference — especially with an eye to social movements whose varied solidarities and affinities confirm the expansionary premises of Marxist internationalism.\textsuperscript{54} Yet, in a great irony, it is exactly these kinds of writings that currently constitute the strongest critique of the production of urban space in the meetings of culture, commerce, geography, and state, and which do so in ways that resonate provocatively, across and despite many terrains of difference, with the discourses of black radical geography. In the context of New York City alone, many of these studies have explored the production of alternative spatialities amid dominant neoliberal urbanisms, sometimes, as in Muñoz, emphasizing ambivalent identifications and gestural (“every night”) temporalities, at other times describing the social necessities of such “despised spaces” as the old West side — Times Square, Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen,  

\textsuperscript{53} Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}, 37.  
\textsuperscript{54} Jose Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity} (New York: NYU, 2009), 30-31.
the piers — and the problems for power these necessities pose. Queer writings on cities, like those by postmodernist spatial and visual specialists, and the tradition of radical black geography I mention, prove not only to thicken accounts of urban change — the gentrification of queer and minority communities, which are central to the writings of every critic I have discussed in this section —, but to pursue the relatedness of cultural, spatial, and aesthetic practices across difference by way of a shared critique of modernist epistemologies of the Right as well as those of the Left.

The interventions I have cited do not constitute a radical protest, nor even a dismissal of most Marxist principals, but a distillation of the central problems of still-dominant (and in a number of contexts increasingly dominant) strains of Marxist thought, diffuse as these ideas are on the left. The failure indeed of Marxist critics to engage seriously the (sexual and racial) politics of the postmodern has served to convert the openings of Lefebvrian social theory into a series of rather conventional critical endeavors, forged from a distance without reflexivity or accountability. Yet in those cases in which Marxism has turned its lens on its own theoretical contrivances, it has uncovered a masterful and (because masterful) naïve series of tendencies within itself: Marxist theory condenses a world of disconnection, discontinuity, hostility, and ambivalence, a world of aesthetics and affect, into an elegant but insufficient theory of everything, a theory which is itself guided by the principals of unity, coherence, progress, and so on. It reduces, as if by a formula, the intricacies of relationality and its aesthetic interfaces to a crude but sturdy set of oppositions between classes or their nearest approximations. It thus denies the relatedness of gendered sexuality, race, and class, and with these a host of other coincidences of birth and prejudices of culture, nation, geography, and economy.

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One need not mine aesthetic or textual-linguistic philosophy to understand why postmodernism poses a problem for the totalities, certitudes, and oppositions expressed by many generations of Marxist criticism in the academy. It is not an esoteric concern. One must merely be an object of the gaze, of appropriation, marginalization, or denial, to understand the need, as Owens says, “to conceive difference without opposition.”57 We must conceive of difference without opposition, without a unitary model of radicalization to which we acquiesce even in protest. We may imagine the universality of aesthetic capacity without imposing through aesthetics any universal conditions, aims, beliefs, or “foundations.” When we do this, we stop speaking the languages of self and other, master and subject, settler and native, old and young, naïve and worldly, one and many, human being and living ecosystem — when we come to recognize instead the materialities of one form in its apparent other, we recognize as well solubility of identities. We recognize this daily in cities, where the formation and dissolution of social bodies is a prescribed but dysfunctional and variegated daily ritual, where appearances belie identity, where identities shift in the instance of each encounter and encumbrance, each impasse in the experience of the ever-emerging subject. Our work entails more than depicting relational systems, but *thinking* relational experience and investigating the ways our thoughts about *being together differently* produce new and uncover old spatial and visual realities.

TO TURN THE WORLD ON ITS HEAD

The prism of difference that emerges in these most generative critiques of Marxist spatial theory resonates as well with some postcolonial discourse, much of which was written straight out of the conflicts I have just rehearsed. In these texts, it is not only a critique of totality that is implied, but a

critique of the global: intensifying movements of capital and labor across borders and regions, and the political crises posed concurrently by decolonization, are generative of novel “dis-coordinations,” which complicate the familiar contradictions of capitalism through the problems of scale and incommensurability. The contradiction of interests between laborer and capitalist, for example, or the economic movements between “core” and “periphery,” are troubled by the very social conditions they generate, through the aggregation, juxtaposition, and syncopation of cultures, bodies, spatial relations, and temporalities. As Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd observe,

multiple sites of contradiction emerge where heterogeneous social formations that are the differential counter-formations of modernity are impacted by and brought into contradiction with postmodern modes of global capitalism … culture becomes politically important where a cultural formation comes into contradiction with an economic or political logic that tries to refunction it for exploitation or domination.  

The contravening and discontinuous political practices Lowe and Lloyd go onto describe are not attenuated by the global scale, but in fact gain new kinds of political salience as a result of being recontextualized at this scale. Such practices may thus address not only the (economic) organization and proliferation of cultural forms and objects, but the ways these processes create value in US and European academies, publishing markets, and art worlds. This means confronting the face of globalism in the heart of the metropolitan west in part by problematizing the arbitrary terms by which scholarly discourse attains its authority.

Scholars, critics, journalists, and activists defer often to global systems by adopting and imposing crudely reductive, indeed cliché metaphors, many of which are forged among the relationalities of urban space. Consider the complexes developed around the myths of linear or

teleological time, a temporality of “now” and “not yet,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s pithy turn of phrase, which marks the anxious diachronics of “development.” These comprise the cliché of encounter, which I discuss at length in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, noting the ways it serves as an object of constant reference in the transformations of cities today and the transformation as well of geographic identifications, practices, and expectations within and about these cities. While this has been true throughout the invention and reinvention of authenticity whenever urban avant-garde movements have appropriated “deviant,” “third world,” or merely “different” cultural objects and practices, the scale and ubiquity have changed dramatically during the last several decades. The aesthetic logics of encounter still appear as an outlet, an escape route from the smooth and hard “styles” of metropolitan modernity; the difference is that today these logics are integrated into the tactics of administrators and developers in the rational production of the city’s built environment.

These problems suggest but do not reflect the correlation of the city and world in their structures and functions. They result from attractive but ultimately imperfect metaphors, which cannot be trusted as interpretive methods for understanding urban space. Iterations of the colonial encounter in urban space should not be confused for the experiences or conditions of postcoloniality, as such. As Gayatri Spivak observes, the popularity of this confusion — favored by some critics in US and European academies for ease of access — produces a comfortable “other” for transnational postmodernity, “ground-level activity,” “emergent discourses.” The radical critic can turn her attention on this hyper-real third world to find, in the name of an alternative history, an arrested space that reproaches postmodernity … the discourse of cultural specificity and difference, packaged for

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transnational consumption along the lines sketched above is often deployed by a specific class. What is dissimulated by this broad-strokes picture is the tremendous complexity of postcolonial space, especially woman-space.⁶¹

Yet what must be emphasized is the extent to which this confusion of internalized and historicized colonization is a prescriptive urban strategy, and quite because of its “broad strokes.” What I am suggesting is that the metaphor of empire, its politics and even its critical discourse, is concretized in urban space and often in ways that are illogical, unpredictable, or contradictory. That these operations have been for the most part calibrated by neoliberal capitalism suggests the extent to which they are cynically designed and set into motion. Thus, Edward Said’s observation that New York bears so many of the Manichean differences that Fanon described in his famous tract on the “colonial city” is not an expression of substitution or confusion; nor does Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the metropolitan uncanny (or unhomely) refer to a mere cipher of memory.⁶² These (first) material-structural and (second) psychoanalytic visions of the metropolis are neither divergent nor coincidental. They appear as effects of the same cliché, the imposition of imperial metaphor — the time of development, in only one example — as a practiced yet indeterminate form of the production of globalized urban space.

The generativity of metaphor poses a problem for scholarly methods because while such metaphors as the “frontier,” the “core” and “periphery,” the “global village” may not reflect extant social realities, they are central to producing such realities. This is exactly the Marxist truism expressed by Lefebvre and later by Smith; for metaphors and/as urban space are reproduced in the combined labors of experience, perception, and imagination. This is, moreover, a recurring theme in

the histories of urban planning, architecture, and even literary studies within and without the (historical) colonial frame, as many artists and commentators have observed (including, of course, Kara Walker, in the piece I described at the start of this dissertation). In cities, we are privy to the imperial metaphor. Most of us do not actively seek to sustain it, but find ourselves through a host of compulsory scripts and aesthetic cues (re)producing it. Those of us who do actively seek to reproduce this metaphor — and here we must think of Spivak’s critique of the metropolitan postcolonial critic, whether or not she is herself a “subaltern intellectual” — must temper our interests by remembering the ethic of reflexive reproachment: “remaking history is a tall order, and we must not take collective enthusiasm or conviction as its sole guarantee.”63 History, Progress, the Nation — these do not die quickly. Their tenacity urges us to question the logics of our interventions, confident as we may be that the invocation of an authentically oppositional alterity will solve the compromises and complicities of any/every power. The effort, then, is not just to identify acts of “resistance” but to ask what these acts, in their agglomeration, tell us about the myths of history — how, indeed, they help us apprehend the artifacts and effects of imperialism, of rationalism, of the Enlightenment, differently.

It is incumbent neither to abandon nor obey such effects, but to “ab-use” them, as Spivak says, to imagine ourselves as a litter of slaves holding aloft the legacy of the Enlightenment, marking with irony the “point of agency” that comes “from below.” With this bemused support, the elephantine epistemology Spivak describes is subject to “unraveling,”64 to “dis-coordination,”65 to “décalage,”66 to “ruination.”67 Yet its form remains decipherable, useful, and at hand. “We want the

63 Spivak, Aesthetic Education, 62.
65 Lloyd and Lowe, Politics, 14.
public sphere gains and private sphere constraints of the Enlightenment,” Spivak says, “yet we must also find something relating to ‘our own history’ to counteract the fact that the Enlightenment came, to colonizer and colonized alike, through colonization.”68 We cannot deny or refuse this fact, for, the inscriptions remain in many forms, not least of which is the savage distance between sites and conditions of production and the metropolitan space of the colloquy — a distance that can, paradoxically, appear amid narrow stretches of inequitable city space. The subaltern is not heard. But we may expose this fact. For just as the project of decolonization evokes, if it has not delivered, a proper postmodernity, the utopian promise of a decentered and coeval globalism, so might the project of the metropolitan critic advance a reorganization of knowledge, a lateralization of knowledge (in spatial terms) through practices of maximal exposure. Herein lies the project of Walter Mignolo, who enjoins us to rename modernity, its logics and its times, “coloniality” — or more properly to graft these terms, exposing each to its irreducible twin. “Modernity/Coloniality” is conceived thus to speak of “now” and “not yet” simultaneously and to recognize as well the irony or ambivalence with which these terms are most often channeled69. Here again appear the politics of postmodernism, expressed in a double-signifier and its literal framing in what would aptly be called “inverted commas.” The propensity indeed to conceive of modernity as a massive list, a grid or ledger of classifications, is precisely what is inverted — the globe turned on its head, as Eduardo Galeano famously suggested, its inside made outside, its scale radically and constantly reconceived. What may be gained by adjusting the globe on the basis of the kinds of dis-coordinates I have

68 Spivak, Aesthetic Education, 4: “This distinguishes our efforts form the best in the modern European attempts to use the European Enlightenment critically, with which we are in sympathy, enough to subvert! … I thought to sacrifice precision and range and simply say ‘From below.’ This too rankles, for it assumes that ‘We,’ whoever we are, are below the level of the Enlightenment. A double bind, again.”
described? And what may be lost?

We may remember that theory, despite its historical lineage with European modernism and the epistemological projects of empire, is not indigenous to the west. What we call “theory” may be laterally conceived as any expression of the tensions and anxieties, and joys as well, that are generated by ambivalent encounters with the world. Theory’s profits do not belong only to oppressors, and neither does its power. Anyone can, and all of us do, participate. This is why the figure of the metropolitan migrant or the subaltern intellectual is so rich: it is not only her disloyalty to an oppositional politics of “ab-use,” but her immersion in the horizontality of experiences of the world, a vast relational field mediated by difference. She moves between objects of postmodern globality while she is being compelled to engage the epistemologies of the Enlightenment and the iterations of the modern that followed. Her richness comes from having it (or wanting to have it) both ways, which she achieves through derision and irony: without holding aloft, even in ab-use, the worldly effigies of modernist globality, she engages what Achille Mbembe describes as the revelatory aesthetics of decolonization’s unfolding, which is the promise as well of postmodern politics. Mbembe describes the coming of a “mix universal community … governed by the principle of a sharing of both differences, and of what is unique.”\(^1\) This enigmatic suggestion (which follows as I discuss shortly the aesthetic turn in political philosophy) delivers us from the determinacy of imperial frameworks as they are erected in New York and elsewhere. Again: we are all made privy to the imperial metaphor. In this commonplace there is an opening. This can be the first step and not the final aim of critical thinking.

ON AESTHETICS AND SUBJECTIVIZATION

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\(^{71}\) Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, (Paris: Cahiers, 2010), 68.
Difference, whether it emerges from within or appears from without the dominant paradigms of
total subjectivity and oppositional thinking, encumbers critical attempts to express the global, even if
we are expressing critique — if it is the many heads of neoliberalism that occupy the center of
inquiry. Yet the discontinuities, hostilities, and aberrations of urban space model ways of admitting
difference into critical perspectives while acknowledging the overbearingness of the global frame.
This dialectical framing, which I have described through my readings of Marxist spatial theory and
its critiques, does not deny but grounds our political commitments, whether these are formed in
opposition to neoliberalism as such or power/knowledge in general. Sometimes, as theorists, our
productive capacity is manifestly clear: the writing on feminist and queer critique and thus
postmodern spatial and visual practice have altered dramatically the terms by which affect,
experience, history, and everyday life enter (or are barred from entering) the realm of meaning.
Postcolonial critique, which considers the role of the metropolitan critic, vexed by the pressure of
modernist metaphor to confuse the city for the total, spherical globe, is manifest richly in urban
space through the sheer obviousness of the outsized inequity of cosmopolitan experience. Yet even
in these cases, the revelatory qualities of critical politics are best illuminated by experiences,
discourses, and encounters outside of dominant sphere of critical production — contrary, in other
words, to the exclusionary order of the academy, to the pace of scholarly (from the Greek schole:
“one who lives at ease”) temporality, and to the oppositional logics of traditional scholarly discourse.

While many critics have attempted to mine and to express the sensual ecology of everyday
life, my concerns for difference and participation – as opposed to the consensual and oppositional
models I have rehearsed – has directed me to a recent revival of aesthetic theory. Here I address the
writing of two disaffected political theorists, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, who turned to
the revelatory power of aesthetic experience in order to think relationality — the “problem” of
being together — in the present. For Nancy, this problem takes the form of a play between each
“singularity” (or each individual subject) and the gathering of relationalities into a complex of “being with.” Such a complex serves as a postmodern allegory for Heidegger’s account of human’s transcendent place with relation to existence: da-sein, or “being there,” in Heidegger, is displaced by mit-sein, or “being with,” in Nancy, designating a kind of counter-worldliness made of the sensations of semblance and difference. Aesthetic experience opens a space for this subject- and world-forming relational play: “The eye,” Nancy writes, “discovers itself seeing. It sees this: that it sees. It sees that it sees there: it sees there where there is something of the world that shows itself.”

Here one witnesses one’s own participation in the world’s unfolding through the processes of self-estrangement. Subject formation occurs, thus, as a strange and uncanny experience that affirms the centrality of difference (estranged-ness) inherent to any social formation. The pull of semblance and difference in the social field generates a sense of what Nancy calls the “singular-plural,” wherein, as Jose Muñoz says in his gloss, the “antirelational” and “relational” are an irreducible and essential pairing.

Rancière takes a perhaps less transcendental approach to the problem of difference. For Rancière, it appears as a surprising consequence of following certain enduring instruments of Enlightenment epistemology to their untested conclusion — which serves paradoxically as their undoing. He asks, must the aesthetic properties of a work of art confirm the essence of a universal subject, or may they cleave an individual from her context, milieu, estrange her from her terrain of identification? Is it the work alone that engages the individual’s awareness of her own subjectivization, or is she herself a participant? He suggests a relational play wherein a work’s

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74 Muñoz, Cruising, 10-11
apparent incompleteness provokes the spectator so that she may participate and alter, and thus fulfill, the work’s promise or presence in the world. Art manifests the oscillation between the abstract and the concrete (and here we think of a Marx’s definition of “production, in general”) and each transformation becomes a production, in turn, of what Rancière calls a new “idiom,” marked in its exposure by instability and indeterminacy. This process of indeterminate production may undo what Rancière has termed the “distribution of the sensible,” a mode of organizing sense through the imposition of static forms of oppositional difference between the artists and audiences. This distribution does not only sanction forms of sensory stimuli — emphasizing the hums and glows of technics, and repressing the din of the urban rabble — but conceives the essential properties by which sense is generated and shaped. Explication, transmission, continuity, realism, the hierarchies of subject and object, teacher and student: these are favored models for making sense and generating meaning, even (especially) on the Left, where despite their prominence they have delivered diminishing returns. In this distribution, some sensory stimuli are deemed intelligible and others are not; some are admitted into political discourse, while others, which make no direct expression of political identification or sympathy, are vilified.

In responding to ways this distribution is reproduced and codified, Rancière attempts to revive the aesthetic insights of the late Enlightenment and Romantic eras, expressed most ardently by Immanuel Kant. In Kant, an object’s form opens to a universal quality, whether it is “good” (characterized by internal coherence that reflects reason) or it is “beautiful” (indicating of a kind of finality) or it is “sublime” (fearsomely suspending, and thus affirming, the civilized subject’s inherent rationality). The point in Kant’s critiques of aesthetics is not to detect universal qualities from

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76 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London & New York: Verso, 2007), 13: The effect to the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story.”
particular objects, but to divine openings to the universal from the “free play” of a subject’s experience of an object. Experience, for Kant, is a lynchpin of social and civilizational unity, an affirmation of intuitive reason and an essential element in our effort to understand what is. Art, thus, affirms a universal substance. If we mark, however, a break with Kant, by denying the aim of universality, a very different kind of politics may appear: In Rancière, the aesthetic work is a differentiating object, which encourages each spectator to establish a unique relation to its themes, expressions, and sensations, and often (especially in the urban context), with an Other. It is the nature of equivalence, and not universality, that is revealed by aesthetic experience. Rancière’s is a doctrine of “equality without condition”: “Everywhere,” he writes, “there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories.”

The idea of an easy causal relationship, the transmission of an idea or a politics into the receptacle-being of the empty subject, is compromised. The explicative model is destabilized. But only if scholars are inclined to make a choice: to do away with a kind of territorial identification or proprietary sense of self and to become immersed, unattached, in the vibrations of living, aesthetic ecology. This choice means relinquishing our luxurious roles as masters of meaning and motors of subjectivization. It means liberating from the narrow openings of institutional life, and “the profession,” a true interdisciplinarity — and here I use the term not only to describe the clusters of critical inquiry that seek to reform the epistemologies of the university, but groupings outside of

77 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, Trans. Werner Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett, [1790]1987) 41-61, 97-103, 107-144. See also Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, 21: “in a well-ordered community everyone has to do one thing and threat artisans do not have the time to be anywhere other than their workplace and to do anything other than the work appropriate to the (in)capacities allocated them by nature.”
79 Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, 17.
institutions, channeling covertly their vital scholarly resources, generating and sharing new resources out of these, and thus discovering alternatives to the privatized “education factory” model promoted widely by neoliberals. The choice will be difficult, also, for artists, posing the greatest threat or risk or vulnerability of all: *do as you wish*. You do not need to “do your homework,” but you may. You do not need to “say something,” but you may. You certainly do not need to say the “right thing.” This also means (and here is another provocation) that nobody *owns* the right to a particular cultural form or mode of expression. Nor is anyone *owed* the privilege of identifying meaning or defining representational space. Meaning is participatory. Its generativity cannot come to life under regimes of fixed identification wherein workers are expected to toil and to know of toil and to possess the concept of toil, and intellectuals to know and possess “words, yet more words, and nothing but words,” wherein each submits passively to a consensual, distant opposition.\(^80\)

Quite the contrary: It is the agency of each person, the place of each as a producer of meaning, and indeed in the urban context of space and spatial significance, is lateralized in this reading as proceeding by way of an endless and, if not organic, process of differentiation:

Why assimilate learning to passivity, unless through the prejudice that speech is the opposite of action? These oppositions—viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity—are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly defined terms. They specifically define a distribution of the sensible, an *a priori* distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. *They are embodied allegories of inequality.*\(^81\)

The imperative is thus two-fold. We must, yes, emphasize those relational experiences of art if we are to understand their unique signification.\(^82\) But we must also, in the service of returns promised

\(^{80}\) Ibid, 22.

\(^{81}\) Ibid, 12 (emphasis mine).

by this first imperative, engage in institutional critique. This means antagonizing 1) how the
oppositions I’ve described — the “distribution of the sensible” in its current historical mode — are
written into neoliberalism’s managerial consensus, and especially into the production of a consensual
urban aesthetics; 2) the ways social realist as well as participatory art, and for that matter
sanctimonious as well as Socratic or Freirean institutional pedagogies, have been woven into the
corporate museum and university, and therefore invite those forms that are not properly designed by
and for the art and academic worlds into the new, democratic idiom of theory, remembering that
“any one and everyone” is an intellectual, a producer of space because an agent of perception,
contrivance, and experience; 3) the appearance even in participatory aesthetics of a trace of the
idealist universalism marshaled by the Kant and his acolytes.

Like the “modernity/coloniality” designation that Mignolo proposes, and indeed the “ab-
use” that Spivak suggests is the essential practice of metropolitan humanism, the Rancièrean
injunction is to hold aloft a history of reckless and immobilizing certitudes: here is race produced by
the aestheticization of phenotypes, the appearance of a difference coded as fixed, absolute,
oppositional, and inherent; here is empire, produced in the staging of the metropolitan colonial
encounter, which maps onto urban space the temporalities of now and not yet, the Manichean logics
that cultivate some subjectivities while violently suppressing others; here are gender and sexuality,
disallowed from the class-based dogmatism of the orthodox left, marked in advance as too
vulnerable to the market, too vulnerable to power’s apparently novel flexibility. The forms of causal
continuity, representation, and narrative, which characterize the ways the visual and spatial
dimensions of urban space are conceived by neoliberal administrators, as I shall discuss at length in
this dissertation, are exposed here, evidence of a sense-making resides at the heart of the western,
imperial imagination. It is not only a matter of power dividing and conquering through classificatory
schema, but the rehearsal of this conspiracy as if it were a benign, natural, or evolutionary process
that just happened to characterize virtually every modern civilizational (and indeed *urban*) paradigm.

One need not read Rancière or Nancy, or their acolytes, in order to gauge the power of aesthetic subjectivization. On the contrary, the relationships of subjects among each other and within and among the “object world” are themselves sufficient. Even if the aesthetic frame as it has been adopted by Mignolo and Achille Mbembe, for example, has to do with the “turn” marked by Rancière’s recent popularity in art and academic publics, it does not strike me as derivative. On the contrary, it seems that the insights generated through the relational reverie enjoined by Rancière and Nancy derives quite dramatically from the context of empire. For empire, with its rehearsal of oppositions, its production of “embodied allegories of inequality,” remains the mediating form in culture, epistemology, and indeed in the remaking of urban space. The reckoning proposed here is thus not “new,” even as the school of aesthetic philosophy that the theorists I’ve mentioned comprise is sometimes described this way. It is merely *due*—indeed overdue.

**IN BRIEF**

The dissertation comprises four chapters, which test the themes I have described above amid the literal and discursive geographies of New York City. These chapters chart an aesthetic history of neoliberal urbanism from its antecedents in international modernism to the joint aesthetic and social transformations that characterized urban renewal practices in the 1980s and 90s—glutted by global finance and internationalized by consensus—to the crises of cosmopolitanism that attended the globalization of the city’s information and media industries, to the horizon of urban-ecological catastrophe, a cipher for the uncertainty of collective futures and for the emergent, global subject. Each chapter poses a counterpoint to the global in the form of a metaphor, a gesture or insinuation, most often produced in the service of triumphantist global discourse; but in each instance a number of recursive insights peculiar to urban life and cultivated by aesthetic properties arise, transfiguring
as they do so the familiar but illusory form of the globe into an immaterial problematic, the aesthetics of difference. A brief conclusion that discusses the “global university” closes the study.

In Chapter 1) I suggest that the problems of global representation find an outstanding metaphor in the literal and conceptual mapping of cities, looking to the tension between aerial and immediate urban perspectives that animated New York City planning on the eve of the neoliberal turn. I provide a short history of this tension, exemplified by the conflict between Robert Moses’s aerial planning methods — which abstracted and suppressed the city’s constitutive differences — and Jane Jacobs’s partial and fleeting visual urbanisms, the “bits and pieces” that, she says, comprise the modern city and the a-socialities they provoke. Jacobs preferred the “street view,” an embedded view of the city’s matrices of difference: the differences, that is, between visual and architectural forms and (most importantly) between one’s singular apprehension of the city as a series of incomplete contacts and interfaces, and the imposition of “consensus,” “togetherness,” “contemporaneity,” terms characteristic of modernist planning. I emphasize especially the relationship between this intervention and the social movements of the 1960s and early 70s (accountable as they may be for the revanchist consolidation of neoliberal interests), of which Jacobs was a participant, and which find critical form through her suggestion that plurality is the very essence of urban space. The tension between these two figures and their visual urbanisms presages current disputes over the expansion of neoliberal globalization, which is endorsed by local and national politicians, by planners, journalists, and economists, but which has found some friction among a number of recent scholars. Here I engage directly Spivak’s concept of “planetarity,” comparing it to Nancy’s writing on mondialisation. Together, these theorists’ disarticulations of the global write something like Jacobs’ theory of city life into the planetary present. This chapter serves largely to interrogate the concept of the global, suggesting that the idea was delivered into dominant discourse through a series of modernist epistemologies. It also serves to establish a history of
alternatives and disputations that might find some resonance today.

Chapter 2) discusses a figuration of the global shrunk to the intelligible scale of a neighborhood’s built environment, pursuing the relationship between gentrification, aesthetics, empire, and neoliberal governance during the period of the “new urbanism” that followed New York’s 1975 fiscal crisis. I proceed from the naming of Downtown artist Jean-Michel Basquiat the “Radiant Child,” by critic Rene Ricard in a 1980 essay for *Artforum*, to suggest that the production of such a figure exemplifies a number of imperial tropes mobilized, as well, to promote the gentrification of poor and minority neighborhoods: these tropes include the infantilizing conflation of personal and national (here urban) growth; the imposition of temporalities and the imperative to live in self-conscious contemporaneity; and the production, imposition, and suppression of difference. These themes have been generalized in representations of gentrifying neighborhoods as “frontiers” between abjection and globalized urbanism — the primitive and the modern, coded in the language of development, maturation, and aesthetic consciousness. I follow Marxist discourses of gentrification, which emphasize the strategic disinvestment and production of dereliction characteristic of these spaces, with postcolonial critiques of development, subject formation, and temporality, which, as I argue, hinge on the rehearsal of the imperial tropes I describe. I go on to derive from this theoretical supplement the relationship between aesthetic experience and spatial politics, paying special attention to what I call the “aesthetic consensus” that in the era of New York’s neoliberal administration governs jointly the city’s built environment and its terms of personal and social development. To reframe the efficacy of visual art in built environments, I evoke the Rancièrian concept of *dissensus*, differentiated from the subjectivizing premises that are themselves underwritten by the sensibilities and aspirations of neoliberalism. I argue, further, that the calculated and indeed cliché representations of difference and/as the global-urban circuit, which characterized Basquiat and other downtown artist and which has developed dialectically with the (also) spatial-
material problematic of gentrification, might give way under the duress of dissensus. To test these ideas in the context of gentrification after the apex of neoliberal governance, I return to Basquiat, discussing a geography of homage, replicas of his iconic “SAMO” graffiti tag (“Same Old Shit”) that appear in the gentrifying neighborhoods of New York’s diverse outer boroughs to deride and supplement the rationalities of development.

In Chapter 3, I consider the problems of exposure and withdrawal in contemporary World literature based in New York, arguing that literature both participates in and responds to the overwrought infrastructures of global urban space. Concerned especially by the emergence of media industries during the city’s white-collar resurgence in the 1990s, and its historical co-incidence with global cities’ “clash of cosmopolitanisms,” I pursue a model for literature’s inconspicuous solidarities and oblique cosmopolitan interfaces, arguing against the rather limited “cosmopolitical” options expressed by theorists of World literature. The works I discuss – principally Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2010) – imagine the city as an aimless series of inchoate, fragmented, unreadable visual amalgams, “non-places” that evince the cosmopolitan problematic as a condition of exposure that might be resolved by the option to withdraw. Appealing to writings by Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennett and by literary theorists such as Pascale Casanova and Emily Apter, I ask what kinds of resonances such practices provoke. What appear are not the conspicuous cosmo-politans promoted by neoliberal administrators but an ecology of the a-social. I measure this ecology against a number of immediate political problems, and indeed against the liberal imperative to produce more and more discourse, as if this alone could be interpreted as justice. I turn, in examining these obstructions to political work, to Nancy’s theory of literary communism. For Nancy, a “community,” the basis of his conception of the world, is figured by the accumulation of affects, impressions, engagements upon the “surface” of a circulating literary work. Arguing that this literary coming together can indeed be achieved through texts that are nevertheless referential of certain charged and evocative
geographies, I propose to imagine the world novel in the urban center as a site of turning-away-from-the-world, as such, and instead to those articulations of a gravely unattached but contiguous planetary cohabitation.

Having discussed cosmopolitanisms derived from, and enacted through, the anxieties over exposure, I turn in Chapter 4) to the city’s living ecologies. Though I rehearse here some Marxist accounts of the “production of nature,” and counter-pose these to a number of recent “new” materialist writings, I seek to reconcile these methodologies in the urban scene, proposing an aesthetic-ecological mode for gauging the capacities of discourse to materialize or sediment certain effects. Here I follow what Rob Nixon’s has termed “slow violence” and what Ann Stoler describes as “imperial debris,” the sustained and accretive violence of ecological ruin, bringing these into dialogue with theories of ecological aesthetics from Félix Guattari and others. I read this meeting of temporalities and materialisms, and their impressions on the emergent global subject, in the austere documentary Foreign Parts by anthropologists and filmmakers Véréna Paravel and J. P. Sniadecki, which stages this critical aesthetic ecology in a gentrifying neighborhood’s demolition yard, where decades of secreting toxins and the accumulating effects transform the very substance of New York City. Here the poverty and marginalization of some urban spaces — Willer’s Point, Queens — are related to the arrival of (the film’s titular) “foreign parts.” These include migrant and undocumented laborers; automotive materials built originally in the global south, but severed from the bodies of cars and amassed anew; and indeed the appearance of the ethnographer herself, who (knowingly) arrives an outsider and a cipher for the artist out of place. This compound materialization is posed as a frame for the questions of gentrification and displacement, for the articulation of the global and its metaphorization in urban space, and for the destabilization of futures amidst the promises of neoliberalism.

Having established in these four chapters the relationship between neoliberal urbanism and
the aesthetics of difference, I turn in a short closing section to higher education and its evocations of uncertain global futures. Revisiting in this conclusion the problems posed throughout the dissertation, I engage the urban campus as a site of visualized touristic encounter for nascent subjects, noting that the home campuses of “global universities” in cities of the developed north are among the major forces behind gentrification, urban renewal, the privatization of space, and the globalization of cities’ cultures.
1.

WORLD OF MAPS:
JANE JACOBS AND THE GLOBAL CITY

This chapter serves as a prehistory of neoliberal aesthetics. I ground this concern by describing divergent visual urbanisms of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs, which I situate among a number of global movements and which I argue precede, in their visual and spatial interfaces, dominant as well as subversive or contravening modes of contemporary globalism. I follow the legacies of these figures through the neoliberal turn — the city’s 1975 bankruptcy and the austerity that followed — and locate them anew in the networked space of the “global city.” While Moses’ aerial mastery remains, in this reading, an epistemological precursor to the total visions and global ambitions of neoliberalism, Jacobs’ emphasis on the ephemeral, the partial, the discontinuous, and the plural, and indeed her concern for a-socialities and urban aberrations, suggests that her work serves as a reservoir for any discourse of difference or dissent and a model for writing a history of the unraveling urban present.

My inquiry opens with Robert Moses, who served as New York’s master planner for more than thirty years and who sought to “weave together” the tatters of what he imagined to be a sublime urban “tapestry.” Already a “world city,” New York was conceived by Moses from a total, aerial perspective as a screen for the essentially modern synthesis of art, engineering, commerce, and the state — the total synthesis, as prescribed in International Modernist architectural manifestos of the period, between the subject and environment. Yet because of the distance and assuredness from which this synthesis was composed, modernist projects ignored the differentiated and unfixed interfaces that characterize urban experience. Moses expressed frequently and with zeal his distaste
for cities’ diversities, their real and cacophonous order, an (only apparent) chaos that could not be reconciled with the stark geometry of his milieu, the logic of gridwork and what he believed were the civilizing effects of regularity and repetition. His prescription for a network of highways that would deliver drivers from the ordered chaos of life on the street, his “superblock” apartment towers that made of the South Bronx, Brooklyn, the Lower East Side, and Harlem warrens of poverty and crime: these projects revealed Moses’ compulsion to smooth and perfect the city below, suppressing its essential differences and sequestering its unnerving and embarrassing disparities. This thinking guided his work and the planning practices in cities throughout the developed north during the decades before and after World War II but ultimately failed, amid the upheavals of the 1960s, to overwrite the living map.

It was at this dissonant historical juncture that Jacobs entered the scene, her intervention contemporaneous with what Henri Lefebvre would later call the formation of a “grass-roots opposition, in the form of counter-plans and counter-projects designed to thwart strategies, plans and programs imposed from above.” Before her successful campaign against Moses’s cross-town highway, Jacobs had become well known for voicing in articles in her 1961 Death and Life of Great American Cities an elegant, trenchant critique (an “attack,” in her own words) of modernist planning. For Jacobs, modernist concerns over the regularity, flow, and the visual order of cities — and what she considered to be the confusion of built space and high art characteristic of the international modernists — accounted for more than unpopular spatial and visual impositions. These also marked a tendency to ignore the ways irregularity, difference, and aberration enable a city to function and maximize the freedom it (can and may) afford its every citizen. It is by way of this critique, a

reclamation of cities’ partial and unplanned interfaces, an emphasis on codes of limited and
circumspect “watching,” that Jacobs establishes a theory of what I refer to as a vital a-sociality, an
ambivalent but functional relational practice underwritten by an antipathy for discourses of
togetherness and consensus.

A-social practices and attitudes, in Jacobs’ account, reflect a concern for accidental and
circumstantial epistemologies, shifting, relational structures sometimes described in the language of
“situated knowledge” and “subject positionality.” These points of view do not conform to
consensual city planning practices. Nor are they legible from the distant heights of the planner — to
say nothing of the distant certitudes of the theorist, the economist, and so forth. While the
modernists proposed structures that would fix and gird these dissident forms, presuming that the
“poetry” of the architect could resolve the disagreements and dysfunctions of modernity, Jacobs
preferred to employ a metaphor of accidental, inorganic relation. She asks us to

imagine a large field in darkness. In the field, many fires are burning. They are of many sizes,
some great, others small; some far apart, others dotted close together; some are brightening,
some are slowly going out. Each fire, large or small, extends its radiance into the
surrounding murk, and this it carves out a space. But the space and the shape of that space
exist only to the extent that the light from the fire creates it. The murk has no shape or
pattern except where it is carved into space by light. Where the murk between the lights
become deep and indefinable and shapeless, the only way to give it form or structure is to
kindle new fires in the murk or sufficiently enlarge the nearest existing fires.

What Jacobs says in this haunting but refreshingly uncertain and hardly consecrating metaphor, is,
like her other observations, apt both in the context of dense, chaotic cities, and as a critique of the

modernism’s pretense to mastery. Jacobs’ vision of urban form does not heed the modernist imperative to return cities to civilization’s “essence” or “true program,” nor to direct their growth toward global interconnectedness. Instead, she proposes to divine the very premise of human community from the “vitalities” of simple human practices and the agglomeration of theses in city space. To interpret these vitalities as the substance, in turn, of a kind of public and common enlightenment, one that radiates from cities’ diversity, their “bits and pieces,” becomes Jacobs’ role and the basis for her articulation of “the kind of problem a city is.”

Out of this common-sense plurality, Jacobs’ book seems a blueprint for holding multiple scales in one’s head at the same time: the street and the city, the neighborhood and the block, the relationship and discontinuities between thinking and practicing their scales. Thus, when we discuss the relationship between the “city” and the “world” — whether we mean the pluralistic worlds made by the insurrections and “subaltern counterpublics” of the 1960s, or the globalization of economic and political power in the decades that followed — we should take neither as a unity. On the contrary, we can attempt to identify resonances, patterns, and threats from the myriad and conflicting, interweaving and countervailing movements, gestures, instances, gaps, and crises that comprise and create meaning when we speak “the city.” So may we attempt to identify a multiplicity of “global” formations when we apply this otherwise specious modifier to the urban complex — when we find ourselves saying as critics are practiced in doing that New York is the global city par excellence. Jacobs may thus be called upon to antagonize the continuity between aerial modernism and the will to totality that characterizes the architects and celebrants neoliberal globalization. Her appraisals of contact, of mutual limits, of ambivalent relationality comprise a critique of modernist epistemologies that has outlasted of the planning paradigms she describes — even as such

85 Ibid., 428
paradigms remain ubiquitous planetary referents.

Jacobs thus finds company in scholars who voiced similar critiques throughout the afterlives of modernism — in the contexts of the neoliberal, the postmodern, and the “global,” usually with recourse to the urban metaphor — directing us finally to refuse the compulsory totalities that seem to appear whenever the city is conflated with the world. I thus turn in a final section of this chapter to two reconfigurations of the “global” through the prism of difference. First, I rehearse the response to discourses of globalization and neoliberalism made by the postcolonial and deconstructionist literary theorist Gayatri Spivak, who prefers to conceive of the world by way of difference that remains “underived.” Resisting the imposition of the “global,” a term she associates with the interests of transnational capitalist modernity, Spivak calls instead for a “planetary” paradigm, a model that as I argue is a suitable metaphor for global cities’ essential diversities and constitutive simultaneities. Following Spivak, I turn to the philosophy of “world” issued by Jean-Luc Nancy, which posits the “creation of the world” as an undisclosed but always occurring consequence of and response to the interminable imperative to “think” the global in its myriad forms. These theories do not reveal but merely (and yet necessarily) give voice to the centrality of disagreement and ambivalence in the joint productions of global and urban space, emphasizing an oblique engagement with the “wordly” projection of meaning, the imposition of ideas, and the cultivation of subjectivities from above. Nancy and Spivak follow from the discontinuities and embedded views described by Jacobs to direct us not toward a critique of globalization, per se, but its supposed fulfillment of the modernist project. These critiques serve thus as invitations to a reflexive but not compensatory “planet thought.” They need to be written into and directed out of the very processes through which the global and the urban are experienced and reflected if they are to provide the recursive quality they promise — the relief of refusal, the refusal to live the way the master planners demand.
INTERNATIONAL AERIALITY

Robert Moses designed the city from above. Like the Swiss architect and luminary Le Corbusier, with whom he collaborated on several projects, Moses preferred to use drawings and scale models, to impose himself in the sky over the urban landscape. From this vantage point, Moses oversaw the erection of massive bridges and tunnels, complexes of public parks and beaches, housing projects (under Title 1, the 1949 Housing Act’s slum-clearance provision), and of course enormous and intrusive highways — most famously the Cross Bronx Expressway, for which thousands of homes were razed, their residents displaced. Masked by talk of the public good, of efficiency and rationale, and sustained by what the critic and urbanist Marshall Berman has characterized as a “Faustian” refusal to accept the consequences of his own megalomania, Moses envisioned a process of limitless growth, prescribing the interventions of a strong central government and the masterful hand of the planner. 86

Moses was was in step aesthetically and in his flamboyant and determined persona — his “burning eyes” depicted by biographer Robert Caro 87 — with International Modernist movements from Europe and the decolonizing Global South, movements concerned with aesthetic and functional responses to the emergence of global industrial modernity, especially in the form of the overcrowded, cacophonous twentieth-century city. These movements were associated with, but hardly committed to, political internationalisms of the right and left and with the art world in an early, cosmopolitan incarnation (the “International Style,” a term coined by architect Philip Johnson in his catalog for a 1933 MoMA show 88, quickly found popularity). But their primary commitment

was to a modernist directive toward structural and social unity, a synthesis of subject and environment. The architects were concerned by what they interpreted to be a discontinuity between the emergent subject and the modernizing world and sought to repair this rift by shaping urban and industrial modernity into the “perfect” forms and processes of nature — the movement of particles through the human body’s circulatory and skeletal systems, for example, or the stark, geometric regularities of the Ancient Greeks. They developed in conceiving these designs a “total-subjective” methodology, a mode of planning that utilized abstract aerial diagrams, allowing the architect to apprehend a city in its apparent totality. From this point of view, the aberrations and disparities of life below could be refused by what the architects imagined was a soothing and civilizing regularity: Corbusier in his infamous Plan voisin proposed leveling Baron Haussmann’s Paris and replacing its beaux-arts boulevards with a grid of massive, concrete apartments, “superblocks,” which proved so fitting to modernism’s overbearing ambitions, and to the strict formalism to which the era’s planners deferred, that they inspired the shapes of housing projects throughout Moses’ New York and elsewhere.

These methods were proliferated widely through the publication of the 1933 Athens Charter, the modernist declaration drawn up by the influential Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne (CIAM) under the direction of Corbusier and, among others, the urbanists and celebrants of Moses’ New York Sigfried Giedion and Josep Lluís Sert. The Charter summarizes the meeting of functionality and aesthetics that became widely associated with midcentury urban planning, emphasizing the coherence of these concepts through the singular vision of the architect⁸⁹:

Architecture presides over the destiny of cities ... It reserves in advance the open spaces in the midst of which will rise volumes built with harmonious proportions. It lays out

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the circulatory network that will bring the different zones into contact with one another.

Who can take the measures necessary to the accomplishment of this task if not the architect who possesses a complete awareness of man, who has abandoned illusory designs, and who, judiciously adapting the means to the desired ends, will create an order that bears within it a poetry of its own?90

It is the architect who from such heights can study the way “the sun strikes the meridional curve” of the planet, seeing that “although, in its continuous roundness, the Earth admits of no interruption from one parcel of land to the next, countless combinations emerge, each with its particular characteristics.”91 The architect is also enshrined with the capacity to decipher “the races of man kind” as they “multiply the diversity of human undertakings, each proposing its own mode of perception and its own reason for being.”92 Not only does he become in the Charter and in subsequent documents the manager of a city’s spatial and social interfaces, but the suppressor of difference and dissonance in the face of what Martin Heidegger derided contemporaneously as the “conquest of the world as picture,” the accumulation of “worldly” objects and ideas, grasped in their (imagined) totality by a distant and modern subject.93 Indeed, the formalized and cosmopolitan academies that encouraged such a vantage point and the rhetoric of consensus and expertise characteristic of twentieth-century epistemologies are also promoted by the Charter and the work of its adherents. As much as the Charter’s directives speak the political utopianism of the era, in other words, it is as much the emergence of the “world” as a codified referent that is at play in these

91 Ibid, 45.
92 Ibid, 46.
designs and in their designation as “international.”

Throughout this period, New York became a primary site for the growing and increasingly varied discourses of planning and of global theory. A locus of production during global industrial-development programs before and just after World War II, the city reflected the mutual, transnational influences of US and European modernisms. It served as a beacon for the architects, who were influenced by the verticality of the city’s skyscrapers and by the frenetic energy of its roadways. Corbusier, who arrived in 1935, declared to an audience of journalists and photographers at MoMA that the city’s skyscrapers — still at the time novel aberrations — were “too small.” Hailing the metropolitan spirit of creation amidst a modernity “sublime and atrocious,” he argued that New York, which had during the previous year been scoured and polished by Moses and his engineers, exemplified the kind of glittering newness last witnessed in Europe during the Renaissance “when the cathedrals were white”: In New York, he wrote, “men have projected all their strength and labor into the sky — a whole city in the free air of the sky. Good God, what disorder, what impetuosity! What perfection already, what promises!” To Corbusier — who spent much of his career advising planning projects for late- and postcolonial governments, flying in propeller plains above cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America — New York was exemplary of an emergent “world city.” Though its dereliction and poverty spanned all directions, it provided,

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94 See Johnson and Hitchcock, 53: “American functionalists claim to be builders first. They are surely seldom architects in the fullest sense of the word. They are ready, as the European functionalists are not, to deface their building with bad architectural design if the client demands it. Nor can they claim for their skyscrapers and apartment houses the broad sociological justifications that exits for the workers’ housing, the schools and hospitals of Europe. On the whole, American factories, where the client expects no money to be spent on design, are better buildings and at least negatively purer in design that those constructions in which the architect is forced by circumstances to be more than an engineer. Technical developments, moreover, are rapidly forcing almost all commercial and industrial buildings into the mold of the international style.”

95 Caro, 368-402.

especially from the aerial remove that obsessed Corbusier, a glimpse at “unity in a molecular state”. Architect Siegfried Giedion also celebrated Moses’s New York, and Moses in particular for “humanizing” his designs by mimicking not only the monumentality of the modern but the curvature of the Earth. Interested in the movement of cars and trains — what the Charter’s authors call “circulation” — Giedion praised Moses for “carefully following and utilizing the terrain,” his highways “rising and falling with the contours of the earth, merging completely into the landscape.”

Corbusier and Giedion were not alone in their praise for New York, nor in their invocation of its “world” status: the city, by way of Moses’ highways, his airports, his interest in mobility and flow, was the centerpiece of architecture’s “shifting cultural axis … from Europe to America, as well as to outside the usual centers of ferment where crucial architectural developments were occurring — Scandinavia, Japan, South America, Eastern Europe, India.” While some planners and architects clamored for a model of modern design that bypassed exhausted national (or continental) frames, others attempted to marry ancient and indigenous tradition with new global modernisms in an effort to instantiate a regional voice that would resonate in the cosmopolitan theaters of the United Nations and MoMA — institutions that would sustain New York as a lab for hundreds of planners.

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97 Ibid. See also Pinder, *Visions of the City* (London: Routledge, 2005), 89-90; Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Norton, 1992), 192. A quote from Corbusier, *Cathedrals*, 41-42: “Beneath the immaculate office on the fifty-sixth floor the vast nocturnal festival of New York spreads out. No one can imagine it who has not seen it. It is a titanic mineral display, a prismatic stratification shot through with an infinite number of lights, from top to bottom, in depth, in a violent silhouette like a fever chart beside a sick bed. […] The great master of economic destiny are up there, like eagles, in the silence of their eminences. Seated in their chairs, framed by two plate glass windows which fuse their rooms with the surrounding space, they appear to us made out of the substance of this event which is as strong and violent as a cosmic mutation: New York standing up above Manhattan is like a rose-colored stone in the blue of a maritime sky; New York at night is like a limitless cluster of jewels.”


and architects from throughout the world for several decades and embed the city in a dense, global network of urban imaginaries. These regional modernisms were forged transnationally, in triangulated relationships between Europe, the United States — New York in particular — and the global south, constituting a credibly “international” modernism and elucidating the interdependence of labor, tradition, ecology and topography, from above. The city’s growth, its dozens of museums and universities, and its social and historical situation — the US’s midcentury Keynesian economy, which I discuss shortly — enabled the singularity of artistic vision and the generality of content, what Johnson called the International Style’s “controlling” elements, to cohere in works that emphasized progressive public investment and global civil society. Several structures would serve as arenas for the dramas of this self-consciously modern world, including Eero Saarenin’s “new-formalist” TWA terminal at JFK Airport (1962), which was dismantled to some dismay in 2013; the Manhattan headquarters of Chase Bank (1961); and the United Nation’s headquarters on East Forty-Second Street in Manhattan (1952), designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Corbusier in collaboration with Moses, who against the wishes of his collaborators insisted that it be built in Manhattan. These works spectacularized the intersections of commerce, technology, and diplomacy under the lodestar of what was imagined to be a truly international modernism, thematizing for a transnational public the discourses of improvement and futurity — even if these discourses were attached as well to US interests. It had been at Moses’ 1939 Worlds Fair, after all, that visiting delegates, architects, and designers from throughout the world were offered a glimpse of the “future” of urban life, a


101 Johnson and Hitchcock, 34.

massive diorama shaped like the Earth — and sponsored by General Motors — in which “visitors were transported above a vast model in suspended seats, like a horizontal ski chairlift, which gave the illusion of flying.” Moses was, moreover, steeped in architecture’s cosmopolitan culture and enjoyed his status as a prominent and controversial figure in planetary debates over the failures and potentialities of city planning, advising architects and planners throughout the decolonizing and industrializing nations of the global south.

Following Corbusier, Giedion, and the dozens of others who wrote about New York — no strangers, they, to imperial endeavors or the politics of megalomania — we might take Moses, the “Master Builder” of the “World City” as the apotheosis of the architect-planner and his (assuredly his) relation to the world as an available and total entity. I do not mean this to be a celebratory remark, for the ruthlessness with which Moses went about his task — his darkly dispassionate character, and the will to power he unabashedly expressed — calls to mind the ways the aerial remove of the modernist architect resembles the imperial remove of the sovereign, the emperor, exemplary of what the theorist Mary Louise Pratt calls the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” point of view and what Jacobs suggested was a tendency to make of urban space “a great visible ego” that

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103 Witold Rybczynski, *Makeshift Metropolis: Ideas About Cities* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 48: “The model showed an urbanized landscape that included cities with extremely tall skyscrapers, elevated walkways, and underground parking garages. This was in many ways an adaptation of the Voisin Plan, but Bel Geddes's vision of the urban future was far more expansive than Le Corbusier's, and the cities in Futurama were surrounded by sprawling suburban communities, connected to one another by a network of superhighways. Since the exhibit was part of the General Motors Pavilion, the model was equipped with thousands of tiny moving car.”

104 Moses traveled to Brazil in 1949, on behalf of Nelson Rockefeller's private development firms, to direct a study of urban improvements. He drew up speculative plans for a transformation of Sao Paulo (much to the dismay of its public, when they discovered in his plans potential acquisitions for US companies and investors), Caracas, and other cities in Latin America. See Maria Christina de Silva Leme, “Transforming the modern Latin American city: Robert Moses and the International Basic Economic Corporation,” *Planning Perspectives* 25.4 (2010): 515-528.

shouts “‘look what I have made.’” It was the compulsion of the planner to take the whole world as his province, to synthesize cities’ and cultures’ diverse elements, to assess, in the Charter’s language, the “races of mankind,” and to do so through a unity or synthesis of functions and forms.

The distance with which Moses imagined the city thus enabled him to conflate the scales of the urban, the national, and, increasingly, the global, whether in the arena of civic life, cosmopolitan culture, or the transnational corporatism that variously attenuated and reversed the supposed political commitments of modernist architecture. He was by all accounts put off by difference, and could only make sense of a city’s diverse and dissident elements by suppressing them, imagining from the distance of his remove an abstract and to his mind irrelevant population.

Moses’s fervent xenophobia is well documented by Caro and others and demonstrated by his occasional commentary on modernist architecture. In a 1944 op-ed for the New York Times Moses derided the “outspoken revolutionary” tendencies and “familiar subsurface activities” of European intellectuals living on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, at the time home to émigré architects Saarenin, Walter Gropius, and Erich Mendelsohn. He wrote, in what must have seemed an irony to victims of his own aerial planning regime, “You can’t ask a global planner to waste his time on the sidewalks of New York.” The point of his commentary, which demonstrated how well Moses was versed with a number of European planning philosophies, was less to empower common people than to vaunt what he considered to be a pragmatism, borne by endurance and compromise, to the heights of a global (because American) aesthetic ideal. “Actual accomplishments,” he wrote, “were brought about by people who labored day and night for limited objectives in the face of great

106 Jacobs, 23.
difficulties” (before quoting poet Vachel Lindsay: “Record it for the grandson of your son — / a city is not builded in a day”). Even as he paraded his sanctimonious commitment to national culture, he was engaged in a host of transnational and interdisciplinary configurations of modernist planning. When he derided the “long haired planners of Europe,” these “itinerate carpet bag experts,” he was articulating both with and against the world as an available entity — or, rather, as a countless composite of entities that he and the other modernists could only understand through the prism of the unified twentieth-century city. Despite his dismissal of European modernism, Moses proved himself an aesthete in his influences and his conception of urban totality, echoing Johnson, Corbusier, Sert, and others even in his pithy suggestion that his circuitous highways and bridges consecrated a “cherished ambition … to weave together the loose strands and frayed edges of New York's metropolitan arterial tapestry.”

THE UNRAVELING CITY

Here enters Jacobs. Her architecture, the planning paradigm she articulates in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is not a monument to match the world and its totality, to mark the perfect and essential geometry of nature by clearing slums and knolling skyscrapers in their place. Nor is it a prescription for the singularity of the architect and his total subjectivity. Dissatisfied by modernists’ attempt to create visual unity of cities’ apparently disordered elements, Jacobs in her book celebrates the spontaneous and cluttered vitality of urban life, concerning herself with short sections of cement and asphalt, storefronts spilling onto the thoroughfare, sound, chaos, inertia and balance. For Jacobs, the street and this melee embody a network of signs, naturally generated from the rhythm of their functions, the rhythm of navigation and legibility. She reminds us that we do not live in a

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108 Caro, 648
“world of paper maps,” and that it is “differentiation” — a mix of uses and people and architectural forms — and not “duplication” that makes the city legible.\(^{109}\)

Jacobs cared for the diversity of structures and uses, which “work” precisely because they enable the diversity of ways of life; they enable a subject to maintain herself with and through and despite difference. It is the disagreements and discontinuities between “bits and pieces” of city life, Jacobs revealed, that enables the “freedom of countless numbers of people to make and carry out countless plans.”\(^{110}\) As the architect and critic Michael Sorkin suggests, this realization had to do with Jacob’s way of seeing, her ability to “move from the particularities of the local interaction of incident and morphology to the larger patterns of urban life,” manifest as “expansive, ever-transforming difference.”\(^{111}\) Jacobs defines these particularities as the “street” or “intimate” view, the viewpoint of a person whose purpose is to use what exists on that street, rather than to look at it in detachment. Looking at the street in this way, the viewer makes sense, and at least a minimum amount of order, from the intimate view, but only at the price of considering the distance as a deplorable mishmash, better dismissed from mind if possible.\(^{112}\)

This view of “common sense” (a favorite phrase also of Moses) transforms the legibility of cities into a politics of sociality and the self, embodied by the walker in the city, and what Lefebvre would call the “encounters and simultaneities” that in Jacobs’ work go by the name of “contact.” Here she explains in her characteristically wry prose the character of contact, which enacts the basic problem of city life and its perfect, inbuilt solution:

It is possible in a city street neighborhood to know all kinds of people without unwelcome

\(^{109}\) Jacobs, 129

\(^{110}\) Jacobs, 391.


\(^{112}\) Jacobs, 379.
entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuse, explanations, fears of giving offence, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligation which can accompany less limited relationships.\textsuperscript{113}

It is the “familiar public terms,” the “line” of difference that enables these “by-the-way” street relationships to grow, but eventually to stop, their development mercifully arrested by the same common sense that governs their initial appearance. Jacobs suggests that the necessity of sharing one’s life with a community actually poses the community’s greatest threat. What must be maintained are the “bits and pieces” alone, which constitute a partial and fleeting visuality, the paradoxical flatness of the foreground: “The requirement that much shall be shared drives city people apart,” she says, comparing city dwellers to suburbanites. They are forced “to enlarge their private lives if they are to have anything approaching equivalent contact with their neighbors.”\textsuperscript{114}

Jacobs’ visual play is structurally important, in other words. Hers is not the aesthetics of an urban idyll or the ballet on Hudson Street that so many celebrants refer to when they discuss her work.\textsuperscript{115} The very optics of urban life she describes when she writes of dozens of people sitting on benches “watching traffic, watching the people on the busy sidewalks, watching each other” characterize more than a joyous New York City repast; these optics also indicate and initiate a vital, uniquely urban a-sociality, a mode of oblique contact that accommodates cities’ competing singularities and overlapping diversities, teeming as they are, scattering and interweaving as a choreography but not — specifically not — as a manifestation of “togetherness,” a term Jacobs derides. Indeed, the watching Jacobs remarks upon, which she describes taking place on Broadway on Manhattan’s

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 62.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
Upper West Side, extending into Harlem, would have comprised in the early 1960s the ephemeral contact between members of one of the most diverse communities in the world.116 This was a diversity borne as much of necessity as affinity, the watching that took place by degrees cautious, defensive, and circumspect. The racial, ethnic, generational, and class disparities that characterized the atmosphere required a real and not a sentimental or utopian model for co-existence across, amid, and made of difference. These communities were in and of themselves characterized by disjunction, disagreement, and forms of unwanted and promiscuous exposure, obliging Jacobs’ ethic of mutual regard, or, as the sociologist Richard Sennett puts it, of “mutual limits.”117

It should be noted that Jacobs was not alone in her concerns. Although she has been sanctified by architectural historians who claim that hers was the first intervention against Moses and Corbusier’s aerial planning practices, by the time Jacobs published Death and Life, in 1961, modernist orthodoxy was already widely scrutinized. Several critics’ emphasis on the parochial, the partial, and the plural challenged what was perceived in public to be the naïve and annoying utopianism of the modernists. Lewis Mumford (no friend of Jacobs)118 predicted the demise of “abstract and sterile modernism” at least in its “adolescent period, with its quixotic purities, its awkward self-consciousness, its assertive dogmatism” as early as 1947119; and a decade later Charles Abrams railed against the “vast redundancy” of modernist planning, which offered “no sense of intimacy or of things being on a human scale.”120 Still another of Jacobs’ contemporaries, Kevin Lynch, author of the influential 1960 Image of the Modern City, shared her interest in visual differentiation and street

semiotics: “Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns,” Lynch says. “We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants.”

These discourses were in a sense inevitable: by the time Jacobs published her book, New York suffered the exit of industrial jobs and the white middle class, who thanks to Moses’ highways and transportation hubs could enjoy regional access to a “World City” from insipid suburbs that in their regularity and repetition may as well also to have been designed by the planner. Indeed, the terms of modernism enabled by Moses’ singular vision and by the concept of “flow,” resisted difference so strongly that they were no longer identified with the city at all: the profiteers of Moses’ modernism would prefer, to the diversity of New York, vast expanses of tract housing and Long Island parking lots, which from the sky, as the critic Joseph Hudnut observed, took the form of banal and pointless herringbone, “all of them … exactly alike.” The modernists were widely blamed for failing to foresee, or for covertly enabling, the deindustrialization and economic decline of modern cities, in other words, and for failing to account for everyday effects of these processes. These failures stemmed from the propensity to be or to act or to look modern, to weather the degrading and enhance the ennobling circumstances of modernity through a consensual style. Jacobs writes,

It is disturbing to think that men who are young today, men who are being trained now for their careers, should accept on the grounds that they must be “modern” in their thinking, conceptions about cities and traffic which are not only unworkable, but also to which

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122 The most noted of these is Levittown, Long Island, designed by Abraham Levitt’s firm Levitt and sons; several other suburbs designed by the firm share this name, both in New York and elsewhere, including Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico.
nothing new of any significance has been added since their fathers were children.\textsuperscript{124} Not only was the planning she derided out-of-date in its assessment of the ways cities function; it was out-of-date in its insistence on the contemporaneity of elements, the leveling (or monumentalizing) of the old and imposition of the “now.” This insistence on a “now” was, perhaps ironically, revealed in the course of Jacobs’ work to be incompatible with the actual present, which was marked by pluralism and contestation in both public and private life. In revealing this, Jacobs also suggests that International Modernist planning is incompatible with cities in general. This revelation — that the plans of the modernists had been failing all along — animated Jacobs’ casual emphasis on the salient but largely silent capacities of the everyday, her imperative to live as one pleases and not as the Master (Planner) demands, and to do so in the streets.

Indeed, throughout the 1960s, interventions such as Jacobs’ resonated transnationally with movements that emphasized semiotics, discourse, everyday life, the vernacular and partial, the ephemeral and oblique, over the austere formalism and familiar dualities of high-modern planning. Cities’ streets and the “semantics” they coded and conveyed were scrutinized in this era by semioticians, Marxists, and poststructuralists, who emphasized, as the geographer Edward Soja has said, the “lateral” experience of space as well as the “vertical” experience of the \textit{durée}. Urban space was not just a function of time, but historicity, the accumulation of epochs and of seemingly unattached temporalities. What these theorists were expressing was what Foucault means when he identifies theirs as the “age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered,”\textsuperscript{125} and what Soja calls the 1960s’ “reassertion of space.”\textsuperscript{126} Jacobs’ insistence that “various tactics for capturing city visual order are concerned with bits and pieces in the city”

\textsuperscript{124} Jacobs, \textit{Death and Life}, 371.
\textsuperscript{125} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” \textit{Diacritics} 16 (Spring 1986), 22-27.
heeds as well the Marxist geographer and critic Henri Lefebvre’s call to “construct a spatial code” analogous to “the terms of everyday discourse.” Yet Lefebvre describes also, in his 1968 tract Right to the City, the weakness of such a code in the face of a coming political transformation: the city “is situated at an interface,” he writes, “half-way between what is called the near order (relations of the individuals in groups of variable size, more or less organized and structured and the relations of these groups among themselves), and the far order, that of society, regulated by large and powerful institutions.” The “far order,” or the aerial, long view, “projects itself into the practico-material reality and becomes visible by writing itself within this reality.” Lefebvre addresses his warning to the social movements that seemed to have arisen amid the spatial turns in urbanism and philosophy, warning them of the integration of local and embedded practices in the apparatus of power, a power “projected” into the spaces of difference that Jacobs and her contemporaries celebrate. Such diffuse configurations of power came to characterize the planning practices that followed the city’s 1975 bankruptcy. Especially in their familiar, “public-private” framing, these practices substituted for Jacobs’ belief in the capacity of people to forge their own relationships to city life a cynical form of appropriation — even as they ultimately failed to quell the generativity of difference.

THE LONG NEOLIBERAL TURN

As I have suggested, Moses’ extraordinary influence over New York’s “metropolitan arterial tapestry” could only have succeeded in the contexts of national industrialization and social democracy, wedded to and at times at odds with transnational civil society. As Caro observes, Moses’ projects were realized through his mastery of bureaucracy: between 1933 and 1969, Moses, who never won an election, served as the head of more than 11 committees, funding projects as

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127 Lefebvre, Production of Space, 16.
128 Lefebvre, “Right to the City,” 100-103.
New York’s liaison to Washington, which throughout the 1930s and again after World War II was eager to grease the city’s “growth machine.”

His city parks and many of his bridges and highways were authorized federally by Franklin Roosevelt’s depression-era Civil Works, Public Works, and Works Progress Administrations and in New York by the celebrated mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who appointed him Park Commissioner in 1933, facilitating what was a sometimes-hostile relationship with the Whitehouse. La Guardia self-consciously exemplified New York’s diversity and its spirited endurance during the depression and war years and conferred on Moses’ ambitious and expensive plans the air of urban-democratic, liberal idealism.

The planner was able to attain some measure of trust and support from lawmakers and the public through his identification with the national scale and, as I have suggested in my discussion of his relation to the international modernists, through his eminence in emergent global civil society and cosmopolitan culture. Moses’ projects and the dignified technocracy he oversaw were, in other words, indicative of the Keynesian, democratic-social politics. If projects by Roosevelt’s WPA artisans evoked the latencies of national power and identity under the banners of labor, commerce, state, and culture, so did they speak to a variety of cosmopolitan energies I have attempted to describe, even if (especially if) these works were erected within the crucible of US national industrialization.

It was a period of dramatic industrial and demographic growth, domestic prosperity, and emergent consumer culture after World War II that spurred Moses to initiate a series of “drastic surgical treatments” to New York, leveling thousands of homes to create a network of interwoven highways in the South Bronx, along the edges of Manhattan, and elsewhere. Yet throughout the

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130 Caro, 444-448.

postwar period, the civic idealism and cosmopolitan ethos that had once characterized his work —
the *Pax Americana* in a local but conspicuous incarnation — was increasingly lost on Moses, who
revealed himself to be dogmatic in his loyalty to whatever was most efficient, citing and repeating his
favorite axiom, the oddly quaint observation (borrowed, according to Berman, from Joseph Stalin):
“you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.”\(^{132}\) The extraordinarily unpopular Cross-Bronx
expressway, which displaced 60,000 people, took more than two decades to complete, its
construction spanning virtually the entire period between World War II and the city’s 1975
bankruptcy and costing nearly forty million dollars.\(^{133}\) It was during this period that Moses would
also oversee his massive slum clearance initiatives, stacking residents of the city’s poor and minority
neighborhoods — which were razed under title 1 — in isolated housing projects that matched from
the sky the geometric precision of high modernism.

According to Caro, these projects displaced some half-million people, disproportionality
people of color and the poor\(^{134}\) — but not without protest. The labor historian Kim Moody notes
the changing composition of New York’s “social democratic polity” in the period spanning Moses’
decline: “The city became the site of a web of class, race, gender, and anti-imperialist conflict,
replicating in new form the old fight over space, resources, and wealth,” writes Moody, who
considers New York the exemplary “node” for this panoply of transnational movements
— compliments and precursors to the city’s economic globalization. “If Robert Moses drastically
altered the built environment,” writes Moody, “migration, in and out, transformed who did the city’s
work and who filled its neighborhoods.”\(^{135}\) She describes a multivocal expression of New York’s
countercultures and the innumerable political movements that swelled throughout the era:

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\(^{132}\) Berman, 294.
\(^{133}\) Caro, 837-849.
\(^{134}\) Ibid, 20.
transnational activism against racism and empire, and for civil rights, decolonization, black and Puerto Rican nationalism; second wave feminism and gay liberation, which contested urban space and the very concept of the “public”; movements against the war in Vietnam and countless other neo-imperial endeavors in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, movements forged in relations of text and image between New York neighborhoods and diasporic publics throughout the world; the labor movement, which in New York launched successful transit, sanitation, teaching, and telephone operator strikes in the 1960s and early 1970s, and which was at the time being radically restructured and diversified thanks to the interventions of women and minorities, some but not all of whom would affiliate themselves with larger coalitions, and through the extraordinary growth of municipal unions like AFSCME, UFT, and the TWU. The city’s colleges and universities, including the City College of New York, historically an arena for radical expression and working class solidarity, were during this watershed epoch transformed by movements for racial justice, which flowered in 1969 when black and Puerto Rican students occupied CCNY’s campus, demanding open admission and affirmative action programs and renaming the college “Harlem University.” In addition, the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act — signed at the foot of the Statue of Liberty by Lyndon Johnson, who in his speech called the US a “nation of strangers” — admitted over the next several years hundreds of thousands of immigrants from South and Southeast Asia, many of whom, moving to New York, would alter significantly the city’s demographic, political, and cultural landscapes, to say nothing of its relationships to the growing fields of international finance and media.

All these political currents came together in what would be famously termed, in 1962, the

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136 Ibid, 3.
137 Kristen Gallagher, “Teaching Freire and Open Admissions” Radical Teacher 87 (Spring 2010).
decline of the “bourgeois public sphere.”\textsuperscript{139} This decline, as theorists such as Nancy Fraser have argued, would be better conceived as a series of upheavals and structural challenges to the concept of the public as it had been long conceived, and especially to the idea that a “single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publces.”\textsuperscript{140} An earlier conception of a unitary public sphere had been integral to the midcentury welfare state and to the kind of Liberal idealism forged in New York under La Guardia and his successors, and indeed by Moses, who seemed to exemplify public service even as he resisted the people, claiming, as he often did, that “the common man very often doesn’t know what’s in his own best interest.”\textsuperscript{141} What mattered to Moses, as Frances Perkins, labor secretary under Roosevelt, put it, was the public, “but not as people.” To Moses, the public was “a great amorphous mass; it needs to be bathed, it needs to be aired, it needs recreation, but not for personal reasons — just to make it a better public.”\textsuperscript{142} Yet it was the “pluralistic and cacophonous” public that would prove to finally overcome Moses’ singular vision. Its politics played out dramatically in the conflict over his proposal to build a freeway through Washington Square Park, as the historian Robert Fishman has noted, where housing and racial justice activists such as Shirley Hayes and Raymond Rubinow joined prominent public intellectuals like Mumford, William H. Whyte, Charles Abrams, and the anthropologist Margaret Meade in instantiating a full scale revolt against Moses.\textsuperscript{143} Led by the “bunch of mothers” who comprised the movement’s most vocal and sympathetic constituency, the Washington Square Committee, the group also included students at NYU and nearby colleges and representatives of the Italian-immigrant and working class constituency of Greenwich Village, led at the time by

\textsuperscript{140} Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” \textit{Social Text} 25/26 (1990), 62.
\textsuperscript{142} See Berman, 304.
assemblyman and “last of the [Tammany Hall] bosses” Carmine DeSapio, who agreed to fight Moses in the officialdom of city hall in an effort to retain his seat, which was being challenged by a young Ed Koch. Though Jacobs carried the banner and became the group’s spokesperson, it was indeed what planning historian Kenneth Jackson calls the era’s “shifting politics of locality, community, and other special interests” that accounted for the drama with which “Moses’ empire came crashing down.”

The significance of this and other moments was not lost on power. On the contrary, the social movements of the 1960s were written directly into a popular narrative of the city’s subsequent transformation. New York’s 1975 crisis was blamed on inefficient spending, over-borrowing, the ambitions of a bloated Keyensian welfare state, the novel affordances brought about by social movements, and the demands of a new radical urban politics. It was in the face of such contingencies that New York’s creditors declined to guarantee the city’s $1.5 billion debt. The creditors were joined by the US government, under Gerald Ford’s reformist “new federalism,” which refused to bail out what had by the 1970s become known as a violent, volatile, wasteful — in a word, “ungovernable” — city, delivering New York, its social services and public authorities, into bankruptcy. (“FORD TO CITY,” ran the famous headline in the New York Daily News, “DROP DEAD.”) The government, fearful of repercussions in the financial world and the effects of bankruptcy at the state and national economic tiers, did eventually relent, in November of 1975, by offering a number of conditional loans to be paid back within the fiscal quarter. But the reluctance Ford and others expressed was shared widely by elites, including Chase Manhattan Chairman (and brother of the governor) David Rockefeller, who worried that amid the social upheavals and collective demands of the 1960s, “the entire structure of our society is being

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challenged.”

Disdain for the successes of civil rights and other radical movements of the 1960s was written directly into law through the Financial Emergency Act of 1975 and indirectly through creditor-led oversight committees (one chaired by Rockefeller) established in the wake of the crisis — committees that continue, in the present, to review the city’s budget. Furloughs were issued, wages frozen, workers dismissed, and pensions cut. Social services were shuttered, transit fares were raised, and CUNY was closed and reopened, charging full tuition and stripped of resources and new infrastructure. The autonomy of municipal authorities and elected officials was greatly reduced, and municipal unions’ bargaining power checked in a variety of ways that may now — after several decades of neoliberal governing — seem altogether normal. Predictably, under these reforms, New York’s economic and racial inequality dramatically deepened: working class people of color suffered displacement and abandonment under regimes of policing, criminalization, and erasure — “revenge on behalf of an increasingly affluent Manhattan bourgeoisie tired of having to confront the effects of such devastation on their own doorsteps.”

The social repercussion of these “reforms” have continued to play out throughout the neoliberal period, in ways that I will explore below; but for the moment a vital prehistory must be relayed. For while the “victims were blamed” for the city’s bankruptcy, becoming targets for its revanchist policies, they had little to do with it. In fact, the turn to a postindustrial economy urged by New York’s crisis regime reflected a series of longstanding economic initiatives, such as the city’s 1929 Regional Plan, which had been drawn up by prominent land owners like the Rockefellers and put into motion over the intervening decades by Moses and the various public agencies and authorities

146 Quoted in Moody, 17.
147 Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 47-48.
148 Moody, 20-21: “The other potential actors, mainly the black and Latino communities and organized labor, failed to have decisive influence over the outcome because they failed even to contemplate, let alone undertake, the construction of a broad coalition based on some alternative resolution of the crisis more favorable to working-class New York.”
he oversaw. The plan promoted a bloated real estate economy and the consolidation of the New York’s financial class along highways that circumvented the city’s ruining urban core. Its authors foresaw the city’s deindustrialization and other neoliberal trends because they produced the conditions for such a transformation, exacerbating conflicts over resources, growing business districts that would accommodate financial and other white collar services (exemplified by the construction of the World Trade Center, which broke ground in 1965), moving industry to the outer boroughs and exurbs, and relocating the city’s port (the world’s busiest at the time) to New Jersey. No less than these well-documented changes, so did the influx of foreign investment to New York real estate in the 1960s and 70s, especially by Japanese venture capitalists, spur changes generally in keeping with novel investments and innovations of the neoliberal turn. Such changes were aided by rezoning (in 1964) of large parts of the city to accommodate the influx and belated returns on this capital, the effects of which are discussed with some detail in the next chapter. It is thus an outstanding irony in the extended history of the city’s neoliberal transformation that the very infrastructure Moses created was utilized by the enemies of the welfare state and of public expenditure, who capitalized on the flight of blue-collar jobs and the dereliction of industrial spaces as if these were organic and not premeditated circumstances. It was by fulfilling and not rebuking the promises of the late, unpopular Moses and other Keynesian bureaucrats that the crisis regime effected the will toward a postindustrial economy and attendant development initiatives.

As alterations in the funding, design, and use of urban space came to reflect the new economy’s world-wide circulation of goods, services, bodies and especially capital, such developments came also to reflect the thickening and entangling of industries and economies, the intensification of inequalities and meeting of global disparities in local space. The influx especially of

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150 Fitch, 37-46.
undocumented workers and the export of manufacturing and some services to underdeveloped regions in the global south is what Saskia Sassen explains, in her seminal work on the subject, makes the neoliberal city “global.” More than its centrality as a provider of financial services to the transnational capitalist class, the city becomes a global formation through its reflection of these interests in a system of reproductive inequalities, aided by the platitudes of neoliberal administrators and indeed the accommodations of developers and planners. It was Michael Bloomberg’s director of planning, Amanda Burden, who sought to “build like Moses with Jacobs in mind,” pursuing spectacular projects — malls, parks, complexes of high rises — and sustaining simultaneously the slow, molecular transformation of neighborhoods and streets through the comparative inconspicuousness of gentrification, the most violent and insidious renewal practice since Title 1. This strategy was aimed at attracting and sustaining multiple tiers of the global economy and fixing New York as its center. Though I discuss this multi-facing, and indeed globally-oriented development agenda in more depth in the next chapter, following the development of the city’s planning agendas through the 1980s and 90s and the administrations of Mayors Koch and Giuliani, I offer it here to frame the relationship between theories of built space and the neoliberal program — to frame, that is, the ever unfolding relationship between power and space.

151 Amanda Burden, “Jane Jacobs, Robert Moses, and City Planning Today,” Gotham Gazette, November 6, 2006: “Planning today is noisy, combative, iterative and reliant on community involvement. Any initiative that does not build consensus -- that is not shaped by the give-and-take of the public review process -- will be an inferior plan and, deservedly, will be voted down by the City Council, and die… Where we do, or some of us might, have nostalgia for Moses is in the realization that it is very very difficult to get very complex and expensive projects built that are critical to our city’s future such as the Second Avenue Subway, East Side Access, a one seat ride to the airport from Lower Manhattan and the #7 line…With the limitation of a two-term mayoralty, it is an enormous challenge to get great new open spaces such as Fresh Kills, the East River Waterfront in Lower Manhattan, the High Line and the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront approved, designed and built so that the initiative cannot be undone by subsequent administrations …] These are great projects that need the kind of sustained, focused leadership and a guaranteed funding stream that Robert Moses was genius — indeed diabolical — in securing.”
WHAT DOES NEOLIBERALISM LOOK LIKE?

Neoliberal globalization and the situatedness of its constitutive systems in and about New York’s built environment require the total planning model advocated by the Bloomberg administration, marking a continuity with the masterful purposefulness of Moses’ grand plans as well as the everyday ephemerality of Jacobs’ “bits and pieces.”\(^\text{152}\) In adopting these two urban visions, so have neoliberal planners and administrators delivered the legacies of Moses and Jacobs into a narrative of global neoliberal ascendency, naturalizing their union as a mark of the “post-political” state that is supposed to have evolved from a range of competing social theories and cultures. They are both reconfigured as managerial capitalists, despite their associations in the first place with New Deal liberalism and in the second with the social movements of the 1960s. The projects planned in their stead make no modernist promises to “solve” anything, especially not the growing disparity of rich and poor, which despite the pronouncements of Wall Street spoils “trickling down” has only increased throughout the decades. Rather, the growth of dozens of prominent new buildings throughout New York’s business districts, as well as the transformation of whole neighborhoods into self-conscious parodies of the “urban village,” seem merely to ridicule the failure of modernist aesthetics and dissident social movements alike to produce anything like the progress, efficiency, or political utopias so often promised.

The abstract spatiality of this two-fold impression, and indeed its ridicule of modernist aesthetics, first found expression in philosopher Michel de Certeau’s description of standing atop the north tower of the World Trade Center in 1973. Certeau follows Moses and Jacobs in conceiving of the city as a play of aerial dominance and lateral, semiotic “negotiation.”\(^\text{153}\) He suggests what Rem


\(^{153}\) Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 91-93.
Koolhaas has called the “delirious” modernisms of the global era, visualized by two divergent but complimentary axis, an overlarge *verticality*, evocative of those handful of elites who control the global economy, and the undefined *horizontality* of the economy itself, the global marketplace extending in every direction. Such a vision is characteristic of planners and indeed of the theorist, the economist, the cartographer — architects in their own right of neoliberal globalization. Yet Certeau praises as well the ability of the “common man” — who, he says, “squats now at the center of our scientific stages,” fighting back through a “tireless but quiet activity” and enjoins us to ask how the figure of the individual, lifted to such heights by an infrastructure of transnational corporatism, is to make sense of his remove and navigate life in contemporary (advanced capitalist) society.

Certeau describes this play of vertical and horizontal lines and fragments as cause for a cognitive grounding, an interruption of his Apollonian reverie. The mocking voice of the World Trade Center itself, which makes a promise by way of what by 1973 was already a parodic representation of modernity’s “scopic regimes,” speaks to him through a sign that hangs above the observation deck: “Why be down there when you can be up here?” Neoliberalism goads the common person to aspire to a global, aerial vantage-point, to a kind of triumphal correlation between subject-as-consumer and world-as-sign/commodity. The subject is imagined to know but also to deny the complicity inherent in the simultaneous urban visions available from the towers — which where at the time Certeau stood upon their observation decks widely loathed and nearly vacant, the plazas bare and hardly teeming with the melee he describes. Certeau’s generous enthusiasm for resistance amid consumer society poses the problem of his own complicity as well.

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155 Certeau, 5.
and invites a familiar, sobering Marxist rejoinder, voiced in this instance by Lefebvre: “the critic who conceives the city and urban reality as system of signs implicitly hands them over to consumption as integrally consumable: as exchange value in its pure state.” In postmodern New York, as Lefebvre suggests of contemporary cities in general, “one consumes signs as well as objects: signs of happiness, of satisfaction, of power, of wealth, of science, of technology,” which in turn “play a major integrative role in relation to other productive and organizing social activities.”

The unfixity of the correlation between subject and “image world” was for Lefebvre as well as Certeau an open game, which in the course of urban dialectics could — as it had fleetingly in May of 1968 — hope to resolve itself in revolutionary movement. Their thinking was in this regard characteristic of Jacobs’ suggestion that cities’ rhythms of change and renewal provided a constitutive vitality and generated in turn a purpose and meaning to urban semiology. Yet in the context of “postmodern” US cities, after the austerity measures imposed by crisis regimes like New York’s, this hope seemed dashed. Critics such as Jameson and Harvey, who follow Lefebvre in his concern for the cooptation of the everyday, remark especially upon the implausibility of authentic revolution such cities. Jameson sees in postmodern architecture’s self-conscious spatial features a parody of the street view and the aerial remove. Purporting to have been “disalienated” by the interventions of Jacobs and other critics of modernist planning, the buildings and cityscapes he describes (most notably the façade and lobby of the Bonaventure Hotel and its surroundings in downtown Los Angles) conceive a “reconquest of a sense of place” that compels an imaginary subject to “map and remap along the moments of a mobile, alternative trajectory,” only to find in every sign, artifact, event, and tableau mere “autoreferentiality,” a cannibalistic reflexivity that “tends to turn upon itself and designate its own cultural production as its content.”

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157 Lefebvre, “Levels of Reality and Analysis,” *Writing on Cities*, 115
perceives to be an aimless, mocking iteration of referents also characterizes dominant discourses of the global, which generate themselves through the patent strategies of reference and repetition, perfected and familiarized by urban visual forms. This referentiality also typifies postmodern space as it is described by Harvey, who like Jameson mourns the failed potentialities laden in the spatial theories of Jacobs and Lynch (and Lefebvre) and rues the “monotony” of modern cityscapes. The price of the postmodern is not one’s vulnerability before the apparent breakdown of modernist coherence and semiotic legibility, according to these critics. It is aimless mobility amidst the cooptation of that breakdown, what Jameson calls the subject’s “narrative stroll” through the imposition of a mocking and self-interested redundancy that has come to replace what now seem to be the paradoxically limited modernism of Moses and the quaint neighborliness of Jacobs.

Yet these well-known writings on postmodernism have and continue to be widely criticized. As the New York art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has noted, Jameson and Harvey tend to adhere to an acutely modernist subject position, suggested by their propensity for a “meta-theory” that would (in Harvey’s words) provide “some grander conception of what the city as a whole … is all about.”159 Deutsche notes that critics of postmodern culture naively “seek to close the gap between the subject and the object of representation,” claiming to have uncovered in their loyalty to modernist, Marxist epistemology — the expansive system seeded in and reduced to the commodity form or the very shape of dialectical history — “the absolute foundation of a social totality.”160 It is Jameson who argues that this “gap” would once have been reliably filled by class consciousness and ideologies of the orthodox Left, but that under postmodern conditions this central, modernist figuration (something like the “world-as-picture” or the “total subject”) becomes fragmented and confused. So, then, do the categories that could once be called upon reliably to foment social action

159 Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 77.
become confused. Class antagonism in particular, so legible under the iterations of capitalism that preceded the integrative workings of the neoliberal city, is complicated by new movements and struggles, by the “tireless activity” Certeau describes, which cannot be gauged through the scientific precision these later theorists project. Indeed, their longing for modernist coherence derives largely from the “narcissistic looking” characteristic of Western Man — or, more precisely, of western men. Deutsche suggests that it is these critics’ enthusiasm for modernist epistemology’s sense of masterful objectification that links their projects to those of the planners. In this last respect, Jacobs — whose organization of women in Greenwich Village was derided by Moses when he described the group as a “bunch of mothers” — serves not only as the exemplary feminist urbanist of her milieu, but as an intellectual precursor to the many advocates of hybridity, queerness, and other forms of difference associated with urban space.

I will return at many points throughout the rest of this dissertation to the dispute over postmodernism, suggesting that what critics miss when they deride the postmodern turn as just another “another masculine invention engineered to exclude women” is exactly its co-evolution with fields of difference, including feminism.¹⁶¹ Though this theoretical meeting ground has been discussed by many of the critics I have so far mentioned, its politics are expressed with clarity — and with an eye to the global scale — by Craig Owens, who writing contemporaneously with Deutsche called the debate over postmodernism “scandalously in-different.” Describing the master narratives that characterized so many of modernity’s programs, not least of which is Marxist materialism, Owens asks,

What function did these narratives play other than to legitimize Western man’s self-appointed mission of transforming the entire planet in his own image? And what form did

¹⁶¹ Owens, “The Discourse of Others,” Beyond Recognition, 171.
this mission take if not that of man’s placing of his stamp on everything that exists — that is, the transformation of the world into a representation, with man as its subject?\textsuperscript{162}

What is striking about Owens’ observation is not the suggestion that the masculinist, modernist subject position is in decline, or even that it is in a state of prolonged crisis, but the emergence of postmodernist critique as a simultaneous and persistent antagonist to the still-masterful discourses at play. The point is that we need not concern ourselves with announcing a grand and total theory of an epoch and culture that follows modernism, but suppose instead that various postmodern positions serve together and differently to problematize an ongoing tendency of modernity — its propensity for growth, for mastery and objectification, its obsession with the global scale and command (and here one can see why neoliberal and Marxist theses may seem to mirror one another) over the \textit{global} division of labor. We should, secondly, apprehend this novel problem — a composite of difference, ambivalence, hostility, and dissent — as a permanent antagonist to the triumphal rhetoric of the “new world order,” or the “end of history,” those teleological globalisms that Owens describes in their clearest, most assured contemporary forms.

Some will argue that neoliberal globalization is a postmodern form because it problematizes, and at times postdates, the national frame and indeed because it attenuates some of the structures characteristic of modernist politics, not least of which is the structure of class. However, if we follow Owens’ suggestion that modernism’s authority is “based on the universality modern aesthetics attributed to the \textit{forms} utilized for the representation of vision, over and above differences in content,” we are likely to find that what modernist and neoliberal epistemologies have most in common is the \textit{telos} of the global.\textsuperscript{163} The synthesis of parts that Moses conceived by snapping urban

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 175.
aberrations into a grid and setting them into motion on a plait of highways has become the perfect visual metaphor for the shared interests and intersecting mobilities that supposedly characterize the global market and that in their accumulation represent a renewal of the Heideggerian “world-as-picture.” In its monumentality, the global becomes the principal concern of art, commerce, education, media, and politics, to say nothing of the transnational infrastructures of finance and production. Its celebrants imagine the very concept to be the essential, the contemporary, and not merely the most handily referential, scale and space. The vertical and lateral forms of growth that characterize the aims of the neoliberal consensus are transformed, thus, into contemporary (urban) life’s principal abstraction, what’s been called variously a “non place,” an “immense parenthesis,” a “myth,” and as Jameson says a “untotalizable totality” — having missed the fact, evidently, that the totalities to which we could turn under modernism were themselves never truly “totalizable” but were fictions and inscriptions of the aspiring western subject. It is in every case the correlation between this subject and the “world” about her that appears, bringing back to light the question posed to Certeau atop the world trade center: “Why be down there when you can be up here?”

DIFFERENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY

The movement of living people in and out of the (only apparent) position of total subjectivity continues to characterize the most common and most stultifying form of global aesthetics. Today it is not architecture but digital mapping and positioning technologies that promise to proliferate access to the aerial view. These technologies come in the forms of handheld commodities that

165 Auge, Non-Places, 111.
167 Jameson, Cultures of Globalization, 2.
perform exaggerated simulations of the distant remove and employ them, overtly and not through a
critical appraisal, for the purposes of “navigation” and “positioning” — to show us, as the artist and
critic Laura Kurgan says, “where we are.” For Kurgan and other critics of “satellite planetarity,”
the ubiquity of digital mapping and global information systems establishes an increasingly familiar
interface characterized by supposed ease of access. The global, marked by satellite realism and even
in the diagrammatic methods that have come into popularity in literary and art historical fields, as a
calculable and visible reality, is available “to almost anyone” in the form of “an all-seeing image.”
So does it accompany, through the apparent magic of global positioning, the semiotics of the street.
Despite the unfixed situatedness of our every move, each of us carries an abstracted diagram of
totality and a marker, as well, of global infrastructure. While these technologies might seem only to
further exaggerate the play of vertical and horizontal, of aerial and immediate — which, as I have
suggested has marked versions of the modernist, neoliberal, postmodern, and global visions of
urban space — they disclose as well through their emphasis of infrastructure the relationships that
have always linked these disparate scopes. The play between the grid and the screen here enables a
relation between subject and supposed totality to be reconceived along the moments of an
unfinished, ever unfolding craftwork, a kind of atomistic ontology of scale that differs from subject
to subject and in the space between them. We are made aware, thus, of our own individual
relatedness to situated spaces and routed experiences, and the relatedness of these to an outsized
“something else” — a shared externality that may appear in the forms of connections or plans or
paradigms, but may also (and, perhaps principally) appear as a ubiquitous process of permanent
differentiation. A renewed emphasis on difference and its urban frictions — the meetings of

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different bodies, different stories, different communities amid the constant unraveling of Jacobs’
urban scene — may thus be called upon, today, to antagonize the endlessly rational grid works and
networks of neoliberal globalization. It is not to Jacobs, criticizing the total modernisms of Moses
and Corbusier, nor to Deutsche and Owens, quarrelling with the totalities of Marxist epistemologies,
that we should turn, but to critics who protest the discourse of globalization and the prop
epistemologies this discourse has conceived and engendered — but who nevertheless admit the
global problematic to be one of supreme salience, if for no other reason than its prescriptive
redundancy in every scholarly, political, and urban discourse.

Among those interventionists to whom I refer is Gayatri Spivak, whose critique of what she
considers to be the prop epistemology of the global is voiced in a pithy rejoinder to the cult of
Geographic Information Systems (GIS): “The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.”
Spivak is concerned by the ease with which the “gridwork of electronic capital” has shaped
apprehensions of what the world is today — an “abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes,
cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of
GIS” — and what, therefore, the world is not. Because we continue through still more iterations of
the “world-as-picture” (and -as-photograph, -as-composite), we remain loyal to a conception of
globalization that treats its principal referent — the planet — as a separate terrain, the essential other,
a “species of alterity” that “we inhabit on loan.” The planet is differentiated discursively from
“political space,” yet as Spivak suggests the synthetic character of this division comes to the fore as a
necessary impossibility merely by way of making a linguistic alteration, what Spivak calls her
“proposal” for “the planet to overwrite the global”: She writes, “When I invoke the planet, I think
of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition. [...] If we imagine
ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global
entities, alterity remains underived from us.” What is transgressive about this provocation is not its refusal to engage the global as such, but its attempt to transpose the very relation of self and other into a doctrine of “same difference.”

Though Spivak’s program has been criticized for being, in essence, a therapeutic reframing of the global problematic — a theory of “whatever,” as Djelal Kadir says of Spivak’s “underived alterity” — its resonance in the context of the global city should not be ignored. Supplemented by philosophical inquiries into coexistence by the aesthetic-social philosophy of Nancy, with recourse to the deceptively simple credos of Jacobs, Spivak’s proclamation of same difference becomes in cities such as New York an inquiry into the making of meaning in the immediacy of built space and the intimacies of the crowd. Like the difference inherent in Jacob’s unraveling urban scene, Spivak’s theory prefers (inherently textual) simultaneities and discontinuities to any total vision and certainly to the ubiquitous prescriptions for living, thinking, reading, or understanding in the global age. It is indeed her inquiry into the possibility of a universal alterity — not as a constitutive outside but as immediate basis paradoxically made by the overbearing unities of the global — that has compelled Spivak for several decades, notably in the aftermath of the 1975 neoliberal turn in New York. Spivak

170 Spivak, Death of a Discipline (New York: Columbia, 2003), 72.
171 Kadir, “Comp Lit in the Age of Terrorism,” in Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization, ed. Haun Sussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 70-71: “what Spivak overlooks is that the belatedness of staking comparative literature's claim to a planet whose every inch is already platted on universal global positioning systems, whose interplanetary space is thoroughly weaponized, and whose planetarity, rather than ‘undivided “nature” space,’ is already naturalized into marshal containment. Any elliptical tangents that would be drawn by comparative literature, with or without the cooperation of area studies, could no longer have any chance of being tangential, but would inexorably prove to be segments of ubiquitous circumscriptions with opportunistically shifting centers and expedient circumferences. Any emancipatory agency we might exercise as comparatists, then, may be no more than symptomatic illusion of a potently determined cultural indeterminacy or discursive undecidability. Ours may be little more than the calculated freedom accorded to radical fractures and delusionary isolates in free-floating orbits than justly suspect ether own putative autonomy but cannot muster the capability to move beyond isolation, silence, or the ‘cool’ of whatever.”
has brought to the foreground continually the figure of the metropolitan but simultaneously and paradigmatically subaltern intellectual, a living site of urban and global contradiction, her multi-, trans-, and non-nationality a hostile corollary to the global precisely because such a subject is refused access to totality’s remove and recourse to its power. Spivak’s emphasis on this figure is in the same tradition as the “subaltern counterpublics” described by Nancy Faser to upset the tidy consensus machines of the midcentury bourgeois public sphere and indeed as Deutsch’s feminist critique of Marxist urbanism. However, it differs in its emphasis on the multiple binds and contradictions that characterize the philosophical aspirations of such a discourse.

It is by way of this situated and contradictory subject-making that Spivak could mount a critique of totality in the context of New York’s neoliberalization and its emergence as one of the North’s most diverse and inequitable power centers, the exemplary global city: “…it may be pointed out that, whereas Salomon Brothers, thanks to computers, ‘earned about $2 million for … 15 minutes of work,’ the entire economic text would not be what it is if it could not write itself as a palimpsest upon another text where a woman in Sri Lanka has to work 2,287 minutes to buy a t-shirt.” Spivak’s seemingly offhand remark serves as an injunction to write the Other into the dominant but unacknowledged bias of critical discourse as the very destabilizing essence of the always-already total critical subject. In this instance, her remark comes as a demand to recognize the interpellation of the margins in a global division of labor that the visual and semiotic regimes of neoliberalism would prefer not to acknowledge. Indeed, the two of Spivak’s invocations I have mentioned — the Salomon Brothers banker and the Sri Lankan laborer whose presence speaks with irony the total scale of imbrication, the planet composed by alterity overwriting and overriding the unitary global myth — concern the impressions left by one text (one narrative, one account) on

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another. They adopt the palimpsests so often evoked to metaphorize the layered city of simultaneities and contradictions, which, in a critique of global capitalism, may take the form of the developed north’s limitless but undisclosed pairings with an extreme and abject alterity — pairings that are available to witness in any one global city themselves, but which direct us toward the problem of a planetary scale (Manhattan and Sri Lanka and divisions within these spaces) when culled self-consciously by critics like Spivak.

The concept of “same difference” is voiced in a more explicit tenor by Nancy, for whom even the localist and most intimate of relations is an opening into a complex of relationality that creates meaning through and despite the differences between individuals (or, in Nancy, singularities). Nancy calls this configuration of meaning the “creation of a world,” forged by “being-together,” “being-in-common,” and “being-with,” pluralities that make meaning by laying bare and attempting — if failing — to transgress the essential difference between each singularity: “From one singular to another,” he says, “there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up.” This contiguity is rather like the terms of contact — mutual regard and mutual limits — prescribed by Jacobs, but abstracted to a universal if endlessly differentiated scale: “All of being,” Nancy tells us, is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation … If “to come into contact” is to begin to take sense of one another, then this “coming” penetrates nothing; there is no immediate and mediating “milieu.” Meaning is not a milieu in which we are immersed.

This oscillation between the singular and the plural is for Nancy central to the capacities of democratic imagination, rebuffing the regimes of meaning in any modern context. For Nancy, it is

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174 Ibid.
the appearance of the global in its reduced visual form — viewed from an Apollonian remove, covered with a dense and expansive urban patchwork characterized by strained human relationships and a loss of hope in human progress — that makes the creation of this ambivalent, interrelational worldliness possible. Especially in the era of satellite technologies of mapping and surveillance, we are required to adopt what the art historian John Paul Ricco says in his reading of Nancy is the “staging and exhibition of a never-ending exposure to being as always being with — to existence as always co-existence.” There is, as Ricco says, “no world outside of, or above, or beyond this world, the one that is ours as the place — the there — of us.”

Such a world, without an outside, becomes an answer to those philosophers who imagine an articulable object (the globe) and who figure themselves as its distant subjects. Theirs is the posture of what Nancy calls the “subject-of-the-world,” the cosmothermos, whose celestial vantage point is a metaphor for those “onto-theological” concepts that govern total representations of the “world,” of the “earth,” and of the “global.” If these representations include theology, modernity, and the aimless ideology of globalization, they are necessarily evoked, held in abeyance, by discourses of disavowal: the “death of god,” the “decline of modernism,” the refusal to accommodate a “culture of technics.” These are not a separate world, more authentic than the world of satellite mapping and the new imperialism. They form the “ground” upon which is conceived — in reaction, in insurrection — a different kind of world.

This is a world necessarily difficult to express because, as Spivak and others have noted, contemporary epistemologies brought to light in political and social discourse are overdetermined by the world as (first) modernist and (second) neoliberal construction: Nancy’s is a world still “dependent on the gaze of the subject of the world.” It is not an alternative to globalization, as such, but springs from the purchase of the global and its self-fulfilling promise: to turn the world into an

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175 Nancy, Globalization, 33.
uneven landscape of ruin. Nor is it a restaging of the world as metonym for an abstract totality. Nor a critique of totality per se, as in Deutsche’s remarks on Harvey. It is rather an oblique critical engagement, the reframed world that Spivak speaks by way of her injunction to “overwrite.” The universalizing and generalizing compulsions of the global are by way of this kind of oblique “ab-use” transformed into a horizon for what the critic of postcolonial urbanity Achille Mbembe calls, following Nancy, and essentially echoing Spivak’s underivation: for Mbembe, “we are heirs to the whole world ... the world is in creation, as are we too.”176 The very creation of the world, of “we” and of our “legacy,” which as Mbembe says, “still remain to be created,” is based on the sharing of difference and not its erasure. There remains the essential, constitutive difference between and among the singularities and the socialites that signify, even the blandest of which forges the very meaning of the plural.

NEIGHBORS

The qualities of the oblique, reframed, and imaginary worlds (constructions, too) I have mobilized in this chapter leave in relief exactly the kinds of discontinuities — “bits and pieces” — that Jacobs in her sanity preferred not to smooth. In their constitutive openings, their essential limitlessness and the impossibility of total representation, the cross- and counter-globalisms voiced by Nancy and Spivak do not seek to create confusion or uncertainty or to provoke the generative disorientations associated with the proponents of postmodern geographies. They exist, instead, to situate the critical self not as a critic but as an anonymous participant. Like Jacobs’ their ideas recognize the essential functions of friction, one of which is to brace the even partial and imaginary self against the encroachment of the “world,” whether it takes the forms of public works, highways that tear

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176 Mbembe, Sortir de la grande nuit, 70.
through neighborhoods with the flourish of a planner’s hand, the public sphere as a bourgeois unity, or the pernicious discourse of global interconnectedness. Jacobs’ concern over these compulsory terms is of course what prompts her to question our loyalty as urban and worldly (or let us say planetary) readers to iterations of the aerial and the cartographic. For, though in Jacobs’ formulation the city contrives spatial and visual practices of locating and directing oneself, it is hardly her argument that the qualities of urban life that allow us to navigate and to know something of our cities should be lateralized, their energies diffused, their definitive vitalities and diversities blurred by the metropolitan solipsism of the worldly subject, held captive by the shallow interfaces of the screen.

We should adopt Jacobs’ ethic of manifold alterities, born of the difference between neighbors, so that we may create and not merely inhabit the world. I have so far suggested that — yes — to apprehend the city in the ways proposed by Jacobs is to model a refusal of those most contingent and overbearing of modifiers: “neoliberal,” “global,” and so on. Consider these lines from Nancy:

I don’t know [about in] Manhattan … but I think that the “nearest” is absolutely not the nearest in any sense of neighborhood, nor the nearest by place, nor the nearest by taste, nor the nearest according to my desire, etc. The nearest is everybody, to the extent that everybody shares with me the same impossibility of being or becoming the fixed enunciation of a certain position.177

It is the difference spoken, as a “gap,” by critics of the aimless geographies of globalization, of “postmodern” cities, which leave a familiar impression: the walker in the city, the solitude of the mob, Séparés, on est ensemble, “apart we are together.”178 It is the difference that poses some texture to

177 Nancy, Avital Ronell, and Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Love and Community: A Round-Table Discussion,” European Graduate School, August 2011.
178 This is Rancière’s adoption of a line by Malarmay, which he uses to mark a version of the singular-plural. See Emancipated Spectator, 51.
the existential journey of each earthy singularity in Nancy’s enigmatic imperative “to fill the emptiness with emptiness and thus to share it.” Undisclosed, the ethic already operates throughout the spaces of global modernity, making of us all neighbors.

Neighbors are not the same as friends. In reality (and Jacobs knew this well) the neighborhood scale and its codes of ambivalent belonging did not manage to quell the tide of “consensual” development, whether it adopted vocabularies of “progress,” of “togetherness,” or of “individualism.” We should not, turning to these questions, abandon the lessons of Jacobs or her interlocutors. We must bear these in mind, but do so with caution, so weary must we be of the ways these very concepts are bought and sold to us — to say nothing of the way that Jacobs herself has become (very much against her wishes) the godmother of the “urban village” and its mythologies of change. After the conflict of Moses and Jacobs, as I have suggested already, still more regimes of displacement have come to characterize power in New York. These appear in the forms of the belligerent mayor administrations associated with neoliberalism (Koch, Giuliani) and the zealous builders and developers who have — in their need to grow, to accumulate, and to reinvest — co-opted the very relationalities of the street. The (privatized) development regime has done this in an effort to unify not just the “plans” of people, but their tastes and sensibilities, their expectations, identifications, and demands, the very scripts they speak. This is the story I tell next, describing the very redundancy of gentrification, and terming it (after Jacobs) the “aesthetic consensus.”
SAME OLD SHIT:

BASQUIAT AGAINST THE AESTHETIC CONSENSUS

“I’d rather have a Jean-Michel than a Cy Twombly. I do not live in the classical city. My neighborhood is unsafe. Also, I want my home to look like a pile of junk to burglars.”

So concludes “The Radiant Child,” an essay that sanctified graffiti artist and painter Jean-Michel Basquiat as the unexpected visionary of the 1980s. Written by the poet and critic René Ricard and published in a 1981 edition of Artforum, the essay became something of a manifesto for New York’s Downtown art scene, confirming the salience of the urban, the derelict, the ruined, the commodified, and the Other for a generation of artists who lived and worked on Manhattan’s rapidly gentrifying Lower East Side. Ricard, one of several critics who thumped for the neighborhood unrelentingly, promoted a stable of young artists to represent the scene’s conspicuous forms of difference, to walk the cusps of race and nationality, class, sexuality, politics and style, which seemed in their intersections to epitomize urban and aesthetic ideals. By all accounts, Basquiat resented being caricatured as an immigrant artist at odds with his milieu, a “Madison Avenue Primitive” whose idiosyncrasies were cast against the antiseptic minimalism of the New York art world. Yet the clichés and expectations that attended the artist and his reputation proved so lucrative to the city’s culture industries that in the decades since Basquiat’s 1988 death they have been integrated seamlessly into New York’s economic and administrative schemes. The commodification of difference, the transformation of diversity into an aesthetics of authenticity, and

the metaphor of the “radiant child” — encumbered by poverty but, as Ricard says, raising himself up “from the block, from the subway ... to the relative safety and hygiene of the gallery” — have become central to the way urban cultures and geographies are imagined and remade, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block.

My concerns in this chapter are the conditions that enabled the coming into being of a figure such as Basquiat and efforts made by the artist and others to arrest such conditions, to transform them or deny them through wry critique and ironic appropriation. I am referring both to the material conditions characteristic of Basquiat’s New York — the growing disparity between rich and poor, an example among many — and a series of epistemological conditions as well, structures of knowledge fixed by iterations of the modern and cast in the aesthetic and geographic continuities between European imperialism and the urban process known as gentrification. Both in its exemplary Lower East Side context and throughout its transformation into the dominant renewal strategy for cities of the metropolitan north, gentrification has proceeded primarily through the proliferation of discourses that refer to the continuities I describe. These discourses, which I discuss throughout this chapter, emphasize a series of familiar imperial themes: the production of the primitive and the modern and the performance of their intimacies; pedagogies of acculturation and indoctrination; the confusion of personal and cultural development; the suppression and appropriation of difference; the naturalization of displacement; recourse to a stark, empiricist rationale in the face of an irrational transcultural circuitry. I introduce the relationship between imperialism and gentrification very much aware of the tendency, criticized by both geographers and literary critics, \(^{181}\) to find in urban diversity

a handy metaphor, a miniature, for post- and neo- colonial experience. However, as I suggested in my invocation of the colonial encounter, the imposition of such a metaphor or historical narrative in present circumstances can prove indeed to be a prescriptive act. Especially journalistic paens like Ricard’s, which accentuate the most obvious juxtapositions and hybridities of gentrifying neighborhoods, write the imperial metaphor into built space. They establish the referents and produce the desires generative of what Neil Smith calls, in his celebrated account of gentrification on the Lower East Side, the “new urban frontier.” Ricard and others participated in the “unprecedented commodification of art” and the “aestheticization of culture and politics” so characteristic of the frontier’s sustaining allure. So did Basquiat participate. All too happy to parade in costume through the art world’s appropriative mise-en-scène, the artist knew well how and when and to whom he should employ the themes I’ve described. But as I suggest throughout this chapter, Basquiat knew also how to antagonize these themes and their authors, seeing with prescience the reproductive dynamics of the frontier, the banality of the city’s cultures of discourse, and the complicity of artists and their publics.

Though I follow Smith in my concern for the integration of art and real estate development under the influence of neoliberal urbanism, I am interested principally in the aesthetic problems this

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182 Smith, *New Urban Frontier*, 19: “Graffiti came off the trains and into the galleries, while the most outrageous punk and new-wave styles moved rapidly from the streets to full-page advertisements in the New York Times. The press began sporting stories about the opulence of the new art scene — at least for some: Don’t let the poverty of the Lower East Side fool you, was the message; this generation of young artists gets by with American Express Goldcards […] The simultaneous disavowal of social and political context and dependence on the cultural establishment placed avant-garde artists in a sharply contradictory position. They came to function as ‘broker’ between the culture industry and the majority of still-aspiring artists. Lower East Side Galleries Played the pivotal role: they provided the meeting pace for grassroots ambition and the talent and establishment money […] Representing and patronizing the neighborhood as a cultural mecca, the culture industry attracted tourists, consumers, gallery gazers, art patrons, potential immigrants — all fueling gentrification. Not all artists so readily attach themselves to the culture establishment, of course, and not a significant artists’ opposition survived the commodification and price escalation that boosted the neighborhood’s twin industries of the 1980s.”
integration poses, in examining the conceptual boundaries, that is, of what Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan call provocatively in 1984 the “fine art of gentrification.” Neighbhhoods such as the Lower East Side in the 1980s and Williamsburg, Brooklyn in the 1990s and 2000s were during these decades transformed visually and commercially, but were best defined by participatory aesthetic practices that do not appear in built space; the stylistic features remarked upon in most of the literature — the “allure” of the “raw” as Smith suggests or of “grit” as the sociologist Sharon Zukin says in her recent work on Williamsburg — serve primarily to sanction a set of limited aesthetic expectations, the terms by which “culture” and “art” do or do not come into consciousness and the way everyday aesthetic experiences occur and are permitted to be imagined, represented, and criticized. The “urban frontier” is thus not only a metaphor for the immediacy of difference amid the vibrancy of the new and narrow urban scene, but a calculated method of making difference that proceeds through and by a predetermined set of aesthetic relations to cultural forms and to the worldliness they signify. The urban frontier is curatorial, sanctioning the terms and conditions of aesthetic experience. It is grounded in a series of modernist epistemologies that emphasize the civilizing effects of advancement and posit an immutable, universal aspiration to contemporaneity — the aspiration to “catch up” or (in art speak) to “join the conversation.” The compulsory, internalized orientation I describe accounts for the “evolution” of neighborhoods whose residents become suddenly the objects of praise in public discourse, naturalizing modernity’s permanent horizons — progress and development.

Today, a number of social crises from the 1980s have been thematized by city administrators in order establish a fantastic narrative of economic development and social progress. The “frontier

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184 Zukin, Naked City, 53.
“myth” has throughout this process been called upon to serve as the basis for a pragmatic and palatable accord between the city’s most powerful interests, what I am calling neoliberalism’s aesthetic consensus. This is a model of neoliberal (“managerial” or “post-political”) governing popularized by the Bloomberg administration with self-conscious reference to the city’s dynamic “new” neighborhoods, where artists, philanthropists, academics, and entrepreneurs are assembled by administrators at once to cultivate terrain for private development and to curate the optics of inequality. The aim of this consensus is to make difference, the discontinuities and antagonisms characteristic of cities, into a marketable, “authentic” urban style, and, simultaneously, to marshal developmental schemes through reference to this difference, these optics, this narrative — through reference, in short, to the urban frontier and all its imperial attachments. As I argue, this is the basic process by which widely criticized theories of the “creative class” come to characterize the rhetoric of mayors such as Michael Bloomberg, who in describing the gentrification of Williamsburg discusses especially the contributions of young people and of artists, “our great pioneers.”185 In this way, the aesthetic consensus also makes a profound impression on the emerging, “well-adjusted,” neoliberal subject, who suffers the internalization of these themes through obligatory familiarization with frontier scripts and aesthetic norms and, jointly, through participation in one or another discourse of progress. The conflation of personal growth and urban development expressed by Bloomberg refers rather conspicuously what critic Craig Owens calls with derision “puerilism,” the highly marketable symptom of an avant-garde that is also in essence an “enfant-garde,”186 ordained to embody, through its infantile resistance to the redundancies of the art world — a resistance that in the context of the Lower East Side was often confused with cultural hybridity or the antagonisms of class and race — all the compromises of the frontier. So many efforts to complicate or stymie the

186 Craig Owens, “The Problem With Puerilism,” Beyond Recognition, 265.
production of a homogenized neoliberal subjectivity, or to disrupt an art community organized around the commodification of difference, are thus mired in the circularity of imperial (and urban-developmental) cliché: the prescriptive redundancy of the colonial encounter.

Basquiat, despite being so greatly identified the puerilism, may have antagonized its redundancy best. In the late 1970s, before being named the “Radiant Child,” Basquiat and his friend and classmate Al Diaz took to spraying the tag “SAMO” — a slant abbreviation for “Same Old Shit” — on the walls of gentrifying neighborhoods: “SAMO © FOR THE SO-CALLED AVANT-GARDE”; “SAMO © AS A RESULT OF OVEREXPOSURE”; “SAMO © IS DEAD.” The last of these, written in 1980, served at the time to signify a familiar art world process — the conscription of the artist in his own commodification — and by 1988 to suggest that Basquiat was indeed the market’s latest and best-known victim. But in the present, as the tag re-appears on the corrugated iron gates of boutiques and restaurants in gentrifying outer-borough neighborhoods such as Bushwick and Bedford Stuyvesant — neighborhoods that shape and are shaped by the contemporary performances of radical culture and racial difference — it serves another purpose altogether. Here, “SAMO” invites a collaborative reframing of gentrification’s history. It brings into a space of conflict and ambivalence all the compromises and tragedies, all the predictabilities and banalities, we express when we speak of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The reappearance of “SAMO,” in other words, exposes the themes I have mentioned to an aesthetic complex of relationality, a series of interfaces that both bring together and divide artists, publics, and subjects — subjects revealed in their relation to these works to live with and not merely under the neoliberal aesthetic consensus. Through this relational capacity, the tags I describe, both in their original context and in the form of homage, scrutinize the paradoxical uncertainty of the “writing on the wall” and imagine the effect of so much writing to be uncertain, indeterminate, multiple, unfixed, and open-ended.

I make this observation with somewhat ambitious intentions in mind. It seems to me that
those practices, encounters, and experiences lately collected under the (overlarge) banners of “participation,” “social practice,” and “relational aesthetics” bear special import in the context of gentrifying neighborhoods. The practices of participation and active witness are generated by the subtle works of homage I mention — buried such works they are amid the miasma of contradictions that characterize urban space but resonant nevertheless with a host of affects, memories, desires, refusals, and dreams. As diverse proponents of these aesthetic modes have noted, such practices generate difference not only by way of a predetermined narrative — here a narrative of progress and rationale — but as an emergent and indeed relational (this is, multiply-articulated and mutually-constitutive) antagonism between an object and its viewer(s). This relational play, especially when staged in urban space, may momentarily ruin the agreements and neutralities that comprise the aesthetic consensus, positing in their place what the critical theorist Jacques Rancière has called an aesthetics of dissensus, “an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind an appearance nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation.” This revelatory notion of aesthetics-as-politics seeks not only to subvert the undisclosed power of consensus, but also to upset what is by now a tired but enduring division between cultural and material critique. It evokes a critical mode, in other words, that does not deny the influence of economy in urban art worlds, but attempts to reframe this relationship by illuminating — and, by illuminating, inviting the transformation of — the processes by which economy comes to dominate all other ways of “making sense.”

THE RADIANT CHILD

Ricard’s essay is notable not just because it introduced an international art public to Basquiat, but

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187 Rancière, Emancipated Spectator, 48.
because it proposes a model for artistic maturation suited to the gentrifying city: Ricard urges artists to transform the moral contradictions of making art — of commodifying ethnicity in one case, the aesthetics of the street in another — into a personal brand, a trademark, and in so doing to transform their relevance or purchase in the worlds of high art and culture into a metaphor for social liberation. In this model, it is the radiance of youth that compels artists, stumbling through prolonged adolescence on the brink of erasure: “Those teenage prophets are lost in the mists of their own maturity,” Ricard says of graffiti artists whose subway tags set the Downtown scene in motion. And this loss is “reminiscent of the way the origin of the blues is lost, the simple expression of the individual followed much later by full-scale commercial exploitation.”188 Fear of exploitation, of being “ripped off” and “selling out” antagonizes artists and compels Ricard’s decisive if cynical ultimatum: the “teenage prophets” he describes may balk in the face of compromise, fearful of being used, and disappear altogether into the “mists of their maturity.”189 Or, like Basquiat and Keith Haring — the gay graffiti artist whose iconic line drawing of a child radiating energy was the provenance of the essay’s title — these taggers may transform their radiant youth into public and conspicuous brands, transgressing anxieties about selling out by way of professional aspiration: “to support oneself by the work is the absolute distinction between the amateur and the pro.” It is the ambition to become “a pro,” the use of “one’s sheer self as the medium,” that enables an artist’s flight from streets “to the Mudd, to the relative safety and hygiene of the gallery.”190

Ricard, who was a painter in his own right and a fixture in the downtown gay and club scenes — photographed by Bowery doyen Nan Goldin in 1990 smoking crack cocaine — recognizes the significance of place for the alternative, avant-garde, and queer communities,

188 Ricard, The Radiant Child.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
communities of artists and critics, too. He mentions TriBeCa’s Mudd Club, for example, where performers from multiple subcultures could be found collaborating in a decadent aesthetics of revolt. 191 Though Mudd was known as a showcase for the decade’s subcultures and scenes — and indeed as an early venue for Basquiat’s band Grey — it was also affiliated by way of its curator Diego Cortez with New York Collaborative Projects (Colab) and the Lower East Side’s community art space ABC No Rio, both of which were established in response to the urban renewal practices of the 1970s and 80s. Yet, Ricard makes no critique of gentrification. He was one of several New York critics known, on the contrary, for “celebrat[ing] the scene with an inflated and aggressive rhetoric of ‘liberation,’ ‘renewal,’ and ‘ecstasy’” 192 and figuring artists as an army of the spectacle: “I want my soldiers, I mean artists, to be young and strong, with tireless energy performing impossible feats of cunning and bravura.” 193 It may be no surprise that the artists in Ricard’s essay — Basquiat and Haring, and others who took part in Colab’s groundbreaking 1980 Times Square Show — would become ciphers of authenticity because of their derisive play on what by then were widely perceived to be tiresome pretentions of the 1970s art market. Basquiat in particular adored laying bare the decadence of the gallery scene’s “white wine, white walls, and white people,” 194 and doing so through the iconography of the street and the logic of the brand:

In one painting there is even a © copyright sign with a date in impossible Roman numerals directly under the crown. We can now say he copyrighted the crown … So the invention isn’t important; it’s the patent, the transition from the public sector into the private, the monopolizing personal usurpation of a public utility, of prior art; no matter who owned it

194 This description from Fab Five Freddy, quoted in the documentary Radiant Child (2010), Dir. Tamra Davis.
It should not surprise us that this individualizing, capitalizing process of subjectivization would become a hallmark of the artist of color in the age of million dollar markets. As bell hooks explains succinctly, “fame, symbolized by the crown, is offered as the only possible path to subjectivity for the black male artist ... You either enter the phallocentric battlefield of representation and play the game or you are doomed to exist outside history.” The crown symbolizes the commodified power of the streets as markers of suspect difference, of slow lag, arrested development, a past that must be subtly suppressed or guilelessly performed if it is to reside inconspicuously (or ornamentally) in the art world.

These themes coalesce around the idea of authenticity, a concept that will appear throughout this chapter to mark (and at times to efface) the contradictions and myths that characterize gentrifying neighborhoods and their commodification of diversity, radical politics, class conflict, and violence. In Ricard’s formulation, the mark of authenticity emerges through the intimate relationship between the artist and the poor, who “respect” him because he has “circumvented the need to exert the body, […] to live off what appears to be the simplest bodily act.” The deceptive simplicity of this gesture — to live in and through one’s bodily practice — matches the innate, unmediated perception of art ascribed to working class and the poor. But it fails to reconcile the technologies of the brand, the niche, and the cliché (the market, in a word) that had begun by the 1980s to alter the city’s built environment and inveigle artists and publics alike. It is worth

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195 Ricard, “Radiant Child.”
197 Though I develop this theme by way of Ricard’s essay, it has also been discussed in similar contexts by Zukin in *Naked City* and Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *Authenticity* *TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand-Culture* (NYU, 2012).
198 Ricard goes on: “This is a basic class distinction in the perception of art where a picture your son did in jail hangs on your wall as a proof that beauty is possible even in the most wretched; that someone who can make a beautiful thing can’t be all bad; and that beauty has an ability to lift people
considering the degree to which the performance of authenticity has animated urban environments, especially as a token of the narcissism obliged by life among New York’s competitive bourgeoisie and the praise of unfettered, multicultural flows indicative of globalization. The self-possessed admission with which Ricard closes — “I want my home to look like a pile of junk” — suggests with irony the social capital of a certain type of the authenticity: intimacy with an Other who must in this formulation remain forever other, “subliterate,” primal, distant.

Even in shrewd critiques by writers who antagonize the racial politics of the art world, Basquiat’s work is most often taken as a screen onto which are projected the imperatives of development, the compromises of exploitation, and the often futile gestures termed “resistance.” In addition to Ricard’s piece one could point to popular journalistic accounts like Greg Tate’s well known rejoinder to the art world in the Village Voice, which substituted for the ethereal “radiance” of Ricard’s bohemian child the reflexive anguish of Langston Hughes’ “Genius Child,” arguing that Basquiat was a “fly in the buttermilk” of New York’s lily-white art world; fellow artist Julian Schnabel’s saccharine biopic Basquiat (1996), which ends with a parable about “a little prince with a magic crown” imprisoned by an unseen villain and “smashing his crown against the bars” of his cell; or even, most recently, rapper and producer Jay-Z’s identification with the artist — “It ain’t hard to tell, I’m the new Jean Michel / Surrounded by Warhols, my whole team ball / Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel.” By the end of the 1980s and Basquiat’s premature death, of a heroin overdose at age 27 in 1988, he was considered one of the world’s leading contemporary artists. His paintings

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as a Vermeer copy done in a tenement is surely the same as the greatest mural by some MFA. An object of art is an honest way of making a living, and this is much a different idea from the fancier notion that art is a scam and a ripoff. The bourgeoisie have, after all, made it a scam. But you could never explain to someone who uses God’s gift to enslave that you have used God’s gift to be free.”

were dubbed “neo-expressionist” and compared to works by Jean Dubuffet, Cy Twombly, and Jasper Johns. He appeared on the cover of all the weekly magazines. He became a protégé of Andy Warhol and dated Madonna. His paintings fetched hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction. This rise to stardom is spectacular, indeed, and for the most part in step with the theory of the artist laid out by Ricard. But let’s be clear: Basquiat was not from a slum, but a middle class house in Brooklyn, where his father was a respected, if not prominent, member of the Haitian community. Basquiat attended high school and studied studio art at the college level. In other words, the trope of the “Radiant Child” pivots not even on a semblance of fact but on performance, metaphor, hyperbole, and desire.

ART, GENTRIFICATION, & THE FRONTIER MYTH

If these themes resonate with some longstanding imperial clichés — Ricard as Marlow in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, or as Baudelaire to Basquiat’s allegorical Constantin Guys, the “homme du monde, homme des foules et enfant” in the “Painter of Modern Life” — it is not by coincidence. For Ricard was both participating in a modernist tradition of avant-garde ethnography and staging this encounter in the 1980s’ “downtown scene,” a lab for the alliance of art and real estate industries in neoliberal New York. The gentrification of the Lower East Side was complicated and spurred by the growth of the global art market and the industrialization of the art world. This “twinning” of industries occurred, through the familiar tropes of the colonial encounter and the “urban frontier,” and indeed through the modernist practice of slumming, as I have suggested by evoking Conrad and

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200 In 2013, several paintings were auctioned for more than ten million dollars, including Dustheads (1982) for $48,800,00. See Katya Kazakina and Philip Boroff, “Basquiat, Pollock Lead Christie’s $495 Million Record,” Bloomberg, May 16, 2013.


Baudelaire and of course through my discussion of the puerile metaphor. Ricard’s article, evocative as it is of some modernist themes, is exemplary of the tendency to fawn over gentrifying neighborhoods and weave their conspicuous diversity, their poverty, and especially their performative *la vie de bohème* into fictions of an urban renaissance or (simultaneously) the apparently seductive spectacle of race and class conflict. In this way, Ricard’s article is historically specific: it participates, according to Neil Smith, in the production of the “frontier myth,” personified by the figure of the “rugged individualist, the brave soul going where (presumably) no white man has ever gone before.”"^203^ Smith notes the way this “myth” is rephrased and redeployed in the rhetoric of city administrators and developers’ advertisements, which associate minority and immigrant groups with caricatures of third world poverty, and indeed in the celebratory art world paeans like Ricard’s that “aestheticize” the inequity of urban life. But the myth is also materialized through the instantiation and imposition of a prop historicity, a shallow but resilient narrative of progress and human-cultural development. Smith suggests this by emphasizing the way historicity is built into the urban environment through strategic patterns of disinvestment, the production of ruin and dereliction, of poverty and homelessness — the production of the “need” for new money and entrepreneurial creativity. Yet this configuration is also, I argue, mediated by a number of inconspicuous aesthetic operations: I am referring to the consolidation of perceptions and expectations obliged by the aesthetic consensus, naturalized by a host of temporal processes adopted from imperial discourse, and infused into even interpersonal exchange as a way of cultivating a model urban subject. To recognize this process is to recognize, as well, the ways individuals, in and among their relationships with each other and with the urban scene, participate in the reproduction (the rhetoric, the redundancy) of gentrification.

The Lower East Side context is important, and not only because of my discussion of Basquiat and Ricard. The neighborhood was something of a lab for the process I describe — the meeting of art and real estate industries around the (never merely) discursive practices of empire. While this process was set into motion in New York during a period of Neoliberal governing that followed the 1975 fiscal crisis, discussed at some length in Chapter 1, I turn here to its perfection in the 1980s. Throughout the decade, austerity was waged contemptuously against poor and minority communities: lawmakers, indebted to the developers and landowners who oversaw the transformation of the city’s economy after its bankruptcy, suppressed these neighborhoods’ economic growth, creating blight and displacing thousands of people through eviction, rent inflation, intimidation, and other practices. Clinics, shelters, and Single Room Occupancy complexes were closed under the new provisions, starving neighborhoods like the Lower East Side of vital resources, producing an unprecedented crisis of homelessness, and spurring as well the spread of AIDS unevenly throughout the city. During the 1970s, hundreds of abandoned buildings had been transformed through DIY initiatives into squats, community centers, and art and performance spaces, accommodating thousands of people who would be made homeless through the schemes the city administration. And in the 1980s, these buildings were raided and auctioned by the Koch administration to investors who, in turn, sealed the doors shut and allowed the buildings to dilapidate with plans to sell them anew once their value had recovered. Industrial spaces, further, that had been ruined by the flight of manufacturing to the periphery of the metropolitan area, and increasingly to sites in the global South, were rezoned to accommodate artists, but were cleared in the process of their resident squatters, many who were artists themselves.

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204 Smith, New Urban Frontier, 211-218; Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 47-48.
205 See Deutsche and Ryan. See also Martha Rosler’s introduction to If You Lived and Zukin on the rezoning and redevelopment of SoHo light bulb factories in the 1970s to artist lofts in Loft Living.
What emerges from each of these examples — a few among many — is a pattern of strategic disinvestment, the withdrawal of the welfare state and of public works in order to produce the conditions that necessitate private intervention. This process, which also goes by the names “accumulation through dispossession” and “disaster capitalism,” produced the blight so characteristic of the period and enabled what Smith calls the “perverse rationale” of gentrification: “having produced a scarcity of capital in the name of profit, [developers] flood the neighborhood for the same purpose, portraying themselves all along as civic-minded heroes, pioneers taking a risk where no one else would venture, builders of a new city for the worthy populace.”206 Developers, in other words, conspired with administrators not only to produce spaces of investment, but to establish through their control over these spaces — through the form and placement of the “frontier” — the very contours of the social body. Because the poor and dispossessed could be called, in the words of Mayors Koch and Giuliani, “parasites” and “human misfits,” and because artists and other bohemians who personified the meetings of these worlds were jointly sanctified and infantilized, so would white, bourgeois settlers, led as they were on the Lower East Side by “pioneers,” become the (final) cherished subjects of gentrification discourse, heroes of renewal — the “worthy populace” Smith describes. I make this point because Smith, whose work is considered to be the definitive treatment of gentrification theory in New York, draws a stark (and misleading) line between “culturalist” and “Marxist” interpretations. “Capital always leads,” he says, rebuffing celebratory accounts of these neighborhoods’ “renaissances,” of the new forms of cultural production and white-collar work characteristic of gentrifying urban space.207 Smith’s work is part of an effort to reframe the question of gentrification from one of achievement, growth, and

206 Smith, New Urban Frontier, 23.
entrepreneurial creativity to one of (dis)investment, class antagonism, and displacement — to eject the bourgeois subject itself from the center of the discourse. But because of the scale of this effort, he finds himself at a disciplinary crossroads, interrogating perpetually the symbolic reproduction of gentrification’s most insidious tendencies and unremitting themes, which hinge not only on the movement of money but on the scripts, cues, discourses, and representations I have described, marking a continuity with the very epistemology of the “frontier.”

What Smith unexpectedly reveals in falsely denying his pursuit of the cultural as well as material production (and this as I have suggested throughout my dissertation is the paradoxical strength of Marxist critique) is the very integration of culture and “culturalist” approaches in the making of a nominally economic or material situation. Smith suggests that the mere repetition of the frontier myth in journalistic and scholarly discourse participates in the processes by which living subjects are racialized, valued, devalued, foregrounded at one moment to establish the limits of the civic order — “the worthy populace” — and suppressed at the next, as if to maintain a prohibition on racialized bodies. Economies of representation and affect are thus central to the contrivance of the “frontier” and its cultures of spatial mimesis, in any place and time (these are central also to what Smith elsewhere calls the “production of nature,” the generation of an “outside,” and thus the very concept of alterity, which I discuss in this dissertation’s last chapter). The racialization of whole neighborhoods make of built space living thresholds for these kinds of representational and the visual politics, or more precisely for what Angela Davis enjoins us to think of as a “simultaneous presence and absence” of civilizational externalities — prisons, holding centers, black sites, et cetera. It is in other words through representation and discourse that such systems and spaces are sustained and remade, by which they instantiate difference in built space.208

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Indeed, such representations and discourses, especially those that refer to the frontier myth, become also the means through which difference appears as a commodity. The intimacy of bourgeois subjects with working class people of color who are imagined to comprise the city’s authenticating abjection has helped transform the suppressed violence masked by everyday life into a fetish of urban dynamism, and has done so with reference to the same apparently benign or natural processes, those inscribed through and not merely in iterations of the frontier myth. Ricard’s essay is exemplary in this regard, offering a contemporary, urban incarnation of the colonial encounter in the form of the author’s own narcissistic bohemianism — his wish that his home “look like a pile of junk,” and his conflation of this mess with the “subliterate” milieu by which (and against which) he defines himself. The irony he employs here is one discursive form that contributes to the production of the frontier and of the city’s “worthy populace,” for the readership Ricard seems to anticipate (Artforum’s) would presumably be able to decipher the difference between his “junk” and others’.

The essay is exemplary, too, for its conflation of Basquiat’s personal, professional, and symbolic development in the crucible of a cliché art market, and in the apparent transformation of this market into the objects of the artists’ inquiry — taking the form, for Basquiat, of the appropriation of the copyright symbol, ©, the global cipher of cultural commodification. If Ricard’s essay fails to achieve any measure of the subversive mimicry characteristic of Basquiat’s tag, it is because his emphases — the reckless style with which the essay is written, its breathless performance of authenticity, and its simultaneous praise of the popular and the compromising — do not advance a subversive agenda in the least, but fall characteristically into line with the production of material inequalities under the twinning of art and real estate industries. Ricard, in other words, does nothing in this essay to assail what are the driving forces of the art world and the art publics of his time; instead, he merely designates them his own epiphany. He applies the copyright, but unlike Basquiat he seems to miss the point of its application. And in missing the point, in failing to recognize the complicity of his
identification, or his subjectivity, or (especially) of his career in the whole apparatus of gentrification, Ricard seems only to prove Smith’s argument about how readily culture denies economy.

This denial begs comment. Deferral to the contrived opposition between culture and economy (or between “aesthetics” and “cultural production”) does not appear so readily in other contexts. In the British cultural studies tradition, both in the writings of Raymond Williams and the many works that originated at the Birmingham Center for the Study of Contemporary Culture, the relatedness of aesthetics, autonomous art traditions, and cultural politics are taken quite seriously. This is also the case in the French and German theoretical traditions, and indeed in Latin American social theory and its political histories. This enormously productive conflation has only failed to develop in US cultural studies, where the division I have mentioned persists. This has to do with the reluctances of US critics to “go public,” to “de-specialize,” and to admit “personal” politics. It also stems from the conflict over gender and sexuality and the place of these categories in the politics of the US New Left, which I rehearsed at the start of this dissertation. The failure indeed of Marxists to accept the challenges posed by sex, gender, sexuality, et cetera — and the implicit failure to apprehend race, ethnicity, and nationality in their complexities — is a scandal of the first order. (And so much worse are our students for it, so seldom is the relatedness of aesthetics and culture admitted into in disciplinary-pedagogical distillations of our work.) It is scandalous both because it denies economic-material critique a rich and not flatly cliché interpretive apparatus and because it has alienated many of the shrewdest critics of aesthetics from the concerns of class and economy — and thus also the ways these concerns are bound up and relate to race, gender and sexuality.

Critics have addressed this problem before, often by turning to the question of difference in

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urban space, where the salience of planning, of economics, and governance cannot be denied and where the effects of culture and its many faces are equally impressive. The aim of such critics, whose work has influenced my responses to Smith and to Ricard and my interpretation of Basquiat’s legacy, has been to adopt accounts of neoliberal urbanism and theories of art practice, and ask how each is aided, if not “supplemented” or “complimented,” by the other. For Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, for example, the complicity of “art” in gentrification is initiated by the strategic land acquisitions of galleries (more than forty were open in the Lower East Side in the early 1980s); mediated by journalists and critics like Ricard; and manifest in the hostilities between an artist, her public, and the community where she is likely to live and work. Deutsche describes the familiar critique of “audience and reception” made especially obvious in the context of these environments, wherein art audiences are revealed to be “a socially definable entity, one composed not of ‘citizens of art’ but of privileged subjects of class and race.”

For critic Craig Owens, meanwhile, the artist-as-gentrifier trope joins a modernist (and especially avant-garde) tradition of appropriating or ridiculing the margins and marks simultaneously a startling historical juncture: today, such artists are pressed by the unfettered growth of the (global) art world to defer to an “ends-means rationality.”

Though Owens, Deutsche, and others — authors who wrote frequently on the relationships between feminist and queer theories, urban space, and post-modernism — do of course indict the market for compelling the artist to work against her own interests, they are also concerned by the

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210 Deutsche, “Alternative Space,” If You Lived Here, 53.
211 Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism,” Beyond Recognition, 265: “Within the last few years in New York we have witnessed a series of isolated attempts to begin this process again: The reconsolidation of SoHo around established high-art traditions has propelled young, sometimes radical artists out to new marginal locations — the South Bronx, an abandoned massage parlor just south of Times Square — where they have regrouped with new subcultural recruits. The recent centralization of this tendency in the East Village provides it with both a geographic and, more importantly, an economic base, a network of artist-run commercial galleries established specifically for the marketing of subcultural productions (graffiti, cartooning, and other vernacular expressions) or puerile imitations of them.”
contradictions grown of the apparently impossible scenario of living on one’s art without delivering oneself into the conformities and humiliations of the urban frontier: they raise the issue of reflexivity in the works of several of the period’s significant postmodernist and especially feminist artists, such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, sometimes writing in response to dominant and indeed conspicuously masculinist readings of the work of such artists that refused to embrace multiple, partial, and contradictory interpretations and meanings.

I introduce these critics first because theirs are vital critiques in the present context, which I will discuss shortly, and second, and not unrelatedly, because arguments made by Deutsche, Ryan, and Owens are among the first to address the scale of the contradictions and compromises inherent in living, speaking, expressing, creating in the contemporary, neoliberal marketplace, regardless of whether or not one is an “artist” or a member of the “art public.” They are motivated both by materialist critiques and by those theories of postmodernism that undermine materialist certitude; they thus investigate the reflexive, partial, ambivalent, and divergent uses and faces of subjectivities, inferring from these (and their interplay in built space) the instability of consensual or dominant paradigms and clichés. For these reasons, they seek deliberately to part ways with Ricard and also with the cultural-material binary (having done so quite literally by parting ways with ArtForum and writing instead for October, founded by the prominent art historian Rosalind Krauss who had left ArtForum herself largely because of its embrace of the most degrading elements of the marketplace). And in parting ways, they propose also to take with them political or social

212 Some of these themes remain popular in art-activist circles. See, for example, Ben Davis on Rosler in “What Good is Political Art in Times Like These,” 9.5 These on Art and Class (Chicago: Haymarket 2013), 48-49, and Gregory Sholette on Owens in Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Name of Enterprise Culture (New York: Pluto, 2011), xiii-xvi and 65.

213 Krauss in the inaugural issue of the journal: “About October,” October 1 (Spring 1976), 4–5: “Art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions. We will not contribute to that social critique which, swamped by its own disingenuousness, gives credence to such an object of repression as a mural about the war in Vietnam, painted by a white liberal resident in New York, a war fought for
potentialities of art, which have no reason to wither under the conditions of the market, but which on the contrary may be generated, sharpened, problematized, and enriched through the critiques of modernist production and epistemology.

Leaving behind what they imagined to be the precious, indeed self-consciously puerile neo-expressionism of Basquiat and Haring, deterred from their works by the commentaries of Ricard, the scholars I have mentioned preferred art that demonstrated the instability of official discourse and that emphasized the generative discontinuities of artist and public, of apparent content and undisclosed object, of a subjectivity ruined, a narrative arrested, an institution critiqued. Thus, in the context of the Lower East Side, they promoted works by artists such as Martha Rosler, known for her critiques of artists’ (and especially art audiences’) complicity in gentrification and other imperial forms, and works by Krzysztof Wodiczko and Allan Sekula, who in a number of projections, installations, and photographic series (dubbed by Sekula “critical realism”) exposed the undisclosed relationships between power, money, and the overdevelopment of urban space. Yet because these artists preferred the realism of photo documentation, and in Rosler’s case direct political discourse, to the supposed a-politics of neo-expressionist painting, they limited the work’s capacity to transgress its own context. Works by Rosler and others attempted to generate something like the critical interventions made by Deutsche, Ryan, Owens, and of course by Smith, and sometimes to the works’ own detriment, as Rancière has recently suggested; they are of interest to me here the most part by ghetto residents commanded by elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class.214

214 Rancière on Rosler, Emancipated Spectator, 78-82; for another view, see Grant Kester, “The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism,” E-Flux 50, no. 12 (2013): “In its most familiar form, the art critic or historian today takes on the role of a ‘subcontractor,’ in Sylvia Lavin’s memorable phrase, importing theories developed by scholars from very different intellectual traditions into the analysis of specific works of art. While this can, on occasion, be accomplished with some nuance and sophistication, the more typical approach involves a straightforward exegesis, in which a given theory, reduced to a set of notional principles, is simply juxtaposed with a given work of art, as if their sheer coexistence within the space of the essay constitutes meaningful
because, as the most celebrated works in what we might think of as the anti-gentrification genre, they remain encumbered by the binaristic thinking — economy or culture — invoked by Smith and indeed reproduced by many of art world’s most enduring myths. Rosler continually indict the viewer because she imagines him to be a member of the art aristocracy “constantly constructed and reproduced, laboriously, like any constituency.” She suggest that more (empirical) context, more (materialist) framing, might correct the viewer’s perception, as it was meant to in her other well known works, including Bring the War Home (1967-72, 2004-8), which matched images of imperial battlefield with advertisements for bourgeois home décor, and The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems (1974-75), a mixed-media piece that documented evidence of homelessness but not the homeless themselves. Rosler identifies documentary as the best method for challenging the representation of urban renewal and untethering artistic practice from the institutions and prejudices — “the smoke screen of ‘quality’” — that forestall social change.

Documentary practice challenged what was perceived as the collusion of art criticism and neoliberal politics. This was an important intervention in its time, with gains for the left, which enjoyed a series of new documentary objects to which it could refer, and for documentary work generally, which garnered increasing critical praise in the art world and the academy (in part because of the writing of Owens, Deutsche, and Smith). Such efforts as the 1990 Dia project If You Lied Here, curated by Martha Rosler, attempted to shed light on the relationship between art audiences and the gentrification of space. The show included works by Sekula, Hans Haacke, Gregory Sholette, and others, and became a site of many conversations about poverty, displacement, cultural capital, and evidence of their analytic co-relevance. … [T]he critic simply and unproblematically reiterates the key points of a given theory, eliding the deeper textures of thought, as well as any engagement with the contradictions and tensions of the theory itself. The theory functions as a self-contained and self-evident apparatus, which can be brought onto the scene of critical engagement to perform the work of deep analysis or political demystification.”

Rosler, “Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint,” If You Lived Here, 41
urban space generally. When it premiered, the show confused critics who had trouble reconciling its content with the interests of the art world generally. The effort was in part to make poverty visible, and, presumably, out of this visibility, to expose the conditions of viewing poverty and the conditions of being poor as two parts of a whole. Yet a secondary effort (and here is what prompted this detour) doesn’t seem to achieve its aims: Rosler follows Smith in seeking to de-center the white settler figure from the discourse of gentrification; but instead of obviating his subjectivity, she merely takes it as a target of direct discourse, as a figuration of the “constituency” at which she aims her critiques. Her interventions operate precisely through the untroubled transmission of a concept to that very viewer, awakening him to Rosler’s concerns or correcting what she imagines in advance to be his innate prejudices (indeed, such a subject is the only type likely to have seen her work in the first place). She draws lines, in other words, and in doing so defers again to the oppositional logics inscribed in the frontier. In this way, Rosler’s work, precisely because of its political posture, lacks what I propose are the generative and transgressive operations that have emerged in the wake of, and in relation to, the works of Basquiat. Indeed, one of the aims of this chapter is to ask how the opposition between culture and economy, affixed historically to a gendered division of artistic labor and its uneven returns, has also come to characterize debates about the efficacy of different types of political art works and artists. While resistance to the pull of the neo-expressionists and their celebrants may have been a part of the politics of criticism and documentation at its time, it has also, in our time, denied one of the most outsized and influential referents in the global practice of gentrification — the myth and indeed the production of Jean-Michel Basquiat — the richly critical, theoretically-informed account it demands.

URBAN CULTURES AND IMPERIAL TEMPORALITIES

I have so far mentioned the way the imperial configuration of the “urban frontier” hinges on narratives of progress and their cultivation of a kind of subjectivity, especially as this subjectivity is mediated by the art industry and the entanglement of artists in the process of gentrification. I appeal now to a number of theories of imperial temporality to provide some historical and contextual bases for the production of the frontier. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian offers what is by now a well known account of a staggered mapping of historical time, characteristic of imperialism but manifest in many contemporary representations and indeed in intimate ethnographic exchange. He notes that these situations promote the developmentalist ideologies of the west by naturalizing culture and arranging it on a “temporal slope”: as Fabian explains, “a discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage … does not think, or observe, or critically study, the ‘primitive’; it thinks, observes, studies in terms of the primitive.”²¹⁷ One can hardly deny that the West, in the hands of specialists in academia and politics alike, ceaselessly performs its own self-conscious modernism by authoring the “terms” of the primitive. More striking are the powerful associations brokered on this contrivance: “preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial.”²¹⁸ These join a series of other oppositions such as “tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban” and do so even in interpersonal relations by way of what Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness,” a pedagogical opposition between the anthropological subject — the intellectual, the maker of an object, who resides happily in the contemporary — and the ethnographic object, forever in need to catch up.²¹⁹ Fabian is not endorsing such a view of history or insisting that all (even civic) life is constituted by the oppositions of primitive and modern, west and rest or, as the subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has it,

²¹⁸ Ibid, 23.
²¹⁹ See also Zukin on “Kairos” in *Naked City*, 67-68.
“now” and “not yet,” but is following the postcolonial imperative to disrupt the banalities of everyday thinking in an effort to discover the vulnerabilities of enduring imperial subterfuge in the developed, western metropolis. This same imperative and preoccupation with imperial temporalities prompted the critic Kwame Appiah to ask trenchantly in 1991, “Is the ‘post’ in postmodern the same as the ‘post’ in postcolonial?,” and to trace the ruse of world-historical time through art objects exchanged, renamed, and reclassified (first) as culture and (second) as cultural commodity. The art of the decolonizing global South has always had to answer to warped teleology of the developed West and oblique, narcissistic racism of the Western intellectual: the modernist appropriation of indigenous forms — “the ideology that brought something called ‘Bali’ to Antonin Artaud, something called ‘Africa’ to Pablo Picasso, and something called ‘Japan’ to Roland Barthes” — is only one version; the “space-clearing” gesture of (postmodern) neoliberal capitalism, what in other contexts has been referred to as the “flattening of the world,” is quite another.

One may think here of the infantilizing yet consecratory metaphor of the radiant child, urged to brand his ambivalence for the postmodern marketplace. One may also think of 1984’s “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” a controversial exhibition at MoMA comparing the work of modern European masters with totems and masks from West Africa. These were the kinds of objects that bohemian modernists like Picasso and Matisse purchased in Paris but, in this case, were decontextualized, erased of any unique signification, appearing at MoMA without listing artist, date, or media, the sort of documentation always included to contextualize European work, and reducing African forms to anonymous cultural craft. For

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222 Ibid, 347.
anthropologists such as James Clifford and Sally Price, the supposition that underwrote the exhibit, and which went unremarked upon by its curators, was the “power of the modern West to collect the world”; this kind of imperial thinking was of more purchase than ever in 1984, demonstrated by the exhibit’s final room “Contemporary Explorations,” which featured work from the 1980s that had a “primitive feel,” as Clifford says with irony. The play of signs that connected primordial Africa and postmodern New York would reveal the exhibit’s unintended consequences and “unravel for good the category of the primitive, exposing it as an incoherent cluster of qualities that at different times have been used to construct a source, origin, or alter ego confirming some new ‘discovery’ within the territory of the Western self.” Of course, the salience of the western self’s relation to the Other is ceaselessly underwritten in multicultural cities: typical urban “connoisseurship,” as Price suggests. A third example of Fabian’s theory — the “third-world” styles that appeared as markers of superficial difference during the gentrification of the Lower East Side, aestheticizing the frontier to disguise its production — maps this cultural logic on the scale of an entire neighborhood.

MoMA’s version: “Contemporary Explorations presents a selection of post-1970 Western art, including video and performance, which draws its inspiration not so much from tribal objects as from a more conceptualized sympathy with the methods, materials, and mentality of Primitive cultures. Structures of myth and cosmology here combine with a primal sense of art-making activity to embody a strongly altered but still vital bond between modern and tribal creation.”


See Smith, New Urban Frontier, 14-15: ‘New York’s upmarket boutiques dispensing fashionable frontier kitsch are concentrated in SoHo, an area of artists’ lofts and effete galleries, gentrified in the late 1960s and 1970s, and enjoying an unprecedented boom in the 1980s. SoHo borders the Lower East Side to the west and southwest. Here, ‘frontier’ aspires on occasion to philosophy. Zona, on Greene Street, sells Navajo rugs, ‘Otomi Indian natural bark notepaper,’ Santa Fe jewelry, terra-cotta pottery, ‘Lombok baskets in rich harvest colors,’ bola ties. Zona oozes authenticity. The frontier is not always American nor indeed male. At La Rue des Rêves the theme is jungle eclectic. Leopard coats (faux of course), antelope leather skirts, and chamois blouses seem still alive, slinking off their hangers toward the cash registers. Fashion accessories dangle like lianas from the jungle canopy... As middle-class white women come to play a significant role in gentrification their prominence on earlier frontiers is rediscovered and reinvented. [...] Even as Africa is underdeveloped by international capital, engulfed by famine and wars, it is remarke...
Gentrifying spaces are imagined as a meeting of the primitive and the modern along the urban frontier; this is an example of what Smith and others have called “scale-jumping,” initiated by imperial themes and their unyielding resonance in the present, and exploited to meet find the perfect cliché for any scale and any time — the interpersonal, the world-historical, the modern and the post-. Indeed, some celebrants of postmodernism, including art critics like Ricard, have enjoyed inhabiting these spaces and exposing the contradictions that seem to characterize them.227

In this vein, a final example, which anticipates the next section of this chapter — and generalizes to the very scale of a city the imperial tendency to announce, denigrate, and aestheticize difference — is Richard Florida’s lauded creative class theory. In a number of books and articles that turned out to be deeply flawed and even in their infancy widely criticized, Florida argues that “companies follow the people,” and in particular creative white collar professionals who desire “abundant high-quality experiences, an openness to diversity of all kinds, and, above all else, the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people.”228 As Florida explains, though “artists,

but as the preserve of privileged and endangered whites. […] It provides the decorative utensils by which the city is reclaimed from wilderness and remapped for white upper-class settlers with global fantasies of again owning the world—recolonizing it from the neighborhood out. Nature too is rescripted on the urban frontier. The frontier myth—originally engendered as an historicization of nature—is now reapplied as a naturalization of urban history. Even as rapacious economic expansion destroys deserts and rain forests, the new urban frontier is nature-friendly: ‘All woods used in [Lauren’s Safari] collection are grown in the Philippines and are not endangered’ […] The Nature Company, a chain store with a branch in South Street Seaport at the south end of the Lower East Side, is the apotheosis of this naturalized urban history, selling maps and globes, whaling anthologies and telescopes, books on dangerous reptiles, and stories of exploration and conquest. The store’s unabashed nature idolatry and studied avoidance of anything urban are the perfect disappearing mirror in which contested urban histories are refracted. […] In affirming the connection with nature, the new urban frontier erases the social histories, struggles and geographies that made it.” See also Ross, The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life, 5.

227 See for example American new wave filmmaker Shirley Clarke’s Portrait of Jason (1967) and The Cool World (1963) and Norman Mailer’s essay on appropriation and emulation, “The White Negro” Dissent 4 (Fall 1957); see also Brennan, Home in the World, 166-168.

musicians, gay people, and members of the creative class in general prefer places that are open and
diverse,” his “melting pot index” shows that immigrant and minority groups are “not correlated with
job growth” and only with “population growth.” The concept of the melting pot is ornamental, in
other words, performative. It signifies “openness” and “tolerance” in order to validate bourgeois
identity and thus to drive a thriving urban economy; it is the conversion, as the critic Karen
Tongson puts it, of diversity into an “‘urban amenity, a crucial component of what provides the
grain for, and experiential quality to, the creative-class urban lifestyle.” The creative class thesis,
with its breathless praise of urban renewal practices that aestheticize difference and thicken culture
industries, is a provocative final example of imperial time in the context of gentrification; for as
Tongson suggests, it preserves Fabian’s “denial of coevals,” but enjoins the natives to lead and the
settlers to follow. Florida’s use of difference does heed the developmentalist imperative to
neighborhoods and their populations — “catch up” — but it requires first the production of
difference as a marketable fetish. In this way, his proposal seems as if it were based on Smith’s
critique of gentrification and Appiah’s concern for the appropriation of marginal culture by elites of
the metropolis: create difference, sell difference, erase difference; make this process a primary
referent in the discourses and cultures of cities; ordain white, bourgeois man with subjectivity (this
part’s easy), praising his creativity; enlist, or erase, everyone else. As the activist and community
organizer Uzma Shakir put it, on the occasion of Florida’s appointment to the University of Toronto
(in a city that does not wince at talk of imperialism and colonization), “Florida’s exotic city, his
creative city, depends on ghost people, working behind the scenes. Immigrants, people of color. You
want to know what his version of creative is? He’s the relocation agent for the global bourgeoisie.

Florida, 10.
Tongson, Relocations (New York: NYU, 2006), 205.
And the rest of us don’t matter.”

Instances that revive the “construction” and indeed the “unraveling” of the primitive are related by the overloaded concept of *development*, or what Raymond Williams called on the eve of the neoliberal consensus an “old idea” that conflates personal growth with the growth of cultures and economies. Even those moments when the compulsory, acculturative scripts I describe seem to be inverted — when emissaries from a dominant, self-consciously modern position are returned to a stand-in for the authentic, primal scene — are derived from the division of the primitive and the modern and attached to the arc of progressive, linear time this division has come to inscribe. This arc appears in Florida’s emphasis on diversity-as-amenity, which instantiates the temporalities of progress (diversity for how long?) as the creative class model becomes more prescriptive, more productive of an urban-aesthetic ideal. It appears as well in the themes of modernist primitivism revived by the curators of the MoMA show or in the use of Manichean rhetoric by the politicians who promoted the gentrification of the Lower East Side. The reference to the division between the primitive and the modern comes about, too, within an acutely neo-colonial paradigm, as emigrants and refugees become indebted to Western and especially US culture and society. This is the form of developmental temporality suggested by what Mimi Thi Nguyen’s terms the “gift of freedom,” liberalism’s system of moral debt, which obliges service and servility of refugees, the supposed beneficiaries of foreign wars waged by the US. Nguyen emphasizes the interpersonal nature of this time, not only the “waiting-room of history” but also the “tempo” of everyday life and the way both are mediated by personal and social forms of debt. Here is a process of subjectivization founded the temporal tropes I describe, even if it can be abstracted from any immediate (US-imperial) context.

Down-scaling stratified temporality and social debt to local space — and especially urban space,

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where communities of immigrants are burdened by what Nguyen calls “the refugee condition” — obliges us to think of the minutiae of interpersonal interaction as an imperial yet intimate system of dominance and acquiescence. So does the extension of urban revival practices to national and global space amplify the resonance of these themes. Here we may think of Detroit and New Orleans, impoverished cities of color exemplary of the processes of disinvestment and reinvestment, creative destruction, disaster capitalism, accumulation through dispossession and so forth. In such cities, these processes are attended by “creative” agents and institutions, promising the economic gains of what the National Endowments of the Arts recently celebrated as “creative placemaking.”

We may think as well of Bilbao, Spain, a city revived by way of an international art institution — the Guggenheim (1997), designed by US architect Frank Gehry — but characteristic of the “grit” and “rawness” that signifies emergence of post-industry as itself a theme of global aspiration. In each of these cases, regardless of scale, an Other is granted provisional incorporation by aspiring to synchronic identification, to relevancy, to keeping a “finger on the pulse” of culture and society in their most explicitly contemporary incarnations — an old colonial ruse if there ever were one.

The recurring appearance of these themes in all kinds of situations obliges us to ask how this division — the frontier as it is reproduced relentlessly through discourse, culture, the interpersonal and indeed aesthetic scripts that constitute experience and codify knowledge — absorbs and

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235 Just ask Ai Wei Wei, who lived and worked on the Lower East Side and was an art student at SVA. According *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* (2012), Dir. Alyson Klayman, Ai owes his political commitments (to democracy, among other things) to being an art student on the Lower East Side — during which time he apparently witnessed the Oliver North trial, that is, he witnessed the state “putting itself on trial.”
overtakes so many scholarly and creative critiques. There is a profound difficulty inherent to thinking and practicing (politically and on stages that at least appear to be non-political, too) versions of differentiated urban space and time that do not adhere to the frontier or a related binary. Thus many of the leftist or self-consciously activistic conceptions of what constitutes the refutation of a Richard Florida or a Rene Ricard or even a Martha Rosler, different as they are, seem unable to recover or to generate a historical narrative or political program that has not been conceived in relation to this principal division, which reappears in every iteration, every evocation of settler and native, citizen and alien. In lieu of the subjectivity of the settler, some critics prefer to ask what the people designated as the victims of gentrification will say in response to their oppressors, or to insist that these victims because they are disenfranchised are necessarily predisposed to various modes of resistance and refusal. If such critiques seek to correct the narrative of gentrification (and here again Smith’s concern for the bourgeois culturalism characteristic of gentrification discourse comes into play), they are limited greatly. For by denying their own participation in gentrification’s discursive reproduction, they suggest that the internalization of the gentrification process is easily marked, made legible, by what are after all liberal multiculturalist (or merely essentialist) understandings of class and race formation. Conflicts over representational come in this mode of critique not to refute the frontier but to naturalize the static conditions of difference it prescribes and to impoverish as well the discourse of alternatives.

On the other hand, because gentrification has proceeded and continues to operate through the instantiation of this frontier, there seems to be no denying the frontier’s functions; any other way to discuss gentrification, then, would seem no discussion at all. We are thus naïve if we follow the critiques of those who emphasize the endless circularity that seems to attend intellectuals’
discomfort with complicity, but we are perhaps also naïve to fall back on the reproductive binarism of the frontier myth, no matter which “side” we praise. (This, as I understand it, is one of Nguyen’s concerns, evinced in her warning against “compulsive” — and I would add predictable — “interiorization, a wish for a metaphysics of voice or a kind of nature, whether attached to a condition (being a refugee) or another presence (a self.”) For the very success of the frontier myth has transformed an imperial cliché into an inorganic and everywhere-present, everywhere-becoming reality. This is what I mean when I say the frontier is also, perhaps principally an aesthetic phenomenon, for it limits the conditions of what is sensible, what can (and “should”) be sensed through even representation and discourse — what makes sense, in other words, or what produces sense. And so must its critique proceed by way of aesthetic questions and not only the materialities emphasized by social theory, if any if any serious work in the reformation of cities as just, equitable, and humane spaces is to be done.

AESTHETICS AND THE NEOLIBERAL PARADIGM

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the themes I have discussed aided the economic and demographic transformations of the city in ways might be called curatorial or aesthetic, but which are also notably in line with the contemptuous violence described by Smith. Mayors Koch and Giuliani beautified New York by arresting the homeless and bussing them to the outer boroughs, rezoning Times Square and Hell’s Kitchen to stimulate tourism and commerce, closing shelters and clinics, and, perhaps most successfully, establishing a rift between old New York and the tourist playground of today — an opposition that continues to govern urban renewal policies. This kind of curatorial administrative practice was emulated but altered substantially by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who

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236 See Brennan on circularity and narcissism, 88.
237 Nguyen, 27.
promised to quell the tiresome theatrics that had for decades dominated city hall and to initiate instead a managerial post-politics characterized by consensus-building, bipartisanship, pragmatic rationale, and business acumen. Promising to “brand” New York a “luxury city,” the “CEO Mayor” eschewed party bosses and political careerists and assembled in their stead a cadre of businessmen and philanthropists, consultants, and designers whose familiarity with the worlds of commerce, media, architecture, and the arts authorized an aesthetics of city life — shared taste, and palatable style — that would never veer from the overweening imperatives to develop real estate, grow the tourist economies, and stabilize the economic polarities necessitated by neoliberalism. In addition to developing what’s been termed the “Warhol Economy” — the web of creative industries expanded to include fashion, commerce, and nightlife — the Bloomberg administration pursued “public-private partnerships” that would fold universities and arts organizations into its administrative-bureaucratic nexus, allaying concerns over gentrification with promises of community integration and cultural engagement, and acculturating students, employees, interns, and affiliates to discourses and vocabularies of the day, to a consensus that contrives an aspirational (and therefore reproductive) social sphere.

This agenda, which unfolded over Bloomberg’s eleven years in office, constituted an “attempt to fix a single urban imaginary the minds of most, if not all, the city’s residents and users.”

A fixed, unitary ideal may come as a surprise, resonant as it is with an era of modernism sometimes ridiculed by neoliberals. Though the interventions of figures like Jane Jacobs mercifully

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released us from the high-modernist inclination to level cities altogether, to build them from scratch as works of fine art that would represent a unitary ideal or an imperial idiom, they did little to forestall the diffusion of such efforts. As Craig Owens suggested two decades ago, the “crisis of authority” that characterized the decline of modernist orthodoxy, a crisis that might have alleviated the burdens of (imperial) modernity’s grands récits — its master-narratives — was resolved for vested financial interests through the transformation of art and media into vast, flexible, low-scale industries with myriad players and interests. The grands récits still revolve around the themes of progress, conquest, rational man and his Other. The difference today is that these themes admit no attachment to the “public.” They are generated through the nominal a-politics of private sector careerism or the kind of compulsory corporate globalism that knows no (or knows every) party.240

Thus Bloomberg’s plans are generally in keeping with the diffusion of postmodern politics but the endurance of modern power that, in the view of Owens and other critics writing contemporaneously, marks the emergence of neoliberalism as such. As these practices come more and more to characterize the conditions of making and viewing art, so do “artists become collaborative builders and designers.” Not only planners, but the whole (privatized) art bureaucracy “join[s] the ranks of the city’s technocrats,” its work thus aimed at “providing ‘amenities,’ by ‘humanizing’ or ‘beautifying’ the city.”241 Endorsed by neoliberal commentators, this model of aesthetic-urban practice is not a “function of art … but of urbanism,” wherein artists create objects “for redeveloped urban spaces or the design of such spaces themselves.”242 These motives, in other words, authorize an optics of urban renewal conceived to distract the public from the consequences of neoliberal reform and to naturalize an agenda of privatization and displacement under the

241 Deutsche, “Alternative Space,” If you Lived Here, 49. The neoliberal she quotes is Eric Gibson.
essential union of form and function, the specious discourse of “good design.”

Bloomberg’s every effort was to naturalize neoliberal policy and indeed to neutralize the unsavory terms of New York’s aesthetic consensus, to sell the meeting of art and real estate as if it were the immutable essence of urban life. This meant avoiding the grandstanding and overtly racist rhetoric characteristic of his predecessors while emphasizing with what must have been deliberately guileless affect, the most marketable part of their legacy — the relationship between artists, the gentrifying neighborhood, and the city’s postindustrial economic growth. Here he recites with near perfection Florida’s creative class thesis:

No one appreciates great art more than New York City. Because not only do artists feed our collective spirit, they are often our city’s great pioneers — moving into neighborhoods that have been in decline, and reinvigorating them with their unique energy and creativity. The people who love art and make art may be the biggest reasons why New York is the greatest city in the world — and such an incredible place to live, work, and raise a family.

And here he is in 2012, defending the expansion of Manhattan’s High Line Park:

If we didn’t change, Central Park would still be a shantytown; if we didn’t embrace new technology or medicines, life expectancies would still be 25 years old … Cities have to evolve. We have a constant influx of people from around the world moving to this city, and

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243 Paul Rand, “Good Design and Good Will,” Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field, ed. Helen Armstrong (New York: Princeton Architectural Press [1987] 2009), 64-66: “What has always kept the designer and client at odds is the same thing that has kept them in accord. For the former, design is a means for invention and experiment, for the latter, a means of achieving economic, political, or social ends […] design quality is proportionately related to the distance that exists between the designer and the management at the top. The closer this relationship, the more likely chances are for a meaningful design.”

244 Bloomberg, Commencement Address, Bard College, 2007, cont’d: “I know that many of you graduates will be moving to New York City after graduation. “Actually, from what I understand, the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn has ao many ‘Bardians,’ it's become an official post-graduate dormitory.”
the needs of the people who are here change.\textsuperscript{245}

The process of naturalization so integral to Bloomberg’s rhetoric and “post-political” persona relies upon the explicit violence and insurgent conflicts of a prior generation, ossified in the official discourse of the city as a proud legacy of shared belief and experience, personified yet again by the figure of the pioneer. This discourse has been suppressed by Bloomberg’s successor, Bill de Blasio, who prefers to cast himself as a grass-roots “progressive” antagonistic to real estate. But it remains of great purchase through its diffusion by the press, the academy, by decades of strategic zoning legislation, police practices, and of course by the private interests that continue to hold considerable sway over City Hall.\textsuperscript{246} It is indeed this diffusion (and here is a large part of Bloomberg’s legacy) that has converted neoliberalism “from a political movement into something that is natural, democratically chosen, or completely predictable.”\textsuperscript{247}

Again, this is not a matter only of “official” discourses; for as the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu observes, neoliberalism instantiated itself in the first place by appropriating the (only apparent) banalities of language and of space. Contemporary discourse at all levels privileges the “open,” “dynamic,” “mobile,” and “mature,” while condemning the “closed,” “past,” and “local,” which appear only as “a ‘brake’ to be ‘unblocked,’ a ‘factor of backwardness,’ to be neutralized.”\textsuperscript{248} No matter who speaks this doxa, the case remains: what is neo about neoliberalism resides permanently on the horizon, permanently to be disclosed, permanently to be developed, yet

permanently and irrevocably “inevitable.” Thus Margaret Thatcher’s infamous declaration that “there is no alternative” to neoliberal capitalism seems an exemplary, and not terribly radical, comment on the present. This is to say nothing of Ed Koch’s imperative to the squatters, homeless people, anarchists, and displaced tenants on the Lower East Side — “If you can’t afford to live here, move” — which in 2014 serves better an example of managerial realism than frontier revanchism. It is frequently argued that living with gentrification, accepting what it does to a neighborhood, becomes a way of learning to accept what Bourdieu calls the “virtuous necessity of things,” the inevitability of any developmental scheme as the next necessary, natural step in history’s linear progression. Within a few years, the city can show itself to have incorporated and modernized a district that in its prior state was static and, according to developmentalist logic, therefore withering. When a commentator criticizes the gentrification of the Lower East Side or of Williamsburg — bodegas and discount stores shuttered, minority residents displaced — another can remind him that before these neighborhoods were home to blacks and Puerto Ricans, they were home to Jews, and before that to the Irish, and so on and so forth. As each group has adopted an open posture, agreed to assimilate, to resist its backwardness, its wildness, so too has it been afforded recognition and the right to be treated not as a group of primitives or peasants or children, but of adults. Accepting change is a sign of maturation, the argument goes; for change — even that afforded through violence, displacement, and erasure — has always been a part of city life, and cities that fail to remake themselves are likely to wither and die. It is indeed through the “virtuous necessity” of the marketplace’s “ends-means-rationality” that culture in the aesthetic consensus serves capital. As Smith says, “Capital always leads.” Or, as Amanda Burden, Bloomberg’s director of city planning, remarks, “Good design is economic development.”249

249 Burden issues this and other bromides in Urbanized (2010), Dir. Gary Hustwit. Urbanized is the third of Hustwit’s “design trilogy,” after Helvetica (2007) and Objectified (2009).
This ceaseless deferral to economy belies a major irony of the aesthetic consensus: art — “High Art” — has retained its salience as a marker of class consciousness and identification. Superficial appreciation of those cultural forms sanctioned by the museum, the gallery, the discourse of good design is as much an accomplice to the notion of consensus itself as to the specifically neoliberal programs the current consensus mandates. I say this not to hold critics and activists accountable for what I have suggested is their obligatory participation in maintaining some of the structural elements of aesthetic consensus, even if their participation takes the form of critique. For they engage art publics that are themselves unstable, that do not themselves in every instance (and this serves as a lesson, also, to Bloomberg and Amanda Burden) adhere to the system I describe as it is most visibly reproduced. On the contrary, as the artist Gregory Sholette has argued, the vast and varied art communities in New York should not be confused with the most visible communities’ most vocal members, those whose pronouncements mark conspicuously the consolidation of the aesthetic consensus, the event of its redundancy. Indeed, the “dark matter” that, as Sholette says in an exemplary metaphor, holds in suspension these many art communities’ countless modes of practice and conditions of identification, is the very fiber of disputation and ambivalence. These works and practices “emulate dark matter by rejecting art world demands of visibility.” The majority of the artists have indeed “no choice but to be invisible.”

It bears mentioning as I track these genealogies that Jane Jacobs in her own way was characteristic of this uncertain “dark matter,” as a participant in architecture who preferred to the discourses of consensus an indeterminate theory of urban ecology and its surreptitious functions. Such an ecology is shaped by the ubiquity in built space and public discourse of certain modernist redundancies but is hardly defined by them. Rather, it proceeds through a process of differentiation

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and divergence that cannot accommodate the unities of modernist hegemony. I am suggesting that a difference unmediated — forging its own relation to the imposed differences of the frontier and its afterlives — might expose the present if undisclosed instability of the aesthetic consensus. This is a claim I make following Jacobs and others who antagonize any unitary social-aesthetic model, especially if such a model falls into line with what are in essence imperial paradigms for defining bodies and differentiating space. This premise has animated recently a body of writing sometimes called upon in protest of gentrification and the novel banality of New York City. Testimonials of a ruined urban experience, generative in its time of a certain ethic of urban peace — accepting, rather than making, as one maxim holds — oppose the networked, creative ethos characteristic of the aesthetic consensus. What the novelist and critic Sarah Schulman calls the “gentrification of the mind” has been homogenized by industries that promise success, notoriety, contemporaneity, nostalgia, and authenticity in exchange for “accommodation” and “social positioning.” And though Schulman is swift and rather careless in her condemnation of a whole generation (my own) of artists, writers, and activists, the basic argument about the expectations of artists under the conditions of a consensus seem irrefutable: “Just as gentrification literally replaces mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression.” What is lost is the “individuation of perception” generated in (also lost) urban spaces. To put it another way, what is

252 Ibid, 6: “Some weeks later I went out with six young queer wrists to have a drink. One was just about to publish a book with a mainstream publisher and go on a book tour. One was preparing a funded workshop for a piece he had written. They all seem tone doing very well, having opportunities and fitting in to the cultural structure. When I asked one guy what he did for a living, he said "performance." I now know that that is code for "inherited wealth" and does not mean he earns his living as a go-go dancer at the Pyramid Club to pay his $150 rent, as it would have in 1979. None were waiters, hustler, legal proofreaders. One worked for a fancy art magazine, another was the assistant to a famous artist. They were American aristocracy — good suburbs and good schools, clean-cut homosexuals — but somehow still attracted to justice.”
253 Ibid, 29.
lost is the *livability* of dark matter. The target of Schulman’s eulogistic complaints is the delimitation of an everyday aesthetic experience through the banalization of New York’s most artistically generative, and (hardly incidentally) anti-capitalist neighborhoods and scenes. Despite what may seem the rehearsal, yet again, of a generational stalemate (“urbanity is being plundered,” declares Schulman elsewhere), the primary effort is to emphasize one’s capacity to live in an oblique, discontinuous relationship with the frontier as it is imposed and reproduced. It is a directive to celebrate dissonance and not only harmony.

**DISSENSUS AND DIFFERENCE**

I have adopted the concept of “consensus” from the philosophical writings of Jacques Rancière, who uses the term to describe a joint political and aesthetic concept: it is “the annulment of surplus subjects, the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body, and of the political community to the relationship of interests and aspirations of these different parts.” Such a description is in keeping with what Marxists sometimes call the “Washington Consensus,” a set of protocols issued by oligarchs of the metropolitan North and overseen by a global cadre of compradors, police, armies, the laws they author, and deals they make. Jane Jacobs also used the term consensus to describe with some irony the agenda put forth by modernists Moses and Le Corbusier. These all describe a process that generalizes, that subjectivizes, and that naturalizes through the apparatuses of relevance, aspiration, and contemporaneity. Consensus is a machine for framing urban experiences and liberal narratives so that “they can no longer lend themselves to a

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dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world.”

For Rancière, efforts like those advocated by many of gentrification’s artist-critics affirm what he calls the “distribution of the sensible,” an organization of aesthetic possibilities that favors realist representation and employs a pedagogy of transmission between knowing artist and ignorant spectator. This mode presupposes an intellectual and sensory continuum between the artist, the social and political discourses that frame and attend her work, the spectator or audience, and whatever message or shred of knowledge she is expected to glean. Such a mode characterizes the terms of inclusion and recognition in what as I have suggested might be called the creative, gentrifying, neoliberal city.

Against such a consensus, Rancière poses an aesthetics of dissensus: a “conflict between two regimes of sense, and two sensory worlds.” What appears are not the continuities of intent and reception, but the discontinuities between intent and reception and the differences these discontinuities generate between and among spectators. This manifold difference initiates “a distinctive kind of subject,” and mode of aesthetics that “involves this subject in the form of a mode of relation that is its own.” It is the subject’s relation to her own mode of relation that is brought to light through these dissensual processes. The subject witnesses her own engagement, watches herself as she “composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her” and “participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way — by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which

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257 Ibid, 49: “Political commitment thus is equated with the search for the real. But the political is not the ‘outside’ of a ‘real’ that art would have to reach. The ‘outward’ is always the other side of an ‘inward’: What produces their difference is the topography in whose frame the relation of in and out is negotiated. The real as such Simply does not exist. What does exist is a framing or a fiction of reality.”
258 Rancière, “Ten Theses.”
she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented.\textsuperscript{259}

This interest in difference has energized what’s lately been termed “participation”: a loose cluster of practices and theories that place a work’s meaning in the relationship between the artist and spectator or in the meeting of their joint labor.\textsuperscript{260} Though participation has gained purchase in markets, museums, and art biennales in particular — by turns commodified and ossified by way of its association with Nicolas Bourriaud’s popular phrase “relational aesthetics” — its variants have more frequently animated public and urban space, exploiting the aesthetic experiences of everyday life in exactly the way that might ruin cities’ codified, consensual terms of difference, inclusion, and alienation. Claire Bishop, the art historian and critic, has pursued the capacity of (some but not all of) such works to disrupt the complacency of life under iterations of twentieth-century capitalism. While many formal examples of participatory art and social practice merely denote the themes of “self-realization and collective action,”\textsuperscript{261} others succeed precisely by exploiting these themes in order to confront the logics of the art market and art institutions. Kara Walker’s installation, which I discussed at the start of this dissertation, thematizes the problems with participation — “the blurring of art and creativity,” which, as Bishop notes, is itself a strategy of neoliberal urbanism — while denying as well the oppositional pedagogies that characterize so much political art today.\textsuperscript{262} So, as I

\textsuperscript{259} Emancipated Spectator, 13.
\textsuperscript{260} Ranicère’s definition of “people” is instructive here, especially given the exceptional nature of the frontier and the terms of subject formation suggested by Nguyen, “Ten Theses”: “The ‘people’ that is the subject of democracy -- and thus the principal subject of politics -- is not the collection of members in a community, or the laboring classes of the population. It is the supplementary part, in relation to any counting of parts of the population that makes it possible to identify ‘the part of those who have no-part’ with the whole of the community.”
\textsuperscript{262} Bishop claims, for example, that the popularity of participation as a curated urban spectacle demonstrates a trend throughout Europe to have artists, mostly privately funded, fill the gaps in social welfare left by neoliberal reforms. Though as critics have noted, the US context is already dramatically lacking in funds for artists, this observation is certainly in keeping with the artist-as-technocrat model. See Artificial Hells, 16: “What emerges here is a problematic blurring of art and creativity: two overlapping terms that not only have different demographic connotations but also
will suggest in a concluding section, do contemporary homages to Basquiat thematize the relationship between art and gentrification in ways that are indeterminate, unclear. Because these examples are open-ended, they refuse the terms of consensual interpretation or proprietary representation. They cancel (or at the very least challenge) critical and curatorial authority over meaning and value. Because they do this in the site specificity of gentrifying neighborhoods, they extend the net of participation over the experiences of everyday life. Their suggestion is thus that in the narrative or the “brand” of the city, just as in a work of art, meaning cannot be claimed, cannot be determined, cannot be identified with assuredness. Meaning is “owned by no one,” but is generated by the interplay of an object with each spectator, and thus the interplay between the spectator’s relation with the object and her relation with the world. 263

This framing invites us to re-think the relationship between aesthetics and racial difference. As critic Kandice Chuh has shown, the aesthetic “produces racial difference as sensible in [dual] valences — as reasonable (commonsensical) and as affectively apprehensible” and exposes thus the fiction of the former 264. By illuminating the very process of consensual, commonsensical meaning, the aesthetic produces a difference different from that which has been historically bound to “aspiration of modern citizen-subjectivity.” 265 Having refused a priori the confines of this aspiration, the form of subjectivity may emerge “unpredictably, unreasonably, unintentionally.” To re-center distinct discourses concerning their complexity, instrumentalisation, and accessibility. Though the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratised, although today this leads to business rather than Beuys. The dehierarchising rhetoric of artists whose projects seek to facilitate creativity ends up sounding identical to government cultural policy geared towards the twin mantras of social inclusion and creative cities. Yet artistic practice has an element of critical negation and an ability to sustain contradiction that cannot be reconciled with the quantifiable imperatives of positivist economics. Artists and works of art can operate in a space of antagonism or negation vis-a-vis society, a tension that the ideological discourse of creativity reduces to a unified context and instrumentalises for more efficacious profiteering.”

263 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 12.
265 Ibid.
this unaligned, indeterminate subjectivity may help us to productively confuse art and life, to find in their meeting the production and the subversion of the most enduring (imperial, modern, neoliberal) themes. In this experiment in doubling, the polarity of art and everyday life are radically unmediated by facsimile or frame: the map of the city is the city itself; the representation of a “new urbanism” is the very fiber of that urbanism; and the metaphorical inscription of what Rancière calls the “police”— the “symbolic constitution of the social” which is “a partition of the sensible”*266 — is the literal form of (for example) the NYPD. These forms are thus revealed to engage (if only to suppress) everyday aesthetics by coopting the artistic and imaginative energies of art and culture, by imposing a style on the street, by drawing the frontier, by instantiating the optics of empire in its many living forms, and indeed by finding ways to impose difference from above — even as they fail to suppress the emergence of difference from below.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Basquiat’s “SAMO” tag — “Same Old Shit” — reflects the complacency of every urban scene. This may seem obvious to students of Basquiat’s legacy, especially in New York, where as I have suggested emerging subjects are impelled in our very spatial interface to think forward, think progress, to achieve and to create, to compete and to earn. The tag preceded Ricard’s invocation of the “Radiant Child,” a resonant metaphor for burgeoning neoliberal subjectivity — the branding of one’s sense of humor and play, the conversion of one’s innocent or perverse past into an attire, and the branding of this attire, too. They precede, also, the ascendance of Basquiat and his apparent anxieties and volatilities and the narrativization of these in countless texts and films and museum catalogs. Yet, in the present, the “writing on the walls” — layer after layer, erasure after erasure —

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*266 Rancière, “Ten Theses.”
brings to the surface a history of simultaneities, an immediate record of temporalities interwoven in a shapeless net of possibilities, compromises, and regrets.

I have noted already that the most famous of these tags reads “SAMO © IS DEAD.” Its has accumulated various meanings since it first appeared, especially after the artist’s 1988 death when commentators would ask — as they would of dozens of artists who died of various causes during this tumultuous decade — whom to blame: what cultures, what practices, what circumstances, what tendencies, what heredities. All these questions, and the questioners themselves, were participating in the germination of neoliberal subjectivity, defined against the abjection exemplified by the overdosing Basquiat. The myth of selling out, which attached itself to Basquiat and Haring and thus attached these artists to a dominant theme of the neoliberal 1980s, would seem to have as its sole alternative, thus, a kind of legible, politicized abjection. This was another of the themes of the decade: abjection produced by austerity, by displacement, by the appearance in poor and minority communities first of heroin and then of crack cocaine, the appearance as well and the spread in these communities of AIDS, and the conversion of law enforcement into a violent and reckless military force. These well known contingencies, crystalized in the famous parataxis – old New York, new New York — and rehearsed by critics as the emergence of neoliberism as such. They are imagined to comprise every expression’s controlling conditions. Any efforts of black youth, or of queer youth, or of any deviating identities in neoliberal New York serve under this contextual determinism to sustain the degrading ultimatum expressed by Ricard: sell out or be sold, be a brand or be branded. Be a star, or perish. Or both.

The tags signify thus the risk taken by Basquiat, but because they were written before he took these risks, they may signify also a denial of the way that the artists’ ascent was narrativized in the press to parallel (and in certain ways to ameliorate) the rise of finance cultures, Wall Street style, the globalization of real estate, of derivatives, of services, of art markets — to parallel the
gentrification of SOHO and the Lower East Side. Some tags were expressions in part of boredom and other affects critics will never be able to verifiably identify. The temporalities of youth, of depression, of passing time, of getting high, as an always calculated and seldom easy process, were expressed without recourse to their contextual or historical relevancy: “SAMO © ANOTHER DAY / ANOTHER DIME / HYPER COOL / ANOTHER WAY 2 / KILL SOME TIME.” This tag concerns making pace and making art a-historical practices. This is not, then, “political art.” It serves only as an act of “resistance” in so far as it refuses politics as such. It expresses an affective practice that operates despite the overwhelming contingencies of historical and social context, and not (only) because of them. What can such an aspiration to the a-historical, in the language of the a-political, do for the politics of the here and now? Today, “SAMO” reappears in neighborhoods Basquiat may never have visited — may never have heard of — but which were crafted deliberately and conspicuously to consecrate his legacy. For in the decades since his death, as the the frontier myth has shaped dramatically the city’s built environment, its economy, its relation to other cities and to foreign states and individuals, so has Basquiat himself been vaulted to an iconicity that has, in a paradox, untethered its own self from the prejudices of the market and its communities. Basquiat is everywhere. On t-shirts and sneakers, yes, but also in the simple gesture of a crown (seven short lines). Here are individuals remaking Basquiat’s own critique — allegorizing his critique amid the allegories of the global that comprise gentrifying city space — and thus remaking themselves.

To be a well-adjusted urban subject is to command the discourse of the urban frontier and to adopt by way of one’s command over this history a kind of correlated mastery. For the discourses I mention comprise a subjectivizing system with global tethers, a system meant to direct us toward a longstanding metropolitan imperative: to become as urban subjects, subjects also of the world. We may parody through reference to the frontier myth (itself a parody) the world’s inequities and vulnerabilities, and we may learn our learning of this relationship as itself a kind of script. Each subject
becomes the protagonist. Each becomes the center. Each employs and engages these clichés as a will to exposure — exposure to and before a sensible, legible world. To reassert the critique of this early Basquiat in the contemporary context, to expose the urban renaissance as a prolonged rehearsal of imperial cliché — the inscription of empire not on the buildings and parks and sidewalks, but into the relational practice that animates them — is to witness the hostility always active within the emergent subject, the “dissident vectors” that are always still with us, leaving their traces, and to which I turn in this dissertation’s next chapters. These vectors do not comprise an ideology, or evince the materialites of want and injustice. They serve instead as what Nancy calls in a treatise on painting “an affirmation of a surface,” for, without them, “the walls disappear, melt into a groundless ground, taking the dwelling with them.” Thus when encountering SAMO one may feel simultaneously in the presence of a specific ethos, a sublime passage, a Bowery high — and a sense, too, of impermanence amid redundancy, aberration amid continuity, “the present held back against the precipitation of time, the present extracted from time, spaced.” The tags are anchors amid the march of time and yet mark the dissolution of the anchor, the trace — © — of space.

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TOO MUCH WITH US:
THE OVER-EXPOSURE OF WORLD LITERATURE

This project has so far investigated the *global* as a ubiquitous referent in the spatial and visual cultures of a specific, quite local space. The worldliness of Lower Manhattan’s twentieth century bohemia was situated and unique. The various networks that intersected to produce this worldliness were pulled through the specific spatial forms and the socialites they engendered. So were the globalisms of Moses and Jacobs rooted in locality, even as this locality was called upon to serve as a metaphor for global concerns and a theater for worldly aspiration. I have emphasized the extent to which interpretive practices are spurred by the aesthetic experiences of urban space, and the way these practices and experiences generate and expose the centrality of *difference* as a feature of urban modernity — difference that is curated by administrators and difference as it appears unexpectedly, organically, sometimes in ways that confound conventional wisdom and consensual governing. In this chapter, I wish to explore difference as it animates transnational literary works. The texts I consider here — principally Teju Cole’s fiction, but also works by Edwidge Danticat, Joseph O’Neill, and Don Delillo — represent and enact different approaches and reactions to a common topic: the centrality of the global as a mediating frame in the production of literary politics. They share a concern for the ways world literature operates as a global infrastructure, and not one that can be counted on to perform its assigned functions. World lit does little in these examples to salve the discomforting effects of living in global space-time or to mitigate fear of the other, although on syllabi and in the World lit market place, these are its apparent uses. The politics that characterize the dominant mode of worldly reading make a promise — universal understanding through the
performativity of empathy, openness, and sociality. Bearing oneself to others is the ubiquitous practice of being in public; and looking to others, deciphering them and rendering them transparent, is its practical compliment.

I term this situation *cosmopolitan exposure*. In global, urban space, we are exposed to the vast networks and systems that give coherence to our world. We are exposed constantly to these, and we are exposed by them as well. Exposure means both being open — watching, or looking — and at the same time being scrutinized, surveyed, judged. Exposure is symptomatic of urban life, characterized by the looks of others and the overstimulation of the street. So is exposure symptomatic of contemporary transnational migration, the trauma of flight and displacement, and the ceaseless demands of others: *Who are you? Where do you come from? Why did you leave?* or, *Will you take me with you? How often will I hear from you?* Both instances provoke a desire to withdraw — but, in many cases this desire remains unfulfilled. For the doubled experience of exposure I have described here results not in unification or synchronization (though this is the point of many critiques by modernist social theorists, from Simmel to Weber to Benjamin), but in a sense of difference.

These themes are addressed with rich as and critical ambivalence by Teju Cole’s 2010 novel *Open City*, which depicts the wanderings, encounters, and meditations of a Nigerian émigré living in Manhattan’s Washington Heights. Julius, the novel’s narrator, exemplifies the many anxieties provoked by urban exposure, preferring to what he calls the “incessant loudness” of the street a practice of counter-worldly withdrawal that, as some critics have observed, is practiced frequently by cosmopolitan writers and their fictive avatars.\(^\text{269}\) Often, however, this effort falls short and Julius is denied the restorative reveries and meditations of the solitary. The discomfiting effects of New York’s enclosing aesthetic environment stream by Julius like visages of a Benjaminian “one way

street,” leading him from present, at-hand objects of the built environment to a cul-du-sac of self-address. It is not only the urban space that provokes in Julius these responses, but the encounters with other cosmopolitans and migrants that occur in such spaces — especially if these encounters are with other members of the African diaspora, who, the series of exchanges I examine in this chapter, scrutinize Julius and demand from him expressions of identification, empathy, and authenticity. Julius feels himself constantly exposed, unable to withdraw even into a kind of opacity. Others seem constantly to “lay claims” on him, asking him for favors, demanding that he identify himself as African when he is in America, as American when he is in Europe, as a European in Africa. In the face of this scrutiny he longs to “protect” his solitude but nevertheless expresses also a desire to “find a line” connecting him to the stories of others. This desire for some kind of sociality is so frequently shut down, however, that Julius’ only recourse is to internalize the demands of others and, feeling this way, to reveal a strategy for dealing with the world that is itself borne of self-scrutiny.

The insightful criticism on Cole has addressed the issues of trauma and memory, visuality and ekphrasis, and modernist literary motif (the flâneur, who has reappeared in a number of recent literary works). It has also placed the text squarely in the continental tradition. I depart from this work by situating the novel in the conceptual space of the twentieth transnationality, characterized by the contiguity between rich and poor migrants and the location of outsized global infrastructures — global finance, telecommunications, World literature. I take the text as a commentary on the unfulfilled effort to withdraw from ceaseless exposure to the very scale of the planet. It is through the novels’ engagement with the infrastructures and materialites of the global, and their locatedness

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270 Cole, 59.
in urban space, that it addresses an array of concerns over contested political crises, which give form to such scales as the national, the universal, and the global. I thus turn to a line of thought that begins with Hannah Arendt’s writing on the emergence of the global scale, and the problems it provokes for the spheres of private and political life. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that the shrinking or reduction of the world has left moderns “mercilessly exposed” to others; this results in the conversion of politics into a theater of empathy and sameness — the notion, as Arendt says, that “like attracts like.” Following Arendt, the sociologist Richard Sennett argues that anxiety over this kind of exposure, both to the built infrastructures of cities themselves and to the constant scrutiny of other city-dwellers, constitutes the central motif of modern urban culture. Cole’s work, at that of theorists of diaspora such as Paul Gilroy and Eduard Glissant, complicate the problem of exposure by pulling it through the prism of race, ethnicity, and nationality — concerns that were never far from Arendt’s own mind. Central this problem is the experience of displacement, of living between (as Cole and his narrators do) two or three different regions, and experiencing these at once in the interplay between one self and one’s built environment. While exposure is indeed part of cosmopolitan practice, it is unevenly experienced; a kind of compulsory worldliness is especially vexing for stateless people, migrants, members of postcolonial diasporas, people with black and brown bodies, and for those who are illegible to the bureaucrats who guard and secure borders. Arendt’s theory appears in this chapter to mark the continuity of the modern and the neoliberal, and indeed to suggest, as I have throughout this project, the ways the neoliberal allegorizes the modern.

My reading of Cole is thus also a commentary on two positions in the field of transnational literary studies: the first is the project of “cosmopolitics,” which addresses the global scale by

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advocating political programs based upon collective or general sentiments or global predicaments. Sometimes these programs are grounded in multicultural urban space or transnational migration, but they are social and political, and for the most part consensual, premised on an unquestioned “insistence on belonging.” Literature’s chief function in cosmopolitical discourse is to illustrate the challenges of transnationalism as well as to be transnational, and thus, through the extended duration of a novel to generate readerly empathy. The subject was at the center of this discourse — or more precisely the subject’s embedded and partial view of the world. Yet since the publication of Franco Moretti’s plea for “distant reading,” these kinds of programs have been displaced by a growing emphasis on the geo-spatial dimensions of world literature. Critics now describe “world literary space” and emphasize networks and coordinated ecologies, employ maps, diagrams, “big data,” statistics and so on, perhaps registering in this shift a disenchantment with discourse of multiculturalism and identity. The political, worldly subject has been deemphasized, and in its place has appeared a a distant meta-subjectivity, which fails to discern the experiential dimension of the literary. The resonances of such a meta-subjectivity with the history of urban planning and its critique (following my introduction to these debates in preceding chapters) should be evident enough already. Yet the political dimensions remain unclear. This is in part why I’ve turned to Arendt, who suggests that the outsized scale of the global has nullified the capacity for meaningful political action here on Earth and converted public space into a theater of empathy and affinity. Her work, like Cole’s, brings to light the political problems provoked by this new glut of World literary

274 See for a definition, Pheng Cheah, Introduction (Part II), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Robbins and Cheah (Minneapolis: UP of Minessota, 1998), 21: the field of debate over “the feasibility of cosmopolitanism as an alternative to nationalism in our contemporary era”; Bruce Robbins, in (“Comparative Cosmopolitanisms,” *Cosmopolitics*, 247) describes the accompanying critical injunction as “speaking of a new framing of the whole ... that affects even those critics who never ‘do’ world literature or colonial discourse at all — that affects all critics, that is, by shifting criticism’s whole sense of intellectual enterprise.”

theory: to praise the spatial and material is not to deny the politics of identification, but to reduce such identities to data-points.

This chapter is devoted to understanding how politics and the global scale are coordinated through the anxiousness of cosmopolitan exposure and the unfulfilled desire to withdraw. I ask, what kind of politics can be forged out of nonalignment and ambivalence? What is the role of urban form in creating the conditions I have described? What outlets and alternatives can urban spaces also, indeed simultaneously, produce? And literary form? What alternative modes of social being and subjectivity can literature help to engender? It is these last questions to which I turn in the closing sections by speculating about the capacities of literature, and our participation as readers and writers in the literary, to salve or, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, to “un-work” the rush of the global.

AN INCESSANT LOUDNESS

As I have suggested, the term exposure has a kind of double meaning. It connotes being exposed to and being exposed by. It’s one’s meeting with the world — or more precisely with objects in one’s immediate environment that represent or give shape to the problem of the world. So is one’s own self given shape in this process. Here Julius describes this subject-forming operation.

I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day’s focus and relative tranquility, as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. […] Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day. But the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them […]

I took the subway home, and instead of falling asleep immediately, I lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness, and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents
and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which […]

The sight of large masses of people hurrying down into underground chambers was perpetually strange to me, and I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counter-instinctive death drive, into movable catacombs. Aboveground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified.276

It is not noise alone that comprises the street’s incessant loudness, but exposure to others. This causes in Julius a restive quality. Unable to sleep, he attempts to reassemble the situation, as if he were a child playing with blocks. The need to make sense, despite the desire to close one’s eyes, becomes a working metaphor in Julius’ story for the impossibility of full withdrawal. Even sleep provides little recourse, so jarred is Julius, so “impressed” by what he’s seen. Later, he describes the “distinct sensation of being watched,” and looking up — he is standing in Morningside Park — sees a hawk. Throughout, Julius, who is a psychiatrist by training, remarks upon not only the experience of exposure, but the internalization of this experience: Hence the hawk, hence the almost automatic, calculatedly yet off-handedly phrased “distinct sensation of being watched.”

Cole, in illustrating Julius’ internalization of exposure, uses a few variants. He refers to medical exposure, a form of bodily trauma. Julius imagines commuters led “like animals stumbling to slaughter.” He compares the movement of urban space (spurred by the strategic centrality of functionless plazas and streets) to the migration of birds up and down the eastern seaboard; such birds are arrested and transfixed by the deathly and diffuse light of the global city and as a result

276 Cole, Open City, 6-7.
plummet, some dozens or hundreds at a time, onto the streets or into the ocean. He imagines the subways as “moveable catacombs” where urbanites’ desire for solitude go unexpressed amid a constant movement and jostling. He describes the “unacknowledged [but visible] traumas” of other passengers, the sense of being surrounded by “thousands of others in their solitude.” So does he engage the photographic valence of the term exposure: a temporal process by which the shaping of light and shadow around the physical contours of a shape or shapes etches itself into a layer of reactive mineral substance — film — and becomes an image. This delayed process does nothing, of course, to the objects or the play of light themselves, but photographic paper is (as Julius says) “impressed” by them. It is in part this aesthetics of temporal and spatial deferral amidst both forms of exposure that animates Julius’ evocation of solitude, despite his restive effort to reassemble and clarify abstract forms. As John Berger says, the time of exposure has a relation with the time of subjectivity and actuality, the formation of the singular self in a reactive haze. It is the process of processing that comes to light through Julius’ failed effort to withdraw. In the work (no photographs here from Cole, who is a photographer), writing takes the ekphrastic role. Julius tries to make sense of things as if he were recording the day’s events in a diary or relaying them to an analyst. For out of the confluence of differing visions he encounters, a number of temporal and spatial boundaries and registers are blurred, generating thick meditations that transfix him.

These protracted engagements with space open into political and ethical digressions on the subjects of contemporary global and transnational culture (which I discuss in the next section of this

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277 Ibid, 65.
278 John Berger, “Paul Strand,” John Berger: Selected Writings, Ed. Geoff Dyer, New York: Vintage, [1972] 2003), 285: “The I am is given its time in which to reflect on the past and to anticipate its future: the exposure time does no violence to the time of the I am: on the contrary, one has the strange impression that the exposure time is the lifetime.”
chapter). They express an array of concerns that coincides strikingly with those of the German-Jewish-American philosopher Hannah Arendt: for Arendt, modernity means living with a sense of the world in its largest, most outsized manifestation, which is brought to light through technology, through capitalism and imperialism, and through a sense of mastery and conquest. This tendency leads to the collapse of the distinction between public and private realms, leaving one “mercilessly exposed,” in Arendt’s words, to others. As a result, the restorative space of private life is ruined by the great incursions of the polls (the “shattered calm” of a “private chapel,” in Julius’s metaphor); so is the public sphere, which should, in Arendt’s account, be defined by rule-bound argumentation and disagreement, infused with personal feeling. Affect displaces principle and society displaces the field of political argumentation. Affinity, empathy, and identification, what Arendt calls the “attraction of like to like,” become the underpinning values and validating practices of life-in-public. At the same time, the global becomes the requisite scale of human experience, distending social protections. The demand of total, planetary identification, a compulsory state of belongingness and a commitment to the course of human progress — bears on Arendt’s ultimate assessment: that humans today are living in what she calls a “Dazed, tranquilized” reality, where the only protocol is to let go, to “abandon the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living.” Arendt calls this great smoothing of experience the loss of the world, conveying at once the sense of being displaced from one’s familiar and intimate locality and the emergence of planetary systems marked by capital ‘W’s — World Systems, the World Bank, World Literature.

Although Arendt does not write about the city, her interest in these scales of the world stems from a host of discourses that refer self-consciously to urban space. I discussed many of these discourses at the start of this dissertation: the proliferation of mapping and diagramming, and the

notion that the built space of cities should generate standardized, rational practices and produce exemplary liberal subjects, and so on. Arendt indicts the modernist tendency to conquer the earth, either through the systems that organize and coordinates the technics from “above” — a tendency that as I suggest shortly, has found an exemplary form in Franco Moretti’s world systems literary criticism — or through hyper rationality. Indeed, her depiction of the Archimedean posture of moderns characterizes the urban planning practices employed to recklessly modernize cities like New York at the time she was living there in exile. With this in mind, Moretti’s outsized critical practice starts to look like an iteration of modernist planning, while the critics who respond to his work — including recently Emily Apter, whose work I’ll discuss in the final section of this chapter — echo the emphasis on embeddedness, contiguity, and withdrawal in works by anti-modernist critics. These themes have been taken up by the sociologist and urban theorist Richard Sennett (student of both Arendt and Jane Jacobs). He argues that the built spaces of cities are converted increasingly from terrains of play and intimacy into the deadening infrastructures of movement, growth, and competition. This environment provokes especially a kind of self scrutiny — a race to conform. Exposure is internalized by urban subjects, who begin to imagine themselves in a vast interior. Even intimate practices like reading, reminiscing, spending time with friends and lovers become plays staged for imagined audiences, situated and rehearsed. As living subjects — and indeed as functionaries in and of urban and cosmopolitan cultures — we must “dutifully comply with the prescription continually to reinvent ourselves and manage our intricate identities,” as the art critic Jonathan Crary recently put it in his gloss on Arendt, so much so that we feel such a sense of anxiety, and thus the desire to withdraw altogether.\(^{281}\) This line of thought leads to the suggestion that the great problem for moderns is challenging the theaters of scrutiny and identification by

\(^{281}\) Crary, *24/7 Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 72
reviving (in Sennett’s words) “the reality of the outside as a dimension of human experience.”282

Because the world is always at-hand, we have lost a sense of the wondrous, the in-articulable, the impossible.

However, these authors share the mistaken assumption that we all have equal share in the banality. They do not differentiate. Arendt and her acolytes have thus been criticized by many critics. Some have asked, for example, how such a fine division is troubled by the legality and the legibility of one’s practices, lifestyles and communities. Following the concerns for intersectionality that characterize the political aims of this dissertation — and indeed of Cole’s work — we might add to this the problem of racialization as a constitutive feature of public life that could never be merely public. Here I am referring to what Paul Gilroy, following Fanon, calls the “neurotic orientation” of the racialized urban encounter;283 race and nationality, and the problem of “the attraction of like to like” are not stable ways of approaching the problems of multicultural difference, even as these remain (regrettably) standard practices for making sense. As touristic encounters in urban space provoke more and more injunctions to bare oneself, and as a liberal politics of universal humanism characterizes, in popular contexts, the function of literature, the prospects of withdrawal into a solitary or restorative space are of great concern. Liberal calls for tolerance, assimilation, and likeness, the demand to bare one’s inner self become a whole apparatus of disclosure-as-relation. As Eduard Glissant argues, this demand for transparency is a form of objectification: “I understand your difference, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within

282 Sennett, The Conscience of the Eye (New York: Norton, 1992), xiii: “The exposed, outer life of the city cannot be simply a reflection of inner life. Exposure occurs in crowds and among strangers. The cultural problem of the modern city is how to make this impersonal milieu speak, how to relieve its current blandness, its neutrality, whose origin can be traced back to the belief that the outside world of things is unreal.”

my system. I create you afresh.” Glissant calls for the “right to opacity,” a formulation that responds to the scrutiny that emerges from the expectations of the (usually dominant) other. This formulation has the benefit of centering the experiences of migrant, alien, and racialized people; it should not be the “imperial eyes” of the dominant spectator that stands in for subjectivity, as such. (This debate gives vital context as well to the novel’s connection to Roberto Rossellini’s film of the same title, which depicts non-national, post-war Rome. In this site of urban, cosmopolitan experimentation, the film exemplifies the practice of neorealismo by which peasants, beggars, the rabble, were cast to play themselves.)

One can start to see why Arendt would concern herself so greatly with the category of the human, and the condition of banal identification in which we live, at a moment of global crisis. It is worth noting, too, that while Arendt was prone to a certain kind of generalizing sweep, she became (in part because of this sweep) deeply engaged with discourses of race and ethnicity that stemmed, first, from the invention of race as a technology of imperialism and, second, from the uniqueness of individual cultures. To be clear, I look to Arendt and her acolytes not in order to make generalizing

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284 Glissant, Poetics of Relation (Ann Arbor: UP of Michigan, 1997), 190.
286 See Open City, Dir. Roberto Rosselini (1945).
287 See for example Arendt’s exchange with Ralph Ellison: Conflict arose after Arendt published an article on the use of federal troops to desegregate a public school in Little Rock, Arkansas. Arendt argued that children are objects of the private sphere and should not, thus, be burdened by political action. Other spaces should be desegregated, she argued, but the spaces of “society” and indeed those of “children” should not — lest (and here is the moral concern in Arendt’s writing) the children respond through path memory and novel forms of hostility. Ellison responded to this piece twice, once in his famous essay “The World and the Jug,” in which he indicted Arendt’s pose of what he called “apollonian objectivity” and later an interview with Robert Penn Warren, in which he argued that Arendt did not understand the importance of sacrifice in the black community. Arendt, much to her credit, responded in a private letter, admitting that indeed she did not understand this dimension of black us culture. See Arendt “Reflections on the Events at Little Rock,” (cited above); Ellison, “The World and the Jug,” Shadow and Act, (New York: Random House, 1964); Ellison, Interview by Robert Penn Warren, in Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro? (New York: Random House, 1965), 343-44. See also, on the subject of the letter, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (New Haven: Yale UP, [1982] 2004), 315-17, 51.
claims about human life in modernity, but to mark a continuity between her world and ours. There are many similarities: The self-conscious cosmopolitanism that concerned Arendt was spurred by tele-visual, geospatial, mathematic, and communication technologies as well as great crises of statelessness and dispossession. These are among the central themes of global urban space in the contemporary neoliberal period as well. Arendt’s critique can teach us a great deal about how to approach the unities and totalities of the current world and indeed those of World literature.

COSMOPOLITICS AND ENCOUNTER

In *Open City*, Julius’ primary anxiety is the pull of the social. His effort is not necessarily to bare himself to others, but to “find a line” that might “connect” him to his “own part in all these stories.” Yet efforts like those advocated by (for example) champions of cosmopolitics don’t work. They emphasize too strongly the themes of tolerance, interconnection, belonging, and identification, and are thus ridiculed or derided throughout the course of the novel. These programs, which I discuss in this section, appear in other characters’ enthusiasm for *identification* and *affinity* (“Hey, I’m African just like you”), for *empathy* (the trope of the “compassionate African”), and even for *difference* (“people can live together but keep their own values intact”). Early in the novel, for example, Julius enters a taxi. It’s raining, a “torrent of mirrors.” In the cab, Julius offends the driver by not saying hello. The driver asks why — can’t Julius see that he’s another African? Julius apologizes quickly, saying, “my mind was elsewhere. Don’t be offended, my brother, how are you doing?” But he admits, “I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me.” They sit in silence and the driver turns on the radio. “Anger had welled up within me,” says Julius, “unhinging me, the anger of a shattered repose. The traffic finally eased, but the radio

continued to blare inanities.” Later, another man, a museum guard, asks Julius, “Are you Yoruba? One of my housemates was Nigerian.” Julius admits, “I wished he would go away … I thought of the cabdriver who’d driven me home — ‘hey, I’m African just like you. [the man] was making a similar claim.”

This chain of compulsory identification, of bearing oneself to others who are like oneself, is inverted when Julius goes to Europe. At an internet café in Brussels, the clerk says, “You must be from America.” Julius lingers, introduces himself. The clerk is African, from Morocco. He is named Farouq. He a comparatist and translator of poetry, whose thesis, on Bachelard and the Poetics of Space, was rejected by his committee because of concerns over plagiarism — though Farouq insists this was an act of prejudice. Farouq reveals a lot of himself. He discusses his political philosophies. He’s critical of consensual politics and multiculturalism, preferring the concept of difference. “Difference is never seen as containing its own value,” he says, “Difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no.” Farouq explains his theory by referring to the internet café:

Farouq turned to me and said, It’s very busy, as you can see. Not only for all the people making New Year greetings but also for a lot of people calling home for the Eid. He gestured to the computer monitor behind him, and on it was a log of the calls ongoing in all twelve booths: Colombia, Egypt, Senegal, Brazil, France, Germany. It looked like fiction, that such a small group of people really could be making calls to such a wide spectrum of places. It’s been like this for the past two days, Farouq said, and this is one of the things I enjoy about working here. It’s a test case of what I believe; people can live together but still

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290 Ibid, 41.
291 Ibid, 53.
keep their own values intact.\textsuperscript{292}

The cafe itself is called to serve as a metaphor for a cosmopolitan ethic that is based not on likeness, but difference, not on sharing, but on a contiguous and tenuous co-habitation. Cultures are brought into contact, but do not connect. Rather they co-exist without expectation, appealing, in their contiguity, itself (only apparently) empty of politics or ideology, left to mind “their own values.”

Julius is initially intrigued by this articulation of difference, but is then put off by something, which gives the scene an undercurrent of discomfort and anxiety, and which problematizes Farouq’s metaphor and indeed his deferral to the concept of difference. Farouq says that despite his interest in difference, he believes in “divine law”: “Islam, he says, has a lot to teach us about politics.” Julius wonders whether Farouq will be radicalized, thinks of him as “in the grip of rage and rhetoric”; He compares Farouq to the emergent right wing in Europe and reflects on the anxieties of young, anxious men all over the world, radicalized, whatever their ideologies. Ideas — even the concept of difference — are, Julius says, being eaten up by a “cancerous violence”:

Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone, the way to catch the attention of the young and recruit them to one’s cause, was to be enraged. It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?\textsuperscript{293}

He lists a number of recent riots and attacks, violence against African and Asian migrants in Brussels, in squares and plazas and on the subway. These are cities, he notes, with colonial nostalgia that generates still another degree of violence. Later, Farouq and a friend, Khalil, demand from Julius a summary of American attitudes about race, about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,

\textsuperscript{292} Ibid, 112.
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid, 107.
about Israel: “Does America really have a left?” “The American blacks — he used the English expression — are they really as they are shown on MTV?” They make pronouncements: Hezbollah — “It’s resistance, simple.” Al Qaeda — “For us, America is a version of Al-Qaeda.”

Julius calls them extremists, but this seems to him a knowing joke. He says, “I was pretending to an outrage greater than I actually felt. In the game, if it was a game, I was meant to be the outraged American.” There is a difficulty, for Julius, in acting the American — in inhabiting a role, of rehearsing a script. Why should we cling to our identities this way, he seems to ask in this aside. When we do, radicalization is one consequence, redundancy is another. For despite Farouq’s wisdom (and is his professed interest in alternatives to belonging and mix), what he offers is not a coherent philosophy of coexistence but an intellectual argument for affirming of one’s own culture. His ideas have more in common with ethnic nationalism than with the concept of difference that Farouq refers to rhetorically during their encounter (mentioning Edward Said among other influences). Julius describes Farouq as “one of the thwarted ones, whose script would stay in proportion.”

This episode does not end in Brussels, but back in New York, when Julius decides to send to Farouq a copy of Kwame Appiah’s book *Cosmopolitanism* (which is critical of difference as an organizing feature of multicultural societies). At the post office in Harlem, Julius has another encounter that mirrors that with Farouq.

There were two men in a doorway near the entrance of the post office, one of whom I had seen before. He had dirt-encrusted brown hair that fell about his face like fine ropes.

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294 Ibid, 117, 118.
295 Ibid, 120-121
296 Ibid, 120, emphasis mine.
His beard was bushy, flecked with white, and the odor of unwashed weeks emanated from him; his feet, bare and splayed out in front of him in his sitting position, were ashen. The second man, who was clean and much younger, and who was unfamiliar to me, was on one knee, holding the older man’s foot […]

I entered the post office. It was late, almost closing time. Unable to find a customs form for my package, I joined the dishearteningly long line, but just then, one of the postal workers redivided the lines, opened a new window, and asked if anyone was sending an international package. I suddenly found myself at the head of a line. I thanked her, and moved toward the window. I told the man behind the glass, a pleasant, bald, middle-aged man, that I wanted a customs form. I filled it out with Farouq’s address. The memory of my conversations with him had convinced me to send him Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*. I sealed the envelope, and the postal worker showed me various booklets of stamps. No flags, I said, something more interesting.299

The framing of this scene is significant. Before entering the post office, Julius encounters the strange visages of two homeless people. One is clipping the other’s toenails, the other talks quietly to him in Spanish. This seems a tableau of global urban space-time at its most everyday and neighborly but also, it is suggested, at its most unsightly. The scene is perhaps off-putting, another of the insidious effects of exposure. When Julius enters the post office, it is nothing but obstructions — the missing form, the challenge to find postage stamps that do not convey a subtle nationalism. These moments appear as an urban, cosmopolitan, bureaucratic, and abject arabesque. They frame the clerk’s inquiry,  

*Say, brother, where are you from? ’Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland.*

*And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that*

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299 Ibid, 185-186.
is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean. Let me tell you something: I am raising my daughters as Africans.\footnote{Ibid, 186.}

The clerk calls Julius a “visionary,” a “journeyer,” and asks if Julius would like to come to a poetry reading he’s hosting. Julius demurely says “sure thing” before leaving, making note to avoid that post office in the future. Frustrated by this encounter, Julius walks the streets.

When I came out of the building, the younger of the two Spanish-speaking men I had seen earlier had left. The bearded man who’d just had his toenails clipped sat in the golden glow of the sun, which had now come out, and the day became much warmer than I had anticipated. The light fell straight down from the corner of the building across the street. He lay there half-asleep in the pool of light, transfigured.\footnote{Ibid, 188}

On his walk, he hears a dirge from a funeral march. He recognizes it immediately as the anthem of his boarding school in Lagos. Julius remarks on the moment. Here all the problems of difference and sameness, sameness masquerading as difference, and the scrutiny of identification — “hey, I’m African just like you” — give way to this clearing, which occurs in the midst of urban space:

I experienced the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from its mirrored wall, could clearly see the world doubled in on itself […] I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began. This point-for-point imitation, of each porcelain vase, of each dull spot of shine on each stained teak chair, extended as far as where my reversed self had, as I had, halted itself in midturn. And this double of mine had, at that precise moment, begun to tussle with the same problem as its equally confused original. To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be
reflection alone.\textsuperscript{302}

The mirror appears here as a metaphor about metaphor, about the ability of the critical and interpretive mind to recast abstract experience (identity, difference, withdrawal) in the shape of at-hand objects, and thus to produce the heterotopic grounds of writing fiction — the fiction of World literature, and the fiction of one’s life.\textsuperscript{303} Such works exist in a constant state of “mid-turn,” as Julius says, recognizing the oscillation between the world and the self, or rather the way one is perceived — one’s worldly self — and the original. We are indistinguishable from our fictive selves in this light, the expectations and demands of others are internalized.

This premise underwrites another encounter, which takes place in a squat brick building, a detention set in a “concrete wasteland” in Jamaica, Queens, near the airport. He sets the scene, making note of the architecture of customs and borders:

The line did not move for twenty-five minutes; then it moved and, one at a time, we showed our ID cards, passed through the metal detectors, and were let into the waiting room[…]The security officers—oversize, bored, brusque-mannered people, people who made no pretense of enjoying their work—took the visitors, a half dozen at a time, behind secured doors for

\textsuperscript{302} Ibid, 192.

\textsuperscript{303} See Foucault, “Of other spaces,” 24: “I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”
forty-five minute visits. Those waiting their turn were mostly silent, staring into space. No one was reading. That purgatorial waiting room had no windows, and was brightly lit with fluorescent tubes, which seemed to suck into them the little remaining air. I imagined the sun setting outside over the concrete wasteland.\(^{304}\)

An African migrant is being detained there and Julius has agreed to go with his friend (his girlfriend) Nadége, to the detention center to talk to him. In the middle of the visiting room stands a slim, Plexiglas pane, a divider that stands in for borders, for the distinction between citizen and non-. On the other side is Saidu, a Liberian migrant who was detained at US customs and held for twenty-six months. Saidu smiles, “Are you African?” Hearing, “yes,” he tells his story: two civil wars, a family murdered, internment, a plan. “He packed his soccer shoes, two spare shirts, and all his money.”

From Liberia he emigrated illegally to Spain and then Portugal, where for two years he lived among many migrants in a Lisbon squat, scraping together money for a ticket. “His journey ended at JFK, Terminal 4. They took him away at customs.”\(^{305}\)

Throughout this encounter, the objects of infrastructure hang low. The space is abject, marginal — designed, as Julius says “not to be noticed.”\(^{306}\) Yet it is alive with the hum of fluorescent lights and the smell of bleach. The room has a carceral ambience. Julius is in fact mesmerized by this encounter, so that he starts when an officer taps on the glass with his baton.

The visit was over. I raised my hand to the Plexiglas, and Saidu did the same. I don’t want to go back anywhere, he said. I want to stay in this country, I want to be in America and work […] When I got up to leave, he remained seated, and said, Come back and visit me, if I am not deported.

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\(^{304}\) Cole, *Open City*, 63

\(^{305}\) Ibid, 66, 69.

\(^{306}\) Ibid, 62
I said that I would, but never did.

I told the story to Nadège on our way back into Manhattan that day. Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself.307

Perhaps this passage, and in particular its final, reflexive gesture — admitting that one has contrived one’s best self — is a way of expressing guilt. For, Julius admits, he has doubted all along Saidu’s story, has wondered if Saidu had not been a soldier, feigning innocence. He suggests that the US had “its own reasons” for detaining him. It’s appropriate, then, that Julius should see himself not as a “brother” of Saidu, but as a forgery — a compassionate African, who’s fallen in love with the idea of himself.

This self-characterization sticks. It irritates him. Late in the novel, just before another encounter (Nadege has left him), Julius discusses this kind of internalized scrutiny, imagining that it constitutes a kind of common experience of human relationality. He asks,

Who, in the age of television, hasn’t stood in front of a mirror and imagined his life as a show that is already perhaps being watched by multitudes? Who has not, with this consideration in mind, brought something performative into his everyday life? We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don’t, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have through our other decisions merited their sympathy. They are ready to believe the best about us, and not without good reason. From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any especially

307 Cole, 70
heightened sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good. […]

I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives.\(^{308}\)

This passage has been called upon to suggest the formation of an ethical paradigm in Cole’s work, what the critic Peter Vermuelen has called a “minimal program” of literary cosmopolitanism.\(^{309}\) But after examining Julius’ interactions with others, I interpret this not as a working program — or even a wholesome effort to establish such a program — but as a poorly conceived personal strategy. Julius emphasizes performativity and the sense we all seem to have of being exposed to the watching eyes of imaginary “multitudes.” He is satisfied to perform well \textit{most of the time}. When he hasn’t, he’s merely presumed the sympathy of his imagined audience — which is itself a figment of his masterful self-possession. “We articulate ourselves to ourselves,” he says, suggesting the kinds of pedantic circumlocutions by which he exits scenes and ends affairs. Yet, despite this assertion, he singles out with great scrutiny those who “blame others,” who fail to see that they are the common threads of their own bad relationships. This is a crucial moment. Character and narrative are productively unworked in this scene. Julius, who had been so steadfast in preferring the apparent objectivity of the remove, defers to a flimsy and yet familiar construction. Performativity, especially as an invitation to others’ sympathy, is a limited practice. When one is displaced from the social field, one’s performances lose their relational dimension and look instead like neuroses. They remain ways to maneuver interactions with others even as they have become, principally, methods for recuperating the experience of exposure to others.

\(^{308}\) Ibid, 243.
This gesture of self-possession crumbles in the last act of *Open City* just after the passage I’ve quoted: Julius is accused by an acquaintance — Moji, an immigrant from Nigeria, who is the sister of a friend — of having raped her some years ago in Lagos. To this he expresses surprise, before Moji, mocking his stance of disbelief, tells him that he “has not changed a bit.” She asks, “will you say something now? Will you say something?":

You’ll say nothing, she said. I know you’ll say nothing. I’m just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that. Look, bitterness has been eating away at me all this time, because this was so long ago, and it’s my word against yours, and you’ll say it was consensual, or that it never even happened at all. I have anticipated all your possible answers.\(^{310}\)

Julius does not respond. He exists the scene, before turning, with a kind of disaffectedness to a parable about Nietzsche, about the philosopher’s “contempt for pain.” He describes the way Nietzsche as a youth burned and scared his hands with coal in order to prove the concepts of fearlessness and self-sacrifice. A few pages later, however, Julius realizes that he had misremembered the story: it was match sticks, not coal, which “an alarmed schoolyard prefect knocked to the ground,” sparing young Nietzsche of scars. Julius was wrong.\(^{311}\)

We are taught in this final dark anecdote that the presumption of empathy — empathy from an imagined audience — is one consequence of internalized exposure, a consequence that leads neither to the “truth,” nor to acts of kindness, nor to grace. The space of self-address is not a reprieve from exposure and scrutiny, but the site of its internalization, which is, as often as not, a space for ethical denialism. Julius shows his ability to convert his sense of exposure, to turn it around, and embrace the fictive quality of his “mirrored” self. The ethics of this gesture are not as

\(^{310}\) Ibid, 245.

\(^{311}\) Ibid, 246.
vague as Julius would perhaps like his imagined audience (which might also be Cole’s readerly public) to believe. The limited performativity of life in front of the mirror is no absolution. This is a shrewd insight from Cole, who distinguishes himself here from Julius. For this scene attends to the problems of performativity and self possession, the ways we cynically use our state of chronic exposure to excuse our dazed tranquility, to let ourselves go, as Arendt says, lost but safe in the company of others who are doing the same. Cole also takes an immense risk here, providing something that looks like a program, but which when it is tested, fails, and which in failing reveals a darker truth — that when we articulate ourselves to ourselves is we, ourselves, who are misled.

This insight also allows Cole to thematize another strategy, which, though it appears throughout the pages of the novel, is essentially unannounced. I am referring Julius’ masterful command of discourse, of texts, or rather citations. The book’s referentiality — which has the same kind of disembodied or distant affect with which Julius narrates so much of the text — is in fact one of its most glaring and challenging features. From such a masterful posture, so much is likely to disappear; the experiential dimensions of literature, which seem to exist “below” the radar of the self-consciously masculine, pedantic, worldly intellectual remain unaccounted for. Cole is acutely aware of this. He artfully balances Julius’ aerial distance with embedded perspectives: these include the momentary clearings I’ve described, which are uniquely situated in urban space; they include also the routed encounters with other migrants in sites of the periphery that are, simultaneously, essential nodal points of global infrastructure. So does he balance the referentiality of the novel with the intimate, confessional mode of its writing. Cole suggests that these two scales for assessing urban experience comprise multiple forms of exposure and compromised efforts to withdraw — true enough. Yet these views remain, even as a composite, inherently partial. The problems of exposure, vulnerability, trauma are quite different, much worse in fact for Moji, a victim of sexual assault, or for Saidu, and perhaps, given the violence with which Arabs and Africans are
subjugated in Europe, to Farouq as well. There is here a need for mediation through some kind of ethical formations and actions, the “line,” that as Julius says he wishes he might find to connect him to the “stories” of others. But the options offered in the novel, tenuous even in the moment of urban encounter, seem impossible to re-scale for the global.

LOST AND SAFE

The problem of a performative politics of belonging and togetherness ceaselessly confines the cosmopolitan author to spaces of transparency, so frequently is he called upon to account with simultaneous personal and scholarly resolve for the failures of his natal state or global modernity generally. At the same time, the very worldliness of the writer — using here Edward Said’s concept of worldliness, a kind of viscosity between and among objects and their historical/cultural/social contexts — is in some respects his function. The cosmopolitan writer is enjoined, in some famous tracts, to absorb all the “outside” and remake it in an uncanny, unique form. In this way, he is designated, in his exemplarity, as a kind of hyper-masculine Prometheus at the same time as he is, by withdrawal into the familiar (modernist) ambivalences of the self, a cipher for universal humanism.

This is a burdensome way of assessing literature’s role in the productions of subjectivities and cultures, yet it appears to endure in the production of global literature and its economies of legitimacy and prestige. Cole deals with this twofold situation very adeptly, oscillating between Julius’ performative worldliness — his command over an idiosyncratic array of texts and objects — and his withdrawal into the intimacy of a confessional mode that is at once capacious and ethereal. The world in all its clarity falls into the muck of memory and reflection (the metaphor of a “child playing with blocks” resonant here). The problem of deferral to a pose of literary worldliness characterizes

\[313\] Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne.*
the plot too, as I have suggested: Julius’ encounter with Moji, and the accusation that he raped her, evinces as much when Julius defers in his defense of his character to the Neitzschein parable I have mentioned above. One wonders if Cole’s decision to admit this accusation and its failed response onto the pages of the novel is not an effort to cancel at once the politics of empathy and the categorically-masculine performance intellectuality, which goes, predictably, un-remarked upon in the genre of World literature.

World lit is a after all correlate to the “project” of secular humanism, a whole intellectual or epistemic infrastructure of Archimedean progress, a “scientifically ordered and conducted research of reality,” in Erich Auerbach’s words. It is not a benign and certainly not a static geography, but a tide of worldly referentiality, into which writerly subjectivity disappears — either because one’s writing merges seamlessly general flow of humanistic ideas and practices, or because they are so declamatory to an Other that one has no other choice than to “hide out.” (Cole has been criticized by no less iconic a figure of World literature’s overexposure than Salman Rushdie for refusing to honor the relationship between world literature and secular progress. This after and several other writers protested PEN’s conferral of an award on Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical newspaper whose office was the site of a 2015 terrorist attack after the publication of an issue caricaturing the prophet Muhammad.314) One can chart these options through an array of transnational writings concerned with global infrastructures and the subjectivities these engender. Here I am thinking not of the networked nature of World literature, but of the “paranoid” variant described by Emily Apter, who notes in texts by Thomas Pynchon and Don Delillo the “referential status of infrastructure” and what she calls the “delirious aesthetics of systematicity.”315 Apter prefers a model that

emphasizes painful and difficult stops and starts, blockages, what she calls the “checkpoints and borders,” and out of these the traumas, oppressions, and ambivalences that characterize the uniqueness of each life in the overbearing context of the global. Her theoretical prism for exploring spatial infrastructure is translation, but the ethical dimensions appear here as well — they emerge from the immediacy of the encounter. She does not contrive a moral program, but attends to each encounter, each engagement with the materiality of the global. Thus while displacement, immobility, and exposure, and indeed the invention of a public identity vis-à-vis exilic trauma might itself appear to be a dominant global systems available, we must also pay close attention to the “embedded” and “trivial” vantage-points from which this systems are apprehended, experienced, and articulated. The idea is to admit differentiated experience onto the agenda of World literature, even if we acknowledge the world as an extant scale that merits critical attention.\footnote{316}{Rebecca Walkwawitz, \textit{Born Translated} (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 142.}

There are countless examples, many of which were written straight out of the complex of technics that characterizes global New York: Delillo, in an exemplary case, invests his fiction with a brand of paranoia that apparently stems from the technics of empire, fear of terrorism, discomfort at the abject inequalities of urban space, and takes direct aim at the place of the subject amid postmodern cultural politics. His \textit{Mao II} treats these themes by describing the stark juxtapositions between the camp-city in the Lower East Side’s Tompkins Square Park and the mass wedding led by Reverend Sun Yung Moon in Madison Square Garden, finding the perfect metaphor for both of these in a Chelsea gallery showing Andy Warhol’s great, cultic lithographs of Chairman Mao; these spectacles serve as a background for the paranoia of the novel’s protagonist, a photographer hired by a reclusive writer to join a coterie of fugitives in serving as a kind of decoy for a terrorist attack.\footnote{317}{Don Delillo, \textit{Mao II} (New York: Penguin, 1992).}

Joseph O’Neill, in his magisterial New York novel \textit{Netherland}, reduces globalist subjectivity to the
form of an equities analyst at a transnational merchant bank, bent over the blue light of his laptop, traveling the world via the solar eye of Google Earth: “with a single brush on the touch pad I flee upward into the atmosphere and at once have in my sights the physical planet, submarine wrinkles and all.” The world is in suspension here, the wages of war announced from above through the binarism characteristic of US empire — “with us” and “against us.” The global becomes an infrastructure of passive aggression, the most startlingly familiar referent for “you and I,” for “we.” And out of this incursion, withdrawal.318 O’Neill and DeLillo treat this withdrawal as a clearing for the difficult and contradictory musings of their protagonists, something they share with Cole, and thus force themselves to suppress the alienating or traumatizing effects of the “outside.”

Despite the exemplarity associated with performatively masculine World writers who address these forms of scrutiny, who imagine scrutiny in a particular kind of way because they are men (and often men of color), the problem is not limited to the prism of masculinist subjectivity. Quite the contrary. Edwidge Danticat’s memoir *Brother I’m Dying*319 takes a different approach to the question of global space-time and its technics, directing her work in a nearly perfect antagonism with the presumptuous expectations of categorically-feminine postcoloniality or multiculturalism and categorically-masculine discourses of the World (a moniker attached to surprisingly few female voices, despite the enormous production of transnational texts by women).320 Danticat’s memoir deals in the confined space of limited subjectivity — limited by narrative discontinuities, by fortified geographies and failed mobilities, by voicelessness and (geographic) marginality. Her effort is to recount the long and turbulent lives and deaths of her father and uncle. The first died in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, the other in Port-Au-Prince. Neither could speak at the moment of his death,

320 See on this subject Hazel Carby’s “Multicultural Wars” *Radical History Review* 54.7 (1992), 7-18.
and yet each, by way of Danticat’s prose — by way of the relational encounter between their literal inarticulacy and the allegory of speech staged in the authorial act of inscription and communication — expresses a need for and a reluctance to engage, as well, the “voice” promised by (gendered) iterations of US multicultural literature. “I am writing this only because they can’t,” Danticat says. In one text, “out of sequence and in fragments,” are three interweaving narratives, strained and distended and discontinuous, reflecting through their interaction a play of the author’s own dissolution and reappearance. In her effort to translate and synthesize, to “make sense,” Danticat finds herself unable to recount even significant details of their lives and of her own. She must defer, by way of an engagement with global infrastructures, to the premises of missed and lost communications, static and interference: “It reminded him how important voices were,” Danticat says, describing her uncle’s reaction to news of unrest in Haiti transmitted through a radio,

If you had one, you could use it to reach out to your loved ones, no matter how far away.

Technological advances could help — the telephone, the radio, microphones, megaphones, amplifiers. But if you had no voice at all … you were simply left out of the constant hum of the world, the echo of conversations, the shouts and whispers of everyday life.321

In posing this only-apparently extreme scenario — in which one’s dissolution is pulled through the unique but inherently limited capacities of a living body — Danticat emphasizes not the autonomy of withdrawal, whether in a paranoid or melancholic fashion, but the everydayness of not choosing this life but of living it anyway. The risk of writing this ambivalence into a memoir of others’ lives is undertaken by Danticat with acute and deceptive humility, a sense that the burdens of these narratives are not hers but that she will accept them regardless. It reminds one of the observation from Cole that life is merely a clarifying friction within the “swirl” of others’ stories; this observation

321 Danticat, 39.
is itself, in the implication that it might be universally applied, a wonderful rejoinder to any
categorical or classificatory schemes (citizen/alien, global/local, masculine/feminine) that deny the
essential marginality of every subject amid the actuality of such a “swirl.” In Danticat, this is a lesson
learned through the bureaucratic lexicon of transnational migration and its effects on subjectivity: in
lieu of a pure remembrance or the “right” to untroubled belonging, such terms as “arrivals,”
“asylum,” “urgent care,” “next of kin,” “an application ‘placed on hold’” remind one incessantly that
earthly and worldly experiences are characterized by incoherence and trauma, by infrastructures of
surveillance and obstruction. Indeed, the infrastructure wrought out of the conditions (and
commodifications) of exile and migration comprise one of the dominant global systems available,
the literary.

ON EXILE AND COMMUNITY

To review: we are overwhelmed by the obligation to expose ourselves, and to be exposed, before
two valences of the World — the faceless public of readerships, constituencies, governments, and
databanks, and the face-to-face, or screen-to-screen, exposure of everyday, interpersonal interaction.
We are estranged from the experiences of intimate contact and the functions of public decorum,
preoccupied instead by the mundanities (worlds, too) of technologized daily existence, which
generate a shallow field of consumerism and bureaucracy, of cultures whose only aims are
gargantuan projects of global interconnection, planetary belongingness, limitless progress, and total
knowledge. Humanist discourse has been converted into a trajectory, a “human project,” a global
analysis of process and production, of efficiency and mobility, so vast and unwieldy and unthinking
that modernity has essentially conceded (and this is Arendt’s great observation) any interest in pure,

unarticulated contemplation. It is no longer wonder at the “miracle of being” (thaumazein) that characterizes thought, but increasingly a calculus of human praxis (theoria). A bureaucracy of such practices has come to characterize the space of the global city, which is also — and here again are Cole, DeLillo, Naipaul, and Danticat — the space of world literature.

The very form of the World-picture, which as I suggested in Chapter 1 was among the animating concepts of international modernism, and which of course came under stark critique by Arendt’s teacher Heidegger, had appeared in its ubiquity around the time of her writing, with Sputnik flying over New York in 1957. “An earth-born object made by man,” Sputnik seemed to literalize “world-alienation” as “earth-alienation”: the Archimedean miracle of a satellite-in-orbit altered dramatically the ways humans’ relations to earthly space were conceived at a climactic moment of postwar (and indeed Cold War) discourse. The form of the global began to appear, generated from within but posed from without the confines of earthly limits. The earth, viewed from space, was an externality. “Only now,” writes Arendt, “has man taken full possession of his mortal dwelling place and gathered the infinite horizons, which were temptingly and forbiddingly open to all previous ages, into a globe whose majestic outlines and detailed surface he knows as he knows the palm of his hand.”

Concern over this moment was expressed by many critics of modernity who had found themselves living in exile amid the conspicuous processes and structures of Robert Moses’ rapidly, indeed recklessly modernizing city. The calling to arms of modernist critique in Adorno’s contempt for contemporary life as a mere “addendum of the material production-process, without autonomy and without its own substance”; talk of “uprootedness” as

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323 Arendt, Human Condition, 248.
324 Arendt, 250.
325 The dedication to Minima Moralia (London & New York: Verso, [1951] 2006) written in New York between 1944 and 1949, emphasizes commodification: “What philosophy once called life, has turned into the sphere of the private and then merely of consumption, which is dragged along as an addendum of the material production-process, without autonomy and without its own substance.
an “almost mortal disease among a subdued population” in Weil’s concern for the need for vernacular culture; and of course the will in Arendt to refuse the bureaucracies of modernity, and to resuscitate thus the capacity among human subjects for “action,” for a “vita activa”: these all sought to redress this synthesis of “earth” and “world,” and the alienation of the exilic cosmopolitan intellectual from both. The extraordinary power of this moment — in its cosmopolitan angst, its modernist drive, its obsession with technics and social-scientific novelties — is felt doubly today, and sometimes due to inherited planetary framings.

Here one can identify a connection between midcentury exilic intellectuals and contemporary World writers. In both cases, it is the horizon of total systematicity — a feature indeed of global capitalism — that spurs commentary on the limits of political action. In the Cold War context, the options for political identification were defined by ideologies and proximities. Today, they appear as a very short series of general attitudes; oppositional withdrawal or total immersion are the divergent routes of anxious, cosmopolitan exposure. Subjects are paranoid or complicit, fugitive or consigned — complimentary visions or points-of-view of the same sense of an encompassing totality. In the Leftist option, “disclosure replaces enclosure, piracy replaces copyright, fluidity replaces fixity,” and so forth, bringing together a mirror-antagonist to the unities of neoliberalism through declarations of abstract but networked solidaridad. So strong is the logic

Whoever wishes to experience the truth of immediate life, must investigate its alienated form, the objective powers, which determine the individual existence into its innermost recesses.”

326 Weil, The Need for Roots, trans. Arthur Willis (London: Routledge, [1949] 2005) 42-43: “Nowadays a man can belong to so-called cultured circles without, on the one hand, having any sort of conception about human destiny or, on the other hand, being aware, for example, that all the constellations are not visible at all seasons of the year. A lot of people think that a little peasant boy of the present day who goes to primary school knows more than Pythagoras did, simply because he can repeat parrot-wise that the earth moves round the sun. In actual fact, he no longer looks up at the heavens. This sun about which they talk to him in class hasn’t, for him, the slightest connexion with the one he can see. He is severed from the universe surrounding him, just as little Polynesians are severed from their past by being forced to repeat: ‘Our ancestors, the Gauls, had fair hair.’”

327 Apter, 107.
of this double cosmopolitanism that some on the Left advocate aligning with groups that seek to antagonize US empire. They cite transnational affinities with the “enemy of my enemy” and thus link arms with contras, anarchists, hackers, and the mujahidin, whose familiar anonymity represents a conspicuous form of cosmopolitan ego death. Some, appealing to the discourses of the antiglobalization movement, have proclaimed in manifestos and creeds to follow St. Paul (by way of Subcommandante Marcos), masking themselves in order to “be all things to all people.” An alternative route, somewhere between overexposure and writerly withdrawal, is pursued by the cosmopolitan writer, especially the kind of author who, in the Diogenic tradition, abjures worldly politics while remaining in the world. For while literature is featured here as producer — in epistemological terms — of limited political options in and of the global present, it does mark as well a “space” for assessing such options. This much is demonstrated by so many cosmopolitan writers from throughout the histories of cities such as New York; Teju Cole’s interest in transforming ambivalent encounters with cosmopolitics into a stage for the moral hazards of memory and self-assessment is only the latest, and yet a most acutely and urgently contemporary, example.

This uncertain position is situated at an interface with history, politics, economies. The authors who occupy it — due to their transnational heritage, their exilic worldliness — have no choice but to face the expectations, the unique forms of scrutiny and exposure, that characterize life on this threshold. The imperative, then, has to do with parsing, dismantling, “un-working” the world on the other side, arresting the narratives of destiny, progress, perpetual peace wrought by permanent war. It has to do, also (and here is the hard part), with admitting that the supposed space of free expression is itself a political space and part of a larger and at times unsavory epistemology. The question is thus how to “un-work” both material injustice

and the expectant politics that literature, as the very infrastructure of cosmopolitics, generates and sustains.\textsuperscript{329}

In the texts I have surveyed, such un-working comes dramatically to the fore — and not purely out of the clearing provided by withdrawal, but by way of intimacies, memories, anxieties, that problematize the incursion of global cultural politics.

I am adopting the term “un-working,” evocative as it is of the corruption of craft by mechanization that Arendt and many of her contemporaries bemoaned, from Jean-Luc Nancy, who uses it in an early part of his extended series of works on making a world out of disconnection and discontinuity. Such a world appears on very limit between the global circulation of materials, capital, and bodies, and the common if not explicitly or guilelessly “shared” experience of existential awareness (themes to which I turn in this dissertation’s next and final chapter). Nancy asks us, thus, to think of what he calls “literary communism” as an exemplary aesthetic correlate to forming-out-of. Literature, he writes, responding to Arendt and the generation of exilic anti-modernists who expressed anxiety over the Heideggerian world-picture, is neither the clarity of a “program” nor even the singularity of a “voice,” but a process of détournement amid the working of myth. “Literature,” he says, “interrupts itself.” It enacts a suspension of its own narrativization, arrests the reader and writer alike and exposes them to a common threshold, an infrastructure. At this porous limit are “unworked” and “interrupted” the sustaining myths of a community, whether this community is a nation or a region or a network of interests and individuals. Whole orders of storytelling, of the spatial and aesthetic logics, comprise the many myths of belonging, and are thus interrupted by the

\textsuperscript{329} The question reminds us again of Arendt, who seeks to understand how to release human capacity for action from the state of “tranquilized” acquiescence that concerns her and how, to subvert this loyal practice of striving and growing, to reconceive of human agency in the time of unfettered modernity, \textit{Human Condition}, 145: “If we consider the loss of the faculty to distinguish clearly between means and ends in terms of human behavior, we can say that the free disposition and use of tools for a specific end product is replaced by rhythmic unification of the laboring body with its implement, the movement of laboring itself acting as the unifying force.”
very act of narration that constitutes myth, as such.\textsuperscript{330}

But then there is the question of the surface alone, wherein the communistic space of literature is contrived. It is in a sense the mere knowledge that others are reading “this” too. The book itself is of concern as a central object of the global city. Cole provides an example in his first novel, \textit{Every Day is for the Thief}. His narrator sees a woman on a Danfo (a small bus) reading a novel by Michael Ondaatje, the Sri Lankan novelist and poet. Here arrayed outside of New York space is a working — and thus, by way of its protracted engagement in the temporality of reading: exposure and withdrawal, the object of the book and the agency of readers, the making of a world — and the defining of world literature — in a chance encounter that seems initially overdetermined, but which quickly resolves into a vague and indeterminate contiguity.

My mind runs a monologue as I watch the back of her head for the duration of the journey. I hope that she will not get off the bus before my stop at CMS, so that I can hop off as she does, walk alongside her, interrogate her. So that I can say to her, with the wild look common to all those who are crazed by over-identification, “We must talk. We have much to say to each other. Let me explain.” In the last row of the danfo, I work on my courage. Lagosians are distrustful of strangers, and I have to speak the right words to win her confidence. The bus crosses from Yaba over the third mainland Bridge into Lagos Island. In the shadow of skyscrapers, half-nude men in dugouts cast notes into the lagoon. The works of arms and shoulders. I think of Auden’s line: Poetry makes nothing happen. The bus comes to a stop. She disembarks with her book, and quickly vanishes into the bookless crowd. Just like that, she is gone. Gone, but seared into my mind still. That woman, evanescent as an image made with the lens wide open.\textsuperscript{331}

THE PRODUCTION OF NATURE, REVISITED:
ON CITIES, RUINS, CINEMA

A few themes have recurred conspicuously throughout this dissertation: mechanization, rationalization, practices that are self-consciously ecological, concerned as they must be with balancing needs and resources, sustaining certain processes, stifling and deadening others. Here comes to mind Robert Moses, who was one of hundreds of planners, theorists, and architects working under modernist paradigms to correct the inefficiencies and disorders, the visual aberrations, of dilapidating urban space. Robert Caro describes the young Moses standing over the marshlands of the still-feral city, aghast at what appeared before him. A wide swath of eastern Queens was a living ruin. Its streets were unpaved. Reeds and grasses, which sprang up everywhere, were blackened, awash with the feces and urine of horses, with motor oil and soot. Everywhere was ash and smoke and fire. And scattered around the barren meadows were what Moses called the “off-scourings, the cans, cast-off baby carriages and umbrellas of Brooklyn.”

It was against these kinds of landscapes — of waste, of want, of disuse and neglect — that Moses went about his work. They provided vital context to the concept of “renewal.” When he built on these fields the enormous Flushing Meadows Park, site of the 1964 World’s Fair, much of his work consisted of incinerating trash, hauling it into landfills and covering these with sod. It was through an apparatus of representation, in other words, that Moses attempted to tame the city’s wilds and ferry away its waste. Yet we know, remembering lessons from Jane Jacobs, that the urban craftwork is always

\[\text{Caro, 1020.}\]
visible from the level of the street. Jacobs taught us that we live in and about the constant unraveling of urban systems, which comprise a whole complex of discourse, affect, referentiality, and representation. All we have to do is look.

Consider Willet’s Point, Queens, a warren of junkyards, tire yards, demolition yards, of industrial machinery and waste, which sits just north of Flushing Meadows. A vestige of the city’s ash heap — what F. Scott Fitzgerald called, in a passage often quoted by Moses, “a valley … where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens” — the neighborhood has never been “renewed.” It is isolated, in fact, by three of Moses’ highways, which frame in their intersections an “iron triangle” of dereliction and rot. The streets remain unpaved. After Spring and Summer storms, the ground floods with sewage. Cars pass one another slowly, with difficulty. Chickens and dogs wander. There are dozens of people who live in Willet’s Point, though only one is an official resident. The others occupy stalled cars or share rooms in the backs of stores and garages. Most are immigrants and many are undocumented. They speak Spanish and Yiddish and Arabic and all labor, in some way, to dismantle and reassemble automobiles. Among these laborers are middlemen and intermediaries, bureaucrats of circulation who tend with ambivalence the many processes of global ontology — of which they themselves are a part. Willets Point is a whole ecosystem, made of bodies and their routed encounters, animated by an array of sensory stimuli. It is a living locus of mobilities, where objects of multiple displacements move in and out of material forms and merge as they do so with interplays of light and sound, forming in every instance an immeasurable and inarticulable aesthetic ecology that can only be gauged from within. The people who live there, who labor to maintain the city’s constitutive functions, comprise exactly what we

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mean when we talk about “global infrastructure.” But, in comprising this, they are no less agents of perception and expression and no less capable of social transformation. They recognize their centrality to the production of urban ecologies and, thus, to the violent politics of representation that sustains these ecologies and is sustained by them. And they recognize, too, their vulnerability. For the stark white bulbs of nearby CitiField, new home to the New York Mets, have recently joined (and washed into a state of depthless exposure) the garbled neon and tarnished chrome that have for decades given contours to the street. Willet’s Point is being razed. Its residents will have to go.\footnote{Sarah Maslin Nir, “The End of Willet’s Point,” \textit{New York Times}, November 22, 2013.}

The “sensory community” that continues to exist there, that will indeed continue in altered form after the last shop is closed and the last resident displaced, animates a recent documentary about Willet’s Point: \textit{Foreign Parts} (2010), by Directors Verena Paravel and J. P. Sniadecki.\footnote{\textit{Foreign Parts}, dir. Verena Paravel and JP Sniadecki, 2010.} The film charts a year in the junkyards to illuminate the processes and practices, what Paravel calls the “poetry,” of vitality amid neglect. The interweaving of global systems about the frictions of urban space are revealed, through the austerity of the film’s visual language and the obliquity of the ethnographic encounters the film depicts, to have been revealed already, innumerable times for countless people of countless contexts in countless positions. Ecology, the film suggests, is best perceived from within the workings of a (dys)functional urban infrastructure. It appears in the form of “experiential knowledge” that cannot be documented sufficiently through traditional representational practices. The film has thus complicated the suggestion made so frequently by contemporary activists and critics: that the scale of the global has attenuated the environmental movement’s “ethic of proximity,” giving subjects of the developed north license to dismiss global climatic emergency by referring to the modernist doxa “out of sight, out of mind.”\footnote{Rob Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor} (Cambridge: Harvard, 2011), 20.} While this
stripe of representational critique may serve a vital rejoinder to the rhetoric of some policymakers and administrators and to the architects of global resource extraction, it will seem a rather tired point to most city dwellers, who live and work around and about the only-apparently invisible detritus of transnational urban space. Even if we cannot identify with empirical assuredness the routes — the “social life” as Arjun Appadurai has said — of this or that piece of matter, the vast majority of us are exposed regularly to the processes that generate and circulate such matter, that reproduce the world and its social, cultural, and indeed its “natural” forms.

Spaces like Willet’s Point are essential to the city’s functions, even as they remain peripheral to the discourses by which the city regards and represents itself. Such spaces are no less pertinent for their marginality, however, for they provide marvelous vantage points from which to witness the workings of the city, its functions, and indeed its mythologies — mythologies of technics and systems, yes, but mythologies also of the “people,” the “public,” of “consensus,” and indeed of “difference,” imposed from above to validate and reproduce the territories of class and race and thus of power. This is a point I have made throughout this dissertation through reference to Jacobs, concerned as she was by process, periphery, movable parts, and especially by the permanent presence of ruination in cities and the relatedness of this presence to a host of longstanding social hostilities. Jacobs showed how some processes — the processes of contriving consensus, for example, or of zoning neighborhoods to accommodate particular kinds of development — exposed quite publicly the political agendas of the planning class, usually to the detriment of what she considered to be a symbiotic ecology of chance and change. All she had to do was demonstrate how clearly, in the situatedness of everyday life in cities, were all the signs of waste and wear and production, the detritus everywhere of modernist fantasy. From the embedded perspectives of the

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street and the subway, from the scaffolding where workers take their breaks and eat their lunches, all
the truths denied by Moses and his acolytes could be apprehended and interpreted. Jacobs’ point
was not only that the world-making epistemologies of the modernists were failing, but that the
modernists knew all along the paucity of their paradigms — and so did everyone else.

What Jacobs suggests is conspicuously “on view” in any city, and what the directors of
*Foreign Parts* have adopted as an aesthetic object, is nothing less central to modernity than the
“production of nature.”339 This term was coined by Neil Smith to describe Marx’s infrequent but
prescient writings on “nature” and to extrapolate from them a theory of capitalism’s global
expansion: the designations and classifications that prescribe humans’ social reproduction all follow
from the primary division of “nature” and “society,” which derive their difference principally
through the labors of material “production” and discursive, aesthetic, or representational
“expression.” The production of nature “in general” is inaugurated by the cultivation of land and
growth of a social surplus in any age and society, providing thus a sense of what constitutes a
resource, what constitutes wealth, what constitutes scarcity, giving meaning and utility to the concept
of nature through the purely material dimensions of ecology.340 However, in the unique context of
capitalist modernity, in which labor is converted into quantifiable and exchangeable “labor time,”
the production of nature serves to grow spaces as well of global industrial production, converting
laboring bodies into another kind of social surplus, integrated into the processes of trade,
accumulation, investment, and competition. In a classic instance of dialectical causality, the social
taxonomies prescribed by the global division of labor appear, by way of this process, in the very

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the second and third editions, which admit the extent of the discursive and representational
productions of nature, as well as Smith’s original emphasis on labor. See also Michael Eckers
“Revitalizing the production of nature thesis: A Gramscian turn?,” *Progress in Human Geography*
(2013).

material infrastructures of our world — ecologies too. Space and time become “fixed” in real matter. They are imbued with universal, immutable coordinates, which are in turn naturalized as the grid work of an essential earthly inheritance and called upon to validate the strategic patterns of disinvestment and uneven development driven by of global capitalism. Thus, abstractions — and abstract oppositions such as nature/culture, subject/environment — are concretized anew as the global division of labor is recalibrated, as the economies and the spatial features of cities and regions are rebuilt, and as the practices and epistemologies of everyday sense-making, the banalities of human prejudice, are converted into what Smith calls with irony “second nature.” Epistemologies beget ontologies, which beget still more epistemologies. It is not thus an “ecology without nature” that evinces some underlying truth, but the dialectical pairing of these terms. The effects of nature’s production are thus staggering and contradictory. They would seem in their ceaseless validation of the real-as-the-natural to forestall the possibilities of a social and political transformation “from below,” validating the tired critical tendency to identify this or that piece of matter as evidence of some general and yet “historical’ condition of “precarity.” But precisely because of the oscillation between the “abstractions” of discourse, representation, and aesthetic experience and the “concretization” of the “real,” the “actual,” the “empirical,” and the “historical,” such processes are inherently unstable, indeed unfixed. Material change relies upon the routes and mobilites, the aesthetic experiences, of living subjects, wherever in the world they may be. My concern is not, to be clear, the global trade in abstract labor, but the variegated and uneven experiences of producing nature, rife as these are with contradictions and gaps, characterized by acts of sustained labor and routed through, differentiated through, the prism of aesthetic

341 Smith, Nature, 33; See also Harvey, Geography of Difference, pp. 176.
343 Harvey, Geography of Difference, 210-248.
experience. Thinking aesthetics in this way — as the very labor of materialization, an active and not passive practice of perception — complicates the terms by which nature is named and classified in western and especially modernist epistemologies. It invites the (largely positivist) project of admitting into the scope of representation, or merely of criticism, materialities and material processes that complicate, reverse, and ruin the production of nature and that return, by recognizing these unbound and variegated ontologies, to a site of epistemological critique. We may thus admit onto the agenda of critical environmental discourse perspectives, and modes of expressing and interpreting these perspectives, that have been for the most part marginalized or suppressed — so marginalized, so suppressed, as the directors of *Foreign Parts* suggest, that they cannot be adequately represented through traditional modes of scholarly discourse. The returns may be substantial, too, especially for true interdisciplinary efforts: In *Foreign Parts*, the use of slow-cinematic practices enable the directors to engage and (by engaging) transform a whole transnational aesthetic ecology, built around the ruin of cities and their cultures and the many forms of labor forged therein. As an entry point, cinema thus allows us to consider the relatedness of aesthetics, ecology, and (here is the rub) social and cultural difference. Film participates in the dialectical process of worldly transformation described by Marx as the animating feature of historical time and the framework for the revolutionary agency of human labor. And it does so not through the consecration of making, but of exposure — the distended cinematic pace of ruin.

Ruination, as the anthropologist Ann Stoler has recently suggested, is a process that exposes the multiple, simultaneous temporalities and histories by which various relations of power, including those that comprise the production of nature, unfold and manifest themselves in living but inorganic (historical) ontologies. Ruins complicate, if they do not allay, the economies of representation by

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which cities remake themselves. Evocative of “dissociated and dislocated histories of the present,”
ruination exposes the differences in uses and functions of at-hand objects. It lays bare discontinuities
in object’s historical narratives and inconsistencies in the ways they are represented and
reproduced. Ruins become the basis for a kind of eco-historical methodology, the idea of which is
not to make realpolitik out of these increasingly ubiquitous formations, but to register, by way of the
“protracted quality of decimation” that characterizes the afterlives (or the “half-lives”) of
imperialism, a reconfiguration of epistemology itself. I call upon the process of ruination, and the
extant fact of material equivalency, to describe in Foreign Parts a distended aesthetic — a style that ruins
the concept of nature and thus the apparatus of its production, but that cannot erase it entirely.
What is of concern in describing such a style, and pursuing as I do in this chapter its manifestations
in cinema, is thus not the production of nature, per se, but the protracted time of its collapse.

REPRESENTATIONAL MATTER(S)

I have suggested that cities serve as crucibles for ecological thinking, for the production of nature
laid bare. Here I provide some historical context to this idea, emphasizing the contradictions
characteristic of governing and planning discourse from throughout New York’s history and
especially since the neoliberal turn in the 1970s. It is not only the familiar rhetoric of progress, of
togetherness, or of unity that interests me, but planners’ concern for concealing the city’s parts and
processes, a concern more complicated than what some scholars of ecology would admit. I am
referring to the representational complex criticized by Rob Nixon for its “psychology of denial,” its
efforts to banish from view waste, toxins, failures of infrastructure, et cetera — to establish, in other
words, “temporal as well as spatial denial through the literal concretizing of out of sight out of

345 ibid, 8.
346 ibid, 11.
mind.” Such efforts remain central to the way the city’s “resource imaginaries” 347 have been maintained, especially today, as manufacturing and waste repositories are relocated to “remote” parts of the global south. Yet throughout the city’s history appear also, conspicuously, the failures and inconsistencies of such representational techniques — and not always by accident. At these moments it is most often the social interfaces, and thus also the raced and gendered polarities of urban space and resource and waste distribution, that come into focus: pollution and toxification are well known to affect unevenly poor and minority areas, especially those sequestered in the furthest regions of the outer boroughs. 348 Sometimes these effects generate social movements that respond to these inequities. Sometimes they go virtually unremarked upon. And sometimes — as I will suggest referring to a number of “political ecologists” working at the global scale — the effects become abstracted and vague, screens for the self-possession of the metropolitan intellectual and the preservation of her scholarly discipline.

Virtually all modernist planning emphasized the contrived division between “nature” and “culture,” promoting in pseudo-scientific discourse “paternalizing ideas about the social benefits to citizens of nature” and imagining the “city as an evolutionary unit, and therefore as the inevitable result of conditions of growth and progress.” 349 Especially salient in this discourse were biological metaphors “infused with assumptions about the pathology of the racial and class composition of neighborhoods and their populations.” 350 Under such “evolutionary” paradigms, the city's biological referentiality was not only employed to naturalize the concept of progress, but to validate an array of Darwinian social programs. This was a primary aim, for example, of the Chicago School of

350 Ibid, 117.
sociology, which imagined the city to be comprised, in the words of its exemplar Robert Parks, by “the poor, the vicious, and the delinquent, crushed together in an unhealthful and contagious immediacy.” These theories are jointly evocative of what contemporaneous public health officials called the “miasma theory” of urban ecology, which envisioned public wellbeing as comprised by a miasma of biological determinants, including air, water, and soil toxification, as well as nutritional, psychological, and social factors. Moses, who publicly caricaturized the scientific metaphors of urban planning, was nevertheless indebted to a number of these movements, including City Beautiful, City Rational, and of course International Modernism. Especially the authors of the modernist *Athens Charter —* which as I noted in Chapter 1 was among the influential texts that endowed the architect-planner with a “poetic” purpose and apollonian perspective — believed that the visibility of process and waste, of discontinuous, movable parts, was detrimental to the growth of subjects and to the strength of industry and state. Yet Moses and other planners accounted for the acute awareness, among marginalized constituencies especially, of the untidy operations of urban planning and thus went to great lengths to exploit this awareness. For political purposes especially, planners sought to expose the process of modernization, and in this exposition to devise a politics of want, anxiety, and need. Though they were fond of adopting the “out of sight out of mind” trope when it was politically necessary, they needed as well to emphasize boldly the scale and difficulty of their work: “Am I not the man who blotted out the valley of ashes,” asked Moses in a late interview, attempting to salvage his own wrecked reputation, “and gave mankind beauty in its place?” The effort, expressed in this quotation and many others from throughout Moses’ tenure, was never just to make waste disappear, nor to deny the visibility of process in urban systematicity, but to show how colossal the task of environmental engineering truly was, and in turn to generate around it

352 Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 312
political and social capital.

It is thus a strategic but unwieldy economy of representation that has guided the planning practices of New York and other cities since at least the time of Moses. As the critic Julie Sze has shown, New York’s financial classes have adopted the practice of rezoning — designed with the influence of the planning paradigms I’ve described and revised dramatically in the 1960s to account for the city’s nascent deindustrialization — to utilize the visibility of blight and dereliction in the serves of remapping the city’s geographies of wealth and poverty.

While historically industrial manufacturing areas have been rezoned to spur real estate growth for an ascendant class of white-collar workers, so have the residential districts of poor and minority groups been transformed to accommodate the concentration of industrial and especially waste-treatment facilities. New spaces of accumulation require the exacerbation of social polarities and toxification of adjacent areas. This means also, as I suggested throughout the previous chapters of this dissertation, creating populations of abjection through the representational effects of austerity — effects that are roundly and dishonestly denied by administrators, who continue to deploy calculated biological metaphors to justify (and to naturalize) violent social policies: Consider the use of “contagion theory” to link the spread of AIDS — a “terminal urban dance,” “the final spasm of a dying city” — to the city’s financial insolvency; or the Koch administration’s favorite epithet, “parasites,” which was employed frequently to describe welfare recipients; or Giuliani’s “quality of life” campaigns, which emphasized waste, dog shit, and a variety of other quotidian environmental hazards. Or consider a recent report from the Manhattan Institute, a prominent neoconservative think tank, which argues

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354 Ross, 119-120.
355 Smith, New Urban Frontier, 5.
that “the crushing burdens of [New York’s] over-generous social welfare spending” and the “malign influence of the city’s over-powerful civil service unions” comprise a “complex web of different, but closely related, ailments.” Warning that despite the thirty years of austerity and privatization that have characterized the city’s neoliberal transformation, the “disease” of social affordances and collective bargaining, “has always been lurking there, just under the skin, waiting to flare up at any moment.”

The representational production of nature in the examples I have rehearsed is sutured together through the complicities of media, commerce, finance, education, and the state — a neoliberal model, to be sure, with eco-systemic properties and attached to an array of durable social-biological metaphors. Responses must be similarly integrative, considering the relationships between local, global, regional scales a host of issues that may appear, in the dominant (eco-critical) literature, unrelated. Organizations in the Bronx, in Staten Island, in Williamsburg strive to antagonize the immediate and present planning efforts (acknowledging their historical precursors) that have transformed their neighborhoods into blighted areas. This has meant criticizing not only the policies that generate air and water pollution or, in David Pellow’s study, the storage of waste, but those policies as well that produce economic and racial inequality. Such activists are compelled indeed by a renewed sense of “miasma” — regardless of its exactitude as a scientific metaphor, as Sze presciently reminds us in her account — to articulate also a critique of the global systems that necessitate waste, dereliction, and poverty. These communities may, indeed, be characterized by a lack of formal education and political capital, but are perhaps more knowledgeable than prominent

358 ibid.
359 Sze, 207-211.
360 Pellow, Garbage Wars (Cambridge: MIT, 2002)
361 Sze, 32-33.
or authoritative environmentalists about the histories and causes of social-environmental conditions. These groups do not express their concern for such conditions through the narrow or limited discourses of a “single issue.” They do not lack, as some critics have insisted, “environmental values.” On the contrary, because of each group’s unique situatedness in the workings of representation and urban ecology it is uniquely equipped to articulate a number of links between ecological crises in cities of the north and global economies of resource extraction, financialization, and real estate—and indeed to criticize the relatedness of these to the processes of racialization that mark spatial production everywhere. Yet despite this knowledge, such groups remain peripheral to mainstream environmental movements, denied the authoritative coordinates of a dominant social or discursive position and denied, as a consequence, the hope of or large-scale political effects.

The questions of position and scale—and their relatedness to the question of difference—thus come to illuminate many of the problems with representational critiques of environmental and ecological crisis. Here is called into question the “ethic of proximity,” adopted from a history of platonic rationalism, which presumes that were more climatic and social atrocities reported on, were these conditions brought better to light in their concrete particularities, publics throughout the world (or the city) would be mobilized. Perhaps the majority of writing on ecology and social inequality expresses this exigency, especially among critics who perceive their work to be part of a collective effort to disclose, to reveal, to “speak truth.” But of course these efforts are, at times, lost amid the thick traffic of so much scholarly discourse and its routes through and about the very circuits of neoliberal globalization. Acts of disclosure, characterized by the many contradictions of scholarly authority and positionality, bring to the fore the vexing problem of complicity—the problem of fulfilling, while seeking to undermine, the infrastructures and epistemologies of neoliberal politics. For example: the scale and unevenness of the global and the many simultaneous sites of global ecological concern force critics to abstract a number of already discontinuous and
contradictory particularities if they are to say anything at all about the stakes and scale of
environmental crises. Abstraction, however, is sometimes perceived to be a source of critical failure,
matching what Nixon calls capitalism’s “innate tendency to abstract in order to extract, intensifying
the distancing mechanisms that make the sources of environmental violence harder to tack and
multinational environmentalism answerability harder to impose.”

While ethnography is posed frequently as an alternative — finding in the “friction” of locality a prism through which to gauge global operations — it is also problematized due to its recourse to representation, even to “thick” description. Andrew Ross, in his own reflexive meditation on urban political ecology, describes the aimless narcissism of liberal metropolitans, deciding that “writing about others (nothing will silence this desire) is usually autobiographical”; one must hope “that the self-indulgence carries over, mutates, into some useful region of thought and action for which there are no guaranteed navigational coordinates.” Critical recourse to (broadly) ethnographic representation of “human ecology” may thus be compromised by its rehearsal of divisions, not only between subject and ethnographic object, but between subject and reader, filmmaker, viewer, and student, figures who are all transformed into receptacles for what sometimes amounts merely to sanctimony or pedantry. The metropolitan critic, like the planner, is no byproduct of the un-representable. The critic is a broker of representation who achieves as seat at table of metropolitan “modernity” (in Latour’s expression) precisely by inventing sites of alterity and conflating them with the usual objects of anthropological concern — indigenous people and peasants who are presumed, per Marx, incapable of self-representation.

362 Nixon, 41.
363 Ross, 29.
365 See Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, trans. Saul K. Padover (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1934) (emphasis mine): “Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond,
Of particular purchase is the brand of stylized activism that participates in recasting “nature” as a “desirable signifier with inherent worth and value to consumer markets.”366 Here we see the centrality of representation, and the contentiousness of critical accounts, in the ongoing production of nature. Even scholars and environmentalists generally antagonistic to capitalism find themselves, in their effort to affront the global scale of climatic emergency, rehearsing some version of this green signification, whether they depict nature as untrammeled and violent, as inert and empty, or as a uniformly positive, pure, or self-regulating system. So may the corporate agents who, as Heather Rodgers has shown, author the “greening” of the global markets, defer to the consensus among so many scientists, humanists, and environmentalists — the notion, expressed in the language of the deep ecology movement, that the earth is humanity’s “big other.”367 Even critics otherwise committed to Marxist thought may find themselves apprehending the opposition between nature and culture as permanent, itself natural and not cultural, fixed in stone and not, as Marx suggests, pulled in and out of “empirical reality” through an endless dialectical flux. While many of the very engaged political ecologists I have cited here rebuff so brilliantly the cynical and contrived ways nature is and is not represented as part of its production, the ends of their concerns could be broadened considerably by exploring a host of aesthetic questions; for writers concerned, furthermore, with issues of space, in the forms of proximity and scale, as I have suggested, they have nevertheless been remiss to engage the production as well as novel human subjects who are actually, concretely altered by their own practices, labor, representations, and indeed their own deviations in the

and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above.”

366 ibid., 8
context of constant historical and social change.

I make this point in order to say something (briefly) about *Foreign Parts*, which I will discuss in more detail shortly. The film seeks to engage the subjectivizing, aesthetic operation to which I turn next, precisely by problematizing (or invalidating) the representational mode of scholarly critique I have so far discussed — while at the same time engaging ceaselessly the apparatus of representational modes of cinema and indeed of urban space. As the filmmakers suggest in interviews and commentary, objects of critical representation are most often conveyed in documentary film through these same representational methods — metaphor, insinuation, direct discourse — sometimes employing the empiricist modes of “certainty and clarity” that supposedly grants ethnographic work “intellectual legitimacy”:

If documentary seeks, like ethnography, to convey a sense of what life is like to the people who live it, very few of us go through life in a state of certainty and clarity. Far from it. So there’s a kind of performative contradiction in films (and texts) that promulgate a series of black and white propositions about the world. In *Foreign Parts*, we sought above all to bring to the screen the “life-world” of the junkyard—not just of the human subjects but also the ecology of the auto parts, often in some liminal state between life and death and the animate and the inanimate—rather than to tell viewers exactly what they should think and feel about the place. …. The challenge for filmmakers, as opposed to anthropological scriveners, is to reach beyond what can be said.368

Or, I would add, to stop short of saying on others’ behalf. The film, without narrative voice, framing, or even some of the traditionally “reflexive” *verité* cues that serves as a kind of autocritique of documentary, refuses the legitimating conventions of the medium and emphasizes experience, or

“experiential knowledge,” as the subjectivizing link between filmmaker, object, and audience. But that is not all. For Paravel, the power of the film, and indeed the redemption of the representational problematic, comes precisely from this “sharing of the sensible,” which does not perform its politics or extend into the open relational space of viewership an ideology or aim: Sense, and not representational clarity, is the object of the film. Participation, and not the logic of platonic rational, is its mode. The junk yard, a site of ruin, evocative of the multiple histories of urban modernity, and not a sylvan expanse or primitive commune, is its clearing. The critique of empirical certitude expressed by Paravel and demonstrated by the film thus reflects my assessment of the role of the metropolitan eco-activist in the production of nature and of the preoccupations — disclosure, abstraction, self-possession — that deny her the satisfaction of thinking “ecologically.” To think this way, as some critics of the “new materialism” have suggested in comments to which I will return shortly, is to covert and not merely to metaphorize the ontological processes of ruination, entropy, and distension into the designated spaces of “thought” and “culture” and witness what occurs. The very distension of this unproductive witnessing becomes, thus, a ground for a new kind of lifework, characterized not by the modernist propensity to grow or to progress or to perfect, and to imagine these efforts as extension of “Nature,” but to plod and recover, to produce by way of experience, by way indeed of sentience, and by way of this production to become a subject.

SUBJECTS OF RUIN

Ecology should not be perceived as an esoteric issue, the province of intellectuals alone. It appears in one’s daily life, whatever one’s class or community, through the acts of labor — perception, imagination, experience, as Lefebvre reminds us — that reproduce social life. This is not a secret, even if it has eluded some critics. Indeed one of the ways Michael Bloomberg, who was hardly a friend to the poor, secured a positive legacy was to exploit the referentialities of living ecology in their
everydayness, across communities. Bloomberg, whose speeches I cite in Chapter 2 to mark a moment of self-referential maturation in neoliberal discourse, became at the end of his eleven years in office a prominent fixture in international debates around the “sustainability” of cities. He did not deploy biological metaphors, but observed the ecological dimensions of urban governance through his emphasis on public health, the balancing of spatial resources, and the cultivation of a (largely privatized) scenic-recreational waterscape throughout the New York archipelago. During his mayoralty, he oversaw a number of ecologically themed projects, many of which sought to “connect” the five boroughs and adjacent areas, while urging publics to adopt “a new global ethic of responsibility toward one another, and toward the future of God’s good earth.” The irony of Bloomberg calling attention to global frame and presuming it to be a catalyst for environmental action or awareness matters; for the patterns of financialization that generated this frame — and that obliged the global divisions of labor, resource, and waste — have of course grounded Bloomberg’s vision of the “luxury city.”

This irony is manifest in the spatial features introduced by his administration: the injunction to “build like Moses with Jacobs in mind,” which I described in Chapter 1, meant not only transforming whole parts of the city through low-scale development initiatives, but creating by way of these initiatives an exposed ecological infrastructure, which shows wear, admits decline, and emphasizes ruin. I have already suggested the extent to which ruin accentuates Brooklyn’s gentrifying waterfront, site of the Kara Walker installation I discuss at the start of this dissertation, where the conspicuous signs of age appear against the sleek verticality of skyscrapers. I have

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369 May Joseph, *Fluid New York: Cosmopolitan Urbanism and the Green Imagination* (Durham: Duke, 2013), 139: “Under Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030, the city is consciously transforming its infrastructure at all levels — land, air, water energy, and transportation. The manifesto proposes a vision for ecological sustainability and the reclamation of New York’s waterfront as a space for enjoyment and public leisure.”

discussed, also, how strategic instances of ruination and deterioration, generated in reference to neo-expressionism, marked the gentrification of the Lower East Side. In these examples, urban ruins are conceived by power to create an authenticating style — a style adopted by planners throughout the world in the drive to revive and commodify urban imaginaries. Some efforts, like Bloomberg’s celebrated 2009 Highline Park, a disused elevated subway track tangled in wilds, have generated whole living ecosystems and dramatically transformed districts of derelict spaces into clusters of tony buildings and museums (what is sometimes called “the Bilbao effect”). Yet, such transformations, as critic May Joseph has observed, tend to reveal as well the strategic disinvestment and inequitability that attends any such project — the shuttering of nearby buildings and services, the rezoning of these districts to accommodate the interests of wealthy and powerful people, the privatization of public spaces, and as a result of these processes, the dramatic exposition of a landscape of precariousness and anxiety. From such vantage points, especially at moments of crisis, such as the power failure that followed 2010’s Hurricane Sandy, there can be gathered an “acute sense of two topographies, two cities.”

This fact would seem to confirm the views of scholars who discuss the ruination of such cities as Detroit, Baltimore, and New Orleans, imagining this process to be a cynical contrivance by neoliberal planners, offered in a conciliatory gesture to artists and bohemians who find such ruins “beautiful”: “As faith in a better future erodes,” suggests the art historian Dora Apel, writing of post-industrial landscapes, “the beauty of decay helps us cope with the terror of apocalyptic decline.” Yet there is something more generative in this double-vision than the mere trompe l’oeil of disinvestment. What appears is rather a consciousness born by the sensory experience of multiple

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ecologies in the here and now of built space. Such a consciousness may reflect the extant facts of neoliberal planning, but it is not itself a contingency of neoliberalism; it is merely the bearing of witness. We must find a way to deal with these problems together: the problems of thinking ecology without denying the politics of the global and their impressions on these ecologies. We must, moreover, consider the representational devices employed by these acts of power not as a sleight-of-hand by which “nature” is contrived, but as an element in the real materiality of ecology. We walk a line here between the potentialities and futilities of human production, which are illuminated for us by the sheer ubiquity of ruin throughout urban space and the relationships of these to the concept of nature. Such concerns urge us not toward the political conclusiveness of the neoliberal thesis, but toward an aesthetic interpretation of human and social ecologies that does not deny the salience of neoliberal systems. We must proceed through an imaginary-material, rational-sensual complex of uncertainty and anxiety, vaunted to the scale of global climatic emergency and tethered to the trajectories and rhythms of transnational capital.

The only prominent theorist of ecology — and here I am using the term in its broadest sense — who comes close to expressing a theory of nature’s production that acknowledges, even if it does not allay, these concerns is Félix Guattari. I am referring to an eco-aesthetic continuum that produces the living subject, the complex of subjectivization Guattari refers to as the “three ecologies,” and the field of integrated philosophy he calls “chaosmosis.” Briefly: The first two of his ecologies, nature and culture, comprise one and the same machine for social conditioning, what we might call the aesthetic production of nature. These ecologies generate a “dispositional mis en scène, a bringing into-existence, that authorizes … a discursive intelligibility.” And it is against them that a third ecology — subjectivity — appears. It is the subject’s relation to a dominant mode of relationality that is at issue here, the subject’s suspension from as well as her immersion in and construction by the structured but still indeterminate forces of a social life. The art historian David
Joselit calls this a-situatedness “behind-beside-within-before,” a relation of infinite positions exemplary of a networked, immaterial ecology of telecommunications and information economies, something like the sense of exposure I discussed in the last chapter.373

Despite attempts by globalists to write into being a “dominant subjectivity,” or to write from a place of presumed universality, the “dissident vectors” of our own subjectivities, operate in a “counter-repetition … which invokes other intensities to form new existential configurations.”374 It is this suggestion, a proposal that “other intensities” are bound always to exist, that makes Guattari’s work more than yet another rehearsal of modernity’s double registers: being singular-plural, alone together, spheres, globes, and bubbles, the self and the net, the self and society. On the contrary, the revelatory power of Guattari’s essay is a kind of messianic indeterminacy, the insinuation of difference between subjects and indeed of a future necessarily but unpredictably different from the present:

By their very essence analytic cartographies extend beyond the existential territories to which they are assigned. As in painting or literature, the concrete performance of these cartographies requires that they evolve and innovate, that they open up new futures, without their authors [auteurs] having prior recourse to assured theoretical principles or to the authority of a group, a school or an academy . . . Work in progress!375

What is expressed here is mode of subjectivization apt to what Deleuze and Guattari elsewhere call a “deterritorial” program, wherein one’s “average daily life … is shaped by structures, processes, and products that originate elsewhere,” and is “inconceivable without global networks for information and exchange,” but where the parameters, the coordinates of this “elsewhere” are constantly

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374 Guattari, 30.
375 ibid., 26.
shifting.

The subject is formed as her daily practices and identifications are torn from their localities by only sometimes-voluntary mobilities, by changing structures of governance and resource management, by the globalization of telecommunications, by the expectations of labor in the neoliberal marketplace, and by the indeterminacy of every aesthetic culture — the complex of difference that generates an anxious, moribund “earth song” that knows no center, that obeys no constitutive logic. This is not just a discourse of rootlessness or of abstract nomadism, concepts that have retained purchase across cultural worlds and especially since the US environmental movement’s emergence in the 1970s. Nor is it a discourse of high-cosmopolitanism. “What is at stake in experiencing deterritorialized culture is not, critically, level of affluence,” as Ursula K. Heise says, but a whole differentiated process of subjectivization commensurate with the “various forces of global modernity” wherein one’s life is “lifted off” its connection with locality.”

Deterritorialization does not affirm a uniform, and certainly not a uniformly “good” or “balanced,” process or experience or condition. In another valence, the term refers the centrality of displacement as a constitutive process of imperial modernity in whatever form: the mass displacement of peoples for resource extraction, whether these resources are nutrients, land, or value — as in the complex of deterritorialization called gentrification. The “lifting off” described here has dramatically changed the very ways space and time, and our relation to them, are conceived and represented, exposing the inadequacies of generalizing representational strategies. Indeed, Guattari’s critique of “non-human temporalities” such as “the acceleration of the technological and data-processing revolutions, as prefigured in the phenomenal growth of a computer-aided subjectivity,” is too general and too breathless, even if the underlying premise — that we are pluralities, made of and in a techno-aesthetic ecology — is

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Here the invocation of protracted time of ecological damage offered in works by Ann Stoler and Rob Nixon, what Nixon calls “slow violence,” serves as a sobering rejoinder: we should survey the “attritional catastrophes [that] overspill clear boundaries in time and space” and observe the way these are “marked above all by displacements.” The scale and equivalence of displacement are suggested by what Nixon calls “the temporal distance between short-lived actions and long-lived consequences,” by the “protracted aftermath” of catastrophe where “the body counts of slow violence are diffused — and defused — by time.” The notion of temporal defusing is not quite accurate, however, for slow violence as Nixon himself says is attritional, accumulative, at times exponential. Distension is not attenuation. Ruins do not efface power. Even in the economy of representation that concerns Nixon and scholars like him, time does not necessarily “defuse” the political significance of an action, even if, materially and discursively, it does “diffuse” them, scatter them, displace them from their temporal and spatial moorings. Quite the contrary: as Stoler says, a focus on ruination submits to critique “the opacities that imperial formations produce between the elusive vectors of accountability and the lasting tangibilities in which ruination operates — and on which such formations thrive.” An ecology of protracted time and compressed space “redirects the engagement elsewhere, to the politics animated, to the common sense they disturb, to the critiques condensed or disallowed, and to the social relations avidly coalesced or shattered around them.” The imagined public, who evidently follow only those spectacles that gain currency through the banalities of mass mediation, is perhaps unmoored from any single catastrophe elsewhere, but fewer people than Nixon thinks live in Plato’s Cave.

377 Guattari, 38.
378 Nixon, 41.
379 Stoler, 9.
380 ibid., 13.
One of the methods by which *Foreign Parts* so strongly rebuffs the platonic terms of representation, disclosure, pedagogy, and ethnography, is bringing to the fore the concept of equivalency: the equivalency of matter and idea. Staging equivalency is an immense risk for any artist, although it is central to the processes by which art comes into being. Art is, after all, matter. Ideas are matter. I do not mean the object alone, but the ways the labor of experiencing ecology transform living subjects — a transformation that cannot be immediately or verifiably identified, and certainly not through distant, bromidic theory. This propensity for change suggests that in every instance matter fails to endure in a reliable or coherent form. Adopting ruination thus as a prism for critical urban geography, especially in its humanist variances, helps us do away with the fixity of the nature/culture binary. It helps us recognize the relationship between idea and matter to be one of equivalence and thus the value of two opinions — ethnographer and object, teacher and pupil — to each weather the same material processes. The stakes of recognizing the centrality of equivalency, and doing so through the prism of ruins, are as I have suggested quite serious. The residents of Willet’s Point cannot simply sit around and wait to be greened. What is lost is more, indeed, than the purity of the air or the clarity of the water: The threats are different. Condos, a mall, parking lots. Another extension to the field. The roads will finally be paved (dotted, no doubt, by a few of Bloomberg’s one million trees), but a living, indeed thriving, ecology will wither — even as toxins continue to secrete, staining and crippling, *ruining* these novelties.

A NOTE ON POSTMODERNISM

Stoler’s work, along with the tracts I’ve cited by Heise and Joseph, demonstrates the meeting of a properly Marxist production of nature and its derivations in representational and “new-materialist” critique — an intersection that is largely unexplored, and for which there is, regrettably, little space here. But a few things may be said about the implication of this meeting for theory and for history,
especially if we are to take seriously some recent critical commentary on the statuses of matter and modernity: the ecological problematic constitutes, according to recent writings by Timothy Morton, the definitive “postmodern” turn, for it collapses the principal binary of modernity. The division between nature and culture grounds the epistemologies of the European Enlightenment and its modernist afterlives; the increasing difficulty in maintaining these epistemologies in the face of the sheer obviousness of climatic emergency thus constitutes the current crisis. Global Warming, mass extinctions, brownouts, scarcities and resource wars, the much-discussed weaning of the “anthropocene”: these “humiliate the human” and reveal “the truth of the word humiliation itself, which means being brought low, being brought down to earth.” Morton insists that this moment is more “postmodern” than the last precisely because it is less concerned with exposing constitutive fictions than admitting the irreducibility of certain ontological problems. We are presented with “scalar dilemmas in which the ontotheological statements about which thing is the most real (ecosystem, world, environment, or conversely, individual) become impossible,” and are thus enjoined to abandon the “real” as a site of arrival, and adopt it instead as a premise for departure: we know, indeed, what is not real — oppositions, classifications, declarations of the natural and the human. The “big other” writes itself into everyday life, “irony qua absolute distance also becomes inoperative,” writes Morton. “Rather than a vertiginous antirealist abyss, irony present us with intimacy with existing nonhumans,” with a terrain hitherto “outside” the sphere of humanistic study or the Archimedean designs of progress and conquest.

We find ourselves at a prolonged moment of realization in Marx’s dialectical durée, transfixed still by the inadequacies, the illusions, of modernism — coded here as the production of nature — and thus generate works that problematize the concept of modernity, with all of the rational,

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381 Morton, Hyperobjects (Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 2013), 17.
382 ibid.
representational logics it obliges. Art amid the “end of the world” is characterized by confusion or blurring of constitutive parts — of foreground and background, for example — and the entrance of static, of interference, as a mediating (“medial”) formal element. Atmospheric and ambient aesthetics, especially those which are exemplary of the urban-aesthetic experiences expressed by critics and celebrants of the first postmodern turn, characterize this ecological-aesthetic mode. So are durable modernist concepts such as totality, universalism, and historical teleology, in this postmodern state of exposure, subject to “natural” processes such as entropy and “positive feedback,” suggesting the salience of the Marxist oscillation between abstract and material worlds. If Ross’ work serves as a kind of reflexive critique of the problems generated by representational ethnography and criticism, then this investment of cultural materials with ecological properties serves similar purpose; as the ontologist Peter Sloterdijk recently put it, “optimism too is subject to entropy.”[^383] Yet this remark and others are prone, in the breathlessness of so much “optimism,” to slip once more into positive metaphors and uncritical celebrations of the “real” and its conspicuous return in new materialist fields. Thus, when the “object oriented ontologist” Levi Bryant asks how “theorizations will function ecologically in social ecosystem,” and whether they’ll “be capable of assembling other people, organic and inorganic entities, and technologies to bring change,”[^384] he may be reminded that the capitulation of social life to processes perceived and sanctified in traditionally scientific fields is the very basis of modernism and the final aim — as I suggested at the start of this chapter — of so many of its most loathsome projects. While ecology itself may be a matter of ontological circumstance, our every word and phrase on the subject comprise a challenge to a network of epistemologies that never bore much resemblance to the “real” in the first place.

Just as we put faith in the “scientific community” for its apparent forthrightness on the subject of environmental catastrophe, all along iterations of scientific knowledge were failing to quell, and were indeed impelling, the sense of mastery that we call modernism. If the production of nature marks the origins of the social surplus, as Smith argues, it marks also the production of scientific rationality. It is the production of human dependence on the pseudoscience of modernism, exemplified by “progress,” by planning, by the managerial state, aesthetic consensus, and so forth. The invocation of postmodernism comes not, then, at the total collapse of any of these constructs, but a partial and uneven collapse, an entropic slowing, a wavering and sputtering, indeed a form of inevitable un-working, as I proposed at the end of the last chapter.

Here we think again of Jacobs and her derisory remarks on consensus, rationale, and technocratic governmenality, and indeed her proposal to imagine the functions of cities from a number of “embedded” perspectives. Though Jacobs of course abjured the cold realism of Moses, which he purported to be a calculated effort in scientific representation, and the rational planning proposed by Lewis Mumford, she did find some company in the aphoristic worldliness of Marshall MacLuhan, with whom she collaborated on many projects. Indeed, her suggestion that the economic growth and disintegration of natural systems mirrored a number of spatial forms found at other scales of life — clusters and densities that thrive, regenerate, differentiate, and indeed decline — demonstrated her own theory of nature’s production, which was transgressive because it refused the evolutionary movement sometimes imagined to direct these processes. In this respect, Jacobs was as interested as the modernists in urban forms’ similarities to nature’s, but declined to attach any of these to scientific or historical (humanist) discourse of progress. Unlike the emphasis among various modernist schools, for example, on growth and the aspiration of the human subject, Jacobs brought

the fore entropy, not as a metaphorical antagonist to capitalism’s growth, but as a literal, always-occurring ecological operation that only *happens* to serve a kind of worldly foreboding. So did she show how ruination tended to unmask the revelatory histories occluded (often by accident) by modernist planning and architecture. Indeed, the aimless, postmodern ecology that Jacobs suggests sustains urban space with some degree of balance and reciprocity has recently made her work a compelling addition to the genealogy of object-history. The theorist Manuel De Landa, for example, whose Braudellian theories of the generation of urban form are considered by some to exemplify a kind of postmodern historical practice, has cited Jacobs’ work on the ecology of urban economies and her theories of embedded positionality.386

I say this not to frame Jacobs as a precursor to the “new materialism,” but to suggest that her work provides a ground for postmodern technologists and postmodern humanists alike.

The long period of postmodernism sometimes described with derision by contemporary critics, like the ecological crisis that has altered dramatically the terms of the production of nature today, was a revelation. The social movements that I describe in Chapter 1 — movements for racial and sexual justice, for example, that comprise the “subaltern counter-publics” of the 1960s — emerged contemporaneously with Jacobs’ work and that of some other urbanists of her time, such as Lefebvre. They had much in common, including shared critiques of totality, of determinism, of western historiography and its systems of classification and reproduction, its epistemologies. The critiques of western, modernist doctrine expressed by scholars (associated ruefully by some new materialist critics with critical theory’s “anti-realist […] cultural turn”)387 proceeded on many of the same thematic if not overtly philosophical bases as the new materialism. They did much of the work

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destabilizing nature first, with significant if insufficient returns in social and political arenas. The proponents of this thinking came to such realizations largely through reference to urban systems and aberrations and saw in aesthetics a site for residual and critical energies. The various aesthetic and political movements that comprised the (first) postmodern turn derived largely from the miasma of visual stimuli characteristic of living and working in a declining urban environment, even if decline was not their “content.” The formal indeterminacy of these expressions, their emphasis on the simultaneous and juxtaposed, came from the confluence of partialities that marked the period before the consolidation of neoliberalism in its current consensual, managerial mode. It was this complex of “situated” epistemologies — of “street views,” in Jacobs’ pithy language — that accounted for dramatic transformations in scholarly practice and public culture. Irony, the palpability of the “end of the world,” and of course variations on “ecological thought” were derived from the frictions between the naturalized epistemologies of the enlightenment and the dissident epistemologies that were and had always been emerging, evinced for any subject in the pluralist melee of a few square miles of concrete and asphalt. So, indeed, were the cultural faces of these epistemologies and their crises.

The related concern in postmodern writing and aesthetics for exposing process(es) emphasized the politics behind classificatory schema, but expressed also, simultaneously, a critique of progress — the process behind making the future. Thus, so much artwork of “high postmodernism” demonstrates exactly the kind of “ambient” and “medial” tendencies characteristic of contemporary self-consciously ecological art (John Cage and other Black Mountain artists are exemplary). Postmodernism is precisely not, to be clear, the conversion of the world into a hologram or facsimile, but the exposure of the limits of the “world” itself, the exposure of modernity’s organizations and processes and will to let these ruin. To play amid the ruin of the episteme, and not to deny its existence, is called “postmodernism.” It is also the called the “urban
experience.” It is also called (and here is the point) “ecology.” It is, as Craig Owens says in his prescient discourse on what he terms “earthwords” of the artist Robert Smithson and his pairing of language with matter, “an investigation into what occurs when a structures is actualized by time.”

It is, as Smithson himself said, discussing the creation of no less iconic an ecology than New York’s Central Park, a “democratic dialectic between sylvan and industrial,” which obliges of its subject “a consciousness of mud and the realms of sedimentation.” It is, in the language of the architect of that park, the American Romantic Frederick Law Olmstead, who designed the park during the decade when Marx wrote capital, the idea that “the best pieces of artificial planting” could be “the result of neglect.”

CINEMA AND DISTENDED AESTHETICS

This may seem to have been a long theoretical detour. Its point is to mark the methodological kinship between ecologies and postmodernisms and to locate these in urban space. Practically, this kind of work means identifying sites of friction, sites where globalization shows not only its effects but the very workings of its social-cultural-political-aesthetic infrastructures. In identifying such sites, we must acknowledge the critical problems posed by compulsory recourse to the global frame. For whatever our methods — documentary, ethnography, journalism —, they cannot be relied upon to transmit comprehensively or fairly or coherently or provocatively the actualities of global processes, nor even the acute relatedness between these processes and their local faces. We discover in these contradictions of scholarly practice the cause of so much distant, abstract commentary. Sometimes these efforts represent the cannibalization inherent to a mode of empiricist thinking and

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388 Owens, “Earthwords,” Beyond Recognition, 49.
390 quoted in Smithson, ibid, 157.
representational criticism, the inevitable failure of any model that makes two contradictory promises: the first being truth, and the second being mastery. In realizing this (and such a realization sparked so much of the postmodernist discourse I have surveyed throughout this dissertation) we left with a kind of staggering problem: is there a way we can seek to employ these lessons? Are we not still working in and under and in naïve support of the conditions we seek to transform? Are we not agents after all?

We need to think our relationship to the textual matter we analyze and interpret. We cannot pretend to remain outside the “text.” This form of oppositional thinking, which, as Rancière suggests, is an “embodied allegory of inequality,” reflects too much the oppositions of nature and culture, of knowing subject and ignorant object of ethnography. We would do better, I submit, by adopting the reflexive but ultimately rather direct and unencumbered methods advocated by the filmmakers of Foreign Parts. These would constitute vital reforms in our modes of writing about ecology, for they necessitate accounting for the politics of racial and cultural difference, which is no after all an ancillary but a central concern of urban environments and the processes by which matter — real, living matter — is made and remade. Cinema has proven a unique medium not only for documenting or transmitting but for participating in a kind of aesthetic ecology. I have suggested, moreover, that adopting ecology as a holistic but hardly totalizing or universalizing prism may help us apprehend both the interconnectedness of properly irreducible objects as well as the disconnectedness of epistemologies that so often generate them. It is not just, I wish to emphasize emphatically, the epistemologies of capitalist modernity that appear as real matter. It is on the contrary whole worlds of partial and fleeting exchanges and frictions, cultures and geographies of difference and indeed of hostility. This vast aesthetic ecology generates structures of knowledge all its own, structures which may not endure, which may not materialize in the form of an “historical record,” but which are real nonetheless. This is a lesson (to review) that does not appear first in the
writings of the “new materialists” but in the writings of the old. It is in the writings of Marx that the oscillation between “abstraction” and “concreteness” are suggested to be the very animating substance of human life, of the relatedness between the subject and the world. While the agency of human labor is proposed in the writings of most of Marx’s followers to exemplify these processes, it is also through aesthetics that such real, material changes take shape.

The directors of Foreign Parts, who’ve found in the figures of immigrant laborers exactly the agency proposed by Marx but modified indeed by the other authors I’ve mentioned, engage these processes by joining them: matter and experience and practice, which comprise an aesthetic ecology, a “sensory community,” undergo the very transformations to which Marx directs us. We are witness to their untethering and displacement, the “determinationalization” of objects and sensations and bodies. The “parts” that comprise all these elements in a living ecology reappear in new combinations, new assemblages. Many of these are framed by the film, and indeed by the “frame” itself, which captures a moment of sustained (but ultimately fleeting) labor: a man stands, posed, muscles flexed, with a hose, wrapped around his bare shoulders, spraying an arc of white paint; another cuts a cord from the engine of a car, which, suspended from a crane, opens like a gaping mouth; another dresses steaks with Heineken and salt and garlic powder; another throws these on the grill, misses, drops one on the ground; another wraps himself in tefillin, says his prayers; another sings:

Puerto Rico, / cuando mis labios pronuncian tu nombre / mi corazón se acelera y siempre espera / seguirte a ti / Cuando de niño, yo jugaba en tus calles / que con cariño viven en mi. / Tus lindos montes, tan bellos tus valles / que en esa isla, deseo morir.

This is ecology. The images and sounds accumulate not only in the “real” sensory space of the junk yard, but by way of the actual infrastructure of filmic processing — exposure, clarification, rendering — and in the many spaces of mediation between the street and the screen. They calcify in a number
of immediate and legible forms, even if these forms are also rightly perceived as faces and surfaces of other forms at greater and invisible scales, which are themselves never solely or essential whole.\footnote{See Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 2: The Time Image} (Minnesota, [1985], 1997).}

Though the setting of the film is peripheral, its reach, by way of the officially undisclosed but everywhere available networks and circuits of global exchange, of aimless movement and entropy, seems total. Though its style is austere — and conspicuously so, as some critics have noted —, its long, silent shots convey many temporalities at once, exemplary of the new cinematic movement known as “slow cinema.”\footnote{See Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, \textit{Slow Cinema} (Edinburg Univ Press, 2015).} The mix of sounds, which is also a mix of languages, of music, of rhythmic comings and goings and aberrant crashes, puts ethnographer and object, filmmaker and audience, into a state of diagenic trance, the nearest cinematic equivalent of

Amid this sensory world-making appear as well the names of cars and thus the very intrusions of multinational capitalism into the terrain of human speech, the familiarity of brands a striking and indeed humorous tribute to the endurance not of capital but of its abject afterlives. A man walks through a library of doors and mirrors, fenders and hoods:

\begin{verbatim}
tengo las puertas de taurus, de intrepid, de camry, de maxima, de geotracker, de taurus, de lumina, de neon, de tercel, de crown victoria, altima, maxima, camry, accord, civic. puerta de infiniti, culteri … puertas de integra '94, '95. tengo puerta de civic de 98, accord '98, '92. ja si, des es tudo de quando si.
\end{verbatim}

In this seemingly endless registry of global matter, merged as it has into a collective lifeworld, a “sensory community” appears of an abstract wholeness: the cosmopolitan experience, the global city, the fusion of technology and labor. Nobody can even finish a sentence, so loud are the planes landing at nearby LaGuardia airport, so constant the churn of the No. 7 train, which courses by every fifteen minutes. This conceptual unity comes to the surface but reveals in this surfacing its
own illusory frailty, the essential ephemerality of matter and the indeterminacy of worldly intentions. Everything and nothing, thus, seem at the foreground, which seems also to be the background. The same may be said, indeed, for the ethnographers and their objects of criticism. As the directors themselves have suggested, abjuring critiques of their work by “academic” anthropologists, the dissolution of foreground and back through the inclusivity of film means also a dissolution of the traditional terms of ethnographer and object of inquiry (a lesson from the urban actualities of the Lumière brothers, if not from the history of ethnographic documentary that is often called upon in warning so that anthropologists do not mistake the practice of looking for the work of ethnography).

Paravel is hardly absent from the “lifeworld of the junk yard.” She participates, offers her phone when the woman she interviews needs it — her husband, who is being released from jail, arrives quickly, happy to return to her, to return as well to work, happy to see Paravel and even her camera, to hear how her “school project” is going. The camera is always there, a source of constant conversation and acknowledgement, an invitation to the audience to participate as well, and in this participation, to realize a subjectivity that is deeply and necessarily political. This operation does not occur in a “correct” way, and cannot be counted on to “solve” the problems that provokes it — to solve, that is the moving ontologies of the global or the joys and anguishes of the social that are, through the interplay and ruin of these ontologies, brought to life. For we are there, too, we viewers, we appreciators. We are there when Paravel joins the neighborhood’s only “official” resident in waiting anxiously to be heard: he waits in an empty council chamber, empty but for the ethnographer and her camera, and continues waiting as the shot dissipates, his very chances at autonomy ruined, decimated through the protracted time of bureaucracy and development, allegorized in his plaintive silence. How long will the committee of Bloomberg appointees take? Not even long enough to hear how devastating the latest plan, which will clear the shops and evict the
many people who live and work there, will be. They are nowhere to be seen. There is no hearing. Willet’s point doesn’t appear to matter.

Here the film manages to achieve what criticism cannot — to combine views, and in this combination to evince a basic but vexing truth: disclosure itself comes as a byproduct of the aggregate, the overlaying of, but also the discontinuities between, perspectives. Disclosure must deal with difference. Cinema may thus seek to imply, if not to generate, multiple temporalities: the time (as Deleuze says) of a single flicker of an image, and the distended time of the always-implied duree, the life of a person, of a vehicle, of a neighborhood, the length of a song. Cinema thematizes the ephemerality of this coming together and falling apart, of the space and time of difference. It conveys this through the limits of the frame, the limits indeed of what can be achieved in a film. Cinema admits it limits, and makes a demand: it is thus up the audience, knowing already what a car is, what a city is, to extend the features of the film into their own milieus, which converge in the form of the simultaneous, discontinuous, illegible and irrational ecologies — whether in the open air of a junkyard to the darkness of a theater.
Conclusion

THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

Cities demand a horizontal view of history. Through the rituals of preserving and admiring old architectural forms and through the performances and commodifications of nostalgia, we may recognize those parts of life that have not changed so greatly or dramatically over centuries, but which in their redundancy give the city something like the sense of coherence or continuity planners attempted to impose from above. The recurring preference for the individuation of everyday experience, the preference, thus, for aberration and deviation as themselves “common sense” elements in the working of urban space, is one such continuity.

This is a point that has been made elsewhere through reference to Michel de Certeau and the ways his famous vantage point — the “solar eye” of the observation deck atop the north tower of the World Trade Center — allegorizes the work of the urban historian. History is archaeological, speculative. Yet it is always at hand.393 History appears in the simultaneities of space, in sites of affirmation and resistance. History is, in this sense, inherently partial, since it is “spread out” before every spectator, who must do the work of ordering with some kind of guide. Through primers and textbooks, through the meticulous ordering of archives, and through iterations of the

393 Thomas Bender, The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea (New York: NYU, 2007), 103: “Even as he wishes to rescue the ordinary lives of the city, Certeau, like the planner, grants them too little. There are authors to the stories, and spectators as well. The narratives, however, inevitably remain obscure; one will know there is a story, but not be sure of its origins or its trajectory. What Certeau, like the planners, omits is the historicity of the city. The two structures of perception to be examined here also constitute two attitudes toward history: one largely denying or freezing history into a perpetual urban present; the other insisting that the city itself is historical, perhaps even a sum of micro histories. The ordinary people of New York are continually and partly making their own and the city’s history. Although Certeau does not say it directly, he implies, quite correctly, that twentieth-century planning converts the city into an abstraction, often articulated in either geometric or quantitative terms. What he does not say, but could say, is that history resists abstraction, and insofar as one understands urban places as the precipitate (social, narrative, physical) of lived experience over time, the historical city represents a contrast to that of the planners.”
map — the Borgesian map, which doubles the city it is supposed to merely represent — the past appears with doubtful but useful clarity. These sites are multiply ontological, troves not merely of witnessing or of documentation, but of doing and keeping done, of making. They are records of production — perception, conception, and experience — and are not so different in this way from other heterotopic spaces: warehouses and graveyards, disused subway stations whose mosaic walls, if they are not ruined, are miraculously preserved, Vesuvian.

Kara Walker’s richly stubborn work, *A Subtlety*, stages an assault on the idea of a static or a distant past. It ridicules the ways history is stripped of its politics by the discourses of progress and overcoming. *An Homage* (to repeat the its full title) *to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World*, the work displaces the spatial moorings of colonialism into sites and practices of contemporary everyday urban life, first of which is displacement itself: the spaces of the gentrified Williamsburg waterfront and of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant in particular are identified by Walker’s composition as terrains of this ongoing, coordinated world-system.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, contemptuous, like Walker, of the expectations of an artist of color in a city seemingly driven by the exploitation of difference, writes into and out of such spaces a critique of redundancy. The deliberate ruination of the street is replicated by Basquiat on canvases covered with the referents of empire, slavery, and diasporic cultures: bones and chains, tools, masks, winged bodies, words like “liberty,” “loans,” “slave ship,” “mattocks,” “the dark continent,” “griot,” “Toussaint L’Ouverture.”394 These words are circled and underlined and crossed out, marked as if by centuries of wear. So do these themes appear in the works I have discussed already, Basquiat’s inscriptions on the walls of the gentrifying city: SAMO (Same Old Shit) is a critique of redundancy

394 See for example Basquiat’s “Daros Suite of Thirty-Two Drawings” and his “Untitled” from 1982, featured at his solo exhibition at the Fun Gallery.
masked, as redundancies are, by talk of the “new.” SAMO expresses the failure of “bohemia” to throw asunder its roots in privilege, in appropriation, in inauthenticity, in its guileless aspiration to be Other, and the cynical bargain conceived in the form of the urban frontier. Those designated canvases, renamed during the short life of the artist the “East Village,” “SoHo,” “TriBeCa,” are framed through frontier discourse as objects of empire. They become ironic spatial promises of and to a “new world.”

Teju Cole (still more contemptuous) describes the slave burial ground that abuts Wall Street. It is memorialized today by a circular stone plaza, itself a representation of the globe, tilted, with West Africa — modernity’s entry point — at its center. Some fifteen thousand people are estimated to have been buried on six acres in lower Manhattan during the century before George Washington took his oath of office on the steps of Federal Hall. Cole, who is himself a historian, does not dwell on the mysteries of this distended historical durée, but, again, on the semblance of direct continuity (and concern over a contiguous “loudness”) between new worlds. His narrator thinks of his father, buried in Lagos, remembers wearing a suit to the funeral, remembers and in remembering finds himself arrested, “midturn,” by ambivalence. The point is not (just) to bear upon the politics of the present, where the exclusions of built space — the proverbial or literal wall, which is also, in every case, a frontier — feature centrally in contriving the new. It is also to recognize the “here and now” of Dutch settlement and its victims and its effects, and what these are in the unbound ecologies of spatio-temporality. The walls of the settlement have not gone away, they are merely adorned with Bloomberg computer terminals, which chart the fortunes (and losses) of investor-consumers globally.

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How many other such sites are there in New York? To ask this question is to admit ecology onto the agenda of history and thus to transform our interpretations of the present. It is “the peeling of the skin back to the bone.” Here are seeded contestation and disagreement and the impressions that must be described as aesthetic. Confusion, epiphany, sadness, and calm are all in their unique, limitlessly variegated modes, generated by this sense of time in space, whether in the examples I have named or in the everyday banalities of spatialized history: in the imagining, for example, of a pre-modern Manahatta or in the great allegorizations of encounter and empire that occur when anyone sees the replica of Henry Hudson’s tall ship sailing north on the river, celebrating a “founding.”

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The “Global University” in its outsized, networked banality is exactly this type of everyday monument to the past-in-present. New York’s private institutions have attempted to invest their sustaining histories of power — hierarchies, stratified verticalities of privilege and influence — into vast horizontalities of living wealth. It is not venerability alone that generates the social value of Columbia University or NYU, but a history of attachments to the “global” within and without their ivied walls and gothic arches. The list, as we know, of things that in the contemporary make these universities “global” is very, very long: their satellite campuses (Shanghai, Abu-Dhabi, Accra, Nairobi, Mumbai), their global and area studies curricula, their ceaseless but calculated emphasis on diversity and diversification, their very centrality to and in global cities, as incubators of the “global citizens” who will “man” the global economy. The propensity of institutions both to “collect the world” (James Clifford’s term) and to produce the world, makes them extraordinary outlets to alterity,
sites of touristic encounter and reverential appropriation, justified or warranted or excused because
the schools are at once icons of the old and rich and powerhouses of the young and eager.

Yet making subjects “worldly” has long been the effort of the institutions that have only
recently adopted the “global,” as a requisite mantle for doing business. Columbia University,
-founded as King’s College by a board of wealthy and influential professionals in the 1750s, was an
experiment from its start in urban worldliness. Its founding trustees were cosmopolitan secularists,
who, affiliating themselves with the anti-sectarian salons associated with the European
enlightenment, believed the still-nascent city of mercantilism and law to be the perfect environment
for the meeting of “men with the world.” New York University was founded in the 1830s precisely
in order to train the middle classes in professional life. The institution emphasized learned societies
and social clubs, apt environments for well-adjusted (Christian- secular) American Victorians set to
make fortunes in nascent transnational industries. Even in its nineteenth-century incarnation,
NYU (then the University of the City of New York) emphasized the relatedness of the city to the
world and to the very terms of contriving such a world out of the deliriousness of the city’s
emerging professional-managerial bourgeoisie — who had gone to NYU in the first place to become
bourgeois and, quite because of the institution’s only seemingly provincial commitment to its place, to
become worldly. NYU’s first chancellor James Matthews described the school’s exigencies in the
form of the global city “in a plastic state,” which “has shot up with a rapidity that defies calculation,
numbering in its population multitudes from every quarter of our globe which are not yet
assimilated into a common character or by a common spirit.” The sustaining genius of these
institutions, in the years since, has continued to be a practice of conceiving the world and the city

398 See Louise Stevenson, “Preparing for Public Life: The Collegiate Students at New York
University 1832-1881,” The University and the City ed. Thomas Bender (New York: Oxford, 1988),
151-154.
jointly out of curricular commitments to the “global,” and making of this juncture a passage for many, many generations of New York’s elite (in the first place) and bourgeois (in the second) progeny.

This process validates these schools’ cherished place in American civic life as well. Such institutions may, by churning out transnational compradors, deny identification with the state, deny even in their official dicta a national attachment, preferring to link themselves to “new” and still “newer” world orders of the global, the neoliberal and so forth. Yet they confirm in this performative denial exactly the posture of the global city with regard to its national frame, arraying the treasures of the world, disseminating languages and cultures and modes of exchange. So worldly indeed are the graduates of global universities that they come to serve as interlocutors, bureaucrats and intermediaries, between nations and cosmopolitan bodies. They are trained to be expert in the banalities of capitalism, in other words, and are perfectly nationalist in this regard. The use of global curriculum for nationalist commitments, which as I’ve suggested follows rather directly from the ways worldliness was conceived at these schools in their infancy, is a major point of contestation.

Practitioners of global, multicultural, and transnational studies have for some time expressed concern over the displaced returns of teaching such work, observing the ways students of even radically-framed discourses such as postcolonialism and critical race theory may be investing their studies with the logics of transnational corporatism or re-inscribing divisions and conquests by naming the Other, typifying the marginal, emphasizing the abject, and so on. Recently, Critic Jodi Melamed has followed such theorists as Hazel Carby and Gayatri Spivak to name outright the collaboration between liberal multicultural institutionality, global (neoliberal) politics, and state-led white supremacism; their meeting, she suggests, is a function of contemporary humanities

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curriculum concerned by what its authors consider to be edifying discourses of difference. The invention and the commodification of “enlightened multicultural global citizens” has, in Melamed’s account, channeled the limited gains of the US civil rights movement into a “rite of passage for white students, a means for them to honor and participate in (the spirit of) antiracist activism as consumers in a way that did not antagonize but furthered racial capitalism.” At many points between the founding of such schools and their triumphant global conquests today, have they emphasized the acculturation of worldly subjects through limited exposure to difference, to poverty, to marginality. As Melamed observes, this has occurred by way of the discourses of racial uplift and protest nationalism that characterized these institutions’ handling of civil rights and its cultures, through the emergence of protests on university campuses against South African apartheid and for various kinds of boycott movements, and of course through the institutionalization of multiculturalist US literature.

So have instances of multicultural exposure been provided through these institutions’ immediate geographies. Formerly working-class, minority neighborhoods like Manhattan’s

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401 Melamed, Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence and the New Racial Capitalism (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2011), pp. 36: “Literary studies at US universities socialized future member of the professional-managerial class, whereto white, of color, or international into progressive constituencies for regressive public policies and a grossly unequal system of global capital accumulation. That is, it taught them to perceive themselves was antiracist and multicultural, which was in line with the period’s corporate humanism, in a manner that allowed the material conditions for a new apartheid between have and have-nots to flourish. Students received pastoral care that integrated liberal-multicultural concepts into their sense of self-actualization and prepared them to manage populations abandoned to the punitive effects of post-Keynesian politics. … Because multicultural literature was presumed to be authentic, intimate, and representative, white students with minimal knowledge of or contact with radicalized communities could nonetheless presume enough familiarity to legitimate their managerial-class position. The capacity of books (and other cultural commodities) to stand in for people’s useful considering the gap between the commitment of colleges and universities to diversity and the general decline of African American enrollment.” See also Hazel Carby, “The Multicultural Wars”; see also Spivak, “Who Claims Alterity,” Remaking History eds. Barbara Kruger and Phili Miriam (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1992), reprinted in Aesthetic Education (Harvard, 2013).
Morningside Heights, as well as such iconic “frontiers” as Hyde Park in Chicago and South Central Los Angeles, provided exactly the kinds of edifying, indeed “cosmopolitanizing,” encounters characteristic of liberal arts curriculum. The sharp differences between students at such schools (Columbia, the University of Chicago, and the University of Southern California) and the people who live, or lived until recently, in these schools’ neighborhoods has confirmed the purchase of the city as a lab for conflicts of interest between classes and races — confirmed the sense, as Melamed says, that institutional (or urban-institutional) multiculturalism is the localist face of “global diversity.” Just as the place of these institutions provides much of the “human infrastructure” for globalization (even in its rather sunny, seemingly compensatory forms, such as global academic consortia and transnational NGOs), so does it produce the sustaining allure of global corporate and US-Nationalist cultures. And more often than not this allure is itself coded in the racialized discourse of urban spaces and the narratives of these spaces’ “taming” or “civilizing.” Thus such schools have been able to gentrify neighborhoods by utilizing a number of durable alibies — patrimony, pedagogy, worldliness, the making of modern subjects — as a way of having it “both ways”: On one hand, the “wretchedness” of such places, or the memory of wretchedness in the storied histories of the institutions and their cities, remains a draw for liberal arts students who are already schooled, like all budding modernists, in the frontier geographies of la vie de bohème, on the other hand, it’s “safe” to reside there. Everything has been taken care of, parents of students will be happy to know.

This two-fold practice of accommodation has been conceived by marketers and retailers, forged indeed by the puerile metaphor of the “Radiant Child,” and has come full circle in one of the most prominent narratives in American cultural politics. No less iconic a figure than Barack Obama seems to embody it, and not just through the hindsight of his presidency. I mean the author of Dreams from My Father, the child of grass roots politics and inheritor of postcolonial ambitions and
expectations, the affiliate of the cosmopolitan Left (an associate, as a number of right wing commentators have noted, of Edward Said). He is described in one popular journalistic account as a New York bohemian spending his Sundays in Harlem: he would “lounge around, drinking coffee and solving the New York Times crossword puzzle, bare-chested, wearing a blue and white sarong.”

Obama remarked at length in his first memoir about participating in the global university complex, deriving from it, and producing within it, so strong a sense of urban authenticity that one wonders if his is not the exemplary narrative of liberal subjectivization and its suppressed alternatives. His writing seems an effort to discover a feature of his future (urban, diverse, educated) constituency — and indeed its moorings in the superficiality of urban liberalism:

Beneath the hum, the motion, I was seeing the steady fracturing of the world taking place. I had seen worse poverty in Indonesia and glimpsed the violent mood of inner-city kids in L.A.; I had grown accustomed, everywhere, to suspicion between the races. But whether because of New York’s density or because of its scale, it was only now that I began to grasp the almost mathematical precision with which America’s race and class problems joined; the depth, the ferocity, of resulting tribal wars; the bile that flowed freely not just out on the streets but in the stalls of Columbia’s bathrooms as well, where, no matter how many times the administration tried to paint them over, the walls remained scratched with blunt correspondence between niggers and kikes.

I need not finish this sketch of Obama's young life. Readers will surely detect the authenticating gestures — a brooding modernist mind vexed by the “hum” of reckless urban development — and will identify, too, an unsettling familiarity: Obama writes seriously about the failure of White liberalism to obscure the localist hostilities of race and ethnicity in the very heart of the global

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metropolis. Indeed, the process of subjectivization he describes leads clearly to the next: compromise, political disillusionment, the sense that the promises of one’s radical youth will give way before pressures to capitulate, whether to ambition or to realpolitik or to adulthood in its unsavory, predictable familiarity. Familiarity, in adulthood, becomes redundancy. Redundancy, in adulthood, becomes cynicism. For this (re)telling of Obama’s story completes too neatly another familiar, indeed cynical, tale: the delivery of cosmopolitan idealism, of secular, metropolitan humanism into the structure of US empire, first Cold War and later New World Order globalism, drone strikes and the TPP (Obama admits his sympathies for the “western tradition”)\(^\text{404}\).

This tragic narrative of subjectivization, and its articulation in the lifeworld of US cultural politics, the stamp of the Obama brand, serves as exactly the bridge between the state and its antagonists in the private sector. The institutions I have discussed have gentrified their neighborhoods through campus policing, strategic disinvestment, and especially through expansion, and have also in keeping with neoliberal orthodoxy co-opted a number of state practices, including eminent domain, tax-increment financing, and of course the displacement of federal loans and thus the indebtedness of students and tax-payers nationally. These are the “public-private partnerships” we keep hearing about, contrivances of the investor-developers who were appointed to the cabinets of such managerial administrators as Michael Bloomberg and exculpated on the Left through promises of multicultural urbanity and cosmopolitan idealism. This whole complex, and not by coincidence, confirms the centrality of *development* in the economies and cultures of cities and thus the public face of so much privatization: the institutions have become the dominant property owners in many cities, and certainly in New York. Their influence in resource rich-nations is conspicuous, if not unparalleled. They are thus US-national civic leaders, regardless of their

\(^{404}\) Maraniss, “Becoming Obama.”
commitment to civics, as such. They remain in every sense subject-makers. And these seemingly ancillary forays into real estate development are not outside of this imperative in the least — they merely serve the production of space and space’s productiveness.

The structural effects of this operation are contradictory and staggering, with minority and international enrollments declining at elite schools and tuition ($75,000, including room and board, at NYU in 2016-2017) prohibitively expensive and deliberately exclusionary. Yet the institutions themselves deny political identifications, bracing themselves against criticism with steady talk of excellence, growth, and community integration and of course with shallow paens to quantitative diversity metrics.405

State institutions are caught in this last snare as well. They are after all victims of many of these schemes, as infrastructures and economies of and for the “public.” And, as communities of working class people of color, they are no less global. Nor are their histories. The City University of New York, one of the largest and most diverse such institutions, was founded as the Free Academy in the 1847 as an “experiment” in educating the “children of a whole people.” It has long served as an arena of worldly resentment for such people, a site of dynamism and ingenuity borne of lack. Its centrality in the discourses of New York’s vast, cosmopolitan, and staunchly leftist Jewish culture between and after the World Wars begat the strongest commentary on the “crises of man” that characterized public life during America’s short century (begetting also a stripe of neo-conservatism).406 So did its next generation, which emerged, as I suggested in Chapter 1, out of the new pluralism of New York’s diversifying demos and radicalized social politics, instantiate a

405 See Bill Readings, University in Ruins (Cambridge Harvard, 2004), 21-29; for another view, see Rod Ferguson, The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2012), 80-81.
406 See for an example of both the radicalism I mention and the neoconservative turn it provoked Nathan Glazer, “Facing Three Ways,” The University and the City, 267-287.
commentary on the worldliness of its present, the global 1960s. The social movements of this time illuminated the problem of difference through their efforts to transform the ways higher education could be imagined. Any graduating high school senior in New York City should be offered admission to a CUNY college, they argued, where tuition should of course be free and where curriculum should reflect the diversity of the institution and its community, emphasizing suppressed academic areas such as black, third world, and women’s studies. These groups issued joint epistemological and materialist critiques (and demands), in other words, and instantiated these through their efforts to “take back” the space of the urban university campus, effecting a counter-worldliness in the spatial practice of occupation.407

Yet these efforts met fierce resistance. As Critics Ashley Dawson and Penny Lewis have noted, CUNY became after this watershed period an object of prolonged and punitive “structural adjustment,” learned by the city’s “crisis regime” from global lending agencies and imposed especially upon those minority groups associated with social movements.408 The history of the institution is now marked by the outward hostility of mayors like Giuliani, for whom the gutting of CUNY followed the gutting of ruining neighborhoods. An institution (at that time) 60% Black and Hispanic became, in the words of they mayor’s advisors, a “remedial backwater” because of its “capitulation to race politics”; its commitment to minoritarian and sexual-political “content,” moreover, was a “betrayal of Western and Eastern scholarly traditions.”409 CUNY’s increasingly uneven expansion has been mounted in the wake of these attacks, belying the legacies of activism,

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407 See Ferguson, 76-77.
commitments to the “whole people,” that I have described. As faculty scramble for grants and patents, and students — still for the most part working class students of many colors and backgrounds — are paying an increased tuition rate every semester, so have administrative salaries grown dramatically and “capital planning” given premium import by creditors. These are the trends in public education in the US and its other allies in austerity abroad. They, too, are “global.”

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The kinds of worldliness I have described, which derive their salience and their power not only from the contemporary purchase of the “global” but its multiple historical resonances, are conjoined, as I have suggested here, by the processes of neoliberalization. The epistemologies of liberal multiculturalism and global diversity which have been called upon to confront and to sustain the projects of US empire at such schools and in their historical ecologies comprise a whole world of meaning, referentiality, and affect that goes beyond any literal “place.” So central are such institutions to the aims of neoliberalism that their current incarnations — what in another context has been called the “800-Pound Gargoyle” — may seem, at times, a natural consequence of their cosmopolitan origins. Yet as I have suggested at the start of this final statement, the only source of coherence or continuity that can be genuinely counted on is the coincidence of power with resistance, of vertical singularity with horizontal heterogeneity. We must remind ourselves ceaselessly of this coincidence if we are to recover “alternatives” from the past and base our history on the investigation of these alternatives and deviances and refusals.

CUNY is in some respects an antidote, in other respects not. Its history is stirring, but is more complex than any one person can know. Here is a lesson to be gained from those protests, which sought precisely to refuse forms of knowledge produced in the singular. This realization is

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itself is something closer to an antidote, an antidote not to the prosaic problems of movement building, but to the illusory politics of criticism and worldliness. Edward Said, who wrote frequently but not lovingly of this encounter — the meeting of the critic and the world — observed that “no one today is purely one thing.”

This is an observation borne by many experiences, including occupation, exile, prestige, and contempt, and indeed the need for a politics that express these experiences. But in the context of global space, it is the very form of multicultural, inequitable, inarticulate cities, their capacities to contain all of these exigencies at once, that best enables us to think and to live the spirit of this truism, whomever we are.

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