

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: INAPPROPRIATE(D) LITERATURES OF  
THE UNITED STATES: HEGEMONIC  
PROPRIETY AND POSTRACIAL  
RACIALIZATION

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The rise of multiculturalism and its impact on the U.S. academy reached its peak at the end of the twentieth century. Since then the rhetoric of liberal multiculturalism that valorized diversity has largely given way to a neoliberal multiculturalism that celebrates postracialism as a means to dismantle the institutional programs and critical discourses that took racial difference as their starting point. Yet the racially inflected demarcations between positions of privilege and positions of stigma that have historically characterized the U.S. nation-state remain intact. In this context, how do we read race in contemporary literature by U.S. ethnic writers when celebrations of colorblindness dominate public discourse? As a repository for what Foucault has called subjugated knowledges, minoritized literatures hold the potential to de-naturalize the neoliberal status quo, critique the academic discourse that surrounds it, and engage with the political economy within which it is produced.

This project argues that the institutional work of disciplining minority subjects—once openly performed by racialization in a way no longer possible under neoliberal multiculturalism—has been continued in part by political, social, and economic forces I group under the umbrella term *propriety*. I expose how the designation “appropriate” becomes a prerequisite for political recognition and representation, analyzing representative political texts that are fundamental to contemporary definitions of minority subjects alongside national and literary-critical genealogies of discourses of difference. I argue that attachments to values and forms explicitly identified as “appropriate” conceal and maintain race-based hierarchies characteristic of U.S. national identity formation. In response, I theorize *inappropriateness* as a category of political and literary representation for exploring questions of visibility and enfranchisement central to the national narrative of the United States. Inappropriateness is a political and aesthetic movement that deploys subjects and forms often denounced as improper to the contemporary era. Inappropriate aesthetic works are those which attempt to distinguish difference from “diversity,” influence minority subject formation, and shape knowledge production in ways that are counter to the objectives of neoliberal multiculturalism. Four chapters establish a taxonomy of the ways inappropriateness operates: formally, corporeally, nationally, and historically.

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PROPRIETY AND POSTRACIAL RACIALIZATION

By

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## Introduction: Inappropriate(d) Literatures of the United States:

### Hegemonic Propriety and Postracial Racialization

“At the threshold of this new millennium, we encounter once again W. E. B. Du Bois’s ‘problem of the color line,’ but this time in more duplicitous and seductive guises. No doubt racism as practice/ideology has undergone a tortuous metamorphosis in the twentieth century. But what has not changed, and has instead become more egregious, is the existence of a determinate racial polity called the United States of America.”

- E. San Juan, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

“I am more interested in exploring the ways in which racisms take on the form of other things, wrap themselves around heated issues, descend upon political pulse points, appear as reasoned judgments, beyond sentiment, as they penetrate impassioned bodies.”

- Ann Laura Stoler<sup>2</sup>

“Hegemony works at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest details of our daily lives.”

- Trinh T. Minh-ha<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Within a week of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, United States Department of Justice lawyers drafted legislation that would become the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. The final version, authored primarily by Attorney General John Ashcroft and Assistant Attorney General Viet Dinh, incorporated provisions from earlier House and Senate bills. It was signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and quickly became the most (in)famous piece of United States legislation of the last twenty years.

Despite the Act’s continuing notoriety, sustained through various legal challenges and Congressional reauthorizations, the Patriot Act’s acronym has almost entirely superseded public use or knowledge of the law’s full title.<sup>4</sup> One of its source bills, H.R.

2975, had been provisionally titled To Deter and Punish Terrorist Acts in the United States and around the World, to Enhance Law Enforcement Investigatory Tools, and for Other Purposes. But by the time the final version of the act was passed, following “a truncated process of hearings in both houses and without the usual committee reports to explain it,”<sup>5</sup> its title had officially changed, to Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act.<sup>6</sup>

Like most significant security legislation of the last century, the USA PATRIOT Act codifies a particular set of rhetorics and logics into a vocabulary that proceeds to pervade public discourse.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the act’s full title is instructive. Though some analysts dismiss it as a convenient “backronym” conjured by legislative aides who appreciated the obvious poetry of the appeal to patriotism, the full title presents the exigence and justification for anti-terrorism activities like increased domestic surveillance, roving wiretaps, and access to private records. “America,” left presumably weak and divided by a devastating death toll and the dark audacity required to successfully transform four passenger jets into weapons of mass destruction, will be reunited and made stronger by particular “tools”—an innocuous term for the combined powers of the CIA, FBI, law enforcement, and the newly created Office of Homeland Security. Such tools would “intercept” and “obstruct” terrorism, two verbs that anchor their post-9/11 effectiveness in shared resonances of arresting movement from one place to another. The Patriot Act, its title implies, would hinder precisely the fluid, agential form of terror that captivated the U.S. national imagination and brought the country to a relative standstill.

The apparently innocuous adjective “appropriate,” which serves as the crucial descriptor of the aforementioned tools, registers the central interest of this dissertation. Certainly it is a common term in legal discourse. Within the text of the Patriot Act, the adjective “appropriate” appears seventy times, most frequently in reference to an open-ended or catch-all section of the law that gestures to whatever future person, agency or activity is deemed appropriate.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the term functions to describe that which is “specially fitted or suitable, proper.” Yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* also defines the adjectival form of “appropriate” as meaning “[a]ttached or belonging as an attribute, quality, or right; peculiar to, own.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the appropriateness of the tools authorized to combat terrorism by this act are not only specialized, suitable and proper—they are also the distinct purview of the act itself, peculiar to its particular amalgamation of violent exigence and political opportunism.

Although then-Attorney General John Ashcroft is perhaps the figure most publicly associated with the creation and defense of the Patriot Act, in fact Viet D. Dinh, an Assistant Attorney General from 2001-2003, is frequently credited as chief architect of the legislation. A Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States in 1978, Dinh published a first-person account of the twelve days his family spent aboard a boat between Vietnam and Malaysia in *The New York Times* in 1992.<sup>10</sup> He became a U.S. citizen in 1989 and went on to attend Harvard College and then Harvard Law School before clerking for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and joining the attorney general’s staff. Mimi Nguyen’s study of the “gift of freedom,” a system of benevolence that burdens U.S. immigrants with obligations to capitalism and to a racist nation-state, examines the significance of Dinh’s co-authorship. According to Nguyen,

“[b]ecause the Patriot Act specifically targets the racial stranger for detention and deportation, Dinh’s refugee story operates as a bulwark against the worry that the act might target ‘just anyone.’”<sup>11</sup> An exemplary immigrant and newly minted citizen, Dinh and his story of merit-based success suggest that proper racialized subjects have nothing to fear from this legislation.

Ten years after crafting the Patriot Act, Ashcroft and Dinh collaborated again, this time co-authoring a defense of the act titled “Liberty, Security, and the USA Patriot Act” that appeared in a book of essays commemorating the tenth anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. The term “appropriate” serves the same flexible, pervasive purpose in this essay as in the Patriot Act itself, as Ashcroft and Dinh engage with influential critics who frequently deploy Benjamin Franklin’s adage that those who would sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither. In response, Ashcroft and Dinh argue that “appropriate security enables freedom, rather than competes against it.”<sup>12</sup> The essay makes several claims regarding the act’s success that reinforce the centrality of discourses of propriety to antiterrorism rhetoric. First, it appeals to the act’s ostensible ability to limit or check governmental overreach, suggesting that it both “enables government to combat a protracted and difficult war against those who wish to rob us of our way of life—a way of life defined by freedom” and at the same time “constrains attempts by governmental actors to extend the government’s reach inappropriately.”<sup>13</sup> Ashcroft and Dinh argue that though the act abolished the traditional wall between the intelligence and law enforcement communities, it nonetheless “maintained the appropriate respect for constitutional requirements in criminal prosecutions.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, they cite the 2005 Congressional reauthorization of the Patriot Act as evidence of “the effectiveness and

appropriateness of many of the act's provisions," and they argue that instances of the act's furtherance of investigative overreach are mitigated by distinguishing between a violation of law, on the one hand, and "a law that itself offends liberty" on the other.<sup>15</sup> Although a 2007 Justice Department audit found that the FBI had "improperly" used the Patriot Act to spy on U.S. citizens, Ashcroft and Dinh state emphatically that this finding "does not mean the Patriot Act itself is improper."<sup>16</sup> To be improper, in fact, would align the act with the racialized subjects it was designed to discipline. The act's situation, they are quick to remind us, is quite the opposite—it *embodies* propriety as evidenced by its very title.

This dissertation argues that the use of the term "appropriate" to justify extraordinary measures to combat terrorism is not arbitrary, and therefore not especially extraordinary. Rather, this designation epitomizes a larger political and cultural shift toward alibis of appropriateness and propriety that seized the United States in recent decades, conditions that exemplify a modality of the economic and racial regime of neoliberal multiculturalism. I begin with an analysis of the Patriot Act to situate the pervasiveness of ideological propriety in official discourse within the larger context of contemporary race and racialization, including post-Civil Rights multiculturalism, post-identity politics and colorblindness.<sup>17</sup> I argue that propriety functions as a distinct and covert mode of racialization in an ostensibly post-identity or postracial context, the pretext for continued production of minoritized U.S. subjects within the larger regime of diversity multiculturalism that ostensibly guarantees those subjects equal rights under the law and equal access to political, social, cultural and economic capital. In the same moment that neoliberal multiculturalism flattens difference into a comfortable difference-

as-sameness, allowing whiteness to appear in the post-Civil Rights era as just another ethnicity,<sup>18</sup> it also produces appropriate difference and circumscribes such difference as the purview of proper multicultural citizens. The deployment of appropriate forms, bodies, histories and citizens reveals propriety as ideology in action—the enactment of the continuing hegemony of neoliberal multicultural world orders and the reproduction of globalized forms of late capitalism.

In conjunction with this identification of propriety's contemporary hegemony, this study inaugurates a category I term "inappropriateness" to trace the counterhegemonic emergence of forms of resistance to propriety's ideologies. I situate this term through Trinh T. Minh-ha's analysis of the inappropriate Other and Jacques Rancière's notion of inappropriate appropriate forms, drawing from two very different aesthetico-critical formulations that nonetheless make use of strikingly similar language. A postcolonial feminist scholar and artist, Trinh theorizes the inappropriate Other as a Third World Women's issue grounded in the understanding that difference is "a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance."<sup>19</sup> In this context, the inappropriate Other "moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at."<sup>20</sup> The inappropriate Other is always also inappropriately in identity with ourselves: she prevents distinctions between self and other from cohering into persistent patterns, and she undermines regressive binaries between subjective and objective knowledges. To articulate the business of the inappropriate Other in the language of this project, she resists the collapsing of difference into sameness even as she performs difference in ways that continually affirm likeness.

My theory of inappropriateness also rethinks the formulation of aesthetic appropriateness described by French philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose Euro-centric work examines the complex relations between politics, aesthetics, power and education. Rancière contends in *The Future of the Image* (2007) that the representational suitability of forms collapses in the modern era, such that the inappropriate form is always already also the appropriate form. By this, Rancière means that the object or event being represented, in and of itself, “neither prescribes nor proscribes any artistic means [i.e., form or medium] . . . it does not impose any duty on art to represent, or not to represent, in some particular way.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, there are no longer directives of representation that dictate which forms might be employed to represent which performances, events, objects or subjects. All forms are always already appropriate (i.e., suitable) *and* inappropriate (i.e., unable to actually transform representation into the real).

The germination of inappropriateness in these disparate genealogies carries through the body of this project. Even now, I am not entirely certain that it is possible to synthesize Trinh and Rancière—or, for that matter, the theorists from philosophy, postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, history, psychoanalysis, American studies, ethnic studies and literary studies upon whom I draw—into a seamless historical and aesthetic methodology. But this project attempts a different kind of labor, incomplete and exploratory: the strategic assembly of a set of critical instruments to help theorize the place of race in a contemporary neoliberal system that simultaneously evacuates and entrenches racial concerns. Historian David Scott articulates the stakes for such a project when he asks: “If our sense is (difficult as it may be to establish with verifiable empirical certainty) that our present constitutes something of a new conjuncture, and that

consequently the old story about the past's relation to the present and to possible futures is no longer adequate, no longer provides or sustains critical leverage, how do we go about altering that story?"<sup>22</sup> Such an alteration is precisely what this study attempts, as I illuminate the postracial present as a new conjuncture and modify one story of its relationship to the past in order to engender a sustaining critical intervention. The old story will not be altered by professional adherence to ingrained institutional structures and field-specific assumptions. To register the persistence of race-based minoritization in the postracial present—a comprehensive ideological propriety that pervades legal, political, academic, public, military, and educational spheres, to name a few—requires an emerging kind of interdisciplinary expertise. That story will only be altered when these institutional sites of knowledge production and reproduction develop modes of collaboration that are, in many ways, inappropriate to the disciplinary structures of critique that have coalesced and even concretized in interventions otherwise committed to evaluating the status quo and theorizing alternatives to it.

This project arose from my curiosity about the repercussions of wide-ranging and persistent claims in many arenas of public discourse—political commentary, judicial opinions, journalism, public opinion polls—that the United States has become “postracial.” Presumably this term is meant to indicate a teleological shift to a collective state of colorblindness, presenting an optimistic assessment of the meaning of Barack Obama's election, in 2008, as the country's first black president. It suggests an end to the kind of identity politics that characterized the post-Civil Rights era in the United States, not because identity-based activism has failed but because such efforts have succeeded and therefore are no longer necessary. This classification recognizes that slavery,

segregation, antimiscegenation, discrimination, and racially motivated violence are no longer legal and gestures to the fact that the actions or expressions that we now identify as racist are no longer widely or publicly tolerated. Yet if we as a nation exist beyond racism, if we have progressed from institutionalized and legalized racial discrimination to a bright colorblind society, how do we account for persistent differentiated access to resources, protection from violence, and political and social enfranchisement that continues to fall along racial lines?

Contemporary claims to postracialization and colorblindness deny pervasive and continuing race-based structural inequities in employment, incarceration, education, and poverty. (While I most frequently use the term “postrace,” this project also folds in the more capacious term “post-identity” to signal its engagement with not only race and ethnicity but gender, sexuality, and other forms of difference.) It is true that many pundits who blithely proclaimed a postracial United States in the months between President Obama’s first election and inauguration no longer speak in such optimistic language. Yet even the hope of postracialism exposes the contours of thinking about race in the contemporary era. That most Americans aspire to a state of colorblindness from which legacies of slavery, dispossession, and internment will no longer materially matter illuminates our deep discomfort with the primacy of race and racism in U.S. history as well as our desire to have progressed beyond the mistakes of earlier generations. It suggests our willingness to overlook material inequality or ascribe such inequality to individual rather than structural factors. It reveals our deep-seated optimism regarding the power of diversity and multiculturalism. The claim of postracialism clears space for the continuation of race-based disciplinary mechanisms in the guise of deracialized merit-

based systems. A pronouncement of postidentitarian thinking insists upon the success of multiculturalism and invalidates the need for coalition politics, elevates questions of individual merit and denies the presence of structural inequality, and privileges language of diversity and evacuates categories of difference of their historical meanings. Even those who publicly question whether we have achieved a postracial state do not generally question that the condition of postracialism is something to which we ought to aspire. If we are postracial, at least superficially, what takes the disciplinary place of race? In other words, this project asks, what do we talk about when we *don't* talk about race?

I argue that, in the absence of sanctioned racialized language, we turn to the vocabulary of propriety. This discourse allows us to continue demarcating privilege and stigma along racial lines and conceals a flourishing system of racialized discrimination while providing a ready alibi: that such distinctions are instead based in objective assessments of appropriateness. To call for appropriateness—in discourse, in bodily presentation, in civic engagement, in political participation, in aesthetic production—is to deploy coded racial language that is nonetheless welcome in postracial dialogues.

As many critics note, the term “postracial” conflates race and racism.<sup>23</sup> If we shift our focus from the collective to the individual (as neoliberalism is so eager for us to do), in a postracial society that conflates racism and race, what is the place and meaning of *race* for those citizens and subjects still marked as racialized? If we are beyond race, then race is occluded or erased and its significance in political, economic, social and cultural life is devalued. In this context, what happens to identity-based categories of critique like ethnic studies and ethnic literature?

This is the founding question of my project, which is focalized through literary studies as the problem-space of investigation.<sup>24</sup> This dissertation asks, how do we read race in contemporary U.S. literature when celebrations of colorblindness dominate public discourse? What does race, or difference more broadly, mean at the turn of the twenty-first century? To answer this question, I turn to the space of the literary. As a repository for what Foucault has called subjugated knowledges, minoritized literatures hold the potential to de-naturalize the neoliberal status quo, critique the academic discourse that surrounds it, and engage with the political economy within which it is produced. Culture is a site from which to “imagine the impossible,” as Grace Hong says,<sup>25</sup> and even to stage the impossible as actual, as I argue of realist forms in my first chapter. Kandice Chuh suggests that literariness is an aesthetic modality that possesses the “distinctive ability to illuminate the role of sense and sensibility in the production of everyday life and the multiscale articulations of dominant ideologies.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the space of the literary facilitates the kind of interpretation that illuminates textures of agency—in the case of this project, for inappropriate subjects and epistemologies—on the differing registers of text, discourse, and politics. It allows us to absorb and analyze moments of performance (for example, Dinh’s self-representation as the exemplary immigrant jurist) where subjects operate according to established narratives or scripts. The kind of interpretation that literature invites helps us understand the complex motions of affect and agency that surround subjects who perform in these situations and invites us to think about such performances in more nuanced ways.<sup>27</sup> Michel de Certeau suggests that literature is a discredited knowledge practice that becomes the repository of what official knowledge deems meaningless.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, in a country that denies the continuing

meaning of race, I argue, literariness registers and captures its contemporary meaningfulness. To invoke the literary is to pursue the affective and imaginative components of everyday participation in political, economic, social and cultural realms.

### **A History of the Present**

This project is a history of the present, and I map the ways propriety functions at the turn of the twenty-first century as an ideological apparatus to discipline U.S. subjects, including especially minoritized subjects. In the midst of the institutions, events and norms that structure life under this modality of neoliberalism, Lauren Berlant suggests that “[d]iscussions about the contours and contents of the shared historical present are . . . always profoundly political ones, insofar as they are about what forces should be considered responsible and what crises urgent.”<sup>29</sup> If such histories are always political, they are also always untimely, existing within a kind of prematurity that saturates their efforts. They require us to “be examining, absorbing, feeling, reflecting on, and writing about the archive as it is being produced, rushing at us—literally, to entertain an unfolding archive.”<sup>30</sup> Yet perhaps this untimeliness, this prematurity, is matched by a particular timeliness. This study suggests that to identify persistent racisms is to give exigence to antiracist efforts in a way that neoliberal multiculturalism works to deny.<sup>31</sup> My project does not attempt to provide a comprehensive cultural history of the neoliberal United States, though it draws upon scholars who do just that. Instead, I investigate the critical attachments, embodiments and gestures evinced by U.S. ethnic literature—both literary works categorized in this way and academic literary study more broadly—under neoliberal multiculturalism at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In this study, I trace the pervasive deployment of a language of appropriateness in political and legal documents, in public speeches, and in editorials. The primary focus of these documents is not race per se, but issues like immigration, welfare reform, anti-terrorism efforts, and electoral processes. Yet my analysis reveals just how often such documents invoke proper language and how calls for appropriateness or the identification of inappropriateness fall along racial lines. I also find such calls at the level of academic discourse, particularly with regard to the reception of literary texts and their authors as well as the theorization of the study of ethnic literatures that understands them to enable the management and understanding of difference in a new generation of (potentially postracial) citizens. I discover frequent calls to appropriateness in cultural discourse as well, as writers, academics and activists question what is appropriate to contemporary literature and what ethnic literatures ought to do and be. In a nation that aspires to postracialism, the place of literature that is so clearly defined by difference and that so clearly foregrounds a racialized perspective is uncertain. Equally uncertain, if paradoxically so, is the status of ethnic writers who trouble designations of authenticity or do not appear to foreground racial concerns in their work in the ways lay and professional readers often expect—in other words, who do not perform a politics recognizable as such.

These multiple valences from which ethnic literature is produced and received ultimately suggest the existence of a force or impulse that unites much contemporary ethnic literature. I name that force inappropriateness. This term is meant to convey both the way inappropriateness works in opposition to the ideological apparatus of propriety that covertly reproduces contemporary race-based inequality and the way it conjures an unlikely group of cultural productions that are united not by an obvious common purpose

but a set of uncommon ones: to rearticulate difference, to reregister the formation and interpellation of minoritized subjects, to theorize alternative histories and archives, and to suggest alternative modes of contemporary subjectivity.

We can trace the contours of neoliberalism and multiculturalism through the disciplinary history of ethnic literary studies, as a point of entry and perspective from which to examine both past and future. Ethnic studies arose in the post-Civil Rights era in response to material unrest, student and faculty activism, and a growing agitation for the inclusion of non-dominant histories and perspectives within institutions of higher education.<sup>32</sup> Minoritized literatures were understood to present a crucial challenge to Eurocentric ideals of universal value that had heretofore characterized much of literary studies across the United States. Yet a retrospective assessment of the institutionalization of interdisciplinarity and the consolidation of an ethnic canon reveals just how frequently ethnic literature became valued for its political dimensions at the expense of aesthetic concerns. Even as particular works by Asian American, African American, Native American and Latino/a writers achieved critical recognition and became widely taught, the literariness of these works was generally occluded by a focus on ethnic literature as a transparent representation of difference—how things “really” are for communities of difference, as I describe in detail in my first chapter. Situating what is “ethnic” in tension with what is “aesthetic,” such deployments of ethnic literature inadvertently undermined the possibility that minoritized literatures were valuable for their formal qualities. Thus a hierarchy of value was institutionalized that only further naturalized canonical literary texts as aesthetically great and ethnic literary texts as ideologically valuable, reducing

ethnic literature in many senses to the kind of instruction it could provide to white readers about people of color.

In many ways, this disparity continues today, despite a recent turn to aesthetic form in scholarship on ethnic literatures.<sup>33</sup> It is fed from two very different streams. On one hand, a conservative backlash against ethnic studies departments began in the late 1980s that emphasized the perceived aesthetic value of unmarked masterworks against compromised ethnic literatures.<sup>34</sup> White privilege found itself under attack again, this time in the form of challenges to the traditional literary canon, and responded by calling into question the value of interdisciplinarity. On the other, liberalism and neoliberalism identified racialized immigrants as provisional heirs of the American Dream and situated ethnic literatures as privileged sites from which to understand difference. When the justification of ethnic literary study is reduced to “diversity,” such works occupy a second-class status in relation to works of aesthetic greatness and are co-opted to manage the very questions of racism and racialization they thematically raise.<sup>35</sup>

I link the recent emergence of propriety as an ideology of covert racialization to the legacies of twentieth-century U.S. racisms and anti-racisms. It is not propriety in the sense of decorum that I trace here, a mode of formal exchange that I believe we have largely discarded in U.S. national culture. Rather, it is propriety-as-discipline, appropriateness functioning as an ideological apparatus for the formation and interpellation of proper subjects: immigrants who prove themselves sufficiently multicultural—in other words, amenable to assimilation—are lauded, as are LGBT subjects who adopt a homonormative familial lifestyle and are rewarded with the opportunity to legally marry. (I am mindful that the limits of this analogy between racial

or ethnic and sex-gender difference include their incommensurate historical contexts and the ways political discourse often situates them in tension.) The conditions of hegemonic propriety this dissertation investigates exemplify a specific modality of neoliberalism that intersects with and relies upon postracialization.<sup>36</sup> I argue that discourses of propriety function to re-align distinctions between privilege and stigma while eliding the continuing power and evolution of racial formations. To do so, I adopt the political, economic, and cultural genealogy of neoliberalism elaborated by Lisa Duggan, Jodi Melamed, and others, who situate neoliberalism's rise in its rhetorical (but not actual) separation of economic questions from questions of politics and culture, and further from its ability to make the upward distribution of wealth (its primary effect) seem inevitable and natural—even merit based—rather than systemically determined. In the context of this emphasis on the commonsensical, pro-profit global business interests find a welcome position from which to naturalize financial austerity, minimal government, and “free” markets.

During this same period, post-Civil Rights identity politics began to retreat from a unifying concern with material equality to pursue victories in the judicial and legislative realms. In response, in the United States and elsewhere, neoliberalism adopted a multiculturalist guise to answer calls for non-economic equality, tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. The key characteristic of neoliberal multiculturalism is that it fosters a form of diversity compatible with global business interests—in other words, a commitment to diversity that is rhetorical and nonredistributive. I employ Jodi Melamed's two-stage definition of neoliberal multiculturalism, an era she dates from the mid-1990s: first, as “a market ideology turned social philosophy” that “posits neoliberal restructuring across the

globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity”; and, more centrally for my analysis here, as a racial formation that names “the signifying systems and cultural repertoires that produce and fix the meaning of human bodies and human groups” within national and global biopolitics.<sup>37</sup> As a racial formation, neoliberal multiculturalism works to overlay former racial logics of white supremacy, from which the U.S. nation-state has sought to distance itself since World War II, with new processes of privilege and stigma that separate lives recognized as valuable from those considered valueless, or what Judith Butler would term the grievable and ungrivable.<sup>38</sup> What neoliberal multiculturalism as global epoch means for the U.S., Melamed argues, is “a new flexibility in racial procedures, so that racism constantly appears to be disappearing according to conventional race categories, even as neoliberal racialization continues to justify inequality using codes that can signify as nonracial or even nonracist.”<sup>39</sup> Neoliberal multiculturalism is characterized by its primary impulses toward homogenization, appropriation, and dematerialization, and these impulses are practiced most frequently in the context of separating the privileged and stigmatized along old lines using new alibis.<sup>40</sup>

One ready alibi, I argue, is the designation “appropriate,” which can flexibly be applied to laws, subjects, bodies, histories, and literary forms. Melamed describes the centrality of literary operations and values to the ideological and racializing vectors of neoliberal multiculturalism, arguing that literature functions as an antiracist technology that produces “truth effects” about individuality, the apprehension of difference, globalization and appropriate multicultural subjects. Literary sensibility, redefined under a rubric of multiethnic and global literature courses in U.S. universities as the ability to

appreciate the literature of other cultures, distinguishes successful multicultural subjects from backward monocultural ones and marks the elite members of a burgeoning neoliberal global community. According to Melamed, literature functions as an element of technologies of subjectivity *and* subjugation:

On the one hand, the idea that literature has something to do with antiracism and being a good person enters into the self-care of elites, who learn to see themselves as part of a multinational group of enlightened multicultural global citizens and to uphold certain standards as (neoliberal) multicultural universals. On the other hand, the idea that the engagement with literature helps one to come to terms with difference ethically prepares elites to administer differentiated citizenship across the globe. In other words, literary training prepares them for the part they play within disciplinary and civilizing/disqualifying regimes that manage populations cut off from (or exploited within) circuits of global capitalism.<sup>41</sup>

University-authorized experience with literatures of difference prepares the figure of the multicultural elite to fully understand and manage populations characterized by difference. Literature's privilege, as a fundamental site for information retrieval and the management of difference, is transformed into a mandate. This understanding of literature as an antiracist technology reduces alterity to depoliticized and dematerialized "culture."

In my critique of neoliberal multiculturalism, I do not mean to discount the meaningful advances multiculturalism represents as a product of tangible victories by anti-racist movements. Key legal and political victories have resulted in greater rights and opportunities for subjects of difference in enfranchisement, education, property,

employment, and privacy, to name a few. On an academic scale, the widespread incorporation of literature by women and ethnic writers into the literary canon has resulted in a diversification of courses, critical methods, and textual objects of study. It is because of such movements that we can publicly entertain and debate the possibility of a postracial United States. Yet the vision that enabled these victories has narrowed in the last several decades, satisfied with legal victories and official mandates about representation and visibility—about diversity—in the absence of meaningful material redistribution. Furthermore, that very emphasis on diversity has been effectively co-opted by neoliberal multiculturalism, which points to examples of individual advancement and success of minoritized subjects as proof that the system is working without addressing lingering and fundamental inequalities.

My work represents a profound intervention into the discourses of the historical present and neoliberal multiculturalism laid out by scholars like Lauren Berlant and Melamed, as my analysis of appropriateness as an ideological apparatus illuminates how forms of racially differentiated citizenship work in practice. Berlant's work of cataloging the impact of affective forms and values on the political, economic, social and cultural realms foregrounds those "who presumed they would be protected" through the "new precarities" of recession, terrorism, disenfranchisement and debt; her formulations of privilege in crisis do not engage with the particular ways that the attachment she names "cruel optimism" manifests in the pursuit of "the good life" for racially minoritized subjects in the U.S.<sup>42</sup> My project articulates the specificity of cruel optimism as it attends to the ostensible choice to perform appropriately that is only provisionally extended to such subjects.

In a similar sense, Melamed's historical study articulates the terms by which neoliberal multiculturalism creates "new privileged subjects" by "racializing [its] beneficiaries . . . as worthy multicultural citizens and racializing the losers as unworthy and excludable on the basis of monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other historic-cultural deficiencies."<sup>43</sup> Her work is most compelling as it illuminates the ways that the flood of information generated about race in the twentieth century—generated in order to produce discursive certainty that would substantiate official antiracisms—ultimately established capitalism as the solution to contemporary racisms. In this context, Melamed examines how literature functions as a tool of racial neoliberalism, and especially how the orders of difference constructed in literary studies unite with the logics of neoliberalism to create and impose normative systems of representation that extend to economics, politics, and law. Yet her analysis arises almost exclusively from an examination of African American literature and culture (with gestures to Iranian and Native American cultural productions), and as such invites a consideration of the ways the political, cultural and aesthetic genealogies of other ethnic populations—most notably Asian American, Latino, and Afro-Caribbean—complicate and revise her formulations. Furthermore, as she discloses in *Represent and Destroy*, her readings of literature are conducted under a historical-materialist lens, an orientation that at times elides the literariness of these aesthetic acts. My study extends her analysis to emphasize the aesthetic and formal possibility of these works and to identify the specific forms and criteria that are innovated in service of postracial racialization.

The key to neoliberal multiculturalism is that it appears as common sense—rational, inevitable, and even apolitical. In Melamed's account, neoliberal

multiculturalism racializes as it “constitutes differential relations of human value and valuelessness” while “appearing to be (and being) a rationally inevitable normative system that merely sorts human beings into categories of difference.”<sup>44</sup> Because racialization is, as Jasbir Puar has said, “a figure for specific social formations and processes that are not necessarily or only tied to what has been historically theorized as ‘race,’”<sup>45</sup> it provides the key validation for neoliberal multiculturalism, as members of recognized racial categories occupy places of both privilege and stigma. When this inevitability dissolves, momentarily, into the appearance of a choice requiring consent, it is reconstructed by these appeals to appropriateness that offer their own kind of common sense.

### **Propriety as a Mode of Racialization**

The eradication of race as an overt method of regulating value and valuelessness leaves behind a vacuum, even as multiculturalism enables the temporary and capricious extension of the benefits of privilege to select minoritized groups or, more commonly, individuals. Susan Koshy and Rey Chow have traced how racial frames lose their power in the face of the ability to consume within capitalist markets, as the nation-state becomes subsumed into concerns of capitalist economic functions.<sup>46</sup> These complementary genealogies of the contemporary U.S. gesture to “the end(s) of race” (to borrow David Eng’s phrasing, discussed further in the second chapter), and from their consensus my project addresses the flexibility that inhabits terms like “difference” or “ethnicity” and ensures that multiculturalism’s “benign tolerance remains cathected to advantage.”<sup>47</sup> Melamed suggestively argues that neoliberal racialization procedures “have independently and flexibly employed the criteria that white supremacy historically has

collapsed with color, and they have *innovated new criteria*, often using nationalist and antiracist terms of value.”<sup>48</sup> This dissertation identifies a crucial set of criteria aggregated under the umbrella term Propriety: designations of “appropriate” and “proper” are deployed as terms of value designed to police the boundaries between privilege and stigma. They, along with their antonyms “improper” and “inappropriate,” become the signs under which full inclusion or exclusion into the profits of neoliberal multiculturalism are extended to individual subjects.

In this sense, then, propriety is a function of ideology. Louis Althusser theorized that individuals do not possess a free, independent subjectivity; rather, they are interpellated into established systems of official and especially unofficial governance through social practices arising from institutions that he termed ideological state apparatuses. These ideological apparatuses complement official systems of government but operate primarily in the private (or privatized) realm: religion, education, family, the law, politics, communications, and culture.<sup>49</sup> I adopt Althusser’s definition of ideology as the (imagined) relationship of individuals to their lived conditions, a relationship that always takes material form in the sense that it exists only via practices—the rituals of membership in the realms of religion, education, politics, and others—and extend it to identify the appropriateness that has come to signify for race in these realms in recent decades.<sup>50</sup>

The power of official state apparatuses like the government and military combine with ideological apparatuses like propriety to establish hegemony, which Raymond Williams defines as “a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally

confirming.”<sup>51</sup> As my study illustrates, propriety complements other modes of hegemonic power, engendering the continued existence of a civil society that “operates without ‘sanctions’ or compulsory ‘obligations,’ but nevertheless asserts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc.”<sup>52</sup> Individuals are interpellated into subjectivity, into a sense of collective humanity, by way of these forces: “educative pressure” is applied “to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into ‘freedom.’”<sup>53</sup> This dynamic of consent and coercion detailed by Antonio Gramsci is the reason propriety as an apparatus is so powerful: it appears as a choice available to any and all individuals. As they perform as rational contemporary subjects, discourses of propriety invite them to “choose” multicultural values, evince properly patriotic attachments, and manifest moral decisions in their everyday lives—just as other ideological apparatuses invite people to profess Christianity, protect their children, or abide by the law. What these choices occlude are the myriad sanctions that attach to those who do not choose properly.

The power of propriety as an ideological apparatus of neoliberal hegemony is two-fold. First, it lies in the way propriety’s relations of domination and subordination appear “normal.” Williams describes this achievement in this way: “the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.”<sup>54</sup> Second, propriety’s particular ideological saturation in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century arises from its ability to occupy the gaps and fissures that remain after the multicultural elision of race and racism described earlier. What results

from this discursive elevation of appropriateness in the public sphere, this establishment of propriety as an alibi for covert racisms and a state which minoritized subjects are expected to aspire, is a relation of what Berlant terms “cruel optimism,” which comes into being “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”<sup>55</sup> The power of such attachments and the desire they engender—in the case of this study, to perform as appropriate bodies and citizens and to have one’s cultural productions recognized as valid forms and histories—obscures the deeply destructive nature of such attachments.

Appeals to propriety range across the political spectrum, inhabiting conservative calls for individual responsibility and identification of model minorities as well as liberal faith in diversity models that promote visibility to the exclusion of material redistribution. We see appeals to propriety working to justify violence and inequality in anti-terrorism legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act, which establishes propriety as a prerequisite for protection, as well as in welfare “reform” legislation like the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and immigration legislation like the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996.<sup>56</sup> We see appeals to propriety that would regulate bodies and performances of identity to multicultural, heteronormative guises.<sup>57</sup> We see appeals to propriety by members of dominant and minoritized communities that promote particular representations of ethnic identity and suppress others.<sup>58</sup>

Propriety’s flexibility comes from its unmerited reputation as a matter of individual choice—the apparently universal freedom to adopt the behavior, appearance, investments and attachments of proper U.S. citizens. It presumes an agency common to

all citizen-subjects that is independent from structural considerations or affective complications. Even as the boundaries of what can be called appropriate shift (recent examples include support for gays in the military and gay marriage more generally), those boundaries claim a level of explicitness that indicts those who continue, to their peril, to “choose” inappropriateness.

Propriety’s connection to questions of freedom and agency can be traced to post-enlightenment moral and aesthetic philosophy. Key figures like John Locke, Adam Smith, David Hume and John Stuart Mill understood liberty as a form of propriety, defined as “appropriate agency” and tied to questions of ownership, dignity, rights, judgment, taste, and justice. As Duncan Kelly outlines, the notion of propriety that has been passed down in the West incorporates both an individual and collective understanding. One meaning “concerns something like the quality of agency one owns oneself . . . predicated upon a discrete conception of personhood” that defines someone as “at liberty to act.” Yet propriety also refers to “shared or intersubjective judgments about the propriety of particular actions, rooted in a common conception of justice.”<sup>59</sup> Propriety’s implicit appeal to common or universal judgments of what is proper reestablish and maintain racism, for as David Lloyd argues, Western aesthetic culture and the disinterested perceiving subject which emerges from it (and which is its goal) becomes the basis for universalizing judgments and a developmental hierarchy of racialized subjects who can and cannot produce such judgments. In this context, the discourse of racism is constituted not by “the antagonistic recognition of difference” but rather “the subordination of difference to the demand of identity” via the process of mandatory assimilation (or an equally mandatory expulsion).<sup>60</sup>

I want to be clear that I do not mean to establish ideological propriety as a flexible form of contemporary racial formation in contrast to older, ostensibly static or less powerful forms. I do suggest that the disarticulation of appropriateness explicitly from phenotype allows for propriety's unique consolidation, in that the exemplary individuals who are exceptions to propriety's racializing logics operate in the public sphere to belie the existence of those logics—as, for example, when critics of affirmative action point to public figures like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor as proof that minoritized citizens can achieve the highest echelons of education and public service without the aid of such measures. Yet Ann Laura Stoler reminds us that “old” racisms were not limited or unwieldy, arguing that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialisms evinced their own particular felicity and adaptability in deploying “changing properties” like “cultural competencies, moral civilities, and affective sensibilities that were poorly secured by chromatic indices.”<sup>61</sup> Old (colonial) racisms were both fluid and flexible, and they often relied on affective and social components to distinguish between figures in positions of privilege and those in positions of stigma. My work situates contemporary U.S. ideological propriety within the colonial genealogy Stoler marks out between race and appropriateness.<sup>62</sup> I contend that the dialectic of fixity and fluidity that has always characterized racial logics endures in the neoliberal moment under the umbrella of propriety, but the hierarchy of terms has shifted: whereas propriety once mediated or helped determine imperial racialization, now racialization continues under the guise of propriety for propriety's sake and without any obvious recourse to somatic racial logics.

### **Inappropriateness**

Alongside the emergence of propriety as an ideological discourse that this introduction sketches, another opposing force arises unevenly during the neoliberal multicultural era. I identify this force—or more accurately, this set of acts, affects and representations—as *inappropriateness*. I do not mean to suggest that the minoritized subjects and artists under discussion would identify themselves, or group themselves, in such a way (although some certainly would, using related if different terminology). Rather, I posit inappropriateness as category of political and literary representation for exploring questions of visibility and enfranchisement central to the national narrative of the United States. Understanding these acts, affects and representations as part of a political and aesthetic movement—one that deploys subjects and forms often denounced as improper to the contemporary era—illuminates the connections and imbrications of acts that neoliberal ideology frames as discrete, unrelated, or dislocated from everyday life.

Inappropriateness is a capacious concept that encompasses both the aesthetic object and the creating subject. It has two trajectories or functions: the epistemological, which includes the creation of new modes of knowledge through the deployment of inappropriate forms, and the subjectivizing, which is concerned with the formation and interpellation of new kinds of subjects by the circulation of alternate epistemologies. I use the term “improper” in all its registers to gesture toward external and internal expectations that minority subjects must negotiate in the processes of aesthetic creation and identity formation. In the face of such expectations, inappropriate aesthetic works are those which attempt to distinguish difference from “diversity,” influence minority subject

formation, and shape knowledge production in ways that are counter to the objectives of neoliberal multiculturalism.

I commence this work by way of an aesthetic archive because such an archive indexes the lived relations of people in the world—their affects and attachments—in relation to larger questions of structure and ideology. Nonetheless, I am not naïve about the institutional power wielded by literature, or more precisely literary studies, in the expansionist pursuits of neoliberal multiculturalism. Melamed’s analysis of the role of literary studies in official antiracisms suggests how literature perpetuates the sort of “liberal antiracist terms of difference” that have “structured and maintained systems of heteronormativity, political economic normativity, and U.S. national cultural normativity by limiting which social representations of difference have appeared reasonable, possible, or desirable.”<sup>63</sup> It is not only the universalizing aesthetic of taste hierarchies or the homogeneity of an established canon that promotes this pervasive institutionalization. The very politics of representation that attend to cultural productions by U.S. ethnic writers contribute to neoliberalism’s entrenchment and are complemented by the politics of multiculturalism that accompany the academic study of literature, as college and university students are encouraged to approach the study of ethnic and global literatures as rarified opportunities for the knowledge and future management of difference.

In a particular way, then, this project posits inappropriateness as a counterhegemonic force. The way hegemony works—as a “system . . . which persuades people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives”—is powerful precisely because its ideas, as Jack Halberstam notes, “do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent.”<sup>64</sup> I would emphasize that such ideas do not

*appear* to solicit consent; in fact, they are deeply oriented toward the creation of acquiescent and unaware subjects. They do not expend energy in the business of persuasion, but rather reserve their efforts for the purpose of presenting themselves as naturalized facts, appealing to the normative, the already established, and the obvious.

This is not to suggest, as so much critical attention to hegemony inadvertently does, that hegemony is as total or dominant as it aspires to be. Too often critiques of hegemony themselves reinscribe the dominance of the force they mean to analyze and unsettle.<sup>65</sup> One reason hegemony appears so dominant is its flexibility in incorporating oppositional arguments, whether those “arguments” take critical or literary form. It is difficult to distinguish between oppositional movements that a specific hegemony incorporates in order to reproduce itself (in the process limiting the efficacy of such opposition), and those movements that operate independently from a given hegemony. In other words, to adopt the language from my fourth chapter, it is difficult to determine which counterhegemonic efforts “fail,” reproducing hegemony, and which efforts resist incorporation into the cycle of production and reproduction. Crucially, Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) theorizes a third possibility, a category of works and ideas which are “clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures” but that nonetheless represent, at least in part, “significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and individual.” Thus the counterhegemonic intensity generated by inappropriate ideas and works need not be total, or perpetual, to be significant. We can better equip ourselves to see the significance of such ideas and works—to discern the interplay of failure and success—“if we develop modes of analysis

which instead of reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions, are capable of discerning, in good faith, the finite but significant openness of many actual initiatives and contributions.”<sup>66</sup> It is this mode of analysis, this form of good faith discernment, which this project strives to practice, as we interrogate the limits, straining seams, and other vulnerabilities of hegemonic propriety.

Together, the following four chapters present an alternative archive to establish a taxonomy of the ways inappropriateness operates: formally, corporeally, nationally, and historically. I comparatively investigate U.S. ethnic literatures from Asian American, Afro-Caribbean American, Latino/a, and Native American traditions. These works and artists present realism as the appropriate inappropriate form for the contemporary moment; theorize the racialized body as an alternate archive by which to negotiate memory and history; posit adoption as a new trope for racialized citizenship in order to rethink conventional immigration narratives; and suggest the power of so-called failed (or literary) histories to de-naturalize the historical present.

In Chapter One, “Representation and the Real: Realism as Inappropriate Form,” I investigate the identity politics of representation that attend to contemporary ethnic writers’ use of realism. I read form as an epistemological frame in Jamaica Kincaid’s novel-memoir *My Brother* (1997) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), arguing that the realism of these texts makes legible the processes of minoritization organized under neoliberal multiculturalism and calls forth a community of readers who cannot contribute to neoliberalism’s diversity economy because they do not understand difference in the “right” way.

Registering the limits of the archive as another epistemological frame allows minoritized U.S. citizens to privilege embodied modes of knowing to counter institutionalized knowledges. In Chapter Two, “Embodied Knowledges: Synesthesia and the Archive in Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*,” I read the word-taste correlations produced by the protagonist’s auditory-gustatory synesthesia as an embodied archive. Locating inappropriateness in the figure whose bodily difference illuminates the failure of systems of representation, I argue that Truong’s 2010 novel theorizes a subject who cannot be entirely assimilated into the archive or, by extension, the nation.

Lauren Berlant and David Eng have argued that the private realm has become a privileged space for negotiating sovereignty and citizenship at the turn of the twenty-first century. My third chapter, “Adopting National Identity: The Necessary Gestures of Proper Citizen-Subjects,” examines apparently private acts of adoption and property ownership as performances by which multicultural Americans attempt to identify as proper national subjects. Centered on Chang-rae Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life* (1999), this chapter argues that appropriate multiculturalism, coded in economic and kinship terms, elides the violence minoritized subjects must experience and enact in order to fulfill the requirements of racialized U.S. citizenship. As Lee’s novel stages the pursuit of U.S. citizenship over and against a failed citizenship elsewhere, it situates domestic forms of neoliberal multiculturalism in the context of planetary subjectivity.

Distinctions among citizens rely upon a historical archive that facilitates both the record of the past and its necessary forgetting. Chapter Four, “Making Literary History: The Improper Accounts of *Flight* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” investigates how the literary archive encounters and revises the historical archive.

Answering Lisa Lowe's call for attention to "the politics of our lack of knowledge," this chapter theorizes a counter-historicism that understands memory and forgetting as equal partners in the project of history. I argue that these literary histories by Sherman Alexie and Junot Diaz, both published in 2007, stage an encounter between embodied memory and tropes of the book (storytelling, writing, the lost book, the blank page) to imagine a mode of history that does not naturalize the historical present.

Together these texts suggest venues for displays of difference that complicate neoliberal multiculturalism's privileging of proper forms of alterity. Even as they are alternately castigated for insufficient political investment and venerated for their ostensibly postracial portrayals of contemporary ethnic life, these literary works resist the appropriation of minority discourse as manifested in late capitalism and re-articulate difference inappropriately as a potent force against propriety's disciplinary apparatus. They gesture to the possibilities of literariness and to its limits, inciting readers to embrace affective and ephemeral knowledges, to question received values and tastes, to fail spectacularly and read improperly, and to desire differently.

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<sup>1</sup> *Racism and Cultural Studies* 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth" 200.

<sup>3</sup> "Not You/Like You" 416.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps purposefully. In his 2010 memoir *Decision Points*, President George W. Bush blames Congress for the change: "My one regret about the PATRIOT Act is its name. When my administration sent the bill to Capitol Hill, it was initially called the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001. Congress got clever and renamed it. As a result, there was an implication that people who opposed the law were unpatriotic. That was not what I intended. I should have pushed Congress to change the name of the bill before I signed it" (162).

<sup>5</sup> Schulhofer 3.

<sup>6</sup> H.R. 3162, 107th Congress

<sup>7</sup> Writing about the National Security Act of 1947, an inaugural Cold War document that resulted in the creation of the Department of Defense and a national security state more broadly, Jodi Kim argues that the act "rhetorically replac[ed] the traditional conception of war with such euphemisms as 'security,' 'stability,' 'balance,' and yes, 'peace'" (17).

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, moments when the act authorizes the Secretary of State to define “account” of a non-banking institution to include any meanings “that the Secretary deems appropriate” (81, Sec. 311, e, 2); when the act notes that an “alien,” or detained suspected terrorist, “may be released on such conditions as the Attorney General deems appropriate” (211, Sec. 412, a, 7); when the act authorizes the Secretary of State to provide information to foreign governments “when necessary and appropriate” (214, Sec. 413, 2).

<sup>9</sup> “appropriate, *adj.* and *n.*” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here the *OED* quotes Coleridge’s *Friend* (1837), that “To charm away...*Ennui*, is the chief and appropriate business of the poet.”

<sup>10</sup> “Drifting to Freedom” January 8, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *The Gift of Freedom* 165-66.

<sup>12</sup> “Liberty, Security, and the USA Patriot Act” 188-89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 194.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

<sup>17</sup> The rhetorical logics of propriety the Patriot Act deploys indicate its significance as a foundational document of neoliberal multiculturalism. Jodi Melamed identifies the act as embodying neoliberal multiculturalism’s “revision of racialized privilege and stigma,” a revision that crystalizes in the act’s lengthy opening section titled “Sense of Congress Condemning Discrimination against Arab and Muslim Americans.” In the moment of rhetorically extending protection to Arab Americans, the act “excuses the racializing violence that the act enables—namely, the stripping of civil and human rights from nonpatriotic or non-American Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians” (“Spirit” 18). By way of this explicit gesture of multicultural value, the act re-stigmatizes and makes newly vulnerable those people who do not meet the criteria of multicultural American, “innovating a new racism” that operates along related but different trajectories of reward and punishment (“Spirit” 19). Mimi Nguyen argues that the Patriot Act “enacted discourses and practices of security that are future-inflected, including...modifiable specifications for identifying terror along a spectrum of variation and indeterminacy” (159). This “indeterminacy...represents the state as vulnerable and unstable...[but] also provides it an alibi for its racial violence” and “systematizes a racial political rationality” (159).

<sup>18</sup> Susan Koshy details the “morphing of race into ethnicity in public discourses about national belonging, social difference, economic inequality, and global competitiveness” that “obscures the operations of race and class” in “Morphing Race Into Ethnicity” 156.

<sup>19</sup> “Not You/Like You” 416.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 418.

<sup>21</sup> *The Future of the Image* 130.

<sup>22</sup> *Conscripts of Modernity* 42.

<sup>23</sup> See especially Li’s *Signifying Without Specifying*.

<sup>24</sup> Here I adopt David Scott’s term. He defines a problem-space as a discursive context or “ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (4).

<sup>25</sup> *Ruptures of Capital* xxiv.

<sup>26</sup> Forthcoming manuscript 3.

<sup>27</sup> Thanks to Crystal Parikh for this formulation.

<sup>28</sup> *The Practice of Everyday Life* 70: “*Literature* is transformed into a repertory of these practices that have no technological copyright.”

<sup>29</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4. See also Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy*, Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, and Duggan’s *The Twilight of Equality?*

<sup>30</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* xix.

<sup>31</sup> Even as Ann Laura Stoler critiques the production of histories of race, she reminds us of their necessity: “It is more histories of the present we need—not less—to appreciate what political investments have made histories of racism in the post civil rights 1970s look so different from (and sometimes similar to) histories of racism in the multicultural 1980s, and from histories of racism written under the spectre of the New Rights sophisticated cultural politics that so fiercely denies that racism—and therefore any antiracist effort—matters today” (201).

<sup>32</sup> Examining the twentieth-century transformation of the university by minority difference in *The Reorder of Things* (2012), Roderick Ferguson traces a genealogy of ethnic studies through the post-World War II

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expansion and nationalization of the university, the Civil Rights movement, the rise of People of Color radicalism, student movements around race and gender, associated calls for interdisciplinary curriculums and canons, and promotion of the value of multicultural diversity in politics, education and business. These intersections of government support and social protest led to the creation, beginning in California state schools in 1968, of interdisciplinary fields like African American studies, Asian American studies, Women's studies, American Indian studies, Chicano studies, and others. See also David Palumbo-Liu's *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (1995), Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Johnella Butler's *Color-line to Borderland* (2001), and Barbara Christian's "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway" (1989).

<sup>33</sup> This is especially true in Asian American literary studies. See studies by Colleen Lye and Christopher Lee, and forthcoming work by Kandice Chuh.

<sup>34</sup> See especially Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

<sup>35</sup> David Palumbo-Liu's introduction to 1995's *The Ethnic Canon* contends that "the recent interest in diversity is...a mode of managing a crisis of race, ethnicity, gender, and labor in the First World and its relations with the Third as late capitalism has fostered the uneven flow of capital, products, materials, and labor" (6).

<sup>36</sup> Certain theorists and historians object to what they identify as the totalizing impact of an over-reliance on periodizing terms like neoliberal multiculturalism in analyses of contemporary life. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant suggests that while we can identify "a set of delocalized processes that have played a huge role in transforming postwar political and economic norms of reciprocity and meritocracy since the 1970s," nonetheless these processes do not "constitute a world-homogenizing system whose forces are played out to the same effect, or affect, everywhere. The differences matter, as do the continuities" (9). Anticipating such concerns, Lisa Duggan argues that neoliberalism must be understood not as a unified system but as a project – a "complex, contradictory cultural and political project created within specific institutions, with an agenda for reshaping the everyday life of contemporary global capitalism" (70). In this sense, then, neoliberalism is best understood not by coalescing or homogenizing its effects but by the identification of motivations that correspond between corporations, nations, and political efforts.

<sup>37</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 138.

<sup>38</sup> *Frames of War* 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 151.

<sup>40</sup> Melamed's comprehensive genealogy of post-World War II race liberal regimes and her identification of the ways neoliberal multiculturalism functions as an economically inflected racial formation are crucial for my project. However, though Melamed's study begins in the United States, her analysis of neoliberal multiculturalism emphasizes its globalized, transnational forms rather than its domestic technologies of representation. My analysis of contemporary U.S. politics and ethnic literature accentuates the domestic presence of neoliberal multiculturalism in ways Melamed's work does not attempt.

<sup>41</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 141.

<sup>42</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 20. In the full passage, Berlant cautions more broadly against thinking reductively about minoritization: "People born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected. But it is not as though the normative affect management styles of any status saturate the whole of anyone's being, psychology, way of interacting with themselves and the world, or experience of the world as an affecting force."

<sup>43</sup> *Represent and Destroy* xxi.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>45</sup> Puar xii.

<sup>46</sup> *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; "Morphing Race Into Ethnicity."

<sup>47</sup> Chow 13. Race, in the neoliberal multicultural era, mutates in fascinating ways in public discourse. Melamed notes neoliberal multiculturalism's comfort with the term "difference" rather than with overt discussions of race (43). Susan Koshy describes the ways race has morphed into ethnicity, allowing whites to ostensibly occupy the same strata as non-dominant groups by virtue of the way whiteness becomes just another ethnicity even as white privilege is preserved. In the words of Rey Chow, "ethnicity exists in modernity as a boundary—a line of exclusion—that nonetheless pretends to be a nonboundary—a framework of inclusion—only then to reveal its full persecutory and discriminatory force whenever political, economic, or ideological gains are at stake" (30).

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<sup>48</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 12, emphasis mine. Melamed cites the designations of “liberal,” “multicultural,” and “global citizen” as examples of the terms of value that have become new criteria for access to citizenship, profit and protection.

<sup>49</sup> According to Althusser, “all ideological State apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e., of capitalist relations of exploitation... Each of them contributes toward this single result in the way proper to it” (154).

<sup>50</sup> “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” 162-68.

<sup>51</sup> *Marxism and Literature* 110.

<sup>52</sup> Gramsci 242.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>54</sup> *Marxism and Literature* 110.

<sup>55</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 1.

<sup>56</sup> Christina Gerken characterizes these two pieces of legislation as part of “the neoliberal discourse on immigration of the mid-1990s [that] created a new, seemingly raceless way of talking about immigrants, while drawing on earlier overtly racist discourses” (153). IIRIRA appeals to appropriateness with respect to appropriate sentencing enhancements and the “inappropriate behavior” of “aliens,” noting that sometimes the removal of the alien is “appropriate and in the best interests of the United States.” PRWORA opens with a deeply normative section detailing the Congressional “findings” that ostensibly justify the legislation. Moving from the statement that “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society,” the findings section details the increase in single-parent families receiving support (aid to families with dependent children, or AFDC), the general increase in “out-of-wedlock pregnancies” since 1976, and a litany of statistics about the negative social, cognitive, educational and carceral impact of growing up in a single-parent household to conclude, “in light of this demonstration of the crisis in our Nation, it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are very important government interests.” See Eric Tang for more details on the ways PRWORA particularly impacts black families and Asian immigrants (*Social Text*).

<sup>57</sup> Jasbir Puar traces the twin modes by which ethnic bodies achieve appropriate status: the recoding of difference as sameness, and the disidentification from bodies that do not qualify for such privileged status. As racial frames lose their authoritative hold over the demarcation between privilege and stigma, “appropriate multicultural ethnic bodies” inevitably multiply. Such exceptional (often ethnic) citizens are characterized by their “careful management of difference: of difference within sameness, and of difference containing sameness” (25). In other words, the status of appropriate requires that difference be safely situated in relation to sameness—while maintaining the status of difference, it is nonetheless recoded as difference-in-sameness, or sameness-in-difference. This careful management of difference on an individual level becomes coupled with the management of the difference of others. Choosing appropriateness necessitates “the factioning, fractioning, and fractalizing of identity... whereby subjects... orient themselves as subjects through their disassociation or disidentification from others disenfranchised in similar ways in favor of consolidations with axes of privilege” (28). Such disidentification becomes a prerequisite for appropriateness within neoliberal multicultural regimes of capital.

<sup>58</sup> See particularly reactions to Sherman Alexie’s and Junot Diaz’s work as discussed in this project’s fourth chapter. Rey Chow describes this process as ethnic *ressentiment*, a psychic “reaction to the injustice created by the coercive and unequal encounter with the white world” that “ends up directing rancor toward certain members of one’s own ethnic group—that ends up, as it were, ethnically profiling, shaming, and scapegoating those members” (186).

<sup>59</sup> *The Propriety of Liberty* 15.

<sup>60</sup> “Race Under Representation” 71.

<sup>61</sup> “Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth” 186.

<sup>62</sup> Analyzing not only the nineteenth century powers of the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina but also twentieth-century South Africa, Latin America, and the United States, Stoler argues that “nineteenth-century racism was not built on those sure-footed classifications of science but on a potent set of cultural and affective criteria whose malleability was a key to the flexible scale along which economic privileges could be cordoned off and social entitlements reassigned” (198). Many of these classifications rested upon the kind of performative, behavioral appropriateness I outline in the contemporary United States that is “explicitly preoccupied with the politics of exclusion, with the making of adults and children into racialized

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beings, with educating their racially cued comportements, moral sentiments and desires in ways that were invariably 'about' bourgeois respectability, 'civility,' and cultural and less explicitly 'about' race" (196).

<sup>63</sup> *Represent and Destroy* xvi.

<sup>64</sup> Halberstam 17.

<sup>65</sup> Halberstam cautions that when our critiques of hegemony "attribute[] so much power to it that it has seemed impossible to imagine counterhegemonic options," it is extremely difficult to imagine "the production and circulation of another, competing set of ideas which could join in an active struggle to change society" (17).

<sup>66</sup> Williams 114.

## Chapter One: Representation and the Real: Realism as

### Inappropriate Form

“There are no longer any inherent limits to representation, to its possibilities. This boundlessness also means that there is no longer a language or form which is appropriate to a subject, whatever it might be.”—Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

“These aren’t particularly healthy times,” Zadie Smith states flatly in “Two Paths for the Novel,” her critique of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> literary realism published in *The New York Review of Books* on November 20, 2008.<sup>2</sup> Smith argues that novels as a genre always “attempt to cut neural routes through the brain, to convince us that down this road the true future of the novel lies,” and in healthy times, she suggests, their modes and forms are varying and various. But in the years following the turn of the twenty-first century, Smith laments, lyrical realism—and its central tenets, “the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self”—has gained a stranglehold in English language literature. The formal experimentation of postmodernism has been consigned to a limited subset of literary history, and lyrical realism has become entrenched—not because it is “the closest model we have to our condition,” as proponents of realism have long argued, but because it is “the bedtime story that comforts us most.”

Smith’s criticism is grounded in her analysis of Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008), a novel she depicts as casting about in aesthetically pleasing description for “the real thing” on which its middle-class readership can base a sense of self and relation to the world. Two weeks after Smith’s review, *The New York Times* named O’Neill’s novel to its list of “The 10 Best Books of 2008,” a middlebrow reception that seems evidence of

Smith's claims about contemporary realism's pervasive appeal.<sup>3</sup> More than her critique of lyrical realism as a larger literary mode, Smith's primary charge against *Netherland* and novels like it concerns its perfect translation of realism to our twenty-first century milieu. In fact, she suggests, "to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition . . . It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis." Though Smith does not, in this piece, proceed to elaborate on what she believes "we have been taught to value in fiction," the evaluative gesture itself is one of this chapter's central concerns. How do we, as readers and literary scholars, come to value certain modes of fiction and denigrate others as ideologically suspect? What do such values reveal about the politics being imagined and practiced in the U.S. context at the turn of the twenty-first century? Why are American readers and literary critics—even writers like Smith herself—so invested in establishing an appropriate form for our era, and what does such a pursuit reflect about the way concerns of appropriateness have taken hold in our cultural and political understanding?

In the process of addressing these questions, this chapter identifies and examines forms that might be considered particularly inappropriate to the contemporary era, and considers how their violation of "proper" literary, discursive and political conventions situates them in unique relation to their readers, to literary studies, and to the political economy. Inappropriateness here is grounded in the literary because, as Jacques Rancière argues, literature possesses its own politics, defined as "the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world . . . a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience."<sup>4</sup> In this way, the politics of literariness exist apart from

any political investments of the writer: “literature ‘does’ politics as literature” and in fact “there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing.”<sup>5</sup> Thus I open with Smith’s public attempt to formulate a theory of proper literary form in the hope of commencing a more concentrated analysis of the ways in which form becomes coded in public discourse as appropriate or inappropriate, particularly in ethnic literature of the United States under neoliberal multiculturalism. In order to examine the precise crisis of representation in U.S. ethnic cultural production of the past two decades, I situate these questions of form within the context of what Rancière has termed modernity’s aesthetic regime of the arts, an epoch of cultural production characterized by a lack of hierarchy in subject matter and the end of requisite correlations between subject and form. In short, the convention that certain subjects require certain forms or that certain forms are best yoked to certain subjects no longer has wide purchase: all forms are potentially suitable and so no forms are specific to particular subjects. I draw on Rancière’s formulation but particularize it to the contemporary neoliberal moment to analyze the ways that ethnic literature responds to the manifestations of propriety as an ideological apparatus in the political and cultural spheres, most notably to the reinvigoration of discourses of authenticity and representationality. Under Rancière’s formulation, all forms are concomitantly appropriate and inappropriate to any task of representation to which they are set. Beginning with this premise that the appropriate form is always the inappropriate form, this chapter examines the regulatory power of the designation “inappropriate” as applied to literature in order to better understand the functions of literary discourse in the United

States and the challenges that literature written from a minoritized perspective poses to received knowledge about what contemporary literature should do and be.

I look to literature written from a minoritized perspective to consider form because such literary productions carry the burden of propriety on multiple valences: not only in the content of their narratives but also their formal experimentation (or lack thereof), their publishing and marketing strategies, and their perceived appeal (or lack thereof) to a mainstream white readership. Specifically, ethnic literary texts are expected to perform, both by members of their respective ethnic communities and externally by wider arbiters of multicultural diversity, as appropriately representative of the ethnic and cultural contexts from which they emerge—whether this means striving for assimilation or, with equal fervor, opposing such integration into U.S. and transnational multiculturalism. In this way, discussions of form always already invoke the political.

I also consider U.S. ethnic literature because the histories of U.S. ethnic literary production present a condensed genealogy—a microcosm—in which national debates about aesthetics appear with particular clarity. Literary texts tend to face contradictory claims from the archive of literary studies and the archive of cultural studies.<sup>6</sup> As such, minority discourse in the post-Civil Rights era becomes a proving ground for debates about politicization at the expense of the aesthetic and, conversely, about the untenable a-politics that comes from an overinvestment in the aesthetic. On the one hand, politically inflected readings of literary texts have resulted in increased visibility of and tolerance toward minoritized perspectives in the late twentieth century. Such readings necessarily situate literature in a larger political, social and economic context, registering the relationship between literature and “other kinds of discourses, institutions, and material

forces” in the processes of racialization and subject formation.<sup>7</sup> But ethnic studies scholars calling for a formalist revival contend that such relationships often situate what is “ethnic” in tension with what is “aesthetic.” Read prescriptively, ethnic literature becomes a transparent window into difference that collapses the literary into the “real” in service of neoliberal multiculturalism’s production and management of difference. Yet attention to aesthetics can tip too far in the opposite direction as well, leading to a reification of form and an understanding of literature as transcendent—as sufficient, in and of itself, to revolutionize the aesthetic *and* political realms. In this case, material political action is rendered unnecessary because literature is, itself, “enough.”

Studying literature written from a minoritized perspective reminds us that certain forms or formal conventions are not limited to a particular group or time period, contradicting the dominant narrative of U.S. literary history that collapses genre and period to consign realism to the latter half of the nineteenth century. Minoritized literatures also complicate the kind of formalism that would characterize certain devices, approaches or techniques as the special purview of particular groups, especially ethnic labels like “Asian American,” created for their usefulness to identity politics, that do not meaningfully correlate to or describe forms of literary production. In light of the history of this term, Colleen Lye argues that “there is no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic form.”<sup>8</sup> I would extend this to emphasize that there is no U.S. ethnic form *per se*.

As minoritization reveals certain underlying expectations endemic to discussions of form, so an analysis of form, I propose, will help make legible the processes of minoritization codified under neoliberal multiculturalism, particularly the transformation

of race into ethnicity and the flattening of difference such that difference becomes reclassified as sameness under the heading of “diversity.” Form, understood as an aesthetic act and as an epistemological frame, enables recognition of the subjects of literature. Form signals to the reader that a work possesses or at least aspires to the qualities of literariness, that it seeks recognition as literary. Form is a strategy by which literature attempts to obscure its own limits and at the same time a device by which it gestures to those limits. Politically invested, form organizes experience and regulates legibility, while always containing the conditions of its own breakdown. And inappropriate forms, I posit, are those forms that reveal their own exteriority—that, as they seek recognition as literary, point us to what exceeds their frame and the political ramifications of that excess.

In this sense, this study begins with form as such not to suggest that form is sufficient in and of itself, but that we must consider form as a condition of political possibility. This chapter examines two literary works that operate on different valences of formal impropriety in order to illuminate a relationship between neoliberalism and formal inappropriateness. More specifically, these works demonstrate formal engagement with realism, enabling an articulation of realism and its putative relationships with various ideologies and political economies. My intervention into the modes and functions of realism operates on three different registers. At the level of the individual literary text, I consider formal innovations and gestures that create a kind of inappropriate relation between the narrative content of story and the form of its narration. The second register concerns the functions of academic discourse: the way realism has been appraised and critiqued within literary studies and the relation between literary studies and narratives of

popular reading practices that coalesce in the U.S. literary imagination. Finally, at the level of the political, I consider realism's relationship to neoliberalism: the way realism evoked by the formal properties of a text and codified at the level of academic discourse functions on the register of political economy to naturalize or denaturalize the status quo.

I begin by analyzing a highly descriptive realist work, Jamaica Kincaid's novel-memoir *My Brother* (1997). Existing scholarship on this text tends to center on the ethical ramifications of writing from the U.S. about a Caribbean figure, usually arguing that Kincaid's narrative about the three years following Devon Drew's AIDS diagnosis exploits the diseased body of her brother in order to foreground the narrator as a diasporic and literary subject. While remaining mindful of the ethical questions this work raises, I am dedicated to rethinking the formal aspects of Kincaid's work. This realist text is characterized, I argue, by its experiments with ekphrasis, defined broadly as verbal representation of visual representation. Yet *My Brother* eschews conventional parameters of ekphrasis to stage an encounter with images of bodies othered by disease. Early in the text these encounters arise out of other representations, most crucially from medical photographs. Eventually, though, the narrative evaporates even this tenuous distinction between art and life to bring body as aesthetic object, speaker-seer, and reader into a relation of transformative closeness. In these ekphrastic moments, inappropriate ekphrasis becomes a strategy by which the aestheticized body becomes re-naturalized, complicating the realist text's relationship to the putative "real."

From Kincaid's inappropriate ekphrasis, this chapter moves to consider the short stories of Bengali American writer Jhumpa Lahiri. As Smith foregrounds the regressive ideologies endemic to realism at the level of political economy, so Lahiri's critics in the

realm of academic discourse often condemn her work for its ostensible striving to a kind of apolitical universality, resulting in stories that comfortably depict “normal life.” Accused of taking up a form that is inappropriate to her contemporary moment and especially to representations of minoritized figures in U.S. literature by virtue of its conventionality, Lahiri nonetheless enacts a political critique of her own in her refusal of the expectations that she, as an ethnic writer, must perform a politics recognizable as such. I will argue that Lahiri’s appropriate—domesticated, genteel—formal realism as practiced in “Going Ashore,” the final story in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), is inappropriate *not* because it does not do justice to U.S. ethnic immigrant experience but precisely because it resists the expectations of formal experimentation and the discursive common sense that would designate realism as a normative, repressive, appeasing genre. Turning to Judith Butler’s explication of epistemological frames that regulate apprehension and recognition, I suggest that literary form functions as one such epistemological frame, and that Lahiri’s overt use of realist framing devices effects an inappropriate materialization of realism’s concealed operations.

It is my contention that the deployments and forms of inappropriateness I describe here help generate alternatives to neoliberal modes of representation because they are forms that encourage re-materialization—a return to bodies, to material inequality, to precarity and visibility and biopolitics. Neoliberalism dematerializes, unyoking economic causes from their effects and positing a theoretical universal subject who inhabits a fictionalized meritocracy unavailable and unrecognizable to U.S. citizen-subjects who live in poverty, violence and rampant race, gender, and sexuality-based inequities. An economic structure by which wealth is distributed upward by way of “free” markets,

deregulation, and unfettered transnational capitalism, neoliberalism masquerades as common sense—the appropriate form of political economy in our era of globalization. Inappropriate ekphrasis in Jamaica Kincaid’s realist text *My Brother* re-situates the diseased body in the context of the natural, in the process bringing speaker-seer and embodied art object together in a way that nonetheless resists the collapse of difference into sameness. Inappropriate realism in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Going Ashore” overtly stages the process of frame building and maintenance in order to draw attention to the framing devices by which realism creates the illusion of the real. In doing so, Lahiri’s multiplicity of frames conveys the precarity of bodies, both those appropriate to neoliberalism by way of their fluid multicultural status and those casually designated for illegibility and death.

The question of form consistently revolves, as a return to Zadie Smith’s essay on “the future of the Anglophone novel” reveals, around what it teaches us to expect or recognize and how it flouts or disrupts these expectations and recognitions. Responding to what she determines realist novels like *Netherland* attempt to offer—the authentic story of a self—Smith provocatively resists this illusion of inevitability:

is this really what having a self feels like? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they not sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really Realism?

How memory works—how time feels—what is “really” real: it is these questions that literature, by way of its formal qualities, supposes to answer. Smith’s litany of questions contests what she sees as the insidious epistemological frames of contemporary literature that exist with the goal of containing and cataloguing proper notions of how life feels, of how living works. Yet these questions come in an essay attempting to establish precisely what contemporary literature should(n’t) be and do.

As part of a larger project about the disciplinary operations conducted under the guise of propriety in the U.S. at the turn of the twenty-first century, this chapter sets critical work on racialization under neoliberalism in conversation with Rancière’s theorization of the politics of aesthetics. In *Represent and Destroy* (2011), Jodi Melamed traces the way the U.S. government reacted to global scrutiny of white supremacy following World War II by developing and promulgating official, state-sponsored antiracisms to justify and consolidate its position as the leader of global capitalism. In a series of race-liberal regimes over the succeeding decades, procedures of racialization “independently and flexibly employed the criteria that white supremacy historically has collapsed with color, and . . . innovated new criteria, often using nationalist and antiracist terms of value.”<sup>9</sup> This project argues that one crucial set of new criteria can be grouped under the umbrella of *propriety*, as terms like “appropriate” and “proper” are strategically deployed as nationalist terms of value that naturalize the political and economic status quo. Such terms attempt to construct and are mutually enforced by what Rancière has termed the distribution of the sensible, “the system of self evident facts of sense perception” that regulates the terms of visibility and perception and creates a community of perceivers—the sensible—in common.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than establishing and then reinforcing such notions of what is proper, inappropriate forms produce new modes of knowledge by the deployment of narrative and representational strategies that foreclose conventional methods of aesthetic apprehension and engagement. In this way, their impropriety moves between and consolidates the realm of the literary and the realm of the political in the creation of a particular audience. This is especially true of realism as a formal mode with a complicated history, and of other formal conventions like ekphrasis that this chapter considers within the larger context of realist ethnic literature. Inappropriate forms, then, are concerned with bringing into being a different kind of audience, inaugurating the kinds of aesthetic states that do not serve primarily to educate—either our tastes or our sense of the real that translates into the common (and communal) sense of inevitability—but instead to evoke resistant valences of desire and identification. This project imagines the production of new collectivities able to withstand the demands of neoliberal multicultural formulations of what Lauren Berlant has termed “the good life.”<sup>11</sup> As consumers of inappropriate texts, newly inappropriate subjects produced in this shared readership are created—subjects who cannot contribute to the neoliberal diversity economy because they do not understand difference in the “right” way.

### **Inappropriate Form as Appropriate Form**

While this chapter negotiates various meanings of form at the level of literary text and beyond, the goal of my analysis is to move beyond our investments, as literary scholars and readers, in form as an end in itself to consider political structures and economies that regulate contemporary life. For this reason, I begin with Rancière’s definition of aesthetics as “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a

mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.”<sup>12</sup> Rancière theorizes the aesthetic regime, which he dates as beginning with Flaubertian descriptive realism in the mid-nineteenth century, as functionally “destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished the ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the ethical regime, concerned with questions of artistic purpose, and the representative regime, which regulated mimesis by monitoring “proper” correlation between subject matter and form, the aesthetic regime leaves aside questions of proper forms or ethical merit in an abandonment of aesthetic hierarchy. Within this regime, Rancière explicitly situates artistic representation in political terms, defining aesthetic acts as “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.”<sup>14</sup> Aesthetics understood in this way governs the distribution of the sensible, which in turn determines the parameters of what is taken as common sense; it sets the terms by which we recognize, understand and characterize art and art’s role in political and social formation.

And so, as Rancière notes elsewhere, the question of the political is also a question of form. In *The Future of the Image*, he describes form’s new role within an aesthetic regime that has abolished not only hierarchies of form but also all rules governing the relationship between subject matter and medium. Images and events have been unyoked from expectations of what should be represented (appropriate subjects) and how (appropriate forms): “there are no longer any inherent limits to representation, to its possibilities. This boundlessness also means that there is no longer a language or form which is appropriate to a subject, whatever it may be.”<sup>15</sup> In other moments Rancière is

even more explicit about the relationship between appropriate and inappropriate forms, arguing that “the appropriate form is also the inappropriate form. In and of itself the event neither prescribes nor proscribes any artistic means. And it does not impose any duty on art to represent, or not to represent, in some particular way.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Rancière’s theorization of form also requires an understanding of how this “radical autonomy of art” established by the conditions of the aesthetic regime concomitantly requires a collapse of the distinction between representation and the real, between the spheres of fact and the spheres of fiction, undermining the conventional autonomy art has been understood to possess in its existence as apart from real life.<sup>17</sup> Because realism as a formal mode strives to enact such a collapse as well, though in aesthetic terms, this chapter foregrounds the tense and complicated relationship between representation and the real.

This analysis of appropriate and inappropriate forms is the starting point for my invocation of inappropriate form as the defining feature of contemporary U.S. literature written from a minoritized perspective. I depart from Rancière’s work, however, in terms of the scope of the deployment of inappropriateness to which I attend in this chapter. He would characterize all formal choices since the mid-nineteenth century as inappropriate in the sense described above. I want to reiterate that the inappropriate forms delineated in this chapter function as a vehicle for the resistant creation of minoritized subjects under the political epoch of neoliberal multiculturalism.<sup>18</sup>

In making these arguments, I draw on and extend Christopher Lee’s definition of form as “a process of representation through which the world becomes legible, a process that both makes use of and disrupts given formal conventions.”<sup>19</sup> In its broadest sense as an epistemological frame, form is in conversation with the literary devices that we

recognize as components of literary form. Form refers to the structure of a literary work, and is constructed through the deployment and disruption of recognizable literary devices and formal conventions. In this sense, form is a container, a vehicle, for narrative; story and form together are the primary components of literary meaning-making. This chapter also traces form as a strategy of representation designed to capture the reader's attention. Form in this iteration is meant to register literariness—the particular qualities of a literary text crafted to authenticate its privileged status as literature. Form also registers processes of subject formation represented in the text and the possibilities suggested by such representations, and gestures on a larger scale to the concealed operations of social, political and economic structures that condition us for life under late capitalism. Finally, form functions as an epistemological frame by which conditions of contemporary life come to be understood.

Unsettling reader expectations about genre, period, experimentation, representation and political engagement, inappropriate form both draws attention to these implicit expectations and suggests our own dissatisfaction with them—their failure, in aesthetic terms, to achieve the promise of formal transcendence on which we have been taught to pin our political imaginings. First and most obviously, inappropriate form can be characterized by its fundamental flouting of the conventions of literary form: experimentations with the parameters of genre, with the boundaries between artistic media, with the literary traditions and attendant political expectations endemic to particular modes like realism. But the inappropriateness of inappropriate form stems not from its formal experimentation, though such experimentation is one way literary impropriety is most often recognized. Rather, inappropriate form for the purposes of this

project is form which disrupts the distribution of the sensible by way of its formal experimentation; it is form that makes us see differently and, because of this, presents the possibility that we might desire differently, in the context of literary challenges to the politics and ethics of neoliberal multiculturalism. As we shall see, inappropriate form is form that complicates literature's investment in maintaining its own inevitability, and that works against its own power to delimit the boundaries and hierarchize the components of legible human action—power that stems from literature's capacity to influence proper ways of doing, making, and being.

### **Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Inappropriate Realism**

If form is a process of representation through which the world is created and made legible, then inappropriate forms extend legibility beyond the proper boundaries maintained through neoliberal multiculturalism's technologies of representation. The central tension of ethnic literary study operates along a supposed continuum between aesthetics and politics. Considered broadly, literary critics tend either to resort to formalism and the reification of form that limits politics to aesthetics, or to read minoritized literature as cultural artifact. As cultural artifact, ethnic literature becomes transparently political and historical, its literariness occluded. Often this divide between formalism and artifact maps onto the contested territory between cultural studies and literary studies. As I discuss in my introduction, neoliberal multiculturalism encourages and reinforces this divide, exploiting the history of U.S. ethnic studies and minority discourse to distract from the ways literary studies can function to support its project of dematerialization. Following Melamed, I understand neoliberal multiculturalism as a racial formation that codifies bodies and groups within a global biopolitical regime and

makes such codification—and the ensuing racialized demarcations between positions of privilege and positions of stigma—appear the fair and natural outcome of economic freedom and multicultural ideals. Under neoliberal multiculturalism, literature performs as an antiracist technology that produces “truth effects” about personhood, difference, globalization, and contemporary propriety.

Inappropriate forms generate literature and a readership which fundamentally *cannot* serve this function, and they resist investment in maintaining their own inevitability by overtly staging their underlying conditions of possibility in such a way as to reinforce how they could always have been otherwise.<sup>20</sup> If inappropriate form is that which disrupts the distribution of the sensible, the epistemological frames that structure recognition of value, then such forms offer no ready authorization to would-be multicultural elites of the neoliberal era. Even when operating in the realist mode, the effects of such forms should not be mistaken for the art-for-art’s-sake aesthetic encounter of literary formalism. In fact, it is literary formalism which serves the neoliberal project outlined in the introduction, because it is an aesthetic philosophy that depoliticizes political ideology and allows it to appear as moral truth. These universalized moral truths become hierarchized above any local, individual, cultural truths, eventually becoming the only aspect a U.S.-based reader needs to take away from a given work of literature. In contrast, inappropriate forms are strictly opposed to such formalism; whether overtly politically charged or apparently apolitical, whether obviously experimental or deceptively “normal,” inappropriate forms chip away at formalism’s universal claims and resist designations of literary value that would reduce literature to its potential for providing information about difference. Inappropriate forms recall us to the body that

underlies representation rather than occluding it. They register precarity and its causes and consequences under neoliberalism. They make manifest the assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality that facilitate the workings of neoliberalism.

This chapter argues that realism is one inappropriate instantiation of form that exploits the tension between politicization and aestheticization of U.S. ethnic literature. In its elusive craftedness, realism encourages aesthetic apprehension and engagement in the unpacking of a densely literary work. Yet the devices it deploys to establish its sense of credibility—like historical allusion and framing—concomitantly encourage political investment in the historical past, present, and future. Marxist critics from George Lukacs onward have argued that realism presents a condensed model of the world to our scrutiny, available for critique<sup>21</sup>; yet this formulation must also address realism's concomitant insistence on the externality and significance of the world it claims to represent.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the very tools by which realism seeks to create the illusion of reality are the devices that can be marshalled to undermine realism's project and return us to the external world, existing as distinct from the world of representation. The particularities of time, character and place identified by Ian Watt as the fundamental components of realism<sup>23</sup>—the devices by which realism attempts to represent and, in representing, occlude the representative project—become the devices by which we are returned to the realness, and political necessities, of the world in which we live.

I consider instances when realism, particularly realist texts written from a minoritized perspective, offers a unique challenge to neoliberalism's perceived hegemony. I do not seek a total rehabilitation of realism; certainly, realism can and has been complicit in the solidification of normative cultures, politics and economies. But it

is also true that some of the most trenchant critiques of realism veer toward homogenizing and reifying difference, collapsing valences of difference into a single, knowable instantiation. Furthermore, distinctions between the literary and the real disappear as U.S. ethnic texts are asked, even expected, under the strictures of multiculturalism to work transparently as cultural artifacts that reveal or testify to cultural difference.<sup>24</sup>

In considering realism in contemporary U.S. ethnic literature, I suggest that the critical debate in discourses of realism between referentiality and textuality can be mapped, in certain productive ways, onto the debates in U.S. ethnic studies between political prescriptiveness and aesthetic formalism. Specifically, scholars' respective investments in referentiality or textuality become the foundation for what will be considered appropriate ethnic literature, on the textual register, and the appropriate critical uses of that literature on an academic register.<sup>25</sup> It is this intersection of referentiality and textuality that makes realism the appropriate inappropriate form for an examination of the thorny political and aesthetic investments of U.S. ethnic literary studies. Further, such an understanding of mutually sustaining tensions might prove suggestive in the project of reading U.S. ethnic literature in the shadow of neoliberal multiculturalism. In her work on nineteenth-century American realism, Lilian Furst argues that realism must be understood as both referential and discursive: the illusion of referentiality is created and maintained discursively, and realist narrative always incorporates "the semblance of reference into the illusion-making process."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the two cannot be disentangled without creating a partial or mangled account of the way realism works. Further, she suggests that the tension between referentiality and textuality

is in fact central to the project of realism: “The realist novel must be taken at one and the same time as a record (more or less faithful, as the case may be) of a past social situation *and* as a texture made of verbal signs. Far from cancelling each other out, the two overlap in an inescapable and reciprocally sustaining tension that forms the core of realism’s precarious enterprise.”<sup>27</sup>

In certain instantiations, realism is a particular deployment of form that most clearly activates the tension fundamental to all representative acts: the relationship between the work of representation itself and the external “real” world. In literary criticism, realism is generally identified by the literary conventions—density of description, particularity of time and place—that create an illusion of “reality” and contribute to what Sue-Im Lee calls the “localizability” of characters within a realist framework that itself implies a direct correlation to the realities of the external world.<sup>28</sup> At the level of critical discourse, realism is often described as an ideological technology of subject formation or a strategy for managing power and powerlessness in the imagining of a world that is coherent and stable.<sup>29</sup> Yet recent reformulations, like the “peripheral realisms” theorized by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, suggest that realism “mark[s] a shared investment in theorizing the referential function of the text even as it inspires extraordinary flexible and active ways of reconceiving and transcoding social referents.”<sup>30</sup> Realism matters and is a useful term because, in the peripheral realisms identified by Esty and Lye, it takes seriously the attempt to represent the totality of global capitalism—“rather than thematizing its unrepresentability”—and in doing so questions its “status as permanent fact.”<sup>31</sup>

While this chapter will at times consider the use of literary devices in the creation of worlds suggestively constructed to evoke a sense of the real, I am more interested in the larger question of realism as a form that concomitantly evokes and interrogates this assumed real. Edward Barnaby calls this process the attempt “to render social experience visible by accounting for what was possible to express and to observe within a particular social reality.”<sup>32</sup> Christopher Lee, drawing on and revising Frederic Jameson, suggests that realism is “an aesthetic as well as an epistemological literary form” that activates and questions “the possibility of objective knowledge in/of a heterogeneous world.”<sup>33</sup> The aesthetic and epistemological claims of realism compete, staging the tension of all literary attempts to represent the real by way of the non-real most overtly. In other words, if realism is successful aesthetically, the illusion of a literary work’s reality is sustained. But if realism is successful epistemologically, it is a mode by which we come to knowledge of an external world that is fundamentally separate from the work of representation.

To summarize, when inappropriate form takes shape as realism, this translates to an improper materialization on the three registers under discussion here: text, discourse, and ideology. Realism’s inappropriateness at the level of literary text is reflected in the ways it frames character beliefs and actions, unrealistically (in the sense that it does not function as a mirror of “real life”) marking out particular events as significant. At the level of academic discourse, realism’s impropriety comes as it overreaches the historical boundaries established for it. Finally, at the level of political economy, realism becomes inappropriate when it seeks, in a non-experimental guise, to undermine the neoliberal

multicultural project by interrogating the literary devices, academic discourse and political distribution of the sensible that are its tools.

I want to mark a distinction here, drawn from Melamed, between the function of individual works of literature and the function of literary studies as a discourse. In the decades after World War II, literature became understood as “a privileged tool for information retrieval, a privileged domain for coming to terms with difference, and a social guarantee of racism’s eventual irrelevance.”<sup>34</sup> Literary texts, in this larger rubric, come to stand as sufficient in and of themselves: reading a literary text is a path to real knowledge of the other, a privileged technology for the creation and training of good multicultural elites who will administer the codes and criteria of neoliberalism’s privilege/stigma divide. Literature eventually functions collectively as an “antiracist technology” that produces not truth but “truth effects.”<sup>35</sup> But while Melamed’s theorization critiques the institutionalization of literature—its formal coalescence as literary studies and its installment in colleges and universities—as complicit with and subject to neoliberalism’s attempts to regulate difference, it also preserves the transformative possibilities of individual literary texts. The processes by which literary studies fosters neoliberal agendas—serving as a tool for information retrieval, a safe space for encounters with difference, and a sign of society’s postracial promise—are processes that do not attend to form except in the ways form might offer a shortcut to mastery of difference. Individual works of literature can counter this flattening, Melamed suggests—works that present “antiracist visions incompatible with liberal political solutions to destructively uneven global social-material relations.”<sup>36</sup>

So, this chapter asks, can inappropriate forms withstand the relentless hegemony of literary studies and multiculturalism more broadly? And how exactly do inappropriate forms generate alternatives to the commonsensical propriety of late capitalism? Finally, even when they fail to stage such alternatives, what might inappropriate forms suggest about the possibilities for resisting neoliberalism that are grounded in the aesthetic? Certainly realism is a form that evokes the real. But literature's power is often situated in the fact that it has no requirement to accurately reflect real life and so it can imagine, and then represent, any thing in any way. I propose that this dynamic is at the heart of why so many scholars find realism suspect, though they would likely not articulate it in this way: because the underlying assumption of this understanding of realism is that it would be better to be real than to be representative. As realism is a formal attempt to sustain the illusion of the real, it exchanges representation's political and aesthetic potential for a weak and blighted attempt to operate as the real—despite the fact that literature is fundamentally always inadequate in this attempt to represent the real by way of the non-real. But what if we understood realism as possessing no such aspirations and no such correlation? In that case, perhaps realism does not forgo the possible for the actual but instead becomes a form in which the possible gets staged as actual, in the process increasing the force and fact of its possibility for the reader. Understood this way, realism as an appropriate inappropriate form assumes a kind of political manifestation in advance of its realization in the world of the actual.

### **Inappropriate Ekphrasis**

Inappropriate form describes less a genre than an orientation, as I suggest by opening my textual analysis of inappropriate realism with a consideration of the prose

ekphrasis in Jamaica Kincaid's novel-memoir *My Brother* (1997). In his review of the novel following its release, Craig Seligman relates a conversation he had with young Jamaica Kincaid when they both worked for the *New Yorker*: "She told me over lunch one day that she wasn't happy with the formal strictures of stories and novels; 'I want to find a new form,' she said."<sup>37</sup> Though *My Brother* employs Kincaid's characteristic impressionistic style and non-chronological timeline, this work also evinces the quotidian details, family dynamics, quest for knowledge of the self and others, and narrative of subject formation generally recognized as attributes of the style of representation known as realism. These textual characteristics of *My Brother* work together to create and sustain "the illusion that the characters we encounter are somehow real," Christopher Lee's description of realism's central effect.<sup>38</sup> This impression is further reinforced at the level of discourse by widespread knowledge of the work's autobiographical inspiration: Kincaid's half-brother, Devon Drew, died of AIDS in Antigua in 1996. For the three years between his diagnosis and his death, Kincaid regularly traveled between her home and family in the United States and her birthplace and family of origin, bringing her brother the life-extending antiretroviral medication not available to him in Antigua.

Reviews of *My Brother* indicate that the novel-memoir's minor experimentations actually shore up its realist project. Tangential descriptions of *My Brother* at the time of its publication are highly suggestive when we consider what they register as visible, or true, or normal, or "realistic," within the distribution of the sensible such reviews reinforce. Writing for *The New York Times*, Anna Quindlen affirms that the work is in fact "a *lesson* in constructing a memoir that resembles not a neat narrative but the meandering river of human memory" and that "memory *feels exactly like*" Kincaid's text.

She goes on to testify that *My Brother* “provid[es] . . . the deep satisfaction of recognition.”<sup>39</sup> Quindlen is not the only critic to gesture to the text’s powerful handling of our impulses and expectations. Seligman argues that “Kincaid’s fiction doesn’t *feel* like fiction. It has the misshapen contours of the real, not the symmetry of art.”<sup>40</sup> Contrasting his first impression with the way the work reshapes his frames of reference on an extremely detailed scale, Seligman admits that “a first reading left the impression of something highly artificial, but when I went back it didn’t seem artificial, it seemed inevitable.”<sup>41</sup> These reviews provide a kind of microcosm of realism’s aspirations. Though Seligman’s first impression was artifice, the novel-memoir’s residual effect worked on him in the space of one reading to convince him of its own inevitability. Quindlen’s argument that memory feels just like Kincaid’s narrative even leads Quindlen to suggest that it should serve as a “lesson” for writers and readers alike. These reviews argue for Kincaid’s text as model or lesson, marking its regulatory function within literary production and literary studies. The discourse produced around Kincaid’s semi-autobiographical experiment suggests that Kincaid has taken that which might have previously been considered improper subjects of representation—decaying genitalia, the horror of advanced-stage AIDS—and rendered it in a novel-memoir for the masses.

*My Brother* begins with the Kincaidian narrator’s return to Antigua after learning of her brother’s diagnosis from a family friend. There, she enlists the help of Dr. Ramsay, the island’s foremost expert on AIDS, whose approach to prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS operates in conflict with the prevailing views of the island’s medical and lay communities: “In Antigua if you are diagnosed with the HIV virus you are considered to be dying,” Kincaid writes. “Public concern, obsession with the treatment and care of

members of the AIDS-suffering community by groups in the larger non-AIDS-suffering community, does not exist. There are only the people suffering from AIDS, and then the people who are not suffering from AIDS,” strict boundaries policed by careful attention to social norms (31). Intrigued by the public-health component of Ramsay’s practice—contraception and the prevention of STDs—Kincaid attends one of his lectures and encounters the doctor’s photographic slides of infected genitalia of patients in various stages of sexually transmitted disease. The powerful images erase her memory of the actual lecture, and her deep and unwilling engagement with the photographs is the subject of the text’s first extended prose ekphrasis, in which Kincaid crafts a triangle between herself as speaker-seer, the reader of her narrative, and the slides of infected genitalia as fraught art object. Here, Kincaid’s use of the photographs renders them aesthetic objects. Framed by the discourse of disease Ramsay presents in his lecture, these slide photographs as represented in Kincaid’s text operate as a kind of inappropriate ekphrasis.

Unusual scenarios of reading and self-education in this text extend to Kincaid’s attempts to read the body of her diseased brother and negotiate the complex dynamics of their “intimate otherness,”<sup>42</sup> setting the diseased body as a discursive space on which to write the history of their relationship and her evolution as a writer. These imbrications of self, home and family are reiterated in this work in the conflicted relationship it portrays between image and text. Therefore, the complicated tensions manifested in this text’s distinctive relationship to image require closer examination, particularly in moments of ekphrasis, the verbal representation of visual representation. Ultimately, Kincaid’s ekphrasis transitions from representing visual representation to representing visual *apprehension*; rather than maintaining the distinction between speaker-seer and object

that fundamentally characterizes conventional ekphrasis, Kincaid's inappropriate ekphrastic project brings the two into closer relation. Furthermore, *My Brother's* moments of ekphrasis become the ground upon which the text enacts a naturalization of the diseased body via the deployment of metaphors of flowering, growth and gardens. This naturalization and the transition to apprehension structure the text's experimental realism and attempt to representationally re-materialize a body dematerialized by medical discourse and othered by disease.

Thus far I have employed James Heffernan's broad construction of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation."<sup>43</sup> Heffernan characterizes ekphrasis as an often-gendered poetics of power that speaks not only about, but also to and for, works of visual art.<sup>44</sup> Kincaid's uneasy relationship with Devon, a brother she only knew for the first three and last three years of his life—the brother whose birth to which she attributes her mother's transformation from a beautiful to a bitter woman—finds interesting analogy in the ekphrastic situation.<sup>45</sup> Though half-siblings, Kincaid and Devon are widely divergent subjects in very different situations. What they share in racial heritage and familial ties is not just countered but overwhelmed by their differences: in economic class, in sexual orientation, in social identity. These differences consume Kincaid for much of the narrative, as she seeks to distance and distinguish herself from Devon's life, choices and fate. Most significantly, they differ in their relative power within the narrative: Devon cannot speak, but only be spoken about, as Kincaid controls the modes and methods of representation and ultimately the picture of Devon's life and death that will be presented to the reader.

At first, Kincaid's text reinforces the ways even potentially inappropriate ekphrasis—inappropriate in the most basic sense that it takes as its art object the photograph of a diseased body—is susceptible to the pitfalls of aestheticization. Here I retreat momentarily from Rancière's formulation of the politics of aesthetics to aestheticization in a more conventional sense: a stylization that extracts the subject/object from the realm of the "real" to the realm of "art." Analysis of the first moment of ekphrasis, the medical photographs, reveals a violation of the integrity and identity of their subjects. Kincaid prefaces the actual description by noting only that "the pictures were amazing," a gesture to an aesthetic encounter that is simultaneously banal and extraordinary, in that the subject of these pictures is not water lilies or a nude but actual diseased bodies. Kincaid transitions from her brief assessment of the slides as a whole into an extensive ekphrastic passage:

There were penises that looked like ladyfingers left in the oven too long and with a bite taken out of them that revealed a jam-filled center. There were labias covered with thick blue crusts, or black crusts, or crusts that were iridescent. There were breasts with large parts missing, eaten away, not from a large bite taken at once but nibbled, as if by an animal in a state of high enjoyment, each morsel savored for maximum pleasure. There were pictures of people emaciated by disease, who looked very different from people emaciated from starvation; they did not have that parched look of flesh and blood evaporated, leaving a wreck of skin and bones; they looked like the remains of a black hole, something that had once burned brightly and then collapsed in on itself. (37-8)

Here we see how ekphrasis tends to unleash dematerializing forces that would reduce the object of study to merely a subject of representation. In a figurative sense, the trope that is most prominent on the first reading of this passage is the unlikely allusion to consumption. The penises appear to have had “a bite taken out” that reveals “a jam-filled center”; the labias are covered in various “crusts,” while the breasts are “morsels” that have been “nibbled.” Kincaid evokes not only gustatory overtones but explicitly pleasurable ones, as the creature biting and nibbling is imagined as “an animal in a state of high enjoyment,” even “maximum pleasure.” This describes not the aesthetic pleasure of an encounter with the sublime, but unhurried digestive pleasure yoked to images of destruction and decay. The close-up photographs of genitals in the first half of the passage, represented as baked goods in varying stages of edibility, are contrasted directly with the emaciated bodies in the second half of the passage, emphasizing the irony that the same bodily figures, emaciated by disease rather than starvation, would be the owners of the veritable bakery of diseased genitalia. In contrast to the penises, breasts and labias, the bodies in entire appear as the detritus of a collapsed black hole, inviting the reader to experience a sense of wonder and risk that complicates the experience of aesthetic pleasure with overtones of fear or danger.

Though this ekphrastic moment allows aestheticization—and its cathartic subsuming of horror to pleasure—full sway, the text unsettles these forces in its movement between ekphrasis of photographs of bodies and the text’s ekphrasis of bodies themselves. This fluctuation from ekphrasis of photographs to ekphrasis of bodies, most frequently the body of Devon Drew, allows the reader to grapple along with Kincaid with alternative forces that complicate this aestheticization via a repeated, enforced return to

the body that underlies the representation. As moments of ekphrasis come to consist of apprehension rather than representation, we as readers are insistently returned to the “real” body even as we register over and over again the relationship of copy to copy underlying the ekphrastic encounter.

Although generally overlooked by reviewers and critics, ekphrasis is crucial to the project of *My Brother*'s inappropriate realism, in that it is a formal device that insists we attend to the “outside” of the narrative's sustained reality in the form of an image. As a genre or situation that intrinsically—though not always explicitly—involves the reader in a triangular relation with the speaker-seer and the visually represented “art object,” ekphrasis makes manifest the complex relations at work in the narrative of *My Brother* by registering the components necessary to sustain the illusion of reality. This triangular relation necessarily intrudes another element into the realist compact between reader and author/narrator, disrupting the relationship through which fictional disbelief is suspended and the world of the novel establishes its credentials of realness. Further, what Brian Glavey has identified as the dual mimesis of ekphrasis—its status as an overt copy of a copy—reintroduces the question of representation and brings the literary text's status as representation to the forefront.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in moments of ekphrasis, realism as a mode is revealed for what it is: an attempt, always already a failure, to make representation appear as reality.

*My Brother*'s repeated inclusion of a situation inherently at odds with the realist mode in and through which this literary text operates is this chapter's first example of inappropriate form. As I depict below, Kincaid's deployment of ekphrastic realism becomes one example of the way U.S. ethnic literature can turn to the realist mode to

register literariness and maintain aesthetic possibility without sidestepping political critique. Just as Kincaid's inappropriate ekphrasis becomes, on a textual level, a way to rematerialize the properties of the diseased body and bring speaker-seer and body-as-aesthetic object closer, so the text's use of inappropriate form suggests that an ideological alternative to the dematerializing forces of neoliberalism might arise from literary realism's particular status as representation distinct from the real that nonetheless returns us to the realm of the political. At the same time, the fact that lay and professional readers generally miss this element of *My Brother* identifies the limits of inappropriate form to redistribute sensibility, reinforcing that literary form alone is insufficient to transform the political.

Theorizations of modes of looking from queer studies and disability studies help illuminate the relationship *My Brother* registers between looking and legibility, representation and materiality. Articulating a formal intervention he terms "queer ekphrasis," Brian Glavey considers the ways the ekphrastic situation between art object, speaker-seer and reader complicates modes of visibility, identification, and desire. He writes against the vein of ekphrastic criticism (most notably W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory*) that understands ekphrasis as an autonomous, colonizing gesture that subordinates the visual to the verbal. Glavey posits instead that ekphrasis is "a form that emphasizes the impossibility of coherence and identity even as it testifies to the power of their appeal."<sup>47</sup> The gaze of the queer ekphrastic situation does not seek to master, control, or classify; it displays the body of the aesthetic object/subject while enabling this body to maintain its difference from the apprehending audience. In a similar fashion, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on acts of looking distinguishes between the stare,

which is motivated by astonishment, and the gaze motivated by desire. She argues that “[s]taring offers an occasion to rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not.”<sup>48</sup>

The inappropriate ekphrasis I trace here functions in similar ways, becoming a mode of approach to difference that allows for the maintenance of difference, all the while creating the conditions for a relation of closeness that might avoid the colonizing collapse of art object into speaker-seer.<sup>49</sup> Jumping scale to the regime of the political, this expansion of conceptions of identity functions similarly on a public, social level, Garland-Thomson suggests, in that “when people with stareable bodies . . . enter the public eye . . . their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the act of staring and in fact “starees” who invite the stare disrupt the distribution of the sensible with regard to the regulation of bodies. In the context of *My Brother*’s realist mode, inappropriate ekphrasis makes visible the distribution of the sensible that, under neoliberalism, structures and regulates what can be designated as the proper relation between representation and what we understand as “real.”

*My Brother* is a literary work about acts of looking, and inappropriate ekphrasis, the verbal representation of visual *apprehension*, characterizes many of Kincaid’s interactions with her brother in this text. The novel-memoir invites this understanding of ekphrasis in that Kincaid explicitly aestheticizes the body of her brother in an extended description of Devon Drew’s body at the end of Part One—a description that returns the reader to the scene described in the memoir’s opening lines, when Kincaid first sees him in the hospital. The passage at the end of Part One activates and denies the reader’s

expectations of ekphrasis by imagining her brother's physical appearance in aesthetic terms. Observing his face and body on that first day in Holberton Hospital, Kincaid notes that "his lips were scarlet red, as if layers and layers of skin had been removed and only one last layer remained, holding in place the dangerous fluid that was his blood" (83). This reference to the danger of his disease evolves into overt aestheticization of his sickly face, which "was sharp like a carving, like an image embossed on an emblem, a face full of deep suffering, beyond regrets or pleadings for a second chance," the face "of someone who had lived in extremes, sometimes a saint, sometimes a sinner" (83). In the last glimpse of Devon Drew before the narrator opens Part Two with the abrupt announcement of his death, Kincaid complicates the conventions of ekphrasis by descriptively transforming a diseased body into an aesthetic object: a carving, an embossed image. In doing so, she registers the danger of aestheticization inherent to all ekphrastic encounters. At the same time, she reinforces the legitimacy of dwelling upon the body wracked by disease as a moment of insight into the relation between self and other.

Modes of looking such as ekphrasis are complicated and at times inadequate ways of engaging with subjectivity. Glavey argues that ekphrasis critiques the conditions of public representation in its suggestion that minoritized figures "need to see [themselves] represented" but that "such figurations are always disfiguring."<sup>51</sup> But Garland-Thomson's formulation allows for increased agency for those figures she terms "starees," the recipients of the stare, by arguing that "staring is a conduit to knowledge. Stares are urgent efforts to make the unknown known, to render legible something that seems at first glance incomprehensible. In this way, staring becomes a starrer's quest to know and a

staree's opportunity to be known."<sup>52</sup> In fact, Garland-Thomson argues, looking away from a stare is not actually a mark of propriety or respect but a form of non-recognition—"an active denial of acknowledgment" and a surrender to the impulse to re-stabilize the world that attends each instance of "inexplicable sight."<sup>53</sup> Kincaid's prolonged dwelling on the diseased body of her brother, understood in these terms, demands that the reader grapple with the feeling of being unsettled. It does not distance us from the object/subject being represented but rather brings us closer. In this sense, then, inappropriate ekphrasis functions as a form of staring that disrupts the processes of normativization endemic to neoliberalism. Insistent and relentless toward the reader, yet oriented and even generous toward the object of representation, inappropriate ekphrasis creates an epistemological and ontological space in which difference and likeness coexist.

We see how *My Brother* is not satisfied with conventional ekphrastic recourse to object-as-art most explicitly in a scene, reminiscent of Ramsay's slides in its careful catalog of the symptoms of disease written on the body, that establishes a crucial intratextual contrast between photograph and live encounter. The passage begins with Kincaid's silent gazing upon the body of her brother, a gaze that continues for "a long time" before he notes her presence (90). Immediately, he "threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then he grabbed his penis and held it up" (91). Such action essentially frames the diseased member with his hands as separate from the larger figure of his body, a gesture that re-enacts the slideshow's separated exhibition, first of disease in part (genitals alone, disembodied) and then in its entirety (the emaciated bodies). The description of his penis extends Kincaid's figurative language about the ravages of AIDS, combining edible

metaphors with garden imagery: “his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus” (91). Ramsay’s slides are referenced in the “creamy,” “floury” nature of the fungus, while the description of the penis as a “bruised flower” connects this image to the novel’s repeated correlations of Devon with the garden. In addition to being diseased, Devon’s body-as-art-object is portrayed as being deformed, “cut short,” as if the painting of his body has been defaced by AIDS.

A brief foray into Kincaid’s writing on gardens showcases her reliance on the naturalized image as a method for working through the relationship between representation and the real. Writing of the Botanical Museum at Harvard in 1999’s *My Garden (Book)*; Kincaid describes specimens of blown glass on display there: “These fruits and flowers, decaying or unblemished, are all beautiful, and, as is the way of likenesses, seem more representative of the real than do the things that they are meant to resemble” (79). Here representation achieves greater “realness,” in flower and in decay, than the “real” specimens of fruit and flowers. Yet two pages later Kincaid offers an example that suggests representation might, in fact, be a conduit to the real. Reading a descriptive text on roses, Kincaid writes, “I’ve found when I’m reading this book a copy of the Pickering Nurseries catalogue . . . is good company. Sometimes [the] description is so tempting . . . that I want to have the rose being described” (81). Here a causal relationship is suggested between an encounter with representation and the subsequent awakening of desire for the real.

In her last visit to Antigua while her brother lives, Kincaid reinforces the complex relations of nearness and distance that characterize their relationship and are evident in

her ekphrastic project. Kincaid situates herself as “looking at him through the louvered windows,” an action that results in greater acknowledgment of the fraught connection between speaker-seer and art object: “I began to distance myself from him,” she writes, “I began to feel I didn’t like being so tied up with his life” (90). But Devon’s death in the second half of the text does not, in fact, enact this distance, but rather collapses it even further. The memoir’s final ekphrasis of a diseased body comes as Kincaid looks upon dual presentations of his dead body. Having requested that the undertaker refrain from cosmetic modifications to the corpse until she views it, Kincaid confronts her brother’s body “in a plastic bag with a zipper running the length of its front and middle . . . a plastic bag like the ones given to customers when they buy an expensive suit” (178). The zipper undone, Kincaid encounters the corpse: “He looked as if he had been deliberately drained of all fluids”—the same “dangerous” fluids of an earlier ekphrastic passage—“as if his flesh had been liquefied and that, too, drained out. He did not look like my brother, he did not look like the body of my brother . . . His hair was uncombed, his face unshaven, his eyes were wide-open, and his mouth wide-open, too” (178-9). At the funeral, the body in the coffin bears little resemblance to the corpse from the zippered bag, for Devon’s “hair was nicely combed and dyed black . . . his lips were clamped tightly together and they made a shape that did not amount to his mouth as I had known it; and his eyes had been sewn shut, sewn shut” (180-1). In both instances, the food and flower imagery is no longer present; presumably in death the baked goods have been completely consumed, the blooms fully decayed. Here the body has been aestheticized in a different, funereal sense: prepared for viewing and properly “made up” to resemble life. But the very process intended to manufacture this resemblance in fact underscores the

difference from life: the clamping of his mouth has produced “a shape that did not amount to his mouth” as Kincaid would recognize it. Thus, this scene conceives of aestheticization and naturalization as mutually exclusive forces.

Kincaid’s desired distance from the body of her brother, articulated in other passages, has been fully achieved in this moment: his hair is “styled in a way [she] had never seen it styled,” his eyes “closed, shut, sealed, like an envelope, not a vault,” his body “delicate, fragile-seeming, all bones, finally stilled”—ultimately, “his farawayness so complete, so final” (190). Elizabeth Loizeaux has argued that the power and complexity of ekphrasis lies in the tension between “disciplined looking” and “the distance available . . . [that] may make it possible to look on suffering and not succumb to despair.”<sup>54</sup> Most of *My Brother*, I suggest, works inappropriately to subtend the possibility of such “disciplined looking” in favor of undisciplined looking—the stare that makes visible and disrupts our bodily distribution of the sensible; the garden imagery that re-naturalizes a body wracked by disease; the de-privileging of representation and paradoxical insistence on what lies beyond the representational event. Yet here something different seems to be happening. The suspension between distance and nearness in the passage and the unresolved state of the ekphrastic moment is figured here in terms of words: face to face with her brother’s corpse, Kincaid concludes that “he shall never speak again; he shall never speak again in the everyday way that I speak of speech” (190). This passage again differentiates between Kincaid and Devon, noting the different meanings “speech” holds for each of them, now that he is dead—a differentiation that reinforces the text’s tension between recognition and misrecognition of self and other.

In its unexpected and embodied route to the experience of an aesthetic state—which Rancière defines as that “pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself” and “the moment of the formation of a specific type of humanity”<sup>55</sup>—*My Brother* harnesses the power of the ekphrastic situation to make visible in literature the gaps and elisions of minoritized subjects at the level of political economy. Kincaid’s often quoted negotiation of the delicate balance between recognition and misrecognition comes after the revelation of Devon’s secret life: “His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I know best” (162). This observation connects their respective life trajectories while seeking to maintain sufficient distance. Her identification with Devon as living an untenable life in Antigua is slightly revised a few pages later, as she sets the details of their lives side by side to assert that “his life is the one I shall not have, the life that, for reasons I hope shall never be too clear to me, I avoided or escaped. Not his fate, for I, too, shall die, only his life” (176). Here Kincaid finds relief in the limits of her own abilities of recognition, recording her hope that the reasons for her life’s trajectory “shall never be too clear,” a gesture to the fearful knowledge and ethical imperatives that often accompany a correct reading. The role of our Kincaidian narrator as privileged migrant is frequently referenced in the text—her early desire to write, her belief in writing as a kind of self-salvation (“I became a writer out of desperation” (195)), her conflicted feelings of relief each time she returns from her brother’s bedside in Antigua to the comforts of home and family waiting in Vermont. As Sangeeta Ray has noted, the titular character of *My Brother* does not occupy the center of this narrative because “even as the narrator vividly describes the vicissitudes

of the deteriorating diseased body, the suffering of the AIDS-ridden body gets written over by the body of the healthy heterosexual woman who is so glad to have escaped the possibility of this fate through migration.”<sup>56</sup> Yet I would argue that the ekphrastic moments already identified present exceptions to this characterization. In Kincaid’s purposeful dwelling upon of the body of her brother and the constructing of a triangular relation between his body, herself as narrator, and her reader, the materialization of the AIDS-ridden body is, if not fully enacted, at least suggestively posited.

Ultimately, though, Kincaid is confronted by her failure to adequately read her brother’s body in a climactic scene that takes place, ironically, at Kincaid’s first book reading following Devon’s death. A familiar-looking woman approaches her, and she realizes that this woman attended the same Ramsay lecture where Kincaid first viewed the photographic slides. In the presence of this near-stranger, she recalls “that whole afternoon of the AIDS support group listening to Dr. Ramsey and viewing his display of slides depicting all sorts of stages of sexually transmitted diseases with all the sexual organs looking so decayed the viewer could almost smell the decay just by looking at them” (158). This strategic reference re-situates the reader in the space of ekphrasis, where knowledge is questioned, where the certainty Kincaid attributes to Antiguan and shares with them is revealed as a failure to recognize. The woman tells Kincaid that she provided a space for homosexual men to gather without stigma every Sunday at her home, and Kincaid’s brother, “she said, was a frequent visitor to her house. She only said all that” (161). On the receiving end of an aesthetic education that entails a re-reading of the body of her brother as a closeted gay or bisexual man, Kincaid imagines his life “unfold[ing]” before her—but “not like a map just found, or a piece of old paper just

found” (162). In this unfolding, we learn only that upon this life “there was everything to see and there was nothing to see; in his life there had been no flowering, his life was the opposite of that, a flowering, his life was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet” (162-3). Language of the garden here reminds us of the revelation of his diseased penis and its resemblance to a bruised flower by which Kincaid communicates the extent of his disease. More important, though, is the distribution of the sensible imagined in Kincaid’s claim that “there was everything to see and there was nothing to see.” The difficult paradox of visibility is itself mapped here. This phrasing suggests that this moment of recognition, situated in a revision of an earlier ekphrastic encounter, eradicates the boundary between visible and invisible.

The most evocative example of the relation Kincaid theorizes between representative and real in her book on gardens is characterized by an obsession with what is available to be seen. She describes a visit to Claude Monet’s garden:

to see these things—the wisteria, the Japanese bridge, the water lilies, the pond itself . . . —is to be suddenly in a whirl of feelings. For here is the real thing, the real material thing: wisteria, water lily, pond, Japanese bridge—in its proper setting, a made-up landscape in Giverny, made up by the gardener Claude Monet. And yet I see these scenes now because I had seen the day before in a museum . . . and it is the impression of them (wisteria, water lily, pond, Japanese bridge) that I had seen in these other ways before (the paintings in the museums, the reproductions in the books) that gave them a life, a meaning outside the ordinary. (127-29)

Representation makes the real visible; Kincaid can only see the real because she has seen it represented ahead of time. More importantly, representation makes the real materialize, these passages suggest—in the sense that the represented elements take material form, and in the sense that they are made available for recognition.

Yet even in descriptions of the interplay between paintings of gardens and gardens restored to “match” their painted depictions, Kincaid does not lose sight of the regulative power of representation. At the end of the essay on Monet’s garden, Kincaid acknowledges the way that the interplay of representative and real serves a disciplining function: “The garden that Monet made has been restored to itself, has been restored so that when we now look at it, there is no discrepancy, it is just the way we remember it (but this must be the paintings), *it is just the way it should be*” (130, emphasis mine). Memory and expectation unite here to designate a naturalized view as proper, precisely in the way inappropriate ekphrasis in *My Brother* disallows. Drawing the reader into triangular ekphrastic relation, moments of verbal representation of visual apprehension de-privilege representation’s regulatory status; as a result, the text suggestively represents not “the way it should be” but the way it *is* and, in fact, should *not* be. Extended staring as staged in inappropriate ekphrasis becomes a conduit to knowledge (to paraphrase Garland-Thomson) of the re-materialized body that nonetheless, maintaining its illegibility, resists subordination to the representative sphere, insistently attempting to make the neoliberal unknown known.

### **Form as Epistemological Frame**

As reviews of *My Brother* suggest, realism is generally deemed most successful by popular audiences when it realizes its investment in making its form and events appear

natural and inevitable. For this reason and others, realism as a mode of fiction has not just fallen out of favor in academic circles but in the latter half of the twentieth century became regularly accused of inescapable ideological complicity. The litany of theorists, particularly poststructuralists and postcolonialists, who malign realism is long: Michel Foucault, who argues that realism is a bourgeois tool; Roland Barthes, who denigrates realism for merely recording when writing should perform; Kwame Anthony Appiah, who tracks realism's inescapable enmeshment in nationalism; Pascale Casanova, who suggests that realism's hegemony is most enacted in the most "impoverished" literary spaces; and of course Zadie Smith, who argues that realism perpetuates our preoccupation with an authentic, transformative self.<sup>57</sup> The realist mode has been accused of impossibly retrograde investments in teleology, the middle class, the nation, and normativity, as critics suggest that realism naturalizes the status quo while obscuring operations of power—in other words, by duping the middlebrow readers who appreciate its clean sense of inevitability. Even a traditionalist defense of realism, Robert Anchor's 1983 "Realism and Ideology," acknowledges that realism stages a tension between the closed world of a work of fiction and the openness of history and negotiates this tension "stylistically, by fulfilling expectations along unexpected lines, which the text coaxes us into accepting *as if* they had been expected."<sup>58</sup> Realism, critiques and defenses suggest, is anything but formally experimental, and anything but politically progressive.

Jhumpa Lahiri would almost certainly agree with at least one of those charges. "I'm the least experimental writer," she told Boris Kachka in an interview in the wake of the publication of *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Scholars and reviewers note her "lapidary eye for detail," her "scrupulous realism," and suggest that "stylistically, she doesn't have

a hook.”<sup>59</sup> Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung are preoccupied with what they term the “easy consumability” of her work.<sup>60</sup> Andrew Hoberek, in an introduction to a special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* on postmodernism, credits Lahiri’s “traditional, highly crafted prose” with the creation of her consistent “middle class realism.”<sup>61</sup> Like Kincaid, she is frequently cited for misrepresenting the political implications of the diasporic situations portrayed in her works and for focusing on upwardly mobile heterosexual (in this case, Bengali) experience to the exclusion of other minority populations within the U.S.<sup>62</sup> But none of these existing studies manages to answer the implied question at the heart of their critique: what is gained or lost in Lahiri’s embrace of traditional, highly crafted realism as the formal vehicle for her stories of migration and diasporic experience?

One reason Lahiri might be drawn to realism, Min Song suggests in his discussion of her 2003 novel *The Namesake*, is that experimental form no longer signifies to mark “serious postwar American fiction” as it once did:

a generational shift in perspective has taken place. The cultural landscape that confronted an earlier cohort of pioneering high cultural postwar novelists required hard work to make imaginable the phenomena we have come to group under the capacious and aging sign of postmodernism . . . The narrative of *The Namesake*, on the other hand, can assume the pressures such phenomena have placed on the concept of the nation and must furthermore contend with a mainstream that has fully mastered the rhetoric and formal innovations associated with postmodern fiction.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, although the literary movement we term postmodernism has successfully unsettled the apparent naturalness of concepts like nation, the formal experimentation we tend to associate with postmodernism is no longer sufficient to productively unsettle an increasingly jaded or overexposed contemporary readership. This is not to say, as Song makes clear, that Lahiri's works evince a naïve relation to postmodern phenomena; her work stages border porousness, the acceleration of life under late capitalism, and the self-fashioning of hypermobile global citizens. But Song argues that Lahiri's innovation lies in the complex self-reflexivity of her otherwise conventional realist narratives. In contrast, I want to suggest that it is precisely Lahiri's inappropriate and untimely use of the realist mode that makes her acutely appropriate for the contemporary moment. Thwarting the ethnopolitical expectations that attend to her as a successful South Asian American writer, Lahiri deploys a representational mode often understood as the literary embodiment of propriety against the very arbiters of multicultural appropriateness who dominate public discourse about ethnic literature in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. The aesthetic investments of Lahiri's work do not evaporate the need for political investment—rather, they call forth such a politics.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* takes its title from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Custom-House preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1852), a signal that explicitly locates Lahiri's text in the tradition of the American literary canon. Such a move suggests Lahiri's familiarity and engagement with the distribution of the sensible surrounding the production of U.S. ethnic contemporary literature, including but not limited to the questions of genealogy and canonicity that continue to attach to works written from a minoritized perspective despite the emergence and proliferation of ethnic

studies anthologies, course offerings and scholarship in the post-Civil Rights era. In the passage Lahiri has chosen for her epigraph, Hawthorne's narrator argues that "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil" and expresses the hope that "My children . . . so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." The collection includes eight stories that grapple with the second-generation effects of migration to the United States, presenting the familial and cultural tensions experienced by Americanized Bengali children now grown. Many of them have Anglo-American spouses and children who do not speak or look Bengali, and nearly all of them live with a defining sense of obligation to their more traditional parents.

While Lahiri's realist form is recognizably conventional in many ways, I argue that her deployment of it is not. To elucidate this, I turn to Judith Butler's theorization of epistemological frames, the structures that regulate what is made available for apprehension and recognition. In *Frames of War*, Butler seeks to isolate the epistemological frames that mediate our relationship to violence (especially in the context of war) and that determine which lives are valued as such and are thus available to be grieved. Her work describes the ways that this "recognizability" of life is differentially distributed in the contemporary era. Calling for a new "bodily ontology" that would focus on questions of interdependence, vulnerability, and persistence, Butler argues that the loss of those lives that are not deemed grievable becomes coded in the biopolitics of precarity as necessary to protect the "living."<sup>64</sup> I yoke Butler's theory of epistemological frames that generate specific ontologies of the subject with Rancière's distribution of the sensible to situate my theoretical analysis at the intersection of aesthetics and subject

formation. I do so in order to engage with contemporary debates about the value and visibility of minoritized figures under U.S. neoliberal multiculturalism that have taken, as one arena, the realm of the literary.

This section analyzes realism's use of frames as literary devices, epitomized in the final story, "Going Ashore," as a strategy for examining realism itself as a formal frame. Just as Rancière's work suggests that an established distribution of the sensible is vulnerable to the power of aesthetic acts which reconfigure it, so Butler emphasizes the vulnerability of epistemological frames to the very characteristics that constitute their "frameness." These frames, Butler suggests, are operations of power that attempt "to delimit the sphere of appearance itself"—to determine what is made available for apprehension and recognition.<sup>65</sup> These processes of delimitation and differentiation are fundamental to ontologies of subjectivity, in that they become "norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized."<sup>66</sup> Frames are a regular device of literary realism, Lilian Furst argues in her work, and attention to their workings is crucial to a discursive understanding of how realism interacts with professional and lay readers to reinforce its illusion of realness. Drawing on the work of Furst and Butler, I contend that literary form itself functions as an epistemological frame, organizing experience and determining what is made visible, and incorporating the necessary conditions of its own breakdown. Further, in the context of "Going Ashore," I isolate realism as an exemplary frame: one that is often hospitable to teleologies of progress and the recertification of the status quo but that also possesses political and aesthetic impropriety at the core of what we generally register as its very proper mode.

To attend to the frame is to attend to its parameters, which implicitly calls the power of the frame into question. This process reveals “that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determines precisely what it is we see, think, recognize and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.”<sup>67</sup> The frame’s interior is only made possible by its exterior, to which it quietly but relentlessly calls attention. In and of itself, the frame registers its own inherent limits; these limits are compounded by the circulation required for the frame to do its epistemological work of making some things visible and occluding others. According to Butler, this circulation requires a break with context, as the frame leaves its ordinary situation and moves through space and time. In her formulation, the frame does not merely permit but actually necessitates such breakage:

The frame breaks with itself in order to reproduce itself, and its reproduction becomes the site where a politically consequential break is possible. Thus, the frame functions normatively, but it can, depending on the specific mode of circulation, call certain fields of normativity into question. Such frames structure modes of recognition . . . but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention as well.<sup>68</sup>

If this is how form as an epistemological frame functions, what would it mean in this sense to be an inappropriate form? If we understand realism as one such frame, Butler’s formulation would suggest that realism’s continuing cultural traction—not, perhaps, within academic circles but within the U.S. literary population more broadly<sup>69</sup>—in fact

inappropriately holds the potential for its own “politically consequential break.” As realism reproduces itself, its frame is translated into new contexts. These new contexts reveal the frame for what it is, a limited epistemological structure, and call into question the very sense of inevitability of the status quo—in our case, of neoliberal multiculturalism—that realism is often considered to perpetuate.

Unlike Lahiri’s previous work, the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* formally accentuate the collection’s realist frames by moving between third-person narration, often of more than one viewpoint, and single-character focalization. In the first title story, Ruma prepares for a rare visit from her newly widowed father, gradually shifting from worry that he will expect an invitation to live with her to desire for him to accept such an offer, even as her father grows more resolutely opposed to such an arrangement. “A Choice of Accommodations” finds Amit negotiating what he calls the “disappearance” of his marriage at the wedding of a friend on the grounds of his old boarding school, while “Only Goodness” follows Sudha’s relationship with her brother and the way his alcoholism affects her marriage and young son. “Nobody’s Business” is focalized through Paul, a white American whose housemate, Sang, experiences romantic conflict with her longtime boyfriend. In the collection’s first section, only the second story, “Hell-Heaven,” is told in the first person, as Usha describes the entry of an uncle-type figure into her unhappy family life and her mother’s deep-seated infatuation.

To register the particular ways that *Unaccustomed Earth* foregrounds its realist frames in order to attend to their breakages, I turn to the last three stories in the collection. These stories are set aside from the preceding five as a short story cycle or novella with its own title: “Part Two: Hema and Kaushik.” This section represents its

own break with Lahiri's past work, alternating between first and third person to present the relationship between Hema and Kaushik, two Bengali American children whose families lose touch as they grow up but who individually reconnect as adults decades later. "Once in a Lifetime," narrated by Hema in first-person direct address to Kaushik, describes how Kaushik's family temporarily lived in her home after returning to the U.S. from India following his mother's terminal breast cancer diagnosis. In its opening line, the direct address is unmistakable: "I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell that my family threw for yours, at our house in Inman Square, is when I begin to recall your presence in my life" (223). Hema's story has an audience of one, and her tale of their mutual adolescence is filled with the "you" that formally gestures to her relationship with Kaushik even as the details of the narrative reinforce their connection: "When I was born, your parents were the only friends to visit the hospital. I was fed in your old high chair, pushed along the streets in your old pram" (225). The story ends with Kaushik's revelation to Hema that his mother is dying of breast cancer (a secret from everyone else) and his family's exit to an elaborate modernist house on the North Shore.

"Year's End" resumes a few years later, when Kaushik returns home from college for Christmas and meets his father's new Bengali wife and her two daughters. The narrating "I" has clearly shifted from Hema to Kaushik, but the "you" of direct address appears as well—not immediately, but three times in the course of the narrative. Thinking back to the time after his mother's death when acquaintances were invited to take her clothing, Kaushik thinks, "[t]hat is probably the last time I remember you from that period" (256). Later, thinking about his mother's attachment to Christmas, Kaushik describes how she loved that time of year: "she spoke fondly about Cambridge, about

your family and the others we had left behind” (265). Finally, following an angry encounter with his young stepsisters, who have rifled through a sealed box containing photographs of his mother, Kaushik drives aimlessly north along the eastern seaboard. Looking through ads for Maine waterfront properties, Kaushik is reminded of his parent’s Massachusetts real estate search: “And it was then, wandering alone that winter up the coast of Maine, that I thought of you, and our weeks in your house during another winter five years before” (291). That time with Hema’s family, he determines, was “the last place that had felt like a home” (291).

In these ways, the first two stories of the concluding novella establish a particular style that is both utterly realist and oddly not, as Ambreen Hai has suggested—an assessment that echoes Zadie Smith’s complaint against *Netherland*. Considering the way *Unaccustomed Earth* stages competitions between families of origin and families of choice, Hai argues that these two first-person narratives “provide far too much detail to serve as realistic voices; they are a composite of thoughts and memories, evoked perhaps in the unspecified present of the third story.”<sup>70</sup> This sense of highly mediated memory in two otherwise conventionally realist stories is reinforced not only by the direct address but by the final story’s return to alternating third person—a shift that impacts the reader precisely because of its contrast to the first-person direct address of the preceding stories.

For this reason, my consideration of form as an epistemological frame centers primarily on the collection’s final story to interrogate the ways its apparent return to a more conventionally realist mode in fact works to facilitate a breakdown of realism’s epistemological frames. “Going Ashore” begins *en media res* with a description of Hema, now an adult: “Again she’d lied about what had brought her to Rome” (294). Fleeing an

impending arranged marriage, Hema goes to Italy during a course release from Wellesley to research the Etruscans. Kaushik, we learn, had moved to Rome years earlier for a now-departed ex-girlfriend and his career as a photojournalist. The story centers on the details of their brief but passionate affair, itself prompted by their mutual nostalgia for the past. It culminates with Kaushik's death, confirmed by news reports but not itself represented in the narrative, in the Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26, 2004, that killed more than 200,000 people.

The other seven stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* together produce a textual frame that conditions our encounter with the final story. Preoccupations with the visual, often the photographic, populate earlier narratives: the postcards Ruma's father sends her from abroad in "Unaccustomed Earth"; the revealing photographs in "Hell-Heaven" suggestive of the illicit family Usha's mother yearns to form with Pranab Kaku; the John Van Eyck painting that registers the exterior forces at work on a betrothed couple and in front of which Sudha meets her husband-to-be; and Kaushik's early preoccupation with the act of taking and developing his own photographs, his mother speculating that his darkroom is what death will feel like. The collection's title, drawn from Hawthorne, indicates the literal and figurative role that nature plays, the question of roots that will flourish or wither giving way to Ruma's father's garden with the hydrangea meant to honor her deceased mother, the bullfrogs calling to one another around the pond of Amit's former boarding school in "A Choice of Accommodations," and finally the Maine landscape into which Kaushik forcefully buries the photographic evidence of his mother's life that has been violated by his father's new family. And because of its crucial absence from the first six stories, History is made prominent when it intrudes in "Going Ashore." Each of the

stories that come before extract readers from the contemporary moment, unmooring them from historical markers or characteristics (beyond brief period details like Deborah's 1970s style hair that attracts Usha so much in "Hell-Heaven"). In this way, our re-immersion into a sense of History with a representation of the 2004 tsunami signals the myriad discourses realism calls upon to establish its reality, even as it prompts the reader to recognize the ways the story's "political present" is influenced by contemporary readers' senses of experience and expectation—categories that influence the relationship of a narrative to its historical subject and a reader to that narrative as described by David Scott and discussed in greater detail in this dissertation's fourth chapter.

The literary framing devices in "Going Ashore" center on the activity of photography and the recurrence of earthquakes. Kaushik began taking photographs, we learn in the two earlier stories, around the time of his mother's breast cancer diagnosis, but the hobby is transformed into profession in an early scene marked with an earthquake—one of two such scenes framed this way in "Going Ashore." The retrospective narration begins straightforwardly, telling of a day during Kaushik's travels with a friend through El Salvador amid civil war:

While sitting with Espen one afternoon, eating lunch in a village outside Morazán, the table began to shake, dark stew spilling from bowls. By then he'd grown used to occasional tremors, the earth's violence yielding a moment's pause. They picked up their spoons, continued eating, but then people began exclaiming, running past them through the small square. He and Espen leapt up, following the crowd, thinking perhaps a building had fallen, but the commotion had nothing to do with the tremors. They turned a corner to see a young man lying in the street.

He'd been shot in the head, blood pouring like a slowly widening river away from his skull, but not a speck of blood, or even dirt, Kaushik still remembered, staining his tan shirt and trousers. (304)

At first, Kaushik does not respond to the “moment’s pause” yielded by “the earth’s violence,” a violence that he believes to be distinct from the human violence in which the region is embroiled. But it is precisely this moment’s pause that enables the framing of a single act of violence in such a way as to differentiate it from the general milieu of fear and uncertainty to which Kaushik has become accustomed during his travels through Central America. The death of this man shot in the head is not like all the other deaths, precisely because it follows the earthquake. The silence produced by the tremor is broken, and the breaking is registered by the very fact of the silence which preceded it. The quake continues to frame the scene, as Kaushik’s first expectation—a collapsed building—is replaced by the singularity of a particular dying body; “dark stew spilling from bowls” becomes “blood pouring like a slowly widening river,” emphasizing the crucial connection between tremor and death even as Kaushik misreads these signs as the properties of two discrete events.

Kaushik understands this scene and his life choices that follow as having “nothing to do with the tremors,” but this assessment is belied by the presence of another crucial earthquake in this story—a tremor that reminds him of this first moment of photographic witness and re-activates the emphasis on the natural world for Lahiri’s readers. Following the resolution of his relationship with Hema, who has refused to leave her tenured position at Wellesley to accompany him to Hong Kong, Kaushik retreats to a beachfront resort in Thailand and casually befriends a Swedish television editor vacationing with his

wife and young children. The next day, it is Henrik who informs Kaushik of the story's second tremor, asking "You felt your bed shake this morning?" before telling him, with the brevity that characterizes Henrik's dialogue, "They said in the hotel, a small earthquake . . . Over now" (329). This scene correlates to the representation of the first earthquake in certain ways, particularly the story's marked attention to the fact of the event. In each case, a participant describes the event in the first person; in each case the tremor registers in the space of the quotidian, shaking a bowl of stew and a bed. Yet the detailed description of the first tremor becomes here an event in absentia: Kaushik has slept through the tremor, and is informed about it only by a second party. It happens off-screen, so to speak, preparing the reader for the way Kaushik's death in the tsunami generated by the quake will go similarly unrepresented.

The next paragraph indicates the continuing presence of the tremor frame: "Whatever had happened, Kaushik had slept through it. He thought back to the day in El Salvador when he'd taken his first real picture, and the tremor that had come just before: the stew spilling from its bowls, the young man in impeccably clean tan trousers lying in a pool of blood on the street" (329). We come to realize that the momentous day in El Salvador is not, in fact, significant in Kaushik's memory because of the quake or the death, though these are the events that mark it for Lahiri's reader. Such events happened, in Kaushik's then-present, on a regular basis. The reason the day is significant for Kaushik is because that was the day he snapped his first "real" photograph. Once again, Kaushik's presence at the epicenter of significant events is coupled with his obliviousness; whereas before he continued to eat his stew and then downplayed the connection between the quake and the young man's death, here he actually sleeps through

the event that he casually designates (indicating distrust for Henrik's account or perhaps just a lack of interest entirely) as "whatever had happened."

Furst's discussion of the narrative strategies realism employs to sustain its illusion of reality identifies framing as the most significant because of its role as container and bridge: drawing limits between reality and representation, the frame concomitantly invites the reader to cross from the former to the latter and then to forget such a crossing. In Furst's analysis, the frame is formed by narrator and reader pretending together; it is "the fundamental fictional truth the text has to generate."<sup>71</sup> Certain key components of the formation of the frame as literary device include narratorial voice, the establishment or abdication of knowledge authority, and intertextuality, as references to other works provide a framing mythos to guide readerly interpretation. In essence, the frame "produces a concord, a contract, by adumbrating a set of agreements not only about the happenings in the narrative, but also about appropriate modes of interpretation."<sup>72</sup> And yet, while the frame as literary device delimits appropriate modes of interpretation, the frame as epistemology calls attention to the ways these proper modes must exclude certain elements in order to sufficiently sustain the illusion of their own inevitability.

Our understanding of *Unaccustomed Earth* benefits from analysis via Butler's frames of war on several registers, a fact reinforced by Kaushik's profession as an international photojournalist. This detail suggests his status as the appropriate multicultural subject described by Melamed. He is a world traveler, at ease in many cultural spaces and without ties to a permanent home: "For most of the past five years, Rome had simply been a place from which to get where he needed to go" (302). In fact, Kaushik is a global economic subject who enables the flow of news around the world.

The closest he comes to recognizing his status is when he admits, in one brief moment, that “he knew that in his own way, with his camera, he was dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go” (309). Here we see that Kaushik is the primary beneficiary of this relation, though in later moments he will instead emphasize the value of his acts in countering state-sponsored violence.

The short story’s presentation of his professional accomplishments departs from a model minority presentation of meritocratic ascension, as it foregrounds not Kaushik’s work ethic but rather the way he stumbles upon his profession accidentally. After that first tremor, it is his friend Espen, a journalist with whom he has “watched air force planes dropping bombs at night,” who tells Kaushik—up to this moment an amateur—to take a photograph. Because “he did not have a long lens with him”—in other words, because he was not prepared to document such an event—“[he] had to get in close” (304). This closeness breeds distance, however; though he remembers his hands shaking, “otherwise he felt untouched by the situation, unmoved once he was behind the camera” (305).

From the two stories that precede “Going Ashore,” readers recognize that much of Kaushik’s photographic detachment stems from the melancholic fear surrounding his mother’s early death from breast cancer and what he perceives as his father’s replacement of her with a new, more traditional family. At a young age, it was the distance provided by his photographic pursuits that gave him a ready alibi for escape, first from Hema’s home in which his mother was secretly, claustrophobically ill, and later from the impersonal modernist house in which she dies. But in the scene of the tremor Kaushik also functions as the perfect pluralist multicultural subject—close enough to witness the

“truth” of this death, he nonetheless occupies the position of elite observer.<sup>73</sup> And his position leads to a sense of satisfaction: he is deeply aware of his status as “the only person to document what had happened,” and “though he had not saved the man’s life he’d felt useful, aware that he had done something to mitigate the crime” (305). Whatever Lahiri’s politics (or lack thereof), this representation of Kaushik invites critique of the multicultural subject whose position as witness enables the continuation of global neoliberalism’s requisite violence. The circuits of news and money continue unabated—Kaushik only knows his photographs have been printed when he receives “a small check, and then, when the photo was picked up by a European newsmagazine, a larger one” (305)—and the acts of witnessing and documentation become invested, in Kaushik’s mind, with sufficient political significance such that no greater intervention is required. This episode is suggestive of the way neoliberalism can co-opt aesthetics to ensure its functioning remains undisturbed. Because Kaushik is present to record, the implication is that those who view his photograph can satisfy themselves that they have acted adequately against violence through the act of witnessing alone. Aesthetics becomes sufficiently political, such that it replaces the need for political action, even as the violence is safely framed within the bounds of the photograph and set apart from “real life.”<sup>74</sup>

But the reader’s attention is drawn by the form of Lahiri’s story to note the insufficiency of Kaushik’s own framing gesture as the violence he first captures on the day of the tremor finds fulfillment in a litany of subsequent (and progressively more violent) assignments: he goes on to photograph “bodies with faces smashed and throats slit and penises hacked from between their legs,” and eventually can “no longer

remember all the corpses he'd photographed, their faces bloated, their mouths stuffed with dirt, their vacant eyes reflecting the passing clouds over their heads" (305).

Reference to the dirt in their mouths and clouds in their eyes suggestively affiliates the fates of these bodies with natural acts, implicitly attributing their deaths to a violence that is both political and, in a limited sense, natural. Violence has not been contained by the photographic frame, the literary frame suggests. The realism of Kaushik's story requires the escalation of violence that would reflect the work of a wartime journalist at the beginning of the twenty-first century—and in this way Lahiri's literary realism also suggests that to photograph a scene of violence does not in fact impact or prevent future violence.

The end of "Going Ashore" continues to register the presence of discursive frames, this time by overtly exceeding the story's primary one. Following a paratextual icon on the page (shaped like a fan, or a leaf), the coda to this story breaks with the third-person omniscient voice of the preceding section. We shift, in the final two pages, to first-person direct address—the "I" speaking to a "you" that characterizes the first two stories in the Hema-Kaushik trilogy, themselves the most formally experimental of any of Lahiri's published work to date. What is the effect of this direct address that breaks the realist frame? Kaushik's section has ended just lines before, with a scene in which he overcomes his fears of the ocean and lowers himself into a sea "as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go" (331). In fact, then, this break with the frame marks Kaushik's death—a death the story leaves conspicuously unrepresented, in contrast to the gruesome deaths Kaushik has framed, recorded and disseminated via his photographs. Kaushik cannot frame the final tremor's violent

aftermath; he is, in fact, its victim.<sup>75</sup> And so the story suggests that violence—whether “natural” or political—will inevitably escape its frame and encompass those citizens who believe themselves secure as witnesses, protected by aesthetic mediation from the violence produced as a necessary condition of neoliberal multiculturalism. Caught sleeping, Kaushik cannot witness, cannot frame, cannot separate this violence’s effects from its causes.

So, how is realism the appropriate inappropriate form in which to stage this crisis of representation? The first tremor becomes inextricable from political violence through its timing—the bowls of stew transformed into blood on the streets. While the second scene of violence, the off-screen tsunami, might appear at first as “natural,” the first tremor scene (which includes the shooting of the man in tan clothes) has taught us to question such distinctions between natural and political. In “Going Ashore,” natural violence and political violence seem yoked. The “real” here is, overtly, a historical tsunami, but the representation of the real (the realist story) is the vehicle that allows the tsunami to be framed not as neutral history but as political event, one of many forms of violence required for the expansion and sustenance of global neoliberalism. The reach of such violence is wide: it extends from South America to Rome to Thailand and India and (presumably, along with Hema and her new husband) back to the United States.

Hema’s reaction to Kaushik’s death underscores what this text hopes to inspire in the reader: it is the possible as actual within the realist mode. For this reason, the final section—Hema’s first-person response to Kaushik’s death—merits close attention. It begins with an indictment that seems, in the context of this study, to extend to privileged populations in general: “All day I was oblivious” (331). Caught up in the economic

exchange at the heart of wedding preparations, Hema only thinks of Kaushik in the moments fear flares up and she questions whether she has chosen the wrong man, the wrong future. Returning to her parents' apartment, she is notified that "a terrible thing has happened" and settles down to coverage of the tsunami "in a pink sitting room with stark fluorescent light" that foregrounds the act of watching as much as the scene represented on television: "I saw images of the Indian and Sri Lankan coastline, glimpses from vacationers' video cameras never intended to capture such a thing. I saw a massive surge of water moving so quickly that the tape seemed to be playing at an unnatural speed" (332). Hema continues her media binge, buying newspapers to search for Kaushik's photo credit and checking his website for updates that never post. Eventually, though, Hema's everyday life intrudes into this moment of witnessing, as everyday life always does, separating her from violence and its victims: "Navin pulled me away from you, as the final gust of autumn wind pulls the last leaves from the trees. We were married, we were blessed, my hand was placed on top of his, and the ends of our clothing were knotted together. I felt the weight of each ritual, felt the ground once more underfoot" (332). No longer trembling, the ground below her—the ground that solaced Kaushik on his first foray into the ocean in years—provides a firm footing. But there is some indication that Hema's "return . . . to [her] existence" is not complete. Before formal confirmation is available, Hema turns to her body to register Kaushik's loss: "A small obituary ran in *The New York Times*. By then I needed no proof of your absence from the world; I felt it as plainly and implacably as the cells that were gathering and shaping themselves in my body" (333). Pregnant not with Kaushik's child ("We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind") but with her husband Navin's, Hema nonetheless

experiences Kaushik's loss unmediated and (un)materialized—a growing fetus that both exists and reinforces the end of Kaushik's existence.

One might argue that Kaushik's off-screen death is in actuality just a re-establishment of the realness of realism: his death cannot be appropriately narrated, and so the suspension of disbelief for which realism strives can only be sustained by an implied drowning in a historically situated tsunami. But the story's unlikely coda demonstrates that Kaushik's death is represented to others on the stage of international media, in the end of his picture bylines and website updates, and finally confirmation in the *Times* obituary, all of which Hema tracks from India as she prepares for her wedding. It would seem, then, that the short story itself precludes the representation of Kaushik's death: such a representation would re-enact the problematic distancing whereby Kaushik creates a framed representation of violence and then his viewers witness that violence safely ensconced in their privileged lives. Because Kaushik's death is not represented, we cannot "witness" via literature and be satisfied that this is all that is required of us. Instead, we observe as another figure (Hema) witnesses it secondhand. What is transmitted instead of aesthetic satisfaction is an ontological and epistemological dissatisfaction with this process of political engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Both *My Brother* and "Going Ashore" (as well as *Unaccustomed Earth* more broadly) turn to the visual to interrogate the limits of realist representation. *My Brother* generates an ekphrastic mode that interpellates the reader as a third participant in the apprehension of otherness, while "Going Ashore" ultimately denies us the solace of witnessing to prevent us from being satisfied with an aestheticized representation of

violence. Both these works stage these interventions from a realist mode, suggesting how a genre defined by its frames is the appropriate inappropriate space to register the presence of framing devices in all literary productions.

If, as I have argued, inappropriate forms resist the “truth effects” necessary to sustain neoliberal multiculturalism, then how does inappropriate realism function instead? Daniel Kim’s analysis of another contemporary U.S. ethnic literary work considers “the demands of the realist mode” to suggest one possibility: that even representation of a failed utopian political vision might still engender in its readers the longing for an alternative politics.<sup>76</sup> Reading Kim’s analysis of the failed political vision fictionalized in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1995), I posit that it is precisely at the moment of such failure that Lee’s novel resists the truth effects demanded in neoliberal multiculturalism. If the multicultural coalition sought by the novel’s primary political figure were successful, the ideological construction necessary to neoliberal multiculturalism would reach literary culmination. Instead, what is produced is not information about difference, or the authority to manage difference, or a vision of difference assimilated, but rather a reaction in an entirely different mode: the affective. As Kim argues, “if this work of *literary* representation fails in the end to satisfy the political longing that it seeks to engender, this shortcoming does not mean that the longing itself . . . is buried along with the fictional campaign of a fictional figure . . . What is most to be valued . . . then, is not the politics that it as a novel could never give us anyway but the politics that it might make us want.”<sup>77</sup> Rather than embodying the triumph of a post-racial United States, such a novel, in the very fact of its failure, might enable or inspire us to desire differently. This conception of failure is taken up again in

chapter four, where I investigate the act of forgetting and consider how such failures of memory are required by what we understand as History. For the purposes of this discussion, what matters is that a desire engendered by failure does not prompt the literary text to become a mode of authorization, because the politics as imagined by Lee are such that “a novel could never give us anyway,” because politics cannot find their ends in aesthetics. But the affective engendering of desire—always still conditional, as signaled by Kim’s “might”—redefines the relationship between politics and aesthetics in a configuration that opposes the co-optation of literature as antiracist technology.

Such a project of inciting readers to desire differently is the project of inappropriate forms. In *My Brother*, inappropriate form produces through ekphrasis a re-naturalized and eventually re-materialized body available for recognition and legibility under global multiculturalism. In “Going Ashore,” the authority to manage representation is contravened by relentless attention to the epistemological work of framing and the ideological ramifications of the frame’s breakdown. Both these works appeal to the interplay between literature and visual culture—ekphrasis, photography—to foreground modes of apprehension and recognition that break away from propriety’s hegemonic necessities.

One resistant vector to the program of literary studies as currently practiced within U.S. universities might be the description of literariness offered by Rancière: a regime of “democratic disorder” in which the distribution of the sensible is utterly democratized. Exploring this conception, Rancière describes politics as “the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world . . . a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience . . . a specific intertwining of ways of being,

ways of doing and ways of speaking.”<sup>78</sup> It is true that Rancière’s invocation of literature’s participation in the distribution of the sensible aligns in certain respects with literature’s participation in the neoliberal multicultural project of producing subjects fit to subjugate that Melamed describes. Yet Rancière is more invested in literature’s democratic tendencies within the aesthetic regime of the arts, when we understand democracy not as a state project but as a specific distribution of the sensible that “upset[s] any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being.” In fact, literature in this context actively enables a democratized distribution of the sensible, and Rancière details the process by which an inappropriate audience might be born in the midst of “the democratic disorder of literariness,” for “literature is the art of writing that specifically addresses those who *should not* read.”<sup>79</sup> In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière goes even further to describe the ways in which the equalities of the aesthetic regime ultimately create “a community of readers as a community without legitimacy” in the Platonic sense—“a community formed only by random circulation of the written word.”<sup>80</sup> Such “uncertain communities,” he later writes, “contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible.”<sup>81</sup> What happens if we understand contemporary U.S. ethnic literatures as actively creating a “community without legitimacy”—a community that is unsanctioned, unauthorized, utterly inappropriate? Could such an inappropriate, illegitimate community of readers, expanded beyond the boundaries of literary studies and academic discourse—democratized and desiring following their individual and collective encounters with literature that deploys inappropriate forms—mount a challenge to the hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism?

Inappropriate form seeks to establish a community without legitimacy, an inappropriate cadre of readers to push back against the strictures and disciplinary demands of neoliberal multiculturalism by rejecting propriety as an acceptable rationale for discipline or a compelling impulse for life. Perhaps those who should not read, less susceptible to the conventions and signposts by which literature has historically sought to imitate inevitability, might come together in a community without legitimacy to create an illegitimate distribution of the sensible—one that is utterly, appropriately, inappropriate.

The next chapter takes up the case of an exceptionally inappropriate reader, the synesthetic protagonist of Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*. Reinforcing this chapter's insistent return to the body that underlies representation but shifting from an exploration of the visual to one of taste, chapter two analyzes the story of Linda Hammerick, a Vietnamese American woman with auditory-gustatory synesthesia growing up in the American South. In a literal as well as figurative sense, Linda reads and interprets her family's secret histories, her uncertain status as a minoritized subject, and the difference her synesthesia makes through an embodied archive of word-taste correlations. Staging the conditions of contemporary subjectivity—both archive fever as theorized by Jacques Derrida and synesthesia as a trope for minoritization more broadly—the second chapter investigates the counterhegemonic possibilities of bodies that are insistentlly inappropriate to neoliberal multiculturalism.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future of the Image* 137.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/books/review/10Best-t.htm>

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<sup>4</sup> “The Politics of Literature” 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>6</sup> Lye, Colleen. “Racial Form.” 96.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 12.

<sup>10</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics* 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 1.

<sup>12</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics* 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 9. I am not arguing here for the legitimacy of Rancière’s historical genealogy of the overlapping ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes. What interests me most is the way that his work recognizes the imbrications of the political and the aesthetic, understanding that the regimes and institutions we identify as political are in fact experienced by and structured through distributions of the sensible that are always already aesthetically inflected. The usefulness of his formulations lies in their acknowledgment that aesthetics pervades politics at the deepest levels – the level of what is available to be apprehended and understood – and that aesthetic acts contain the potential to radically disrupt existing forms of political subjectivity.

<sup>15</sup> *The Future of the Image* 137.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 123.

<sup>18</sup> To say that such resistance is intentioned, while sometimes true, would nevertheless limit the possibilities of inappropriate form. In the same vein, I would not say that the crafting of literary works with demonstrably appropriate form—those which uphold normative notions of liberal sovereignty, economic value and global citizenship—is generally intentioned. Though it is not a work of fiction, Zadie Smith’s essay that opens this chapter suggests the frequency with which intention and effect diverge.

<sup>19</sup> “Form-Giving and the Remains of Identity in *A Gesture Life*” 114.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Briana Brickley for this formulation

<sup>21</sup> See *Studies in European Realism*.

<sup>22</sup> Realism as defined through this era—as an essentially referential genre—continues to inform present day discourses. Nineteenth century novelists suggested such an understanding (whether in the heuristics of the text or in explanatory prefaces) and were taken at their word by early twentieth century critics of the novel, who reinforced such definitions by frequently defining realism in relation to an other (for example, romanticism). Later theorists of modernism and poststructuralism continued this work, situating classical realism as the transcended other of both discourses (Esty and Lye 274). Lukacs, in *Realism in the Balance*, suggests that competing aesthetic movements like realism and modernism indicate that capitalism has reached its breaking point, it’s “moment of crisis” (29). Joe Cleary suggests that the West’s repudiation of realism has much to do with Cold War antagonism of the Soviet Union, which “took ‘ownership’ of realism” in the postwar period (262).

<sup>23</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 11-27.

<sup>24</sup> See S. Kim 165, Coykendall 3.

<sup>25</sup> If realism is referential, as the Marxist argument for social realism goes, then it is a formal mode by which a true picture of the outside world can be presented to our ready critique. In this sense, the realist text becomes a transparent reflection of political and economic reality. As such, it can and should be read prescriptively, with an analytical eye peeled for solutions that can be translated into political reality—the same process by which ethnic texts come to be read historically as cultural artifacts or tools of political critique. But if the realist representation does not refer directly to the truths of the world it claims to represent, the structuralist rebuttal goes, then it is purely discursive. Unhinged from the necessity of reflecting a true world “out there,” realism as a product of discourse must be taken on its own terms as referring to nothing but language itself—a framework that trends remarkably close to the art for art’s sake vein of aestheticism.

<sup>26</sup> *All is True* 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>28</sup> “Suspicious Characters: Realism, Asian American Identity, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*” 231.

<sup>29</sup> See Kaplan.

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- <sup>30</sup> “Peripheral Realisms Now,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012), 277-78.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 285, 287.
- <sup>32</sup> “The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle” 43.
- <sup>33</sup> “Form-Giving and the Remains of Identity in *A Gesture Life*” 97.
- <sup>34</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 140.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 140, 141.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* xvii. Melamed’s work traces a genealogy of what she terms “race-radical” texts. I make no particular claims for race radicalism in the works this chapter considers; rather, I trace how engagements with a distribution of the sensible based on codes of propriety might manifest in inappropriately formal ways.
- <sup>37</sup> “The Bitterness of Jamaica Kincaid,” *The Threepenny Review* 74 (1998): 14.
- <sup>38</sup> “Form-Giving and the Remains of Identity in *A Gesture Life*” 108.
- <sup>39</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/19/reviews/971019.19quindlt.html>. Italics mine.
- <sup>40</sup> “The Bitterness of Jamaica Kincaid” 13, italics original.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 12.
- <sup>42</sup> A term for their complicated relationship from Brophy 267.
- <sup>43</sup> *Museum of Words* 3, 7.
- <sup>44</sup> Writing about ekphrastic power, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that it arises from the fact that “the ‘workings’ of ekphrasis...tend to unravel the conventional suturing of the imagetext and to expose the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire” – that is, an inherently political situation that troubles any straightforward understanding of image/text relations and points to the wedded aesthetic and ethical concerns of literature as intersecting in an ekphrastic encounter (*Picture Theory* 180).
- <sup>45</sup> Both Mitchell and Elizabeth Loizeaux interpret the ekphrastic encounter between speaker/seer and art object as an encounter with difference. Representation of the visual image through writing, Mitchell argues, is an attempt to overcome otherness that assumes problematically that “visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse” (*Picture Theory* 157). Drawing on various formulations of the gaze throughout the history of literary theory, Loizeaux observes that “looking is not, has never been, ethically neutral, and ekphrasis stages relations lived under that fact” (*Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* 8). Yet Loizeaux and especially Mitchell understand the relationship between speaker-seer and visual object in extremely antagonistic terms. I want to preserve the distance their work registers while also considering the ways Kincaid’s ekphrastic formulation intrudes the intimacy of kinship and care into the combative formulation established by Mitchell.
- <sup>46</sup> “Frank O’Hara Nude with Boots: Queer Ekphrasis and the Statuesque Poet” 793.
- <sup>47</sup> “Dazzling Estrangement” 751.
- <sup>48</sup> *Staring* 6. Garland-Thomson’s work links staring to expectations: “because we come to expect one another to have certain kinds of bodies and behaviors, stares flare up when we glimpse people who look or act in ways that contradict our expectations” (6).
- <sup>49</sup> This formulation is quite similar to the “inappropriate(d) Other” theorized by Trinh T. Minh-ha and discussed in my introduction.
- <sup>50</sup> *Staring* 9.
- <sup>51</sup> “Frank O’Hara Nude with Boots” 801.
- <sup>52</sup> *Staring* 15.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 83, 90.
- <sup>54</sup> *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* 79.
- <sup>55</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics* 24.
- <sup>56</sup> *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* 102.
- <sup>57</sup> See *S/Z* and “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” in which Barthes identifies realism as “literature maintain[ing] a totalitarian ideology of the referent” (138); “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?”; and *The World Republic of Letters*.
- <sup>58</sup> Intriguingly, Anchor reveals his own investments in the distribution of the sensible when he states definitively in the same essay, “The purpose of literary criticism is precisely to distinguish appropriate reactions from inappropriate ones” (118).
- <sup>59</sup> See Kakutani, Song 349, and Kachka.
- <sup>60</sup> *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri* ix, xiii.

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<sup>61</sup> Hoberek 240, 236.

<sup>62</sup> See Bhalla, Kachka, and Srikanth, for example. Given Lahiri's realist style and ostensibly "middle class" investments, it is perhaps not surprising that certain critics have dismissed her work as apolitical. More unexpected is the way they tend to yoke this lack of proper politics explicitly to form and style. In their introduction to the essay collection *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Contexts*, Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung argue that Lahiri's "engaging realist writing style" (xii) coupled with the "deracination of her characters and depoliticizing of the historical events (including in *Unaccustomed Earth* which is written long after 9/11/01)" (xiii) results in an "easy consumability" that explains Lahiri's popularity with a non-South Asian readership. (It is unclear what they mean to suggest by noting that *Unaccustomed Earth* was written after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> – do they mean to imply that all post-9/11 fiction must address 9/11?) In the same collection, Rajini Srikanth states blatantly that "the political sphere – issues of power, privilege, and rights – are completely absent from the pages of Lahiri's writing" (61) because Lahiri's stories focus on "the realm of the private, within the unit of the family, within the domestic space" (57). This surprising binarization of political (public) and private aside, Srikanth proceeds to confine her definition of the political to "the 'messy' questions associated with the distribution of power and resources among different groups of people" (65). Such political messiness (the term occurs twice in the essay) is then juxtaposed to the presentation of Freddy/Farouk, Sang's Egyptian boyfriend in "Nobody's Business." Of this presentation, Srikanth writes, "The danger lies precisely in Lahiri's superior craft...Lahiri wraps him in her artfully constructed narrative and weaves him into her rich tapestry. We too are seduced by her story and caught up in its allure" (69). The messiness of politics is not only overlooked but also, by implication, antithetical to form, which can be so "crafted" as to make readers overlook a stereotypical presentation of an Arab character or the lack of public/political storylines.

<sup>63</sup> "The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53.3 (2007) 346-47.

<sup>64</sup> *Frames of War* 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Frames of War* 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 3-4.

<sup>67</sup> *Frames of War* 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>69</sup> Dhingra and Cheung describe Lahiri's "meteoric success" (vii). Her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) received the Pulitzer Prize and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, while *The Namesake* (2004) was a commercial success and spawned a successful film adaptation starring Kal Penn. Several stories from *Unaccustomed Earth* were previously published in *The New Yorker* and the collection debuted at the top of the bestseller lists. Tamara Bhalla's ethnographic study of South Asian lay readers conducted in 2005 and 2006 found that they expressed "profound attachment" (111) to Lahiri's presentations of second-generation immigrant experience.

<sup>70</sup> "Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" 200.

<sup>71</sup> *All is True* 48.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>73</sup> Ambreen Hai registers this tension in Kaushik's character as well, suggesting that "Lahiri's mode of presentation allows for alternate possible readings of Kaushik without privileging either: he is presented both sympathetically, as grieving, traumatized and so damaged that he lashes out egregiously at his helpless young stepsisters...and later, fails to make an equitable offer to Hema, with whom he forms his last and only real relationship. Or, in a less sympathetic reading, both these lapses signify *ethical* failures on his part, inexcusable for his failure...to engage with human empathy toward those more vulnerable than himself" (201).

<sup>74</sup> Rajini Srikanth makes an adjacent claim, stating that "[p]olitics is aestheticized and made distant, reduced to photographic evidence, in this story" (61). But rather than focusing on the way "Going Ashore" stages a critique of this mode of witnessing, Srikanth suggests that the story unreflexively promotes such a separation: "It is Lahiri's way of gesturing to a world out there awash with complicated struggles but one that she is unwilling to let into her delicately constructed domain of personal relationships" (62). Such a formulation cannot account for the story's final scene, in which the domestic space of Hema's Calcutta living room is invaded by representations of the tsunami.

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<sup>75</sup> In her discussion of the conflict in Lahiri's work between families of origin and families of choice, Hai reads the tsunami symbolically, as "suggestive not only of the accidental or the disastrous that may overcome the everyday, but also of the enormity and unpreparedness of the tsunami of migration and displacement as a force of upheaval and change" (202). This interpretation certainly accounts for a crucial thematic emphasis of the collection. Nonetheless, I want to maintain the literal sense of natural violence suggested by the use of a contemporary historical tsunami in order to investigate the ways that "Going Ashore" critiques the interplay between aesthetic representation and the distance offered in acts of witnessing.

<sup>76</sup> "Do I, Too, Sing America?" 238.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 250.

<sup>78</sup> "The Politics of Literature" 10.

<sup>79</sup> "The Politics of Literature" 15.

<sup>80</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics* 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 40

## Chapter Two: Embodied Knowledges: Synesthesia and the Archive in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*

“I asked myself what is the moment *proper* to the archive, if there is such a thing, the instant of archivization strictly speaking . . .” – Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

“The dispersion of the boundaries of bodies forces a completely chaotic challenge to normative conventions of gender, sexuality, and race, disobeying normative conventions of ‘appropriate’ bodily practices and the sanctity of the able body.” – Jasbir Puar<sup>2</sup>

“We are in need of archives,” Jacques Derrida writes in *Archive Fever* (1996).<sup>3</sup>

This need infects subjects of twentieth-century Western modernity. The characteristics of archive fever are numerous: “It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive . . . It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, symptoms of archive fever include the desire for that which is elusive (“right where it slips away”), as well as nostalgia for not just “the past” in general, but for the moment of origination, of beginnings. Archive fever seeks knowledge that might secure us ontologically and epistemologically through encounter with a kind of primary self.

But *why* are we in need of archives, defined for the purposes of this study as a general “meaning-making system that allows for some statements to be enunciated and others to lack intelligibility”?<sup>5</sup> And to sharpen this question to the scope of this study, what is the discursive, historical, political work of archives in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century? Certainly, archives are intimately intertwined with our desire to locate ourselves, to make visible the residue of the past as it informs the present,

to make sense of legacies (historical, intellectual, affective) that intimately inform our sense of ourselves as subjects. Yet archives have been called into question over the past several decades in discourses as wide-ranging as performance, queer, feminist and postcolonial studies.<sup>6</sup> Such critical work identifies the archive as a formulation by which the ephemeral and the personal are erased in favor of the enduring and the state-sanctioned as the archive, in turn, bolsters such institutions as the nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, despite our legitimate suspicions of the way the archive inevitably facilitates the consolidation of authority and erasure of difference, we cannot leave the archive behind. As Derrida argues, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the archive is at the center of that which we deem the political; it is a throughline to and for power, history, memory and identity. Tracing the emergence of “migrant archives” that “reside in obscurity” outside official spaces of archivization, Rodrigo Lazo argues that such archives prompt renewed attention to “how memory is constituted, how history is written, and how research is connected to identity” and the ways that “control of the archive has epistemological and political ramifications.”<sup>9</sup> Like migrant archives, minoritized bodies are the bodies that resist representation in the conventionally dominating discourse of archives, and so they enable a rearticulation of archive’s primacy as a place of knowledge production. Therefore, in the face of the archive’s historical enabling of the contrived hegemony of official histories and institutionalized documentation, I argue that it is a meaning-making system

that nonetheless holds the potential for a revised political engagement for minoritized subjects.

In his examination of archives that implicitly critique nationalism rather than mutually reinforce it, Lazo notes that “the archival claim, meaning the terms under which the archive is constructed, always threatens to become hegemonic.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the archival context into which recovered works are inevitably incorporated always also jeopardizes them. However, Lazo goes on to suggest that “some texts may contain a difference emphatic enough to prompt a reconsideration of the archive’s limits.”<sup>11</sup> Though Lazo’s analysis is restricted to the recuperation of historical works, his claim is suggestive for the terms of this study as well. Might literary representation of such difference, difference “emphatic enough”—or difference that “robustly appear[s],” Jodi Melamed’s claim for Native literature discussed in chapter four—require a renegotiation of what we understand as archive and the limits of that archival structure?

This chapter considers a poststructuralist theorization of archive fever in tandem with manifestations of archive fever at the site of minority subject formation. I explore the archive as an analytic category by which to understand embodiment and subjectivity, and as a crucial intersection between representation and knowledge, particularly in the dematerializing context of the neoliberal era. Anchored by Monique Truong’s second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), this chapter investigates narratives of minority subject formation within the increasingly pervasive conception of propriety in the United States. Analyzing the ways that subjects who are understood to be improperly embodied construct different epistemological relationships to their surroundings, I argue that the creation of improper archives—archives that catalogue highly ephemeral and subjective

events and experiences, and in doing so challenge expectations of content, curation and transmission—facilitates the inappropriate and productive epistemes of these literary works. Two questions drive this chapter as part of a larger study of the way propriety becomes established as a mode of regulation between privilege and stigma in the United States in the vacuum following what Howard Winant has termed the post-World War II “racial break.”<sup>12</sup> First, what is propriety’s relationship to the archive, embodied here by the minoritized subject? And, extending these considerations of archive and embodiment even further into the representational realm, what is the inappropriate archive’s relationship to the aesthetic?

A “proper” archive works not only to stabilize institutions like the nation-state but to constitute and codify the link between body and knowledge. But who or what designates a body, or an archive, as improper? Theorizing from the discourses of psychoanalysis, queer theory, and biopolitics, Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar identify the role of the improper body in contemporary U.S. politics and culture: to exist as the outside other who gives meaning, or “matter,” to appropriate (most frequently wealthy, white, male, hetero/homonormative) bodies. Both Butler and Puar note that these ostensibly externalized bodies nonetheless arise from internal constructions of the appropriate body, and so the disavowal of these bodies betrays the deep-seated anxiety that attends to structures of propriety. Disentangling the automatic association between materiality and the body, Butler demonstrates that what we assume to be material is actually constructed, and must be continually constructed, in order to materialize at all. In other words, the characteristics we ascribe to materiality, when the term “material” is meant to be synonymous with “natural,” are undermined by materiality’s status as a

function of discourse. The necessity of this process of “reiteration” is “a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, the materiality of appropriate subjects, and the appearance of their compliant bodies as “natural,” is dependent on the same repudiated bodies that threaten the self-evidence of the correlation between materiality and the body. Puar explicitly registers the centrality of propriety in constructions of bodies in her study of the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> figures of the suicide bomber and the tortured enemy combatant, whose bodies she argues are queer assemblages that serve as “barometer[s] of ab/normality involved in disciplinary apparatuses.”<sup>14</sup> Defining the “improperly racialized” subject as one who exists “outside the norms of multiculturalism,” Puar concomitantly identifies the potential power adhering to improper bodies that this chapter seeks to disclose. Her gesture to a space outside multiculturalism prompts the question of what existence outside the norms of multiculturalism might entail. In describing the minority subject who must be improperly racialized and perversely sexualized in order to materialize in the first place, Puar’s work implicitly suggests that it is via inappropriateness that one might access the “outside” and perhaps tentatively engender an existence less governed by neoliberal multicultural structures and discourses.

Monique Truong’s novel *Bitter in the Mouth* theorizes an understanding of the archive that illuminates the centrality of processes of racialization for subject formation and political representation in the contemporary era of neoliberal multiculturalism. This chapter examines this story, of a figure whose bodily difference becomes the mode by which a radically embodied archive is created, in order to consider ways the archive

enables a complex negotiation of legacies of violence, trauma, and racial formation. Truong's novel expresses a fundamental impropriety between sensation and representation, centering minority subjects as the site upon which the inappropriate, inadequate link between the body and the archive as knowledge repository can be indexed and disentangled.

Registering the curious correlations in the functions of race and the archive in U.S. culture and politics—correlations staged in Truong's work—this chapter attempts to provoke a rearticulation of difference in our time. David Eng initiates this process in his analysis of Truong's first novel, reading “the end(s) of race” evidenced in *The Book of Salt* (2003). Eng suggests that the novel is an “archive of traces” that registers the dialectic of race and freedom.<sup>15</sup> He situates Truong's first novel in the context of the shift to an ostensibly “postidentity” politics, framed in political discourse as the culmination of narratives of progress and the triumph of colorblindness. Eng explains, “we inhabit a political moment when disparities of race, not to mention gender, sexuality, and class, apparently no longer matter; they neither signify deep structural inequities nor mark profound institutional emergencies.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, as he succinctly puts it, “race has always appeared as disappearing,” by which he means that postidentity conceptions of minority subjectivity actually reinscribe a familiar thesis. Therefore, we require a spatial and temporal dislocation of the ideological frames, notably U.S. exceptionalism, which condition contemporary understandings of race and racialization. If, with Eng, we refuse the erasure of such structural inequities and institutional emergencies, how do we interrogate the political culmination of postidentity? I propose to examine the archive as a figuration that, like race, always appears as disappearing, and is consequently a

generative locus for grappling with contemporary modes of racialization in the context of minority subject formation at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The archive is distinct from memory or history. Though it shapes memory as fundamentally as it affects what we designate as “history,” the archive is more systematic and referential than memory, and differs from history in its status as that which preserves “across time.”<sup>17</sup> Archival knowledge claims are based on traces which mark that which has been lost and metonymically signify for the lost past itself; investigating the archive as an epistemological mode makes visible the archive’s deceptively naturalized claims of stability and cultural authority. Such questions of authority and knowledge formation are central to *Bitter in the Mouth*. I use this text to investigate the link between race and the archive by examining the archive produced by an Asian American synesthete who tastes language and spends her life amassing a catalog of taste-word correlations in the hope of recovering memories of her childhood. Analysis of the synesthetic archive generated by the novel’s protagonist, Linda Hammerick, allows us to denaturalize the link between the body and knowledge-as-archive that characterizes the archive’s work of world-making. Doing so reveals the archive’s complicity in the flattening of difference necessitated in the structures of liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism.

Re-invoking representations of difference in contemporary U.S. ethnic literature, this chapter’s conclusion argues that Linda’s inappropriateness to any archive suggests that she might be considered as a figure for the aesthetic itself. Russ Castronovo defines the aesthetic as the mode of making and doing that yokes “the divided and shifting ground upon which matters of beauty, perception, taste and the sublime stand” to “material engagements with embodiment, collectivity, and social life.”<sup>18</sup> Jacques

Rancière presents a more expansive definition, theorizing aesthetics as “a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.”<sup>19</sup> If we accept this formulation—that aesthetics makes difference and assesses correspondences among differences—then it follows that aesthetics is the mode for determining value and creating hierarchies, and for naturalizing those hierarchies through the creation of an apparently universal common sensibility. As such, aesthetics is the realm of racialization as well as representation. At the same time, aesthetics is a mode for challenging and dismantling those hierarchies, for disrupting common sense, as inappropriate texts of this study suggest. A figure whose body itself evades representation in the archive—even, as we will discover, in the archive of her own making—Linda’s demonstration of the archive’s limits ultimately returns us to the realm of the aesthetic, suggesting the way the aesthetic conditions the appearance of race in postracial national discourse and the potential for racialized subjectivity negotiated in aesthetic terms.

### **Insufficient Archives**

*Bitter in the Mouth* is the story of an utterly improper subject: racially, culturally, regionally, and normatively. Adopted in the 1970s under mysterious circumstances by a white North Carolina family, Linda, we learn in a surprise revelation at the end of the novel’s first part, is a racialized Southern subject of Vietnamese descent. Narrating non-chronologically in the first person, Linda presents her story retrospectively, a *bildungsroman* of her adolescence in the rural South with an aloof and secretive adoptive family. After the trauma of losing her biological parents in a trailer fire and being raped as a young teenager, Linda pursues her adoptive father’s path to law school and a legal

career, all the while keeping the bodily difference of her synesthetic condition a secret from everyone except her childhood best friend, Kelly. Her synesthesia isolates her from an adoptive family overly concerned with appropriate appearances and a conservative community that values normalcy. More significantly, the novel suggests that her condition fundamentally structures her epistemological relation to the world: what knowledge she seeks of the past, what she comes to know, and how she interprets what she learns are intimately conditioned by her auditory-gustatory synesthesia—by the fact that she tastes words.

Formulations of propriety haunt this text and Linda's childhood. The novel associates these formulations with certain characters who invoke the specter of proper thoughts, behaviors, and interpretations. DeAnne Hammerick, her adoptive mother, rejects Linda's disclosure of her condition with the declaration that she will not accept "crazy" in her family. Linda's law school textbooks privilege the figure of the Reasonable Man, historically used in legal discourse to determine reasonable (proper) action and in whom Linda recognizes the person of her adoptive father, Thomas. The Reasonable Man activates a legal subtext that reinforces how propriety is wrapped in spoken legal codes, as well as in unspoken social ones. Adult Linda's longtime partner, Leo Benton, stands in for the specter of clinical diagnostics and heteronormativity, as a doctor and psychiatrist who medicalizes all relationships, even requiring that Linda pass a physical before he will commit to a formal engagement he has initiated. These three sectors of propriety—the social/familial, the legal, and the medical—collectively institute Linda's fundamental inappropriateness as they operate to curtail the memory retrieval and meaning-making made possible by her synesthetic condition.

Through an opening series of gestures and refusals, Truong establishes the ways this novel seeks to undermine the implicit authority of reason, facts, and even first-person narration. Linda's memory has broken down: she has no recollection of the first seven years of her life with her biological family or of the fatal fire. She is consumed with recovering these details in service of her own identity formation. Yet the novel opens by upending the privileged position of facts in a hierarchy of knowledge, deploying a metaphor to illustrate how facts are easily mishandled, whether purposefully or accidentally. Beginning her narrative, Linda gives us an overview of the story to come in grammatically simple sentences that ostensibly address the "easy things first"—"So factual and flat, these statements will land in between us like playing cards on a table" (4). The initial biographical list is comprised of ten brief sentences: "My name is Linda Hammerick. I grew up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. My parents were Thomas and DeAnne. My best friend was named Kelly. I was my father's tomboy. I was my mother's baton twirler. I was my high school's valedictorian. I went far away for college and law school. I live now in New York City. I miss my great-uncle Harper" (4). The brevity of these terse statements of fact suggests they are straightforward and true. Immediately, however, Linda refuses these simple autobiographical statements, noting that playing cards thrown upon a table evince "distorting overlaps":

I grew up in (Thomas and Kelly). My parents were (valedictorian and baton twirler). My best friend was named (Harper). I was my father's (New York City). I was my mother's (college and law school). I was my high school's (tomboy). I went far away for (Thomas and DeAnne). I live now in (Boiling Springs). I miss

(Linda Hammerick). The only way to sort out the truth is to pick up the cards again, slowly, examining each one. (5)

In this passage, Truong presents the structure and function of this narrative: the re-sorting of jumbled facts; the careful, individual consideration of small pieces of the disordered larger picture; the futility of any attempt at comprehensive analysis based in memory or self-reflection. Though Linda never explicitly acknowledges this, however, we learn in the course of the novel that the jumbled pile contains as many “truths” as the factual pile. Her father’s premature death and Kelly’s teenage pregnancy are two catalysts that initiate Linda into the world of adulthood—she “grows up in” and through these events. Linda’s best friend is her closeted transvestite uncle Baby Harper, who serves as the family’s archivist and first teaches Linda how photographs (and eventually archives) can be manipulated. Linda indeed functions as her father’s New York City, in the sense that she is the embodied legacy of the woman he met and fell in love with while in law school at Columbia University. This scene seems intended as a lesson about the necessary care that must accompany any attempt to uncover the truth of what appears simple biography (“pick up the cards again, slowly, examining each one”). But because a reader who has finished the novel will recognize the “truths” of the jumbled pile, the arbitrary pile of playing cards functions instead in the opposite way, to reinforce the role that seemingly coincident juxtaposition plays in registering the “facts” of any story. Though Linda offers what she has characterized as disrupted and illogical associations, these associations nonetheless become the basis for her identity formation via unlikely pairings of word and taste.

As we come to learn, Linda's relation to the world is organized according to an element both individual and ephemeral: her synesthesia. The bitter taste of the novel's title refers to the last word spoken to her by an unknown member of her biological family; she seeks the taste in order to identify the word, in turn in order to register a shred of connection to her lost family and process the trauma of their loss. Thus the mystery of the bitter taste resides at the core of Linda's search for her history. It signifies both the word she cannot identify and the traumatic event whose details are lost to her memory. The synesthetic residue of the memory haunts her: it is a "mystery [with] two halves . . . There was something bitter in the mouth, and there was the word that triggered it" (15). Of the taste, which Linda associates with the bitterness of "greens that were good for us" or "simmering resentment" in a comparison that reinforces the affective component of her synesthesia, Linda reveals that she has yet to find the "corresponding flavor," the "match." But immediately she asserts that, "even if identified, [such a match] would only allow me the illusion of communication and you the illusion of understanding" (15). Here Truong forecloses any temptation her reader might feel to reach for a stable correlation between representation and reality, explicitly negating the possibility that any taste, or narrative, could accomplish what literature implicitly claims for itself: namely, the representation of the real by the non-real. Yet in another manifestation of the narrative's anxiety about the role of "telling one's story" in the processing of trauma, Linda's direct address—"you"—functions in a mimetic, stabilizing fashion to conjure up the possibility of a "real" reader. Perhaps the most generative reading of this section would be to interpret this claim as Linda's attempt to undermine the goal of the archive itself—the

“illusion of understanding” the archive facilitates in its putative claim to correlate the archival object and the moment, event or individual it alleges to represent.

Truong’s novel is a narrative of a body whose condition expands our understanding of the functions of archive fever. Linda’s status as an improbable synesthete whose sense of taste is wired to the words she hears spoken aloud facilitates an improper relationship to knowledge, to “evidence” of trauma and to her own archive. Linda’s synesthetic archive attests to the intimate relationship between the archive and the body: the body as archive, the archive as producer of and imbricated with embodiment. In other words, as I elaborate below, it allows us to extend our understanding of the archive as producer and repository of history and memory, and thus of embodiment as intimately connected to the processes of history and memory as well.

Echoing Derrida, Truong’s novel itself suggests that we are nonetheless in need of archives. Saturated with archives in variously recognizable and unusual instantiations, *Bitter in the Mouth* presents Linda’s catalogue of tastes as an archive situated in the context of countless other archives that fail to represent Linda.<sup>20</sup> The most significant of these are the photographic albums of the Hammerick family compiled by Linda’s uncle, Baby Harper—and through which he instructs her to attend to the constructedness of archive and the centrality of what has been left out—and *North Carolina Parade*, a historical textbook that young Linda reads, absorbs, and uses comparatively to measure her own historical relevance. Of Baby Harper’s numbered photo albums, Linda writes that he “hid from the official history of our family. By excluding himself, he ensured that our history was a false one. Or, at the least, an incomplete one. He never hid that fact from me. My great-uncle always suggested that his photographs weren’t to be trusted . . .

he would tell me what I couldn't see" (41).<sup>21</sup> After Baby Harper sends four supplementary albums to Linda in Boston, she eventually realizes that not only the photographs but the album catalog itself is crucially lacking. These albums, which chronicle Baby Harper's decades-long cross-dressing, are notably unnumbered, signifying their existence outside the primary, family-sanctioned catalog and ameliorating this sense of archival incompleteness. The unnumbered albums are accompanied by several loose photographs of Linda's adoptive father in New York City with her birth mother—the only images Linda ever encounters of Mai-Dao Nguyen. Received knowledges are catalogued even more explicitly in the *North Carolina Parade: Stories of History and People*. Reading this textbook, Linda describes "something reassuring about having the history and people of your world reduced to 209 pages and a handful of drawings" but goes on to imagine in detail a "rest of the story" for each historical figure: Roanoke settlement infant Virginia Dare, the Wright Brothers, African American slave poet George Moses (52). History itself, defined as "what you wanted to remember," is characterized as "always [having] a point of view" (52).<sup>22</sup>

Still more smaller scale archives populate this text: the letters Linda and her best friend Kelly exchange from age seven onward, each assigned a number; the so-called "hagiography" of Dolly Parton they shamefully compile as tribute to their icon; the unusually catalogued personal library of Baby Harper, in which books are organized not by author or title or year but by what they signify for their owner (for example, "B for Buy another Copy as Gift"); and even the oral histories of Yale University, Linda's alma mater, which counteract the university's official narratives about endowments and building dedications with alternative genealogies of queer love. These archives occupy

this narrative, formidably indicating the centrality of evidence, histories, and memories to the milieu Linda negotiates as an embodied and knowledgeable subject of difference.

But the novel insists that none of these archives is individually or collectively sufficient to encompass our protagonist: to incorporate, register, catalogue, and preserve Linda Hammerick as minoritized subject or to enable the performance or archival “transfer” of her subjectivity. Each archive supplements another, yet they contain gaps that Linda communicates and interrogates through her first person narration. In this way, the novel suggests the impossibility of doing away with archives altogether, despite what we recognize as their complicity with normative discourses of subjects and the nation. Truong’s work reinforces the way that the archive as an analytic category continues to structure the relations between knowledge and the body at the turn of the twenty-first century. Such operations occur within what Jacques Rancière terms “the distribution of the sensible,” a “system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime.”<sup>23</sup> This distribution of the sensible regulates the terms of visibility and perception and creates a community of perceivers—the sensible—in common. Therefore it is within the archive that we must operate in order to make visible the imbrications of body and knowledge, itself embodied in and as archive. In other words, knowledge takes material form in the archive, even as the archive indirectly claims representation of bodies in its status as knowledge repository. A figure of difference, Linda creates what may be understood to be an improper archive because the archives proffered are not sufficient: they do not nor can they contain her. And so the novel invites us to ask, what is it about Linda as a synesthetic Asian American woman that requires another mode of memory and of

recorded knowledge? And in a more theoretical register, what does the form and function of Linda's deeply embodied synesthetic archive reveal about the naturalized link between the body and knowledge in the discourse of the archive?

### **Archival Modes of Witness**

A full explanation for the bitter taste of Truong's title does not come until almost halfway through the novel, when Linda writes of her earliest remaining memory with uncharacteristic clarity: "When I was seven, I heard a word that made me taste an unidentifiable bitter, and I never forgot the flames cutting through the seams of a trailer home, the sound of footsteps on gravel, then darkness" (116). Like most of Linda's memories, these exist in a sensual register: along with taste, we have touch (implied in the heat of the flames), sound (the footsteps), and sight (darkness). But again the certainty of this exposition is immediately subverted:

The trailer on fire might not have existed. There were no photographs and no history, official or anecdotal. There was only my memory: coffee left too long on the burner, an uncoated aspirin caught in the throat, how a drop of mercury might taste on the tip of the tongue. I have come close to identifying that taste of bitter . . . As for the word that triggered it, the usual trailhead of my memories, it remains lost to me. (117)

These analogies increase in import and danger: the banality of burned coffee is superseded by pain medication caught in the throat, preventing its efficacy, until finally we enter the realm of real physical harm to speculate the way mercury "might" taste. Together, these examples demonstrate the increasing threat of the unknown bitter taste and emphasize the ways this taste is tied to Linda's well-being (or lack thereof). Linda

remembers the taste but cannot associate it with anything in the world of tastes she has so far accumulated and identified. Similarly, she cannot associate the taste with its inciting word, and thus unlock the mystery of exactly *what* was spoken to her the night she is rescued from the fire and transferred to the care of Thomas Hammerick and his wife DeAnne.

But the first synesthetic taste encounter described in the novel, notably, is not the bitter taste but rather the taste of her adoptive last name. At the end of chapter one, Linda retreats to her dorm room and speaks a single word: “I drew out the ‘Ham,’ lingered on the ‘me,’ and softened the clip of the ‘rick.’ I repeated the word, and with every slow joining of its three syllables, the fizzy taste of sweet licorice with a mild chaser of wood smoke flooded my mouth. A phantom swig of Dr. Pepper” (14). This first representation of the experience of synesthesia introduces the fraught significance of the Hammerick designation for Linda’s sense of identity in the same moment that the novel discloses the particular nature of Linda’s condition. The taste of Dr. Pepper, forbidden by Linda’s mother but allowed, grudgingly, by her grandmother, reveals the disconnection between a word’s taste (familiar, forbidden, comforting) and its denotation, suggesting that Linda’s condition resists conventional methods of explication and instead creates its own significations.

In this context, Linda’s synesthesia becomes what Ann Cvetkovich has termed an “archival mode of witness,” a method for negotiating trauma that involves the compilation of an often unconventional archive to acknowledge and assess trauma’s effects retrospectively.<sup>24</sup> Cvetkovich’s reorganization of the archive’s parameters comes alongside her expansive definition of trauma, which extends Dori Laub’s famous

explanation of trauma as “an event without a witness”<sup>25</sup> to theorize the various ways an event might lack witness. If a traumatic event is one in which “the epistemic crisis of trauma is such that even the survivor is not fully present for the event,” then such a definition negotiates a place for trauma that arises from the quotidian rather than the exceptional.<sup>26</sup> Even more important for the present discussion, Cvetkovich’s description links trauma not to the black-and-white question of presence or absence of a witness, but to the complicated question of presence registered via memory. If, as I explicate in chapter four, memory is the mode by which history is accessed, then the trauma survivor’s lack of full “presence” in the moment of the traumatic event implies a disjuncture between the details of the event in and of itself and how this event will be stored in the survivor’s personal history, as is the case, most notably, with the trailer fire.

The traumas Linda experiences, revealed gradually over the course of the narrative and without regard to precise chronology, certainly feature the kinds of discrete catastrophic events we usually identify as traumatic: the mysterious fire that eradicates her biological family along with her memory of the first seven years of her life; being raped as an adolescent by the neighbor boy who mows her lawn; a cancer diagnosis in her twenties and subsequent removal of both her ovaries, a procedure that leaves her unable to have children. Evidence of these various traumas manifests in the narrative in ways readers have come to expect from fictional and filmic representations of post-traumatic stress: her rapist’s ghost haunts subsequent consensual sexual experiences, causing constriction in her chest and general fearfulness, and she experiences recurring nightmares, regular “nights of sleep interrupted by . . . mumbled cries of ‘Fire!’” (177). Linda’s doctor invokes the medical origins of trauma to describe the removal of her

ovaries necessitated by cancer (likely an effect of the rape), noting that “the removal of any vital organs . . . resulted in a trauma that the body could recover from, but afterward the body would continue to grieve for what had been taken from it” (212). In the language of medical discourse, Truong establishes the body itself as an agent of and for grief, augmenting the rigid medicalized terminology with the evocative possibility of the body’s own memory of loss.<sup>27</sup>

Cvetkovich’s expansion of the scope of trauma yokes its more conventional site, the large-scale catastrophic event, to a second space of trauma, that which results from long-term “systemic contexts.” This latter purview, favored by Cvetkovich in her analysis of trauma and archives that are often excluded from such legitimizing designations, can be individual as well as collective, attributed to such “textures of everyday experience” as incest, AIDS, and racism.<sup>28</sup> Much of Linda’s trauma arises from catastrophic events recognizable by Laub’s definition, perhaps suggesting the degree to which Truong is anxious to establish Linda in a traumatic context. But I am more compelled by the ways Linda’s experiences also fall under Cvetkovich’s interpretation of the concept, manifesting in the systemic trauma of racial and familial otherness coupled with her awareness of her own synesthetic condition, an awareness corresponding to her adoption into the Hammerick family.

Unsettling conventional notions of trauma in Western modernity concomitantly disturbs conventional notions of the archive. As Cvetkovich has argued, unconventional trauma requires an unconventional archive “whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.”<sup>29</sup> Cvetkovich’s demarcation of a necessarily unusual archive that might account for trauma’s ephemeral traces by virtue of

its own ephemerality creates the space for conceiving of Linda's synesthetic catalog as archive. Linda utilizes synesthesia as what Marita Sturken has called a "technology of memory"<sup>30</sup>—a term that understands Foucault's definition of technologies as "social practices that are inevitably implicated in power dynamics" and includes "practices that people enact upon themselves."<sup>31</sup> She involuntarily links tastes to words, and words to memories, in an attempt to bear witness to both the catastrophic events of the fire that destroyed her biological family and the systemic trauma of racial and neurological otherness. For what is simultaneously both so physical, and so fleeting, as a taste?

It is important to note that Linda herself makes a distinction between memory per se and the synesthetic catalog of experience that I have designated a synesthetic archive. Linda's archive becomes her method of access, and her memories (at least those after the night of the fire, as everything before it has been lost) are readily available via the performance of this synesthetic archive. "Memory is a curse," she writes:

My memory was sharp. A thorn, a broken water glass, a jellyfish in a wave that crashed into me and reached back for more. My secret sense, which I have come to understand as my condition, gave me a way to encode information that was immediate and long-lasting, an inborn mnemonic device . . . a multicourse meal prepared by a mad scientist who knew and cared nothing about food. To revisit the dishes and their chaotic juxtaposition of flavors was to recall with precision those facts, from the trivial to the significant, that I have acquired, via the spoken word, during the course of my life. (115)

Metaphor upon metaphor accumulates, as the sharpness of nature (the thorn) and destruction (broken glass) are attributed to memory, along with the agency to "reach . . .

back for more.” Notice her reliance on tactile metaphors in this passage, after having remarked a few pages earlier that food and taste metaphors “were of no use to me” (102). Linda’s highway to memory is not the mnemonic device of Greek rhetoricians, a walk through a city, but instead a multi-course meal that offers precise recollection of spoken facts. Here, facts as associated with her condition are valued, but not naively so, as she sees their potential to cause pain. Yet within each of these comprehensive claims to perfect memory lies, of course, the gaping hole of the trailer fire: “Whoever carried me out, his or her face was blank to me. Whoever stayed inside, by force or by choice, became strangers to me. The years of my life with them, the life before *this* life, had been erased or, rather, my memories of them had been erased by my benevolent brain. The last word that this man or this woman had said to me was the only thing that remained” (279). Thus the end of Truong’s novel centers on the failure of Linda’s archive to produce the details of her lost memory, on its lack that is also construed as a positive fact of protection, the act of a “benevolent brain.” If, as Derrida suggests above, the archive exists at the moment of memory’s breakdown, can the archive be a more hospitable, productive site than that of memory? Perhaps we should read Linda’s archive not just as a coping mechanism, which the phrase “benevolent brain” might suggest, but as a fulcrum for an epistemological relation to the world that accounts for the trauma of otherness and violence but is not in turn accountable to it.

In contrast to the singular events of physical and emotional trauma, the long-term systemic trauma that Linda experiences in this novel centers around two facets of her identity: her Vietnamese racial heritage (specifically her otherness in the post-Vietnam War American South) and her auditory-gustatory synesthesia. Each fundamentally

structures her ways of knowing and being in the world, resulting in a figure highly keyed to her own bodily difference. Paradoxically, Linda's bodily difference is registered most fully in her sense of invisibility. Speculating about the near-universal reaction generated in her homogenous hometown following her adoption by the Hammericks, Linda concludes:

They vowed to make themselves color-blind on my behalf. That didn't happen. What did happen was that I became a blind spot in their otherwise 20-20 field of vision. They heard my voice—it helped that I came to them already speaking English with a southern accent, which was the best and only clue that I had about my whereabouts before Boiling Springs—but they learned never to see me . . . Instead of invisibility, Boiling Springs made an open secret of me. I was the town's pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so. (170-71)

Linda appears here as disappearing, the postidentity poster child whose invisibility resists representation and archivization. The blind spot of Linda's race, a gap in the sight not only of Boiling Springs residents but of Truong's readers, is only brought to visibility at the conclusion of Part One, with an offhand revelation of Linda's given name—Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick—as it is spoken aloud at her graduation ceremony, a revelation framed to suggest that it is Truong's withholding rather than Linda's. Dissecting the politics of naming in Truong's first novel, *The Book of Salt*, David Eng suggests that Truong's refusal to name the character of the Man on the Bridge by his historical moniker, Ho Chi Minh, reveals her insistence on "a consideration of how the politics of naming and misnaming works to stabilize—indeed, to justify—the historical order of things."<sup>32</sup> Instead of creating an appropriate ethnic literary project—recuperation and

rewriting to make visible “the rest of the story”—Truong “shifts our attention from the problem of the real to the politics of our lack of knowledge,” Eng argues. In similar ways, Truong plays with the politics of naming in *Bitter in the Mouth*, withholding Linda’s given name that would signal her racial heritage to the reader. Here, again, Truong refuses the expectations placed upon U.S. ethnic texts to “perform what is ‘missing’ in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities.”<sup>33</sup>

Considering *Bitter in the Mouth* in conversation with Truong’s first novel, we can identify a pattern of resistance in which Truong refuses neoliberal multiculturalism’s demand for authenticity via visible racial difference. The stakes of this decision become clearer when we consider Melamed’s claim that neoliberal multiculturalism “produc[es] difference as a valorized domain of knowledge and then ideologically correlate[es] ethical, moral, technical, and political stances toward difference with what benefits neoliberal agendas.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Truong refuses the expectations placed upon literary texts such as *Bitter in the Mouth* to function as historical archives for U.S. ethnic experience, expectations linked under neoliberal multiculturalism to the agendas of global capitalism.

This refusal becomes especially clear when we consider the novel’s relationship to the Vietnam War.<sup>35</sup> Though the centrality of Vietnam’s civil war to Linda’s arrival in the United States is eventually detailed in the novel’s final pages (a scene to which I will return), the war makes very few appearances in the rest of the narrative. The facts of Vietnam—“Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, the Tet Offensive, the fall of Saigon”—become just another set of playing cards “filed . . . away” but lacking the satisfaction of embodied knowledge offered by synesthesia (216). One war reference does accompany Linda’s

consideration of her status as a blind spot, but the “selective blindness” considered in this passage is sexualized and not limited to the conflict in Vietnam: “If they saw my unformed breasts, the twigs that were my arms and legs, the hands and feet small enough to fit inside their mouths, how many of the men would remember the young female bodies that they bought by the half hour while wearing their country’s uniform in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, or South Vietnam?” (171). This is not a consideration of the exceptional situation of Vietnamese (refugee) immigrants but an indictment of the widespread victimization enacted via U.S. military intervention across Asia.

Visibility is further foregrounded by Linda’s resistance to the narratives of identity proffered by her white community and later by her Boston Brahmin fiancé Leo, as she distinguishes between the “being” and “looking” aspects of racial identity. This distinction is crucial to apprehending Linda’s particular ontological and epistemological world relation: “I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South. You mean what it was like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South, I would say back to them with the southern accent that had revealed to them the particulars of my biography” (169). What does it mean that Linda rejects the designation of “being” Asian? In dissociating “looking” from “being,” Linda undermines the primacy of vision as a mode of apprehension and comprehension in the world. Though to others she may “look” Asian, this has nothing to do with the question of who she is, of her identity.

Linda does elaborate slightly while describing a conversation about race with Leo, who has asserted that the racial prejudice evinced by her classmates means that she has

indeed experienced “being” Asian in the South. Linda counters, but only in an aside to the reader: “No, Leo, I knew what it was like *being* hated in the South . . . I believed, and still do, that this state of *being* that I was trying to understand had content and substance separate and apart from what Boiling Springs had taught me” (173). Thus, Linda claims, “being” is not something that can be assigned externally. Even more importantly, it is not something she believes she has learned from her fellow Boiling Springs inhabitants, for how could those who do not know what it means to “be” Asian teach her? Here, again, visibility as a mode of being is deprivileged to make way for the archive as an alternate episteme and ontology that allows Linda to separate “being” from “looking” and instead to couple it with a mode of sensation which is uniquely her own. Rejecting the significance of vision in comprehension—as the text itself does by withholding the physical description of our protagonist that would reveal the protagonist’s racialized otherness—Linda relies instead on taste affiliated with spoken language through the mysterious processes of synesthesia, a condition that remains at the limits of scientific and medical knowledge.

### **Sensing the Synesthetic Archive**

What does Truong achieve by making her protagonist a synesthete? An examination of the research on synesthesia reveals several characteristics of the condition that reinforce Linda’s position as an inappropriate subject with a unique epistemological relation to the world. In a key and still influential 1990s study, synesthesia is defined as occurring “when stimulation of one sensory modality [taste, touch, etc] automatically triggers a perception in a second modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation to this second modality.”<sup>36</sup> This sensory imbrication can take multiple forms, of which Linda’s

form, auditory-gustatory, is an extremely rare manifestation of an already rare diagnosis. The onset of synesthesia is believed to generally occur by age four, and scientists theorize that it is passed from parent to child.<sup>37</sup> As Linda learns upon viewing a PBS documentary on synesthesia and repeatedly reviewing its transcript, it is most likely that her synesthesia is a physical legacy from her biological parents, probably—because synesthesia is much more common in women—her mother.

Close attention to the moment of Linda's accidental encounter with the PBS documentary, one of the novel's less deft expositional moments, reinforces the significance of this inheritance. Smoking her third cigarette to quell what she terms the "incomings," Linda absorbs the details of her disorder: "The voiceover returned to say that synesthesia was hereditary and could be passed along via either the maternal or the paternal side of the family. The condition, according to the voiceover, was most often found in women. There was the sound of a key turning a lock. Leo was home" (222-23). Linda has dreaded Leo's imminent return, as she has concealed her condition from him, and so the "sound of the key turning in a lock" functions literally to alert her that she must turn off the television. Yet, following Truong's lead in representing and interrogating sensual overlap, it seems we are meant to read the direct juxtaposition of information about synesthesia's inherited nature to the "sound of a key turning in the lock" as a crucial moment of inner unlocking for Linda.<sup>38</sup> Synesthesia, which has isolated her from her adoptive family, community and fiancé, provides a direct, physical link to the biological family and racial heritage of which she has no memory.<sup>39</sup>

In his analysis of synesthesia, neurologist Richard Cytowic foregrounds the embodied theoretical possibilities evoked by the syndrome. The stakes for understanding

this condition, he writes, are directly related to the way synesthesia gestures to questions of “consciousness, the nature of reality, and the relationship between reason and emotion”<sup>40</sup>—the same questions which the archive is conventionally understood to manage. Synesthesia complicates easy designations of what is real, in that synesthetes experience these cross-sensory stimulations with the same strength as ordinary sense stimulation and yet science thus far lacks any method for verifying these experiences or transmitting them to another. In this way, *Bitter in the Mouth* foregrounds the question of the real by complicating representations of perception: synesthesia is, for Linda our narrator, utterly real—powerful, consistent, evocative—and readers experience it as such through her focalization. Yet no other character experiences Linda’s incomings as real, even those like Kelly who believe her descriptions. The question of what is “real,” what counts as knowledge, what can—and should—be perceived, is at the forefront from the novel’s opening pages.

The novel’s distinctive hermeneutics comprise not only regular instances of the destabilization of factual claims but also the tricky negotiation of language and literary form required to represent the moment of synesthetic apprehension. Truong frequently reinforces the unreal quality of Linda’s synesthesia for those around her and the political and cultural sanctions on identity formation operating outside the boundaries of visibility. Though her condition becomes the centerpiece for her epistemological relation to the world, facilitating a specialized relationship to memory and allowing for the construction of an utterly personal archive, this relation comes at a cost: Linda’s synesthesia simultaneously becomes the source of traumatic reinscription of otherness, alienation and rejection.

The resonances of Linda's childhood experience with synesthesia are most apparent in a conversation between young Linda and DeAnne, which is made particularly difficult to apprehend by Truong's decision to represent the experience of auditory-gustatory synesthesia in dialogue. The day before Linda is raped, her mother's new haircut and surprisingly pleasant demeanor inspire Linda to attempt disclosure. Linda's confessions and DeAnne's rebuffs are painful in their vulnerability and their rendering:

“Mom *chocolatemilk*, you *cannedgreenbeans* know *grapejelly* what *grahamcracker* tastes like a *walnut* *hamsteaksugar-cured*? God *walnut* tastes like a *walnut* *hamsteaksugar-cured*. The word *licorice* God *walnut*, I mean *raisin*, and the word *licorice* tastes—”

“Linda *mint*, please *lemonjuice* don't talk *cornchips* like a *crazy-heavycream* person *garlicpower*.”

Linda's second attempt at disclosure elicits a final response from DeAnne: “Linda *mint*. Stop *cannedcorn* it! I can handle *FruitStripegum* a lot of things *tomato*. God *walnut* knows *grapejelly* I have had to with you *cannedgreenbeans*. But I won't handle *FruitStripegum* *crazyheavycream*. I won't have it in my family *cannedbeets*” (107).

This extended representation of auditory-gustatory synesthesia registers several curious aspects of the word-taste correlation. DeAnne's epithet, “crazy,” is heavy cream: it catches in Linda's throat, too full and rich to absorb other flavors that would mitigate its cloying tendencies, a taste the garlic powder of “person” is ill-equipped to make palatable when the two are joined with a hyphen. Notably, while “you” tastes of canned green beans and “Linda” tastes of mint, “I” is not associated with any taste. As such, it implies an unmarked subject, universal in that it is untouched by synesthetic production, and also

establishes the subject as a fluid conception that cannot be stabilized, even by the process of synesthetic sensation.

Mercifully returned from such dialogue to Linda's narration, we read her interpretation of the brief scene: "I know what my mom meant. *If you want to be one of us, Linda, you hush your mouth*" (108). Resorting to a common convention of rendering unspoken thought in italics, Truong also reinforces the subtextual level of their dialogue. Just as Linda tastes the words she and her mother speak, those tastes undergirding every sentence, so Linda can similarly discern the subtext of her mother's claim that she "won't handle crazy," "won't have it in [her] family." Linda understands that her status as a member of the Hammerick family is dependent on suppressing her synesthetic condition—that is, her difference.

### **The Archival Subject**

*Bitter in the Mouth* opens with the description of two people, a "quiet child" and a formerly quiet child, both "always folding ourselves into smaller pieces" (3). These figures are our narrator Linda and her uncle, Baby Harper. Though we do not yet know the details of her interloper status, the narrative consistently reinforces that Linda is an improper representative of her family and community. Taking her place as a fourth generation Hammerick at Yale, Linda is "a modern, slightly modified representative of the family" (13)—a representative that her grandmother Iris discounts, Linda suspects, because they do not resemble one another. She explains: "I now know that it is no coincidence that the word 'favor' is used to denote physical resemblance. I favor you (your eyes, your chin). You favor me (with love and attention). Favor is a reciprocity based on a biological imperative" (133). Unfortunately for the possibility of her own

happiness as a member of the Hammerick family, Linda physically favors her Vietnamese biological mother, Mai-Dao, in a household where mentioning Mai-Dao has been forbidden. Linda has “eyes the shape of hickory nuts” (33), skin the same color as the Florida tan of her childhood neighbor, and hair longer than the salon’s suggested “China Chop” (105), but these ambiguous details are all that Truong provides before the revelation of Linda’s full name in the Yale graduation scene. The fact of her race, kept secret, indicates the role of the unspoken in identity constitution, even as it facilitates the foregrounding of Linda’s synesthesia. These everyday realities of Linda’s otherness set the terms for larger-scale moments of recognition and identity formation.

Thus far I have advocated reading Truong’s fictional narrative in the terms Cvetkovich claims for quotidian traumas: as incommensurate but nonetheless conversant with large-scale historical trauma, in that they present “lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful.” To do so enables us to “redefine the connections between memory and history, private experience and public life, and individual loss and collective trauma.”<sup>41</sup> *Bitter in the Mouth* explicitly addresses these questions of the imbrication of private and public, individual and collective histories, in the context of two contrasting episodes that illustrate recognition and its lack. The first, when Linda is fourteen and has begun to cultivate the identity of a disembodied smart girl, describes her initial encounter with “the unpronounceable part” of her name, Nguyen, in reference to the President of South Vietnam from 1967 to 1975, Nguyen Van Thieu. Linda continues to feel the odd pull of barely-familiar unfamiliarity:

I learned that the war was still in progress in 1968, the year of my birth, and that it ended for the Vietnamese in 1975, the year of my second birth at the

[Hammericks'] blue and gray ranch house. I filed these facts away. They were connected to me, but I wasn't connected to them. This pattern would repeat itself as I learned more about Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, the Tet Offensive, the fall of Saigon. I filed these facts away too. All that I learned about Vietnam had to do with war and death and dying. At the time, I had no body, which meant that I was impervious and had no use for such information. (216)

Once again, Linda erodes her own relationship to facts: while they might be connected to her by virtue of her Vietnamese middle name, she feels no reciprocating connection, in explicit contrast to the connection she experiences through her taste sensations. Though she narrates the facts of her country of origin explicitly in tandem with the events of her own life—the year of her birth, the year of her relocation to the Hammerick home—to do so only reinforces the lack of connection. These are once again the jumbled “facts” on which we cannot anchor Linda’s story.<sup>42</sup>

Linda’s lack of “proper” recognition for the country and name of her birth is immediately juxtaposed with a second scene of recognition: her encounter with the PBS program on synesthesia that finally offers, in contrast to any history textbook or family album, “what I wanted to know about myself” (216). Tuning in during an interview with a British man in his late thirties who also “suffers” (Linda bristles at the term) from auditory-gustatory synesthesia, Linda has “an in-another-body experience,” a feat facilitated indirectly by her condition that manufactures of a sense of fellow-feeling or kinship: “Everything but this man and me faded into darkness . . . I had never experienced recognition in this pure, undiluted form. It was a mirroring. It was a fact. It was a cord pulled taut between us. Most of all, it was no longer a secret” (217). Linda’s

synesthetic archive, rather than her name or racialized body, facilitates a recognition that is nonetheless specifically figured in bodily terms—to know or recognize another person via this condition is, for Linda, to inhabit the body of another. Once again knowledge (via the archive) is imagined in terms of embodiment and facilitated along the lines of bodily “disorder,” raising the possibility of a community through difference, recoded as sameness.

Truong’s choice of an atypical form of synesthesia for her protagonist disrupts the representational hierarchy that produces the universal unmarked subject. Taste is extremely rare in synesthesia as either a trigger or a response;<sup>43</sup> hence readers cannot even relegate Linda’s experiences to the realm of a “typical” synesthete. More significant, though, is the place of taste in a hierarchy of perception and representation, as delineated by David Lloyd in his analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and racial formation. Lloyd traces the hierarchy of aesthetic apprehension as established by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, noting that aesthetics privileges distance over closeness and active rather than passive reception of the sensed object. Taste, intimate and embodied, gets us closer than a “disinterested” and “active” sense like vision, intended to be deployed by an unmarked “subject without properties.”<sup>44</sup> Yet Linda’s synesthetic mode of apprehension incorporates both the highest form of aesthetic encounter—utterly distant from the object itself and equally mediated by the apprehending subject—and also the lowest and the closest. Just as her synesthesia uniquely yokes the heard word with a taste, so it unites opposing poles of aesthetic apprehension in the sensing figure of Linda as minority subject.

This union is crucial because of the way apprehension, particularly aesthetic apprehension, undergirds modern racial formations and racism. According to Lloyd, racism is culturally determined: it arises from the structure of Western aesthetic culture and proceeds out of the disinterested perceiving subject (the “subject without properties”) that emerges from and is the goal of aesthetic culture. The developmental narrative of the senses described by Lloyd indexes the developmental history within which races are determined to be civilized or primitive. By this, he suggests that such determinations arise out of a minority subject’s perceived ability (or lack of ability) to embody the universal(izing) subject without properties.<sup>45</sup> This unmarked embodiment is the prerequisite for participation in aesthetic judgments and for existence in “identity with ‘every one else,’ that is, with the subject in general.” This existence is, in turn necessary to “provide the conditions for the universal accord of a common or public sense”—the creation of Kant’s *sensus communus*.<sup>46</sup>

But synesthesia as represented in Truong’s novel disrupts this sensual hierarchy and prevents a subject without properties from coalescing. Without an unmarked subject, the structures of culture out of which racism arises are themselves disrupted, and the *sensus communus* cannot achieve the state of universal validity to which it aspires. Synesthesia especially complicates the Kantian privileging of vision as the highest sense. Linda’s synesthetic experience collapses this developmental hierarchy of the senses, in that she is both distant from the object of apprehension (the experiential taste, which is not “really” conjured in her mouth) and utterly present to it, as she nevertheless tastes it on her tongue. In this way, she counters the conditions necessary for the formation of common sense and the public sphere: she is not disinterested but rather intensely

interested, not property-less but marked by her race and her synesthetic condition. She cannot judge as the subject without properties because her judgment, apprehension and understanding are fundamentally conditioned by synesthesia.

The key to understanding how Linda disrupts the racist racial formations that Lloyd attributes to aesthetic culture is to recognize precisely what racism is. Discourses of racism are constituted not by “the antagonistic recognition of difference,” as we often think, but instead by “the subordination of difference to the demands of identity.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the demand of identity can only either exclude on the basis of difference or require sameness in the form of assimilation. Truong’s description of Linda’s putative disembodiment, and the initial suppression of her Vietnamese heritage, play with the expectation of universal subjectivity characterizing the modern systems of aesthetics and archive, establishing Linda as a potentially unmarked figure, at least initially.

Yet for the entirety of the text, Linda’s properties are those of sensation, one aspect of the body that resists representation and thus resists the archive as well. Sensation is affect grounded in the body. It is fleeting, yet intensely registered by the perceiving subject; it is utterly personal, yet collective in that it is common to all human experience. Individuated and non-empirical, Linda’s synesthesia colors her apprehension of the world and works to undermine hierarchical ways of perceiving, knowing and doing, such as those advocated by reference to the Reasonable Man and DeAnne’s emphasis on propriety. Therefore I posit that Linda is not, and can never be, the subject formalized into identity with “every one else,” the subject without properties. Instead, she is a *residual subject*. I craft this term from Lloyd’s theorization of “residue” as the difference that remains after assimilation. In the process of assimilation and the creation

of residue, differences come to signify negatively in a culture that privileges identity. As a result, racial discriminations come to “make sense.”<sup>48</sup> In Linda’s case, however, we see the representation of an atypical synesthetic subject whose subjectivity exists in residue and remainder, suggesting that such a literary subject might disrupt racist racial formations arising from aesthetic culture.

Another crucial characteristic of Linda’s archive is its need for and use of language, an effect of Truong’s choice of the auditory-gustatory manifestation of synesthesia. The words Linda experiences as taste cannot *mean* conventionally, so they must mean differently, reinforcing her inappropriate relationship to language. Though “experiential flavors had to come first,” a link that reinforces her archive’s dependence on material reality, in that she cannot taste a word whose taste she has not yet experienced on her tongue, Linda finds that both denotative and connotative meanings only interfere with her synesthetic experience:

I . . . had to disregard the meanings of the words if I wanted to enjoy what the words could offer me. At first, the letting go of meaning was a difficult step for me to take, like loosening my fingers from the side of a swimming pool for the very first time. The world suddenly became vast and fluid. Anything could happen to me as I drifted toward the deep end of the pool. But without words, resourceful and revealing, who would know of the dangers that I faced? I would be defenseless. I would drown. Maybe all children felt this way. We grabbed on to words because we thought they could save us. (74)

This acceptance of risk and overcoming of fear, framed metaphorically in an act of growing up—the process of children learning to swim—might seem at first to decenter

the sideways growth that often characterizes Linda's narrative. Yet the strangely passive, even literally sideways movement evoked by the words "fluid" and "drift" indicates that the movement from the constraints of conventional denotation to being immersed in the taste sensations of synesthesia would be better understood as itself resistant to the process of growing up. To be passively carried by water, to risk bodily harm—these are not the modes by which we enter adulthood. Further, to uncouple from dependence on words, those "resourceful and revealing" tools by which we are taught to engage the world, Linda risks the loss of meaning, of linguistic structures by which the world is organized and upon which children in need of salvation rely. She characterizes this process as one of powerlessness, yet she finds power in her "incomings"—to counter the blandness of her mother's cooking, to harness the elusive power of memory on her behalf.

This decoupling of words from their meanings, a process that results in words being imbued with new, alternate meanings—their tastes—is characterized as a deliberate choice on Linda's part. She cannot choose (not) to experience her incomings, but she can choose to exploit the complex pleasure those incomings can provide, so long as she is not shackled by linguistic conventions or negative connotations. Yet the pool passage, even as it emphasizes her singularity, also links her own fear with that experienced by non-synesthetic children, those elusive "normal" beings who nonetheless grasp at the power they intrinsically understand language to possess.

Considering Linda's synesthesia as a technology of memory that allows for the construction of an archive requires attention to the "practices that surround [its] production and reception."<sup>49</sup> In other words, to the moments when we see not only archival production (the tasted word, remembered for the future) but archival access and,

to an extent, transfer—the other characteristics that determine an archive. Traditional archives seek reconciliation with the state in the aftermath of trauma, as Rodrigo Lazo reinforces in his analysis of the mutually constitutive relationship between the archive and the nation. But Linda’s archive enables not “recovery,” which often becomes coded as a “healthy” practice that nonetheless always takes the form of the reconciliation named above, but rather survival—a “living on” like the one David Lloyd imagines for traumatized postcolonial subjects that holds the potential for “producing and reproducing a life that lies athwart modernity.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike conventional archives, Linda’s archive of tastes is characterized by two primary practices or affective entanglements: unwillingness and desire. Much of the narrative is consumed with Linda’s attempts to dull the incomings, whether by smoking, consuming alcohol, or having sex. Yet this unwillingness is frequently coupled with or overturned by desire for a particular taste or combination of tastes evoked by spoken language.

The clearest example of Linda’s performance of her archive comes when she first discovers the power of synesthetic tastes to counter the terrible taste of her mother’s cooking. Locking herself in the bathroom, Linda says aloud, “Not again,” and is overwhelmed by the taste of pancake on her tongue: “Each repetition . . . was a revelation. The faster I said it, the more intense and mouth-filling the taste became” (75). Speaking a word aloud repeatedly and experiencing its pleasure, Linda engages in an act she claims is analogous to more conventional childhood explorations of one’s own body: “How old were you when you first touched yourself for the sake of pleasure? . . . We all have to learn how to use what we were born with for something other than the functional and the obvious. All of our bodies hold within them secret chambers and cells” (75).

Speaking the words to herself, feeling the flood of tastes, Linda enacts the second half of archival engagement: the accessing and performance of the archive.<sup>51</sup> Though Linda can perform her archive on her own, a deeper sense of taste satisfaction becomes available when others speak the words to her. Sometimes, craving a word while drifting off to sleep, Linda wakes with an increased desire, fed by the “appreciable distinction between hearing the word said and saying it for [herself], though both would produce the same incomings” (102). Thus Linda’s archive is most satisfying when it involves moments of transfer or access between herself and another, even if this occurs without the other’s knowledge. This archive is embodied to the point of giving pleasure in its contradiction of Linda’s knowledge of the world as a painful place.

In Linda’s experience, every conversation involves an auditory-gustatory connection, regardless of the conversation’s relative significance or unimportance in terms of content. Thus Linda avoids the television in favor of books, requires a heavy smoking habit to make it through the school day, and clings to Baby Harper because his peculiar talk-singing does not trigger the incomings. Yet only at certain moments in Truong’s narrative is the experience of synesthesia performed for the reader; only certain conversations are relayed in dialogue with the tastes each word evokes attached to the words themselves in the closest approximation to what it might mean to share Linda’s condition. Certainly this choice relates to the very cumbersome negotiation necessary to write Linda’s experience of a conversation, to the attachment of italics that disrupts a sentence’s visual flow and its meaningfulness as a tool of literary representation. Yet this representative choice calls into relief those moments when Linda’s conversations are communicated in the fullness of their synesthetic experience, as when she first speaks

aloud her adoptive last name, when she confesses to DeAnne, and when she receives telephone calls, years apart, notifying her of the death of her grandmother Iris and then Baby Harper. These scenes, and the attendant cumbersome but evocative experience of reading them, gesture to the inappropriateness of literature, and of representation more generally, to effectively render the experience of sensation. Sensation is that which evades representation and the archive—the highly embodied, personal and ephemeral aspect of lived experience. Thus these passages make visible the inadequacy of literary representation even as they offer a mode of minority representation that might allow us to better understand the political and aesthetic implications of Linda’s synesthetic archive. As in the writings of Kincaid and Lahiri discussed in chapter one, Truong’s novel presents forms of literariness that call attention to their own limits and the breaking of their frames.

Linda’s synesthesia unites embodiment and the archive. Her archive of tastes is stable in that words always taste the same, no matter who speaks them. Synesthesia offers her the kind of connection to the past that we associate with the archive, an ahistorical persistence of memory that does not change with the passage of time or shifts in interpretation. Linda’s archive both endures and is ephemeral; the stability of the word/taste correlation points to the archival nature of her response to her experience, even while the tastes fade until re-spoken into being once again in the performance of her archive. Like a figure combing through drawers or documents, Linda sifts through the tastes she experiences, always measuring them against the elusive bitter taste that might give her a last word from her lost family, always noting their combination of sweet, sour, salty and cataloging them in terms of her experiential tastes.

## The Archive and the Outside

The role of performance in Linda's synesthetic archive requires that we engage with what Derrida identifies as the central concern of the archive: "Where does the outside commence?"<sup>52</sup> The question of boundaries haunts *Archive Fever*, coming up over and over again as Derrida makes emphatic claims that there can be "*no archive without outside*" and yet struggles to determine just how and why the physical body complicates such claims—a paradox that ultimately leads him to conclude the archive's impossibility. The question of the outside is also central to trauma, which is why designations of trauma like Cvetkovich's systemic notion that expand the concept beyond a clearly demarcated event often generate critical discomfort. Truong's novel both attends to and ultimately subverts the division between inner and outer, leaving open the question of what Linda does, exactly, when she experiences a word as taste, assigns a known taste to that word, and then—most fundamentally—evaluates whether the taste corresponds to the bitterness she remembers from the night of the fire but for which she has no name or word. For Derrida, the difficulty lies in the many instantiations of "inscription"; for readers of *Bitter in the Mouth*, it lies in synesthesia.

Returning to the fundamentals of synesthesia both complicates this question of the outside and crucially undermines the very distinction between inside and outside. In synesthesia, the inducer or trigger—that which appeals to the first sense to be stimulated—generally exists outside the body, often a word in a book, or a strain of music, or a phrase spoken by another. Peter Grossenbacher writes that "sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches have all been reported as synesthetic inducers," and also notes that inducers tend to be human-generated: a majority are "words or music, stimuli

generated by fellow humans and designed to convey meaning.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, in making Linda a synesthete, Truong has created a character who cannot stop the influence of the outside world’s attempts at meaning-making on her body and lived experience. In this way, Linda’s archive implicitly critiques Derrida’s formulation, which relies on the continuing existence (even if indeterminable) of an outside. In Linda’s archive, inner and outer are productively muddled, signaled first by the collapsing of representation and sensation, the heard word and the experienced taste.

In Linda’s case, at the same time that synesthesia breaks down the archival boundaries between inner and outer, it also calls into question clear distinctions of bodily inside and outside. It is this thin-boundedness that returns us to questions of propriety and the power of the improper archive, to Puar’s observation that “the dispersion of the boundaries of bodies forces a completely chaotic challenge to normative conventions of gender, sexuality, and race, disobeying normative conventions of ‘appropriate’ bodily practices and the sanctity of the able body.” Puar suggests that reading such inappropriate bodies as queer assemblages “allows for a scrambling of sides that is illegible to state practices of surveillance, control, banishment, and extermination.”<sup>54</sup> Though Puar’s emphasis is on the oppressive apparatus itself, rather than the inappropriate body’s response to such an apparatus, she attests to the way that propriety is always about boundaries. Her claim implies that the disruption of boundaries might itself enable the creation of positive illegibility. In Linda’s case, synesthesia allows her to be illegible to others but legible, at least in part, to herself. It provides a link to the past, but not one that can be reduced to physical difference or cultural practices.

One further conventional distinction displaced by the unwieldy condition of synesthesia is that of stable temporality. A mnemonic device, Linda's synesthesia registers memory but also constantly gestures to the future day that she might taste the mysterious bitterness and come to knowledge of the word she seeks. Thus Linda's archive is, as Derrida notes for all archives, as much about the future as about the past. (As chapter four explores, this is also true for conceptions of the present.) The archive itself determines its own future content: it "is not only the place for stocking and for consuming an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case . . . the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event."<sup>55</sup> Linda's identification of her catalog of tastes as that which might eventually signify her lost past in turn transforms each auditory-gustatory connection she experiences into that-which-will-be-archived, into the moment of experience coupled with the moment of catalogue, and into something more than a taste—potentially the taste she seeks. Her taste archive thus determines her apprehension of all synesthetic as well as non-synesthetic tastes, in that the experiential flavors she encounters lay the foundations for new word-taste correlations. Fundamentally, this archive determines her epistemological relation to the world around her. Linda experiences tastes and the words associated with those tastes primarily in relation to the potential of those word-taste correlations to illuminate the missing component of her archive: the word and the memory that correspond to the elusive bitter taste.

In the novel's final pages, we learn that Linda's mother first came to the United States to study at Barnard after the partitioning of North and South Vietnam. Thomas Hammerick, a law student at Columbia, fell in love with Mai-Dao "right there on the steps of Low Memorial Library" (268). After Mai-Dao returns to her fiancé in Vietnam, Thomas absorbs news coverage of the increasing hostilities with her in mind:

Over the years, as the name of Mai-Dao's country became a household word even in Boiling Springs, Thomas couldn't see the news of her country's civil war, the deployment of U.S. troops there, and the body bags that returned without thinking of her. In 1968, the year that she gave birth to me, though he didn't know that back then, he thought of her as he watched her hometown—it was the southern capitol [sic], so he thought that it would keep her safe—exploding on his television set. (268-69)

Later, from letters that Thomas had promised to destroy but never does, DeAnne and then Linda learn that Mai-Dao had returned to the United States in 1974, bringing her daughter to join her husband at his postdoctoral fellowship at the University of North Carolina.

These are the most overt references to the Vietnam War—and its impact on the collective U.S. political imaginary—in the novel. Yet in this final scene, the backstory of Linda's family and her ties to Vietnam continue to be subordinated to the conditions of synesthetic knowledge. DeAnne's method of telling Linda's family history—"very slowly, pausing in between words, stopping in midsentence"—activates and heightens the operations of Linda's synesthetic archive: "The incomings, given such a cadence, were acute and more assertive than usual, as if the tastes triggered by the words literally had

more time to sink in” (272). Desperate to quell the incomings, Linda procures a bottle of bourbon, and the story continues without interruption until “[t]he bottle of bourbon was bone dry” and “[t]he afternoon was almost gone” (279).

### **Conclusion**

Why does Linda need to remember? This question gestures to fundamental ideas about what ethnic literatures are trying to do and how they resonate differently for different readers. My analysis suggests that she needs to remember because her sense of identity is deeply tied to a sense of origins that is discursively reinforced at the level of individuals, families, communities, and the nation. Think of how there is no one in Boiling Springs who Linda feels can teach her what it means to “be” Asian. Of how her community extends partial acceptance based on her southern accent. Of the painful sense that she has no image or memory of the family she favors. Linda has been raised in exclusion. There is also the violence of the loss, the unexplained and inexplicable destruction of her family. The search for the bitter taste is a search for legacy, for genealogy. To the extent that *Bitter in the Mouth* accepts its representative status as an example of ethnic literature, it is in portraying the deep imbrication between history and individual subject formation. This history is both personal—an individual loss—and not, in that Linda has no memory of life before the loss. The violence of this erasure haunts her, and it cannot be assuaged by her relentless archive fever. It cannot even be silenced, only approached, by the embodied archive she creates. Specifically, Linda does not—or not only—want to remember her lost family. She wants the answer to the question of the bitter taste—the taste itself and the word that inspired it. This is a discursive recovery project as well as a historical one.

In the context of my larger project, this chapter reinforces how propriety attaches to bodies, occupying the vacuum left by race in a postracial era. Propriety accrues around bodies, designates bodies as proper or improper in the context of turn-of-the-century neoliberal multiculturalism, becomes the arbiter for bodies that will and will not matter. Queer bodies, disabled bodies, racialized bodies—all are inappropriate bodies that, by virtue of their difference, disrupt assimilation into institutionalized neoliberal multiculturalism. Inappropriate bodies existing in the gaps and failures of multiculturalism become the sites of inappropriate subjects who must somehow negotiate their exclusion. This chapter asks after the fate of these inappropriate bodies, examining moments when such bodies concomitantly attract the normative designation of “improper” while also enabling a way of living inappropriately. What responses do minoritized subjects evince in the face of their “inappropriateness” that allow for the creation of alternate epistemes? My readings illuminate the contingent, provisional ways that minority subjects negotiate the archive, suggesting how an improper(ly) embodied archive allows characters to confront the relentless discipline of propriety upon racialized and otherwise improper subjects. Taking the figuration of the body-as-archive as a point of entry for thinking through the problem of contemporary minority identity, this chapter has attended to literary texts that stage such an improper relation to the United States at the turn of the century to explore potential rehabilitations of the designation of “difference.”

The end of Truong’s novel declines to provide any definite answers to questions of memory, trauma and the role of the archive. Following DeAnne’s disclosure of the identity of Linda’s birth family as well as letters between her mother and Thomas

Hammerick, Linda reflects in the novel's final passage on the gaps in history that remain (even DeAnne knows no details of the trailer fire) and the significance of the revelations: "I had thought, in between our sips of bourbon, that she could be making this all up. I decided that it didn't matter. At least it was a story, I thought. We all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay" (282). Crucially, what the plot suggests but the narrative does not otherwise acknowledge is that Linda purposely renders her archive inoperable in this final scene. With the bourbon, Linda suppresses her incomings for this extended conversation about the lost details of her past, a decision that means that even if DeAnne speaks the word that would evoke the bitter taste in Linda's mouth, Linda will not recognize it. She purposely deactivates the archive she has so assiduously compiled, choosing instead an indeterminacy of story and relationships based not in origins but in the possibility of present-day decisions to "put down" roots "and stay." This suggests, ultimately, that Linda's story cannot be contained, even in such an unconventional archive as her catalog of tastes. She is a figure who resists any totalizing impulses of the archive, in the end preferring aesthetic representation—the "story of where we came from and how we got here"—in place of any archiving impulse that might produce factual truths. The archive exhausted—the archivist herself exhausted—aesthetic representation explicitly uncoupled from truth claims becomes the preferred mode of self-understanding.

At the risk of proffering the "illusion of understanding" Linda cautions against in the search for a word-taste that would "match" the bitterness she remembers, I want to return briefly to Truong's first novel. *The Book of Salt* suggests an intriguing intertextual

possibility for the bitter taste at the center of Linda's synesthetic archive. In one of that novel's key scenes, Binh, a Vietnamese chef working for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, meets a fellow countryman in Paris—the man on the bridge the novel neglects to identify as the historical Ho Chi Minh. Before a sexual encounter that becomes one of the defining moments of Binh's life, they share a meal fit for kings described in explicitly sensual terms. Framing their erotic exchange is description of this meal and the conversation it engenders, centered on their mutual culinary expertise. Binh inquires repeatedly about the ingredients of each exquisite dish: morel mushrooms, brown butter, sea salt. One exchange dominates, however: Binh's brief question, "Watercress?" following a bite of the dish that most defies his expectations and activates his culinary curiosity because of the unexpected presence of *fleur de sel*.

But Binh is quick to clarify—he is asking about the preparation of watercress, not its identification as an ingredient, for "watercress is unmistakable, bitter in the mouth, cooling in the body, greens that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed. I know this dish well" (97). I do not wish to undermine Monique Truong's decision to leave the bitterness of Linda's formative taste unidentified within the pages of *Bitter in the Mouth*, but rather to consider what Binh's brief comment illuminates in the context of Linda's synesthetic archive. What would it mean if the taste Linda seeks is that of watercress? This scene from the earlier novel employs the exact same diction to describe a taste that is not only "bitter in the mouth" but also associated with an explicitly ethnic palate: "any Vietnamese," Binh believes, would recognize the specific bitterness of watercress. In this reading, Linda's unsettled status as a racialized subject is once again brought to the forefront—she is not "any Vietnamese," but rather a complexly embodied

figure who unsettles expectations about the performance of race and the formation of appropriate citizen-subjects. More importantly, though, this “answer” to the implicit question of *Bitter in the Mouth* does not actually encompass or fully negotiate the loss signified in the elusive bitter taste, for watercress is never mentioned in Linda’s narrative. In other words, the question of “the word that triggered it” remains conspicuously unanswered. The synesthetic archive remains open.

Derrida characterizes the archive as “a token of the future,” which refers to the fact that “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way.” Further, he argues that the archive is a perpetually open system: “the archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.”<sup>56</sup> What this means for Linda, of course, and for readers, is an indeterminacy forever linked to futurity, the ultimate contingency of the epistemic mode under discussion. *Bitter in the Mouth* ends with the same undermining of “facts” that has characterized the rest of the work but extends this to gesture to the power of story, of representation, when coupled with the sensational power of synesthetic taste. The end of the novel suggests that the archive itself might allow for indeterminacy. Indeed, perhaps it is the archive which enables the conditions of this indeterminate conclusion, having taught Linda and Truong’s readers how to read the world. As Derrida claims of the archive, “if we want to know what it will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps.”<sup>57</sup>

This novel’s hermeneutics of difference is an exemplary instance of the subjective and epistemological inappropriateness this project delineates. The contingency of taste and value it models reinforces the centrality of aesthetics to racialization, even as the emphasis on embodied modes of knowing suggests the possibilities for knowledge

production through difference. As neoliberalism dematerializes categories of difference, flattening them into commensurate claims of difference-as-sameness to populate a colorblind nation and globe, Truong's novel counters with the insistent performance of difference as difference. The next chapter examines a novel that represents what happens when the colorblindness of the neoliberal United States begins to show its seams. Following a model citizen who internalizes imperial and exceptional narratives of propriety, property ownership, and multicultural belonging, Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* illuminates the violence required by and obscured in such performances and theorizes the agency available to minoritized subjects in an era of propriety.

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<sup>1</sup> *Archive Fever* 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Terrorist Assemblages* 221.

<sup>3</sup> *Archive Fever* 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 91.

<sup>5</sup> I take this definition from Kathy E. Ferguson, acknowledging the debt this understanding owes to Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972).

<sup>6</sup> Helen Freshwater suggests that the archive offers "the illusory pleasure of recovered memory" but the price is always "the myth of the fixed historical record" Valerie Rohy writes against what she calls "the familiar model of archival work as a mastery of 'fact.'" See also Diana Taylor, Ann Cvetkovich, and Gayatri Spivak.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasizing the archive's relationship to nation, Rodrigo Lazo asserts that "the history of the modern archive is inextricable from the establishment of nation-states...Archive and nation came together to grant each other authority and credibility" (36).

<sup>8</sup> *Archive Fever* 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Migrant Archives" 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

<sup>12</sup> *The World is a Ghetto*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Bodies That Matter* 2. Yet, Butler acknowledges, this discursive process must be reconciled with the reality of bodies in the world, and so she suggests that "what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power" – the power of an "exclusionary matrix" by which the repudiation of inappropriate bodies makes way for the formation of appropriate subjects (2). In other words, embodiment itself is the final step to forcing power structures into visibility.

<sup>14</sup> *Terrorist Assemblages* 38.

<sup>15</sup> "The End(s) of Race" 1480.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 1479.

<sup>17</sup> Rohy 344.

<sup>18</sup> "Aesthetics" 10.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics* 10.

<sup>20</sup> Reading Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Valerie Rohy argues that such a "proliferation of archives...offers a way for *Fun Home* to inhabit disparate narrative and temporal modes, learning what each one enables and forecloses" (344).

<sup>21</sup> Here, the novel suggests that the "untruth" of the archive can be mitigated by oral testimony – yet *Bitter in the Mouth* explicitly counters this understanding in other scenes. This dichotomy reinforces the way that Linda, and perhaps the novel itself, fails to fully account for the ways knowledge is produced or the possibility of accessing truth.

<sup>22</sup> Here Linda expresses a theory of history that corresponds in many ways with that articulated by historian David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity* when he argues that "what is important [in the practice of historicism] is to read historically not just for the answers that this or that theorist has produced but for the questions that are more or less the epistemological conditions for those answers" (7). I discuss Scott's formulation further in chapter four, particularly his suggestive question, "Does the anticolonial demand for a certain kind of postcolonial future oblige its histories to produce certain kinds of pasts?" (7).

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Definition from Gabriel Rockhill's translator introduction (1).

<sup>24</sup> "Drawing the Archive" 14. In her discussion of *Fun Home*, an autobiographical graphic novel by Alison Bechdel that addresses Bechdel's father's closeted homosexuality and suspected suicide, Cvetkovich outlines her own interest in the way that "idiosyncratic or shameful family stories" enact an "incommensurate relation to global politics and historical trauma" (111). Together with her larger study, *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), this article asserts Cvetkovich's interest in the way quotidian, ordinary figures and events interact with larger cultural narratives of trauma and the archive. Though Cvetkovich's study confines itself to ephemeral and unofficial queer archives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, her theorization of archives based in affect enables our reading of Linda's synesthetic archive as archive.

<sup>25</sup> *Testimony* 75.

<sup>26</sup> Cvetkovich "Drawing" 112.

<sup>27</sup> This representation of a grieving body anticipates chapter four's discussion of the remembering body described by Zits, the narrator of Sherman Alexie's *Flight*.

<sup>28</sup> *Archive of Feelings* 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> *Archive of Feelings* 7. "[T]rauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics" (2003, 7).

<sup>30</sup> Sturken defines a technology of memory "to mean not only materials, objects, and images but the body itself" (12).

<sup>31</sup> *Tangled Memories* 10.

<sup>32</sup> "The End(s) of Race" 1483.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 1484.

<sup>34</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 43.

<sup>35</sup> A rich collection of scholarship on representation and memorialization of the Vietnam War in the U.S. cultural imaginary exists, including work that understands the Vietnam War as a perpetually archived event. See, for example, Sturken, Viet Thanh Nguyen (87-124), and Yen Le Espiritu. See also Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, who concludes her study by arguing that "[t]he association of Vietnamese American literature only with the Viet Nam War is problematic because it obscures the complexities of hybridity, the subjects' postcolonial, refugee, immigrant of color, and transnational experiences, and therefore misses a large part of what is being said and presented in the texts" (132). Building on this scholarship but departing from it in specific ways, I mean to think through Truong's novel as a work of literature rather than reading it as reflecting the historical archive per se.

<sup>36</sup> Harrison and Baron-Cohen 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>38</sup> This juxtaposition is further emphasized by the pagination of the first hardcover edition, with its fortuitous page break immediately after "lock" that disrupts the literal connection between the sound of the key and Leo's entrance.

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<sup>39</sup> While it might be tempting at first to read this as a moment of revelation common in the history of the novel – Linda’s discovery of the “family” she never knew, in the form of the participants in this documentary – *Bitter in the Mouth* disallows this reading by dramatizing Linda’s attempts to reach out to her fellow synesthetes via letter and their complete failure to respond.

<sup>40</sup> “Synaesthesia” 17.

<sup>41</sup> *An Archive of Feelings* 111.

<sup>42</sup> This assessment of historical and biological facts as disconnected from Linda’s subjectivity is echoed in remarkably similar language by *Flight*’s Zits, the light-skinned “unofficial” Indian who does not know his tribe or blood quantum. See chapter four for a fuller discussion of factual insufficiency in Alexie’s novel, and what comes to take its place.

<sup>43</sup> Cytowic 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Race Under Representation” 66.

<sup>45</sup> Lloyd establishes the scope of this conception of human development in another essay, arguing that it is “an end that regulates historical method and evaluation, from the selection and legitimation of archives and sources to the organizing modes of narrative. It bears, moreover, an idea of the human subject which is the product of that narrative and the ideal of the discipline itself – the distinterested subject of modern civil society. The legitimacy of any given historical utterance is proportional to its coherence with the emergence of such a subject” (“Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?” 222).

<sup>46</sup> “Race Under Representation” 65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 71.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>49</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* 7.

<sup>50</sup> “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?” 219.

<sup>51</sup> Diana Taylor maintains that the archive and performance are opposing epistemes, but Linda’s embodied archive yokes archive and performance together at the site of the body. Calling for attention to “the relationship between embodied performance and the production of knowledge” (xviii) as crucial to the study of minority discourse, Taylor nonetheless nearly eradicates the archive in her desire to supplant it with performance. This chapter, rather than arguing that we should elevate one over the other, asks how the archive, understood more broadly than in Taylor’s performance studies framework, is itself enacted through performance. Linda’s synesthetic narrative functions on both of the valences identified by Taylor: those practices or events that are spatially and temporally demarcated as separate from everyday life, and those quotidian negotiations of citizenship, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity that undergird everyday life itself.

<sup>52</sup> *Archive Fever* 8.

<sup>53</sup> “Perception and sensory information in synaesthetic experience” (151-52).

<sup>54</sup> *Terrorist Assemblages* 221.

<sup>55</sup> *Archive Fever* 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> *Archive Fever* 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

## Chapter Three: Adopting National Identity: The Necessary Gestures of Proper Citizen-Subjects

Midway through Chang-rae Lee's novel *A Gesture Life* (1999), protagonist Franklin Hata engages in a telling conversation with two acquaintances regarding the state of race and racism in their small town. When his Indian American friend criticizes the racial politics of Bedley Run, New York, "Good Doc Hata"—neither an actual doctor, nor, as we learn over the course of the novel, a straightforwardly good man—comes to its defense. Renny Bannerjee, ten years into his residence in the small New York suburb, tells Hata he has "had a few displeasing experiences around town in the last few weeks" (134). At first, he characterizes these interactions as merely "annoying comments," but eventually concludes, "It seems everyone has completely forgotten who I am" (134). Old men who haunt the local smoke shop casually mention "the Third World" and expect Renny to respond; mothers at the duck pond look over their strollers at him in suspicion; prominent citizens make offhand remarks about the "direction" in which the town is headed when Renny is in earshot. When Renny's white girlfriend, Liv, accuses him of being overdramatic, he appeals to Hata as a member of another racial minority: "I know you've always been happy here but at least you can partly understand what I'm describing, yes?" (135). Ostensibly of Japanese ethnicity, Hata will, Renny expects, understand the plight of the minoritized figure in white suburban America at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Hata's response is as measured and cautious as we have come to expect from Lee's protagonist by this point in the novel: "I believe I do," he begins. But before Hata can expand on his assessment of Bedley Run's troubled multiculturalism, the car in

which the three are traveling passes Sunny Medical Supply, Hata's former business. Though it was a successful medical supply shop when Hata sold it to retire just three years earlier, the store named after his adopted daughter is now on the verge of bankruptcy. The crucial symbol of Hata's successful engagement with the American Dream, as an immigrant turned entrepreneur and property owner, is fading into obscurity, "its windows hazy and unlighted, with nary a glint of activity" (135). In the shadow of the small business that symbolizes Hata's striving for success and assimilation, he finally elaborates on his answer to Renny's query:

"It's true that at times I have felt somewhat uneasy in certain situations, though probably it was not anyone's fault but my own. You may not agree with this, Renny, but I've always believed that the predominant burden is mine, if it is a question of feeling at home in a place. Why should it be another's? How can it? So I do what is necessary in being complimentary, as a citizen and colleague and partner. This is almost never too onerous. If people say things, I try not to listen. In the end, I have learned I must make whatever peace and solace of my own."  
(135)

Here, Hata takes the "burden" of "feeling at home" in small-town U.S.A. upon himself as a relative newcomer, though he has resided in Bedley Run for thirty years. Something he has "always" believed, this obligation extends backward to the years before his current habitation. Peace and solace, presumably markers of a life unmarred by prejudice and discrimination, are the responsibility of the individual, who "makes" them on his own. Yet the necessarily relational status Hata would downplay in this formulation nonetheless demands certain actions on his part, notably that he be "complimentary." He understands

himself as a colleague and partner (gesturing to the labor and social regimes of life), but before anything else he is a citizen—a term that indexes his inhabiting of a particular town and the legal recognition of his subjecthood by and to a nation.

I begin with this passage because it exemplifies the deep imbrication the novel stages among citizenship, multiculturalism, and property, and because it hints at the way failure in one of these arenas necessitates a kind of failure in the others, at least under the conception of life as an Asian immigrant that Hata understands himself to be living. It is a life of propriety and property, a life lived according to the dictates of “ought” and “should” that, despite Hata’s assertion to the contrary, *are* almost always too onerous, in the sense that they cannot be sustained indefinitely. The novel invites us to situate the United States within a global context as we come to realize that Hata’s U.S. citizenship is being played out against a failed citizenship elsewhere. In this way, the novel grapples with the premises of formulations like neoliberalism and the model minority, prompting prompts readers to register neoliberal multiculturalism’s global scale and planetary connections through the life of one U.S. immigrant.

This chapter investigates the price propriety requires of racialized U.S. citizens and the way that appropriate multiculturalism coded in neoliberal terms covers over the violence necessary to enact such citizenship. It examines *A Gesture Life* to consider the novel’s example of one man whose desperation to accrue the identity of “abstract and equal subject”—David Eng’s term for the figures who populate a colorblind nation<sup>1</sup>—leads him to a deeply suspect and unsustaining life of gestures, shadows, and ghosts which prove to be the residue of his complicity in wartime violence. I argue the following: first, that Hata’s noted citizenship drive is intimately connected to adoption,

and so it is impossible to understand his desire for national belonging without accounting for his own adoption, as well as his decision to adopt Sunny so as to create a recognized, normative version of family-as-property. I read propriety as an ideological apparatus, the fulcrum upon which both wartime and peacetime subject formation centers and the force that structures the relationship between capitalism and adoption staged in this text.

Second, I suggest that this novel must be understood as a critique of multiculturalism and the violence that multiculturalism covers over in its requisite forgetting of race and consolidation of normative family and property status.<sup>2</sup> Required from a young age to “become” someone else via the colonial apparatus of Imperial Japan, adult Hata believes that accruing property and performing the pedagogical gestures of U.S. citizenship (embodied in the right to property and family) will allow him access to a form of legitimate citizenship hitherto denied him. The novel ultimately suggests the extent to which such a citizenship is borrowed and fragile, and thus attainable (or unattainable) to the racialized other only as shadows and gestures. Finally, I examine the novel’s absent moment of migration—its silence about the details of Hata’s immigration or official citizenship status—in an attempt to unravel the notions of agency that this work posits are available to minoritized subjects under neoliberal multiculturalism.

An economic project and a project of racialization dating from mid-1990s to the present, neoliberal multiculturalism is at once national and global. My introduction discusses in greater depth the ways that neoliberal multiculturalism naturalizes processes of privilege and stigma by overlaying these processes onto longstanding U.S. racial logics. This contemporary economic and racial regime works to “represent a certain set of economic policies as multicultural rights, to portray the equality of the free market as the

most fundamental expression of equality, and to make the diversity of goods, services, and capital flowing across national boundaries stand for the best manifestation of multiculturalism.”<sup>3</sup> Under this regime, the individual as producer and especially as consumer occupies the apex of multiculturalism and is imbued with the freedom to choose the greatest good. In *A Gesture Life*, Hata espouses this flow of capital, as Lee makes him the mouthpiece for neoliberal multiculturalism in conversations with Renny and Liv and in his narration of life as an immigrant. But the novel proceeds to carefully and totally undermine Hata’s stances by gradually revealing their beginnings in violence and their inability to provide Hata the home he seeks. The novel’s hermeneutics encourage readers to make connections between Hata’s circumscribed small-town existence, the ornate philosophies of contemporary life he articulates, and the conspicuously withheld details of his immigration.

The life history Good Doc Hata presents requires us to unravel its non-linear temporality and Hata’s circuitous, ambiguous mode of narration. *A Gesture Life* is the story of a boy from an ethnic Korean family, the Ohs, who is adopted in a state-arranged transaction into a middle-class Japanese family during Japan’s imperial rule. Rechristened Jiro Kurohata, the boy attends school and eventually enlists in the imperial army during World War II, working as a medic at a military outpost in Burma. One of his primary responsibilities is the medical upkeep of a collection of “comfort women,” Koreans forced into sexual slavery to Japanese military officers and servicemen. During his service, Kurohata grows attached to a woman named Kkuteah (his narration generally shortens her name to K) who recognizes him as ethnically Korean and appeals to him to mercy kill her. Jiro refuses, dreaming that she will survive her wartime duties, allowing

them to marry and travel the world together. But after K kills the camp doctor, she is raped and disemboweled by a group of soldiers. The years following World War II constitute a significant absence in the novel, but eventually we learn that Kurohata has changed his name to Franklin Hata, found his way to Bedley Run, and adopted an orphan from Korea whom he names Sunny. Chafing under his strict parenting and lack of demonstrable love, teenage Sunny leaves Bedley Run; at the time the novel opens, Hata and Sunny have been estranged for more than a decade, and he learns from a friend that she is living in a neighboring town with a young son whom Hata has never met.

Scholarship on *A Gesture Life* demonstrates the difficulty of accounting for the breadth and depth of the novel's aesthetico-political investments in the space of a single essay or chapter. Even deeply insightful critics generally limit their focus to either citizenship or adoption—in the first instance, analyzing Hata's pursuit of legitimate citizenship in the context of his relation to K but leaving aside the significance of his American life with Sunny, and in the second, addressing the questions of kinship and racial politics raised by transnational adoption without delving into Hata's precarious citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Much adoption-focused scholarship thoughtfully addresses Sunny's adoption but neglects Hata's own adoptive status and the ways Sunny's adoption is conditioned by Hata's relationship to K and by his understanding of a normative family unit as a precursor to citizenship. In the same vein, citizenship-centered methodologies often read Sunny reductively, as merely another reiteration of K—Hata's straightforward attempt to re-stage his wartime relation to more positive results. In contrast, I suggest that Hata's understanding of adoption intimately conditions his pursuit of citizenship, and so these twin trajectories can only be understood in relation to one another. Most

significantly, no analysis of Lee's novel thus far addresses the work's curious silence on the concrete details of national belonging—the blank spaces where we would expect the story of Hata's immigration to the U.S. or his legal citizenship status to appear.

In the decade and a half since its publication, *A Gesture Life* has been broadly taken up by Asian American studies. Alone or with other novels about Korean immigration, “comfort women,” and adoption, Lee's second novel is the subject of more than a dozen journal articles and book chapters at the time of this writing. The approaches modeled in these essays offer some insight into the novel's significance for Asian American studies, suggesting that critics understand the novel as facilitating discussions about representations of U.S. imperialism and exceptionalism; about modes of assimilation, particularly through the central character's unapologetic aspirations to model-minority status; and about diaspora and transnationalism at the height of their disciplinary cachet.<sup>5</sup> Yet the myriad research questions that converge on *A Gesture Life* are more suggestive of the effects rather than the cause of academic interest in the novel. What prompts Asian Americanists to return repeatedly to this text?

I posit that the prestige and prevalence of *A Gesture Life* in Asian American studies has to do with the way the novel affords us a mode of grappling with the present in the context of the past. In the language of my fourth chapter, this literary text illustrates the ways possible futures that existed in particular moments of the past are no longer available to contemporary subjects, whether to imagine or inhabit.<sup>6</sup> Hata's story spatially and temporally occupies a wide swath of twentieth-century history, in its movement from pre-World War II Imperial Japan to the contemporary United States over the course of his life, which spans nearly three quarters of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, Hata's

history tracks the political history of the United States as a nascent global superpower. Like the U.S., Hata comes to maturity during World War II, and he migrates to the United States just two years before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 dramatically expanded immigration from East and South Asia, a legal precursor to the creation of the strategic political category of “Asian America.” Finally, Hata attempts to establish and embrace a stable, coherent American identity (over and against former global powers like Japan and emerging competitors like the Soviet Union). He lives as a minoritized citizen in the U.S. through the Civil Rights era, the rise of identity politics and the turn to post-identity multiculturalism that plays such a crucial role (as the introduction details) in the hegemonic ascendance of neoliberalism. In this way, Hata as protagonist, narrating in a form that transitions between present day and flashbacks to the past, effectively pulls the entirety of the twentieth century forward into the present moment.

Published in 1999, *A Gesture Life*'s emphasis on the historical continuity between the post-World War II era and the neoliberal present seems prescient. To examine the constitution of the neoliberal subject under economic disparities exacerbated by globalization, to disentangle the indefinite conflation between times of war and times of peace, and to analyze the production of the present requires what Lauren Berlant calls the “historical sense” of “conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment.”<sup>8</sup> This effort at the level of academic discourse and political economy corresponds to the textual project *A Gesture Life* stages—the project of its dissembling narrator. The sense of history suggested by Lee's novel is one also advanced by scholars like Jodi Kim, who investigates the “protracted afterlife” of the Cold War to critique our sense of that

conflict's end. Kim argues that we fail to see how cold war logics and rhetorics are reinscribed in post-9/11 military and domestic efforts like the "War on Terror," an indefinite conflict "waged . . . through explicit comparisons to and as an extension of the Cold War."<sup>9</sup> In order to understand the way "the present" as an epoch is produced and reproduced under neoliberalism, we must attempt both the ambitious historicization modeled by Berlant and the critical continuity advocated by Kim. Lee's novel offers a textual and aesthetic stage from which to grapple with the condition of the neoliberal at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The much-analyzed opening paragraphs of the novel situate Good Doc Hata as a figure of paradoxical visibility and invisibility: finally established after decades of residence as a "familiar sight to the eyes," he is no longer the object of "a lingering or vacant stare" (1)—the first presumably an effect of Hata's racialization, the second referring to the lack of recognition afforded to a stranger. In fact, he tells us, over the course of his Bedley Run life, his longevity and his Japanese name become "both odd and delightful" to his fellow residents, "somehow town-affirming" (2). Hata's description demonstrates a kind of casual and self-congratulatory diversity, as if its multicultural mettle is proven daily by the delight the town takes, collectively and anonymously, in his "odd" name and face. We learn next that Hata chose Bedley Run (then a less prosperous village going by the inauspicious name Bedleyville) based on "a brief slice-of-life article with a picture of a meadow that had been completely cleared for new suburban-style homes" in the newspaper, an article that highlighted the "peaceful pace of life" in the outlying suburb of New York City (2). When Hata first arrives, he tells us, his neighbors made sure to emphasize that he was "not *unwelcome*," though he suspects their motives

were economic, in that he represented a potential “addition to the census and tax base” (3). But eventually the “question of [his] status” evaporates to the multicultural, colorblind “almost nothing” of the present day (4). Even in this early moment, a careful reader detects the traces of unnecessarily weighty protestation.

Initial episodes of intimidation that Hata characterizes as the activities of mischievous boys lessen in frequency as those boys grow into men who often consult him on medical questions when visiting his store. Hata did not expect the “condition of transience” he develops as “a walking case of others’ certitude,” he claims, but it nonetheless becomes increasingly unsettling (21). The novel’s opening pages admit: “I don’t know how or when it happened, or if it is truly happening but I’m sure something is afoot, for I keep stepping outside my house, walking its grounds, peering at the highly angled shape of its roofs, the warm color and time-textured façade, looking at it as though I were doing so for the very first time, when I wondered if I would ever in my life call such a house my home” (22). But though Hata admits a sense of unease in the opening pages, a return to certain early feelings of American Dream-based anxiety, he cannot acknowledge this feeling to Renny or affirm the latter’s impression that the town is undergoing a significant and disturbing change in tenor. For Renny is not satisfied to leave the source of his impressions ambiguous; he does not hesitate to name this shift as racially motivated, as the economically inflected diversity of neoliberal multiculturalism begins to show its seams. “The mood has changed around here,” he tells Hata. “I don’t know if it’s this recession and that people are feeling insecure and threatened . . . The worst part is that I’m beginning to think I should have realized this long ago, and that I’ve been living for years inside an ugly cloud” (135).

Franklin “Doc” Hata is concerned twice over with being the proper subject of the nation, as his pursuit of proper U.S. citizenship unfolds against the backdrop of an earlier failed citizenship. Given up for adoption by his working class Korean family to a middle class Japanese family, Hata strives for the entirety of his early life to be the proper Japanese citizen, defined against what he understands to be Korean, and then a proper soldier in the imperial army. After his adoption, he successfully “passes” as Japanese—only a superior officer and K seem aware of his Korean ethnicity. Upon immigrating to the U.S. and settling in New York state in 1963, he minimizes any ethnic specificity, a “generic Asian American”<sup>10</sup> in the eyes of his fellow residents who can be neatly incorporated into post-Civil Rights multiculturalism and appear—or so he believes—a non-racialized U.S. citizen. But as tensions arise within multiculturalism’s diversity regime and repressed histories of racism bubble over in *Bedley Run*, Hata’s past returns to haunt him. Thus this chapter investigates what must be covered over or concealed for the figure of the proper citizen-subject to be maintained.

The suppressed violence that I identify as integral to the ways appropriate multicultural citizen-subjects come into being takes two different but related valances, both considered in this chapter. Though he might deny it, Hata is the object of the first kind of violence, to which Renny alludes: the violence of a requisite life of gestures, of the processes of disembodiment and disavowal necessary to produce abstract and equal subjects who can enact the promise of multicultural U.S. citizenship. This violence experienced by Hata is complicated by another form—the violence Hata perpetrates in his pursuit of proper citizenship. In the novel, this second form of violence occurs in two waves, first against a “comfort woman” in his care during his time as a medic in World

War II and then against his adopted daughter Sunny. The escalating scenes of violence to which Hata admits complicity, most notably a series of compelled sexual encounters and a coerced late-term abortion, belie the atmosphere of pastoral contentment conjured in Hata's early descriptions.

As part of a larger project that investigates the workings of propriety and inappropriate responses to these workings in the contemporary United States, this chapter asks, how does propriety become a necessary quality for the creation of the citizen-subject? Propriety, I argue, is an effective mode of regulation precisely because, as an ideological apparatus of neoliberalism, it is self-perpetuating.<sup>11</sup> An aspect of hegemony that works in conjunction with other neoliberal apparatuses, propriety manufactures a civil society that “operates without ‘sanctions’ or compulsory ‘obligations,’ but nevertheless asserts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc.”<sup>12</sup> Once a subject instills in him- or herself the value of appropriateness and its gatekeeping role as a precursor to the privileges of citizenship—recognition, property ownership, enfranchisement, stable economic/political/social status—the system closes and its continued functioning becomes nearly automatic. As Hata's life story implies, even episodes of trauma or violence are not necessarily sufficient to unsettle this attachment. Such episodes may even reinforce this attachment, in that coercive violence complements the work of consent-based ideological apparatuses like propriety.<sup>13</sup> More so even than the regulation of bodies or forms discussed in this dissertation's earlier chapters, the production and regulation of appropriate subjects can be passed down from generation to generation (from father to daughter, as we see Hata attempt with Sunny). And yet

propriety is powerful enough to supersede kinship ties, splitting families by framing a rogue member's inappropriateness as a threat to the proper order embodied by everyone else. Propriety's flexibility owes much to its alliance in public discourse with what are perceived as honorable normative values: family, community, faith, moral integrity. Therefore, to discipline oneself and one's family along the lines of propriety can be understood as honorable, aligned with but less maligned in the public imagination as, for example, racial uplift or the politics of respectability.

Citizenship is one of the forms propriety takes, one of the modes by which propriety operates on the lives of those who aspire to appropriateness. To be a citizen is to be a fully enfranchised, recognized subject of the nation. But as seminal work by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Lowe reminds us, to be a racialized citizen in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism entails particular commitments and responsibilities. In the mid-1990s, Berlant identified a shift toward what she terms "the privatization of U.S. citizenship" that corresponded to the rise of Reagan-era economic and culture wars but continues beyond the Reagan presidency.<sup>14</sup> Here "privatization" refers not only to a spatial shift, as the prerequisites for citizenship transitioned from the public sphere to the realm of the private, intimate, and quotidian, but also to the move toward personalized, subjective modes for the measurement of outsider or "minoritized" status. In this "intimate public sphere of the U.S. present tense," citizenship becomes "a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere."<sup>15</sup> It may seem odd that this chapter foregrounds citizenship as one of its central concerns, considering that a primary focus of this analysis is the absence in *A Gesture Life* of any concrete or historical details about Hata's legal

citizenship status. It is also true that this novel unsettles particular conventions of the U.S. immigrant narrative in substantive ways, notably in its extended narration of the global “before” of migration to the United States. Nonetheless, I argue for the centrality of a kind of diffused citizenship to *A Gesture Life* on the foundation Berlant creates when she defines contemporary citizenship as a space “on which diverse political demands can be made,” a status “whose definitions are always in process,” and “an index for appraising domestic national life, and for witnessing the processes of valorization that make different populations differently legitimate socially and under the law.”<sup>16</sup> The question of citizenship is especially trenchant for Asian American subjects, Lisa Lowe argues, in that “the genealogy of the legal exclusion, disenfranchisement, and restricted enfranchisement of Asian immigrants” is in fact “a genealogy of the American institution of citizenship.”<sup>17</sup> Thus to consider Hata as a figure with uncertain access to U.S. citizenship is to consider the larger histories and absences of the institution itself.

In the first half of the novel, Hata positions himself as the perfect embodiment of appropriateness, assessing his own behavior and the behavior of others by this measure. After being welcomed by his new neighbors, Hata “judge[s] the exact scale of what an appropriate response should be,” determining it best to limit his reply to “a gracious and simple note” (44). When he meets Mary Burns, a widowed neighbor with whom he will develop a long-term romantic relationship, he is flattered that she “paid as much attention as she appropriately should” to Hata rather than staring at his racialized features or speaking as if he has not mastered English, as do his other neighbors (49). Years later, when some of his customers remark on Mary’s developing relationship with his adopted daughter Sunny, Hata makes certain to tell his reader, “Of course I always thanked them,

was appropriately pleased” (56). Here he is not merely pleased as any other parent might be; rather, he actually measures his pleasure against a hypothetical parent to ensure it is not wanting. Appropriate behavior—the delicate decorum that will gratify his fellow citizens and maintain normative relations—becomes a central facet of Hata’s character.<sup>18</sup>

This concern for propriety and for discerning and meeting the expectations of others pervades even Hata’s first-person storytelling: his pride in ownership takes the traditional routes of home and business, as discussed later in this chapter, but ownership for Lee’s protagonist also appears to be a mode of aesthetic practice. Always concerned with enacting “the polite duty of a host or proprietor” (13), Hata’s opening descriptions establish him as a narrator-proprietor, inviting readers into the confines of the narrative he has thoughtfully constructed and cultivated. This is reflexive storytelling: Lee writes Hata as a figure who pays attention to certain kinds of details, a characteristic that further illustrates his exemplary neoliberal subjectivity. As in Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*, it is the racial or ethnic outsider who can best tell a family and village story, and best decipher the unwritten codes of propriety. Even as Hata muses upon the welcome he felt from the town, he references the burden storytelling exerts upon him as a storyteller: “I have long felt that I ought to place my energies toward the reckoning of what stands in the here and now, especially given my ever-dwindling years, and so this is what I shall do” (5).

Though he appears as a self-reflexive narrator, in certain moments Hata’s narration registers the paradoxical nature of his own attachments, as Lee reminds his readers that what we want to believe about ourselves (or imagine about our relations to the material world, in Althusser’s terms) conditions our perceptions. In a conversation with a police officer friend regarding their shared outlook on life, Hata reveals (making a

pun on “outlook”) that he is no longer sure of what he sees when he “looks out”: “if it’s real or of my own making or something in between, a widely shared fantasy of what we wish life to be and, therefore, have contrived to create. Or perhaps more to the point, what ought we see, for best sustenance and contentment and sense of purpose to our days?” (80). Though he couples these sentiments with the amplifying phrase “more to the point,” they actually express two disquietingly different epistemological orientations. The first references the commonality of shared vision necessary for citizenship in the world: the way that what “we wish life to be” intimately conditions the world we observe and in which we find ourselves, the way that contrived creation of life is a task shared by those around us who evince similar attachments to a kind of good life. But this incisive investigation of the investments that condition our “outlook”—that structure not only how we understand the world but, on a more individual level, what we see each time we stop to observe this world—is checked by Hata’s attention to propriety. In the same moment that he approaches the question of the “realness” of the good life to which he is attached, his psychological investments (obscured even to himself) turn his attention back to the possibility that there is something we “ought” to see. This passage articulates the belief that such appropriate vision will sustain us, providing a generic sense of purpose and an abstract, unattributable contentment. It illustrates a central flaw of neoliberalism, the belief that consumption and the market can solve everything, including our inability to define (not to mention, possess) the good life.

Hata’s pervasive pursuit of sustenance and contentment is underscored by the novel’s title, taken from teenage Sunny’s charge to her adoptive father that he lives a life of gestures rather than substance. In this way, *A Gesture Life* foregrounds the delicate and

tenuous nature of agency and connects it to questions of visibility and abstraction. What precisely Hata pursues via his life of gestures is helpfully elucidated by David Eng's work on the way race appears as disappearing in the U.S. context at the turn of the twenty-first century. A mode of knowing Eng calls "the logic of colorblindness" has taken hold in the ostensibly postidentity politics of the past two decades. This logic asserts the triumphant success of diversity and multiculturalism to claim that "racial difference has given way to an abstract U.S. community of individualism and merit"<sup>19</sup>—precisely the kind of community Hata describes to Renny and the reader, firmly believing the fitness of his place in it. Under the politics of colorblindness demanded by this logic, race as an identity construction and system of measurement fades away. This diminishing of race is not merely an inevitable conclusion but in fact a desired and necessary component of postidentitarian thinking. It is this "abstract and equal" citizenship that Hata so assiduously pursues in a recurring pattern of upward mobility, as suggested by the novel's many levels of "the erasure of difference in the abstraction of representation."<sup>20</sup> Time and time again, Hata forgoes the specificity of race and culture in pursuit of an abstraction he believes will guarantee equality.

Yet Lee's novel intimates the cost of this relentless orientation to an impossible subject position, for this life of appropriate multicultural citizenship comes at a cost. When Hata inquires into teenage Sunny's sexual activities, she responds angrily: "all you care about is your reputation in this snotty, shitty town, and how I might hurt it" (95). After Hata dismisses this claim as nonsense, Sunny responds pointedly:

"all I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-

talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You're always having to be the ideal partner and colleague... You know what I overheard down at the card shop? How nice it is to have such a 'good Charlie' to organize the garbage and sidewalk-cleaning schedule. That's what they really think of you. It's become your job to be the number-one citizen.” (95)

Distilling the essence of Hata's identity to his ownership of property, signified most clearly by their large house and his store, Sunny lists the roles that accrue to his life of gestures: partner, colleague, citizen. They are the same terms that Hata resurrects proudly in his conversation with Renny and Liv about life in Bedley Run, the same roles that have led him to believe he can establish a home in this place. Hata's response to Sunny's charge once more activates the question of adopted citizenship that concerns this chapter: “And why not? Firstly, I am Japanese! And then what is so awful about being amenable and liked?” (95). Here, he essentializes his amenability, aligning it with a national and racial identity that we later learn is one he has adopted, consciously eliding the remnants of his racial and cultural heritage. Sunny's reference to “good Charlie” reminds us of the depth of racial anxiety in Hata's pursuit of propriety, just as his U.S. citizenship is always performed in relation to his early life in “twilight” as an ethnic Korean in Japan.

Sunny's characterization of Hata's life as one of gestures is echoed much later in the novel, in a flashback to his time as a member of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. Explaining why Hata will never make a good surgeon, his supervisor Captain Ono asserts that, in Hata's life, “too much depend[s] upon generous fate and gesture. There is no internal possession, no embodiment” (266). Perhaps surprisingly, the

Captain does not attribute this weakness to Hata's Korean parentage, mentioning, in what might be understood as a precursor to liberal colorblindness, "It's for the weak and lame-minded to focus on such things. Blood is only so useful, or hindering" (266). Rather, the Captain identifies this lack as something intrinsic and individual to the man himself, a position Hata's emphasis on individual responsibility suggests he has internalized. If we accept the Captain's assessment, a life of gesture is explicitly contrasted with "internal possession" and "embodiment," traits that would convince a soldier like the Captain of Hata's fortitude. We see in this exchange, and in Hata's impassioned claim to Japanese identity while arguing with Sunny, that Hata has been interpellated as a subject long before he ever arrives in the U.S. This initial hailing does not prevent but in fact facilitates his incorporation into U.S. multiculturalism, as these processes are complementary rather than dichotomous. When aligned with Sunny's eerily similar understanding of Hata's life in the United States, the two conversations suggest that to live a life of gestures is to pursue a position of "number-one citizen" that is, curiously and conversely, a life of disembodiment: the citizenly gestures that define Hata fade him even further into abstraction.

Though he only once uses the term "gesture" to describe his life, Hata's narration as he grows increasingly forthright with his readers echoes the parameters established by Sunny's accusation. Expressing congratulations to Renny and Liv on their engagement late in the text, Hata thinks, "I feel I have not really been living anywhere or anytime, not for the future and not in the past and not at all of-the-moment, but rather in the lonely dream of an oblivion, the nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next, which is really the most bloodless marking-out, automatic and involuntary" (320-21). His life is

bloodlessly disembodied; rather than internal possession, his actions and the passage of time are governed by a system that is both automated and outside of his control. Hata seems to be coming to a kind of realization, in these final chapters, about the deterioration that attends the life of gestures and the diffused agency it entails. This question of agency conditions Hata's desire for a feeling of proper citizenship, most notably through his accrual of property and family-as-property in pursuit of the good life.

### **Modes of Proper Citizenship: Adoption**

Sunny's accusations about Hata's dependence upon and cultivation of two sites—the house and store—establish a two-fold foundation for our understanding of Lee's novel. First, the familiar sites of work and home are places of intimacy and routine, where the life of citizenship is acted and reactivated on a quotidian basis. Secondly, in Hata's case as an entrepreneur, both places are sites of property that signify ownership, the good life, and prosperity. In fact, family itself functions as a particular subset of property: to create and maintain a stable family structure is a form of ownership. We see this most clearly in a scene where Hata, attempting to contact an adult Sunny after a long period of estrangement, fantasizes about an alternate future in which Bedley Run in general and his store in particular had continued to be economically successful. A vital, thriving store, this version of Sunny Medical Supply would have been, for him and Sunny as his heir, “a place to leave each night and glance back upon and feel sure it would contain us” (205). But Hata goes on to make explicit how the store (and his investment in its success) signifies only the latest step in a life oriented toward the creation of such a containing space: “For isn't this what I've attempted for most all of my life, from entering the regular school with my Japanese parents when I was a boy, to enlisting

myself in what should have been a glorious war, and then settling in this country and in a most respectable town, isn't this my long folly, my continuous failure?" (205). His Japanese adoption and education, his voluntary wartime service, his immigration to the suburban U.S.—all are precursors to the establishment of his own small business and his adoption of Sunny, whose name he takes for his store. Like Hata, Sunny is the product of an adoption designed to officially elevate a child deemed racially inferior to middle-class prosperity.

At the levels of academic discourse and political economy, I suggest that it might be generative for Asian American studies and U.S. ethnic studies more broadly to take up *adoption* as a trope for minoritized citizenship in the U.S. Adoption is intimate, even familial, yet it registers the complexities of race, gender and migration that attend to ethnic subjects. Adoption as presented in *A Gesture Life* productively indexes the questions of agency and the violence of consent considered in this chapter. In this way, adoption illuminates the nexus of official and unofficial relations inherent in propriety and reminds us of the ideological apparatus's scope and power. Yet it might also facilitate a rethinking of concepts of "assimilation" or "incorporation" as they have been theorized in the past five decades as modes of minoritized citizenship, particularly with regard to Asian Americans, a group that since the 1960s has been widely presented as a "model minority" over and against other minoritized groups.<sup>21</sup> These loaded terms have a tendency to uncritically restage the assessments of authenticity to which minoritized citizens and minority cultural productions have too long been subjected, first in the culture wars of the post-Civil Rights era and then during the rise of institutionalized multiculturalism.<sup>22</sup> What if instead of the conventional tropes of assimilation and

incorporation, burdened with legacies of model minority ideologies and intraethnic conflict, we considered adoption as a mode of understanding the complex ways subjects choose and are chosen to be national citizens?

This is not to overlook the ways that adoption-as-citizenship might just as easily facilitate the reproduction of a sense of “native” citizenship as a more genuine form of belonging in comparison to the figure of the adopted citizen. It is true that contemporary adoption discourse still battles with implicit hierarchies that distinguish between biological and adopted children, and so to adopt this trope might strengthen the hierarchies of U.S. citizenship that already fall too readily along racial lines. Nonetheless, to press this concept even further to conceive of adoption as a model of citizenship for marked *and* unmarked U.S. subjects more broadly might unsettle such pervasive biological essentialism, in that to choose—to be chosen—foregrounds bonds of agency and attachment in place of blood or biology.

Conceptualized in this way, adoption clarifies the role of the family in determining and modeling citizenship. David Palumbo-Liu’s recent work on literature’s function as a delivery system for otherness emphasizes the ways the family structure conditions the development of the subject. He writes, “in these microcommunal spaces we are formed and act as subjects: ‘family values’ are persistently alluded to for . . . the assumed transience they evoke between two scales of social organization—what goes on the family is a smaller version of our national sense of belonging.”<sup>23</sup> Even if it is merely a product of “assumed transience,” this correlation between the family as microcosm and the nation as macrocosm suggestively situates adoption and citizenship in conversation. In this sense, then, adoption is a term that registers the affective valences of

multicultural citizenship—the expected love for adopted country and the resolute attachments adoptive citizens are pressed to evince.

I posit in this chapter that the life of the appropriate multicultural citizen is defined by what Berlant has termed “cruel optimism,” which exists “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”<sup>24</sup> Attachment to fantasies of the good life—fantasies that became increasingly less achievable under the ascendance of neoliberalism—prompt contemporary subjects to make political, economic, and social choices that fall on a spectrum between counterintuitive, unproductive, and overtly destructive. Such attachments are a mode of capitalism’s reproduction that is related, though not identical, to the good life promised to a young Jiro Kurohata as a colonial subject. Optimism under this formulation refers not to a positive feeling but to an underlying, sometimes automatic orientation to future prosperity or pleasure, the negotiation of encounters and choices that evinces a kind of hope. Citizenship attachments demonstrate a particular form of cruel optimism, Berlant argues: “Much contemporary theory defines citizenship as an amalgam of the legal and commercial activity of states and business and individual acts of participation and consumption,” she writes, “but . . . in its formal and informal senses of social belonging, [it] is also an affective state where attachments that matter take shape.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Berlant’s work and my concern here includes those activities, performances and encounters that not only encompass the formal, legal ramifications of citizenship but also reveal what citizenship *feels* like—what it feels like to pursue the version of the good life tied up in this legal, commercial, and social identity. To understand U.S. minoritized citizenship as

an adoptive relation is to recover structures of feeling that are elided by terms like assimilation.

Hata's belief in the correlation between family and nation is made clear with respect to his own adoption; such a correlation is implied as well in his efforts to procure a child. The circumstances of Hata's adoption by a Japanese middle-class family are disclosed in the course of an early conversation when K, the "comfort woman" to whom Hata becomes attached, challenges him to admit his Korean ancestry. Although his familiarity with the Korean language leads K to identify him as Korean, Hata denies it, first outright and then with the fact of imperialism: "I have lived in Japan since I was born" (234). She reveals her Korean name to him and presses him to reveal his own, which he refuses to do. At this point, the narrative digresses to note that even his birth family rarely used his Korean name; his parents, "it must be said, wished as much as I that I become wholly and thoroughly Japanese. They had of course agreed to give me up to the office of the children's authority, which in turn placed me with the family Kurohata, and the day the administrator came for me was the last time I heard their tanners' raspy voices, and their birth-name for me" (235-6).<sup>26</sup> Hata's story announces that his adoption is initiated formally at the level of colonial authority, which demands that parents "agree" to the relocation and re-education of their children far from the Korean ghettos of the Japanese imperial project.<sup>27</sup>

Hata narrates his adoption as the true beginning of his life, the moment when he "first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relation between a self and his society. There is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating" (72). Analyzing this claim, Anne Anlin Cheng

suggests that “[w]hat is startling about this confession is not the insight that assimilation for a disenfranchised person can provide material advantages but rather its revelation into the unseen, ontological dividends afforded by such assimilation . . . the reward for ‘fitting in’ promises nothing less than personhood itself.”<sup>28</sup> Yet Kandice Chuh observes that the novel as a whole resists Hata’s description of a seamless social personhood, modeling instead the “lurching, sometimes irascible processes of subject formation that directly undermines the unilateral seamlessness of the immigration narratives forwarded by U.S. nationalism.”<sup>29</sup> Understood in this way, the novel’s portrayal of subjecthood stages not only the ineluctable appeal and rewards of the good life of citizenship, but at the same time the impossibility of such a culmination—even in the official yet intimate context of adoptive relation.

Just as Hata’s U.S. citizenship is enacted upon the screen of his Japanese identity, so his own adoption provides a foundation from which we should understand his decision to adopt Sunny. Hata’s desire for a child is even more complex than the confluence of empire, class, and ethnicity that contributes to his adoption. Nonetheless, key elements of Hata’s state-initiated adoption follow him in his immigration to the United States—a migration that is presumably self-initiated, though the novel confirms nothing about this process. Situated, as we eventually learn, in the context of K’s violent death and her haunting of his Japanese and U.S. existence, Sunny is meant to be a revision, an erasure of the past. Yet she is also the figure Hata hopes will facilitate his full incorporation into appropriate twentieth-century U.S. citizenship, an incorporation begun by his successful assimilation as a multicultural subject.<sup>30</sup> The novel offers his role as primary citizen as first enabled and then threatened by Sunny’s public appearance and disappearance.

Hata and Sunny discuss the circumstances of her adoption near the novel's end, while visiting Renny in the hospital after he experiences a heart attack, during a tentative rapprochement. The revelations—that Sunny was not “put up for adoption” but in fact abandoned at what she describes as a kind of “halfway house”—come in the context of her rejection of the careful life of property and ownership that Hata has gathered around himself. Revealing that she shares her son's dislike of hospitals, Sunny discloses, “That's why I didn't like being around the store, either . . . All those depressing devices. Before I came to you they had me in a place like this [hospital], but much worse, of course” (335). When Hata finds himself speaking to Sunny in the same “lawyerly and justifying way” he knows he used during her childhood, he attempts to soften his approach, “suddenly” admitting, “You probably wish you had never had to come live with me” (335). Sunny allows that she once felt that way, and then cuts to the heart of Hata's constructed multicultural identity: “I thought this even when I was very young, why you would ever want a child, me or anyone else. You seemed to prefer being alone, in the house you so carefully set up, your yard and your pool. You could have married someone nice, like Mary Burns. You could have had an instant, solid family, in your fine neighborhood, in your fine town. But you didn't. You just had me. And I always wondered why” (335).

As it re-enacts and revises Hata's own adoption by his Japanese family, Sunny's adoption underscores the novel's concern with the modes of citizenship available to minoritized subjects. In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng studies what he terms “queer liberalism,” the selective incorporation of LGBT subjects into U.S. national identity on the basis of homonormative attachments and aspirations. Such subjects, once stigmatized, transition into the realm of privilege on the basis of three factors: economic

empowerment, the forgetting of race, and the construction of recognizable family units. Eng elucidates the role of transnational adoption in this emergence of queer subjects of privilege, describing it as “a practice in which infants are entangled in transnational flows of human capital . . . a post-World War II phenomenon associated with American liberalism, post-war prosperity, and Cold War politics.”<sup>31</sup> In the past two decades, Eng notes, the practice has gained popularity as a method for “(re)consolidat[ing] conventional structures of family and kinship” available not only to heterosexual couples but increasingly to homosexual couples and people who are single.<sup>32</sup> As it facilitates the construction of recognizable family units, transnational adoption also serves as a contemporary example of overt racial forgetting, as the racialized adoptee is incorporated into the white American family.<sup>33</sup> Sunny the transnational adoptee indeed functions as a figure of value, “a special kind of property straddling both subjecthood and objecthood, both capital and labor.”<sup>34</sup> But Sunny’s adoption, I argue, is also a process that ultimately prevents such racial forgetting, as the surprise appearance of her differently racialized body complicates her adoptive father’s quest to attain a position of privilege despite his status as a minoritized citizen.

Hata’s impulse to adopt makes sense in light of the constraints of modern U.S. citizenship; certainly “the possession of a child, whether biological or adopted, has today become the sign of guarantee both for family and for full and robust citizenship, for being a fully realized political, economic, and social subject in American life.”<sup>35</sup> His aspiration to the traditional ideals associated with the nuclear family demonstrates a desire for social respectability and value, of which family life is the primary indicator. While it is true that Hata’s desire to adopt is motivated in part by his feelings of guilt over K, it is significant

that he looks to replace K not with a substitute wife but with a child. His impulse to adopt centers on the fact of his own adoption, which he suggests was not the work of a single family (the Kurohatas are only mentioned briefly) but a nation—the “purposeful society” that rears him. His hopes for Sunny seem focused on the marked improvement in her economic status such an adoption would provide: “My Sunny, I thought, would . . . [n]ot be so thankful or beholden to me, necessarily, but at least she’d be somewhat appreciative of the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of the orphanage—the best of which can be only so happy—to an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America, with a hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means” (73). Yet, as we shall see, Sunny’s race is not “like-enough,” and the “necessarily” that qualifies his expectations for Sunny’s beholdenness reminds us of the disingenuous tenor of so much of Hata’s reflection: he may not formally require such submission and gratitude (if such a thing were possible), but he certainly expects it.

Hata’s pursuit of a child who will confer respectability and normativity upon him as head of a family unit is motivated by his desire for recognition as an appropriate citizen-subject. Yet the details of that quest, we learn, violate those same principles of appropriateness. Seeking to procure a daughter through adoption, Hata encounters policies that prevent single men from adopting. Nonetheless, he pursues and obtains a face-to-face interview where he bribes the agency representative with a large donation to the agency and a gift for the woman herself. He explains the latter gesture to the recipient as “a most proper gift in [his] former homeland” but admits to his reader, “This wasn’t actually proper, however” and attributes his lapse in propriety to “desire for a child so paramount as to cloud my good judgment” (73). As that episode suggests, the road to

propriety paved by an adopted child will not be smooth. Hata's relationship to Sunny disrupts the affective norms of adoption discourse, as Mary Burns observes when she suggests that the obligation Hata feels toward Sunny is unnatural and ought to be reversed.<sup>36</sup> As Sunny is to be "both the beneficiary of Hata's success and the token of it,"<sup>37</sup> she occupies an untenable position of multicultural transracial adoptee who is meant to bridge past, present, and future. Hamilton Carroll argues:

Caught between Hata's desire to rewrite his past and his need to constitute himself as an American citizen, Sunny is both a daughter who solidifies his patriarchal (and paternal) presence and an *abstractable* figure of purity who 'needs' protecting from the ills of society and through whom Hata can assimilate to the order logics of US cultural nationalism. For Hata, Sunny is to be both a body he can police and a litmus test of the success of his own assimilation.<sup>38</sup>

Yet Sunny's abstractability—her very blankness on which Hata means to write and solidify his position as an abstract and equal subject—is compromised by the evidence of her specific racial minoritization.

Hata's narration makes clear that he hopes an Asian daughter will enable the project of eliding or forgetting his racialization that he enacted by settling in Bedley Run. After being notified by the adoption agency that no Japanese children are available, Hata lowers his expectations to accept any child of "like-enough race," relaxing his racial parameters in the face of "harmony and balance," the "unitary bond of a daughter and father" of which he speaks to the agency representative. This attitude lasts only as long as his first introduction to Sunny, "a skinny, jointy young girl, with thick, wavy black hair and dark-hued skin" (204). Hata is disappointed: "the agency had promised a child from a

hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family who had gone down on their luck” (204)—a family like his own, an adoption like his own that will transform the child into a Japanese(-American) subject. Such a child, Hata believes, would have helped him “make [his] own family, and if by necessity the single-parent kind then at least one that would soon be well reputed and happily known, the Hatas of Bedley Run” (204). The fantasy he describes here is of a family defined by its communal citizenship: “colleagues and associates and neighbors, though knowing her to be adopted, would have little trouble quickly accepting [their] being of a single kind and blood.” Such a fantasy, it is important to recognize, is based in knowledge of Bedley Run’s rudimentary understanding of racialization: community members do not recognize the nuances in distinguishing difference but rely instead upon “like enough.” Nevertheless, Hata’s dream of a Japanese(-enough) family is disrupted by the “less dignified circumstance[s]” of Sunny’s likely origins as the child of an African-American GI and a Korean prostitute. In fact, “her hair, her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her” (204).<sup>39</sup> Sze Wei Ang’s work on Hata as a model minority figure emphasizes his difficulty with negotiating racialized bodies, noting his “anxieties over the body and how raced bodies appear in the landscape of the United States” and the fact that “Sunny’s body constantly breaks into Hata’s repressions of the very idea of race” while “her absence allows him to resolve that dissonance back into beliefs about citizenship qua individual propriety.”<sup>40</sup> But this understanding of Hata’s racial forgetting as “repression” is imprecise, or at least it does not function at the level of individual belief; his statements reveal that he has simply accepted the promise of racial

forgetting first extended by his state-sponsored Japanese adoption and then re-articulated by U.S. multiculturalism in a post-Civil Rights era.

### **Modes of Proper Citizenship: Ownership**

In many cases, the good life offered to minoritized citizen-subjects is presented as accessible via “the proper life that capitalism offers”—of employment, even entrepreneurship, and a nuclear family to welcome the worker home at the end of labor.<sup>41</sup> Though capitalism would occlude the functions of race in the work and home spaces, the process Eng terms “the racialization of intimacy” situates kinship and family as the new space for the management of race, racism, and property in the United States now that racial discourse in the public domain is circumscribed by doctrines of colorblindness and multiculturalism. His study usefully outlines the relationship between property and citizenship under neoliberal multiculturalism to argue that “under the neoliberal mandates of the ‘ownership’ society, political and economic rights—citizenship and property—are increasingly conflated.”<sup>42</sup> The inevitable result of this conflation is that problems of a political nature are widely understood to have economic solutions: universal human ideals like emancipation and equality are narrowed and narrowed still further until they encompass only the ability to possess, to own, and to work.

It is worth noting that Berlant cautions scholars mapping the contours of neoliberalism and global capitalism to be measured in the critique of this desire for the proper life as imagined and enabled via capitalist enterprise. The “fantasy of being deserving” of the good life is deeply related to “practices of intimacy” that take place at home, at work, and as a consumer. She encourages us to see normativity “as something other than a synonym for privilege . . . as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent

cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging.”<sup>43</sup> Even in the moment that we identify the desire for proper citizenship as an attachment of cruel optimism—one not generally available to minoritized subjects and that actually prevents the instantiation of other possible versions of the good life—we must be cautious of minimizing normativity’s appeal for minoritized subjects. Berlant asks, what can we learn about the desire for normativity when we stop equating it with privilege?

In *A Gesture Life*, this conflation of citizenship and property centers on Hata’s reputation as a genial and successful businessman, as well as on his possession of a highly desirable home. He has built a reputation as “Good Doc Hata,” the proprietor of a medical supply store who sweeps the sidewalk, regularly updates his display window, and freely dispenses medical advice to his patrons. As the novel opens, Hata laments somewhat blandly that the New York City couple who purchased Sunny Medical Supply in its entirety have let the storefront get “weatherworn,” the sign’s gold-leaf lettering “now quite chipped and dull” (5). Indeed, the storefront display is three years old, the final arrangement Hata created before selling the store. In the hopelessly outdated Easter scene assembled to attractively present “bedpans and insulin kits,” we can read a metaphor for the life Hata has constructed and now narratively confronts. His efforts at creating “a window that is almost pleasing to look at” (5) have been invalidated by neglect and disrepair, as the display has been plundered of saleable items that have yet to be replaced. The once carefully cultivated window is, Hata is forced to admit, “a sad sight for the eyes. Everything’s been ruined by time and light” (6).

Still in control of his home, Hata has allowed no such decay to creep in. In fact, his friendship with Liv Crawford, a real estate agent, is based in large part on her breezy, aggressive manner toward him as a potential client. She compliments his landscaping, sends him gift baskets, and arrives at his door without an appointment, hopeful homebuyers squeezed into her convertible and eager for a glimpse of the interior. Hata reflects on the satisfaction of ownership in the silence that settles following his disagreement with Renny about the racial tensions of Bedley Run:

Liv is perfectly right in describing to Renny what store of happy goods I possess, my house and property being the crown pieces. And though it does occur to me as somewhat unfortunate that this should be so strictly true, I cannot help but feel blessed that I have as much as I do, even if it is in the form of box hedge and brick and paving stone. There is, I think, a most simple majesty in this, that in regarding one's own house or car or boat one can discover the discretionary pleasures of ownership—not at all conspicuous or competitive—and thus have another way of seeing the shape of one's life, how it has transformed and, with any luck, multiplied and grown. (137)

Hata's philosophy, then, is to read the course of his life in the accumulation of goods—not, if we take him at his word, in a rapacious or competitive way, but in a sense of the intangible being made tangible. His language here, in describing his home and the land it sits upon as “crown pieces” and the sense of accomplishment as “simple majesty,” is aspirational, reaching for nobility and implying a kind of honor that possession confers. The possibility of racial tension raised by Renny's objections, of the gradual collapse of the premises of multiculturalism, threatens this.

It is significant, then, that the most overt threat to the well-tended state of Hata's property comes from Hata himself. Early in the novel, Hata uncharacteristically determines to start a fire to warm himself after a regular swim in his backyard pool. An absentminded arranging of kindling progresses to the impulse to burn "the decades-old files and papers and other expired and useless documents" related to the upkeep of the house that Hata has assiduously and, he finds, needlessly compiled (24). Feeding canceled checks, mortgage paperwork, and bank documents into the fire to keep it steady, he finds himself attracted to the "purity in the startling heat, its crave and intent" (25). Finally, he burns a set of insurance photographs, a visual record of the store and its inventory, of home improvement renovations and a lifetime of car ownership, "the catalog of my life, my being's fill of good fortune" that speaks to the centrality of ownership and (self-)improvement that guides his days (25). Distracted by memories of Sunny, Hata does not notice as the fire burns out of control, escaping the constraints of the fireplace and putting Hata in the hospital with smoke inhalation.

In light of Hata's long-term economic prosperity, it might at first feel counterintuitive to classify his attachments to entrepreneurship, property, and family as ones of cruel optimism—as fantasies that impede his flourishing. Such attachments are the very stuff of the American Dream, "[a] popular form of political optimism [that] fuses private fortune with that of the nation."<sup>44</sup> Certainly a central characteristic of cruel optimism is its tendency to register most powerfully precisely in moments like the past two decades when such economic goals prove especially difficult to achieve. But *A Gesture Life* tells the story of how even a most appropriate minoritized subject who pursues the good life via the proper life of capitalism still encounters fundamental

impediments to his flourishing that are structurally yoked to the shape of his attachments. In Hata's case, such impediments include a counterintuitive and unvoiced impulse to destroy the material proofs of economic success; a sense of obligation to an adopted daughter as atonement for past crimes that results only in mutual distance and disdain; and a literal haunting of the site of one's family pride by the figure of past shame and death. The external threat of multiculturalism's failure is coupled by the internal possibility that manifestations of cruel optimism—the actions that characterize a life of gestures—might undermine the life of propriety Hata works to establish and propagate.

Property ownership structures Hata's understanding of his obligations to his community. He is connected to his neighbors not, as some are to each other, by carpools or holiday parties, but by "an unwritten covenant of conduct" that "governs" all (44). Riding home in Liv's car from the hospital after the house fire, he is struck again by his affinity for his adopted home town: "I know again why I favor it so much here, how I esteem the hush of this suburban foliage in every season, the surprising naturalness of its studied, human plan, how the privying hills and vales and dead-end lanes make one feel this indeed is the good and decent living, a cloister for those of us who are modest and unspecial" (130). The forethought, planning, and structure necessary to create a cloister of normativity reach their fullest potential in this suburb, manifested in an appealing and artificial sense of naturalness. No mere "unspecial" resident, however, Hata serves a crucial role for the imagined community of Bedley Run, a role he can rarely acknowledge, even to himself. He tells us in the first paragraphs of the text that his Japanese surname is "somehow town-affirming" (2), but it is not until we have experienced flashbacks to his time in World War II and his struggle to adopt and raise

Sunny (culminating in her departure) that he “aw[akes] to the notion” that he is “perfectly suited” to the town—that he “had steadily become, oddly and unofficially, its primary citizen, the living, breathing expression of what people here wanted—privacy and decorum and the quietude of hard-earned privilege” (275).<sup>45</sup> What he has characterized as “an almost Oriental veneration” in the opening paragraphs of his narration is revealed not as the abstraction and equality of prominent citizenship, but tokenism. Significantly, the fact of his fitness to serve as the town’s primary citizen occurs to him only “during Sunny’s absence” (275), which suggests that her presence provides not the normative respectability of family (or, more darkly, the opportunity to revisit and revise past mistakes) but in fact a visible, racialized reminder of war, imperialism, and difference.

### **Wartime Agency and the Adopted Subject**

As the scene in which Hata meets Sunny makes clear, he immediately recognizes Sunny as a racialized subject, but his story gives no hint that he recognizes himself as such. The “self-evident” facts of race he reads in the hair and skin of his adopted daughter find no correlation in any physical description of himself. There is no question that the Japanese-ification begun by colonial authorities in the moment of his adoption is anything but a complete success—no question, that is, except those raised by his wartime encounters with K. Eng argues that rights conferred by transnational adoption are “ghosted” by queer and diasporic subjects who remain outside the adoptive citizenship machine.<sup>46</sup> Drawing upon and extending Eng’s analysis, I want to consider the ways Lee’s novel literalizes this process, by envisioning Sunny’s adoption and her estrangement from Hata to be ghosted by the figure of K. Examining the Lt. Jiro Kurohata’s relationship with K will help us understand the connection the novel

illuminates between adoption and violence.<sup>47</sup> In the same moment that Sunny embodies Hata's hope for a kind of redemption, her presence compromises Hata's attempts to forget his past violent actions. Thus the stakes of Sunny's adoption encompass more than the simple happiness of an abandoned Korean-American girl and her reticent, distant father: Hata apparently intends Sunny to provide a second chance to form a meaningful, non-coerced relationship with a woman.

Later sections of the novel locate Hata's obsession with propriety to a time and space that precedes his setting foot on American soil. Once Hata begins the slow narrative process of divulging his wartime complicity in the Japanese military machine, particularly in the maintenance of the "comfort women" conscripted into service, readers can see Hata as narrator strain to contextualize his interactions with the comfort women in relation to propriety. After Captain Ono informs Lieutenant Kurohata that he will be responsible for maintaining the "readiness" of these enslaved prostitutes, he thinks to himself, "As I was the paramedical officer—field-trained but not formally educated—it would be more than appropriate for me to handle their care" (166). The captain expects fighting to resume soon, and his attention will be required elsewhere; thus "maintaining the readiness of the girls" falls to Hata. The implication, Hata tells us here, is that their state of relative good health is bound to decline once they are subject to regular visits from officers and enlisted men. This is, essentially, a promotion for Hata, one he attempts to justify as "more than appropriate" given his training and readiness for the "difficult challenges" of propping up women increasingly abused, mistreated and used up in the course of performing their function.

Further details of Hata's wartime experience emerge in the midst of his attempt to contextualize his fears of teenage Sunny's vulnerability. In a flashback to 1944, Hata remembers the camp's low morale due to the death of Admiral Yamamoto, the increasing frequency of Allied bombers, and a general lack of supplies. Two hundred soldiers live under "a deepening atmosphere of malaise and fear" that manifests itself, to medic Kurohata, in the prevalence of skin rashes and infections such that "the whole encampment [seems] afflicted" (158). Against these and other psychological manifestations of anxiety, Hata sets himself as the emissary of protocol, reminding a young Corporal Endo that "it is our way of life we're struggling for, and so it behooves each one of us to carry himself with dignity, in whatever he does" (162). But Hata's bracing words do not prevent Endo from developing an obsession with the "comfort women" newly introduced to camp; ultimately, the corporal kills one of the Korean woman and is executed. Following these deaths, Hata fears his own susceptibility to the malaise, worrying that to succumb would result in a failure of obligation that would be, like Endo's murder of the woman, "not one of ego or self but of an obligation public and total—and one resulting in the burdening of the entire society of his peers" (229). Ever the proper soldier and citizen, Hata realizes that this fear is not specific to wartime but has actually been present all his life, "from the day I was adopted by the family Kurohata to my induction into the Imperial Army to even the grand opening of Sunny Medical Supply, through the initial hours of which I was nearly paralyzed with the dread of dishonoring my fellow merchants" (229). And so his striving in Bedley Run results in the creation of "Good Doc Hata," the kind and knowledgeable Japanese medical man who becomes the town's primary citizen.

Yet no matter how he would deny it, as the novel progresses Hata's fear of dishonor crystallizes around the figures of the "comfort women" he has been assigned to care for—especially the woman he refers to as K.<sup>48</sup> She represents the Korean identity from which he has exiled himself, and the dream of a future from which he has absented himself.<sup>49</sup> As his attachment to K deepens, Hata schemes how to shield her from the caprice of Captain Ono and the violence of the comfort house but nonetheless engineers two coercive sexual encounters between them. Finally, he refuses her central request: that he kill her, as Corporal Endo killed her sister, and save her from the life ahead. Eventually K takes matters into her own hands, killing the captain and ensuring her own brutal death. Hata's failure to acquiesce to K's only request becomes, we realize, the central obsession of his life, the crime which he covers over again and again, only to have K reappear in his dreams.

*A Gesture Life* suggests the lengths propriety must go to in order to cover over its origins in and continuing relation to violence. Hata's concern with a kind of medicalized propriety becomes more evident as the novel progresses further into his army experience. Significantly, these concerns are often articulated in nationalist and even racial terms, as essentially Japanese traits that Hata identifies and then claims for and about himself. He invokes the Japanese sense of self-respect, glossing the term as having "little to do with pride or one's rights but with the efforts a person should make to be viewed well by his comrades" (237). Self-respect does not, then, refer to one's respect for oneself, except in the sense that one could not respect oneself if the respect of one's colleagues were lacking. In fact, a primary source of Hata's discomfort with his assignment to care for the "comfort women" in general and for K, set aside for the Captain's mysterious and

particular purpose, is that there is “no protocol [he] could pattern [him]self by” (233).

Finally he determines a kind of pseudo-protocol, that his “care” of the “comfort women” will be conducted with the same intent as care of the average soldier: to return the individual to a state from which his or her duties can once again be performed.

Delineating the standards of “appropriate” care in a later section, Hata characterizes army policies as natural and binding: “as the doctor had already pointed out to me, it was a matter of standards, in this case to apply the level of treatment that was most appropriate for the situation, and for whom . . . All this was inviolable, like any set of natural laws” (227). Here, Hata’s description registers the ways attention to appropriateness serves a pernicious function—distinguishing between who merits treatment, and how much, and for what purpose. The natural law of wartime medical propriety enables and maintains a hierarchy of value of persons.

Though perhaps more evident in times of conflict, the necessary violence of such a hierarchy attends the workings of propriety in civilian life as surely as it does in wartime. Hata is painfully aware of the harsh edges and subtleties of hierarchy from an early age, living under Japanese colonialism. Leaving behind his community of “hide tanners and renderers,” ethnic Koreans who “spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight,” Hata takes the name and station of a childless Japanese couple (72). His relation to his adoptive parents is respectful but distant. Though he claims to “think of them most warmly,” as he does his biological parents, he maintains that he was raised and formed in the most fundamental sense not by either family but by the nation—that “purposeful society . . . and really nothing and no one else” (73). Hata’s painful consciousness, from an early age, of the stigma of life lived in “twilight” joins with his

nationally-orchestrated adoption to consolidate his reliance on received knowledge and his veneration for wealth, education, and position. He resolves at age twelve that he will “always give [him]self over to [society’s] vigilance, entrusting to its care everything [he] could know or ever hope for” (73).

Hata writes of his military service in terms that consistently register his adoption and national identity. His training as a medic prepares him “to aid and sustain my comrades, to save them whenever possible, fulfilling my duty for Nation and Emperor”; he finds himself hopeful that battle would manifest his “truest mettle,” his “essential, inner spirit” and the “worthiness of raising [him] away from the lowly quarters of [his] kin” (120). For Hata, the nation is thus constituted through adoption, colonialism and war. The novel’s first reference to Hata’s wartime experiences comes after his house fire, as his interaction with a young Bedley Run candy striper leads him to contemplate his solitary status and the difficulties attendant to raising a child. In this moment, Hata claims to understand himself best in a solitary state (unlike those who understand themselves in relation to family or community), and contrasts his solitary present-day self with the communal self of the war: “there was a time when I held my own associations quite close to who I was, in the years leading up to and during the Pacific war, when in the course of events one naturally accepted the wartime culture of shared sacrifice and military codes of conduct. But then I eventually relinquished those ties for the relative freedoms of everyday, civilian life, and then finally decided to leave Japan altogether, for the relative—though very different—liberties of America” (68). But readers of this passage who continue through the novel realize the disingenuous basis on which such claims rest,

as Hata attempts to demonstrate that he has left behind an emphasis on codes of conduct in favor of freedoms and liberties that such codes might constrict.<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, this brief and ambiguous passage contains the novel's only reference to the "lost years" of Hata's life—the time between K's brutal, gruesome death at the hands of two dozen Japanese soldiers and his careful construction of home, business, and family in Bedley Run. Thus this short, obscure assessment of that period merits further examination. To begin, what does Hata mean when he claims, "I held my own associations quite close to who I was"? Earlier in that paragraph, Hata has suggested that "a surprising number of people prefer to imagine themselves through a filter of associations and links" (68), and so "associations" seems to reference the relationships and affiliations that structure an interior sense of self. This passage acknowledges the centrality of affiliation, most crucially to an adopted nation, in young Jiro Kurohata's identity construction. The "natural" acceptance of a "wartime culture of shared sacrifice and military codes of conduct" became, Hata suggests, the foundation upon which his subject formation proceeded, with a sense of national loyalty and military propriety (reinforced, of course, by military justice) superseding all. Hata's description here attempts to engage a kind of agency—he "relinquishe[s]" such ties, "eventually," experiencing civilian life in Japan before the United States. What is most striking about this passage is the extreme language of qualification on a grammatical level: though he once "naturally" accepted wartime culture, he "eventually" leaves the military for the "relative" freedom of civilian existence, before "finally" emigrating from Japan in search of other "relative" (though different) civilian freedoms.

The uncertainty that surrounds this period of Hata's life is most central, for the project of this chapter, in relation to what Kandice Chuh briefly identifies as the novel's refusal "to offer origins, genetic or geographic, as the grounds for conceptualizing identity."<sup>51</sup> As Chuh suggests, "Adoption itself metaphorically subordinates the importance of origins to identity . . . And none of the other characters peopling this world have distinctly identifiable births, either literal or metaphoric."<sup>52</sup> She explains this aesthetic choice as a demonstration of the novel's commitment to the circumstantiality of knowledge. But I want to rest for a moment in this question of the novel's notable absences, to consider not only what the lack of origins leaves open but also to explicate the kind of citizenship that such absences theorize. In doing so, I hope to rectify what I identify as the most significant lack in existing criticism of this novel.

It is important to consider the historical specificity of Franklin Hata's Asian immigrant status, particularly in light of Lisa Lowe's foundational work on the ways legal genealogies of Asian immigrants constitute the meaning of U.S. citizenship more broadly. If, as Lowe argues, "the life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the U.S. state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies, through the enfranchisements denied or extended . . . and through the process of naturalization and citizenship,"<sup>53</sup> why leave such details of Hata's life experience outside the parameters of *A Gesture Life*? Lowe's work suggests a possible answer, as she argues that "being represented as a citizen within the political sphere" requires that "the subject [be] 'split off' from the unrepresentable histories of situated embodiment that contradict the abstract form of citizenship" by which individuals are established as formally and legally equivalent.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the

process of transforming an *alien* into a *citizen* concretizes a disavowal of racialized capitalism, sidestepping bodies defined by race and labor in the pursuit of the freedom that citizenship is understood to confer.

If, as Lowe suggests, to be politically represented as an abstract and equal citizen requires a kind of violent, ahistorical disembodiment—the disfigurement Brian Glavey identifies that accompanies public representation discussed in chapter one—perhaps *A Gesture Life* works to resist a similar trajectory at the level of aesthetic representation. The “contemporary modes through which the liberal state discriminates, surveys, and produces immigrant identities”<sup>55</sup>—the binary designations of legal and illegal, citizen and non-citizen, and native-born and permanent resident—cannot gain traction in the case of this novel, which refuses to articulate the trajectory and history of such designations in the life of its main character. At the level of the text and the political economy, *A Gesture Life* leaves open the details of Hata’s migration from Japan as well as the question of his status in the eyes of the U.S. government. This decision redirects our focus away from the details of a legally inflected subjecthood to the questions of imperialism, family and adoption the text foregrounds instead. Such a decision also relentlessly begins and ends the question of agency not with the kind of agential citizenship conferred by the nation-state but rather with the relational agency of a single man.

What does agency mean, at the complicated nexus of imperialism, nationalism, and racism created in *A Gesture Life*? Looking back on the scene of the captain’s death, Hata as narrator claims, “All I wished for was to be part (if but a millionth) of the massing, and that I pass through with something more than a life of gestures. And yet, I see now, I was in fact a critical part of events . . . Indeed the horror of it was how central

we were, how ingenuously and not we comprised the larger processes, feeding ourselves and one another to the all-consuming engine of the war” (299). The shift from the singular “I” to the plural “we” suggests a kind of grammatical distancing. Even so, this passage raises a key question about the balance between participation and responsibility, about the relationship between what passes for a life of gestures and deep moral complicity.

This passage ultimately suggests a question of agency deeply rooted in adoptive identity. In her discussion of this novel, Anne Anlin Cheng critiques formations of the ethics of recognition that are founded on liberal subject-centered notions of agency because they cannot account for moments when questions of consent and choice are compromised by minoritization. For example, Cheng suggests that the ways imperial discourse designates “comfort women” as “volunteers” calls into question Hata’s own “choice” to enlist in the Japanese Imperial Army, along with the ways we define agency for minoritized subjects more generally.<sup>56</sup> To answer the questions *A Gesture Life* raises about the privilege of choice during crises of consent, Cheng suggests a triangular relationship of Lacanian visibility that would account for not only a subject and an object but also the gaze, “an agent without agency” that “serves precisely as a critique of our agency, our illusion of subjective and visual mastery.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast, I suggest that the center of Hata’s agency or lack thereof rests not (or not only) in the question of visibility with which Cheng frames her study but rather with the question of attachment and how it complicates our understanding of agency. Berlant’s careful theorization of “lateral agency”—agency that we often do not recognize as agency because it does not articulate to our vision of the sovereign liberal subject—requires that we expand our notions of how

agency might appear or what it might accomplish outside the context of cognitive will: “Most of what we do, after all, involves not being purposive but inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself . . . [Such moments] can be seen as interrupting the liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionality, and effective will.”<sup>58</sup> In this sense, then, adjacent agencies are “a relief, a reprieve, not a repair”<sup>59</sup>—efforts that perhaps do not fully undermine the destructive attachments of cruel optimism but that might prevent the politico-aesthetic forms of capitalism from running quite so smoothly.

Hata’s description of his own life considered earlier—a “nothing-of nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next . . . the most bloodless marking-out, automatic and involuntary”—suggestively frames a life of gestures as a life without what we would conventionally identify as agency. Understood in this way, Hata’s pursuit of an appropriate multicultural citizenship precludes the kind of sovereignty we associate with the citizen-subject. But as Berlant reminds us, “Sovereignty, after all, is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimizing . . . But it is inadequate for talking about agency outside . . . acts in proximity to certain performances of law, like executions and pardons.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, sovereignty is not an actual state but an aspirational orientation. It allows individuals and institutions to perform as sovereigns and feel in control of their actions—a desire that manifests the twin valences of physical and psychic violence this chapter traces, suggesting that Hata focuses on his own guilt because it is a recognizable form of agency. We can see Hata’s self-legitimizing performativity in the figure of “Good Doc Hata” that he presents to his fellow citizens and his audience of readers, and in his affective sense of

control in the “lawyerly” way he speaks to his adopted daughter. He must perform control of Sunny because such performances satisfy his need to feel power over his own life. In this sense, the conventional understanding of sovereignty that forms the foundation for so much political and social critique is not illuminating but occluding—it gets in our way. In order to understand the form of agency that Hata enacts—not, notably, the one he imagines himself enacting—we need a different formulation.

As much as Hata works to divorce his Bedley Run existence from the horrors he experiences and participates in during the war, his later emphasis on property and prosperity is dependent upon, and indeed framed by, the violence of war. A shocking transition between the end of chapter nine and the beginning of chapter ten underscores this most poignantly. After Corporal Endo, the unstable officer Hata has been mentoring, takes K’s sister into the forest and executes her before the commencement of her duties as a “comfort woman,” Endo is charged with treason (not murder) and sentenced to death. The description of both deaths is delicate and beautiful in its horror: her blood pools beneath her body, “the dry red earth turned a rich hue of brown” (188), while Endo cannot bring himself to commit ritual suicide on demand and so is beheaded, after which “his headless body pitched forward lightly, his delicate hands oddly outstretched, as if to break his fall” (189). Swiftly and terribly, these two figures are dispatched with no description of Hata’s reaction to their deaths. Immediately the next chapter returns us to the present, the monotonous propriety of Bedley Run:

On any Saturday morning in the Village of Bedley Run, one can see everywhere the prosperity and spirit and subtle industry of its citizens. There are the running, double-parked cars in front of Sammy’s Bagel Nook, where inside the store

middle-aged fathers line up along the foggy glass case of salads and schmears . . .  
the as-if-competing pairs of lady walkers, neon-headbanded and sweat-suited . . .  
the well-dressed young families, many with prams . . . all over the village is the  
bracing air of insistence, this lifting breeze of accomplishment, and whether the  
people are happy or not in their lives, they have learned to keep steadily moving,  
moving all the time. (190-91)

Quotidian, hard-working, wealthy, the citizenry of Hata's adopted town and the banal normalcy of their weekend routines follows the images of death. Insistence, accomplishment, and most of all motion provide the atmosphere in which these individuals and families strive and acquire. But this quotidian scene is ghosted for Hata's readers by the abrupt killings of Endo and the Korean woman, implying a strange and serious relationship between the scene of the past and the scene of the present that remains uncommented upon by our genteel narrator.

After teenage Sunny returns to Bedley Run in the final stages of a pregnancy, Hata daydreams of ways to resolve their tortured relationship, imagining unbuckling his seatbelt and allowing the car to slide heavily into a stone wall bordering a sharp turn in the roadway. "If only once," he thinks in the midst of the flashback, "I could cease imagining the various motions, and instead of conjurings and dummy musings that leave one subtly affected, take hold of some moment and fully acquit myself to it, whether decently or ignobly" (340). Hata's dream here is that his agency would, for once, manifest itself as suitable for a sovereign subject: that he would act in such a way as to determine for himself his freedom or demise. Nonetheless, even in his fantasy, Hata's agency is undermined. His actions are those of inaction: he would refrain from guiding

the car through the turn and submit to the hurtling forward of inertia and its inevitable consequences.

When his agency does assert itself in ways we might recognize as sovereign, it destructively impinges on the sovereignty of others. Hata's desire for agency, that he would "cease imagining the various motions" and *act*, "whether decently or ignobly," finds its opportunity when his journey with a pregnant and unseatbelted Sunny reaches its termination: a local abortion clinic. Just a few days after Hata makes "several discrete contacts" following a panicked phone call about what he terms "her difficulty," Sunny arrives from New York City much further along in her pregnancy than Hata expected (339, 338). The morning of her appointment for a requisite preliminary examination, Sunny tells Hata "she wasn't sure anymore about going ahead"; in reply, he dissembles, reminding her that the first appointment is only an exam, not the procedure (341). When the doctor refuses to perform the abortion, Hata intimates that his decision will send Sunny to someone less skilled, where she will "no doubt suffer terrible injuries" (342). Reviving the adoption agency bribe by which Sunny was first procured, Hata suggests that the complications of such an operation might make it "much more costly than usual" but that he is "willing to do everything [he] can" to obtain the doctor's assistance (343). Soothing the doctor's concerns that Sunny herself seems "unsure" and that his nurse will not agree to assist in the procedure, Hata volunteers himself: "I'll stand in for her . . . I was trained, once, in surgical methods and nursing. A long time ago, during the world war" (343). Once the doctor reluctantly agrees, Hata presents his final request: "that she [Sunny] be heavily sedated . . . so that she wouldn't realize I was there, or much remember anything of what was done" (344). If Sunny were to ask in the present day,

Hata states that he would not admit his role in the abortion, that he would “have to lie” (345), a need he attributes to the extreme difficulty of the late-term procedure and the persistence of his memories: “what I saw that evening at the clinic endures, remaining unaltered, preserved” (345).

Here the violence upon which appropriate multiculturalism is necessarily built comes to the forefront. This violence is not only the violence of minoritized subjectivity as it seeks to conform to the requirements of multiculturalism—the “nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next . . . automatic and involuntary” (320-21)—but physical violence enacted upon the coerced body of a pregnant woman. Hata’s desire to obtain Sunny’s abortion is explicitly coded in terms of his community-based shame: his first thought, when she emerges from the train, is that “it was a Sunday and quiet, when there was hardly anyone about . . . I ought to spirit her to the private clinic and to Dr. Anastasia as quickly as possible” (339). Though he resists this impulse, driving them home instead to await the appointed hour, Hata becomes obsessed with the physicality of Sunny’s pregnancy; in the fullness of her body he sees “a most sickening vision . . . the clearest picture of my defeats, familial and otherwise” (341). His determination to eradicate evidence of these defeats, by violent means if necessary, suggests the underlying violence by which propriety ensures its continued hegemony.

### **Conclusion**

Late in the novel, we learn that Hata has been regularly visited by the specter of K in his thirty years in Bedley Run. Her final visitation comes near the end of the text, and this time her presence, Hata asserts, is “absolutely, unquestionably real, a once-personhood come wholly into being” (286).<sup>61</sup> She asks, “Will we be going away soon,

Lieutenant?" (287). With her question, K lays claim to a promise made by a young medic to a "comfort woman" who requested that he end her life: the promise that they would travel the world together after the war's end. Tersely, present-day Hata answers K's request with an appeal to the pleasure of ownership and established personhood which anchors him: "We have an impressive house and property in the best town in the area, where we are happily known and respected. We have ample time and quiet and means. I have tried as hard as I can to provide these things, and we have been welcomed as warmly as anyone can expect. Everything is in delicate harmony" (287). But K understands their mutual situation quite differently: the "delicate harmony" constructed and maintained by Hata's life of gestures has in fact prevented K, once again, from dying and leaving Hata alone. The trappings of economic prosperity are literally a "penultimate trap of living, sustaining her beyond the pale" (287). History is being repeated, as Hata's cautious and appropriate execution of his responsibilities to care for K prevent him from acquiescing to her central request—that he allow her to die.

K's resistance to Hata's framework of home and property makes him realize that her question is not new. It is, rather, "a daily conversation we have . . . we have gone over this ground before, and before" (287). And it ends, on this night like all the others, with K's fatigued acceptance of Hata's refusal. After she joins him in bed, he falls asleep satisfied that K will remain with him, but wakes alone and steps outside, anxious for a trace of her: "When I looked back across the precious, stately landscape of my property, it seemed I had traveled far miles to the place I was standing, as if I had gone round and round the earth in an endless junket, the broad lawn a continent, the pool a whole ocean, the house the darkened museum of a one-man civilization, whose latent history, if I could

so will it, would be left always unspoken, unsung” (289). Here the ultimate expanse opened up by ownership is revealed: the bounded spaces of Hata’s property become a continent, an ocean, a one-man civilization of its very own that guarantees citizenship for its monarch and sole subject, even as it binds the ghostly spirit in whose honor it has been constructed.

In the dark light of dawn, Hata returns to his house and draws a bath for himself in the bathroom once assigned to Sunny. The scalding water makes him feel as if his flesh were dissolving, enacting “the sensation of near-perfect lightness, of being in a place and not being there”—the “chronic condition” of Hata’s entire life, he admits (289-90). In this disembodied state that unites presence and absence, Hata wishes for “erasure.” But this is a wish that calls up once again the specter of what he ought to do, think, feel:

a man like me *should* be craving every last bit and tatter of his memory. He *should* consider the character of all his times whether pleasurable or tragic or sad. He *should* at last appreciate the serendipity and circumstance and ironical mien of events, and their often necessary befalling. He *should*, some god willing, take firm hold of all these and call himself among the fortunate, that he should have survived such riches of experience, and consider himself made over again for it, gently refitted for his slow stroll to the edge. But all I seem to think of doing is to stop, or turn around, or else dig in for a sprint, a stiffened, perambling, old-man leap off the precipice. And if I could just clear the first jutting ledges and simply free-fall, enjoy the briefest flying, I should be very thankful indeed. (290-91, emphasis mine)

It is significant that appropriateness here refers to the story a person will tell himself about the past, about the necessity of events, about his good fortune. Here, for the first time in the novel, Hata acknowledges the “should” of expectation but does not force his inclinations into direct alignment with it. Unlike the narration that has come before, where expressions of brief dissent or allusions to emotions or events that might disrupt the life of propriety he has built are quickly stifled by a re-articulation of duty, obligation, and proper action, in this scene Hata allows himself to dream inappropriately.

But only for a moment. “[P]erhaps rightly, there is none of that for me,” the narrative resumes, transporting us back to the final day of K’s life, revealing Hata’s sexual desire for her, its violent culmination, her request once again that he kill her, and finally the utter violence of the demise she orchestrates. Reviewing the events of that day, Hata realizes that what K most hoped to escape was not just “the ever-imminent misery and horror” of her enforced role but in fact the desperate weakness Hata displays, as “someone heroic enough to act only upon his own trembling desire” (295). Seeking out the site of K’s slaughter, Hata gathers her remains and the figure of her unborn fetus, ripped from her body, claiming, “I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part” (305). Once again the next chapter returns us to the idyll of Bedley Run: an outing to the town pool with Sunny’s son, Thomas, which turns threatening when Thomas disappears in the water and Renny experiences a heart attack. And then the final revelation: that Hata not only orchestrated a late term abortion for Sunny after she returned to Bedley Run, but that he in fact assisted the doctor in performing the procedure. Here the sense of what is proper is out of joint:

[I]f in my life I've witnessed the most terrible of things, if I've seen what no decent being should ever look upon and have to hold in close remembrance, perhaps it means I should be left to the cold device of history, my likeness festooning the ramparts of every house and town and district of man.

But it is not. And I do not live in broad infamy, nor hide from righteous pursuers or seekers of the truth. I do not mask my face or screen my doings of each day. I have not yet been banished from this earth. And though nearly every soul I've closely known has come to some dread or grave misfortune, I instead persist, with warmth and privilege accruing to me unabated, ever securing my good station here, the last place I will belong. (345-46)

Propriety demands his humiliation, his dissociation. The forces of decency would transfer Hata's personhood from contemporary life to the domain of history, adopting his face as a warning in a reinvention of the black flag that is his namesake. Propriety is revealed, in these final pages, to be not a path to citizenship but in fact that force that would demand Hata's destruction. And it is only by escaping the regime of propriety, through a loophole this passage cannot identify, that Hata's "fortune" and "good stations" remain intact.

Ultimately, the novel ends with Hata reinforcing the way personhood (as he puts it, "to be") is enacted via the complication that is family: his adopted mixed-race daughter and her fatherless son, conceived in circumstances outside Hata's knowledge. It is an "unpredictable, richly evolving" form of subjectivity, which occupies a void that nothing else can fill: "For what else but this sort of complication will prove my actually having been here, or there? What else will mark me, besides the never-to-be-known annals of the rest?" (334). In these final pages, family and house are finally disentangled,

the one proof of his existence, the other a site that must be left behind, because it is there that “warmth and privilege accrue[es] to [him] unabated” (345).

Only in the context of these observations can Hata discern what is false about his home and property, that with all its “double steeples and bluish leaded panes, and the crossed beaming of the stuccoed Tudor style,” it is in fact “a lovely, standing forgery” (352). He has instructed Liv to generate a bidding war that will fund his final plans: to purchase Sunny Medical Supply back for his daughter and her son, along with the apartments above it; to fund the hospital stay for Patrick Hickey, son of the couple who purchased his store and ran it aground amid their son’s wait for a heart transplant. And finally, to leave, seeking not “destiny or fate” but instead an existence apart: “Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home” (356).

Critics disagree quite strongly about the meaning of these final lines.<sup>62</sup> Certainly the ending registers once again the novel’s preoccupation with time (the gesture to tomorrow), adoption (what does it mean to “come almost home”?), and the flesh, blood and bones of racialized bodies. But these lines must be contextualized in light of the novel’s final flashback, to a conversation in which Hata and Mary Burns part for the last time. Their brief discussion about inheritance is incited by an unpleasant phone call from her daughter, whose eagerness to determine the amount she can expect to receive upon the death of her mother leaves Mary Burns somber. Mary Burns resumes the conversation with Hata the next day while swimming laps in his pool, observing that she imagines

Hata will leave his home and property to Sunny. Hata quickly agrees, but the reality of his complicated relationship with a then-fifteen-year-old Sunny immediately intrudes:

It was then I understood better what had upset Mary Burns about her daughter's phone call. There is a need for the belief—even if illusory—that despite the ever-obvious evidence of familial messiness and complication, one's child will always hold the most unconditional regard for her parent . . . We wish it somehow pure, this thing, we wish it unmixed, unalloyed with human hope or piety or fear or maybe even love. For we wish it not to be ornate.

And yet it always is. (351)

Hata's use of the term "ornate" initially activates images of elaborate decoration, artfully wrought or perhaps even overwrought. But the adjectival form of "ornate" is also that which is seemly, decorous, and dignified.<sup>63</sup> It is a term more suited to Hata's Tudor-style home than his descriptions of "familial messiness," and yet upon further reflection perhaps "ornate" is the perfect descriptor of Hata's life of gestures. What he ultimately finds himself wishing for—what his decision to sell his home, leave the store to Sunny, and leave Bedley Run behind suggests—is in fact a way out of the seemly, decorous, dignified citizenship he has (perhaps unofficially) established for himself, and the alibi it provides for both the subject and object of the violence of neoliberal multiculturalism.

From the deceptive dignity of a model citizen whose attempts to embody propriety occlude the violence of minoritized citizenship, this dissertation's final chapter moves to two novels that forcefully embody inappropriateness at the level of language and literariness. Presenting the contemporary novel as an open system of textual and paratextual commentary that gathers together past, present and future in a way similar to

*A Gesture Life*'s enfolding of the twentieth century, two works by Sherman Alexie and Junot Díaz theorize the ways historical racialized violence begets present violence. Experimenting with an alternative conception of memory—not Hata's rehearsed repository of individual sins but a mode of knowing that partners with forgetting—these novels present a form of empathetic relationality, grounded in difference, that this project posits as available to subjects of the contemporary postracial moment.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Feeling of Kinship* 5.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lowe has described the ways official multiculturalism “supplements abstract political citizenship where the unrealizability of the political claims to equality become apparent: it is the national cultural form that seeks to unify the diversity of the United States through the integration of differences as *cultural* equivalents abstracted from the domains of racial inequality unresolved in the economic and political domains” (30).

<sup>3</sup> Melamed *Represent and Destroy* 139.

<sup>4</sup> For the former, see Sze Wei Ang, Christopher Lee, Young-Oak Lee, Belinda Kong, Anne Anlin Cheng, and Hamilton Carroll; for the latter, see Jenny Heijun Wills and Mark Jerng.

<sup>5</sup> Belinda Kong argues that *A Gesture Life* “has kept Lee in good pace with critical trends within Asian American studies” (1), extending the trajectory established with his first novel, *Native Speaker* (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Scott 29.

<sup>7</sup> We know that Hata was already a military medic by 1943 because he notes the impact of Admiral Yamamoto's death on camp morale. Assuming he was at least eighteen years old, he would have been born circa 1925.

<sup>8</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ends of Empire* 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ang 125.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser writes that the success of late capitalism depends on a continuous reproduction of the forces and existing relations of production. Thus what must be produced in order for capitalism to continue is not only the skills necessary for labor but at the same time “submission to the rules of the established order” (132)—both the ruling ideology that appears as common sense and the relation individuals understand themselves to occupy to their lived conditions.

<sup>12</sup> Gramsci 242.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Queen* 3. Though Berlant's early work does not explicitly identify the economic overtones indexed for contemporary readers by the term “privatization,” she does register the relationship between intimacy and the economy, describing how this process relies upon “defining the United States as a place where normal intimacy is considered the foundation of the citizen's happiness,” a definition that “attempt[s] to control the ways questions of economic survival are seen as matters of citizenship” (8). In describing the systemic inequalities of wealth, labor and immigration that are covered over by privatized citizenship, her formulation is a precursor for Melamed's understanding of the economic and racial overtones of neoliberal multiculturalism.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> *Immigrant Acts* ix.

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<sup>18</sup> In her study of Hata as the figure of the model minority, Sze Wei Ang has argued that Hata's goal is moral exemplarity that would leave him beyond reproach and in fact free to designate other minoritized figures as "good" or "bad" in turn. Certainly my version of propriety includes this aspect of Hata's character. Yet I take this question further, in that propriety as formulated in this study encompasses not only the register of morality but also an implied political and economic valence.

<sup>19</sup> *The Feeling of Kinship* 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ang 125.

<sup>21</sup> Jinqi Ling's work registers the ways that assimilation is a binary term that is falsely opposed to "nativism," a construction with origins in "the dominant sociology of American nativism, a construction that actively and hegemonically defines the terms of racial minorities' efforts to understand the nature of their displacement in American society" (42).

<sup>22</sup> Asian American cultural production has been read for signs of assimilation since early anthologies like 1974's *Aiiiiieee!*, but reading minoritized texts in this way leads, as Zhou Xiaojing argues, to a critical tendency "to evaluate individual texts and authors according to a predominant formula, that is, according to whether the texts demonstrate complicity with or resistance to hegemonic ideologies of assimilation" (4).

<sup>23</sup> *The Deliverance of Others* 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>26</sup> Unpacking the significance of his decision to shorten his name from Kurohata to Hata, Belinda Kong argues that, "By abridging his Japanese surname, Hata drops the initial K"—which many critics read, in the context of Kkuteah, as a stand in for Korea—"as much as the embedded 'oh' [his Korean surname] in the center of 'Kurohata'" (4).

<sup>27</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng productively suggests that we understand Hata's passing in *A Gesture Life* not (or not only) as a form of self-denial but as an act of insertion into the social field, one that encompasses not only the exceptional but also the quotidian (559). Yet Cheng's continual reference to Hata's status as "passing" as Japanese, while technically true, downplays the official sanction of Hata's Japanese status: he has been adopted *by the state* in a ritual of colonial consolidation.

<sup>28</sup> "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan" 559.

<sup>29</sup> *Imagine Otherwise* 90.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Lee notes that, contrary to what certain scholars have claimed, "Hata's assimilation does not erase his Asian/Japanese identity even though it does resituate it within the terrain of U.S. race relations. In other words, Hata demonstrates that compatibility of his ethnic identity within late-twentieth-century U.S. multiculturalism" (116n25).

<sup>31</sup> *The Feeling of Kinship* 94.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>33</sup> Asian adoptions in particular fuel a certain U.S. national narrative, according to Jenny Heijun Wills, who describes how "adoption from Asia feeds into American nationalism both in terms of its global relations as well as its self-recognition as a democratic, liberal pluralist state" (par. 20). Wills details how such twentieth-century adoptions have often been characterized either as taking responsibility for the unclaimed children of U.S. servicemen abroad, or, more frequently, as welcoming those multiracial children who were marginalized in their homelands' pursuit of racial purity.

<sup>34</sup> Eng *Feeling of Kinship* 102.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>36</sup> Jerng 56.

<sup>37</sup> Carroll 609.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 609, emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> In her examination of adoptive parenthood, Jenny Heijun Wills identifies the ironic paradox of Hata's assessment: as the daughter of an American GI, Sunny's "multiraciality implies that she, unlike Hata, has some kind of biological roots in America" (par. 12).

<sup>40</sup> "The Politics of Victimization and the Model Minority" 130.

<sup>41</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 164.

<sup>42</sup> *The Feeling of Kinship* 23.

<sup>43</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 167.

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<sup>44</sup> Berlant *Queen* 4. “[T]he fantasy of the American Dream...promises that if you invest your energies in work and family-making, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which your labor can gain value and your life can be lived with dignity. It is a story that addresses the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type, a redemptive story pinning its hope on class mobility. Yet this promise is voiced in the language of unconflicted personhood: to be American, in this view, would be to inhabit a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history. For this paradoxical feeling to persist, such that a citizen of the Dream can feel firmly placed in a zone of protected value while on the move in an arc of social mobility, the vulnerability of personal existence to the instability of capitalism and the concretely unequal forms and norms of national life must be suppressed, minimized, or made to seem exceptional, not general to the population.”

<sup>45</sup> Ang notes the revealing nature of this construction, and the subjective compromises it details: “That the town has ‘oddly and unofficially’ recognized him as its ‘primary citizen’ is insignificant so long as he counts as one of its citizens” (131).

<sup>46</sup> *The Feeling of Kinship* 101.

<sup>47</sup> Critics have carefully explicated the relationship between Hata’s desire for citizenship and his wartime activities, but they have not yet accounted for Sunny’s role in this dynamic. Kong argues that Hata is “the perfect servant” to the imperial army, “not simply because he unquestioningly abided by military directives, but because he desired above all that which was denied him as a Korean subject within the Japanese empire: citizenship” (6). Carroll argues that Hata’s relationship with K reveals that the route to citizenship he finds most promising is the route of domesticity: “In both his rape of K and the ambiguous nature of his narration of it, Hata attempts to dissociate himself from his own ethnic origins; in his construction of an imaginary future for Kkuteah, he attempts to inaugurate his citizenship by domesticating her...[he attempts] to orchestrate the production of citizenship through the domestic logic of family” (604).

<sup>48</sup> This assignment is colored from its inception by the question of family honor, in that Captain Ono chooses a black flag as the lieutenant’s signal that K requires attention in honor of his surname, Kurohata, which literally translates “black flag.” Such a flag, Hata tells us, refers to “the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within” (224); the Kurohatas, a family of apothecaries, were not warned away but instead called to any town under that banner. A sign of his military (national) obligation and his adoption, the black flag that marks K’s presence inside the infirmary and the commencement of Hata’s care for her is also, literally, “a signal of spreading death” (224).

<sup>49</sup> A “product of colonialism,” K is a distorted reflection of Hata himself, Kandice Chuh suggests, in that his infatuation with her is the result of his desire to resolve his own contradictory subject positions: comfort woman/Korean and Japanese/abuser. Chuh writes: “By rearing and habitus ‘Japanese’ and yet coded by his ability to understand and speak in Korean as also ‘Korean,’ Hata uncomfortably resides at precisely the point at which these available subject positions collide. That in his memory Hata falls in love with K indicates his desire somehow to resolve these tensions. However, both through K’s rejection of his emotional advances and by showing us her ultimate demise, Lee demonstrates the impossibility of fulfilling that desire” (105).

<sup>50</sup> Belinda Kong notes that the language of welcome and comfort with which Hata characterizes his home in the United States is made suspect as its beginnings in the euphemistic language of war are revealed: “In his text’s proliferation of ‘comfort’ and ‘welcome,’ Asia’s ‘welcoming houses’ (105, 111) start to resonate with the not ‘unwelcoming’ house of America upon Hata’s arrival in 1963 (3-4, 135-36), the ambivalent year of civil rights hope and violence” (7).

<sup>51</sup> *Imagine Otherwise* 102.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>53</sup> *Immigrant Acts* 7

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>56</sup> “Passing, Natural Selection, and Love’s Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan” 560.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 567.

<sup>58</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 116. Berlant’s study emphasizes moments of pleasure as relief or reprieve—her most notable example is the pleasure of fast food consumption. Hata’s “pleasures” (for example, his romantic relationship with Mary Burns) take up very little space in *A Gesture Life*, and they are always subordinated to his social anxieties and private individualism (as the end of that relationship seems to suggest).

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 117.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 97-98.

<sup>61</sup> Scholars of *A Gesture Life* are divided on the significance and material realness of K as late-in-life visitor to Hata's home. Perhaps most intriguingly, Christopher Lee reads the scene of K's return as an exception to the novel's realist materiality, in which her unexplained presence authorizes her as a source of objective truth (102). Though Hata's recourse to narrative establishes and sustains what Lee terms K's "aesthetic afterlife," this recourse to aesthetics obscures the violence of the sexual enslavement that frames their meeting (105). Nonetheless, he understands K's very powerlessness in the historico-political reality of the Imperial Japanese Army as in fact transformed into the power to narrate historical truth—a power withheld from Hata as complicit prevaricator of his life's actions and story (106).

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Lee reads the ending as Hata refusing a future of kinship or community, choosing instead "a future that consists chiefly of the unstoppable movement of time, a future, in other words, that is a function of the novel's linear temporality rather than a product of his agency" (109). Contrasting the final lines with the novel's opening, Mark C. Jerng suggests that "Doc Hata narrates himself as the example of the good, assimilated immigrant whose quest for recognition and belonging has been fulfilled. But this process of assimilation is complicated by the ambivalences of the adoption narrative, captured by the latter phrase, 'come almost home'" (62). In other words, Lee's novel is "resistant to the narrative closures that mark the search narratives and roots narratives of adoption discourse to the very end...forc[ing] us to dwell in the uncomfortable space of being 'almost home'" (63). Anne Anlin Cheng argues that the ending demonstrates Hata's "choice for *active passivity* in the most earnest sense: not the passive aggression that motivated much of Hata's actions in the past...but instead an *active refusal to act any further* in bad faith" (571, emphasis original). Consequently, Cheng suggests that this active refusal results in "a refiguring of the very notion of gesture as the form of desire" (572), an acknowledgement that counteracts Hata's many past acts of blind desire with an act of knowing desire. Chuh emphasizes the way the end of the novel leaves Hata's plans unsettled: "The subject, I, has disappeared altogether in this final sentence, leaving it to read ambiguously as imperative and declaration both. It is a conclusion that is not a closure, the infinity of the circle having replaced the definitude of linear narration" (106).

<sup>63</sup> "ornate, *adj.*" *Oxford English Dictionary*.

## Chapter Four: Making Literary History: The Improper Accounts of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Flight*

At the end of this project—its final chapter—I want to begin with beginnings: the epigraphs of two novels, both published in 2007, which claim the space of the literary as an appropriate space for conducting the business of history. These epigraphs invoke questions of historicism, value, unspeakability, and witness. At the same time, they insert their respective texts—a Native American novel and a Hispanic Caribbean American novel—into particular literary histories, citing the irreverence of postmodern American literature, the galactic scale of comic book science fiction, and the racialized poetics of the Caribbean canon. Attention to these paratextual elements—the thresholds of the novels—reveals how these contemporary works theorize their respective historical projects as situated in a present that is always conditioned by particular pasts and that anticipates a specific form of futurity.<sup>1</sup>

Sherman Alexie's *Flight* takes its epigraph from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), a firsthand account of the firebombing of Dresden that tells the story of a World War II veteran named Billy Pilgrim who becomes "unstuck" in time. The novel's refrain, and *Flight*'s epigraph, is the commentary of a bird who witnesses Pilgrim's time travel, the aftermath of wartime atrocities on Pilgrim's apparently "normal" middle-class American life, and finally the Dresden massacre itself. The bird's response—"Poo-tee-weet?"—ends the novel, dramatizing the essential unspeakability the text ascribes to the bombing by leaving the last word to a bird. Alexie's choice of epigraph indicates that his novel will grapple with questions of historical unspeakability

via the perspective of an unsuitable witness—in the case of *Flight*, a half-Indian foster kid whose mass shooting sparks his own journey through time.<sup>2</sup>

Junot Díaz precedes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with two epigraphs. The first, from a 1966 volume of Stan Lee's *Fantastic Four*, asks, "Of what import are brief, nameless lives. . .to **Galactus**?" The second is an excerpt from the first section of Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner *Flight*" (1980). The speaker, Shabine, ends the epigraph portion of the poem by claiming, "I'm just a red nigger who love the sea, / I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." Together, Díaz's epigraphs establish his novel as involved in a historical project, one that stages two primary concerns. The first is a question of scale and of value—of whether "brief, nameless lives" possess any importance in the face of massive but non-equivalent destructive forces that seem to hold modern life in thrall: neoliberalism, late capitalism more broadly, globalization, poverty, the consolidation of wealth, racism, perpetual war. Value is evoked in the second epigraph by the suggestive linguistic impossibility that "I'm nobody"—that a speaking subject might in some sense possess no recognized subjectivity.

The second historical concern of these epigraphs, Díaz's novel, and this chapter is the paradoxical multiplicity of modern subjectivity—the plurality of brief lives that cohere in the face of immense power, and the desperate risk evoked by the gesture to twin poles of being: "either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."<sup>3</sup> Walcott's poem injects these concerns of value and multiplicity with a racial inflection; in other words, it is precisely because the speaker is of mixed race, the poem suggests, that he must be either "nobody" or "a nation." The analytical apparatus that leads him to make such an assessment, his

“sound colonial education,” does not leave space for imagining a sustainable identity independent from the form of the nation. And so the epigraph reminds us of the constitutive nature of race in minority subject formation and neoliberal nation formation. Together, these two epigraphs reconnect race and material conditions by invoking the ways the situated perceiver (in the first case, Galactus; in the second, Shabine) represents the state of being valuable as inextricable from imperial subjectification and racialization. To be recognized as valuable (and worthy of protection) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries requires that subjects achieve a particular racialized legibility to distinguish themselves from the mass of brief, nameless lives that inhabit our global neoliberal present.

As projects of contemporary history by way of the literary, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Flight* adopt the hazards and motivations of their epigraphs. *Oscar Wao* risks the collapsing of scale implied in the invocation of a galactic dismissal of nameless lives and the possibility that some body could be a nation, could contain multitudes. It locates the science fictional universe of the Fantastic Four and the poetic Caribbean as the appropriate sites from which to embark on a history of America and of the “New World” more broadly. (As Oscar asks and the narrator Yunior repeats, “What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (6)). Similarly, the historical literariness of *Flight* sends its narrator-protagonist back in time to witness firsthand the cycles of violence, dispossession and betrayal that thickly condition white-minority relations in the contemporary U.S. Asked how he feels in the midst of his first time-travel episode, a 1970s altercation between Native Americans and the FBI, Zits concludes, “Fucked by time, I think, and fucked by memory” (54).

Analyzing the histories presented in these literary texts, I examine the mutually constitutive dynamic between memory and forgetting that they deploy. In this final chapter, the concerns and critiques of the chapters that precede it are combined and extended: the Marxist-inflected forms of chapter one, the embodied archive of chapter two, and the affective citizenship of chapter three are expanded to the level of the historical archive to consider the relationship between the affective event and modes of historicization. I again invoke the trope of adoption and the related notion of fostering in order to consider ways of living in minoritized relation to the nation-state. Mindful of the different discourses of minoritization in which *Flight* as a Native American text and *Oscar Wao* as a Caribbean American text participate, I suggest that their related but incommensurate efforts to write history in the realm of the literary register the ways that history as literary strategy can be deployed to underwrite and undermine the political regime of neoliberal multiculturalism. Further, I posit that the prevalence of this historico-literary project in work by writers of diverse ethnic and Native literatures illuminates the exigence of projects of inappropriateness as a whole—the way that inappropriateness as an aesthetic mode operates to counter propriety's perceived hegemony.

Though *Oscar Wao* is an irreverent epic and *Flight* is generally characterized as a young adult novel, both works feature adolescent protagonists whose lives are shaped (as Hata's life is shaped in *A Gesture Life*) by multivalent violence: the violence of diaspora and dispossession, of familial and kinship destruction, of conquest and colonialism. Zits, the narrator of *Flight*, and Oscar, the titular protagonist of *Oscar Wao*, share a series of characteristics and interests. Unattractive and largely unloved (even self-loathing), these

characters' alienation cannot only be attributed to racial and ethnic difference. Both teenage boys lack social savvy and instead immerse themselves in the world of media: for Zits, books (especially histories) and television; for Oscar, books (especially science fiction) and role playing games. Each is uncomfortable with his living situation and attuned to the rejection, physical abuse, and hypocrisy enacted by family members, by authority figures (like police officers and psychiatrists) and by the nation-states in which he resides. These tangled characteristics and investments result in the creation of subjectivities that "lie athwart modernity"<sup>4</sup>: neither children nor adults, Zits and Oscar do not embody the possibilities of the future or possess the authority that maturity conveys. Their mutual obsession with genre—whether science fiction and fantasy or the conventions and expectations of genre more broadly—underscores each text's deployment of histories that critique the parameters of "real" (official) history and the seriousness of institutionalized knowledges generally ascribed to history, as is hinted in the epigraphs. Most importantly, these texts foreground character development—physical, mental, emotional—as a way to register and critique history's own developmental teleologies. In each of these novels, Oscar and Zits "grow up" into family, into experienced sexuality, and into a sense of their identity and individual worth. These processes are represented as engaging with but also troubling tidy narratives of human development, whether individual and formal—as in the genre of the *bildungsroman*—or collective and historical—as in the teleology of progress that separates civilized from primitive. In place of any such teleological narratives, *Flight* and *Oscar Wao* present *affective* histories that engage with the historical events, institutions, and norms of neoliberal multiculturalism relationally, emotionally, and imaginatively.

## History and Neoliberalism

To understand how these texts concomitantly trouble history and neoliberalism, we must consider: what does history come to mean under neoliberalism? To paraphrase historian David Scott, how does the demand for a certain kind of (neoliberal) future oblige its histories to produce certain kinds of pasts?<sup>5</sup> A brief analysis of major legislative and judicial decisions of the past two decades reveals how history is deployed in key sectors of public discourse. We see the claims neoliberalism makes upon history at such documentary sites as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which presents a history of “out-of-wedlock” births since 1965 as justification for congressional welfare-to-work “reform.”<sup>6</sup> Such histories are even more significant in jurisprudence, where the role of history intersects with juridical concern for precedent. Appeals to precedent are meant to ensure continuity of outcomes, and yet certain judicial narratives step outside legal precedent to engage with extralegal histories. This process crystalizes, for example, in the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down the section of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (reauthorized by Congress most recently in 2006) requiring federal “pre-clearance” for electoral changes in states and counties known for egregious voter suppression. Authoring the majority opinion and presenting a history of U.S. electoral process dating from the 1870 Fifteenth Amendment, Chief Justice John Roberts suggests that “[n]early 50 years [after the Voting Rights Act], things have changed dramatically,” “in large part *because of* the Voting Rights Act.”<sup>7</sup> As evidence, Roberts specifically cites 1964 and 1965 electoral violence in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and Selma, Alabama, before noting triumphantly that both towns are now governed by African American mayors. “[O]ur Nation has made great strides,” the opinion concludes,

and thus “the conditions that originally justified these measures no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions.”<sup>8</sup>

To frame the significance of history under neoliberalism as the obligation for histories to produce certain pasts is meant to indicate that such production is not total or hegemonic but flexible and dependent. This project has adopted Jodi Melamed’s definition of neoliberalism as “a world-historical configuration of economy, governance, and biological and social life.”<sup>9</sup> In Melamed’s crucial formulation, neoliberalism is “more than just an economic theory”:

it encompasses the entire complex of social, political, and cultural norms and knowledges that organize contemporary regimes of rule and becomes a name for the differentiated experience of citizenship that ensures that governments protect those who are valuable to capital, whether formally citizens or not, and that they render vulnerable those who are not valuable within circuits of capital, whether formally citizens or not.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, neoliberalism is a regime of late capitalism that activates a complex system of epistemological and ontological norms to categorize and motivate contemporary global and national subjects. Like Alexie’s and Díaz’s epigraphs, this definition centralizes questions of value to underline the precarity that accompanies differentiated citizenship.

Under neoliberalism, history comes to mean teleology: moving in a linear fashion from a defined past to a clear present, setting the developmental stage for an anticipated future that can be understood in light of the past. Conceptualized in this way, the histories of the present must stage the failures of the past and explain the successes of the present

as progress. Neoliberal histories naturalize the austere present, producing the present as the rational and inevitable outlay of U.S. nationalism and global capitalism. To do this, such histories must characterize racial, class-based, gender and sexual inequalities as regrettable effects of past political and cultural systems that preceded neoliberalism, as remnants of the past's failures that will be remedied by neoliberalism's emphasis on individual (economic) freedoms.

In particular, neoliberal histories produce the present as an exceptional moment, such that the "crisis ordinariness" (to use Lauren Berlant's term) of perpetual war appears as commonsensical national and global existence.<sup>11</sup> Neoliberal histories perform transparency, offering themselves as comprehensive. As Lisa Lowe says of the work of recovery scholarship, neoliberal histories "supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence" and reproduce "the violence of affirmation and forgetting" in such a way that it does not appear as violence.<sup>12</sup> Thus in asking its histories to render the past entirely knowable, neoliberalism effectively, affectively, asks them to exhaust us—to preemptively render our efforts to register what has been forgotten, the what-could-have-been, unnecessary. In other words, histories that operate to uphold and maintain neoliberalism must convey the sense of a self-evident and comprehensive past in order to disenfranchise other potentially subversive histories.<sup>13</sup>

Under neoliberal multiculturalism, a particular instantiation of neoliberalism assigned to deal with difference, "history" comes to mean a reliable mode of accounting for difference. Melamed defines neoliberal multiculturalism as a dimension of racial formation that creates "new privileged subjects, racializing the beneficiaries of neoliberalism as worthy multicultural citizens and racializing the losers as unworthy and

excludable on the basis of monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other historic-cultural deficiencies.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, multicultural histories stage the failure of old ways of understanding (and valuing) difference, colonizing white supremacy and legalized racism as the purview of a misguided past. Such histories facilitate the collapse of difference—understood as an outmoded form of identity politics no longer useful or necessary in a post-Civil Rights United States—into the regime of difference-as-sameness that goes by the term “diversity.” They dissolve race into “ethnicity” and universalize ethnicity as the possession of every U.S. subject in a nation of immigrants. Finally, under neoliberal multiculturalism, “history” comes to mean a disconnection of race from material conditions, the elevation of individual rather than racially collective positions and freedoms, and the obscuring of economic and racialized systems that discipline minoritized subjects—notably, ideological apparatuses like propriety.

In this vein, inappropriate histories like those narratives I trace in this chapter are histories that fail. Such histories compromise rather than uphold neoliberal ideologies. Of course, neoliberal discourse does not register these failed histories so straightforwardly—they are denigrated instead as improperly subjective or aesthetically compromised; as monocultural or regressive; as shallow or glib.<sup>15</sup> But I use the term “failure” to evoke the ways that such histories call forth the vulnerabilities of neoliberalism. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, a treatise on the circumstances, effects and affects that coalesce around what we mark as failure, Jack Halberstam investigates the “rewards” of failure—the ways it might circumvent business as usual under racialized late capitalism: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the

world.”<sup>16</sup> Halberstam explores how we might find new ways of being in the world not only in relation to political discourse but also academic discourse, which conventionally advocates knowledge, mastery, recovery, and management of the archive as appropriate scholarly aspirations. In response, Halberstam encourages us to “master the art of staying lost” in order to conduct “a detour around ‘proper’ knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> Such an art also, Halberstam’s work suggests, offers a detour around neoliberalism’s pervasive scope, for “failure’s byways are all the spaces in between the superhighways of capital.”<sup>18</sup> Thus failure is an improper affective, discursive, economic and political endeavor.

The histories examined in this project are those that fail to sufficiently encompass the past and make it knowable, that fail to naturalize the present. *Oscar Wao* and *Flight* do not straightforwardly substitute presence for absence; they in fact privilege forgetting as an equal partner to memory. They fail to consign inequality and injustice to the past, to safely cordon off violence and racism from the present. Such histories, produced in literariness, conduct what I term an aesthetic betrayal, in that they resist the identity politics of representation attached to them by academic and cultural discourses. These histories do not merely elevate subjugated knowledges to the status of official knowledge—they blend and negotiate official and unofficial knowledges to illuminate their continual interplay in the lives of formal and informal subjects of the United States.

### **Forgetting in the Present**

My larger project is a history of the present—a history of the ways that propriety functions as an ideological apparatus to discipline U.S. subjects at the turn of the twenty-first century, especially subjects who are re-hierarchized and re-racialized under the terms of racial minoritization.<sup>19</sup> In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant asks after “a historicism

that takes seriously the form or aesthetics of the affective event” to consider what such a historicism “might have to attend to, in relation to the institutions, events, and norms that are already deemed history’s proper evidence.”<sup>20</sup> To write a history (especially one of the historical present) requires attention to institutions, events, and norms—what Berlant calls history’s proper evidence. But what about the affective realm, Berlant’s work asks, and the affective events that occur alongside such events that meet the criteria of proper evidence?

This chapter, then, is about literary histories—temporally situated representations—and propriety as an ideological apparatus that regulates history-telling in our historical present. Riffing on Frederic Jameson’s claim in *The Political Unconscious* that “history is what hurts,” Berlant states: “History hurts, but not only. It also engenders optimism in response to the oppressive presence of what dominates or is taken for granted.”<sup>21</sup> In this context, optimism means a hopeful attachment that can itself be dark (or cruel). Yet to suggest that history can respond to the dominant, the taken-for-granted, with a generative force (what Berlant calls “political emotions”) is to suggest that history possesses the ability to register these elided hegemonic forces in the first place and then to engage them. For this reason, this chapter considers the discerning and generative powers of inappropriate histories. At the level of text, I examine how literary texts perform history: how they formulate historical knowledge and modes of knowing; how they communicate the relationship between past, present, and future; how they support or disrupt narratives of human development. I also interrogate historical knowing at the level of academic discourse, considering how histories like those by Alexie and Díaz impact disciplinary conventions and how our structuring disciplinary expectations

determine the histories we recover and those we work to repress. Finally, at the level of political economy, I ask how disentangling the contemporary processes of neoliberal history-making exposes the vulnerabilities of neoliberal racial formations. When we mark the ways our contemporary present is constituted by experience and expectation—Reinhart Koselleck’s terms for the “present past,” the part of the past incorporated into the present, and the “future made present,” our affective desiring relationship to the not-yet<sup>22</sup>—we can see the contours of alternate futurities that neoliberal histories occlude.

On the surface, both novels under study have met with generally positive critical reception; the inappropriateness I identify does not stem from their place in academic or popular discourse, though each has its critics, too. The *New York Times* characterized *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as “Mario Vargas Llosa meets ‘Star Trek’ meets David Foster Wallace meets Kanye West,” and suggests that it “decisively establishes [Junot Díaz] as one of contemporary fiction’s most distinctive and irresistible new voices.”<sup>23</sup> A *Washington Post* reviewer goes so far as to claim that “Junot Díaz has the cure for [the] woeful myopia” afflicting many Americans who know the Dominican Republic only for its many contributions to Major League Baseball.<sup>24</sup> Implicitly reflecting the concerns with cultural authenticity that attend most (if not all) productions by minoritized writers, a *New York Times* review of *Flight* calls Alexie’s work “raw and vital . . . there isn’t a false word in it”<sup>25</sup>—an assessment that Alexie’s publisher chose to feature on the front cover of the paperback printing. In scholarly criticism, the charges against each seem to rest in the vividness of their broad cultural brushstrokes. While acknowledging the “seminal” role Alexie plays in contemporary American literature as a writer “who complicates simple prescriptions of national identity,” Steven Salaita charges

that “Alexie’s fiction is tacitly reliant on the normative categories he challenges in terms of aesthetics, politics, and marketing.”<sup>26</sup> Elena Machado Sáez describes *Oscar Wao* as “a seductive novel that probably didn’t need the 2008 Pulitzer Prize to endear it to the academy” because “the novel is responsive to the values of an academic readership” in its appealing deployment of hybrid, polyvocal, diasporic identity. Yet Sáez argues that the work presents a narrator, Yunió, who “dictates” the heteronormative terms on which authentic diasporic identity must be enacted.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter presents for comparison two works arising from different, though related, political contexts. In reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* together with *Flight*, I do not wish to collapse diasporic ethnicity and indigeneity into a defanged category of general U.S. racialization—such is, in fact, the very project of neoliberal multiculturalism that this study interrogates. In *When Did Indians Become Straight?* Mark Rifkin cogently articulates what happens when indigeneity is reduced to race or ethnicity: “While the exertion of authority over native peoples certainly has relied on racialization,” he acknowledges, “viewing all ‘subjects of color’ as members of ‘minority cultures’ . . . reinstalls the nation-state as the sole way of framing geopolitical identity rather than acknowledging the existence of competing forms of sovereignty and self-determination.”<sup>28</sup> To understand “Native American” as a racial category is to evacuate native peoples of their status as political entities and characterize their modes of governance and cultural structures as forms outside the realm of proper politics.

Such an evacuation consolidates the nation-state as embodiment, performer and arbiter of proper politics; it is also a crucial tool of neoliberal multiculturalism’s efforts to populate a pluralistic United States with appropriate national and global citizens.

Melamed attributes this orientation to “the multicultural understanding of culture as aesthetics and identity—unmoored from materialism and the natural world” that has particularly and violently impacted indigenous peoples worldwide: “By portraying all the world as the potential property of global multicultural citizens and treating indigenous people as ethnic minorities at best, neoliberal multiculturalism has made the appropriation of indigenous lands, territories, and resources by state governments and corporations appear democratic and fair.”<sup>29</sup> Conventional multicultural discourse treats American Indians as ethnic minorities under the confines of cultural pluralism, Melamed argues, and in doing so undermines the political independence of tribal governance and makes any government-to-government relations between the U.S. and American Indian nations seem counterintuitive.

Native literary criticism and fiction in turn mount a particular challenge to the perceived hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism, in their relative indifference to the canon wars, emphasis on tribe- and region-specific sovereignty criticism, and commitment to establishing centers for knowledge production that are independent of dominant state-oriented epistemologies. For these reasons, Native fiction and poetry holds the potential to “stymie[ ] liberal-multicultural reading habits to make *difference* robustly appear as a different episteme.”<sup>30</sup> To make difference robustly appear as a different episteme might be understood as a central effort of both *Flight* and *Oscar Wao*. As I discuss with regard to the fiction of Monique Truong, Rodrigo Lazo contends that certain minoritized texts contain difference “emphatic enough to prompt a reconsideration of the archive’s limits.”<sup>31</sup> Presumably this includes the limits of historical and literary-historical archives. Drawing on and unraveling the genres of

fantasy, science fiction, history, and magical realism, these novels voiced by angry nerd outcasts are obsessed with language—the language of the streets, the language of Spanish, foul language, official language, and especially the language of alienation. Such linguistic acrobatics formally resist the consolidation of conventional reading habits—as with the synesthetic renderings in *Bitter in the Mouth*—perpetually unsettling the middlebrow reading practice with reference to the worlds of science fiction and pop culture. They also index a primarily popular rather than academic audience.

Setting these works in conversation enacts a comparative move that also unsettles the terms of neoliberal multiculturalism at the level of academic discourse, undermining the category of American literature as it coalesces around or excludes contemporary writers of color. In his critique of Alexie’s fiction, Steven Salaita draws attention to the way that Native American literature complements and complicates the category of “American literature” precisely because “North America’s Indigenous peoples predate the taxonomical criteria that underline” the category.<sup>32</sup> Junot Díaz similarly seeks to unsettle distinctions—academic and especially political—between “America” as a synonym for the United States and the Caribbean or Dominican Republic, arguing that “America, the United States, what we call the contemporary world, doesn’t make sense without the knowledge that the Caribbean bears on its back and in its silences.”<sup>33</sup>

The particular purview of this chapter is literature by minoritized writers that perform history in inappropriate ways. Nancy Peterson, in a comparative project on ethnic women writers in contemporary U.S. literature, suggests that “minority histories have never come into full cultural consciousness, because mainstream American history is so relentlessly optimistic and teleological that it has become painfully difficult to

articulate counterhistories that do not share these values, and because postmodern culture works against sustained engagement with memory and commitment to complexity that is crucial for these histories.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, such histories are inconvenient to a political consciousness that would privilege the developmental immigrant narrative and to a philosophical orientation that undermines the possibility of unmediated access to historical truth. In response, Peterson turns to literature as a site of counter-history, arguing that “literature is an unofficial, unauthorized site for writing histories” that can “address issues and events that are marginalized or ignored by the rules of safe politics and clear evidence that underlie official historical accounts” through the deployment of “narrative flexibility” and the eliciting of “willing suspension of disbelief.”<sup>35</sup> Peterson’s claims about the power of the historicist dimensions of literature to counter the national amnesia of the United States align at a foundational level with my desire to examine the ways literature does history. Yet I am mindful that minoritized literary histories can serve the status quo just as official histories can—especially in the neoliberal multicultural moment when stories about difference are asked to serve as stand-ins for difference and to authorize the management of difference in the service of late capitalism.

Much excellent recovery work has been conducted in the disciplines of literary studies, cultural studies, and history in the past few decades, particularly by scholars in feminist, ethnic and African American literature seeking to expand a patriarchal canon and challenge white supremacist narratives of U.S. history. Yet such recovery work at the same time reflects an orientation to neoliberal conceptions of history and race that privilege filling in gaps over efforts to interrogate the systems that created such gaps in the first place. In contrast, Lisa Lowe’s essay “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” a

study of the archival traces of “coolie” laborers in the Caribbean following the Haitian Revolution, theorizes recovery with a different purpose in mind. Lowe’s piece investigates the elision of Asian laborers “not to pursue a single, particularist cultural identity, not to ‘fill in the gaps’ or ‘add on’ another transoceanic group, but to explain *the politics of our lack of knowledge*.”<sup>36</sup> Resisting the impulse toward immediate recovery or recuperation of this “coolie” figure, Lowe instead dwells on the ethics and politics of loss, on “the way the humanist archive naturalizes itself and ‘forgets’ the conditions of its own making” and on “what it means to supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence.”<sup>37</sup> This distinction lies in the activation of a “past conditional temporality” that makes claims to “what could have been”—what Reinhart Koselleck calls “futures past,”<sup>38</sup> or the possibilities that conventional histories foreclose in favor of a fixed emphasis we might term “what was.” In this context, Lowe calls upon scholars of history “to act within but think beyond our received humanist tradition and, all the while, to imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now, in which what is foreclosed as unknowable is forever saturating the ‘what-can-be-known.’”<sup>39</sup>

For this reason, my project foregrounds an approach to history based on the relationship between memory and forgetting, understood as failed memory. Attending to forgetting as an equal partner to remembering, I consider forgetting as a project and event that must itself be marked as it opens up a new mode of historicism to account for history’s absences as well as presences. Thus one way to examine the politics of our lack of knowledge is to register and fill in not the historical memory that has been lost, but the process of forgetting that has been elided. To dwell in forgetting can be productive,

Halberstam argues, if we understand it as opposed to (historical) memory. Foucault calls memory a disciplinary mechanism, a “ritual of power” that “selects for what is important (the histories of triumph)” and “reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions.”<sup>40</sup> In contrast, “*forgetting* becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.”<sup>41</sup> Invoking spectrality, lost genealogies and erasure, this question of memory and forgetting is intimately connected to the analysis of archives conducted in chapter two. In that examination of ephemeral archives and their traces, I articulate the relationship between memory and history as one that is triangulated through the archive. Memory is less systematic and referential than the archive, and history does not possess the archive’s capacity to preserve across time. Yet their mutual relationship is also significant—memory’s relation to historical knowledge has to do with its capacity as one way knowledge is accessed.

Forgetting arrests narratives of development and progress, and so the art of forgetting (of staying lost to memory) “can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary.”<sup>42</sup> Yet forgetting is not an end in itself (as Halberstam acknowledges), and so I do not want to privilege the gap, the aporia, in such a way that concern for real knowledge of lost histories and counterhistories holds no value. Rather, the concept of forgetting is useful not because it does away entirely with memory, or with history, but because “[f]orgetting is also what allows for a new way of remembering.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, forgetting is not always necessarily an antagonistic

counter-narrative to neoliberalism or the regime's institutionalized histories; it is, however, one avenue to enrich discourses of history.

The role of history in academic discourse, and particularly the histories created in the work of analysis, interpretation and recovery, deserves further scrutiny. Examining the scholarly histories generated in postcolonial studies, Ann Laura Stoler posits that racial histories should themselves be objects of study, suggesting that they too often accept and replicate the regimes of truth of the very racial discourses they mean to examine. She cautions scholars to consider the founding myths and investments that their own histories perpetuate—even histories that appear as vehicles of critique.<sup>44</sup> Arguing that the critically generated dichotomy between the static nature of old racial discourse and the fluidity of new racial discourse dramatically oversimplifies eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialism, Stoler reminds us that the adaptability of colonial racisms was not a weakness but in fact a strength that ensured their continuation. This observation must impact how we generate critical histories, for “if racial discourse embraces fixity and fluidity and this oscillation is partly where racisms’ resiliency lies, then the new histories we write and how we write them . . . too must reckon with the political field in which both notions are strategically invoked for scholarly argument.”<sup>45</sup> What does this observation mean for a racial history of the present, and for this chapter’s investigation of inappropriate literary histories? Postracialism is a racial discourse; to reckon with its fixity and its fluidity requires us to analyze its stable tenets and its softer places, being cautious that what we perceive as postracialism’s vulnerabilities may nonetheless reinforce its hegemonic hold on contemporary life. It is precisely for this reason—postracial fixity and fluidity—that I advocate for the re-examination of works that fail to

adopt a properly multicultural perspective. To understand the strategic oscillation postracialism practices between advocating and rejecting particular cultural productions is to begin to sketch the contours of contemporary racial discourse. And to understand the theories of history these novels present as they open out from their historically minded epigraphs is to begin identifying a mode of inappropriate historicism.

### **History as Curse**

From the start, *Oscar Wao*'s Oscar de León is the unlikely subject of a historical epic. Sensitive, sentimental and sexually rejected, the overweight Dominican son of diaspora posts obscure *Lord of the Rings* jokes above his dorm room. He's a poor student, a copious and aspiring writer. It is from his posthumous archive—"fragmented and unfinished books, letters, composition notebooks, and a quartet of space operas"<sup>46</sup>—that primary narrator Yuniór pieces together the novel's complex story of three generations of a Dominican American family: Abelard Cabral, who is arrested by the Trujillato after attempting to shield his daughters from the dictator's voracious appetites; Belicia Cabral, Abelard's daughter and the only surviving family member, who immigrates to New Jersey after she is beaten nearly to death following an affair with Trujillo's brother-in-law; and Beli's children, Lola and Oscar de León. While *Oscar Wao* centers primarily on Oscar's nerdboy fandom and romantic turmoil, it is also from the start an ambitious narrative about diaspora and the violent legacy of dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic in various official capacities from 1930 to his assassination in 1961. Díaz registers the gaps and elisions necessary to the project of historical representation in the novel's distinctive formal choices: its use of extensive historical footnotes and multiple narrators (including Lola), the mid-story revelation of a highly

subjective primary narrator, and its cobbling together of the stories of three generations of the de León family that have been lost to history. What happens, this novel asks, when the aesthetic unravels—when the gaps and fissures in a story about the historical past threaten to overwhelm the project of representation?

The novel opens with a much-analyzed seven page introduction that establishes the novel's concern with history via a genealogy of *fukú*—"generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1). Díaz's introduction presents a counterhistory of Columbus's "discovery" and the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola; of Rafael Trujillo's brutal twentieth-century Dominican dictatorship; and of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the cause of the Vietnam War. But the history of *fukú*, the narrator is quick to reveal, "ain't just ancient history" (2). What's more, the history of *fukú* is not a history of mere superstition, because whether or not you believe in it, "*fukú* believes in you" (5).<sup>47</sup> This new form of spectral memory is unleashed by particular kinds of forgetting.

This introductory section situates Díaz's novel as both within and without history, as revising history and revising the parameters within which we understand history to operate. "[I]t is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world," the narrator describes, adopting the passive, objective tone we might expect from an official history of the Caribbean. But the sentence continues, dispelling this impression with the frank observation that "we've all been in the shit ever since" (1). Further, this section establishes the literary form by which the novel will engage with history, a form characterized by casual slang, self-reflexive references to writing itself, metaphorization of history as science fiction, and regular use of footnotes. On the second

page, Díaz includes one of what he calls his Melville footnotes—the epic digressions from the body of the narrative that fill in, contradict, and playfully elaborate upon the body of the narrative, each time dramatizing the push-pull tensions involved in the telling of any story, any history. This first footnote is itself about history, in that it annotates the novel’s earliest mention of Trujillo and is presented explicitly “[f]or those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2n2). Trujillo merits this footnote, we are told, not only because of the reader’s presumed ignorance but also because of the true scale of Trujillo’s power: “terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured, or, I would argue, imagined” (2n2). Here we see the parameters of the history that will possess this text taking shape. Such a history cannot be captured, even in the imagination, without recourse to literariness—without the intervention of the aesthetic.

The history of fukú—and the general understanding of history the novel theorizes—incorporates both the public and the private, the large and small scale. Fukú tells us the story of Trujillo, of JFK, of Vietnam, but it also operates individually to populate the realm of the personal: “Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family . . . [an] uncle in the Cibao who believed that he’d been cursed by an old lover never to have male children . . . a tía who believed she’d been denied happiness because she’d laughed at a rival’s funeral” (5). The scale of history in *Oscar Wao* encompasses the macro (nations, dictatorships, assassinations, foreign relations) and the micro, the family legacies and young life of Oscar de León. What qualifies Oscar’s story to be told, the narrator reveals, is not its inherent exceptionalism: “I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. Mine ain’t

the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful” (6). Not the “most” anything, this story merits historicization only incidentally, as “It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat” (6). In this way, the introduction theorizes history at once as a curse, pervasively dangerous to modern life, and yet so ubiquitous as to be unremarkable.

If history is a quotidian curse, particularly to the teller (this fukú has its fingers around Yuniór’s throat, not Oscar’s), then how can histories be written in such a way as to mitigate that threat? In fact, Yuniór theorizes the telling of a history as fukú’s opposite—zafa. At the end of the novel’s introduction, Yuniór invokes “zafa,” the “only surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word” (7). Zafa prevents the curse of fukú from cohering, Yuniór explains, before expanding the power of the single word to comprise the entirety of the novel: “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). Despite this invocation of zafaesque storytelling powers to counter fukú’s malevolent curse, there remains a particular obsession in *Oscar Wao* with marking the unspeakable or unrepresentable that this chapter investigates. This obsession manifests most frequently by reference to the tropes of the lost book and the blank page. So, this chapter asks, what is remembered and repurposed as counterspell? What is instead aesthetically “forgotten,” and why is it nonetheless important to mark these forgettings?

Since its publication, many scholars have analyzed the hybrid experimental form of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Monica Hanna suggests that the novel is a “resistance history” that acts as “an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican

Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres,” particularly those that arise from popular or unofficial origins.<sup>48</sup> Ramón Saldívar situates Díaz’s novel within a twenty-first century genre he terms “historical fantasy” that merges “historical novel, bildungsroman, postmagical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, and super-hero comic romance” to address concerns of historical injustice by way of a form created by its own fantastical events.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to these extant analyses of the novel’s form, my concern in this chapter is the way Díaz figuratively repurposes historical facts as aesthetic tropes. Rarticulating the infamous “página en blanco” of Dominican dictator Joaquín Balaguer—literally, a blank page of Balaguer’s memoir set aside to reveal the identity of a murderer widely understood to be Balaguer himself—Díaz transforms the blank page into an acknowledgement of representation’s own fundamental inadequacy and a double gesture: to past crimes, long-suppressed, and to the future, the “day the páginas en blanco finally speak.” Originating as a material piece of the historical archive, Díaz’s blank page nonetheless comes to stand for loss itself, for the silences of history that cannot and should not be filled. It signifies what is forgotten or lost to history, and theorizes forgetting itself as a historical practice.

*Oscar Wao* is a novel that arises from the fictional consultation of archives. It stages the politics of our lack of knowledge through the narrator Yúnior’s project of compiling Oscar’s research on his family’s history along with Oscar’s science fiction manuscripts, letters, and interviews with other family members. Staging the twin processes of research and reading, Díaz’s novel relies for its historical sense upon intertextuality and historical footnotes related to the Dominican Republic and diaspora. In this context the novel’s blank page operates explicitly in opposition to a disingenuous

attempt to fill in the gaps of a historical archive: the memoir of Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo confidant and subsequently Dominican president. Balaguer's memoir—*Memorias de un cortesano de la 'era de Trujillo'*—was published in 1989 and included a blank page ostensibly for the posthumous identification of the murderer of journalist Oscar Martinez. To the right of the blank page, Balaguer inserts a photograph of Oscar Martinez Howley and several other journalists at the house of then-Dominican President Juan Bosch. Above the photograph, Balaguer presents this explanation, titled “The Case of the Journalist Orlando Martínez Howley”:

This blank page is inserted here. For many years it will remain mute, but one day it will speak so that its voice is heard by history. Silent, like a grave whose secret voices will rise loudly and accuse, when time permits the raising of the gravestone under which the truth is lying. Its content has been left in the hands of a friend who for reasons of age is probably going to outlive me and who has been charged by me to make it public some years after my death.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, our narrator Yunion claims, it is widely known in the Dominican Republic that Balaguer himself orchestrated the murder (*Oscar* 90n9).

Díaz's novel takes this disingenuous gesture to the blanks of history and engages with the violence Balaguer attempts to conceal through a feint of transparency. Unlike Balaguer, the manifestation of the blank page adopted by Díaz and Yunion is not a literal blank page but a recurring metaphor that nonetheless registers its origins via a suggestive residue of materiality. I trace the novel's four deployments of the “página en blanco” to argue that the novel's engagement with unrepresentability raises the question of what happens when we choose to designate something as forgotten to history.

Yunior's most explicit gesture to a "página en blanco" comes amid the miniature history lesson in the novel's ninth footnote. The footnote details how Balaguer, a Trujillo confidante, rose to power after the dictator's assassination and served three stints as president between 1960 and 1996. But the footnote centers primarily on Balaguer's identity as "a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself," presenting a historicized explanation of the blank page that reveals disgust not only for the act of killing but, as we will see, for the way unrepresentability becomes coded by Balaguer as innocence. The footnote continues: "Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a página en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say *impunity*?) Balaguer died in 2002. The página is still blanca" (90n9). In other words, the blank page is invoked here as a space of dissembling, of prevarication. Balaguer's blank page is not the considered refusal to elide absence by summarily filling it with presence, but rather the denunciation of widely held but nonetheless unofficial knowledge by marshalling the silences of official history to preserve the dictatorial status quo.

All four references to the "página en blanco" find their home in the middle story of the de León family, which details Belicia Cabral's adolescence in the Dominican Republic before immigrating to the United States and giving birth to Lola and Oscar. The first appearance of a "página en blanco" comes a dozen pages before its explanation in the ninth footnote, in the form of a brief parenthetical gesture to the dark events of Belicia's lost childhood: "(Before 1951, our orphaned girl had lived with another foster family, monstrous people if the rumors are to be believed, a dark period of her life neither

she nor her madre ever referenced. Their very own *página en blanco*” (78). In this way, the phrase is parenthetically presented within the narrative both as a placeholder for purposeful silence—for forgetting—and as the purview of individuals like Beli who have not achieved record in official archives. Though Yuniór goes on to situate the phrase in terms of Balaguer’s memoir, he first presents it without the contextualizing frame of history, as if to produce in advance an alternative knowledge to counter the official narrative to come.

That the blank page could serve different ends underscores Balaguer’s troubling deployment of it. The next invocation comes in the explanatory Balaguer footnote, while the third reference to a *página en blanco* signals the historical silences surrounding Belicia’s lover, a figure known in the text only as the Gangster. Explaining this allusion to the blank page, Yuniór describes the circumstances of his attempts at research: “Due partially to Beli’s silence on the matter and other folks’ lingering unease when it comes to talking about the [Trujillo] regime, info on the Gangster is fragmented; I’ll give you what I’ve managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en blanco* finally speak” (119). Here, the trope of the blank page is extended toward a future, alternate temporality—a moment-to-come when the silences will be reversed, when what is forgotten will engender new modes of remembering and, presumably, storytelling. But this is not a passive process, in which an outside entity fills in the gaps or writes the missing chronicle; rather, such a future is configured as the realm of blank pages that themselves “speak.” Yuniór’s blank page is not meant to signal the gaps in a physical archive—Balaguer has already done so, perniciously—but the limits of knowledge inherent to any subject who would seek to interrogate or fill such gaps.

The final reference to the blank page appears at the climax of Beli's story. In what we are told will be "the strangest part of our tale," Oscar's future mother awakens from a brutal beating suffered at the hands of two members of Trujillo's secret police. This beating follows the revelation that the Gangster, by whom she is now pregnant, is married to Trujillo's sister. In this passage, Yuniór self-consciously signals that the definitive details of this past event evade even the tentative parameters of representation he has thus far set out: "Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco" (149). This blank page opens away from Balaguer and Beli to Yuniór. The narrator understands himself as a Watcher, a member of the alien race figuring prominently in *Fantastic Four* comics whose philosophy dictates observation of other species but always non-interference. Our narrator, the "Watcher" of our tale, possesses an omniscience that is nonetheless foiled by particularly significant absences. This paradox suggests that the persistent power of historical forgetting might foil even a presumably omniscient storyteller—or might serve as one of his crucial tools. It reminds us that claims to omniscience still contend with the partiality of our historical knowledge—not only of the past, but of futures past—and with the pain of repressed (or recovered) memories.

This dynamic suggested by the choice to conduct history via literature is difficult to parse. Monica Hanna argues that Yuniór's narrative acknowledgement of the impossibility of recovering any definitive historical account frees him to reject the responsibility for such a work in favor of the possibility of aesthetic creation. In Hanna's formulation, the distinction between the stagnating silences of the Trujillo regime and the

freeing silences of Yuniór's narrative seems to rest in the aesthetic: in place of conventional historiography, Yuniór is able to "imagine" his way to the truth.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to such a formulation, which arguably re-establishes the distinction between fiction (coded as "imagination") and history, I posit that the novel desires to unsettle history's claim to truth value. This unsettling follows the mode of forgetting as historical practice the novel sets forth, in which Yuniór does not fill in the blanks or address the politics of the *página en blanco*—what Lowe calls "the politics of our lack of knowledge."

Diaz's blank page offers an interesting resonance to the gaps and silences observed in chapter three in the story of Franklin Hata presented by Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*. Each of these novels concerned with twentieth-century histories suggestively posits that the value of history lies not, or not only, with its true value—or, to enlist the discussion of realism from chapter one, with its truth effects. These literary histories instead display the aesthetic work of blanks, elisions, gaps and silences, to remind us of the contingency of historical projects and the presence of "futures past" that inform the writing and reception of all historico-literary texts.

So how can we read the strategy of the blank page to symbolize the silence that eludes representation's powerful pull? Like the elided details of Hata's immigration in *A Gesture Life* or the unrepresented tsunami that kills Kaushik in Lahiri's "Going Ashore," the blank page confronts the reader with a present absence. The murder of Oscar Martínez and the elimination of details that would reveal the true murderer—the creation of a historical gap—materialize in the trope of the blank page. The blank page as deployed by Balaguer serves as a placeholder, occupying a space that cannot be "filled"

even as it eliminates traces of the murder of Orlando Martinez. Díaz draws on this initial deployment but crucially transforms the “página en blanco” from a literal, material blank page to a metaphorical one that nonetheless registers the traces of materiality. This is why the blank page that attends to the elimination of traces, to our lack of knowledge, takes place in literature, in the realm of the aesthetic: the metaphorical “página en blanco” conjures a literal blank page in the same moment that it is explicitly figurative. In this sense, *Oscar Wao* conducts an aesthetic betrayal of its historical source text by resignifying Balaguer’s blank page as exactly the indictment Balaguer’s memoir was created to manage. The fluidity of a trope versus the stasis of a physical blank page suggests the “what could have been” of Lisa Lowe’s past conditional temporality, allowing Yunior the freedom to speculate, producing historical knowledge by way of the aesthetic while registering forgetting and memory as equal partners in the historical project.

### **Human Development**

This chapter’s focus to this point has been on Yunior’s effort, via the deployment of the blank page, to recognize what has been elided from historical narratives while resisting the urge for straightforward recovery. I consider the ways this move keeps alive the future conditional tense theorized by Lowe, in part to understand a form of agential forgetting that respects, even as it registers, historical silence. This project of recognizing absence and presence is significant not only because it emphasizes the politics of our lack of knowledge; it is also related to the disruption of neat, progressive narratives of individual and national development. Such narratives are crucial to the historical

trajectories necessary for neoliberal multiculturalism's sustained political, economic and cultural traction.

I shift now to consider Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007), which opens with another allusion that situates the novel in an American literary genealogy: "Call me Zits," the narrator-protagonist begins, echoing Melville's famous introduction to *Moby-Dick*. Zits quickly details how his American Indian father disappeared after his birth and his Irish mother died of cancer when he was six. In the intervening nine years, Zits has lived in twenty foster homes and attended twenty-two schools. "I'm a fifteen-year-old foster kid with a history of fire setting, time traveling, body shifting, and mass-murder contemplation," he tells us near the end of the novel, after he opens fire on a local bank lobby and is shot in the head (173). Though Zits narrates the experience of his own death, the shooting instigates a series of time-traveling incidents during which he inhabits the bodies of five individuals as "a subject in and through history"<sup>52</sup>: a white FBI agent investigating a fictionalized indigenous rights group in 1970s Idaho; a twelve-year-old Native American boy witnessing the Battle of Little Bighorn; a white tracker named Gus leading a group of nineteenth-century cavalry soldiers to avenge a native massacre of a group of white villagers; Jimmy, a white pilot living in the post-9/11 U.S. who has recently been betrayed by a friend-turned-terrorist; and a Native American homeless man in the "present" of 2007, who Zits learns is his own father. These five episodes coalesce into a "time-travel paradigm" that "creates a 'bodily epistemology' that makes traumas of the past present for Zits and readers."<sup>53</sup>

One reason I have chosen to analyze *Flight* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* together is that each novel stages a failure to grow up properly—to move from

childhood to adolescence, to achieve the milestones (whether academic, familial, or sexual) that mark the transition toward adulthood. Shunted through a series of new foster homes and schools, Zits purposely provokes the authority figures in each situation as if to anticipate their eventual, inevitable rejection of him. His vulnerability translates to extreme violence when, early in the novel, he is recruited by a new friend, Justice, to the bank shooting that initially results in his own death. While Oscar seems full of unrequited love rather than rage, his development is similarly disrupted. While his peers (even other geeks) are securing girlfriends and discovering their place in the social spectrums of high school and college, Oscar finds himself striking out on both counts, left alone with his science fiction and his role-playing games. His first and only reciprocated love interest is not a New Jersey girl but an older Dominican woman named Ybón who is already in a relationship with a brutal police captain; this relationship culminates in several days of sexual intimacy and Oscar's murder at the hands of the captain's henchmen. (It's worth noting that both Oscar and Zits experience violent deaths at an untimely age that reinforce the failure of development, though Zits finds his own reversed.)

Each protagonist is also a figure of conspicuous cultural inauthenticity. Describing his mixed-race heritage, Zits tells the reader, "I'm not really Irish *or* Indian. I'm a blank sky, a human solar eclipse" (5). Later he emphasizes that he has not been registered with any tribe or government bureaucracy, revealing, "I'm not an official Indian . . . I'm not a legal Indian" (9) by way of explaining why he has not been placed with Native American foster parents under the Indian Child Welfare Act. While Oscar is ethnically Dominican, he does not demonstrate the characteristics that would reinforce his identity in the eyes of other characters: the narrator Yunion comments repeatedly that

Oscar's poor luck with women is "*very un-Dominican of him*" (11), while others frequently note that his dark skin and curly hair make him appear more Haitian than Dominican. Moreover, the extent of his nerdiness guarantees that Oscar "[c]ouldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21). Both Zits and Oscar, faced with a chronic inability to perform normality (whether ethnically, behaviorally, or physically), are shunted from home to home—Zits through two dozen foster homes, and Oscar back and forth between his mother's home in New Jersey and his great-aunt's house in the Dominican Republic.

One set of problems with proper histories has to do with the developmental teleology they tend to trace and the abstract and equal liberal subject such teleology requires and produces. The "dominant historical conception of human development," according to David Lloyd, is "an end that regulates historical method and evaluation, from the selection and legitimation of archives and sources to the organizing modes of narrative. It bears, moreover, an idea of the human subject which is the product of that narrative and the ideal of the discipline [history] itself—the disinterested subject of modern civil society." In this sense, Lloyd goes on to argue, "[t]he legitimacy of any given historical utterance is proportional to its coherence with the emergence of such a subject."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the ways hegemonic history conditions us to understand human development—teleologically—both determines what counts as history and how such history will be reckoned, but also what counts as human subjectivity. Then, history measures itself against the subject it has created in order to demonstrate and establish its ontological and epistemological authenticity. The developmental narratives that Zits and Oscar disrupt—to which they fail to adhere—exist to make them knowable,

categorizable, and legitimate subjects.<sup>55</sup> Their inappropriateness as representatives of and witnesses to history is fundamental to the work of these literary histories.

*Flight* is a novel of the historical present told in present tense.<sup>56</sup> Though the text carefully dates each episode with reference to incidents like Custer's Last Stand, indigenous rights activism of the 1970s and the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, it is clear from the beginning that such attention to detail does not extend to certain aspects of the present day. "My real name isn't important," Zits states flatly on the first page. Describing his American Indian heritage, he tells us, "My father was an Indian. From this or that tribe. From this or that reservation" (4). Like Linda in *Bitter in the Mouth*, the facts are refused as a foundation for identity construction. His casual assessment comments on the categorizing impulse that would flatten American Indian culture, experiences, and ethnicity to more easily incorporate them into multicultural pluralism. Certainly, as David Eng has observed of other historical novels by contemporary U.S. writers, "the politics of naming and misnaming works to stabilize—indeed, to justify—the historical order of things" (1483). Yet if the real name of our narrator and the specifics of his indigenous heritage are not important—as Franklin Hata's "real" (Korean) name and the specifics of his U.S. immigration and citizenship are elided in *A Gesture Life*—what is offered as significant in their place? And how does the de-privileging of the facts of history—the names of individuals, of tribes, of reservations—unsettle a conventional project of historical literariness?<sup>57</sup>

Though Zits presents himself as a rage-filled autodidact, armored with dismissive language and violent impulses against a world that has proven itself alternately dangerous, disappointing, and abusive, he is deeply aware of the expectations upon him.

Often these expectations are structural and have to do with his identity as an orphan, a foster kid, and a “half-breed” Indian. In other moments, these expectations are grounded in particular relationships with the two people to whom Zits feels a sense of closeness: Officer Dave, who arrests him frequently and enjoins him to make better choices, and Justice, the detention center cellmate who encourages Zits to imagine a Ghost Dance brought violently to modern life in the form of a mass shooting. Though Zits often rages against such expectations, their terminology—the language of “supposed to”—frequently invades his narration.

Propriety as an ideological apparatus structures much of his common sense, particularly about the history and life of American Indians. He watches television about tribal history and traditions in order to perform proper “Indianness” more thoroughly in the multitude of white foster homes: “Maybe I can’t live like an Indian, but I can learn how real Indians used to live and how they’re supposed to live now” (12). In the second time-traveling episode, as Zits inhabits the body of the Indian boy, he gazes appreciatively around the immense camp that awaits Custer at Little Bighorn, populated by dark-skinned natives: “These are how Indians used to be, how Indians are supposed to be” (60). These observations suggest the extent to which Zits has internalized a conception of indigeneity that denies Native Americans the possibility of evolving—a conception sourced by book and television histories he desperately ingests to ascertain a measure of authenticity:

Everything I know about Indians (and I could easily beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuit) I’ve learned from television.

I know about famous chiefs, broken treaties, the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Indian wars of the nineteenth century.

I know all this stuff because it makes me feel more like a real Indian. Maybe I can't live like an Indian, but I can learn how real Indians used to live and how they're supposed to live now. (12)

To this image he opposes himself, as the light-skinned unofficial and illegible Indian.<sup>58</sup>

The ways Zits negotiates this historical knowledge suggest the novel's commitment to undermining any conception of the totality of historical knowledge available to us. A documentary has taught Zits that the two men, Horse and Elk, are "super famous" for their work "protecting traditional Indians from the evil Indian tribal government dudes" (46, 47). Yet it dawns on Zits, inhabiting the body of FBI agent Hank Storm, that the Horse and Elk of the History Channel documentary would never meet secretly with an FBI agent, much less converse on a first-name basis. Zits negotiates the realization that Horse and Elk are "double agents," "traitors," in the context of how this information from 1975 is unknown in 2007: "This is major news. Back in the future, these guys are still heroes" (49). This scene stages the complex chronology and epistemology of Alexie's project as a whole: the question of how the present signifies a time period "back in the future," and the ramifications for this unsettling in time when it comes to projects of historical knowledge. Perhaps, albeit obliquely, Zits's ability to inhabit a white FBI agent in the first place gestures to the vulnerability of the neoliberal apparatus to invasion and co-optation.

At times, the inevitable temporality of the what-will-happen dominates these exchanges, as the present-day knowledge Zits brings with him while time-traveling

collides with the knowledge he gains as a first-person witness to historical events.

Blissfully basking in the fact that he has a father for the first time (albeit only in the sense that the thirteen-year-old Indian boy he embodies has a father), Zits is brought back to sorrow by his ability to see more than a hundred years of Native American history:

All these old-time Indians are doomed. They're going to die of disease. And they'll be slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry soldiers. They'll be packed into train cars and shipped off to reservations. And they'll starve in winter camps near iced-over rivers.

The children are going to be kidnapped and sent off to boarding schools. Their hair will be cut short and they will be beaten for speaking their tribal languages.

They'll be beaten for dancing and singing the old-time Indian songs. (66)

Such moments create a dialectic between remembering what has been forgotten and the invasion of institutionalized history on a suddenly present past. The problem-space of the 2007 narrative present collides with the problem-space of Custer's Last Stand, bringing each into sharper relief even as this relation establishes continuity between past and present.

As an inappropriate history, Alexie's novel is careful to distinguish itself from what is often called magical realism. At one point, as the Indian tracker Gus helps a white cavalry officer and a young Indian boy flee from the bullets of the soldiers who follow them, Zits playfully adopts and then rescinds magical conditions as a way out of history:

The pony leaps into the air. It grows wings and flies into the forest.

No, of course not. It doesn't grow wings. How can a horse grow wings?

That kind of extraordinary magic is not permitted here. No, the only magic here is ordinary. It's so ordinary that it might not be magic at all. It might only be luck.

(96)

Alexie toys with his readers here, extending the conditions of historical possibility and then batting them down, even as the narrative itself stages an impossible relation to history—time travel—as reality. Ramón Saldívar defines magical realism as a genre that “present[s] the world in such a way as to entice readers to react with wonder at the marvelous nature of American reality” (594). In this sense, *Flight* is emphatically not a work of magical realism, in that it does not mean to situate magical acts as natural to the “real” world or appeal to our sense of wonder. The unlikely magic of Zits’s time-travel experience is meant to register as an exception to the rules of nature and it evokes not our wonder but our horror at the cyclical atrocities upon which “American reality” is founded.

In this same vein, Alexie presents a realistic explanation for Zits’s brief disappearance on the bank security tape near the novel’s end. Watching with a detective and Officer Dave after Zits has re-appeared in the bank and surrendered instead of opening fire, Zits observes, “my image disappears for a second. I’m gone. And then I reappear” (166). They rewind the tape and it happens again: “I’m there in the bank. Then I’m gone—*poof*. And then I reappear” (166). The detective, whom Zits calls Eyeglasses, presents a logical explanation: “Aw, it’s just a flaw in the tape . . . They reuse these tapes over and over. The quality goes down. They got weird bumps and cuts in them” (166). Zits obliquely attests, “Eyeglasses is probably right” (166). And yet. And yet. Just because there are ordinary explanations—for time-travel disappearances, for a fifteen-

year-old Indian foster kid, for revenge and betrayal, for the whole of a racially inflected U.S. history—does not mean that *Flight* will allow them for us as readers.

### **Impossible, Embodied Memory**

Much of the historical sense of *Flight* is couched in terms of memory—specifically, what Zits should and should not be able to remember. To couple history and memory in this way is to foreground the question of access. In the novel’s opening pages, Zits describes how his mother used to sing “I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know” by Blood, Sweat & Tears to him as a baby: “I remember her singing it to me. I know I’m not supposed to remember it. But I do. My memory is strange that way. I often remember people I’ve never met and events and places I’ve never seen” (2). Here Zits does not forget, to paraphrase Lowe, the conditions of his own making: his relation to the what-can-be-known is saturated by impossible memory. His claim in this passage foreshadows the time-travel structure of the novel—an experience that will allow Zits to literally remember people, places and events he *could not* have met or seen. Furthermore, this statement floats the question of what we ought to remember and what we ought to *be able to* remember, given the limitations and abilities we understand humans to possess.<sup>59</sup> While embodying Jimmy the pilot, Zits admits that he has only flown twice, and one of those times was in utero: “I know I’m not supposed to remember it. And I don’t remember it, not really. But I can feel it. I have the memory of it in my DNA” (108). A memory that can be felt, a memory that resides on the genetic level—such memories are impossible. As building blocks of affective histories, impossible memories violate the rules of history-telling in order to register emotion, attachments and diffused forms of agency. To possess an impossible memory is to possess a form of access to the blank

pages of our own histories. The ordinary magic of this story operates in terms of plot (the time-travel narrative) but also theorizes the way that impossible memories constitute contemporary subjects in legacies of inequality and racialization—the way subjects like Zits and Oscar (in his moments of near-death and death at the hands of Dominican hired muscle) must negotiate for their figurative and physical survival by way of ordinary (and sometimes not so ordinary) magic.

The novel seems to be suggesting something else: not only that memory is a discursive formulation that is conditioned by what we are taught to remember and to forget, but also that the parameters of this discursive formulation can be disrupted. Zits remembers not with his conscious mind but with his *body*—the memory of his first flight resides in his DNA, he says. The memory of the night he was conceived is described in complementary terms: “I remember how they conceived me that night. Okay, I don’t exactly remember it. I can’t see my mother and father naked in bed, but I can feel a lightning ball rebound off my soul whenever I think about it” (3). For Zits and for this novel, the most effective, affective memories are those that are impossible and yet nonetheless manifestly pervasive—those memories that are encoded into the genes or that result in an affective response, like the “lightning ball” that rebounds off his soul. In this way, the novel posits an embodied, affective history centered in memory (and, perversely, in forgetfulness) that operates on a different plane from the official histories Zits has consumed in pursuit of a proper Native American identity.

Another form of impossible memory Zits experiences is the holding of two memories, or even two sets of memories, at the same time. In his time-travel episodes, he remembers as two subjects simultaneously, the host and the traveler. In this way, the

novel's theory of memory literalizes the emotional act we call empathy. As Zits travels through time and occupies the bodies of different figures (some Indian, some white, spanning three centuries of U.S. existence), the relationships he has to the bodies and minds of these figures vary. Yet somehow the bodies themselves are mediators that negotiate between the mind and affect of the body's owner and the mind and affect that comprise the subject-narrator Zits. When Zits occupies the body of the young Indian at the Battle of Bunker Hill, he is at first confused about why he cannot speak. Yet the "memory" of the body he possesses floods him, as "his" father encourages him to slit the throat of a captured cavalry soldier: "In another camp on a different river, a white soldier grabbed my hair, lifted my chin, and slashed my throat with a bayonet. And now my father wants revenge. He wants me to want revenge" (75). How precisely this memory is transmitted to the mind of Zits is unclear, but it ultimately leads him to a memory from his own life, signaled by four longer paragraphs that all begin "I remember." The narrative shifts from the memory of the boy's body to his own memory, "back when I was Zits, back when I was eight years old . . . living in this foster home on a mountain near Seattle" (75). This entwined relationship between two sets of memories, two sets of desires, performs the interpersonal relation of empathy in the space of a single embodied subject.

The four subsequent paragraphs describe his feelings while fostering with a rich white family and his fascination with the miles of model trains in his foster father's basement. A secret is revealed to the reader: "I remember I played with those trains for hours and hours. Played until I could barely keep my eyes open. Then my new father took me into another dark room in the basement, one without any trains, and did evil things to

me. Things that hurt. Things that made me bleed” (75). The memory of the sexual abuse Zits has suffered is reworked and contextualized in the historical setting of this moment of time travel. The questions of violence—the violence he witnesses against the bodies of dead cavalry soldiers, the violence “his” Indian father encourages against the captive, the violence young Zits suffers in the Seattle basement—refuse a progressive understanding of history that would situate the violence of Little Bighorn comfortably in the past. The way revenge operates, as “a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle,” creates a continuum between past and present (77). The body’s memory leads him to his own memory, and the desire for revenge called up by his memory of the basement abuse helps him empathize with the revenge “his” father wishes him to enact.

Yet in every instance when Zits is called upon to enact the violence of these scenes, he refuses or at least delays, closing his eyes. This act of refusing witness seems to trigger his transportation to another body. From the body of the Indian boy he finds himself inhabiting Gus, the Indian tracker. In this episode Zits is confronted with a more active question of agency and responsibility, because Gus is leading a cavalry regiment to an Indian camp on a revenge mission. When Zits realizes the plan and his complicity in it, he plots to foil the mission and “get very, very lost” (85). But as Zits soon discovers, the remnant of Gus that remains in Gus’s body exists to frustrate this plan of lostness:

even though I keep thinking, *I want to be lost, I want to be lost, I want to be lost*, I can’t do it. Gus won’t let me. What it comes to is this: I can’t completely control Gus. I can move his arms and legs. I can talk with his voice. And I can think my own thoughts. But Gus is stronger than I am. His memories become my

memories, too . . . And Gus remembers—and I remember—what he saw when he came upon those slaughtered white settlers. (86)

This episode speaks to the difficulty of intentionally enacting the state of being lost, and perhaps offers a gentle critique of the way Halberstam's formulation of failure and forgetting elide the role (or lack thereof) of willed agency in those actions. At the same time, it stages the experience of empathy that foregrounds the question of individual sovereignty; in other words, this empathy does not and perhaps cannot remake the other in the image of the self. The clear distinction between the Indian boy and Zits established during the second episode, in which their memories were related but distinct, has evaporated in this next experience, as if these occupations are progressing to deeper levels of body/mind integration. "His memories become my memories, too," Zits says of Gus. "This is new. I couldn't see into the past of the other bodies I've inhabited. I'm scared that Gus might reclaim his body and drown me in his blood" (86). The stakes of this memory melding are significant, such that Zits feels threatened by the body of the white tracker seeking revenge. And yet while this potential violence is clear, it exists in tension with a deeper level of imbrication—the memories of bodily host and time-traveling inhabitant cannot be clearly separated, and so when "Gus's eyes water at the memory," Zits feels his eyes watering, too (86).

After Gus, Zits inhabits the body of Jimmy, a white pilot with his own small plane who is wracked by guilt and betrayal after unknowingly teaching a would-be terrorist to fly.<sup>60</sup> This episode is complicated by the revelation that Jimmy has been unfaithful to his wife since the attack. From the beginning, the level of connection sets this embodiment apart: "I'm inside the body of the pilot. No, I have become the pilot. I don't feel separate

from him” (107). This sense of one-ness extends to his surroundings as well, as he flies above the ocean: “I am the pilot and the clouds and the ocean and the plane” (107). While this one-ness might appear to operate only at the level of metaphor, Alexie is careful to bring us back to the deep embodiedness of Zits’s time travel: “I can feel this body remembering. Every part of you has different memories. Your fingers remember the feel of a velvet coat. Your feet remember a warm sandy beach. Your eyes remember a face” (109). The appeals to sense are reminiscent of the central work of sensation in *Bitter in the Mouth*’s representation of synesthetic archival subjectivity. Here again the repository of memory is not (or not only) the mind but also the body: it is the body that remembers, according to sensory interactions with the external world. Zits realizes that this body remembers—as all bodies remember, according to Zits—because he can *feel* this body conducting the process of memory, accessing a face: the face of Abbad, the mechanical engineer who lived in the U.S. for fifteen years before crashing a plane with his wife and child into downtown Chicago. If bodies can remember, then history and the archive are privileged but not singular in their access to memory. If bodies can remember, then history’s objectivity is complicated by a democratically subjective way of knowing, in that all bodies possess the capacity to know.<sup>61</sup>

The clearest culmination of memory as embodied, as violent, comes in the final episode, when Zits embodies a homeless Indian man he later learns is his father. Citing Hamlet, Zits asks desperately, “Who can survive such a relation?”, and indeed this episode asks for the greatest expansive empathy yet required of Zits: to empathize with his own offender (151). Accessing his father’s memories is not like the process of memory meld (with Gus) or materialization (with Jimmy). Possessed of the opportunity

he has fantasized about—to demand satisfaction from the father who abandoned him—  
Zits forces himself inside his father’s memory of that day:

I will make him remember. I will force him to remember. I will kill him if I have  
to.

And so I push against my father’s mind and soul. I crash through his fortifications  
and rampage into his memory and tear through his homes, wells, and streets, until  
I see it: the hospital where I was born. Or, rather, the memory of that hospital.

And I burst inside and race up the stairs, and back through the years, and rush  
through a door into the maternity ward hallway where my father paces. (152)

Memory is violent, here; moreover, it is *physical*. It erects fortifications to protect the city  
of memories (materialized as homes, wells, streets). When the memory of the hospital  
appears, Zits must “race up the stairs,” and this action brings him not just to a different  
space but a different time—“back through the years.” Such violence is not required  
because his father recognizes that Zits has possessed him and desires to keep such  
knowledge secret from his son; there is no indication that any of these characters know  
they are possessed, beyond a vague sense of a different agency at work that occasionally  
opposes their own. Rather, his father fights on his own behalf, Zits tells us: “he doesn’t  
want to remember the day he left me” (152). Here memory of the past is intrinsically  
violent, and forgetting is a mode of coping, surviving, living on. Memory cannot simply  
be recovered without destruction to the subject—this memory invasion, which reveals the  
psychological abuse inflicted upon Zits’s father by his own father, leaves Zits’s father  
“whipped and bloodied by his memory” (156).

To force remembrance and its related therapeutic concept, recovery, can be a violent act—at an individual level, certainly, but especially at the level of a community or people group. In the context of decolonization, David Lloyd questions whether the concepts of psychological trauma and therapeutic recovery often used to describe an individual’s response to past experience are useful formulations at the level of collective relation to the past. Lloyd argues that they are not, because the relationship of decolonization to the past incorporates “a social history and its material and institutional effects.”<sup>62</sup> To advocate a psychological model of “recovery” at the level of the formerly colonized nation or people is to facilitate the way conventional historical archives seek reconciliation with the state in the aftermath of trauma. Rather than recovery, Lloyd posits a model of *survival*—a “living on” (akin to Halberstam’s “being in the world”) that holds the potential for “producing and reproducing a life that lies athwart modernity.” To do so holds historical resolution in suspension; it sustains “the memory of alternative possibilities that live athwart the mournful logic of historicized events.”<sup>63</sup> Theorizing not reconciliative recovery but rather survivalistic living on thus entertains the “what could have been” described by Lowe; it refuses to bow to the historically determined “what-can-be-known.”

By the end of the time-travel journey, Zits has learned to appreciate, even to seek out, the deep empathy afforded by these fantastical embodiments. These bodily possessions have taught Zits how it feels to be loved as well as how it feels to betray and be betrayed. They have taught him the power of memory and the solace of forgetting. Returned to the present of the bank scene, moments before he first begins shooting, Zits purposely attempts to “step inside” the body of a young boy, jealous of the love the boy

appears to experience from his mother. But “it doesn’t work. I cannot be him” (158). The time-traveling embodiment that has allowed Zits to experience being a father (Hank Storm) and having a father (the teenage Indian) is no longer operational.

Yet without the direct embodiment, Zits still comes to experience a sense of solidarity: “I think all the people in this bank are better than I am. They have better lives than I do. Or maybe they don’t. Maybe we’re all lonely. Maybe some of them also hurtle through time and see war, war, war. Maybe we’re all in this together” (158). On the heels of this sense of collectivity, this acknowledgement of the violence that knits together epochs and individuals, and the revelation of his father’s darkest memory, Zits presents readers with “the dirtiest secret [he] own[s]” (159). It is as if, in feeling his father’s degradation and entertaining the possibility that others are lonely and exhausted by seeing “war, war, war,” he prepares to trust the readers of his own story. After his mother’s death, Zits tells us, he lived with his Aunt Zooey, who hit him when he cried for his mother and allowed her boyfriend to molest six-year-old Zits even after he informed her of the abuse. During this time, he admits, “I learned how to hide inside of myself. *I learned how to be somebody else*” (161, emphasis mine). This statement recasts the time-travel experiences that have come before as the necessary culmination of a process begun when Zits abandoned his identity (including his given name) as a necessary precursor to survival exemplary of the colonial experience. Learning how to be somebody else has for much of his life been a requirement, a mode of “living on” that his life demanded. Yet in *Flight* this learning is repurposed to the project of empathy, a project against unmediated and unmeditated revenge. In *Flight*, empathy is literally staged for Zits as an encounter between a body’s memories and his own memories. The impossibility of dual memory is

made possible, and eventually carried over, as in Oscar Wao's blank page, from the literal to the figurative: the body's memory to the process of storytelling. What is operational, even after Zits loses the ability to inhabit the body of another, is a form of empathy the novel reminds us is widely available. To truly empathize, this novel suggests, is both "to be somebody else" and, in the same moment, to be, to sense, and to remember ourselves.

### **Storytelling as Living On**

The embodied time travel of *Flight* suggests a central question about the appropriate response to betrayal and a justified desire for revenge. This question is another way of articulating the difficult relationship between presence and absence that conditions what we recognize as history. In other words, to consider betrayal and revenge reformulates the pursuit of recovery—an act that substitutes facts, details, or histories obtained in the present for the gaps of the past—in terms of restitution. To pursue revenge is to privilege memory over forgetting and to refuse tropes of the blank page, the lost book.

Each time-travel episode presents relations of betrayal. As Hank Storm, Zits facilitates the betrayal two tribe members enact against their own indigenous movement. As a Native American youth, he is confronted with the opportunity to enact revenge in the name of his old injury. While embodying Gus, Zits betrays his fellow soldiers to save an Indian boy, and as Jimmy he is unfaithful to his wife and lives in the aftermath of betrayal by a man he believed to be his friend. Finally, in the body of his homeless father, Zits is betrayed by "his" own father and in turn betrays "his" son. The final sections of the novel, from Zits's realization that he embodies his own father, through his re-

appearance at the bank and decision to surrender instead of shoot, to the scenes in which Officer Dave engineers Zits a new foster home with the officer's brother and sister-in-law, theorize an answer to the question of betrayal as they foreground the power of storytelling.

Memory as purposely shared storytelling becomes a new mode of embodiment, replacing the time travel and violence that characterize Zits's earlier episodes. Via storytelling, *Flight* shifts from a time-traveling narrative to a project of empathy that can be practiced in everyday life. Unlike the science-fictional nature of the bodily epistemology time travel engenders, the end of the novel presents an embodied empathy offered freely between strangers—a mode of living on through the process of betraying and being betrayed. This suggests that inappropriate histories engender empathy; they negotiate the conventional boundaries and relations between individuals and discard the violence of invasion in favor of a gentler mode of knowing others.

As the homeless Indian in the final time-travel sequence, Zits instigates a violent encounter with a white couple and then wanders the streets shouting, "I want some respect" (141). When a man he encounters relents ("All right, all right . . . How do I show you some respect?"), Zits is baffled: "This body wants respect. I don't know what I want. And I don't know how to define respect, for me or for this homeless guy" (143). He guesses: "'Tell me a story,' I say . . . 'something personal . . . something you haven't told anybody. Something secret'" (143). At first the man refuses on the grounds that they do not know one another, but eventually he realizes that it is precisely this unknowing that enables such an exchange.

In brief snippets of conversational dialogue, the man describes how a parakeet he purchased for his daughter flew into a pot of boiling water one evening before dinner. Rushing the bird to an emergency animal hospital, the man finds himself laughing at the scene in the veterinary ICU—the bird is “hooked up to this tiny little oxygen machine [with] this tiny oxygen tube . . . running down his throat” (148)—in front of his horrified wife and daughter, who leave him the next day. Telling this story, this man emphasizes his unlikely connection to the bird, as well as the unbidden hilarity of the extraordinary measures that actually indicate a moment of familial crisis. While the man cries, Zits asks if he can see a picture of the daughter; the man complies, and requests the same of him—a gesture that places them on a certain level of equality, furthering the mutual respect begun in the telling of the story. This unlikely relation generated by the telling of a story leads to *Flight*'s most dramatic revelation, as Zits draws out a picture from his pocket, and finds himself staring at a picture of five-year-old Zits, who he clarifies is “the real me” (150). It is only through the scene of storytelling that the photograph is revealed; wondering how the homeless man possesses such a picture, Zits finds a mirror, assesses himself as “battered, bruised, and broken,” and articulates an impossibility to match Shabine's “I'm nobody” from the epigraph to *Oscar Wao*: “I am my father” (150).

The second scene of storytelling takes place after embodied time travel has ended, as Officer Dave visits Zits in a holding cell following his surrender. Officer Dave weeps relating the details of a 9-1-1 call from earlier in the week that led him to discover two toddlers burned to death in the bath while their drug-addicted parents were passed out in the next room. Zits watches Dave carefully while the officer begins his story; when Dave looks at the ceiling “as if his memory was playing like a movie up there,” Zits looks up to

see the memory, too, but cannot: “I can’t jump into Dave’s body but I can feel and see and understand a little bit about his pain, I guess” (169). Though he does not inhabit Dave’s body, Zits admits that he can feel, see, and understand something of the officer’s pain—even if the “I guess” qualifies this sense of empathy and reminds us that fifteen-year-old Zits still finds this kind of understanding unusual. Dave’s story ends with a meditation on time, but it is not clear, because Zits has paraphrased this story rather than relating the dialogue, whether the observation belongs to Zits or Dave: “He wants to go back in time. He only needs to travel back an hour—just one hour—and he’ll be able to save those kids” (171). Expressing a wish for the ability Zits no longer possesses, this unattributed desire reinforces the extent to which our understanding of the past conditions the way we encounter the present.

*Oscar Wao* similarly posits storytelling as a mode of empathy and aesthetic betrayal. Díaz’s novel is about betrayal on multiple levels—the betrayal of Oscar’s grandfather by his friend and neighbor, who reports him to Trujillo; the betrayal of Oscar’s mother, Beli, by the Gangster; Yunior’s betrayal of Oscar in the act of illicitly reading his diary; the betrayal of Lola by Yunior, who cheats on her repeatedly during their romantic involvement. This last is particularly curious, as at least one of Lola’s narrative sections is apparently dictated to Yunior (she addresses him as “you”); his betrayal of her has not negated but perhaps facilitated their mutual storytelling. The end of *Oscar Wao* stages the power even of storytelling that is never completed. In the novel’s final pages, Lola receives a posthumous communication from her dead brother that opens out into a gesture of futurity. Eight months after Oscar’s murder, a package arrives at their New Jersey family home with two manuscripts and promise of a third:

“the new book he was writing, a book he was sending under another cover . . . (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.)” (333). But the book-as-cure never arrives, and the circumstances of this final betrayal remain unclear: “Either got lost in the mail or he was slain before he put it in the mail, or whoever he trusted to deliver it forgot” (334). A book that tantalizes Yuniors with its existence—with its insight, if Oscar’s opinion of his own work can be believed, into cosmic DNA—forever remembered for being forgotten, misplaced, or waylaid.

As Berlant says, history hurts, but not only. Nancy Peterson writes that “[o]ne of the problems of Native American history is trying to record these losses and tragedies without falling into the predominant late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century image of vanishing Indians, of totally victimized and colonized natives on the verge of extinction. On the other hand, the writer-historian cannot ignore the painful events of the past simply because they seem to lend themselves to being organized along the lines of a tragic narrative.”<sup>64</sup> This tension is dramatized in Zits’s narration by the conflicts between his 2007 knowledge via historical documentaries and the scenes he experiences while time traveling, and in *Oscar Wao* by the deployment of the blank page and the lost book. Yet perhaps each of these texts walks the line by giving our main characters a do-over. Oscar’s death does not halt the production and dissemination of his storytelling, and the novel ends with the tantalizing possibility that one day another package will arrive that contains “the cure.” Zits remembers causing the deaths of others and his own in turn, but given the choice again—presented with the opportunity to take representative agency upon himself, Ghost-Dance style—Zits recalls the earlier scene of violence and refuses to re-enact it. Returned to the bank after his time travel, Zits is faced with a choice that he

has already made—whether to open fire on a bank full of people at the insistence of his mysterious friend, Justice. “I’m supposed to kill for Justice,” he thinks. This “supposed” speaks to the temporal structure of the time-travel experience. Zits is “supposed” to kill for Justice because he already *has*—because “I did it before: a long time ago, a little while ago, a second ago” (157). Yet Zits finds himself unbound from the dictates of his own history, able to choose differently.

Many critics resist the end of *Flight*, which presents Zits at home with a foster couple who appear to truly care about him, as they take him to baseball games and tend to his acne and make pithy statements like, “A few months from now, you’ll be brand new” (180).<sup>65</sup> Critical resistance to this remark is understandable if we consider adoption as a trope for the incorporation of minoritized citizens into the nation, as I do in this project’s third chapter.<sup>66</sup> The implication that incorporation into the multicultural nation requires subjects to discard their old (inappropriate) selves in the process of transformation to proper citizens is troubling. Yet we should not forget that this is a transformation for which Zits longs deeply; the desire for normativization must not be summarily dismissed by cultural critics on behalf of those racialized outsiders who seek inclusion. And the novel implies that this “brand new” self—unspotted, adopted—hearkens back to a past self, in that Zits reveals his real name—Michael—in the novel’s final lines. The text ends with a litany of the lessons Zits (and presumably the reader) should have learned by this point:

I know the world is still a cold and cruel place.

I know that people will always go to war against each other.

I know that children will always be targets.

I know that people will always betray each other.

I know that I am a betrayer.

But I'm beginning to think I've been given a chance. I'm beginning to think I might get unlonely. (180)

At the level of plot, the narrative certainly ends optimistically. However, the final litany of what Zits knows communicates the optimism of a “chance” for Zits in the context of relentless violence of war, child victims, and betrayal. Even the portmanteau of “unlonely” is a word that registers what it is not—not lonely, certainly, but also not befriended, in the world where people betray one another and we participate in that betrayal.

Perhaps betrayal, like forgetting, is a traumatic act that nonetheless allows for new ways of remembering, of writing histories. Crystal Parikh describes the “after” of betrayal as “a new world of meanings and relations, brought into existence by betrayal, into which the subject is thrown.”<sup>67</sup> This is not to romanticize betrayal or gloss over the deep injustices perpetrated by a nation that betrays its minority subjects through regimes of dispossession and enslavement and a general failure to uphold the principles of equal protection upon which it claims to be founded. It is not to forget that incommensurate betrayals can also be enacted by minority subjects against a nation (treason, in a literal or figurative sense) or other minority subjects (for example, by economic exploitation or political representation). Rather, it is to suggest that betrayal, for all its associated trauma, illuminates existing attachments—even as they are ruptured—and engenders new ways of living, or living on.

Betrayals “can open a future that is unimaginable and unintelligible from within the bonds of fidelity and identification.”<sup>68</sup> Relationships of betrayal operate at the level of the political or collective and at the level of the intimate and the affective. Yet Parikh also suggests the possibility of something like an aesthetic betrayal when she describes how treating certain narratives as “exemplary and performative as an ethics of betrayal,” as she does in her study, reveals that such texts “always already betray the identity politics of representation that are so often attributed to them.”<sup>69</sup> What is the relationship between betrayal and empathy? Both establish the relation, generally one of obligation, between self and other that is grounded in the ethical. To betray is to suspend empathy, or refuse its call, but not to negate the self-other relation at empathy’s core. To empathize is to feel another’s pain at being betrayed—or any other emotion—at a greater level of remove. Both betrayal and empathy engender a future not predicated on identification—on sameness—but on difference.

## **Conclusion**

In interviews, Junot Díaz and Sherman Alexie have both expounded on the theories of history they believe their novels invoke and deploy. Alexie characterizes Native American literature as widely nostalgic for the purity of reservation identity: “very few of the top 30 or 40 Native writers publishing now grew up on the reservation, and yet most Native literature is about the reservation . . . a time when we were all together and our identity was sure.”<sup>70</sup> Junot Díaz argues that “part of what allows us to move through the contemporary world is not knowing anything about how [it] was born.”<sup>71</sup>

But in July of 2013, Junot Díaz took authorial commentary and paratextuality to a new level, releasing a self-annotated section of *Oscar Wao* via the poetry section of the

website Rap Genius.<sup>72</sup> Originally conceived as a space for the collective annotation and explication of rap music lyrics (think Wikipedia for explaining rap allusions), Rap Genius began to branch out in late 2012 after a multi-million dollar investment from a venture capital firm, as users annotated works like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.<sup>73</sup> The site announced its newest set of verified annotations with a Facebook link on July 23, 2013, titled "The Brief Wondrous Annotations of Junot Díaz."<sup>74</sup> A literal aesthetic betrayal, in the sense that Díaz invades the sacrosanct space of the text to amplify, moderate, and personalize, this move theorizes an understanding of texts and of history as open, circulating forces. Perhaps this gesture can also be understood as a discursive betrayal of the literary prestige that accrued to the Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel in the gesture to the editor-readers of Rap Genius as the appropriate audience with whom to amplify his text.

From a literary studies perspective, Díaz's choice of excerpt seems incongruous, a brief section near the end of the novel about the first time La Inca heard rumors that Belicia was still alive: "For two days she didn't want to believe. People were always starting rumors about everything in Santo Domingo. Didn't want to believe that the girl could have survived, could be alive in Outer Ázua, of all places" (256). Yet upon closer inspection this excerpt registers the dynamic between knowledge and the refusal of knowledge alongside the way rumors and truth coalesce to challenge accepted narratives. It also includes a textual footnote, which Díaz annotates along with the body text. Footnote number thirty-two begins with a reference to readers' knowledge (or lack thereof) of the Dominican Republic, a familiar theme: "Those of you who know the Island . . . know exactly the landscape I'm talking about" (256). The region, Yuniór as

footnote narrator continues, “resembled the irradiated terrains from those-end-of-the-world scenarios that Oscar loved so much”; he goes on to list eleven imaginary worlds from the realms of works like Star Trek’s *The Wrath of Khan*, *Dune*, and *Star Wars*.

In annotating this excerpt and its textual footnote, Díaz engages in the kind of discursive play that readers of *Oscar Wao* have come to expect. Specifically, he footnotes the footnote itself, creating a hyperlink to the number “32” that leads to an in-annotation discussion of the novel’s use of footnotes: “This is one of my Melville footnotes, where I simply go buckwild,” Díaz writes in the second of twenty-one RapGenius annotations. “The first editor I had on this novel wanted me to cut the footnotes. I’m so glad the second editor thought they were as important as I did to the book’s point about what narratives we authorize what [sic] narratives we don’t.” Here Díaz endorses the many literary scholars who read the interplay of text and footnote in the novel as drawing attention to the hierarchies of narrative and questions of authorization that always attend to the writing of histories.<sup>75</sup>

The Rap Genius annotations draw not only upon his publishing history but also his personal history. Of the footnote’s reference to the Cursed Earth, from the *Planet of the Apes*, Díaz writes in his ninth annotation, “When I saw the first best film and scoped those landscapes I was convinced that they had filmed in Ázua. Everything looked like Ázua to me in those days; I was desperate for any connection to the homeland in those first lonely years in [New Jersey].” Explaining that Tatooine, the home planet of Anakin and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, is “either the first or second most famous desert planet in nerd-dom,” Díaz says, “Again when I saw those landscapes in *Star Wars* I felt a surge of kinship. Shit, on first viewing I also thought my man’s name was Juan Kenobi. But that’s

what happens when you're an immigrant kid of color in a culture that erases your community completely. You start inventing filiations." Like the impossible memories that populate and undergird the affective histories of this novel, Díaz's invented filiations register a kind of misremembering and forgetting.

Díaz's annotations engage with and collapse the three levels of discourse this project invokes: text, discourse, politics. At the textual level, Díaz reactivates and reinscribes the unconventional literariness of *Oscar Wao*, descending further into the published novel's crevasse of self-reflexive textual and paratextual commentary to footnote the footnotes. Most obviously, these annotations operate at the level of discourse to foreground the process of discursive construction: the authorial intentions and affective connections that drove Díaz, the editorial battles he waged to preserve the literary form of his text, and the invocation of an active readership implied in the act of providing explanatory annotations via a public website. To do so suggests an openness to text and discourse, even to history. He specifically references magical realism, the Latin American-influenced genre in which many critics place him, avowing instead, "I'm way more SF [sci-fi] than magical realista." In the same breath, he reinforces the imbrications between "real" and fictional—he sees Ázua in the planets of the apes and understands the Dominican Republic as best described by references to Star Wars and Star Trek.

Furthermore, Díaz advocates an understanding of his novel both as historically situated and as utterly fictional. While the novel's footnote describes his mother's near-death experience from rheumatic fever and how her uncles had already bought her coffin by the time she recovered, the twenty-third annotation admits that "[t]he coffin part of that sentence is true but it wasn't fever that nearly killed my mom—it was getting herself

lost up in the highlands of Azua.” She only came down, Díaz claims, because she “came upon a talking mongoose in the brush that led her back to civilization,” an anecdote that *Oscar Wao* repurposes in twin episodes where a mongoose rescues Belicia Cabral and her son Oscar. Finally, the annotations invoke the realm of the political economy to foreground the process of diaspora that Díaz experienced and to implicate this diasporic identity as crucial to the writing of the novel: the boy who exists as “an immigrant kid of color in a culture that erases your community completely,” who “invent[s] filiations” and hears “Juan Kenobi” and sees Azua in the fictionalized planets portrayed in movies of his childhood. To invent origins; to situate origins in the realm of science fiction; to employ literature to critique the ideologies of History—these are the projects of inappropriate histories.

Inappropriate histories like *Oscar Wao* and *Flight* stage memory and forgetting as equal partners and filter historical knowledge through the questions of access that memory raises. They exuberantly collide the problem-space of contemporary reading and writing with problem-spaces of the past to emphasize the intertwined nature of those seemingly discrete designations of past, present, and future. They question how and why we remember and even why we formulate questions of race, identity and subjectivity in terms of remembering and forgetting in the first place. Inappropriate histories blur the line between empathy and betrayal, unwilling to ascribe only good to one act and only bad to the other. Instead, they suggest that both impulses can produce a critical reflexivity that suspends certainty and refuses to demand a particular kind of past in service of an overdetermined future.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Genette's *Paratexts* makes clear the orientation of epigraphs: the reader. Presenting an epigraph is "always a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader," Genette suggests, emphasizing that epigraphs are not produced but consumed (156, 160).

<sup>2</sup> Alexie's preferred term for members of indigenous tribes in the Americas is "Indian." In general, this chapter will align with his usage in relation to *Flight*, employing the term Indian to designate characters in Alexie's fiction, while using the term "Native American" to reference an indigenous political identity.

<sup>3</sup> Ramón Saldívar reads "the oscillation between 'nobody' and 'a nation'" as "reflect[ing] the anxiety of belonging" and emphasizes that the construction "does not imagine redemption in the dispersal of identity" (586). In other words, this choice of epigraph is not a celebration of diaspora.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" 219.

<sup>5</sup> *Conscripts of Modernity* 7. Scott's original question reads, "Does the anticolonial demand for a certain kind of postcolonial future oblige its histories to produce certain kinds of pasts?"

<sup>6</sup> PRWORA's introductory section concludes, "in light of this demonstration of the crisis in our Nation, it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are very important Government interests" (Sec. 101, No. 10)

<sup>7</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder* 13, 15 (emphasis original).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 16, 2. The full claim is as follows: "But history did not end in 1965. By the time the Act was reauthorized in 2006, there had been 40 more years of it. In assessing the 'current need[]' for a preclearance system that treats States differently from one another today, that history cannot be ignored. During that time, largely because of the Voting Rights Act, voting tests were abolished, disparities in voter registration and turnout due to race were erased, and African-Americans attained political office in record numbers. And yet the coverage formula that Congress reauthorized in 2006 ignores these developments, keeping the focus on decades-old data relevant to decades-old problems, rather than current data reflecting current needs.

The Fifteenth Amendment commands that the right to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race or color, and it gives Congress the power to enforce that command. The Amendment is not designed to punish for the past; its purpose is to ensure a better future" (20).

<sup>9</sup> *Represent and Destroy* 147.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* xxi.

<sup>11</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 11. For an example of the production of American exceptionalism, see the discussion of John Ashcroft's treatise on the USA PATRIOT Act in the introduction.

<sup>12</sup> "The Intimacies of Four Continents" 207-08.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Liz Smith for this formulation.

<sup>14</sup> *Represent and Destroy* xxi.

<sup>15</sup> During an interview with NPR, Alexie cites these last two characterizations as criticisms leveled at *Flight*.

<sup>16</sup> *The Queer Art of Failure* 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>19</sup> David Scott understands Foucault's "history of the present" to mean not only that the past can only be known through the present, but also that "morally and politically what ought to be at stake in historical inquiry is a critical appraisal of the present itself, not the mere reconstruction of the past" (41).

<sup>20</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Futures Past* 259.

<sup>23</sup> Kakutani.

<sup>24</sup> Asim.

<sup>25</sup> Barbrash.

<sup>26</sup> "Concocting Terrorism off the Reservation" 37. Salaita argues that "both Indians and Muslims in Alexie's fiction question sociopolitical orthodoxies, but both rely on orthodox assumptions about the limits of intercultural engagement—those assumptions finally concede the existence of inalterable difference among humans. That concession is one of the hallmarks of liberal Orientalism, an attitude that extols difference but only in a limited context of deference to nationalist sensibilities. (These nationalist sensibilities are not the same as military nationalism or ethnonationalism; rather, it is a nationalism of liberal American exuberance, a celebration of exceptionalism, a panegyric of secular modernity.)" (39).

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<sup>27</sup> 522-23.

<sup>28</sup> 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Represent and Destroy* xxii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 203.

<sup>31</sup> “Migrant Archives” 47.

<sup>32</sup> “Concocting Terrorism off the Reservation” 23.

<sup>33</sup> Faber. In the same interview, Diaz claims that *Oscar Wao* “was an American project” and that “the Dominican Republic was just a means to an end...[it] was standing in for the New World, how the world was forged, what we call the Americas.” Later: “if you remove the mask of Trujillo, what you find is the United States, and if you remove the mask of the United States, what you find is Trujillo.”

<sup>34</sup> *Against Amnesia* 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 5, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Lowe 206, italics original.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 206, 207.

<sup>38</sup> *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*.

<sup>39</sup> Lowe 208. Nancy Peterson describes this another way: “The conventions of history do not allow imaginative speculation to restore the record, and so literary texts are essential, if not to restore the record through speculation, to mark the spaces, gaps, aporias that cannot be filled” (9).

<sup>40</sup> Halberstam 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

<sup>43</sup> Halberstam 82. Peterson, writing about Native American literature, argues that “telling the history of...dispossession can paradoxically make it possible to narrate a history of...survival and cultural continuance” (35).

<sup>44</sup> In our eagerness to align racism with the interests of the state and conservative politics, Stoler argues that we miss the utopian—even progressive—ideals that often underlie racist discourse. Paraphrasing Foucault, Stoler identifies one reason for the mobility of racial logics: “racial discourses contain both ‘erudite’ and ‘subjugated’ knowledge...racial discourse has not, as often assumed, always positioned itself as a narrative/history of those allied with state power, but at different moments as a...‘counter narrative/history’ of those contesting the state’s legitimate claims to rule” (192). In this sense, racism—whether colonial or national—promises progress via a return to the valorized and now lost past.

<sup>45</sup> “Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth” 198-99.

<sup>46</sup> J.D. Saldívar 124

<sup>47</sup> This dynamic is dramatized by Oscar himself, as Junot Díaz suggested in an interview: “the deeper into Oscar’s life we push, in fact, the more present his history becomes. What’s interesting is that it’s a history that he’s completely unaware of and never becomes aware of. In a way, the only person who gets to assemble all the pieces is the reader” (Faber).

<sup>48</sup> “Reassembling the Fragments” 500.

<sup>49</sup> “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction” 585. Saldívar’s larger project traces twenty-first century “postrace” fiction by authors born in the 1960s and 70s who experience the Civil Rights movement as history, not memory. His work reformulates “postrace” as a term that indicates not teleology (as the designation “postracial” comes to mean under neoliberal multiculturalism) but ontology: it refers to “the logic of something having been ‘shaped as a consequence of’ imperialism and racism” and is meant to mark a critical aesthetic difference between twentieth- and twenty-first century U.S. ethnic fiction (575). Saldívar’s work on historical fantasy is parallel though not congruent to this investigation of inappropriate histories. He identifies and investigates a meaningful shift in contemporary U.S. literature toward formal innovation that links history and political desire—a genealogy this project traces—to consider “the new aesthetic...created to deal with the meaning of race in a time when race supposedly no longer matters” (575). In contrast, I examine postracialism as a neoliberal multicultural discourse that is interwoven with a larger ideological apparatus of propriety to consider not only how minority discourse engages with colorblindness but also what operates in racism’s stead.

<sup>50</sup> 333. Esta página se intersta en blanco. Durante muchos años permanecerá muda, pero un día hablará, para que su voz sea recogida por la historia. Callada, como una tumba cuyo secreto a voces se levantará, acusador, cuando el tiempo permita levantar la losa bajo la cual permanece yacente la verdad. Su contenido

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se deja en manos de una persona amiga que por razones de edad está supuesta a sobrevivirme y que ha sido encardaga por mí de harcelo público algunos años después de mi muerte.

<sup>51</sup> Such a reconstruction can “only take place in the literary realm,” Hanna argues, because “traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by accepted forms of evidence whereas Yuniors history explicitly relies on imagination and invention” (504).

<sup>52</sup> Berglund xxv.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson 230.

<sup>54</sup> “Race Under Representation” 222.

<sup>55</sup> One benefit of failure, Halberstam argues, is that it “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (3).

<sup>56</sup> The exceptions to the novel’s present-tense narration come in moments when Zits resorts to histories he’s read or seen on television to flesh out the details of the scene before him. Such moments include the first episode, when he observes the back-channel dealings between the FBI and a native sovereignty movement, and the second embodiment, when Zits encounters Crazy Horse waiting for Custer’s cavalry to attack an Indian camp. He recognizes Horse and Elk, two members of the fictionalized Indigenous Rights Now! (IRON) movement, from “this documentary about the civil war in Red River” (46), while his knowledge of Little Bighorn (narrated in the past tense) is from books and “a TV show about it on the History Channel” (71). Zits recognizes the figure of Sitting Bull, the Lakota holy man and chief who had a vision of Custer’s defeat, because he matches “the history-book pictorials” (68).

<sup>57</sup> I am especially interested in this question in light of Sherman Alexie’s claim, in an interview published in *MELUS* in 2005, about the mathematics of ethnicity that attends Native American identity: “As you grow up as an Indian, you know mathematically for certain your ethnicity. I’m 13/16 Indian. Everything is assigned and valued and placed. When I was born, I had a social security number and a tribal identification number” (167). Zits occupies a life outside of this certainty.

<sup>58</sup> Shortly after this scene, however, Zits encounters a light-skinned, brown-haired warrior that he realizes is Crazy Horse, the “mystical warrior...the magical one. Bullets couldn’t hit him. He could never be photographed. He was a holy ghost” (67-68). Looking into the gold-colored eyes of the figure next to him, Zits thinks, “the greatest warrior in Sioux history is a half-breed mystery...this legendary killer of white men is half white, like me” (68). This observation reinforces the extent to which Zits turns to a constructed past to authorize his identity in the present.

<sup>59</sup> Later in the novel, while Zits inhabits Jimmy, he compares Jimmy’s relationship to his plane as he washes it to Zits’s relationship to his mother: “I remember my mother naming my parts as she bathed me. How could I remember that? I was just a baby...Do I really remember that? Or am I pretending to remember it?” (113). The power of such memories prompts Zits to question their validity, yet in the end he reclaims the possibilities such impossible memories present.

<sup>60</sup> Steven Salaita argues that the Jimmy episode is notable for the extent to which it seems “out of place...in relation to Zits’s other experiences in time travel” in that “Alexie discards the novel’s oblique Indian motifs in favor of an ethical analysis of violence and racial profiling in post-9/11 America” (34). Yet this chapter’s emphasis on degrees of embodied empathy and impossible memory emphasize the coherence of this section rather than its thematic divergence.

<sup>61</sup> This quality of materiality is reinforced by the descriptions of Jimmy’s memories of Abbad, for the process of remembering Abbad makes him appear: “I look over in the empty seat beside me, and Abbad is there. Or the memory of him is there. Or his ghost is there” (110). Though Abbad’s ontological status in the scenes between them – a memory, a ghost, a living body – might be unclear, Zits’s narration suggests something embodied about Jimmy’s memory of his friend. In later scenes, Abbad “appears again” (113), “suddenly materializes” (120), and “materializes” (128). These claims about the status of memory, about the body that is remembered, reinforce the description of body as remembering force.

<sup>62</sup> “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recover?” 212.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 219, 228.

<sup>64</sup> *Against Amnesia* 21.

<sup>65</sup> Jan Johnson calls it “a remarkably happy ending, one that seems too perfect given the degree of trauma the narrative describes” (233).

<sup>66</sup> Discussing tropes of adoption in Alexie’s earlier fiction, Margaret Homans reads *Indian Killer* (1996) as using adoption “to tell a larger story about, indeed to allegorize, racial alienation” (19). She further suggests

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that “adoption offers a particularly charged and vivid case of the difficulty both of establishing origins and of doing without them, in a life or in a narrative. Adoption is not unique in making origins elusive as well as alluring, but through its presentation of an extreme case of ‘obscured beginnings’ adoption offers a new avenue into thinking about how narratives treat origins” (22).

<sup>67</sup> *An Ethics of Betrayal* 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>70</sup> Nygren 154.

<sup>71</sup> Faber.

<sup>72</sup> See the full annotated excerpt, including several attached images, at <http://poetry.rapgenius.com/Junot-diaz-the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-excerpt-lyrics>

<sup>73</sup> Donnelly.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RapGenius/posts/10151750714398259>

<sup>75</sup> Arguing that the novel demotes “the dominant narrative of the nation” to footnotes, Juanita Herdia suggests that this move allows “traditionally silenced voices” to be magnified (210). Tim Lanzendorfer reads the novel as an ambiguous narrative coupled to unambiguous footnotes, suggesting that the footnotes direct our interpretations even in moments when the narrative appears to offer readers a choice (133). T.S. Miller argues that the footnotes and the narration should be understood as two different texts; beyond “their undercutting of the principal narration,” the footnotes “provid[e] an outlet for Yunior’s historiographical impulse: his secret history becomes marginal in multiple ways, a history told from the margins and *in* the margins” (96). See also Elena Machado Sáez.

## Epilogue

This project began as little more than a hunch that inappropriateness had something to tell us about the contemporary moment: about minoritized subjectivity, about aesthetic production and cultural politics, about persistent economic, social, and political inequality; and about how literary works by ethnic writers engage with and illuminate these conditions. My analysis commenced with a novel that does not appear in the final dissertation, Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), and with Mona's disturbing sense that the roles she was expected to perform—"proper best friend," "proper sister . . . proper daughter . . . proper student" (110)—fit her just as poorly as department store clothes sized for Anglo-American bodies. As the project took shape into the taxonomy of inappropriateness presented here (and as it became clear that I already had too many Asian American writers for a comparative ethnic literature dissertation), *Mona* was set aside. Yet the evocative resonances of her articulation of minoritized expectation—the repeated insistence on propriety and especially the framing of this dilemma in racial and economic terms, as the difficulty of purchasing clothes for her tiny Chinese American frame—carry through this project's final iteration. Mona's inappropriateness was suggestive, as was her choice to exacerbate the automatic inappropriateness of racialized U.S. citizenship by embracing and performing other modes of impropriety, most notably having sex and converting to Judaism, which disrupted her relation to her family and to Chinese American immigrant culture more broadly.

From these early thoughts, this study passed through several phases, each suggesting something richer about the kind of intervention inappropriateness might offer

to U.S. ethnic studies and American literary studies. I began with an interest in the fundamental inappropriateness of the literary: both its always inadequate attempt to represent the real by way of the non-real and the inappropriateness of positing the literary as a space of meaningful political critique and engagement. An initial interest in representations of curious forms, like ekphrasis of diseased bodies, embodied archives, and literary histories, was contextualized by a tentative periodization: neoliberal postracialization. Finally I concluded that the inappropriate literary and political acts and representations I was investigating arose in relation to a pervasive hegemonic force that calls for ethnic subjects, writers and texts to be representative and transparent—to perform their difference in a limited variety of acceptable modes. And so the scope of my study came to encompass not only inappropriateness but its inverse: appropriateness as a hegemonic disciplinary apparatus.

Propriety has been a crucial component of liberal subjectivity since the Enlightenment period, when it was theorized as a partner and precursor to liberty itself. In various guises, propriety accompanied Western colonialism's efforts to subjugate the globe, extending the effective life of colonization by equipping racial formations with the flexibility to account for and regulate class, caste, and other categories of difference. The power of propriety I describe in this study must be understood in the context of this genealogy, yet the contemporary contours of propriety with which this dissertation grapples differ significantly from its colonial and enlightenment legacies. In its contemporary form, propriety not only attends the work of racialization but in fact supplants it, fundamentally enabling the continuing minoritization of racialized subjects while allowing for the simultaneous propagation of the narrative of colorblindness that

has captured the U.S. national imaginary. To say that propriety as an ideological apparatus produces the appropriate minoritized subjects required of global neoliberal capitalism is not to ignore the ways that all contemporary subjects are called upon at times to conform to propriety's dictates regarding public discourse, political engagement and social norms. But propriety as an ideological apparatus is different in scale and in degree: it names a discourse that takes the place of race in a postracial era, openly discriminating along racial lines while appearing straightforwardly fair, or even morally good. This discourse produces the figure of the appropriate ethnic subject and then provisionally extends the benefits of whiteness to individual subjects who adhere to its shifting and conditional dictates in pursuit of the ever-elusive "good life."

Inappropriateness rearticulates difference by refusing neoliberalism's collapse into difference-as-sameness and by positing difference as more than otherness—as critical strategy, aesthetic practice, and affective attachment. Like the inappropriate Other theorized by Trinh T. Minh-ha, inappropriateness unsettles difference and identity by performing them concurrently. The implications of this study for U.S. ethnic studies are therefore profound. Since the mid-twentieth century and especially since the entrenchment of multiculturalism in the 1980s, overt appeals to race and discriminatory actions, policies and speech have fallen out of favor. Structural racism is downplayed and disavowed, and individual racist acts are explained away as the moral failing of particular individuals. As ethnic studies seeks to understand the relationship between declarations of postracialism on the one hand and continued material inequality on the other, my work details the way that the discourse of propriety allows, even encourages, Americans to employ apparently non-racial language that covertly identifies racially essentialist causes

for contemporary inequalities in employment, education, home ownership, and incarceration. This project illuminates the centrality of offensive but otherwise seemingly innocuous appeals to normativity for contemporary racial formation.

My conclusions also critique the ways American literary studies are institutionally organized, and to what ends. In terms of teaching and curriculum design, many students encounter ethnic literatures only after these literatures have been cordoned into general education courses designed to help students “understand plural societies,” to quote from the learning outcomes of my own institution—a weighty task for a single semester’s worth of novels, poetry, and short stories. This curricular organization is an example of the historical division between aesthetic greatness and political difference that encourages us to read literature by minoritized writers for information about difference. Hierarchized in this way, ethnic literatures are vulnerable to co-optation by neoliberal forces that would employ them to educate the next generation of a multicultural global workforce, maximizing the economic benefits of diversity and occluding the questions posed by knottier articulations of difference. Furthermore, when it comes to literary studies research agendas, my work reinforces the significance of comparative methods. Mindful of the different traditions and cultural contexts out of which the works studied here arise, I would nonetheless suggest that my identification of propriety as an ideological apparatus would never have materialized if this were a project about any ethnic literary tradition in isolation. Attempting to be undisciplined with regard to the disciplinary expectations of contemporary literary study, I have been able to articulate a sense of structural normativity that extends from public policy and (post)identity political

movements to the most private corners of contemporary life: home, family, individual sovereignty.

This project therefore posits inappropriateness as a model for contemporary literary studies. As a political and aesthetic category that indexes both subjectivity (the formation of inappropriate subjects) and epistemology (the creation of alternative modes of knowing and bodies of knowledge), inappropriateness suggests a starting point for critique of the postidentitarian status quo and theorization of alternatives to it that draw upon embodied, individual, unofficial ways of knowing. Inappropriateness does not discard inherited forms of knowledge like archives and histories—it re-imagines their location and impetus, in the process illuminating their affective features and potentialities. To do so reclaims these historically meaningful ways of knowing and forms of critique from neoliberal hegemony.

Each of these chapters does so by reading ethnic literatures as theoretically and aesthetically significant. These texts critique the institutional and disciplinary imperatives that condition American literary studies and ethnic studies. In place of mastery, consolidated official knowledges, and sanctioned genealogies, these novels present unanswered mysteries, unexplained time travel, rematerialized bodies, curious medical conditions, and open archives. This study of propriety and inappropriateness investigates inscribed silences—moments when literary texts suggestively conjure tropes of absence as a way of theorizing the presence of absence: the lost book, the blank page, the mysterious trailer fire, the untransmittable taste, the ghost, the elided migration. All gesture to Lisa Lowe's call to attend to the politics of our lack of knowledge—the

significance of these absences and of attempts at the textual, disciplinary, and political level to fill them.

In its multiscalar intervention, this project poses a set of literary, political, and theoretical questions about the study of ethnic literature under neoliberal multiculturalism. In terms of literariness and literary study, what formal innovations have contemporary writers generated in order to represent the political subject and the subject of literature? What is the effect of contemporary literary works that reveal and revel in their own exteriority, for example through paratextual elements, or the flouting of genre convention, or the breaking of their own frames? How do literary texts explore the space of literariness as a challenge to the commodification of literature, as in the elisions and silences performed by first-person narrators—the fact of Linda’s race in *Bitter in the Mouth*, Zits’s real name in *Flight*, Hata’s Korean ancestry in *A Gesture Life*? On a political and cultural level, what is the significance of the way the discipline of U.S. literary studies organizes and codifies its textual objects? How do minoritized writers write race back into the national postracial imaginary? Can the strategies by which literature resists co-optation by neoliberal multiculturalism translate into the realm of political action and critique? What is gained and lost in the tropes, for example adoption, by which we conceptualize contemporary citizenship? On a theoretical valence, how does form operate as a condition of political possibility? What forms does inappropriate agency take and how do they relate to conceptions of (un)stable liberal sovereignty? What are the ethical implications of inappropriateness, for example, the possibilities of an aesthetics of empathy based in storytelling?

Theorizing these forces in terms of appropriateness and inappropriateness requires this project to contend with certain complexities, particularly involving the convolutedness of inappropriate agency—whether appropriateness or inappropriateness can actually be chosen, and to what extent, by contemporary subjects. The question of agency haunts my theorization of inappropriate literatures: is this set of acts, affects and representations dependent on the intentions of these ethnic writers? As this project is revised and expanded, I will conduct an analysis of institutional shifts in the publishing industry and mass media writ large, in order to better situate these ethnic writers as products and drivers of contemporary changes in publication, reception, and readership. At the level of political economy, the conditional nature of hegemonic propriety invites subjects to feel they are choosing to perform properly in their social, economic, political and cultural encounters; those who choose wisely are rewarded with ensuing privileges. Yet this appearance of agency is always circumscribed by appropriateness as an ideological apparatus that invites consent but predetermines who can qualify as appropriate, and on what terms. The paradox of inappropriate agency takes shape more fully when we consider figures who are not invited to choose appropriateness even provisionally, and thus whose performances of appropriateness always depend on stealth: most notably, for future iterations of this work, trans and gender nonconforming people and illegal immigrants.

Certain throughlines have emerged as a consequence of the analyses I conduct in this dissertation. The first is a preoccupation with time, which begins with the project's sense of its own untimeliness, or what I term the prematurity of writing a history of the present in the midst of its unfolding. While the shared historical sense evinced by these

literary works allays some of my analytical anxiety, to be premature in terms of scholarly endeavor is to risk imprecision and revision. In the time of literary study, as institutional and disciplinary imperatives shift, do inappropriate texts that critique them become appropriate—in other words, is inappropriateness always a potentially temporary condition? I also investigate the (un)timeliness of particular forms, like the appropriate inappropriateness of contemporary realism. At the level of representation, the texts examined in this dissertation illuminate the complexities of contemporary senses of time, as in the condensed timeline of *A Gesture Life*, which pulls twentieth-century history inexorably toward turn of the twenty-first century, or *Flight*'s narrative of a boy unstuck in time that is introduced by a nonsensical epigraph—"Poo-tee-weet?"—from *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s final avian witness. These repeated intersections between inappropriateness and time suggest how much the state and project of inappropriateness is conditioned by its placement in time—and further, that repressing the fluidity and uncertainty of time is a linchpin for the ideological apparatus of propriety and, consequently, a site of propriety's vulnerability.

Sketching the contours of inappropriateness also intersects with surprising frequency with the space of family and kinship, including the family as the always-deferred prerequisite to the good life, kinship (or its lack) as a frame that produces outsider status and an attendant epistemological inappropriateness, and the family as a metaphor for particular forms of citizenship. Recent work by David Eng and Lauren Berlant illuminates how ideological battles once contested on public terrain have transitioned to the realm of the private—what Eng calls the racialization of intimacy. The analyses in this dissertation extend Eng's claims to suggest that propriety's need for the

proper family space reveals the centrality of intimate, affective power and self-policing to its continued hegemony. While *A Gesture Life* posits (and then undermines) the “normal” family as a precursor for minoritized citizenship, *Bitter in the Mouth* investigates the limits of familial relation in Linda’s musings on the reciprocity of favoring—“I favor you (your eyes, your chin). You favor me (with love and attention),” a “biological imperative” and “primal vanity” that renders precarious those subjects of the family, and the nation, whose appearance does not elicit this mutual relation. Family spaces enable exploitation and abuse in *My Brother* and *Flight*, yet familial or kinship relations based not in biology but in choice simultaneously become sites from which inappropriate subjectivity and knowledge formation can be enacted. These examples reinforce the relationality of inappropriateness—while inappropriateness does not require the nuclear family hailed by propriety, it nonetheless is not performed in isolation.

As this project draws to a preliminary close, certain questions remain, especially about the performative ethics of inappropriateness. What is the “after” of inappropriateness—what are its ends? What responsibilities inhere to it? As alluded to earlier on the level of the political economy, how do we account for those who cannot “choose” appropriateness, who are unable to align with the model of propriety neoliberalism perpetuates? What improper relations does inappropriateness establish, and how do those relations—between minoritized subjects, between the political subject and the subject of literature—disrupt the smooth functionality of neoliberalism’s production and management of appropriate difference? The work of theorizing inappropriateness is far from complete. Yet as this dissertation has argued, the aesthetic is a space that produces difference and from which difference can be reimagined. I suggest that

inappropriateness presents a particular strategy for the rearticulation of difference that clarifies the constitutive relationship between aesthetics and difference and resists racialized propriety's transformation of difference into diversity.

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