

OTHERWISE THAN NEOLIBERALISM: THE AESTHETICS OF FAILURE IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This study focuses on failure in contemporary American literature. It reads literary texts that foreground failure as responses to the social and economic conditions of neoliberalism, proposing that these texts disclose ethical alternatives to everyday life. The literary texts at the core of this study—be they novels, plays, poems, or short stories—share a commitment to the future, one in which social interdependence as well as responsibility for the wellbeing of others would supplant the egoistic desires abetted by neoliberalism. In each text, failures such as performing badly, implacable unhappiness, and family dysfunction open onto better social arrangements. This study turns to Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy to flesh out its central argument. Levinas understands the self as fundamentally co-implicated with the Other, and it is this constitutive openness to alterity to which the study's literary texts orient readers and/or audiences.

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Introduction: Addressing Failure with an Ethical Mode of Analysis

Only the meaning of the other is irrecusable, and forbids the reclusion and reentry into the shell of the self. A voice comes from the other shore.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being; or Beyond Essence*

For tenderness between people is nothing other than awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose, a solace still glimpsed by those embroiled in purposes.

—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

On July 16, 1992, William Jefferson Clinton accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Before a partisan crowd, he announced that his presidency would mark the birth of a "New Covenant"—a quasi-religious pact between the state and its constituents that would mean "more than opportunities and responsibilities for you and your families." Occasioning change beyond such narrow limits, this relationship was to be about "our common community":

Look beyond the stereotypes that blind us. We need each other—all of us—we need each other. We don't have a person to waste, and yet for too long politicians have told the most of us that are doing all right that what's really wrong with America is the rest of us—they. Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless. Them, the people with disabilities. Them, the gays.

[. . .] But this is America. There is no them. There is only us. ("Address")

In a rhetorical negation of the negation, Clinton insisted on the togetherness of the American social body by first providing a list of groups who had had the stigma of failure, non-normativity, and negativity ascribed to them. According to his logic, recognizing that there are those who have occupied the structural position of failure is the precondition of national unity. His list makes manifest an important dimension of the liberal-democratic order in the United States: failure is as much a material and economic reality as it is a socially constructed fiction. To be *not*

“all right” is to occupy a subject position characterized not only by financial insecurity but by its deviation from a set of cultural and institutional norms. As I describe below, Clinton’s call for the equalization of life chances in the service of “our common community” was little more than symbolic gerrymandering. His administration favoured the enactment of correctional operations on the bodies of deviants over the downward redistribution of wealth, effectively extinguishing the radical energies of social interdependence. Yet his invocation of mutual responsibility invites critical examination of the gulf between living well and living collectively. What does interrogating hegemonic measures of success, of having an all-right life, disclose about the possibilities of collective living in contemporary America? What experiential modalities do such measures abet or foreclose? The logic of Clinton’s move from “them” to “us” suggests that failure provides critical distance from the political, economic, and epistemological regimes organizing the American body politic—that the multitudinous “them” inhabit the most qualified position from which to diagnose the flaws in these regimes. As I argue in *Otherwise than Neoliberalism*, attending to multiple kinds of failure offers insight into the conditions of liberal subjectivity that preclude interdependent relationality and disinterested responsibility. If failure can perform a diagnostic and pedagogical function, then it can provide a vocabulary of dissent and harbour generative *potentialities*, orienting individuals toward embryonic modalities of collective agency. By investigating contemporary American literary portrayals of failure, I seek out (im)possibilities for radical social forms that lie beyond, and therefore contest, the nation’s dominant discourses and instruments of governance.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, the language of failure has come to describe the vagaries of deregulated markets, with little attention paid to rethinking the neoliberal logic of success that regulates lives at the bottom of the pecuniary food chain. While I discuss

neoliberalism more fully below, I delineate a preliminary agenda here with the claim that such logic, setting the social coordinates of living well and comfortably, has disciplined everyday life to the extent that its contradictions and limitations are difficult to grasp. Juxtaposing literary analysis with cultural criticism brings into relief the interconnected symbolic and material conditions under which individuals thrive. Aesthetically mediated failure can critique these conditions, indicating the need for change. In a different context, such a relationship between failure and change would not seem counter-intuitive. The necessity of error for the formulation of new scientific concepts leads Michel Foucault, in one of his final articles, to question “the whole theory of the subject” (“Life” 477). He contends that the “radical feature” of life is that it “has led to a living being that is never completely in the right place, that is destined to ‘err’ and to be ‘wrong’” (476). As he explains elsewhere, subjectivity is not merely the effect of causal discourses but also an ongoing process of self-fashioning according to generalized codes of conduct.¹ This view of the subject blurs the distinction between compulsion and aspiration, such that individual agency can be regulatory. According to Foucault, failure’s productivity lies in its potential to occasion new ways of proposing oneself to the world, ways that hegemonic discourses have yet to capture and domesticate. What makes such reorientation difficult is the threat that life will become less livable; the normative routines by which individuals inhabit social worlds induce adherence because deviating options cannot promise the same level of economic and psychic comfort. Put simply, most individuals want to flourish, which means moving in prescribed ways toward the definitional sweet spot of success. In light of this point, I refuse the romance of negativity and instead probe literary renderings of failure—for example, dramas of performing badly or unhappiness—for suspensions, interruptions, and subversions of

habit, ultimately looking for what Raymond Williams would call “structures of feeling,” emergent social arrangements that develop as responses to established ones (*Marxism* 128-135).

Put differently, I read contemporary literature for transformational moments from below, where breakdowns and crises unfold in domains of ordinariness. It is, of course, derivative to contend that the aesthetic defamiliarizes the quotidian—but no less important. For the quotidian is where liberal subjectivity must negotiate its fundamental incoherence, burdened by consistent pressure from social, political, and economic forces. If these forces are difficult to perceive, it is because the banality of everyday life tends to obscure structural violence by delineating familiar scenes in which the cause and effect of individual choice are most evident. In actuality, daily life constitutes a confused nexus of chance and control, as lifeworlds are no more familiar and comforting than protean and overwhelming. Softening the slings and arrows of chance, the psychic easements of fantasy help subjects bracket contingencies as minor inconveniences cutting across a line of sight that connects individual agency to a horizon of expectation and desire.² Yet to the extent that such fantasies find increasingly less footing in the real world, contemporary literature about failure can disclose heterogeneous modalities of being and being together, new fantasies of being in relation to others. Instead of suggesting a homology between art and life, I claim that in the gap between the aesthetic and the real lies a pedagogical energy that can reshape our vision of the latter. For aesthetic worlds do not merely emerge within larger social words; as Theodor Adorno opines, they also offer a “plenipotentiary of a livable world” (*Aesthetic* 40), dialectically opposing what is real in order to suggest alternatives agleam with anti-normative potential.³

If aesthetically mediated failure highlights flaws in the structures of the world and gestures beyond them at once, then it calls for a mode of analysis that remains open to the

alterity that such structures repress. Analysis of this kind breaks from the chastening bounds of critical convention and risks sinking amid uncertain waters, as if its fate were indexed to that of the failures on which it seeks to get a better purchase.⁴ My theoretical framework in *Otherwise* draws from a variety of poststructuralist approaches, but in the main, I derive my mode of reading failure from Emmanuel Levinas's post-Enlightenment theory of ethical relationality, a conception of the ethical that extends beyond Kantian moral imperatives to describe the self's radical interdependence with the Other. Adapting this concept to the aims of literary and cultural criticism has proven difficult because it directs attention to a radical form of sociality that resists ontological domestication. By emphasizing ethics as a "first philosophy," Levinas refocuses philosophical thought, with its traditional emphasis on the monadic being of consciousness as the absolute base of subjectivity, onto a pre-ontological terrain where the self is responsible for the symbolically unmediated Other (see "Ethics" 75-88). Such responsibility is primary and irrecusable; it precedes, and therefore constitutes the condition of, the individual's emergence *qua* individual. In this light, interpellation does not separate the subject from a fundamental form of selfhood so much as alienate it from its cooperative fundament with the Other.⁵ The socially mediated fiction of sovereign subjectivity requires the endless repression of ethical alterity, and such repression relies, in turn, on the stability of the divisional social structures within which the subject's ontic existence becomes meaningful.⁶

Yet as Clinton's speech quoted above intimates, such structures have never functioned in the equal service of all citizen-subjects. This problem is constitutive of political formations *tout court*, and liberalism more specifically. Any program invested in fostering interdependence and disinterested forms of civic responsibility has to contend with the fact that privilege and resources are unequally distributed across the social field.⁷ The critical dynamism of failure lies

in its capacity to lay bare this inequality, while ethically inflected criticism illuminates the dark corners of failure in search of alternative social arrangements. By adopting an ethical mode of analysis, I argue that literary portrayals of failure allegorize the relationship between ontology and ethics. The primary literary texts of this study are sites of ethical imagining that highlight the limitations of liberal subjectivity with respect to projects of justice, equality, and collective living. And if these texts share a commitment to critiquing neoliberal reason through failure, then they are also united by a shared commitment to the future, a future in which responsibility for the wellbeing of others would supplant the egoistic pursuits abetted by social and political norms.

To be clear, my understanding of failure is capacious. Viewed in isolation, it is a vague term, and it only accrues meaning in relation to norms of success and specific circumstances. In each subsequent chapter, I attend to a particular form of failure—in turn, performing badly, unhappiness, and family dysfunction—which functions as a kind of organizing principle. With this scaffolding in place, the first task of each chapter is to demonstrate how literary representations of these specific forms of failure, be they manifest on a formal or thematic level, serve as responses to the political and economic structures that have shaped contemporary social life in the United States. The other task is analytic: if literature about failure diagnoses flaws in the systems organizing the world, systems that preclude the social interdependence that Clinton promised, what ethical visions do they harbour? Each chapter begins rather humbly before making what I can imagine will be perceived as ambitious claims. The ethically inflected analysis that preoccupies this study draws strength from Jacques Derrida’s notion of transformation through reiteration and proceeds along the lines laid out by A.R. Ammons in his book of poetry *Garbage*: that it is “in the grief of failure, loss, error” that “we find the sweet seed of / new routes” (21).⁸ Literary representations of failure do not necessarily affirm its

wrongness—such a judgement rests on shaky discursive foundations as opposed to a bed of immutable truths—but urge readers to rethink the values mediating failure’s intelligibility as such. To solicit attention to literature’s symbolic dimensions is to show the kind of work literature can do in rechanneling desire; the creative works that constitute this project’s archive urge the displacement of libidinal energy from individualized to collective forms of life.⁹ To substantiate this claim, I need to begin by outlining the historical and theoretical underpinnings of my argument.

Neoliberalism’s Assault on Collective Living

What powers my overarching argument is the growing body of evidence that ethical alternatives are particularly urgent in post-Cold War America. Accordingly, I locate my archive of primary texts in a historically specific nexus of literary production spanning 1990 to the current moment. My first aim is to highlight the social and economic conditions of this period, a move that ultimately will clarify the stakes of my subsequent literary analysis. Clinton’s speech provides a useful starting point, then. The early nineties provided, as he pointed out, “a special moment in history” (“Address”). The collapse of the Soviet Empire, America’s ideological nemesis since World War II, had established the U.S. as the symbolic bastion of free-market capitalism in a world increasingly connected by fluid capital and commodities. This watershed moment provoked Francis Fukuyama’s vatic assertion that the worldwide community, no longer embroiled in the ideological agon between liberalism and state-administered communism, had reached the end of history. Without the ostensible threat of communist subversion, this period also marked a transitional phase for America and provided a chance to abandon its shameful history. Uttered when Americans had not yet decided on a new symbolic pact to replace Cold War anticommunism, Clinton’s speech was meant to level any residual hierarchies and

inaugurate in their place an inclusionary social order. Here was the Democratic nominee conjuring up the past, with its lamentable divisions, discriminations, and paranoia, only to exorcise it with one fell swoop—and by projecting antagonisms within the social body onto the past, he could suture outsiders to a new social fabric.

Yet hindsight suggests bad faith, for his rhetorical dialectics foundered on the shoals of irreconcilable contradiction. The problem was that his neoliberal policies were inimical to collective growth—policies that were not all that different from those enacted by his Republican predecessors and that have remained largely unchanged since the nineties. At the dawn of an era immediately following years of politico-economic policies that favoured the wellbeing of financial markets over constituents, the Clinton administration internalized much of that logic in its policy initiatives. As Donald Pease points out, Clinton’s “embrace of a Third Way that transcended the ‘politics of difference’ enabled him to conceal the structural violence at work in his programmatic elimination of welfare state institutions in the name of market imperatives” (73). His vision for the future would take shape in a domestic arena governed by the bottom-line exigencies of capitalist accumulation and, therefore, gutted of its welfare apparatuses. Unlike state-administered welfare, policies of disinvestment and retrenchment intensify the violence of capitalism, putting downward pressure on constituents, because they transfer the burden of social security to the constituents themselves. The consequences of this displacement cannot be overstated. The decision to privatize social security installs competition at the heart of the body politic, institutionalizing the belief that failure is not the state’s fault but the individual’s or group’s inability to seize the opportunity afforded by the market.¹⁰ Under the sway of such logic, social antagonisms are not fault lines to transcend so much as grounds for rationalizing multiple overlapping hierarchies; economic failure and non-normativity begin to look mutually internal.¹¹

Moreover, capital generates wealth through the creation of surplus labour—a system that, when left unchecked, can threaten social mobility and exacerbate the very divisions that Clinton ostensibly sought to abrogate.¹² Neoliberal governance, that is, engenders and compounds social stratifications by over-organizing lifeworlds according to capitalist logics.¹³

The academic landscape is currently awash with critical work on neoliberalism and its consequences. This glut arguably produces semantic indeterminacy as much as it exhausts the palate. Yet it remains an important term precisely because of this suppleness, covering a variety of overlapping dynamics unique to capitalist modernity. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism names a set of politico-economic policies that serve the market, favouring credit-fueled growth, fiscal austerity, financialization, the privatization of public services, welfare retrenchment, free trade, and entrepreneurial freedoms.¹⁴ The gradual implementation of these reforms has widened wealth disparities in the United States and across the world, a development that bespeaks the need to rethink the relationship between the state and its constituents. The dichotomy between winners and losers is, of course, fundamental to capitalist production, so any politically induced exacerbation of this system leads to an anti-democratic distribution of opportunity. As David Harvey points out, neoliberal governance effaces legal and social checks to capital's growth and functioning (*Brief* 9-19). Domestically, the result is that contemporary capitalism fragments and atomizes the labour force, divesting it of its traditional assurances such as long-term employment and social safety nets.¹⁵ Coupled with the welfare state's abandonment of collective growth, this restructuration of labour reorganizes life, abetting solipsistic modalities of lived subjectivity.

Tracking the historical matrices of this market-oriented mode of governance, either on a global or domestic scale, would constitute a project in and of itself, and that is not my aim.¹⁶ The point here is not to frame Roosevelt's New Deal as pre-lapsarian, for the boons of its social

programs and corrective mechanisms were unevenly distributed. The postwar pact among businesses, labour unions, and the state pivoted on the strength of the country's industrial base, a base that no amount of galvanic activity can restore. Fordism worked largely because workers made enough money to buy what they produced, and this cycle of consumption and production helped businesses thrive and created more employment opportunities for unskilled labour. But the growth of global markets has dramatically reconfigured consumer markets and corporate procedures. Correspondingly, America is embedded in highly profitable, and therefore hyper-exploitative, networks of globalized free trade, so isolationist policies or practices—be they motivated by nationalist or humanitarian concerns—cannot reverse capital flight.

During its prominence in the United States, industrial production also imposed a heteropatriarchal framework on private life, a situation that made domestic labour and work in the service economy the only options for individuals (mostly women) barred from the Fordist wage.¹⁷ Moreover, the manner in which Donald Trump recently acceded to the presidency, mobilizing racist, misogynistic rhetoric while making overblown promises to the whitewashed constituencies of the former industrial hotbeds, highlights the difficulty of innocently celebrating America's past. The support he has found amongst these groups is evidence that systemic privilege engenders entitlement permeated by libidinal energy. Yet the welfare state's practical shortcomings and inequalities should not disqualify it from future consideration but intensify the need to refocus its aims and objectives. If sixties radicalism still bears heuristic power, it is because hybrid clusters of constituents pursued a common goal; political objectives tend to foster motley crews. By contrast, the dismantling of socialist institutions constitutes no less than an assault on collective life.

Keeping this point in mind, I want to call attention to the experiential modalities, the routine ways in which liberal subjects inhabit social worlds, that have emerged as a result of this contemporary shift in the dominant political and economic rationality within the U.S. Just as neoliberalism constitutes a set of macroeconomic policies, so too does it refer to a set of interrelated cultural and moral projects shaping conduct (see Harvey, *Brief* 39-64). This antinomy—putatively dispassionate political reason crossing through the contentious terrain of culture—is not incidental but fundamental to neoliberal governance, denying the facile claim that economic reform and identity politics are mutually unintelligible (Duggan 83).¹⁸ According to neoliberal norms, Elizabeth Povinelli explains, that which “does not have a clear end in market value [. . .] fails economically and morally” (23). This value-based criterion sets a high standard for daily living, which abounds with false starts, wrong turns, and missteps. Making such mistakes often results in panicked catching up to the rhythms of normativity. Therefore, practices of everyday life, transpiring at the centre of the contradiction between the rhetoric of equality and the policies that preclude it, offer a rich archive for understanding the perennial instability of contemporary capitalism, as well as the multiple discourses that justify and sustain it. From this critical vantage attuned to lived subjectivity, historically specific standards of success, applied evenly to an unevenly privileged social body, appear not only as a yardstick by which individuals measure themselves but also as an arbitrary and flawed mechanism of control.

Nowhere are these standards more manifest than in the widespread reshaping of biopolitical life according to entrepreneurial protocols of self-making. As much critical work has noted, the ascension of neoliberalism has fundamentally altered lived subjectivity, extending market rationality into domains of life previously detached from the logics of monetary exchange and capitalist production as well as introducing risk and insecurity as conditions of being

predicated on individualized growth. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the collection of the lectures he gave at the Collège de France (1978-1979), Foucault engages, somewhat prophetically, with the work of early neoliberals such as Gary Becker who espoused neoclassical approaches to capitalist modernity; Foucault concludes that neoliberalism is not just a series of politico-economic policies but a mode of interpellation by which the individual becomes intelligible as a “homo œconomicus”—an entrepreneur of the self whose movement through the world coextends with value-productive action (225-226). This restructuration of subjectivity into human capital means that individual life has become a series of investments yielding future returns. The consequences of this development are far-reaching, as the discrete zones in which subjects’ lives assume seemingly discrete dimensions—the home, the workplace, the school, the bedroom, etc.—are saturated by economic rationality. Just as sound investments pay future dividends, so too do lifestyle choices shape the capital that an entrepreneurial subject can parlay into an advantage.¹⁹ Seen in this light, egoistic fantasies of untrammelled self-actualization find their most positive support in cultural and societal norms, an antinomy that recalls Foucault’s description of discipline’s outcomes: “[D]iscipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (*Discipline* 138). The imperative to self-accumulate, that is, enjoins entrepreneurial subjects to adopt the acquisitive spirit of capitalism as well as generalized codes of conduct.

Much of the foregoing discussion calls to mind Max Weber’s oft-cited work on the Protestant work ethic. Not unlike the relationship between accumulation and cultural normativity under neoliberalism, the work ethic articulates the imperative of productivity to an ascetic lifestyle. It disciplines its adherents because “infraction of its rule is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty” (Weber 17). Since the Reformation, and particularly in the United

States, the Protestant work ethic has functioned as a moral dictate that naturalizes and ossifies social hierarchies in the service of better overall productivity: “[T]he strict asceticism which Church discipline naturally imposed [. . .] on the propertyless classes[] was bound to affect the productivity of labour in the capitalistic sense of the world. The treatment of labour as a calling became as characteristic of the modern worker as the corresponding attitude toward acquisition of the business man” (Weber 121). According to this “divine” logic, humble beginnings are not to be transcended. An individual’s potential for social mobility is less important than the need to remain hardworking. Submission to divine authority thereby induces an uncritical view of the social order. Any state apparatus redolent of socialism falls well below the divine threshold permitting intervention in the lives of believers pursuing their calling. Such thinking subjectifies the ongoing effects of unjust social relations, redirecting onto the individual such politically useful energy as dissatisfaction with both systemic inequality and productivist norms.²⁰

Throughout the years, capitalist formations have benefitted from the work ethic’s conservative and individualizing energy. Late capitalism is no different, the work ethic appearing to underpin another antinomy central to neoliberal reason: the emphasis on personal responsibility alongside the antistatist revolt against taxation. This is the logic of the work ethic: nothing should hamper the individual’s purchasing power, and no institutional authority should have the power to dip into the pay for which the individual works exceedingly hard. Yet this line of thinking misrepresents the effects of taxation. Justifying antitax policy work with celebrations of personal responsibility obscures the neoliberal commitment to nonredistribution. Aside from the whispers of discrimination detectable within invocations of “personal responsibility,” the neoliberal opposition to redistribution makes social mobility increasingly difficult for the working class and the historically dispossessed. Decreased corporate and estate taxes have

established a sclerotic social order in which entrepreneurial skill counts for much less, at least monetarily, than historical privilege and inherited wealth. The state has all but eschewed progressive tax structures, and the result is the conservation of wealth in the upper strata of society. Taking shape alongside this conservative policy work is the state's increasing reliance on punctual intervention in the lives of its constituents—intervention, that is, through repressive state apparatuses, such as the police. The confluence of these two developments signals a significant way in which the work ethic, inimical as it is to the equalization of life chances, continues to exert ideological force in a period of rapid de-industrialization and the disappearance of traditional forms of work.²¹

Thus, while it is tempting to periodize the transition to neoliberalism as a shift from a meta-subjective to an individualized spirit of accumulation, the work ethic has always promoted the latter. It has remained perdurable across different stages of capitalist development, so that periodizing move would be wrong. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, however, does not characterize the situation any more accurately. In a contemporary capitalist context, what distinguishes the work ethic from past iterations is the absence of a clear and stable distinction between work and the rest of life. The displacement of Fordist modes of production by workplace autonomy and a glut of service-economy employment has reconfigured the form and content of labour, indicating that the burdens felt by workers today are unique and unprecedented. As Kathi Weeks explains, “Today's professional is supposed to gain control over his or her thoughts, imagination, relationships, and affects” (73). No line can be drawn between labour time and the reproduction of life, as every dimension of life is implicated in the production and accumulation of capital. These productivist pressures can disorient as much as orient the entrepreneurial subject forced to build a life through precarious employment. The

issue, then, is not the constancy of the work ethic or its decline; the issue is the dogged reluctance, codified in the policies that have caused wealth to trickle upwards, to galvanize the country's economic base as well as the belief amongst a growing portion of the proletariat that the welfare state extinguishes productivist energy. Given the intersection of fiscal austerity and social retrenchment with political and cultural emphases on entrepreneurship, neoliberal reason has coaxed the work ethic into its most dramatic expression. Put differently, neoliberalism weaponizes the work ethic's productivist imperatives against an increasingly dispossessed proletariat, especially the perennially underprivileged segments of the population. The continuing vitality of the work ethic amid the state's disinvestment in its constituents serves as an important motivation for this project's focus on failure in the post-1990 period.

Not insignificantly, the neoliberal inflection of the work ethic bears temporal implications, adapting subjects to the future-oriented routine of creating surplus value. "For neoliberal subjects," Nefertiti Tadiar explains, "life is indistinguishable from labor; therefore the time of labor is the value-productive time of life" (29). The entrepreneurial subject, inhabiting the world according to the exigencies of self-investment, assumes all the risks associated with generating surplus value as they generate it. As Marx reminds us, the condition of capitalist production is the prospect of creating surplus value.²² Neoliberal subjectivation, then, sutures the risks associated with owning the means of production to self-alienating labour. Like capital in an industrial framework, the entrepreneurial subject of late capitalism feels pressure to project into the future amid the vagaries of social worlds.

Maurizio Lazzarato raises this issue in *The Making of Indebted Man*, attending to the social effects of credit's liberalization. It is no secret that, since the nineties, Americans have seized the opportunities that credit affords them, paradoxically living above their means in order

to live comfortably. Yet indebtedness has a regulatory effect, requiring individuals to constitute themselves as risk-capable subjects able to repay debts well into the future. On the economic philosophy underpinning this mode of living, Melinda Cooper points out: “[C]lassical economics projects the accident into a future from which it can never be definitely exorcised. The accident assumes the guise of a virtual event [. . .] whose greater or lesser likelihood we are always contending with in the present” (“Insecure” 518). The generalization of market rationality across every facet of biopolitical life has, in a sense, displaced the future into the present, forcing subjects to over-organize the present with anticipatory strategies of self-making, strategies meant to mitigate the insecurity issuing from contemporary capitalist structures.

Yet such over-organization does not mean that life has become neatly ordered and structured. Wrestling with the future in the present involves wrestling with what is beyond control; that is, the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurship overestimates the subject’s capacity to manage the unmanageable. Such temporal dynamics suggest the institutionalization of Freudian paranoia, the counterpart of narcissism, at the level of conduct (see Freud, “On Narcissism” 73-102). Max Horkheimer and Adorno point out that paranoia emerges from an “abyss of uncertainty” (193). Although they make this claim in the context of a discussion about anti-Semitism, the disconcerting parallel between contemporary far-right politics and neoliberal dispossession indicates that their work remains crucial to understanding the social function of paranoia. No form of living resembles this “abyss” more than neoliberal self-appreciation. While ego formation requires a measure of narcissism, politically and culturally induced uneasiness upsets the balance between self-love and disinterestedness, thereby laying the groundwork for paranoid conduct. Excessive fear of external threats and excessive self-regard interrupt the individual’s capacity to enjoy the comforts of interpersonal intimacy, and the anticipatory

exigencies of self-accumulation abet this behaviour. That aberrant ego-formations are compatible with entrepreneurial subjectivity intimates a good deal about neoliberalism's threat to collective life.²³ As Foucault tells us, neoliberal regimes pivot on the "blindness" of each subject: "The collective good must not be an objective [. . .] because it cannot be calculated, at least, not within an economic strategy" (279). The self interpellated by neoliberal apparatuses must extend itself into social worlds with the goal of securing advantages only for itself.²⁴ In this view, paranoid behaviour begins to look smart and pragmatic.

Justifications for maintaining this pathological position have begun to vanish, though, as the failure to secure entrepreneurial advantages has become an increasingly common outcome. The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism has exacerbated insecurity across the social body, affecting not only historically dispossessed segments of the population but the mainstream too. Capital flight has left in its wake a burden of joblessness as well as a dearth of opportunity. Setting aside financial considerations for the moment, why does this mode of being still have a good deal of currency? From psychoanalytically inflected perspectives, Lee Edelman (Lacan) and Eve Sedgwick (Klein) suggest the difficulty of eschewing paranoid self-making. Neither attends to neoliberalism's entrepreneurial emphases, but their respective analyses are instructive. For Edelman, the figure of the innocent child, whose future wellbeing must be secured in the present, often serves as a coded prescription for heteronormativity (see *No Future*). For Sedgwick, paranoid reading has suffused critical praxis, making anticipation instead of surprise the mark of sound critical work (see *Touching* 123-153). Each shows how a measure of paranoia inheres within broader concerns. However, whereas Edelman's call for queer people to reject the impositions of heteronormativity and embrace the social death drive evinces little hope in the prospect of collective living, Sedgwick's articulation of a new critical praxis, reparative reading,

celebrates the contingencies of the future, the potential lying in wait of stumbling on a life different and perhaps better than life in the present. She recasts anticipation, stripping it of certainty, and this move is helpful for considering the prospect of ethical futures. Similarly, Derrida discusses the ethical potentialities of an uncertain future, writing that “a possible that would only be possible (non-impossible), a possible surely and certainly possible, accessible in advance, would be a poor possible, a futureless possible [. . .] This would be a programme or a causality, a development, a process without an event” (*Politics* 29). Stepping beyond the routines of paranoid self-making will mean cultivating new orientations to a future that can neither be displaced into the present nor anticipated in any programmatic way.

As I discuss more fully below, my ethical analysis operates in the reparative mode, investigating the gaps exposed by failure between normative fantasies of living the good life and the material circumstances precluding the realization of such fantasies. Far from an a priori condition, entrepreneurial subjectivity works as a fantasy of sovereignty and teleological self-realization, one that obscures the incoherence of daily life as well as its collective dimensions. In actuality, individuals benefit from their proximity to and the kindness of others—a consequence of their presence in lifeworlds that, forming and deforming them, rarely enable untrammelled self-extension. Yet for all their illusoriness, fantasies of entrepreneurial self-expansion are nevertheless powerful social and psychic forces, unrolling like so many red carpets ostensible avenues to better futures. By contrast, reparative reading applies to aesthetically mediated scenes in which subjects become unmoored from their conventional assurances and, like Adorno’s notion of “spontaneity,” must improvise new ways of getting by in the world, humbling survival strategies that, perforce, suspend self-interest and paranoia.²⁵ If neoliberal self-accumulation pivots on anti-social modes of being, then disinterestedness and ethical relationality cannot be

abandoned as possible correctives—correctives to which aesthetic worlds, not beholden to the regulations of everyday life, can point. And if neoliberal reason—and its attendant atomizing, assimilationist, and heteropatriarchal protocols—views collective forms of agency and ethical responsibility as impractical, then literary representations of failure can serve as imaginary sites that bring the attritional violence of capitalist modernity into sharp focus. As such, representations of failure implicitly critique the norms and routines by which citizen-subjects recognize themselves as successful. In the face of and within neoliberal structures, to consider ethical responsibility and collective agency is to think irrationally. Educating heterogeneous social modalities requires risking failure as much as tarrying with it. Dialectical thinking is useful: the key is to claim the irrational as the site of embryonic social arrangements.²⁶

Learning from Failure

Before I lay out my theoretical framework more fully, it is helpful here to supply a more detailed justification for this project's focus on failure. At first blush, failure seems to be a counter-intuitive object of critical study. Yet recently a number of critical studies in literary and cultural criticism have made failure their focus. The field of queer studies, in particular, has been the site of tremendous work on this topic. Aside from Lee Edelman's aforementioned *No Future*, three books come to mind: Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*, Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. Whereas Edelman prescribes not just accepting but embracing queerness as the socially legislated site of the death drive, these projects can be seen as implicit refutations of that anti-social polemic, each putting forth the counter-argument that the non-heteronormative can serve as the location of alternative social attachments and modes of being. Muñoz is exemplary, as he asserts that queer failure is "a certain mode of virtuosity" pointing beyond the "stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation,

exploitation, and drudgery associated with capitalism or landlordism” (173).²⁷ Queerness provides an antidote to contemporary capitalist structures for Muñoz because it opens onto non-normative forms of sociality, with their attendant habits, desires, and orientations toward the future, illegible to neoliberal rationality. In the main, my project, preoccupied as it is with the social pedagogy of aesthetically mediated failure, moves in step with such critical work, though it insists on a more capacious understanding of failure, one that exceeds the disciplinary and theoretical bounds of queerness.

To be sure, given its resistance to oppressive social and cultural norms, queerness provides an important experiential idiom for anti-neoliberal critique. Using the language of failure to describe queer life and art unlocks political and critical force that would otherwise not be available, and it contradicts mainstream currents in the LGBTIQ community. For instance, in the eyes of conservatives and centrist liberals, the adoption of heteropatriarchal family formations offers non-normative sexuality and gender identity an ostensibly respectable place in the social body. Adhering to traditional networks of kinship should always be an option—not an ideal or a condition of living the good life. As Halberstam points out, “The contingency of queer relations, their uncertainty, irregularity, and even perversity, disregards the so-called *natural* bonds between memory and futurity” (74; emphasis mine). Queerness insists on radical newness. The queer-as-failure critique of compulsive homonormativity, unsettling the narrow limits of the nuclear family, is thus necessary and important, as it shows that neoliberal protocols of life-building are no more absolute than gender identity.

This line of inquiry, however, risks celebrating transgression without fully attending to the many ramifications of entrepreneurial failure. If entrepreneurial subjectivity is a dominant modality of being as much as a series of habits and desires, the inability to adhere to its demands

has social and personal consequences that should give critics pause. Rare is it that individuals plan to fail or plot their own ennobling demise in the face of social structures that make little room for them. Minority communities, many of whose history in the U.S. is one of dispossession, often must weigh social attachments that exceed the dominant culture against both assimilatory pressures and the material exigencies of building a life. In such cases, failure is not a cause for celebration.²⁸ To closely analyze the new social arrangements that failure can generate, critical work cannot forget that many subjects want to succeed. Lauren Berlant persuasively brings this reality into sharp focus through her analysis of “cruel optimism,” her term for the dogged adherence to normative routines that weaken subjects as much as comfort them (see *Cruel* 1-21). What new perceptions, then, can failure animate in order for subjects to feel that they are standing on more solid ground, to feel that their life amounts to something different than what it amounted to before? Through the bungling of entrepreneurial convention, what new responsibilities, attachments, and desires come to outweigh old ones?

That the logics of success and failure issue from the material conditions of society invites a brief excursion through Marx’s analysis of the relationship between base and superstructure. Marx shows that capital circumscribes zones of lifestyles and behaviours that serve the money-commodity-money (M-C-M) model of productivity and circulation. It has at once a socially generative and repressive effect:

The dissolution of all products and activities into exchange values presupposes the dissolution of all fixed personal (historic) relations of dependence in production, as well as the all-sided dependence of the producers on one another. [. . .] This reciprocal dependence is expressed in the constant necessity for exchange, and in exchange value as the all-sided mediation. [. . .] The real point is

not that each individual's pursuit of his private interest promotes the totality of private interests, the general interest. [. . .] The point is rather that *private interest is itself already a socially determined interest*, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society; hence it is bound to the reproduction of these conditions and means. It is the interest of private persons, but its content, as well as the form and means of its realization, is given by *social conditions independent of all*. (*Grundrisse* 156; emphasis mine)

“Socially determined interest” prefigures what later Marxian critics call ideology. With his dialectical logic of mediation, Marx's aim is to show that history—that is, material conditions coupled with the social relations of production—coopts all natural social formations and modes of being, installing a “historically created need” in the position of “a natural one” (*Grundrisse* 325). There is no outside for Marx, only a progression to the next stage of history. To fail is not only to perform badly at generating surplus value but also to fail within a social context saturated by the dominant ideology. No failure happens in a vacuum but, rather, in relation to a web of capitalistically induced lifestyles, habits, and sensibilities that serve capital's ever-widening mission to create profit—lifestyles and habits sanctioned, in Marx's historical-materialist schema, by the state.²⁹

While helpful for understanding the dominant ideology, Marx's logic transfers a good deal of agency from individuals and social groups to the movement of history, resulting in Hegelianism from below. “Men make their own history,” Marx writes, “but they do not make it as they please” (*Eighteenth*; ch. 1, par. 2). This view leaves little room for the contingent and unanticipated eruption of anti-capitalist desires and feelings, which come to the fore, I contend

via Derrida, “at the crossroads of chance and necessity” (*Politics* 30). The thrust of investing “social conditions independent of all” with sovereign power is that, in order for the bourgeois era to collapse into its next phase, socialism followed by communism, the economic foundation of the social order must first provide the conditions for this transition (see Marx, Preface 426). This argument seems to solicit faith in the inevitability of capitalism’s collapse. As we know, capital continues to find new ways of generating profit. The retraction of socialist institutions characterizes the neoliberal era, after all, so belief in labour’s growing capacity to usurp capital through the latter’s contradictory expansion is no longer tenable.

Furthermore, this reliance on history’s trans-epochal trajectory abstracts from ground-level specificities. From such a distance, “labour” hardens into a rigid ontological category of identity that cannot register diversity. Labourers appear only as labourers, and their multiple social attachments, their intimate bonds and ties to others, disappear from view. In a different context, Achille Mbembe points out that, for the hardline Marxist, “the overcoming of class divisions, the withering away of the state, the flowering of a truly general will presuppose a view of human plurality as the chief obstacle to the eventual realization of a predetermined telos of history” (20). If the self precedes and exceeds the narrow ambit of entrepreneurial subjectivity, it is also the case that a political agent, containing multitudes, is irreducible to their status as one amongst so many identical exploited labourers. Incipient neoliberal reform, Harvey reminds us, “appealed to the cultural nationalism of the white working classes and their besieged sense of moral righteousness” (*Brief* 50), an oft-sublimated form of bigotry that led many to support policies threatening their long-term wellbeing. The only way to address the urgency of contemporary inequality, then, is to leaven the commitment to economic redistribution with a commitment to antidiscrimination and social justice.

In light of this point, submission to meta-subjective conditions, and the experiential modalities they delimit, looks more like nihilism than the germ of a political project from below, especially in an era of unhampered capitalist expansion. The notion of history's straight-line progress into communism is fallacious no less than neoliberalism's antistatist rationality is inimical to collective life. For anti-neoliberal visions, the tensions between submission and control, contingency and choice, knowing and unknowing, responsibility and freedom, and class and cultural identities need to be reconceived as potentially productive antinomies. Radical political and social-justice projects must unite disparate constituencies as much as honour their differences, recognizing at once the epistemological violence of a single, class-based marker of identity and the potential for effective action that composite social arrangements unlock.

For all his misguided confidence in the movement of history, Marx nevertheless intimates the transformative energy that failure harbours. Commenting on the November 1857 issue of *The Times*, Marx gleefully derides a "West-Indian plantation owner" for their "moral indignation" provoked by the work ethic of ex-slaves, who at that point in history constituted a newly formed surplus population of labourers:

[They] content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this 'use value,' regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good [. . .] [They] observe the planters' impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure [. . .] As far as they are concerned, capital does not exist as capital, because autonomous wealth as such can exist only either on the basis of *direct* forced labour, slavery, or *indirect* forced labour, *wage labour*. Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital but rather as *relation of domination*; thus, the relation of domination is the only

thing which is reproduced on this basis, for which wealth itself has value only as gratification, not as wealth itself, and which can therefore never create *general industriousness*. (*Grundrisse* 325-326; emphasis original)

If not a slip, this passage is certainly not the Marx of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, who laments the “lumpenproletariat” for their lack of class consciousness and thus their uselessness to anti-capitalist politics (see ch. 5, par. 4). What distinguishes this passage is the former slaves’ awareness, due to their experience as “direct forced labour,” of how class and race overlap in post-Emancipation Jamaica. The forces of racism and exploitation are, in their view, coextensive, and wealth is merely a means to perpetuate an unfair hierarchy of humanness with which they are too familiar. This awareness motivates an antiwork ethic, as they shirk the productivist exigencies of wage labour, knowing that upward mobility is not an option.³⁰ They become, “instead, self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption” (326).

There are, of course, no easy or unproblematic homologies between post-Emancipation Jamaica and neoliberal America, between the experience of slavery and entrepreneurial subjectivity; the contemporary reach of global capitalism further troubles any effort to draw a clear line from one context to the other, as entrepreneurial subjects benefit from the immiseration of foreign surplus populations whose poorly remunerated work subsidizes a good deal of fetishized commodities. The global and domestic do not align, nor do nineteenth-century Jamaica and contemporary America. Yet the incommensurability of these two scenes of exploitation underscores my above point: that the victims of capitalist exploitation, far from being wholly identical, are differentially inscribed within the social body (or within networks of globalized production and trade). If exploitation affects different people differently, then radical political visions need to recognize the limits, and potential violence, of universal solutions, thereby

honouring the particularity of suffering at every turn. The above passage attests to Marx's belief that alternative desires and modes of being inhere within the experientially specific misery of alienation; it intimates that failing to both generate surplus value and measure up to social norms provides a point from which anti-capitalist hopes begin in earnest. New choices and orientations issue from such hopes. "As formations that transgress capitalist political economies," Ferguson suggests, "surplus populations become the locations for possible critiques of state and capital" (*Aberrations* 15).

Attending to failure for its pedagogical and transformative valences wrests it away from neoliberal discourse. "Representation mingles with what it represents," writes Derrida, so no application of the term "failure" is innocent (*Of* 36). The rhetorical force of the term has long made it the site of class struggle, affording the speaker a good deal of moral leverage to address what they perceive to be the problem at hand. To call something or someone a failure is, more often than not, to inscribe it or them in a morally corrupt zone. Neoliberal discourse frequently uses the language of failure to justify its remedial procedures, and this strategy places any remedial procedure beyond reproach, foreclosing more radical solutions. As Julian Brash explains, for instance, since New York City's bankruptcy in the 1970s—one that made the city a testing ground for attacking the working class through policies of fiscal austerity and social retrenchment (Tabb 15; Harvey, *Brief* 44-48)—leaders of financial institutions and politicians have time and again invoked the term "crisis" to nip downward redistribution, through increased spending and taxes aimed at businesses, in the bud (59-83).³¹ Moreover, the 2008 financial collapse precipitated an immense bailout from the federal government, which saved the institutions that had exposed the economy to catastrophic levels of risk, and the ensuing regulation banning commercial banks from prop trading—namely, the Dodd-Frank act, ratified

by Congress in 2010—has a number of loopholes allowing banks to circumvent regulation (Cockburn 37-43). In sum, the procedures mobilized to address failed markets have had a normalizing effect. But whose interests are served when economic failure is not viewed as the consequence of systemic defects but as an aberration to be brought rapidly back in line?

Treating capitalist problems with neoliberal solutions is a form of palliative care, offering temporary solace against the ongoing attrition of life. To return briefly to Clinton, what characterizes the post-1990 period is the increasing number of people finding that the gap between the life they have and the all-right life they want is difficult to bridge. Walter Benjamin offers direction here: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” (257). Normalizing procedures do not put an end to bad situations but perpetuate them, securing instead of reforming hierarchical social formations. Benjamin intimates that the obverse side of refusing the comforts of quick fixes that reinstall the status quo is the capacity to look more clearly at the structures of the world. For contemporary bearers of the “tradition of the oppressed,” this refusal could potentially yield the insight that failure under neoliberalism is endemic to the adoption of neoliberal routine, a perspective from which demands for radical change would presumably issue.

When a view of this kind takes hold, approaching the prospect of radical change without cynicism and hopelessness becomes a choice. The task of critical work is to treat failure as an unhappy drama from which anti-capitalist visions can emerge. In the primary texts on which I focus, aesthetically mediated failure jams the ostensibly inexorable operations of capitalist modernity, disclosing ethical modalities of being that lie beyond generalized self-interest. As I

suggest below, dwelling more ethically with others requires submission to others' needs—for subjects are radically co-implicated and always relationally inscribed—and such needs precede social and political formations as much as they must be addressed through the social and political choices individuals make.

An Overview of Levinasian Ethics

My analysis of failure draws heavily on Levinas's ethical philosophy. Unlike Kant's notion of moral imperatives accessible to the atomistic individual, Levinas posits an ethical relation that precedes the emergence of the individual as a socially legible subject; this relation is one of radical interdependence between the self and Other. If consciousness and the use of language characterize the individual's career as an ontological being, affording them the psychic and symbolic tools with which to approach other individuals, then Levinas delineates a relationship anterior to ontology, one that recedes from view the moment the self becomes interpellated as a subject. Before becoming aware of itself as an individual, the self bears an ineluctable, irrecusable responsibility for the Other's welfare, a responsibility that "extends into my very bearing as an entity, to the point of substitution" (*Otherwise* 138). The self and Other are irreducibly heterogeneous for Levinas, and the demand the Other's perennial vulnerability places upon the self is the source of ethical responsibility. Put succinctly, the self and Other are radically co-implicated, stitched together in the fabric of a relationship unlike any form of interpersonal contact between individuals. What constitutes ethical transcendence in Levinas's view is a responsibility for the Other before politics, a relation to alterity without the comforts of identification, a compulsion before choice, a "love without concupiscence" ("Ethics" 85). Levinas's riposte to post-Enlightenment philosophy provides a theoretical idiom for social relations illegible to neoliberal rationality.

By contrast, much philosophy since the Enlightenment, particularly twentieth-century phenomenology, emphasizes the priority of the individual in making sense of the world and in seeing beyond the myopia of daily life. For example, Martin Heidegger treats “Dasein,” his term for individual being, as the sole position from which Being, transcendental knowledge, can be conceived: “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. [. . .] And the transcendence of Dasein’s Being is distinctive in that it implies the possibility and the necessity of the most radical *individuation*” (33, 62; emphasis original). Levinas faults phenomenology, the philosophy of perception grounded in ontic experience, for its over-investment in the monadic individual, who “wins out over the otherness of things and men” (“Ethics” 78): “[I]t is in terms of solitude that the analysis of *Dasein* in its authentic form is pursued” (*Time* 93; emphasis original). For Levinas, Dasein operates according to egoistic motivations, and the risk inherent in Heidegger’s position is the individual’s dogged opposition to alterity. Not unlike Hegel’s “World Spirit,” which subsumes non-identical phenomena, Heidegger’s “radical individuation” beyond the ontic realm is not the expression of otherness but, for Levinas, its smothering and repression, “wip[ing] out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalizing thought” (“Ethics” 85).³² It is with respect for the Other’s alterity and wellbeing that Levinas casts doubt upon the priority of phenomenological self, as he wonders whether or not “the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody else’s place” (85). This uncertainty provides the basis for his philosophy of ethics that approaches individualism with skepticism. Refocusing philosophical contemplation, he transfers emphasis from the individual endowed with consciousness and agency to the self whose pre-ontological existence is spent in the service of the Other. For Levinas, that is, passivity constitutes the fundamental feature of selfhood.

This notion of passivity is key to understanding ethical alterity as pre-ontological, on the one hand, and future-oriented and aspirational, on the other. According to Levinas, the interruption of the face, his figure for the Other's absolute alterity, reminds the self of its passive relation to and infinite responsibility for the Other: "[I]n its expression, in its mortality, the face before me *summons* me" ("Ethics" 83; emphasis mine). The face is not the face of another subject, though; as Derrida explains, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, it is characterized by "the absence of determinable properties, of concrete predicates, of empirical visibility" (111). The face recalls the obligation that precedes and exceeds self-concern and the ontological field in which lived subjectivity unfolds. It belongs to the order of transcendence that cannot be absorbed into an interpersonal economy of reciprocity and dialogue. As such, the face redefines the important position that death occupies in much philosophical discourse.

For phenomenology, death is "fundamentally incomprehensible" and therefore demarcates existential limits for ontological beings; as a result, the present bears overwhelming significance in much philosophical thought, as "Nature and Society [. . .] get the better of any exteriority" ("Ethics" 78). Broadly speaking, such an investment in the present is inimical to radical change, tending to foster self-love and suspicion of other subjects. Yet in Levinas's schema, the face supplants the nothingness that death otherwise signifies. To put a face on death in this way is to cast doubt on the solidity of the ego's ontological foundations, as the "other man's death calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become the accomplice of death to which the other, who cannot see it, is exposed" ("Ethics" 83). The face *qua* death does not dialectically valorize ontology but unsettles it, bearing an accusatory force that compels the subject to wonder whether its "being is justified" ("Ethics" 85).³³ This emphasis on the face that "calls me into question" underscores that the ontological being, the

overdetermined object of epistemological regimes, hegemonic discourses, and interpellative apparatuses, is always already displaced, separated from its interdependent fundament.³⁴ The “incomprehensible” terminus of ontology thus becomes the (im)possibility of (once again) being with and for the Other in a future otherwise than the present.

Levinasian ethics provides a philosophical vantage from which to critique capitalist modernity, as pre-ontological openness to the Other and paranoid self-making are mutually unintelligible. Given the protocols of contemporary self-fashioning as well as the reality of widespread precarity, entrepreneurial subjects must measure themselves against the world with ceaseless vigilance, and as a result, life-building is a drama leaving little room for any belief in responsibility that exceeds the overdetermined scenes of everyday life.³⁵ For entrepreneurial subjects, flourishing relies on material, symbolic, and contextually specific circumstances. Whereas ethical analysis aims at the “de-substantiation of the subject, its de-reification, its disinterestedness” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 127), the fantasy of sovereign subjectivity as autonomous and self-reliant requires individualistic pathways to fulfillment in order to function smoothly, pathways marking the repression of ethical alterity.

Levinas also discerns, in ontological being, the pressure to project into the future, a feature to which his notion of an (im)possible future of ethical alterity stands in opposition. “At the service of being,” he writes, the subject “unites the temporal phases into a present by retention and protention” (*Otherwise* 133). This description is redolent of the everydayness of entrepreneurial subjectivity, compelled to wrestle with future contingencies in the present so that no surprises will lie in wait. But unlike the temporal dynamics of entrepreneurial accumulation, ethical alterity constitutes a future standing beyond all projection, inscribed within a “future purified of all content” (*Time* 90). This “anachronic” temporality, incomprehensible through the

ontological moves of “retention and protention,” calls to mind a kind of spectrality—or what Derrida calls a “hauntology,” a mode of being together that escapes ontological domestication and “summons” ontologically captured subjects beyond egoism into relations of disinterestedness and interdependence. A hauntology cannot issue from a constative speech act, as if it were a visible phenomenon or an empirical fact; rather, it resides on the horizon of what is possible, disclosed by the gap between the “infinite promise”—that is, the *idea* of democracy and collective living—and the “determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms” that democracy and collective living take (*Specters* 81).

From the Ethical to the Ontological: Responding to the Other

What immediately complicates this concept of radical interdependence, especially in terms of its applicability to a project of literary analysis, is its elusiveness. On that note, a set of questions begins to spiral out of control: how can a politically circumscribed subject cut its ontological binds in order to approach the Other? How does one discharge their responsibility for the Other without recourse to language, ontologically available as it is? And is it not the case that to address the Other is, on the one hand, to wield a measure of agency and choice, eclipsing the passivity at the heart of this relation, and, on the other, to traffic in symbolically freighted signifiers, thereby corrupting any connection to the Other with a layer of mediation? In order to protect the Other’s irreducible heterogeneity, as well as the interminable nature of responsibility, Levinas positions the Other beyond the reach of all socially and politically legible forms of approach. Criticism of Levinasian ethics has focused on this aporetic stumbling block.

Expressing ambivalence about responsibility that preexists the emergence of subjectivity, Judith Butler worries that ethics marks “an escape from politics” (“Ethical” 15). Similarly, Beatrice Hanssen suggests that, in treating “ethics as that which precedes politics,” Levinas “thus

reduce[s] [politics] to mere strategic action” (165). The through-line here is the belief that Levinasian ethics cannot be adapted to the political exigencies of the world, the social-justice projects that aim to change the status quo in the service of more democratic presents and futures.

Not unrelated to the problem of political agency, another pressing issue stems from the unequal distribution of violence against ontologically situated beings. It is indisputable that specific subjects, or groups of subjects, suffer more than others under the political, economic, and epistemological regimes organizing the world. In the previous section, the hardline Marxist notion of history became untenable due to its reliance on meta-contextual progress. But context matters. With this issue in mind, Sara Ahmed points out that, in a Levinasian framework, “the Other is not present to the subject in the form of a being with rights” (*Differences* 60)—nor, to be sure, as a being whose demands can be satisfied through the extension of rights. By eliding the “question of how a particular other may become a force in the ethical relation,” Levinas “generalises the other *through a discourse on its unknowability*” (*Differences* 61; emphasis original). The imperative of responsibility for the unmediated Other, therefore, must be weighed against the urgent need, doubtlessly exacerbated in the United States by the recent ascendance of Donald Trump, to redress the wrongs committed against specific, socially inscribed subjects. Given that neoliberalism weds economic liberalism to restrictive social norms, it would be insensitive to insist on the relative superfluity of the markers of difference—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability—that not only give shape to everyday life but also mediate a subject’s relation to power and privilege.³⁶

In an early response to Levinasian ethics, one that provoked Levinas to modify his philosophy, Derrida puts forth a similar objection. He points out that, to delineate his philosophy, Levinas must leverage the very phenomenological tools and concepts he indicts. Levinas cannot

escape the mediation of the Greek logos that assimilates the otherness of the Other into the order of immanence. Derrida goes on to contend that, if Levinas grounds his theory on the notion of a pre-original origin, the tension between ethical alterity, the infinite, and phenomenology, the finite, becomes a conceptual binary by which the structures of ontology remain unshaken. Suggesting that ethical alterity should not gesture beyond phenomenology so much as unsettle its foundations, Derrida submits Levinas's concept to the play of deconstruction in order to protect it from itself—from either committing the same violence it denounces or leaving ontological violence intact (see “Violence” 147-192). Ahmed makes a similar point: “To privilege difference against totality is to keep the opposition in place” (*Differences* 48). For if the Other's separation from ontology ensures that the self's obligation remains infinite, then Levinas's schema strays dangerously close to indifference when it comes to addressing particular forms of injustice; as a result, the many operations of power, to which ethical responsibility seems a corrective, remain settled, and the violence embedded in the social field remains untrammelled. In light of these reservations, how can Levinasian ethics be adapted to a project of literary analysis focused on aesthetic responses to the cultural and economic conditions of neoliberalism?

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas submits his philosophy to a similar set of objections, so following his line of thought in this book will prove helpful. It is here that he complicates the self-Other dyad by introducing the “third party.” The third party demands the formation of community, making ontology and its divisional social structures necessary supplements to ethical asymmetry:

The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters. [. . .]
[The third party] is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the

question: “What do I have to do with justice?” A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice. (*Otherwise* 157)

Levinas adduces a dialectic between the imperative of responsibility and the imperative of equality and justice. Whereas responsibility rests on asymmetry, equality and justice designate the exact opposite. Whereas responsibility involves self-sacrifice for the wellbeing of others, equality means that one’s place in the world is no better or different than anyone else’s. Justice requires that individuals stand on “equal footing.” Resisting ultimate synthesis, this dialectic maps onto the categories of the infinite and the finite, the ethical and the ontological. Its irresolvability is not a weakness but a strength of Levinas’s thought, for it means that ethical responsibility forms the basis of the interminable fight for social justice and equality.

One conclusion to draw here is that collective living, whereby self-love does not supersede other-directedness, constitutes for Levinas the only social form in which justice can be extended—the only social form, moreover, that approximates the bottomless imperative of ethical responsibility. To the extent that collective living emanates from an ethical fundament, this narrative of the transition into ontology is distinct from phenomenological emphases on the priority of the self-present individual. Alongside justice, Levinas theorizes, “society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside the control of the responsibility of the one for the other. [. . .] The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights” (*Otherwise* 159). Levinas

posits a sequence of juridico-political structures issuing from ethical matrices, a process that relieves the self of its vertiginous responsibility by inscribing it within an ontic framework that can be assessed and fixed, questioned and improved. For political structures founded upon the asymmetry of ethical responsibility are “open to the better” and possess “the gift of inventing new forms of human coexistence” (Levinas, “The Other, Utopia, and Justice” 230). The betrayal of ethical relationality and the necessity of political apparatuses are thus mutually internal, as ethics requires the political as its *terminus ad quem*. The latter, as such, is neither incidental nor secondary for Levinas but grounded on the opening to alterity, the centrifugal energy of an infinite responsibility that defies ontological closure.³⁷

This notion of ethics as the precondition of ontology finds its clearest formulation in the distinction Levinas makes between two modalities of signification, “the saying” and “the said.” On the one hand, the gerundive saying signifies the self’s openness and proximity to the Other, the “one-for-the-other” at the heart of selfhood that “does not say a word” (*Otherwise* 151). It is the silent language of ethical interdependence. The said, on the other hand, is marked by closure, a modality of communication that bears meaning. The said is the language of culture, epistemology, justice, and politics—in short, the language that betrays ethical openness by “thematizing” the addressee into a recognizable subject. If the saying is the silent language of the ethical and the said the interpellative language of justice, then viewing these two modes of communication as diametrically opposed is incorrect, and this oversight seems to account for a good deal of the critical dismissals of Levinas’s thought. In his schema, the pre-ontological saying constitutes “the matrix of every thematizable relation” (*Otherwise* 136). As he puts it elsewhere, “[i]t is necessary to be for the Other [. . .] for the phenomenon of meaning, correlative of the intention of a thought, to arise” (*Totality* 261). It is in and through its openness to the

Other, in other words, that the self accedes to the position of speaking subject capable of addressing the Other's demands.

The said's relation to the saying is one of *failure* and *necessity*. The necessity of responding to the Other can only find expression in a form of communication that mingles power with knowledge and thereby betrays ethical responsibility. As a secondary mode of communication, the said is no less dubious for being necessary. The relation of the non-ethical said to the ethical saying gives rise to Levinas's notion of the "trace," which marks the immemorial residue of ethics in every symbolic gesture and juridical act. Since the saying is not an ontologically feasible mode of communication, the trace is not the mark of an absent presence—like the evidence left at the scene of a crime—but of an "absence not reducible to the opposition presence/absence" (J. Robbins 20).³⁸ The trace has no empirical presence within systems of signification but denotes the ethical spring from which they have issued, the alterity impelling them beyond their self-present boundaries.³⁹ The trace prevents modes of address from coalescing into a closed system, and such dynamism at the heart of justice implies that no juridical or semantic operation is final or beyond reproach.

Given this relationship between the saying and the said, it follows that political activity, through which equality is pursued, and ethical alterity, whereby the Other's wellbeing constitutes the self's only concern, constitute a dialectic that invites ethical scrutiny from within ontological boundaries. This formulation explains why the self-reflexive question of justice is an impetus for ethical analysis and radical change. By displacing the foundation of post-Enlightenment philosophy, ethics requires the ontologically inscribed subject to justify their self-present identity, and the smooth procession of lived subjectivity requires the individual to feel confident that they are not implicated in any form of injustice. The abiding question of Levinasian ethics

never ceases to introduce doubt into lived subjectivity, however, for the betrayal of, and dislocation from, the Other is the condition of the question in the first place. This mode of critique characterizes Derrida's engagement with Levinasian ethics through a deconstructive lens. As Derrida explains, in *Adieu*, "ethical discourse" involves "the interruption of the self by the self as other" (52). Remaining ethically open to the Other requires the disinterpellative capacity to abjure the social distinctions that mediate relationality, the capacity to allow the Other to disorient the self. "The self as other" can be read as the surplus of ethical responsibility at the heart of personhood, since the Other implants responsibility in the self as a condition of the latter's ontological emergence. An ethical mode of analysis, then, is deconstructive by nature, casting doubt on the self-presence of entrepreneurial subjectivity and on the sociopolitical regimes organizing human life.⁴⁰

This deconstructive inflection of ethics adds political vigor to Levinas's schema, which critics have faulted as indifferent to politics. Levinas figures ethical relationality, embodied in the face-to-face relation, as unsustainable, recognizing the necessity of ontology and the specific circumstances to which it gives rise. Ontological imperfectibility should not disqualify Levinasian ethics from social-justice projects, then. If biopolitical regimes distribute privilege through norms, then the force of ethical inquiry is to unsettle political dogmatism and complacency by pointing out the bottomlessness of responsibility.⁴¹ Much like Adorno and Ernst Bloch, whose materialist methodology appears at first blush to be at cross-purposes with ethics, Levinas is driven by hope for a future otherwise than the present. The future "is absolutely other and new" for Levinas, and to over-speculate about it is to submerge it "in the bowels of a preexistent eternity, where we would come to lay hold of it" (*Time* 80). For if forms of justice could fully capture ethics, there would cease to be ethically oriented hope that the structures of

the world could be made to serve more people more equally.⁴² There would cease to be any need for social relations based on the imperative of responsibility.

Insofar as the translation of “the incomparable subject into a member of society” betrays ethical relationality (Levinas, *Otherwise* 158), democratic forms of justice operate according to a Derridean temporality of *différance* in which theory and praxis are, like the ineffaceable difference between origin and supplement, discontinuous (see Derrida, *Margins* 1-27). Derrida points out, accordingly, the urgency of actualizing progressive political formations as well as the need to resist complacency: “The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking *of* the political, of the contour and limits of the political” (*Rogues* 39; emphasis original). To limit deconstruction to the slipperiness of language is to overlook its applicability to sociopolitical issues. The political is no more anchored to firm ground than a signifier is to a referent. The extension of justice requires political and juridical structures, but the material practices of politics and justice neutralize the singularity of the Other, opening up the possibility of “a democracy to come” within the present. Thus, even though the interruption of the face reduces the subject to radical uncertainty, the ambit of ontological relations, with its perceptible hierarchies and injustices, constitutes the perpetually unfinished site of a struggle for an ethico-democratic social order. To submit to the call of the Other is not to relinquish agency or individuality, for the subject can only respond in and through the mediated realm of the political.

The nature of this response resolves the previously troubling distinction between the unmediated Other and the symbolically overdetermined other. As Crystal Parikh contends, in *An Ethics of Betrayal*, “[t]hinking ethical responsibility through the mediated sociality of our encounters with otherness makes clear that, while one’s responsibility is infinite and

interminable, the imperative to respond takes place in material, determinate, and particular circumstances” (14-15). The compulsion to fix the inequality structuring extant social and political formations may, in an ethical formulation, come from an intersubjective place irreducible to the dominant mode of reason—the self’s openness to the Other—but working toward justice requires “re-dressing [. . .] the constitutive violence which binds *her* to a given place” (Ahmed, *Differences* 66; emphasis mine). Here, Ahmed’s use of the third-person feminine pronoun highlights gender as a category of identity in which the self becomes socially legible, one of several categories that affect an individual’s life chances. The point is that ethical potentialities, lying dormant, cannot be educed without addressing operative social stratifications. If, according to Levinas’s schema, political activity can issue from the interruption of the face, ontological agents can act ethically only if they attend to the differential inscription of subjects within the social order. Responding to the Other’s call means attending to specific forms of violence that disproportionately affect specific subjects, violence that gives the lie to rhetorical pronouncements of equality.

What draws literature decidedly into the fold, making it an ideal object of ethical inquiry, is Levinas’s notion of the “poetic said,” a literary and non-referential mode of discourse that provides the fullest ontological expression of the trace. The poetic said is marked by “an implication of meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts” (*Otherwise* 169-170). The poetic said opens up the possibility of situating literature and, with it, literary studies within an ethical register. Such a concept is absent from much of Levinas’s previous writings on the subject, and this seeming departure from Levinas’s early work deserves a moment’s reflection. In “Reality and its Shadow,” an essay that preceded the publication of *Otherwise than Being* by nearly three

decades, Levinas is unequivocally critical of visual art and literature, both of which he groups into the category of art *tout court*. He argues that art freezes time and creates a “lifeless life” (138). He subsequently uses the words “impotence,” “fixity,” “evasion,” and “irresponsibility” to excoriate art for its abstraction from the inexorable temporality of being, an abstraction that makes it “impossible to go beyond [being]” and “toward the *better*” (141; emphasis original). Art ossifies being into a statue impervious to the twists and turns of contingency, and anything invulnerable to ethical interruptions cannot be said to contain ethical dimensions.⁴³

A deeper investigation of Levinas’s opinions on literature, however, reveals a career-long ambivalence about its ethical dimensions. In *Altered Readings*, Jill Robbins tracks the literary references and examples sprinkled throughout his corpus, highlighting that Levinas often considers the ethical by working through or against these allusions.⁴⁴ Literature serves as a point of contact between the philosophies of immanence that Levinas faults and his meditations on alterity. This point alone calls for greater critical care and nuance vis-à-vis the vexed place of literature in his work. How can Levinas return to literature again and again if it cannot, in some way, function as ethical discourse? Discussing his *primary* philosophical influences in an interview, Levinas himself said: “I think that it was first of all my readings in Russian, specifically Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky. The Russian novel, the novel of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, seemed to me very preoccupied with fundamental things. Books shot through with anxiety—with an essential religious anxiety—but readable as a search for the meaning of life” (28 “Interview”). Engaging with literature as a relatively unlearned reader seems to have ignited the spark of philosophical contemplation in Levinas. Accordingly, a general statement about Levinasian ethics’s incompatibility with literary studies would overlook

and oversimplify the significant place the literary holds in his work—not in spite of its shortcomings but *because* of the “searching” work it performs.

Searching, in the sense that Levinas uses the term, involves not only “anxiety” about the structures of everyday life but also a rejection of them as the ultimate horizon of being. By the force of its semantic ambiguity and thematic depth, the poetic said suspends the norms of thinking and reasoning to offer a fleeting glimpse of the alterity such norms put under erasure. Gabriel Riera provides clarity: “The poetic *said* exposes the possibility of a subversion of essence and accomplishes a dismantling of the normative and violent dimension of coherence” (31; emphasis original). The term “poetic” should be understood here in the sense that Paul Ricoeur gives it. Poetics “is not a literary genre,” Ricoeur contends, “but rather the totality of these genres inasmuch as they exercise a referential function that differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary language” (9). The “poetic function” is irreducible to everyday communication because it “incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by correspondence as well as the criteria of falsification and verification” (Ricoeur 10).⁴⁵

Viewed in this light, the poetic said performs the processual activity of searching for a mode of approaching the Other responsibly that is no less necessary than as yet undetermined. It marks the closest convergence in Levinas’s thought between the *spirit and the letter of the law*. Although literature participates in the world of commerce—books, writes Levinas, “belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords” (*Otherwise* 171)—this world cannot wholly assimilate literature to its logics. Aesthetic worlds are distinct by way of their dialectical separation from the routines of everyday life, staging ethical possibilities and encounters, visions of collective life and social interdependence, that throw the violence of ontological systems into

sharp relief. As far as different mediums of art are concerned, this possibility inheres for Levinas solely within the aesthetic juxtaposition of words on the page, as he positions the poetic said in contradistinction to visual art, which halts the “movement beyond being” with “an irresistible subreption” (*Otherwise* 199n21).

Thus does Levinas not only invite ethical inquiry from within the social field; he decisively orients it toward literary texts, a move that foreshadows the ethical turn in Derrida’s deconstructionist thought. Accordingly, wedding literary analysis to ethical inquiry lends this project’s constellation of primary texts a certain political thrust, evoking Jacques Rancière’s alignment of radical political activity with aesthetics. In *Disagreement*, Rancière argues that the political contains an aesthetic dimension in that it enunciates alterity at the site of its repression by the discursive or structural operations of power. He reads the politics of enunciation, which irrupt into the social field from determinate positions that demand recognition, against the formal politics of the letter—namely, the operations of power that can only establish a regime of sensibility in the abstract. To the extent that dominant political structures determine which members of the social body are most visible and which lifestyles are most viable, the aesthetic insists on the discontinuity between the field of sensibility established by dominant discourses and the particular sites of lived experience where new political demands take shape. The power of the aesthetic is to bring to light alternative social arrangements foreclosed by hegemony. “Indeed, like the political itself,” Tom Fisher explains, “the aesthetic for Rancière redistributes the sensible to make new sense possible” (164). This view of the political resonates with my belief in literature’s capacity to disclose ethical valences within quotidian forms of failure too readily construed according to neoliberal reason. If part of the pedagogy of the poetic said is to

puncture or tear the fabric of everyday routines and norms, then the political *qua* aesthetic activity holds out the promise that that fabric can be remade or restitched along collective lines.

My project draws strength from these positive valuations of literary impact. Literature tells readers a good deal about the material, historical, and political conditions of its emergence, and an ethical mode of analysis must not overlook this historicist dimension. Yet if literary production takes shape within a determinate context, it does not follow that that context has literature in an imaginative chokehold. Williams's concept of structures of feeling, which I cited earlier, does not merely point to the intuitive ways in which individuals make sense of their historical moment; it also suggests that new ways of thinking and new political demands emerge within the ostensibly pre-political domain of everyday life. Literature about failure can harbour radical visions, highlighting the artificiality of dominant social forms and routines. It can underline the need to revise neoliberal forms of existence *by* and *through* allegorizing the self's primary openness to the Other. Consider the process of reading as an example here. Reading is an act of faith and interdependence by which submission and agency overlap: in offering their time to a work of literature, the reader surrenders to the decisions an author beyond the text has made and, in the process, becomes a co-producer of meaning. That meaning emerges this way reminds us that any act of enunciation inspired by the reading process—be it a humble interpretation or a bold new political demand—is rooted in the reader's primary exposure to the strangeness of the text. Keeping this point in mind across subsequent chapters, I treat each primary text as a "poetics of the unthinkable" (Bergo 75)—as a site of ethical imagining that interrupts the egoistic conventions of entrepreneurial subjectivity and summons the reader to recognize the ethical potentialities it harbours.

“Interruption” is the operative word in the foregoing sentence. If contemporary forms of success are bound up with personal accomplishment and have little to do with the common good, then failure can be seen as an interruption, no less meaningful for being temporary, that follows the path laid out by Levinas.⁴⁶ Dramas of failure set in a neoliberal social field replete with egoistic pursuits demand an ethical line of inquiry because they highlight a glitch in the system and thereby return us to a fundamental set of concerns such as responsibility and care. The metaphors Levinas uses to critique egoism provide direction in that regard. Metaphors bear a hefty descriptive burden throughout his work. The face, of course, is one such metaphor, but more to the point at hand, he also describes the subject’s awakening to their responsibility for the Other with a metaphor of unanticipated uneasiness: “the threat of storm” (*Otherwise* 180). Here, ontological precariousness is the condition of ethical awakening, motivating the self-critical question of justice. This metaphor suggests that failure constitutes an ideal object for ethical analysis. Following this line of thought, Derrida contends that alterity is most present to subjects, and most necessary for acknowledgement, “when things are going badly” (*Specters* 26). If dominant forms of life rely on the repression of alternatives, then their growing instability augurs the return of the repressed. This is why social and political transformations begin from below—motored into existence by the cake-eating discontents subdued by precarity, burdened by discrimination, and forced to work endlessly. Aesthetically mediated failure, I contend, amplifies the quiet murmur of ethical potentialities.

In the analysis that unfolds across subsequent chapters, I juxtapose this idea of failure opening up repressed social attachments with Levinas’s concept of the poetic said, bringing an ethical mode of analysis to bear on post-1990 American literature. Each text highlights the violence of capitalist modernity and gestures toward ethically motivated solutions. As I

understand it, the task of ethical inquiry is to illuminate the latent (im)possibilities for “unthinkable” social and political arrangements embedded in these literary representations of failure, and this deconstructive work involves thinking the ethical (the saying) alongside the political (the said)—in other words, the deformatizing energy of the spirit alongside the formalism of the letter. Treating literary works as poetic *said*s requires nothing so much as this difficult balancing act.

Chapter Breakdown

Each subsequent chapter is organized around a specific kind of aesthetically mediated failure. This organizing principle leads to a diverse archive that draws together critically extolled and commercially successful works, but it also contains primary texts that have been neither smashing successes in the literary marketplace nor the focus of much critical work. Given the timeframe of my archive, most of the works on which I focus have not circulated long enough for a body of scholarly work to have accreted around them or for critics to know whether they will transcend their time of publication. I consider this uncertainty a strength of the project, despite the fact that a large body of scholarship secures a text’s place in the canon and thereby makes new interventions critically worthwhile.

For it is not my goal to put forth a canon of literature about failure; rather, I have selected works based on a supplier framework. As John Guillory reminds us in *Cultural Capital*, “difficulty” is the quality by which a literary text accumulates cultural capital, impelling it into an ever-expanding canon. Like any critical distinction, difficulty is an ambiguous term, and a text’s difficulty can be formal, thematic, or a combination thereof. The paradox is that canon formation is integral to the survival of English and Literary Studies as disciplines while often mimicking the hierarchies of the social order outside the university’s walls. Yet decisions must

be made. Much like the passage from the ethical to the ontological in a Levinasian framework, the choice of one text over another cannot help determining the focus of analysis and, conversely, consigning other possible texts to the shadows (Parikh 27). My archive cannot escape these pitfalls. While recognizing the coextension of bias and erasure, I have selected primary texts not with canon formation in mind. On a thematic level, the principal criterion has simply been that each text responds to neoliberal conditions through failure.

On another level, however, I have selected works that shed light on the function of neoliberalism within America. There is a school of thought that believes that the nation-state has become a tenuous unit of analysis in a period of fluid capital. But a focus on American literature neither limits my investigations to phenomena unfolding within the legal borders of the state nor implies an exclusion of globally significant dynamics from the ken of my observations. This seemingly narrow focus, moreover, need not obfuscate the effect corporate agents have had on quotidian life. If zoning procedures attract foreign investment to certain parts of the country—or if tax laws attract foreign capital to South Dakotan banks—then the state remains an important object of inquiry, since it has the power to abet or constrain the global flow of capital (Harvey 35-36). Aihwa Ong explains that “neoliberalism migrates from site to site, interacting with various assemblages that cannot be analytically reduced to cases of a uniform global condition of ‘Neoliberalism’ writ large” (14). Ong advocates an approach to neoliberalism that acknowledges “overlapping sovereignties” (19). As one of these sovereignties, the nation-state remains a helpful category for organizing studies of literature, as well as an illuminating context in which to situate analyses of contemporary capitalism.

In Chapter 1, I build on my analysis of contemporary capitalist structures in America in order to emphasize how neoliberal ideology, working in the abstract to interpellate individuals as

entrepreneurial subjects, blurs the line between discipline and desire. The result is an entrepreneurial subject whose fantasies of self-realization take shape according to neoliberal protocols of self-making, which value individual over collective growth. In this context, narratives about characters who perform badly and bungle the atomistic routines of self-making disclose the gap between neoliberal rationality and the complex social worlds it seeks to organize. My case studies are Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Quiara Alegría Hudes's play *Water by the Spoonful* (2013). These works feature characters whose personal failures interrupt the norms of self-appreciation and thereby force upon them an awareness of their constitutive sociality. In these works, performing badly works to reveal alternative ways of being and being together. By denaturalizing the pressure to value self-accumulation over collective existence, these works engage in what I call an ethico-political project of remaining open to a future unmediated by the broken economic and political structures of the here and now.

In Chapter 2, I attend to the generalized pressure under neoliberalism to be happy and think positively. In an economy increasingly glutted with service-economy work, this requirement to be happy is of piece with entrepreneurial subjectivity. It overestimates individuals' capacity to remain emotionally buoyant in the face of unequal social structures and the ongoing attrition of life under capitalist modernity. Consequently, unhappiness and pessimism—both of which I group under the banner of emotional negativity—come to be seen as personal, moral failings, as opposed to legitimate reactions to social worlds in which certain lives are decidedly less livable than others. My analysis focuses on the deployment of emotional negativity in three collections of poetry by Claudia Rankine: *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014). What preoccupies Rankine is the attenuation of (mostly nonwhite) life under neoliberalism. An archive of broken interactions with the world

distinguishes her work. Examples include silences, abortive actions, and other forms of gestural negativity. Constellating Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime, Levinasian ethics, and theories of the gesture as an enigmatic mode of signification, I argue that Rankine shows how unhappy feelings, often couched in fleeting gestures, go unnoticed within a culture of enforced optimism. The emotional negativity running through her work highlights the limits of entrepreneurial subjectivity in overcoming the reality of discrimination against nonwhite people, as the fantasy of untrammelled self-appreciation cannot efface the facts of inequality. By mobilizing emotional negativity as an organizing theme, her work calls for more ethical forms of democracy that exceed pat liberal celebrations of inclusiveness and instead marry a commitment to antiracism with a commitment to redistribution and greater social security.

In Chapter 3, I interrogate the contemporary celebration of family values, which has taken shape alongside the emergence of entrepreneurial paradigms of being. This connection between individuality and the normative American family suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between strong domestic attachments and entrepreneurial success. In light of neoliberalism's neoconservative energies, the domestic space of the household can be read as a synecdoche for the domestic boundaries of the nation. In the first part of the chapter, I make the case that the private family puts the Other under erasure and thereby abets ethical apathy. To substantiate this point on theoretical grounds, I turn to Levinas's concept of the dwelling in *Totality and Infinity*, a concept that brings into relief how neoconservative emphases on family values work to foreclose ethical (im)possibilities of being. With this concept in mind, I turn to Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland* (2008) and Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1993)—both of which centre on family dysfunction. What unites these works is the fact that both end with a reconstituted family. On the one hand, family dysfunction discloses ethico-political

visions of life; on the other, the reconstitution of the family strikes a conservative note, attesting to the power this social unit continues to exert on contemporary American life. While these works fail to answer the questions they raise about the private family, they leave it up to the reader-critic to actualize the ethical potentialities revealed through dramas of family failure. The task of the critic is especially important when viral pandemics prevent social contact with anyone outside the family unit. I thus close this chapter with a brief reading of John Ashberry's poem "Alcove" (*Planisphere* [2009]) in order to contend that social distancing protocols need not foreclose disinterested forms of action.

In my conclusion, which serves as nothing more than brief coda to the preceding chapters, I briefly analyze Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (15), a work of autotheory that combines typical autobiographical report with a theoretically laden orientation to the self. Nelson enacts what I call "agency interruption," a form of failure that is not accidental so much as willed. Her autotheoretical interrogation of the self performs the work of "interruption" that lies at the work of Levinasian ethics, the displacement of self-centeredness that opens onto ethical responsibility. Nelson performs agency interruption in putting herself, her thoughts, and her past actions under a microscope, always viewing her life within a broader sociopolitical context. To question the self is to entertain ethical alternatives to everyday life. Nelson thus loosens the hold that egoism has on her daily life. She dramatizes the humility that individuals will need to adopt in order to work toward a future otherwise than neoliberalism. The concept of agency interruption, providing a point of contact between my literary readings and the neoliberal culture I address throughout, suggests that failure can become praxis for individuals open to ethical forms of existence.

These primary texts, each in its own way, announce the need to rethink biopolitical life along collective lines. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault points out that hegemonic discourses turn heterogeneous ways of thinking into “subjugated knowledges” and thereby enable “local critique.” In relation to a dominant system of knowledge, a subjugated knowledge is “a particular knowledge, a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all knowledges that surround it” (8-9). Opposing neoliberal reason, the primary texts of this project can be viewed as particular, local counter-responses, disclosing potentialities for being that the dominant scripts of everyday life endlessly repress. Though embedded in a world shaped by neoliberal imperatives, these texts perform imaginative labour whose pedagogical surplus is realized through audience escapism and critical engagement. They project ethical visions onto virtual space, paving figurative grounds on which the political and economic structures of the world necessarily collapse.

Chapter 1 Endnotes

¹ In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault distinguishes between “codes of behavior and forms of subjectivation” and contends that they do not wholly coextend but coexist within broad systems of morality (29). On the one hand, authoritative institutions enforce codes of behaviour, generalized precepts that shape normative conduct. On the other hand, modes of subjectivation designate “self-activity,” the reflexive work individuals perform to constitute themselves as “subjects of moral conduct” and therefore as objects of knowledge “to monitor, test, improve, and transform” (29, 28). Oftentimes, hegemonic discourses and values shape the repertoire of self-activity, as “all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self” (28). Yet Foucault argues that self-making can take shape in

disagreement with the dominant codes of behaviour: “Between [codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation] there have been, at different times, juxtapositions, rivalries and conflicts, and compromises” (30). Failure, as I explain below, can engender this tension, opening up space between norms of conduct and heterogeneous modes of being and being together.

² I am indebted to a psychoanalytic line of thinking for this point. As Lauren Berlant argues, in *Cruel Optimism*, fantasies of the good life blind subjects to the attritional pressure of holding on to such fantasies (see 1-51). The point is that, when life is partitioned into a somewhat manageable series of activities, fantasy can offer subjects psychic comfort predicated on the prospect of satisfaction, even though the *telos* they have in mind may in fact prove unattainable. As a result, disengaging from normative fantasies is difficult. Berlant is indebted to Sigmund Freud’s insight, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” “that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (244).

Traces of Freud’s insight can be found in Lacan’s notions of fantasy. For Lacan, fantasy orients subjects within social worlds, constituting the frame in which desire takes shape: “The subject situates himself as determined by phantasy. The phantasy is the support of desire” (*Four* 185). Fantasy is an unconscious psychic dynamic that gives direction to the subject’s conscious and socially legible demands, providing comfort against the partial drives’ transgressive, and fundamentally asocial, modes of enjoyment. Fantasy, in other words, launches the subject into a career of shifting and fluid desires, keeping them in perpetual motion toward anticipated scenes and objects. As Todd McGowan puts it, “desire poses the question for the answer that fantasy provides” (18). Combining Marxian approaches to ideology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek locates the psychic energy of fantasy in ideology, which functions on a meta-subjective level: “In other words, *fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in*

advance” (*Sublime* 142; emphasis original). Here, fantasy guides subjects’ desire for a “fixed socio-symbolic identity” (142).

³ Adorno elaborates on this idea throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, from which my concept of aesthetically mediated failure’s pedagogical function draws strength. In it, Adorno argues that the “shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work” (244). The artwork, in other words, acts upon the beholder and absorbs them into its ambit, ideally offering a reprieve from overwhelming social and political norms. This concept steers close to the troubled waters of formalism and the idea of aesthetic indifference to the world, but I read it much more capaciously as an invitation to analyze art for, and learn from, its anti-normative elements. Even though the artwork is radically separate from the beholder’s world, permanent escape into its aesthetic comforts is, after all, not an existential possibility. The self-forgetting experience of beholding art, then, can provide a clearer understanding of the world the beholder incompletely evacuates. In its capacity as an object of aesthetic pleasure, the artwork exists beyond, and therefore cannot be captured by, the dominant rationality, and this heterogeneity imbues it with dialectical energy: “By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful,’ [art] criticizes society by merely existing. [. . .] Art’s asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society” (225-226). Also worth considering here is Ernst Bloch’s concept of art’s utopian function: “[T]he essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present” (12). The dialectical function of art, its capacity to deny and negate the ineluctable pressures of reality, is an abiding concern in this project, even though I mainly deploy an ethical mode of analysis, which I outline below.

⁴ Much of this introduction outlines a mode of ethical analysis that leverages a concept of ethics as pre-ontological, a concept that poses unavoidable challenges to critical work focusing on bourgeois forms of art. Adorno provides some guidance here. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he asserts: “The openness of artworks—their crucial relation to the previously established, on which their quality depends—implies the possibility of *complete failure*, and aesthetics alienates itself from its object the moment that by its own form it deceives on this score” (353; emphasis mine). Not unlike its object of analysis, the artwork, an ethical line of inquiry must draw from established critical modes, with their anticipatory comforts, but also assume the risks associated with moving beyond them.

⁵ For the classic discussion of interpellation, which propagates a given society’s hegemonic ideology through subjectifying apparatuses, see Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses.”

⁶ Throughout *Otherwise than Neoliberalism*, I distinguish between the “self” and “selfhood,” on the one hand, and the “subject” and “subjectivity,” on the other. This distinction enables me to keep the line separating ethics and ontology in view. Much of the philosophical work that Levinas opposes treats selfhood interchangeably with individual being, but cultural criticism and critical theory—with their Marxian, Foucauldian, or psychoanalytic approaches to being—posit a self overdetermined by its particular inscription within the social body and intelligible only through layers of mediation. Seen in this light, the self is indissociable from the subject, which becomes socially legible through structural and discursive operations of power. Thus, unless I deploy hyphenated terms like “self-making” or “self-accumulation,” which refer to ontological processes of identity formation, the self refers to the pre-ontological status of the subject, its co-implication with the Other on an ethical plane of non-being. As I explain more fully below, the

paradox of subjectivity is that it exceeds selfhood, marking a betrayal of ethical relationality, *and* affords the only position from which the self can be a social agent and act ethically toward others. I mobilize a similar distinction with regard to “Other” and the “other” or “others.” Unless I quote a source that does not uphold this distinction, the Other refers to the symbolically unmediated counterpart in the ethical relation, whereas the other refers to another ontologically captured subject. Levinas explains that the “absolutely other is the Other” whose “alterity” is “constitutive of the very content of the other” (*Totality* 39). While the Other, infinitely vulnerable and accusatory, calls the subject beyond ontology, ethical response must keep in mind and attend to the structural conditions that make life less livable for certain others.

⁷ As Jacques Rancière argues, in *Disagreement*, the social order pivots on “the essential nexus of logos and wrong, the constitutive function of wrong in transforming egalitarian logic into political logic” (35)—by which he means that political formations cannot capture the idea of social equality without perverting it. Such formations, establishing a system of governance (logos), coextend with an unequal distribution of privilege (wrong). In this schema, and as I allude to later in this Introduction, political activity “exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account” (27). Jacques Derrida echoes this concept of constitutive wrongness in *The Politics of Friendship*, in which he investigates the fundamental contradiction of democracy: “There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the ‘community of friends’ (22; see also 75-111; *Specters* 81). What characterizes and unsettles democratic operations around the world is the agon between respecting heterogeneity and the necessity of adducing a common ground that unites individuals. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas also recognizes the inequality endemic

to political formations and their normative modes of operation. The political constitutes a “betrayal” of the ethical for Levinas.

⁸ Discussing the act of signification in broad terms, Derrida contends that reiteration undermines the “authority of the code as a finite system of rules; at the same time, the radical destruction of any context as the protocol of code” (*Limited* 8). In other words, the process of reiteration across different contexts opens up new channels of meaning and resonance. To aestheticize failure is to make it signify differently.

⁹ Bruce Robbins’s *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* inspired this point about the rechanneling of desire. See, in particular, the book’s introductory chapter (1-21).

¹⁰ During the Clinton administration, the signal piece of legislation that recalibrated the aim and scope of social spending was the 1996 reformation of welfare. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) became Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The language of these new programs alone seems to institutionalize widespread cultural emphases on self-reliance and –sufficiency. Indeed, Clinton’s intervention in the welfare system made access to welfare more difficult, imposed a five-year limit on eligibility, and required recipients to engage in work programs as a condition of receiving funds. A good deal of critical work has focused on the inverse relationship between welfare reform and collective living. The consensus is that debates about welfare constitute sites of class and cultural struggle, as the issue often evokes stereotyped presuppositions of certain demographics as well as broad cultural fears and beliefs. In *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper outlines how welfare reform, in the United States, has increasingly privatized social security; neoliberalism’s “dismantling of the welfare state represents the most effective means of restoring the private bonds of the familial obligation”

(60). For fuller discussions of how welfare reform, governmentality, and conservatism intersect, see Cooper's aforementioned book, particularly Chapter 2, "the Moral Crisis of Inflation" (25-66), and Chapter 3, "The Ethic of Family Responsibility" (67-118); Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality*; Marisa Chappell's *The War on Welfare*; Barbara Cruikshank's *The Will to Empower*; and Mark Neal Aronson's "Scapegoating the Poor."

¹¹ In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan explains: "Part of a broader project of legitimating the redistribution of resources upward, welfare 'reform' has also depended, for its cultural effectiveness, on coded hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality—especially as they affect women and children" (15). Under neoliberalism, upward redistribution, social conservatism, and efforts to establish essential cultural norms overlap, such that they cannot be easily distinguished or viewed in isolation. Maurizio Lazzarato echoes this line of thought, explaining that the maintenance of social stratification creates the conditions for stronger competition: "For neoliberalism, competition, like the market, is not the result of the 'natural play' of appetites, instincts or behaviours. It is rather a 'formal play' of inequalities that must be instituted and constantly *nourished and maintained*" ("Neoliberalism" 117). These points about contemporary inequality call to mind Foucault's discussion of racism's centrality to biopolitical dispensations, the kind of system proper to neoliberalism. The shift from sovereign power to biopower does not, Foucault explains, wholly extinguish the oppressive aspects of the former, as biopolitical institutions can mobilize stigmatizing discourses (i.e. racism) in order to exercise the sovereign right to kill (*Society* 236-264). For Foucault, "killing" does not "mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on" (*Society* 256). I take this problem up in Chapter 2.

¹² Marx shows how the generation of surplus value coextends with the creation of surplus labour.

“What appears as surplus value on capital’s side appears identically on the worker’s side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive. The great historic quality of capital is to *create* this *surplus labour*, surplus labour from the standpoint of mere subsistence” (*Grundrisse* 325-325). The point here is that, by decreasing necessary labour time, capital can expand itself through the recruitment of surplus labour.

¹³ As Maurizio Lazzarato explains, neoliberal governance focuses on the “discontinuities, thresholds, divisions, and segments” that divide the social body, in order “to set these inequalities to act effectively one against the other” (“Neoliberalism” 119).

¹⁴ For broad overviews of neoliberalism and its historical and cultural underpinnings, see David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Robert Brenner’s *The Economics of Global Turbulence*.

¹⁵ Broadly speaking, this restructuration of the labour force can be viewed in the context of the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production. As its name implies, Fordism is associated with industrial, assembly-line production and, more broadly, with an economy of scale in which the dominant business rationality endorses the large-scale production of a limited set of commodities. Post-Fordism is associated with the increasing rise of white-collar, service-economy work, on the one hand, and deindustrialization and capital flight, on the other. Post-Fordist production also tends to foster an economy of scope that favours the small-scale production of commodities that appeal to particularized consumer groups. While critics often use post-Fordism and neoliberalism interchangeably, I use the former to denote a mode of production and the latter to denote the intersection of economic, political, and cultural projects. Post-

Fordism takes shape within a broad neoliberal frame. For a fuller discussion of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism and its ramifications, see Ash Amin's edited collection, *Post-Fordism*. In particular, Amin's "Post-Fordism: Models, Fantasies and Phantoms of Transition" (1-41) and Bob Jessop's "Post-Fordism and the State (251-280) are helpful guides to the social and political implications of this transition.

¹⁶ Supplementing broad overviews of the neoliberalism's ascension, Judith Stein's *Pivotal Decade* provides a helpful history of the postwar developments in foreign and domestic policy that paved the way for the Reagan administration's aggressive anti-Keynesianism, with its policies of social retrenchment and tax relief for the wealthy. Tracking the U.S. government's role in fostering business-friendly foreign markets in Europe and Asia, a project that led to a perennial trade deficit, Stein ultimately lands on the Carter administration's ill-conceived Revenue Act of 1978, ratified during a time of economic duress, that gave tax breaks to "savers" instead of "investors." This transference of tax relief to the former spurred the growth of finance capitalism as well as the engendered the conditions under which capital flight would unfold more fully and aggressively (193).

¹⁷ Both Melinda Cooper, in *Family Values*, and Marisa Chappell, in *The War on Welfare*, discuss the oppressive aspects of the Fordist family wage. The Fordist wage, writes Cooper, "was inseparable from the imperative of sexual normativity" (23). The New Deal pact among the state, businesses, and labour pivoted largely on a private sphere regulated by heteropatriarchal norms. The contemporaneous expansion of the Fordist wage and welfare spending, for which civil-rights activists and feminist groups fought, unsettled this paradigm, giving rise to the conditions under which neoliberals and neoconservatives would form an alliance. If neoliberals wanted an "ongoing reduction in budget allocations dedicated to welfare[.]" neoconservatives "endorsed the

expanding role for the state in the regulation of sexuality.” Both “converged on the necessity of reinstating the family as the foundation of social and economic order” (Cooper, *Family* 49). I attend to this alliance in Chapter 3.

¹⁸ Walter Benn Michaels is one of the most thoughtful critics in disagreement with this point. In much of his recent work, he argues that identity politics obscure class inequality as well as strengthen neoliberalism’s atomizing effect on the social body; see, for instance, *The Trouble with Diversity*. However, this thesis reduces discrimination and class inequality to a binary opposition, misrepresenting the many ways in which they overlap and mutually constitute each other. Identity politics should not be abandoned just because a growing number of downwardly mobile whites, a powerful electoral base for the Republican party, consider themselves the victims of racism and overlook the realities of class inequality. Nor should they be abandoned because, at times, the left—an ambiguous term, given the Democratic party’s rightward shift—has focused on equal opportunity, instead of devoting its attention solely to reversing wealth’s upward flight. The proletariat will have to unite across cultural and racial lines, but it is unrealistic to assume that the battle to soften or efface class inequality will transpire in a vacuum. I elaborate on the necessity of conceiving anti-neoliberal visions in conjunction with antidiscrimination projects below, but for now, consider the outgrowth, since the nineties, of social services provided by religious groups, which tend to make adherence to denominationally specific codes of conduct a condition of receiving benefits. That the introduction of Charitable Choice provisions, a program by which the burden of providing social services is transferred from the state to religious organizations, was contemporaneous with the abolishment of AFDC indicates that broad social-justice and antidiscrimination projects cannot be isolated from efforts to redistribute wealth downwards. Indeed, as aforementioned critics such as Lisa Duggan and

Melinda Cooper contend, class and identity politics cannot be separated “without obscuring the politics of wealth and income distribution itself” (Cooper, *Family* 24).

¹⁹ While Foucault is very clear on how neoliberal reason views all of life as a series of investments, much like a stock portfolio, Marxian theory helps to clarify the violence of this situation. As outlined above, surplus value is equal to surplus labour, measured by what is left of the working day over and above necessary labour time, and the realization of surplus value through the market enables capital to buy labour power on an ever-increasing scale. Wealth, then, is a measure of time. Foucault contends that neoliberal dispensations *subjectify* this system of profit generation; individual life becomes a series of investments “measured in time.”

Drawing a distinction between the “free laborer” and “human capital,” Michel Feher asserts that the latter “does not presuppose a separation of the spheres of production and reproduction. The various things I do, in any existential domain (dietary, erotic, religious, etc.), all contribute to either appreciating or depreciating the human capital that is me” (30). In *Family Values*, Cooper lays out the insidious consequences of evaluating life according to neoliberal reason, as the Reagan administration, when faced with the burgeoning AIDS crisis, maintained that government spending should not defray the costs of unsafe sex. The argument, a coded form of homophobia and indifference to abject suffering, justified funding cutbacks to public hospitals and welfare programs (see 167-215).

²⁰ Adorno is helpful here. In *Negative Dialectics*, he echoes Weber in pointing out how capitalist norms reduce subjectivity to its “role” as a producer. These norms induce uncritical conformity to the division of labour:

The concept of the role sanctions the bad, perverted depersonalization of today: unfreedom [. . .] The hardships of the division of labor are hypostatized as virtues

in the concept of the role. [. . .] The liberated ego, no longer locked up in its identity, would no longer be condemned to play roles either. The remnants of a division of labour which the radical curtailment of working hours might leave in society would lose the horror of shaping the individuals throughout. (278-279)

Adorno's analysis of the role bears some resemblance to midcentury sociologist David Riesman's observation that the postwar rise of white-collar work and new cultural forces transformed Americans from being "inner-directed" and following their own desires to "other-directed" and following the lead of others.

²¹ Two recent studies help to flesh out these two developments I have identified. First, in *The End of Policing*, Alex Vitale shows how modern forms of policing have taken shape alongside the dismantling of the welfare state and have worked to maintain and exacerbate social inequality. The conservative function of policing reflects, I think, the way in which the work ethic conserves class inequality while obscuring it. Often framed as a social good, policing seems to be the counterpart here to widespread emphases on self-reliance in an era of social retrenchment and antitax legislation. Second, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty exhaustively tracks the falling growth rates and neoliberal tax policies that have led to inherited wealth outpacing the wealth derived from labour—such that wealth inequality has, in the United States, reached pre-Depression levels. In the contemporary context of falling growth rates and an increasing reliance on financial instruments as sources of income, progressive policy interventions, the *bête noire* of neoliberals, have become necessary if the social order is to be a meritocratic one.

²² Marx repeatedly emphasizes the speculative logic of capitalist production. Take, for instance, this passage from *Grundrisse*: "[Capital] posits necessary labour only *to the extent and in so far*

as it is surplus labour and the latter is *realizable* as *surplus value*. It posits surplus labour, then, as the condition of the necessary, and surplus value as the limit of objectified labour, of value as such” (421; emphasis original). In other words, production commences only if capital can anticipate the realization of surplus value.

²³ In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno makes a similar point about neuroses’ function in atomizing the social body:

[Neuroses] are the pillars of society; they thwart the better potential of men, and thus the objectively better condition which men might bring about. There are instincts spurring men beyond the false condition; but the *neuroses tend to dam up those instincts*, to push them back toward narcissistic self-gratification in the false condition. Weakness that will mistake itself for strength, if possible, is a hinge in the machinery of evil. (298; emphasis mine)

It should come as no surprise, then, that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define paranoia in contradistinction to schizophrenic desire, which aims to escape the social formations sustained by paranoiac energy (see *Anti* 273-382). The schizophrenic is stigmatized because they puncture the fabric of these repressive formations through an open-ended process of *becoming*—one in which they loosen the constraints of their socially legislated subject position.

²⁴ As Adorno puts it, “For the functionally determined individual interest to find any kind of satisfaction under existing forms, it must become primary in its own eyes [. . .] [I]t is only through the principle of individual self-preservation, for all its narrow-mindedness, that the whole will function” (*Negative* 312). Insights like this one, spaced throughout *Negative Dialectics*, underpin his thesis that metaphysical thought can no longer, following Enlightenment philosophy, proceed toward abstraction but must turn inward and embrace a dialectics of

nonidentity; it must “be a thinking against itself” (365). The negative dialectical mode that Adorno outlines has, I believe, a lot in common with the ethical mode of inquiry that I detail below. The crucial difference is that Adorno is a materialist thinker, whereas Levinas begins his philosophy from the concept of pre-ontological interdependence between the self and Other. If, for Adorno, totalizing thought threatens to extinguish particularity, for Levinas, totalizing thought overlooks its unavoidable relation to the mysteries of infinity. For a fuller discussion on the similarities and differences between Adorno and Levinas, see Alford (“The Opposite”).

²⁵ Adorno characterizes “spontaneity” as a “flash of light between the poles of something long past, something grown all but unrecognizable, and that which some day might come to be.” It is “something physical which consciousness does not exhaust” and it “abruptly leaps out” (*Negative* 229). Spontaneity is an improvised response to contingency that discloses fundamental dimensions of personhood, and it is a helpful term for thinking about the capacity of unexpected failures and swings of fate to disclose ethical possibilities.

²⁶ This point draws strength from Herbert Marcuse’s notion of “dialectical logic”:

Dialectical logic is critical logic: it reveals modes and contents of thought which transcend the codified patterns of use and validation. [. . .] [I]t recovers tabooed meanings and thus appears almost as a return, or rather a conscious liberation of the repressed! Since the established universe of discourse is that of an unfree world, dialectical thought is necessarily destructive, and whatever liberation it may bring is a liberation in thought, in theory. However, the divorce of thought from action, of theory from practice, is itself part of the unfree world. No thought and no theory can undo it; but theory may help to prepare the ground for their

possible reunion, and the ability of the thought to develop a logic and language is a prerequisite for this task. (par. 17)

²⁷ Muñoz, it should be noted, leverages materialist thinkers to substantiate his thesis—in particular, Ernst Bloch and his discussion of art’s utopian function. See Bloch’s *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*.

²⁸ Mari Ruti makes a similar point in her dissection of Halberstam’s celebration of queer failure, contending that “those who have been severely marginalized are unlikely to experience their failures as anything other than failures and even more unlikely to be interested in further failure in the name of radical politics; those who have genuinely failed in relation to our society’s dominant happiness scripts are unlikely to experience their failure as a sexy political stance” (35-36).

²⁹ For Marx’s inaugural discussion of the base-superstructure concept, see his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (424-428).

³⁰ This point echoes the one Chris Taylor makes toward the end of his essay “Plantation Neoliberalism.” Taylor also leverages Marx’s passage about Jamaica.

³¹ A good deal of critical work has looked at the fiscal crisis in New York City, in the seventies, as an incipient site of neoliberal reform attacking the power of public employees and labour. In addition to Brash, Harvey, and Tabb, see Joshua B. Freeman’s *Working-Class New York* and Roger Sanjek’s *The Future of Us All*. To be sure, as Robert Brenner points out, in the preceding decade many of the preconditions for neoliberal reform took shape, as the “advanced capitalist world was suddenly projected from boom to crisis” (99; see 99-121).

³² For a cogent critique of Hegel’s “World Spirit,” see Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (300-360).

³³ In *Time and Other*, Levinas makes clear the way in which his concept of ethics troubles phenomenology's view of death as that which delimits the field of being and consciousness: "It is not the fact that death cuts existence short, that it is end and nothingness, but the fact that the ego is absolutely without initiative in the face of it" (81). Substituting the "relationship with the Other" for death, Levinas unsettles the primacy of ontology, which figures here as a "complication of our original relationship [that is] founded upon the inner dialectic of the relationship with the Other" (81). The "transcendence" and elusiveness of this primary relationship "presupposes the future of alterity," a future beyond being not defined by death but "by the other" (82). The self's immemorial relationship with the Other, perverted by ontological structures, can only be experienced as a return in an unanticipated future.

³⁴ In *Totality and Infinity*, this point is complicated by Levinas's description of an "obscure light coming from beyond the face, from what is *not yet*, from a future never future enough, more remote than the possible" (*Totality* 254-255; emphasis original). Here, the ethical relation is bathed in a light emanating from a source more original than the pre-original interdependence of self and Other. For Levinas, this faint glow issues from the "land of the virgin" (258), the dwelling occupied by "the inhabitant that inhabits it before every inhabitant, the welcoming one par excellence, welcoming in itself—the feminine being" (157). Levinas frames the (im)possible future of ethics as a "retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality," a notion of hospitality as the site of ethics that bears political implications in subsequent chapters of this project (156). It is not merely responsibility for the Other that characterizes ethics but a shared site of belonging. Yet Levinas affixes this idea to a gendered dichotomy according to which the feminine is the figure of absolute vulnerability and the masculine is the virile figure of responsibility. In his most mature work, *Otherwise than Being*,

the maternal replaces explicit references to gender and sexual difference, and the figure of the maternal even comes to symbolize ethical responsibility. While Levinas seems to recognize the issue of using a conceptual binary that rests on sexual difference, which cannot wholly escape charges of essentialism and myopia, he still cannot abandon a culturally overdetermined figuration of female difference. Derrida addresses this issue in *Adieu* (36-45) and *On Touching* (76-91). For feminist responses to Levinas, see Irigaray (185-217); Chanter (170-224).

³⁵ My understanding of “precarity” issues from Judith Butler’s definition: “Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (*Frames* 25).

³⁶ Lawrence Buell echoes these concerns, faulting Levinas for “demand[ing] nothing less than an unconditional dismantling of one’s protective defenses against the claims of the other” (9). For subjects whose relation to privilege and opportunity is tenuous, and whose daily life consists of suffering the attritional pressures of poverty and/or discrimination, this demand can be difficult to stomach. However, as I explain below, Levinas—asserting that “there is also justice for me”—recognizes that “the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society” is an ineluctable necessity, so an ethical mode of analysis has to keep within its sights structural and cultural forms of injustice (*Otherwise* 158-159).

³⁷ Any suggestion that Levinas gives the political short shrift is thus misguided. Much of my discussion regarding the continued legitimacy of welfare institutions resonates within Levinas’s ethical framework. In “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” Levinas distinguishes between the state that issues “from the limitation of charity” from one that issues “from the limitation of violence” (105). The former, servicing equality and justice, is tempered by an ethical infrastructure,

whereas the latter, predicated on a belief in humanity's ineradicable penchant for violence, imposes regulations on lived subjectivity. The problem with the latter is that it determines sociality, arrogating to itself the power and privilege to stage interpersonal relations. As moral arbiter, then, such a state cannot be held to account for its abuses of power. Levinas's distinction between the state grounded on ethical openness and the state grounded on suspicion maps rather neatly, I would argue, onto the contemporary divide between the left's call for economic redistribution and antidiscrimination, on the one hand, and the right's focus on limiting civil liberties in the name of conservative social values, on the other. For more clarity on ethical asymmetry's relation to justice, see "The Other, Utopia, and Justice" (223-233).

³⁸ Levinas puts the relation of the saying to the said most succinctly in an endnote:

The thematizing logos, the saying stating a said in monologue and dialogue and in the exchange of information, with all the cultural and historical dimensions it bears, *proceeds from this pre-original saying*. This saying is prior to all civilization and every beginning in the spoken speech that signifies. The unlocking of sincerity makes possible the dimension in which all communication and thematization will flow. The *trace of signifyingness* in the making of signs and in proximity is not thereby effaced, and marks every use of speech. (*Otherwise* 198n6; emphasis mine)

The paradox is that the two modes of communication are at once knotted together, since the saying is the matrix of the said, and sundered, since the said cannot make the ethical ontologically available. Making the saying ontologically available would involve rendering finite the infinite responsibility that the self bears for the Other. For a fuller discussion on the said emerging from the saying without fully assimilating it, see Eaglestone (129-179).

³⁹ Derrida's explanation of the trace, which he first encounters in Levinas's work, is helpful here:

"Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure" (*Margins* 24). In terms of sovereign subjectivity, the trace unsettles the subject's self-presence, throwing its ontological origins into question and, by the same token, relating it to the ever-elusive alterity of the Other. The trace cannot appear without withdrawing, and so its effect is to keep the economy of signification in pursuit of presence. As Jill Robbins puts it, the trace is that "without which no self could be self, and because of which no self can be itself" (28).

⁴⁰ As I alluded to above, this deconstructive aspect of Levinas's metaphysics calls to mind Adorno's main thesis in *Negative Dialectics*, as he calls for a philosophical orientation toward self-criticism. Reversing the classic course of dialectics—the particular entity's subsumption under the overarching concept—Adorno seeks to liberate thinking from totalizing pressures that extinguish heterogeneity and misrepresent subjects to themselves. "In the unreconciled condition," he writes,

nonidentity is experienced as negativity. From the negative, the subject withdraws to itself, and to the abundance of its ways to react. [. . .] The unregimented thought has an elective affinity to dialectics, which as criticism of the system recalls what would be outside the system; and the force that liberates the dialectical movement in cognition is the very same that rebels against the system.

(31)

If sociopolitical and ideological structures compel conformity, thereby alienating subjects from themselves, it is only a turn inward that enables a critique of these very structures. And such a critique would "recall[] what would be outside the system." That Levinas's unsettling of

sovereign subjectivity's self-presence reflects Adorno's materialist polemic underscores, it seems to me, his philosophy's adaptability for a project of literary analysis, despite the fact that it hinges on the idea of pre-ontological relationality. Like a dialectical mode that would attempt to free the particular from totality, ethical inquiry questions the neoliberal emphasis on self-appreciating entrepreneurship, emphasizing instead the mysteries of alterity.

⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of biopolitics and regulation through norms, see Foucault's final chapter in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (135-159).

⁴² In "The Awakening of the I," Levinas discusses hope and temporality with forceful clarity, underlining the need to "situate ourselves in the perspective of a time bearing a promise" (185). As Robert Eaglestone explains, Levinas's "understanding of temporality is also part of [his] concern with hope, liberation, freedom and the advent of justice[.] [. . .] The existent must have a future, which contains the possibility of continual emergence" (107). "Continual emergence" is here synonymous with change. Hope for a future otherwise than the present is the primary expression of the subject's capacity to change.

⁴³ My reading of "Reality and Its Shadow" largely follows the path laid out by Jill Robbins and Robert Eaglestone.

⁴⁴ Robbins calls her approach to Levinas and literature "intrinsic," arguing that "an extrinsic approach to the topic will lead nowhere" (39). This latter approach is fruitless, she contends, because "[t]here is an incommensurability between the more originary level of Levinas's ethical discourse and the discourse of literary criticism" (39). Yet this distinction is difficult to uphold: her intrinsic approach is meant to show that literature preoccupies Levinas's corpus, and to eschew these allusions is to miss the significant place literature holds in his thinking, be it as a subject of criticism or as an example of ethical discourse. Deconstructive analysis would show

that this distinction is unstable, as literature extrinsically taints Levinasian ethics, the literary and philosophical becoming porous categories of discourse. Moreover, the separation between intrinsic and extrinsic is blurry and uncertain, because no reader of Levinas can effectively bracket away the experiential and critical capital they bring to bear on their reading. Any assessment of Levinas's approach to literature requires familiarity with that literature; to a certain extent, one must already be a literary critic. Thus, the possibility of an ethical line of inquiry vis-à-vis literary criticism always inheres within the claim that it is impossible. Part of my project in this chapter is to show that Levinas is far more open to deconstruction than he seems at first blush. His philosophy enables critics to trouble neoliberal discourse and, further, to understand how contemporary literature troubles it.

⁴⁵ Thomas Loebel's *The Letter and the Spirit of Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Justice, Politics, and Theology* inspired my use of Ricoeur here; see the introduction (3-25).

⁴⁶ "Interruption," "disturbance," and "epiphany" are leitmotifs across Levinas's work. Consider the following distinction he makes between the "comprehension" of the Other and its "epiphany": "The comprehension of the other is [. . .] a hermeneutics and exegesis. [. . .] But the epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own, independently of this signification received from the world" ("The Trace" 351). The epiphany of alterity interrupts rote understandings of others and thereby induces ethical conduct. As Megan Craig explains, "Comprised of multiple voices—passive and active, present and absent—interruption becomes the dominant feature of Levinas's writing" (7).

Chapter 1: Performing Badly: Entrepreneurial Failure in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and Quiara Alegria Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*

The typical investor in human capital is more impetuous and thus more likely to err than is the typical investor in tangible capital.

—Gary Becker, *Human Capital*

Perhaps the spiritual only shows, only reveals its specificity when being's routine is interrupted: in the strangeness of humans vis-à-vis one another, but of humans capable of sociality in which the bond is no longer the integration of parts in a whole.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*

In the same speech at the Democratic National Convention with which I opened this study, Bill Clinton pronounced that the “most important family policy, urban policy, labour policy, minority policy, and foreign policy America can have is an expanding entrepreneurial economy of high-wage, high-skilled jobs” (“Address”). I return to Clinton at the outset of this chapter because his assertion underscores the dominant political rationality in and of neoliberal America. If the state aimed to limit the market in the past, then it has now reversed course, subordinating itself to the market. Like so many politicians’ speeches, of course, Clinton’s sacrifices specificity for emotional appeal. It conflates what should be different policy initiatives and subsumes them under the political need to foster an “entrepreneurial economy,” as if achieving this one objective would be the most significant contribution to the common good. Clinton’s vagueness, moreover, imbues his message with greater moral charge; the question of how biopolitical life should be organized becomes a question of what is good and right for America. Accordingly, those who reject neoliberal rationality do not have America’s best interests in mind.

When such thinking informs the state’s policy work, as it has, it narrows the field of legitimate political demands.¹ In order to count as practicable, any progressive agenda aimed at unsettling the politico-economic status quo must be couched in the language of entrepreneurship. In the not-too-distant past, Occupy Wall Street attempted to shift the terms of political

engagement, insisting that economic inequality constitutes legitimate grounds for collective action. The movement's principal achievement, I would argue, was its contestation of neoliberal reason's grip on what counts as sayable in the political domain ("the 99%"). Since dominant political rationalities work in the abstract, divorced from the vagaries of everyday existence, such contestation resounds on a discursive level.² This chapter considers how aesthetically mediated examples of entrepreneurial failure disclose the gap between neoliberal rationality and the complex social worlds it seeks to organize. The literary works I examine—Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Quiara Alegria Hudes's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Water by the Spoonful* (2013)—interrupt the protocols of entrepreneurial self-appreciation in order to reveal other possibilities of being; in doing so, these works engage in an ethico-political project of remaining open to a future otherwise than the present.

If we understand the political in Levinasian terms—that is, the extension of justice across the social field, such that the "saying is fixed in a said" (*Otherwise* 159)—then "ethico-political" seems an odd, contradictory pairing, to say nothing about what a project premised on the juxtaposition would look like. Whereas the ethical refers to an asymmetrical relationship between the self and Other, with the self feeling endlessly responsible for the Other's wellbeing, the political understands human subjects as equal. Theoretically, action conceived as political works to ensure that each and every subject enjoys the same set of rights and has recourse to the same law. One cannot subscribe to the political law of equality without betraying their ethical obligation to the Other. As I argued in the opening chapter, however, the political extension of rights and opportunities issues from the self's opening to the Other, a figure of radical alterity that no juridical structure can absorb or assimilate. Levinas's assertion that "the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible" should not surprise readers of his work, since he

views political activity, and the securities it establishes, as a necessary supplement to the endlessness of responsibility (*Outside* 123). The ethical, animating the feeling of responsibility for the rightless and less fortunate no less than for the transcendent Other, prevents political action from hardening into a teleological aim.³ It keeps the political open and unfinished. Crystal Parikh, from whom I derive the idea of an ethico-political project, concludes that “one’s responsibilities to the Other cannot be neatly reconciled with one’s responsibilities to other others” (15). That is, one’s ethical obligations exceed the domain of politics, even though the latter often provides the most effective stage on which to act responsibly.

Enacting responsibility, then, translates ethical obligations into a provisional form of political action. If performing badly can disclose ethical modes of living, then the next step is to enact forms of life that trouble the conventions of daily existence. Neoliberal dispossession, widening the gap between the wealthy and the poor as well as eschewing any commitment to the commons, has made such action urgent and necessary. “Citizenship,” writes Wendy Brown of a neoliberal dispensation, “is divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby undermining an already weak investment in an *active citizenry* and an already thin concept of a *public good* from a liberal democratic table of values” (“American” 695; emphasis original). Brown rightly points to the decline of state-administered services—affordable education and healthcare as well as robust forms of social security—as the principal culprit behind a moribund sense of the commons. Consequently, the absence of a shared communitarian sensibility unmediated by religious beliefs and assimilatory imperatives means that ethically motivated political action risks falling on deaf ears.

That said, a performative event is not a plan so much as an opening. Derrida explains that radical political action “wavers between imperative [. . .] and the patient *perhaps* of

messianicity” (*Rogues* 91; emphasis original)—by which he means that political action is not radical if it relies on a program. For a program prioritizes, anticipates, and excludes, foreclosing alterity in advance.⁴ It “prefers expectation to action” and cannot, therefore, imagine a radical “movement without return” (Levinas, “Trace” 347). A project, on the other hand, is etymologically linked to the Latin word for a process or structure that extends beyond a definite limit. An ethico-political project understands that social “[j]ustice does not result from the normal play of injustice” but “comes from outside,” beyond the dominant structures of the here and now (Levinas, *Entre* 30). The ethico-political projects at the core of this chapter reject neoliberalism as the sole horizon of being, thus illuminating the collective capacity to improvise social arrangements and to remain hopeful in the face of economic and political impasses.

Such political behaviour unsettles the grip neoliberal rationality has on daily life. Foucault calls it a “counter-conduct,” which he defines as a “struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (*Security* 201). An analogue to this idea is Adorno’s argument that the disobedient work of negative dialectics is not intellectual but a “mode of conduct” that “harbors no certainty” (*Negative* 34). The movement away from dialectical unity, construed in this chapter as rejecting the protocols of self-appreciation, bears little significance if it fails to become a performative intervention in the material world—if it remains, to invoke Arthur Redding’s understanding of radical thought, “useless”—but the only certainty this “mode of conduct” has is its refusal of the status quo.⁵ To act in such a way is to practice the art of nonidentity, thereby recognizing that the dominant politico-economic rationality does not encapsulate the knowable and the possible.⁶ To that end, I argue that, with their entrepreneurial subjects who perform badly, my case studies mount an ethico-political project that takes shape in the indeterminate temporality of Derrida’s “democracy to come,” a democratic dispensation that

cannot be anticipated in any programmatic way (*Specters* 81). As such, *Cosmopolis* and *Water by the Spoonful* oppose the disciplinary and temporal aspects of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Entrepreneurial Subjectivity: Discipline and Volition

As discussed in my opening chapter, entrepreneurial subjectivity is by no means an *a priori* condition of personhood. Neoliberal ideology interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial subjects, construing their decisions and behaviours in purely economic terms, as if people were no more than fungible units of capital. According to Foucault, neoliberals treat “economic behavior” as “the grid of intelligibility” by which individuals become socially legible and thus governable (*Birth* 252). This view of human life locates value in what a person does with their time only on an abstract plane of economic gains and losses. Lived experience is not the abstraction that it is in the eyes of capital and the state, however, and this tension will only become more palpable as precarity spreads across the social body more fully.

The problem with the neoliberal understanding of human life is that it over-estimates the individual’s capacity to negotiate the contingencies of social worlds and, therefore, misrecognizes agency as always acquisitive. While the imperatives of self-appreciation induce adherence to social and productivist norms, widespread dispossession has also unsettled the line between the attenuation and reproduction of life, such that “agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making” (Berlant, *Cruel* 100). Alongside the bifurcation of biopolitical social bodies into the uber-rich and perennially insecure, these increasingly indistinguishable pressures to survive and accumulate bespeak the need to rethink the atomistic lifestyles abetted by neoliberal governance. The literary works I examine in this chapter suggest that entrepreneurial failure opens onto ethical visions of life in which care, responsibility, and collective attachments outweigh individualistic pursuits and self-investment.

This argument relies on an understanding of entrepreneurial subjectivity as a fantasy of self-realization and a modality of daily life premised on making sound investments in oneself. “My human capital is me,” writes Michel Feher of entrepreneurial subjectivity, “as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect” (26). Feher’s use of personal pronouns underscores my point: entrepreneurial subjectivity needs to be understood as a series of habits by which individuals extend themselves in social worlds no less than as the dominant way in which life is viewed under a “new regime of truth” (Read 28). If the disciplinary function of subjectivation has an end goal, it is the individual’s adoption of normative lifestyles, as interpellation works when people misread their subjection as the terms of their freedom.

The important place debt has in contemporary life highlights this coarticulation of discipline and desire; attending college or buying a home, for instance, is a life experience that many individuals want, even though it often consigns them to years of indebtedness. As Maurizio Lazzarato points out, “[d]ebt repayment is part of a standardization of behaviour that requires conformity to the life norms dictated by the institution” (*Making* 135). That said, the binary logic that governs the intelligibility of the norm, whatever it may be, cannot help soliciting attention to deviations from the norm—namely, mistakes, missteps, wrong turns, and what doctrinaire neoliberals might call bad investments—and this opens the door for a consideration of entrepreneurial failure and the different visions of life it brings to light. The grip of interpellation begins to loosen, after all, when people cease to identify with the prevailing ideology, when “things are going badly” (Derrida, *Specters* 26). The circumstances that lead to this cessation, that interrupt the conventions of self-appreciation, are the focus of this chapter.

To that end, I make a seemingly counter-intuitive move, following neoliberal rationality in adopting entrepreneurial subjectivity as a lens through which to view failure. This approach helps to contextualize entrepreneurial failure as such, and it enables an ethical reading of the social attachments improvised by individuals who have bungled the disciplinary norms of self-investment. Critics have highlighted that the decline of civil society under capitalist modernity makes contemporary forms of discipline remarkably difficult to grasp, since the institutions of civil society have historically served as enclosures within which disciplinary procedures are both enacted and contested. Eve Cherniavsky, for instance, sees in this development a crisis of critique, which no longer has a stable target (13-38), and Aihwa Ong locates neoliberal governmentality in a “new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological” (3). Accordingly, Michael Hardt notes “an intensification and generalization of discipline [. . .] so that there is no longer a distinction between [the] inside and outside” of the institutions compromised by neoliberal governance (“Global” 150).⁷ If the market constitutes the basis of truth and governmentality, and if market efficiency outweighs traditional biopolitical concerns, then capitalist reason, infiltrating each and every domain of daily existence, becomes the principal vehicle of discipline.

Foucault’s lectures on the emergence of neoliberal thought clarify this obfuscation of inside and outside. Discussing the rise of liberalism, Foucault rejects the philosophical romance of civil society and explains that it emerged as a governmental strategy for balancing people’s economic interests, that which lies beyond the scope of government, with their social bonds, that which government seeks to regulate. Civil society, in this formulation, is no more than an “*interface* [. . .] of governors and governed” (*Birth* 297; emphasis mine). I lay stress on “interface” because the art of liberal governmentality is not only to create the subjectivities to be

imposed on a variegated mass of people but to seek soft points of contact between disciplinary processes and volitional activity, ultimately blurring the line of demarcation between the two.

Yet neoliberal governance upsets the balance between the economic and the social, giving rise to a social order in which egoistic pursuits outrank communitarian attachments, and entrepreneurial subjectivity becomes, as a result, “the interface of government and the individual” (*Birth* 253).

Within a neoliberal dispensation, the entrepreneurial subject is the object of generalized discipline that traverses the porous distinction between what lies within and what lies beyond the institutions of civil society.

The coarticulation of economic self-interest and discipline also contains a temporal dimension. As I explained in my opening chapter, the rise of entrepreneurial subjectivity as the dominant mode of life has extended market reason into domains of life previously insulated from the logics of capitalist production, and a significant consequence of this development is the temporal restructuring of everyday life. Neoliberal governance does not simply atomize the social body; through politics of fiscal austerity and disinvestment, it compels individuals to treat the here and now as the time of investment. The future thereby becomes an economic concern, as good investments in the present theoretically lead to future payoffs. The mitigation of unpredictable events, unpredictable because they belong to the future, is the primary task of entrepreneurial self-appreciation, a task that, no matter the soundness of one’s investments, frequently ends in failure. As Feher points out, “the conditions under which neoliberal subjects come to appreciate themselves more or less are especially difficult to predict, both because the future marketability of a conduct or a sentiment cannot easily be anticipated” (28). The impossibility of predicting the future highlights the absurdity of the routine, but the more serious problem is that the routine represses alternative modes of being and being together.

Obviating future problems in the present forecloses individuals' openness to contingency of a radical sort, an altogether unforeseeable future that promises no collection of profits. Such a future would be what Derrida calls an "errant surplus value" because it exceeds all calculation in the present (*Specters* 49). For Derrida, this "errant" future engenders a disjointed order, one that bears no relation to a neoliberal dispensation. Failure is a form of errancy in itself, and it resonates with an ethical mode of inquiry that works to deconstruct and defamiliarize the capitalist logics that structure our understanding of success. As I show in the following sections, performing badly causes characters to unlearn their entrepreneurial habits, thereby opening onto social arrangements that belong to an order and a future otherwise than neoliberalism. I begin with DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, which brings into sharp focus the features of entrepreneurial subjectivity laid out in this section.

***Cosmopolis* and Entrepreneurial Subjectivity**

Toward the end of the first section of *Cosmopolis*, "chief of theory" Vija Kinski tells Eric Packer: "Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself" (77). Her assertion resonates with the experience of her interlocutor, the novel's protagonist. An asset manager in his late twenties, Packer has amassed a fortune trading in financial markets where money begets money, bypassing the mediating presence of the commodity form that completes Marx's classic formula (M-C-M). If, as Marx explains, capitalism pivots on a speculative temporality, with capital anticipating the realization of surplus value before investing in the production process, then Packer's financial gains issue from the purest of speculative activity—activity that takes place within a domain of abstraction seemingly unmoored from concrete realities. Money has lost its narrative quality, Kinski implies, because it has become too abstract, no longer bearing any relation to the concrete world.

Kinski's comment opens onto what critics have isolated as the novel's central focus: postmodern unreality. Reception of the novel has been mixed, to be sure, but no critic has displayed their dissatisfaction more eloquently than James Wood.⁸ He locates the novel's theoretical preoccupation on a formal level, calling *Cosmopolis* "postmodern flaneur fiction" that exhibits "DeLillo's merely theoretical interest in human beings" (n.p.). Wood's references to Saul Bellow and Henry James, amongst others, intimate that DeLillo's novel never stood a chance, but Wood's verbiage unintentionally calls to mind Packer's chief of theory, opening up space for us to consider Kinski's theoretical point alongside DeLillo's "interest in human beings." That is, I want to lay emphasis on the overlooked connection that DeLillo draws and then undermines in the novel, the connection between the abstract quality of finance capital and the speculative pressures of entrepreneurial self-making.

Cosmopolis stands out as a fairly slim work when compared to the length of DeLillo's other novels. Although he wrote a novella between the publications of the tome-like *Underworld* (1997) and *Cosmopolis*, the latter's relative brevity seems to mark a shift in his approach to writing. After the publication of *Underworld*, DeLillo opined that writers "write long, complicated, challenging novels" as "a way of stating our opposition to the requirements of the market" (Moss 165). In light of this comment, the length of *Cosmopolis* seems to suggest DeLillo's capitulation to the "requirements of the market." However, no DeLillo novel takes on capitalist modernity—its pressures as much as its absurdities—as squarely as *Cosmopolis* does. Accordingly, its slimness requires heightened attention to how the minutiae of form and style cross the central narrative of entrepreneurial failure; these elements are crucial sites of the novel's ethico-political project.

Focusing on the explosion of cybercapital in the dot-com era, the novel unfolds over the course of one April day in 2000. The narrative follows Packer, safely tucked away in his stretch limousine, as he travels across town to get a haircut. Along the way he stops to chat with his heiress wife, Elise Shifrin; to have sex with other women; to attend a rave where teenagers, spellbound by a mixture of electronic music and drugs, dance aimlessly; and to sneak his way as an extra into a movie scene. Forces beyond his control also interrupt his mission: his car passes through, and therefore attracts the scorn of, an anti-capitalist protest, and the funereal procession of a dead rap star, attended by prominent politicians, the police commissioner, and famous celebrities, compel his limo to reroute its course. These contingencies in the concrete world happen in tandem with Packer's unexpected losses in the currency markets. Much like the speed at which the dot-com era went from boom to bust, the optimism with which he begins his day fades by the end of the narrative, as his strategy of borrowing enormous amounts of yen for speculative purposes backfires when the value of the currency fails to depreciate. His portfolio is "reduced to near nothingness in the course of the day" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 121). DeLillo solicits our attention to the personal stakes of these bad investments: Packer does not "separate live and work" (56); the company that he runs into the ground, Packer Capital, is little more than an extension of himself; and in the novel's final scene, DeLillo forces Packer into a showdown with Benno Levin, a disgruntled former employee whose hatred is directed entirely at the man, not the corporate entity. What ultimately concerns DeLillo, *pace* Wood, is the individual's condition as a point of contact between concrete realities and the realm of financial abstraction.

Nothing expresses this liminality more clearly than Packer's frequent use of futuristic technology. Inside his high-tech limousine, there is an "array of visual display units" showing "medleys of data": "He used to sit here in hand-held space but that was finished now. The

context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank” (13). While ability to afford touchless gadgetry sets Packer off from the pedestrians his limousine passes by, what he calls the “interaction between technology and capital” is by no means a new dimension of DeLillo’s work (23). DeLillo’s career has consisted of works that, amongst other aims, take the pulse of American culture as it collides with, and becomes mediated by, technology (Boxall 7). A novel such as *White Noise* (1985) has preoccupied critics for precisely this reason. In it, protagonist Jack Gladney feels “something of deep personal value” when checking his bank account on an ATM (46). Leigh Claire La Berge argues that this example of technology mediating between the abstract and the concrete establishes a conflict between postmodern form and the content of lived experience it seeks to convey (*Scandals* 37-72). This conflict carries over into *Cosmopolis*, but the difference is that, in this later novel, it assumes its most dramatic dimensions.

For the passage of time has made the ATM obsolescent. In *Cosmopolis*, Packer meditates about “automated teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory.” The technology, he thinks, is “anti-futuristic, so cumbersome and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated” (54). DeLillo has thus transferred the burden of mediating between the concrete and abstract to technology that he cannot quite name. If he had written *Cosmopolis* at the end of the aughts, then perhaps Packer would have done his banking on an iPhone. Nevertheless, technology is a means by which DeLillo imbues his novels with a sense of futurity. As he explains in the essay he wrote in response to 9/11:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don’t have to depend on God or the

prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think. ("In" 37)

While these words were penned in the context of national loss and confusion, they provide insight into the role technology plays in *Cosmopolis*. Technology allows Packer to not only manipulate currency markets but also literally see into the future. In his limousine, for example, Packer "watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline" and then "placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he's seen it on-screen" (22). This is one of several moments in the novel when Packer's gadgets give him a foretaste of what is to come. DeLillo's thoughts about the future vis-à-vis technology can thus be located on a subjective level within *Cosmopolis*, and this devolution from the national to the personal paves the way for a discussion of DeLillo's treatment of entrepreneurial subjectivity within a novel that has no greater preoccupation than the corrupting effects of individualist striving. DeLillo suggests a homology between the technologies that allow Packer to interact with currency markets and the lived experience of human capital.

Packer's refusal to admit defeat in the market highlights this connection between the vatic role of technology and the speculative temporality of lived subjectivity. Jane Melman, his chief of finance, cautions him to stop borrowing astronomical sums of yen, because his prediction "doesn't chart" (46). Accordingly, she tells him that "the yen will fall" but in the meantime you have to draw back" (53-54). "Chart" is a shorthand for predicting the outcomes of investments. If activity in the market charts, then it is a sound investment, likely to pay dividends. Just as technology makes "it possible for us to claim our future," so the logic of speculation underwrites the behaviours of successful entrepreneurial subjects like Packer.

DeLillo suggests that what makes Packer so successful, and indeed stubborn, is his ability to chart the future: “He liked knowing what was coming. It confirmed the presence of some heredity script available to those who could decode it” (38). In this light, Packer’s eventual failure takes on greater thematic import. He does not merely lose all his money but finds himself exposed to the contingencies of his surroundings as well as other people, for whom he has little more than indifference at the outset of the novel.

Between the Concrete and the Abstract

DeLillo’s treatment of entrepreneurial subjectivity prompts a discussion of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract under neoliberal capitalism. In a novel preoccupied by finance’s abstract flows of money, there is nevertheless a concrete kernel at the heart of abstract value to which DeLillo points. The pressures, struggles, and contradictions endemic to entrepreneurial subjectivity are to be found on this concrete level of existence. Thus far, however, critics have overlooked how the novel sheds light on neoliberal modes of life. Alison Shonkwiler focuses not on lived subjectivity but on literary form, an emphasis that leads her to pay more attention to the abstract processes of finance capitalism. What she calls the “financial sublime” is the novel’s inability to contain the process by which finance capital appreciates within its narrative framework (249). (Incidentally, the Kantian sublime preoccupies my following chapter.) A detour through Shonkwiler’s work will help distinguish my approach.

According to Shonkwiler, DeLillo’s examination of finance capitalism pushes the genre of the novel toward a point of inadequacy. It is not entrepreneurial failure that preoccupies Shonkwiler so much as representational failure, which yields “a detached narrative style” whose stiffness approximates the impersonal flows of finance capital, “as if discourses themselves run like data along discrete tiers, jumping from one level to another without a flicker of distinction”

(273). To Shonkwiler's point, *Cosmopolis* is replete with examples of a system that defies narrative domestication; for example, as Kinski and Packer gaze at the "electronic display of market information" hurtling across the side of an office tower, they witness a "hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 80). In this light, the novel's form, issuing from the conflict between a literary genre that seeks representational hegemony and a capitalist system that eludes representational capture, is a function of what it cannot represent. Shonkwiler thus contends that critics cannot understand DeLillo's "narrative style" without first understanding it as a *historical* phenomenon.

This line of reasoning follows Fredric Jameson's work on postmodern culture. According to Jameson, finance capital "separates from the concrete context of its productive geography" and produces "new and unrepresentable symptoms in late-capitalist everyday life" ("Culture" 251, 252). Capital is no longer anchored to an identifiable locus of production; it is altogether unmoored from the material context within which ontic life takes shape. Jameson calls this phenomenon the "becoming abstract of land and the earth" to suggest that capitalist reification, confronting nothing that cannot be translated into a unit of value, is now total and complete (260). Consequently, postmodern style reflects "a play of monetary entities that need neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does), which supremely, like cyberspace, can live on their own internal metabolism and circulate without any reference to an older type of content" (265). With this reality of runaway financial abstraction in mind, Shonkwiler equates "Packer's lyric flights about cybercapital" with Kantian sublimity (252).

It is the first half of that equation, however, that demands further attention and scrutiny, for "Packer's lyric flights" do not merely signal the representational inadequacy of the

postmodern novel, convincing as Shonkwiler's analysis may be; the aspirational nature of any lyric flight, at least if the Romantics have taught us anything, suggests a drama of lived subjectivity as much as, if not more than, a problem of form. Of course, what separates Packer from the Romantics is that the latter yearned for transcendence, whereas the former wants to follow his money into a place of abstraction: "He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to arrays of information" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 48). Packer resents his body for being irreducible to a unit of value. Try as he might, he cannot achieve an altogether fungible state of personhood; he cannot, that is, escape into a domain of pure abstraction.

While the thrust of this passage may seem quite obvious to readers, it assumes more significance when juxtaposed with Jameson's argument that the "forces of reification" have spread "through ever greater zones of social life (including individual subjectivity)" ("Culture" 256). With his conspicuous use of parentheses here, Jameson emphasizes a point that he does not wish to qualify, as if he were under the impression that the reification of lived subjectivity under neoliberalism *may not be obvious* to his readers. While the growth of the gig economy and the expansion of capital's moneymaking apparatus to include cosmetic surgery, mental health, stem cells, and surrogacy certainly give credence to his point, it is debatable nevertheless—an assertion that should be the thesis of a long paper rather than a parenthetical aside. Put differently, is the reification of individual subjectivity so complete that it demands no further explanation or analysis? I have argued up to this moment that, on the one hand, neoliberal rationality views individuals as no more than fungible units of value, and this argument certainly accords with Jameson's point. On the other hand, I have also taken pains to emphasize that

entrepreneurial subjectivity amounts to series of routines by which individuals invest in themselves. Packer's fantasy of complete transferability underscores that entrepreneurial subjectivity mediates between the abstract and the concrete; ineluctably, it is a processual mode of being that can never escape the irresolvable contradiction it inhabits.⁹

The contradiction is irresolvable because no entrepreneurial subject can close the gap between the dominant politico-economic rationality and the lived experience of translating the self into a valuable asset on the open market. Translation of this kind involves a two-step movement of self-objectification followed by a fetishization of the objectified self. For Marx, commodity fetishism blinds the consumer, or at least makes them indifferent to, the commodity's exploitative provenance. To speak of fetishism is always in some way to speak of misrecognition. Yet the entrepreneurial subject does not have the luxury of detachment on which commodity fetishism pivots. The subject is also the labourer that fetishism obscures. The successful entrepreneur requires, apart from luck and institutional advantage, as much egoistic hope and desire as willpower and hard work. And yet, this mode of living seems no different from life within any liberal dispensation. What intensifies this process under neoliberalism is the fact that every facet of life is available to reification, and the toxic trend of privatizing public life and services only exacerbates these conditions. Packer's dream of disembodiment is but a hyperbolic example of this totalizing pressure to turn the self into a piece of value; conversely, his "asymmetrical" prostrate—"a counterforce to balance and calm"—is an unobvious reminder of the body's ineffaceable ontology (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 52).

But why, exactly, does the successful entrepreneur come to embrace self-reification? Wolfgang Fritz Haug's work on commodity aesthetics proves helpful here. Commodity fetishism, Haug argues, involves an "aesthetic abstraction" that "detaches both sensuality and

meaning from the object acting as a carrier of exchange-value” (50). The detached meaning becomes, in Haug’s evocative formulation, a “second skin” that shows the consumer “unfulfilled aspects of their existence” (50, 52). The second skin names the consumer’s libidinal investment in the commodity, a delusion whereby the reified thing is wrested from a system of equivalence (exchange value) and cathected. Recasting the fetishized self—which could not be further from the notion of selfhood at the core of Levinasian ethics—as a second skin explains how the reification of the individual can still bear deeply personal meaning.¹⁰ This heuristic exercise yields further insight into the condition of entrepreneurial subjectivity examined by DeLillo. For the self-investing entrepreneur, the second skin ceases to be the object of desire and becomes the desired, fully realized self “acting as a carrier of exchange-value.” Packer sees in the “arrays of information” to which he cannot wholly accede the “unfulfilled aspects” of himself. He yearns to inhabit a second skin. If neoliberal rationality requires Packer to treat himself as a reified piece of capital, then it is also the case that his desires have merged with this requirement. The agency of the second skin is to knit self-reification and personal fantasies of fulfillment together.

The fetishistic production of a second skin means that the stories entrepreneurial subjects tell about themselves do not line up with the logic of equivalence underpinning the market. Their uniqueness, however real or illusory, contradicts their fungibility. The second skin works like a metaphor, bringing two unlike terms, the desiring subject and the abstract unit of value, into harmony. But if dissonance is the metaphor’s condition of possibility, then this harmony is always precarious, continually at risk of falling through a semantic gap. Richard Godden turns to Paul Ricoeur’s work on metaphor to suggest that no amount of fetishism can efface the concrete origins of value that remain inassimilable to capitalist abstraction. In each case, the second skin as well as the metaphor, “a semantic excess, resulting from an impertinent conjunction of terms,

leaves a generative remainder beyond the reconstituted possibilities of meaning” (417). This ineffaceable remainder becomes the source of “a critical anxiety that the meaning of the metaphor, like the reference of the fetish, both is and is not” (418). The semantic precariousness of metaphor leads Godden to contend that Jameson “fails to note the structural tension inherent in the value form,” and we might extend his insight to Shonkwiler’s analysis of DeLillo’s novel (420).¹¹ Just as bad metaphors cause readers to interrogate the awkward fusion of heterogeneous elements, to the detriment of the writer’s credibility and the reader’s credulity, so failure can exacerbate the “critical anxiety” generated by this fusion, inducing entrepreneurial subjects to reevaluate their desires and daily routines.

This alternative approach to capitalist abstraction anchors our inquiry to the concrete world, and it thereby sheds light on Packer’s uneasiness about his asymmetrical prostate: “When he removed the word [asymmetry] from its cosmological register and applied it to the body of a mammal, his body, he began to feel pale and spooked. [. . .] [H]e was haunted to the point of superstitious silence” (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 53). This downward trajectory from cosmology to embodiment gives the lie to Packer’s fantasies of disembodiment. If his upward mobility has turned into a desire for complete abstraction, then what “spooks” him at this early point in the novel, before he has lost his fortune, is the unpredictability that attends embodiment. Indeed, the bodies of other people, particularly the imperfections they bear, tend to surprise Packer when he takes time to look. His bodyguard Danko has “a body hammered out of raw experience, things suffered and done to extreme limits” (125), and his driver, Ibrahim, has a “collapsed eye” that is the result of a “hellish” experience that goes unexplained because any explanation would “seem a betrayal of his pain” (163, 168). Difficult experiences have left their mark on the bodies of Packer’s employees. To have a body is to inhabit a political terrain where life chances are bound

to a sliding scale of wealth and privilege. The agency of the word that dismays Packer is to return him to this ethico-political plane of human sociality, where the “strangeness of human beings vis-à-vis one another” displaces the fungibility of the value form (Levinas, *Outside* 103).

It is telling that the word that perturbs him is the same word at the heart of Levinasian ethics. The self occupies an asymmetrical position in its relation to the Other, and the body is the source of ethically motivated action precisely because it is non-interchangeable: “The unicity of the I is the fact that no one can answer in my place” (Levinas, “Trace” 353). According to Levinas, the condition of the self’s individuation is its co-implication with the Other. Neither the value form nor the illusion of political equality can undo the heteronomy at the heart of lived subjectivity, and laying hold of radical otherness would signal nothing more than a superficial kind of supremacy. That asymmetrical responsibility could outrank personal involvements can only strike someone like Packer as a roadblock to self-fulfillment. Because his narcissistic goal is to achieve a state of complete abstraction, we cannot abandon the ethical resonance of his fear of bodily contingency. The uneasiness caused by his asymmetrical prostate wrests the narrative’s mood of unexpectedness from financial uncertainty and grounds it in the concrete realm of human difference, the only place where the alterity of other people can eclipse the speculative protocols of neoliberal self-making.

In this light, the novel’s problem of representation is not financial abstraction so much as the antinomy between the concrete and the abstract. To return to the scene with Kinski and Packer, as the two gaze up at the “hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols,” DeLillo’s representational strategy suggests that any attention given to abstraction requires countervailing attention to the concrete world:

[Packer] knew what she was thinking. Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment. (80)

What we can immediately glean from this passage is that fetishism is at play. For Marx, fetishism works because the commodity “abound[s] in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (*Capital* 164). Accordingly, DeLillo suggests that “idolatry,” “astonishment,” and the “sacred” are involved in the “pure spectacle” of information that Packer aspires to be. But since the commodity constitutes “the phantasmagoric form of the social relation between men,” fetishism is no more than the consumer’s participation in the trick capitalist production plays on their senses (Derrida, *Specters* 208). DeLillo’s religious verbiage, which verges on the absurd, is more disengaging than immersive, making the obfuscations of capitalist abstraction available for scrutiny. He deliberately makes poor use of language’s symbolic capacity, thereby affirming the power of language to undo the tricks capitalist abstraction plays. To engage in idolatry, after all, is to inhabit a space of mundanity, and this moment of “pure spectacle” only happens because Packer’s limousine sits “in stationary traffic” (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 78). As Andrew Strombeck argues, DeLillo “takes pains to emphasize—at the very moment that the novel’s rhetoric about cybercapitalism is at its most abstract—the limousine as a physical thing” (154).¹² DeLillo shows how no amount of financialization can efface the concrete basis of value.

DeLillo's rhetorical strategy also privileges embodiment over abstraction. As the above passage unfolds, his indirect report blends with Packer's thoughts. What appears at first blush to be overblown writing is in fact a moment of authorial humility, as DeLillo subordinates third-person narration to Packer's subjective perspective. Alongside the personal pronoun "we" and the sentence fragments that interrupt the impersonal relay of content, the shift from past to present tense indicates that DeLillo is not conveying abstract information so much as depicting subjective experience. He does not call upon language to reify lived subjectivity, as if it were no more than a capital asset; rather, language is the means by which he exerts counter pressure against the pull of abstraction. And while DeLillo reclaims his position of narrative authority in the paragraph that follows, it is telling what this allows him to do, as Kinski's reported speech—"Fantastic," she says (80)—corroborates Packer's presumption. What Packer knows—"He knew what she was thinking"—can only be realized as truth once DeLillo reconstitutes the triadic structure of narrator and interlocutors. The effect of this shift from Packer's mind to a space of interpersonal communication is to emphasize the power of ideology. Both Packer and Kinski fetishize the "hellbent spring of numbers," and their consensus underscores the agency of dominant discourses to delimit what is thinkable and doable. If DeLillo's use of free indirect style grounds this scene in the messy terrain of embodied experience, his subsequent reestablishment of authorial distance intimates that the (im)possibilities inscribed in the future greatly depend on how people choose to think and act collectively. It is no coincidence that an anti-capitalist protest interrupts Packer and Kinski's conversation, for opening up avenues to different futures requires different forms of thought and conduct.

In dramatizing class strife, this scene also hints at how entrepreneurial failure might come to serve an ethico-political project aimed at emancipating the future from the temporality of

capitalist production. Before Packer loses all his money, the phrase that best exemplifies his thoughts about the future—“This is [. . .] the future”—underscores how dominant rationalities can repress the possibility of heterogeneous futures. The phrase hovers between constative and metaphor, such that the two become indistinguishable. What is true or not becomes imbricated with what is or is not desired. The structure of the sentence, a copula linking a subject to its complement, assumes the appearance of a constative, a statement that can be verified as either true or false. Since the “flow of information” witnessed by Packer and Kinski cannot *really* be the future, there is no ground for calling what Packer thinks a statement of truth. Nothing can close the gap between the present and the future. And yet, in syntactically joining the present to the future, Packer’s thought expresses the speculative logic of capitalist desire. As Haug’s notion of the second skin has illustrated, metaphors can function as repositories of desire, with the individual identifying with their reified self, and this dynamic is at play in the insistence with which the copula connects present and future. The implication here is that the subordination of the concrete world to abstract data could become the truth, in an analytical sense of the word, if people, especially plutocrats like Packer, continue to act on their desire for such a world.

But the confusion itself is absurd. The growing resentment for Packer and his way of life, evinced by the protest, underscores this point. If truth and desire have become frustratingly interlinked for Packer, then it is not beyond the realm of possibility that failure could dislodge desire from the truth of neoliberal reason, a truth that is no more than what neoliberal reason deems sayable and thinkable. To the extent that failure interrupts entrepreneurial routine, it has the power to make Packer rethink his *values*. Drawing on the grammar of economics to illustrate the endlessness of responsibility, Levinas writes that “with the other our accounts are never settled”; settling this perennially unsettled account involves “investing one’s own freedom”

(*Outside* 123). Emancipated desire puts the forms of economic behaviour, such as investing and accounting, to new use—such that they become unmoored from their conventional referents.¹³

The world need not be what Packer wants it to be, and he need not think what he thinks.

For Levinas, ethical responsibility moves the self toward a future that defies conceptual intelligibility. Such a future would be one “without hope for oneself” (Levinas, “Trace” 349), undermining the terms by which one has come to understand themselves. And it would unfold “the moment when all the joints give way between form and content” (Derrida, *Specters* 144). To return to Packer’s patterns of thought, if a copula is one of these joints that yoke content to form, if it provides a syntactical idiom for capitalist speculation, then what would happen when Packer is no longer in a position to imagine the future as a mediatized flicker of data? What would happen when Packer’s entrepreneurial failure forces him to consider the alterity of other people?

The subject’s passive relation to the Other is the guiding principle of my ethically inflected reading. But *Cosmopolis* is no stranger to ethically inflected criticism. Russell Scott Valentino, also calling attention to the binary between the concrete and abstract, draws on Greek and Enlightenment philosophy to understand the novel’s ethics. For Valentino, the novel shows how capitalist modernity threatens the moral foundations of democratic society, as the growing virtuality of wealth abets the “de-corporealization” of virtue, which can only be enacted from a place of bodily autonomy and integrity (144). While much of Valentino’s argument resonates with mine, especially my analysis in this section, the philosophical sources on which he draws posit a self-present, sovereign subject. As Aaron Chandler argues, the Levinasian idea of self-divided, non-sovereign subjectivity underpins the novel’s ethics. But in laying emphasis on Packer’s ethical failure as opposed to the ethical potentialities opened up by his entrepreneurial failure, Chandler suggests that the novel’s philosophical investments are only negatively

apparent (252). There is more to the novel's philosophical dimensions than that. In what follows, I offer a different reading, paying attention to how Packer's entrepreneurial failure paves the way for the novel's pedagogy, its ethico-political project that gestures beyond the here and now of neoliberal capitalism. As the novel unfolds, Packer's bad investments bring him down to earth, so to speak, and it is indeed through his failure that the novel enacts its ethico-political project.

Eric Packer's Downward Mobility

After his conversation with Kinski, which coincides with the opening act of the anti-capitalist protest, Packer stands outside his limousine and gazes at "the currency ticker restored to normal function" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 106). The "flow of information" shows that the yen has "renewed strength, advancing against the dollar in microdecimal increments every sextillionth of a second" (106). During his conversation with Kinski, then, Packer's fortune wavers between the possibilities of astronomic growth and catastrophic collapse, and it is the latter that finally becomes reality. Yet this scene is notable not only because it marks the twilight of Packer's financial security but also because it links this imminent failure to the breakdown of his insularity. While talking to Kinski, for instance, Packer notices that the activists have pulled their slogan—"A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY"—from "the same poetry he'd been reading" (96, 97). Such identification compromises his ideological distance from the protest without denying his idiosyncratic taste for "spare poems sited minutely in white space" (5). Poetry makes Packer "conscious of his breathing" and discloses "things he was not normally prepared to notice" (5). It reminds him of his untranslatable and irreducible singularity. Thus, the recognition of a similar taste in poetry between himself and the activists performs the double task of puncturing his ego's defenses and modeling for him a form of collectivity comprised of complex singularities, a social formation that "does not absorb the difference of strangeness"

(Levinas, *Outside* 103).¹⁴ The quickness with which complete estrangement becomes partial identification imbues the narrative with a sense of hopeful futurity that has nothing to do with the speculative temporality of neoliberal self-making.

Further contributing to a change in Packer is the man who lights himself on fire in protest. Kinski construes the act of self-immolation as “not original,” no more than a futile attempt to “hold off the future” (100, 91). For Kinski, the market has engulfed the real world, a development that leaves “no outside” (90). Her remarks encode the familiar understanding of postmodernity: unlike the modernist project that determined to propose a space beyond the market, the postmodern project accepts that cultural production unfolds within the field laid out by the market. Recalling Jameson’s discussion of postmodern pastiche (*Postmodernism* 279-296), Kinski thinks that self-immolation is a derivative form of protest. “All those Vietnamese monks,” she tells Packer, “one after another, in all their lotus positions” (100). According to Kinski, the man outside Packer’s limousine has merely appropriated a form of protest utilized by Thích Quảng Đức in 1963, when he burned himself to death to protest Ngô Đình Diệm’s political regime in South Vietnam. The footage of Đức’s burning body became a powerful symbol of the oppression of Buddhists, playing no small part in the reversal of international support for Diệm’s government, and it has now had a long afterlife in popular culture. For example, Malcolm Browne’s Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of Đức appears on the cover of Rage Against the Machine’s self-titled album (1992). The picture’s de-contextualization seems to substantiate Kinski’s point. However, the anonymous man’s self-immolation is not without a performative context, as it happens right before Packer’s and Kinski’s eyes. It is firmly rooted to an identifiable place and time, demanding more attention than Kinski is willing to give it.

Packer is open to this line of thinking. While Kinski urges him to believe that the “protest was a form of systemic hygiene” that “attested [. . .] to the market culture’s innovative brilliance” (99), he thinks that she is “wrong”: “The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act” (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 100). Witnessing the act of self-immolation suggests to Packer that no amount of financialization can expunge dissent, the resistant kernel of embodied life that refuses the laws of the market. Against Kinski’s assertion of “systemic hygiene,” DeLillo emphasizes “the stink” of the man’s burning flesh, the “burnt flesh mixed with gasoline” that Packer and Kinski “began to smell” (101, 98). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Adorno provide a list of intimate exchanges, “infectious gestures” like “touch, soothing, snuggling up, coaxing” (182), that decenter the ego-driven subject and thereby exceed the impersonal injunctions of regimented thought and action, but nothing undermines the ego’s hegemony more than smell:

The multifarious nuances of the sense of smell embody the archetypal longing for the lower forms of existence, for direct unification with circumambient nature, with the earth and mud. Of all the senses, that of smell—which is *attracted without objectifying*—bears clearest witness to the urge to lose oneself in and become the “other.” As perception and the perceived—both are united—smell is more expressive than the other senses. When we see we remain what we are; but when we smell we are *taken over by otherness*. (184; emphasis mine)

More than any other sensorial encounter with otherness, smell works to dissolve the ego’s defenses. Olfaction, associated with the “lower” strata of the social order, decenters the entrepreneurial subject, forcing upon them an awareness of their inscription within a collective context. The burning man, lacking a name and a story, is proof against the market’s

omnipotence; he is a principal agent in Packer's reversal of thought. Even though the burning flesh may be a citation, as Kinski would have it, its smell nevertheless reminds Packer that he inhabits a concrete world that does not always obey the laws of the market. The scene, coinciding more or less with Packer's entrepreneurial failure, signals the failure of abstraction.¹⁵

Accordingly, the intrusiveness of smell becomes a motif in the final scenes of the novel. Upon arriving at a movie set in the final chapter, Packer wants to be one of the extras, naked and exposed on the pavement, "those who stank" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 176). Smelliness has the power to draw Packer out of his entrepreneurial aloofness. After joining the extras, he feels "one" with the group, but his ensuing thoughts indicate that this felt oneness does not signify homogeneity: "Was there a man with a missing limb, brave stump knotted below the knee? How many bodies bearing surgical scars? And who is the girl in the dreadlocks, folded into herself, nearly all of her lost in her hair, pink toes showing?" (176-177). Once again submerging his narrator's voice in his protagonist's consciousness, DeLillo indicates that togetherness need not expunge difference. Packer needs to be part of a group of people—people marked by unpleasant smells—in order to recognize its diversity, the singularity of each constituent. The agency of smell carries over into the Packer's final confrontation with Benno Levin, who attributes his unemployment to stinking (193). Smelling badly, according to Levin, is a variant of performing badly, precluding entrepreneurial success.

Alongside the olfactory decentering of his ego, in the final half of the novel, Packer also abandons the patterns of thought with which he began the day. Such character growth is evident in his reaction to the funereal procession that he encounters after losing his money. Packer learns that he knew the man who died, a rapper called Brutha Fez. In the middle of the procession is a hodgepodge of elected officials, religious figures, entertainment luminaries, and police officers;

what is more, the late Fez's style, both musical and sartorial, is an equally confusing mixture of appropriated forms of cultural expression: not only is Fez notable for always wearing a red fez, but his music blends "ancient Sufi music" and rap "in Punjabi and Urdu and in the black-swagger English of the street" (133). At first blush, DeLillo presents a rather bleak, if highly ironic, picture of popular culture and how great wealth unites celebrities with establishment politics and the state's repressive apparatus. The procession seems to underscore the homogenizing influence of the market.

Yet as he watches the procession pass by, Packer's "delight in going broke seemed blessed and authenticated" (136). Performing badly takes on a positive meaning for Packer here, as the grammar of Christian soteriology has replaced the "idolatry" of fetishism. Amy Hungerford argues that DeLillo's novels "imagine language in a way that preserves a specifically Catholic understanding of transcendent experience while driving far from Catholic traditions and themes" (53). While Hungerford does not analyze *Cosmopolis*, her point sheds light on the suspension of entrepreneurial willpower that Packer's "blessed" delight conveys. The whole scene is a "spectacle he could clearly not command" and it "felt disinterested and free" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 136). By the end, it reduces him to "enormous body sobs." And when he seeks the "enveloping bulk" of Fez's manager, Kozmo, Packer feels "the beginnings of thoughtful acceptance" (139). Packer's engagement with the scene unfolding around him stands apart as a counternarrative at odds with the spectacle the funeral has become. Sobbing, he joins the mass of mourners, but he does so without participating in or fetishizing the tawdry procession. This episode stages the conflict between embodiment and abstraction, tipping the balance in favour of the former. Packer subsequently returns to his limousine and puts all "the screens [back] into their hatches and cabinets, restoring the interior of the car to its natural grandness of scale, with

sightlines unobstructed and his body isolated in space” (140). The downward progression from fantasies of abstraction to embodied contingencies is all but complete.

An Ethico-Political Project; or, Against Closure

Packer’s entrepreneurial failure, overwhelming him with a sense of existential contingency, prepares him for his arrival at the barbershop in the novel’s final chapter. Most striking about this scene is that the barbershop and the surrounding neighbourhood represent so much of what Packer reviles at the outset of *Cosmopolis*. In the novel’s opening section, his limousine drives through the Lower East Side, and he sees the neighbourhood as “an offense to the truth of the future” (65), but after losing all of his money, he arrives at the barbershop that stands across the street from “a row of old brick tenements” (159). Inside, “elapsed time hangs in the air, suffusing solid objects and men’s faces” (166). Steeped in a past of working-class and immigrant poverty, the barbershop has no place in the future Packer envisions himself entering at the outset of the novel, and it belies the feudal history of wealth’s intergenerational transmission that he values in his wife. Prior to this scene, Packer tells Elise that “a little history is nice”: “I married you for your money in a way, the history of it, piling up over generations” (120). He fetishizes his wife’s patrician heritage, considering it the missing element to his persona as the ultra-rich wunderkind. Whereas his wife’s provenance enables him to indulge his fantasies of abstraction more freely, the barbershop reminds him of his working-class origins.

The barbershop’s association with Packer’s existential provenance highlights his conspicuous relation to time. Oscillating between a future he cannot inhabit and a past that he cannot relive, Packer never seems to be in the right place at the right time. As Peter Boxall puts it, “the present disappears continually into the past or into the future,” in *Cosmopolis*, “so that to experience time is always somehow to miss it” (224). But in the barbershop scene, missing time

takes on a new significance. The scene calls to mind Levinas's idea that belatedness inheres within the structure of selfhood, as the self is always too late in responding to the Other. The self's situatedness within the ontological order means that they have already missed the Other. The Other impinges upon the self within a "past that bypasses the present," the pre-original past that "can not be recuperated by reminiscence not because of its remoteness, but because of its incommensurability with the present" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 11). Yet this very belatedness is what makes responsibility endless, keeping the ethically oriented subject moving toward a future otherwise than the present. Packer's return to his personal origins is not mere nostalgia, then; it also insists on a different relation to time and futurity.

The scene generates this new horizon of possibility through multiple figures, the most personal for Packer being his late father. The barbershop is in the same neighbourhood where his "father had grown up" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 159). Allusions to Packer's late father attest to the spectral agency he exerts on the present—by which I mean that his non-presence conjoins the scene to a time from which it is nevertheless divided. He thus provides an idiom for the Levinasian Other that affects the ontological order through absence. Packer cannot deny his concrete origins, no matter how close he comes to realizing his entrepreneurial dream of abstraction, nor can he avoid his constitutive relation to the Other. When the barber begins to recount the life of Packer's father, Packer "sat in the chair and half-dreamed scenes and wavery faces out of his father's mind, faces levitating in his father's sleep or his momentary reverie or his final morphine relief" (166). His strained imagining dramatizes the self's twofold relation to its metaphysical provenance: co-implicated with the Other, the self is both attached to the past and incapable of understanding the past in order to put it to rest. A deficit of understanding binds the self to the Other and keeps the self from righteously closing in on itself.¹⁶ This constitutive

ignorance, however, is not diametrically opposed to all forms of understanding, for such a binary would reduce ethical responsibility to sheer stupidity. If claiming to know the Other perpetrates epistemological violence, foreclosing forms of genuinely disinterested action, then accepting the limits of one's knowledge paves the way for a greater understanding of one's ethical openness, duty to others, and non-sovereignty—an understanding that Packer's entrepreneurial failure has prepared him to recognize.

Packer's preoccupation with his father bespeaks his growing immersion in the world. His capacity to act ethically increases as he interacts with his surroundings more openly. At the beginning of the novel, his routine is to literally overlook the people in his life: "He did not look at Shiner [his adviser] anymore. He hadn't looked in three years. Once you'd looked, there was nothing else to know" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 11). Arrogance underpins Packer's refusal to look at his employees, as if he were so infallible a judge of character that nothing could escape his notice. His entrepreneurial failure eventually reveals his fallibility and leads him to approach difference with intellectual humility. Outside the barbershop Packer "wanted to feel it," but what he feels is not "longing or yearning or sense of the past." Rather, Packer "was feeling what his father would feel standing in this place" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 159). With the ambiguity of feeling overriding intellectual isolation, his father's unknowable experience of the world displaces Packer's entrepreneurial ego, already weakened by his exposure to the contingencies of the market. Wanting to feel what he cannot know, Packer implicitly acknowledges the alterity of the Other. This form of embodied engagement with the world is the precondition of a vision of social justice that respects difference. The affectively decentered individual respects the singularity of experience while acknowledging the possibility of doing justice to the repressed

past and to the Other. In this light, the barbershop scene brings the novel's ethical dimensions into contact with its political ones, proffering the hope of ethically induced political change.¹⁷

This fusion of the ethical and the political is most clear when the barber remarks that Packer has “ratty hair” (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 160). The choice of adjective draws yet another connection between Packer and the protesters, for whom the rat is a symbol of their anti-capitalist agenda. As Chandler points out, the “rat leitmotif comes to signify an ominous otherness at every turn,” but he tempers this observation by suggesting that the threat posed by the rat is neutralized when “translated into the safer pliability of language” (250, 249). According to this logic, to call someone's hair “ratty” is to quell any sense of alterity, moving from the ego-shattering precipice of the saying to the safe confines of the said. There is a limit to language's safeness, however, and the unmistakable irony of Packer's “ratty” hair points to how far he has come since the opening pages. That is, it points to how his failures on the market have embedded him more deeply in the world, displacing the unpredictability of the market with the contingencies of other people—the kind of people who live in Wall Street's growing shadow.

Thus does “ratty” invite a deconstructive reading. Levinas accounts for language's instability with his notion of alterity's trace. For Levinas, language lacks self-presence; the meaning of any utterance or text is always partly inscribed in a transcendent domain beyond semantic reach, and nothing more than a trace of transcendence inheres within the said. The trace is, to use Derrida's word, a “send-off,” keeping texts, people, and politics open to radical difference (*Rogues* 39). Accordingly, DeLillo illustrates the paradox of textuality with his epigraph to *Cosmopolis*—“a rat became the unit of currency”—a line he gets from Zbigniew Herbert, the poet for whom Packer and the protestors share an appreciation. The figure of the rat initially belongs to a place beyond the novel's diegesis, a place that gives the events of the

narrative a sense of unsettling otherness even as it remains inaccessible to narrative capture. Not unlike Packer's late father, the epigraph simulates the transcendent order inhabited by the Other, the domain of pure alterity from which the self is alienated as long as they remain ontologically inscribed. When reiterated in the diegesis, the rat assumes trace-like dimensions, driving the narrative into a future it cannot formally contain or convey.

Packer's hair cannot be easily dismissed, then. In making the rat the symbol of their anti-capitalist project, the protestors are linked to, if ultimately different from, what Derrida calls "the irreducible excess of a disjuncture of an anachrony" (*Specters* 32)—an epigraphic time and place beyond what they know, see, and anticipate. The implication is that collective action has the power to effect radical change, change that would belong to a "disjointed or dis-adjusted time without which there would be neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice" (*Specters* 214). By giving Packer ratty hair, DeLillo joins him to and divides him from the protestors at once. DeLillo limns another picture of asymmetry, collapsing the distance separating Packer and the protestors while channeling the enormity of the protest into the singularity of his protagonist. Although the protestors are fighting for a future otherwise than neoliberalism, DeLillo intimates that such a future will nevertheless depend upon the choices, and indeed sacrifices, that individuals like Packer make. While seemingly frivolous, Packer's hair suggests that the world need not be an entrepreneurial sandbox—that political change can issue from individuals acting more selflessly and approaching others more ethically.

The entwinement of the self's constitutive openness and the urgency of a political project that rejects the dictates of neoliberal reason carries into the final scene of the novel, as Packer finally understands his duty to others.¹⁸ A feeling "called guilt" overwhelms him when confronted by Levin: "He felt an enormous remorseful awareness" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 196).

Although entrepreneurial failure undermines his fantasies of abstraction, it is only in the final moments of his life that Packer feels the true weight of the violence he has committed against Levin, his former employee—to say nothing about the brutal way in which he executed his chief of security earlier in the night. The argument could be made that no place is more significant to a novel's ethico-political project than the final scene, when closure seems imminent and unavoidable. There is, after all, no point of completion to an ethical transformation, no point at which the self can sink into smug satisfaction. At first blush, DeLillo gives us a tragedy of belatedness. For Packer is too late; in the “plea” of Levin's eyes, he discerns “a hope and need in ruins.” Packer “had failed this docile and friendless man, raging man, this lunatic, and would fail him again, and had to look away” (204). Here, in one of the final moments of the novel, failure no longer bears entrepreneurial connotations, as DeLillo uses the word to signify Packer's ethical betrayal of a man whose “feeling and experience” he “could not reciprocate” (204). With Levin resigned to his role as murderer, there is nothing left to do for Packer than wait to be killed.

And yet, the vocation of the novel's final scene is to refuse closure. Before the final paragraph, Packer looks down at his watch, the same watch that allows him to see into the future, and “saw an identification tag. It was a tag in long shot, fixed to a plastic wristband. [. . .] He saw the tag in tight close-up now and read the legend printed there. Male Z. He knew what this meant” (206). The watch appears to fulfill DeLillo's vatic statement about technology, enabling Packer to know in advance what Levin will do, to foresee his own death. But in driving chronologically ahead of his novel's final pages, DeLillo prevents *Cosmopolis* from closing and once again leaves the connection between capitalist abstraction and lived subjectivity in tatters. In the final paragraph, Levin “sits facing” Packer, who “has lost interest in him” and who “closes his eyes one more time”: “This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still

alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound” (209). To know what comes next, to get some sense of closure, readers must flip backwards, and not only to the morgue scene mediated by the watch screen but also to the second section of the novel, “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” in which Levin tell us that Packer “is dead” (55). The way in which DeLillo plays with time here is not particularly difficult to follow—especially for readers of *Underworld*, in which DeLillo defies linear narrative development on a grander scale—but my point is simply that the novel is invaginated, folding back into itself in order to move further into the future.¹⁹ In *Cosmopolis*, closure leads to reopening, as the future always cycles back to the present—the final paragraph—the “original,” concrete space and time of ethico-political potentiality. DeLillo implies that capitalist speculation, dramatized by Packer’s watch, is not insulated from chances, events, and decisions that prevent the realization of anticipated results.²⁰

DeLillo’s shift in verb tense in the final pages illustrates how the novel’s invagination serves its ethico-political project. Packer’s realization of ethical failure is couched in the past-perfect and future-in-the-past tenses—“had failed” and “would fail”—which obliterates any hope of acting responsibly toward Levin. The future, which unfolds *before* the end of the novel even though it belongs to a chronological point *beyond* the final paragraph, seems predetermined. However, DeLillo writes the final paragraph in the present tense, returning to the novel, not a moment too soon, the “absolutely messianic hope” for “the to-come of an event *and* of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated” (Derrida, *Specters* 81; emphasis original). That is, DeLillo reanimates hope for an ethical epiphany that does not come too late, an epiphany that leads Packer to act selflessly and thereby prevent the act of murder, which is no more than a dramatically heightened version of the egoistic antagonism abetted by neoliberal culture. It is the momentum of this hope, what Boxall calls “pure potential” (232), that prevents closure, keeping

the novel stuck in a proverbial hall of mirrors. Such hope gives the novel's final paragraph a utopian dimension, as the novel remains stubbornly open—open to the (im)possibility of a different ending even as readers know how everything will play out on the page. DeLillo thus indicates that there is always a chance for a future otherwise than neoliberalism. But radical action, action that (proverbially) jumps off the page, leaving the invaginated novel behind as much as the politico-cultural status quo, will constitute the basis of such a future.

In its refusal to end, *Cosmopolis* enacts the principle of openness at the heart of Levinasian ethics, positing ethical behaviour as the antidote to the attrition of life under neoliberalism. The novel's ethics do not lie in its attempt, if ultimate failure, to represent the workings of finance capitalism, as Shonkwiler argues, but in its failure to delineate what a radical future would look like. *Cosmopolis* is not a work of science fiction, after all, and it is “too full of meaning for a transgression of meaning” (Derrida, *Writing* 350). A future otherwise than neoliberalism, lacking coordinates in space and time, is not thinkable without exceeding the bounds of neoliberal reason—the bounds, that is, of the said. Such a future would lie not in the ambit of a foreseeable tomorrow, always already enfolded within the capitalist program of speculation *ad nauseum*, but “beyond, *if that's possible*, the last extremity” (*Specters* 45; emphasis original). For what keeps individual beings and political formations open to alterity also applies to literary forms: an “an-economic ex-position to others” that resists the formalizing appetite of the novel (*Specters* 26). To present a highly idiosyncratic version of what a radical future would look like is to perform the same work of speculation that neoliberal culture demands of its entrepreneurial subjects. Because literary fiction is a bourgeois art form, by now a well-known point, it cannot wholly transcend the capitalist system it critiques.²¹ That novels do not constitute radical action in themselves does not, however, preclude them from being deeply

pedagogical, soliciting careful reading and rereading. Indeed, Levinas's concept of the poetic said suggests that literary fiction can indicate, from within the realm of the said, the urgent need to think beyond the epistemological boundaries laid out by the dominant rationality.

That novels and plays demand different forms of engagement is one of my principal justifications for looking at *Cosmopolis* alongside Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*, which I address in this chapter's next section. Whereas entrepreneurial failure leads DeLillo to marry a pedagogy of performative contingency to invaginated form, *staging* entrepreneurial failure entails an altogether different approach. There is a more direct, and indeed more affective, connection between bodies on a stage and their audiences than between characters in a book and their readers.²² This formal dissimilarity bleeds into another justification: much of *Water* takes place within an online chat room. The chat room is a site of care and belonging for characters performing badly as atomistic entrepreneurs in the real world, but the most striking aspect of the play is that Hudes stages this virtual space, unsettling any facile condemnation of technology that *Cosmopolis* may urge us to make. Read alongside DeLillo's novel, *Water* shows how enacting responsibility before it is too late can be a source of life-saving energy, opening people up to a future otherwise than neoliberalism.

Staging Entrepreneurial Failure

In the third scene of Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*, Yaz, an adjunct professor of music at Swarthmore College, changes her course syllabus on a whim and outlines a new assignment for her class:

I want you to pinpoint the first time you really noticed dissonance. The composer, the piece, the measures. Two pages analyzing the notes and two pages describing the experience personally. This is your creation myth. Before you leave this

school you better figure out that story and cling to it for dear life or you'll be a stockbroker within a year. (16)

Aligning one's first exposure to musical dissonance with matrices of personhood, Yaz also invests such memory with the power to shape the future. For audiences familiar with Hudes's work, this moment is symbolically pregnant; she draws on musical genres for dramatic structure throughout her trilogy of plays that follows Elliot Ortiz, Yaz's cousin, from his time as a soldier in Iraq (*Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* [2007]) to his return to Philadelphia (*Water*) to his career as a film star (*The Happiest Song Plays Last* [2014]). Anne García-Romero writes that Hudes's use of fugue in *Elliot* "sets up the expectation of a multi-vocal landscape which surrounds one main theme or idea" (88). In *Water*, Hudes uses the experimental free jazz of the 1960s to establish a different dramatic structure, one no longer characterized by "one main theme" but by dissonance and improvisation. As Yaz tells her class, "Coltrane democratized the notes. He said, they're all equal. Freedom. It was called Free Jazz but freedom is a hard thing to express musically without spinning into noise" (*Water* 15). Free jazz cannot equalize the notes, she suggests, without the possibility of failure, as freedom and cohesion are never guaranteed to coextend. The link between dissonant sounds and personal origins implies a homology between formal conservatism and linear time, laying the groundwork for an investigation of how this play troubles contemporary forms of lived subjectivity and the speculative temporality by which people live.

More specifically, the tension between form and content provides a musical idiom for *Water*'s political and identitarian concerns, which Hudes routes through a number of irresolvable dialectical registers: memory and longing, freedom and responsibility, trauma and healing, Puerto Rican and US culture, and individualist striving and collective attachments. To the extent that it cannot synthesize these dialectical oppositions, the play constitutes a helpful site for an

inquiry into the neoliberal conditions that foreclose the promise of liberal democracy, which pivots rhetorically on the ideas of freedom and equality, even though reality does not bear these out. Read as a play that fails to resolve its dissonance into a harmonious whole, *Water* displays a commitment to a radical democratic future, engaging in an ethico-political project that rejects contemporary capitalist structures as the sole horizon of being.

Just as invagination opens DeLillo's novel up to a radical future that it cannot convey, so Yaz's admonition establishes dissonance ("your creation myth") as a kind of pre-lapsarian condition of personhood as well as a democratic ideal inscribed in the future. In this view, Yaz's warning that failing to remember the past will result in a postgraduate career as a stockbroker suggests that the latter figure stands in the way of such a future. In the liberal-arts setting of a Swarthmore classroom, "stockbroker" is not an innocent term, and given her earnestness, Yaz's comment cannot be dismissed as mere flippancy. While Packer's example from the previous section may be strong enough to illustrate the import of Yaz's message, it is important to note that *Water* is set in 2009, well after the time in which *Cosmopolis* is set. The mention of anyone remotely connected to the machinations within financial markets calls to mind the subprime mortgage crisis, exacerbated as it was by a fragile network that connected exploitative lending practices to markets trading in highly profitable securities. "Stockbroker," then, is to be read as a metonym for finance capitalism, and it conjures up the spectre of economic collapse. Yaz's comment can thus be read as a challenge to neoliberal notions of thriving, as she suggests that one's proficiency at trading in the stock market—that is, at being a perennially appreciating entrepreneur—is a broken measure of success. For Yaz, it is only by holding onto the past for "dear life," a past that promises little financial yield because its dissonance resists valorization, that better social arrangements, delinked from contemporary capitalist logics, might take shape.

The play's commitment to the future translates into an urgent demystification of neoliberal reason. A play about recovering crack addicts, the temporal slippages produced by trauma, diasporic feelings of unbelonging, and non-normative familial formations, *Water by the Spoonful* focuses on aleatory networks of care and disinterest that neoliberalism's emphasis on entrepreneurship renders illegible. It likewise highlights the tension between assimilation and cultural heterogeneity that inflects its Puerto Rican characters' entrepreneurial self-making. Following Patricia Ybarra, who contends that the theatrical prevalence of the "liberal hero" has served as "an impediment to understanding the contemporary capitalist subjectivation" ("Young" 515), I argue that Hudes's play illuminates the violence of capitalist modernity through its collection of failed entrepreneurial subjects, subjects who bungle the precepts of self-appreciation. The characters' respective shortcomings cause them to lean on as well as support others in similar predicaments. Instead of reading them merely as failed enterprises, or as "liberal heroes," we can view their interdependent sociality as both an ethical matrix undergirding their socially intelligible lives as human capitals *and* an emergent form of being together that resonates alongside the play's investment in the future. Such displays of social interdependence make this play the ideal complement to *Cosmopolis*, despite much dissimilarity, for *Water's* preoccupation with dissonant pasts and futures stands in stark opposition to the speculative pressures of entrepreneurial subjectivity. It is through its ethically oriented characters that the play retains hope for a "democracy to come" that can neither be displaced into the present nor anticipated in any programmatic way (Derrida, *Specters* 81).

It is tempting to read *Water* as a Latinx play, since Hudes and the Ortiz family are both Puerto Rican and since the play deals to some extent with the difficulty of living in diaspora. Within the U.S., Parikh argues, Latinx and Asian American subjects occupy a structurally

difficult position between the betrayal that endows them with agency and an “ethical betrayal” by which they respond to the ethnic other: “[T]he radical potential of ethical betrayal is precisely to ‘remember’ continually those others who block the subject’s achievement of self-presence” (49). Deracination precipitates and politicizes ethical responsibility for these diasporic subjects whose place within the nation is marginal and never firmly established. Their perennial obligation to perform Americanness runs up against their responsibility for ethnic others.

In *Water*, Elliot underscores the liminality described by Parikh when he tells his interlocutor that his native language is “Spanglish” (2013, 11). His portmanteau intimates that the routines of neoliberal self-making, shaped by domestic norms, come with increased difficulty for entrepreneurial subjects who feel a countervailing imperative to maintain their cultural heterogeneity, an imperative that allegorizes the trace’s inscription within the said.²³ In an article on Hudes’s trilogy, Ybarra echoes Parikh’s focus on identity, calling “for a mode of reading Latinx plays that always links content to aesthetics and political critique to form” (“How” 49). Ybarra’s approach to Hudes’s work avoids formalist insularity as well as the trap that reads work by minority playwrights exclusively for political and identitarian concerns, as if form were an afterthought. This mode of analysis is well suited to a play like *Water*, which stages the *virtual* space of an online chat room in which recovering drug addicts form interdependent bonds.

Yet it is with this online chat room that *Water* calls for a critical approach that registers the eruption of ethical responsibility between characters of vastly different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In an interview, Hudes explains that she bristles at “the annoying interview questions about ‘Do you write Latino plays?’ It can be so relentlessly about everything but the content of the material” (Young 193). She then offers a pithy summary of the play: “It’s a play about communities—different communities. It’s a play about human beings and how they

find friends and family. It's a play about survival" (Young 193). In light of these comments, I suggest an approach to Hudes's play that attends principally to its multiple dramas of failure and the ethical dynamics discernible within them. As I have emphasized, ethical alterity resonates most forcefully when life becomes precarious and uncertain, and Levinas figures the suspension of egoistic pursuits as "a panting, a trembling of substantiality," the result of epiphanies, interruptions, and failures that force upon individuals an awareness of their responsibility for others (*Otherwise* 180). "The epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own," he writes, and "its life consists in undoing the form in which ever entity [. . .] is already dissimulated" ("Trace" 351). Evoking John Coltrane's dissonance that defies the aesthetic criteria of jazz music, the ethical epiphany interrupts rote understandings of others and scrambles the common calculus of everyday life; it thereby induces selfless conduct.

The point here is not to displace focus from *Water*'s expression of issues unique to Latinx people—I do look at its treatment of diaspora—but to insist more emphatically on its commitment to unsettling neoliberal reason through its collection of failed entrepreneurial subjects. If contemporary capitalist logics appraise all of life's activities in terms of their future payoff, then the radical potential of staging entrepreneurial failure is to disturb this thinking, suspending the dominant rationality to reveal heterogeneous ways of inhabiting and co-experiencing social worlds. Far from romanticizing the wholly unromantic way individuals flounder within social worlds that demand adept performances, staging failure can lay bare experiential modalities within which life-building is not an endless process of capital accumulation but, more simply, one of remaining buoyant and collective amid the reality of generalized precarity, growing wealth inequality, and the state's disinvestment in its constituents. To stage entrepreneurial failure is to engage in a "poetics of the unthinkable" that pushes beyond,

as well as distances audiences from, biopolitical life's daily oversaturation by market rationality (Bergo 75). In what follows, I first read the play for its staging of ethical matrices that destabilize the self-presence of entrepreneurial subjectivity, and I attend to the sociality within the chat room that collapses raced and classed lines of division in the service of ethical relationality. I then look more closely at the Ortiz family, analyzing the play's ethico-political investment in a democratic future, an "unthinkable" investment that promises no collection of profits.

The Chat Room's Interdependent Sociality

Discussing the contemporary individualization of risk and the concomitant retraction of social safety nets, Maurizio Lazzarato explains that neoliberalism "only needs to define a threshold, a vital minimum, above which the individual can become an 'enterprise' and below which he/she falls out of the game and needs punctual rather than systematic state assistance"

("Neoliberalism" 128). Neoliberal governance proliferates the politics of personal responsibility, and what constitutes "the game" is the individual's capacity to assume risk as human capital.

Such reason elides not only collective modes of lived experience but also the fact that entrepreneurial subjects are differentially inscribed within the social body according to the dynamics of class, race, gender, ability, and sexuality. With its recovering addicts who need each other in order to play the "game" of entrepreneurial subjectivity, *Water by the Spoonful* problematizes neoliberalism's individualizing norms. The positive social interdependence within the chat room dramatizes ethical relationality, gradually causing characters to unlearn their atomistic lifestyles.

The scenes that take place within the chat room mainly consist of Haikumom—the online pseudonym of Elliot's biological mother, Odessa—offering words of encouragement to the other members and helping them stay sober. "Any time you feel like using," she tells a new

participant, “log on here instead. It’s worked for me. [. . .] Once upon time I had a beautiful family, too. Now all I have is six years clean” (*Water* 20). Just like Odessa, the other characters have online avatars: Clayton Wilkie, a black IRS agent living in San Diego, goes by Chutes&Ladders; Madeleine Mays, a Japanese American teaching in Japan, goes by Orangutan; and John, the newest member, a white entrepreneur living in Philadelphia, goes by Fountainhead. The characters’ self-presentation in the chat room poses an immediate challenge to critical work, especially in light of my discussion of *Cosmopolis*.

For the computer is generally seen as a device that abets neoliberal self-making and enables capital to further penetrate our lives. Jodie Dean calls this phenomenon “communicative capitalism” to argue that the democratic possibilities of political participation promoted by the internet merely serve as smokescreens for increased exploitation (51-74). Echoing this line of thinking, Matthew Flisfeder argues that social media have led to the unprecedented “objectivization” of the individual as a commodity circulating online (553-570). In this light, Hudes’s play seems caught within the very networks of self-marketing and profit generation that underpin capitalist modernity. Yet such a conclusion capitulates too readily to cynicism, as if every social engagement over the internet were wholly characterized by pretense and the profit motive. The recovering crack addicts of Hudes’s play are not the unfeeling currency trader of DeLillo’s novel. As David Román notes in his review of Hudes’s Elliot trilogy, “the internet is a place of profound political potential, a life-saving resource that connects disparate people living in isolation” (147). The chat room offers a communal space for the participants whose addictions have separated them from traditional support networks such as their families. By staging the virtual space of the chat room—according to the stage directions, the “‘real world’ is populated with chairs” and the “‘online world’ is an empty space. A space that connects the chairs” (Hudes,

Water 7)—Hudes makes literal the Levinasian idea of responsibility for the Other situated beyond a phenomenological field of vision.

In fact, the chat room enables the participants to think about each other in a new light, affording interpersonal communication unmediated by overdetermined epistemological lenses. For instance, when Chutes&Ladders discovers that Orangutan was born in Japan before her birth parents gave her up for adoption, he types: “Japan . . . Wow, that little white rock sure doesn’t discriminate” (14). His comment performs the dual function of evoking racist conceptions of both Asian Americans as model minorities and African Americans as drug users and, in turn, of undermining such presuppositions through the realization of shared fallibility. The chat room works paradoxically, then: instead of suffusing the participants’ respective identities in the real world with a layer of fiction, it displaces harmful stereotypes with epistemological indeterminacy and irreducibility. This mode of communication calls to mind Derrida’s Levinasian formulation of “ethical discourse,” which I discussed in my opening chapter; Derrida contends that such discourse signals the “interruption of the self” (*Adieu* 51). Remaining ethically open to the Other requires the disinterpellative capacity to abjure the social distinctions that mediate relationality, the capacity to allow the Other to disorient and decenter the self. “If one could possess, grasp, and know the other,” writes Levinas, “it could not be other” (*Time* 90). The online world, performing the social work of epistemological negation, enables each participant to be unknowingly open to the others, whose socially over-coded images have not yet taken shape.

That said, the neoliberal scripts of self-making threaten this Levinasian dynamic. When Fountainhead joins the chat room, the language of self-appreciation shapes his inaugural message, which reads like a curriculum vitae promoting his individual achievements. He tells them that he is “[m]ildly athletic, but works twice as hard” and has an “M.B.A. from Wharton.”

He started a “programming company from the ground up” and “sold it at its peak, bought a yellow Porsche, got a day job to keep myself honest. Salary was 300k, company run by morons, got laid off, handsome severance, which left me swimming in cash and free time.” His addiction having worsened, he describes damaging his Porsche and admits that driving a “rental Mustang” is “as close to rock bottom as I’d like to get” (*Water* 18). He proceeds to trivialize crack addiction, fetishizing the help that the other members can presumably provide: “It’s the first day of school and I’m knocking at your classroom door. [. . .] It’s a psychological battle and I’m armed with two weapons: willpower and the experts” (19). Viewing the others as “experts” evokes a narrative of social climbing in which “have-nots” can theoretically become “haves.” Fountainhead presents himself as a kind of failed liberal hero, a declining human capital who does not need to rethink his individualistic way of inhabiting the world but simply needs timely help from the experts. His inability to describe his addiction without using the language of value-productive subjectivity precludes ethical relationality.

It is small wonder, then, that Fountainhead’s path to entrepreneurial success has been to get a business degree and build a “company from the ground up.” Recall the Swarthmore classroom in which Yaz invokes the figure of the stockbroker to warn her students against forgetting their “creation myth” (16). The trajectory of Fountainhead’s life, the amenities of which he does not want to relinquish, is the antithesis of the kind that Yaz values. To put into perspective this opposition between the two characters distinguished by scholastic achievement, it is illuminating to note here that, since neoliberalism’s ascension, market rationality has increasingly saturated higher education, transforming it “from a social and public good to a personal investment in individual futures, futures construed mainly in terms of earning capacity” (Brown, “End” 23). This organization of universities according to capitalist protocols threatens

the traditional goals of higher education, as it disincentivizes liberal-arts degrees and, conversely, makes business-oriented concentrations more appealing for debt-laden students. Discussing the shift that university education has undergone, Wendy Brown contends that neoliberalism “mak[es] incoherent the idea of an engaged citizen, an educated public or education for public life” (“End” 23). Higher education’s infusion with neoliberal logics has furthered the politics of personal accountability and the atomization of the social body. Fountainhead’s self-congratulatory message, describing his entrepreneurial path to success via Wharton, bespeaks neoliberalism’s broad devaluation of collective growth.

That Hudes racializes as white the member of the chat room who has most fully embraced the conventions of neoliberal self-making bears further investigation. Denoting the main source from which an entity issues, the word “fountainhead” is an apt metaphor for entrepreneurial subjectivity. More tellingly, though, Fountainhead is the name of an Ayn Rand novel about an uncompromising protagonist seeking personal success; over the years, Rand’s work has become popular among the political right in the U.S., with prominent Republicans citing her work’s influence on their antistatist politics. The symbolic heft of John’s avatar is hardly coincidental, then. While increasingly becoming part of a first-world precariat, heteronormative white men continue to benefit from greater access to privilege. On the subject of welfare retrenchment, Lisa Duggan points out that it is indivisible from “a broader project of legitimating the redistribution of resources upward” and has therefore “depended, for its cultural effectiveness, on coded hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality” (15; see also Harvey 36-64). Neoliberal governance, that is, cannot be easily delinked from nationalist discourses prescribing essential social values and norms.

Within this context, Fountainhead's glib celebration of his achievements does not initially endear him to the other chat-room participants. Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders deride him in the language of value-productive subjectivity. The former asks: "Was that an addiction or an online dating profile?" And the latter adds: "Fountainhead, you sound like the kind of guy who's read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* cover to cover. Was one of those habits crack? Give the essays a rest and type three words. 'I'm. A. Crackhead'" (*Water* 19). For Fountainhead's interlocutors, drug addiction is not a problem divisible into tiers, with certain individuals suffering less than others, but a condition in which all sufferers are level. This absolutist notion of addiction challenges neoliberal celebrations of the entrepreneurial individual, and as the aforementioned effacement of stereotyped presuppositions between Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders makes manifest, the paradox of such a notion is that it allows the participants' respective singularities to radiate more brightly. Unlearning the routines of self-investment means recasting oneself in relation to others, so when Fountainhead finally does admit to being a "crackhead," Chutes&Ladders responds with empathy: "I'm a crackhead too and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy" (32). In the chat room, then, to call oneself an addict is to collapse socioeconomically mediated relationality into an ethical form of sociality whereby personal triumphs, such as staying sober and beating addiction in the long term, are indistinguishable from caring for others in a similar condition.

In the same conversation, Haikumom crystallizes this point, describing the chat room as a virtual site of disinterest and interdependence:

Fountainhead, welcome to the dinner party. Granted, it's a party we never wanted to be invited to, but pull up a chair and pass the salt. Some people here may pour it in your wounds. Just like you, we've all crawled on the floor with a flashlight.

We've thrown out the Brillo and bought some more. [. . .] You need every supporting resource. You are in for the fight of your life. You mentioned Wharton. I live in Philly. If you're still in the area and you have an emergency or even a craving, email me directly. Any time of night. Don't take it lightly when I say a sober day for you is a sober day for me. I know you can do this but I know you can't do it alone. So stop being a *highly functioning isolator and start being highly dysfunctional person*. The only way out is through it. (32; emphasis mine)

Though platitudinous, Haikumom nevertheless trafficks in the vocabulary of other-directedness, encouraging Fountainhead to eschew the conventions of entrepreneurial subjectivity and acknowledge that he is a “highly dysfunctional person.” Even then, some might still throw salt on his wounds, because unlearning the competitive scripts of neoliberal self-making is difficult, as the example of DeLillo's protagonist illustrates. Given the significance of metaphor in my discussion of *Cosmopolis*, Haikumom's dinner-party metaphor seems to offer a point of contact between the two works. Unlike Packer's fetishism of the self, however, her image evokes Levinas's notion of the poetic said, pointing semantic dissonance away from capitalist desire and in the direction of interdependent sociality. In a world structured by the imperatives of self-appreciation, such interdependence is illegible to market rationality.

Haikumom's metaphor intimates an allegorical connection between the chat room and the ethical plane of sociality at the heart of Levinas's work. In other words, she emphasizes that embracing the chat room's principle of openness, each participant drawing strength from as well as helping others, is the *condition of entrepreneurial subjectivity*, such that their mutually beneficial interactions in the chat room subtend their socially intelligible lives as human capitals, which unfold in the “real world.” Haikumom's message draws attention to the networks of

support that neoliberal reason does not fully register. Staging the relationship between the online and real worlds in much the same way that Levinas distinguishes alterity from ontology, Hudes thus gives Levinasian ethics a distinctive treatment here. If, for Levinas, personhood is grounded in the self's non-sovereign relation to the Other, the chat-room participants' openness to each other enables them to extend themselves in the real world in less self-destructive ways.

The relationships that develop among the chat room participants bring into relief this relationship between the real and online worlds. The close bond between Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders is exemplary, a bond that is neither exploitative nor erotic. Initially, Chutes&Ladders is reticent to meet Orangutan in the real world. To her suggestion, "Maybe we could hang out and have a relationship that has very little to do with crack or addiction or history" (*Water* 28), he responds: "Stay in the box. Keep things in their place. It's a simple, effective recipe for ten clean years" (28). The threat of recidivism is so great that the possibility of extending himself socially beyond the chat room poses a significant challenge, and his image of the box figures his unwillingness to compromise the routine by which he has sustained his sobriety. This exchange reminds us that intimacy is difficult, even for someone ostensibly receptive to help from others. Haikumom intervenes, though, once again mobilizing a metaphor of other-directedness; addressing Chutes&Ladders, she types: "[Orangutan is] telling you, 'Be my friend.' When's the last time someone opened your closet door, saw all them skeletons, and said, 'Wassup?! Can I join the party?'" (29). Haikumom's image of the open door starkly opposes his image of the box, challenging the clear boundaries he establishes with the possibility of their penetration by others. Remaining radically open to others requires the exposure of one's shortcomings, inconsistencies, and failures—the skeletons in the closet that reveal the illusoriness of neoliberal reason's alignment of lived subjectivity with the entrepreneur.

Haikumom points out that the imperatives of value-productive subjectivity do not structure Chutes&Ladders's friendship with Orangutan, which has developed, rather, from their shared recognition of entrepreneurial failure and non-sovereignty.

Later, when Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders finally do meet in person as Madeleine and Clayton, respectively, Hudes's stage directions recall Haikumom's image of the open closet: "*They hug. They melt into each other's arms. A hug of basic survival and necessary friendship*" (59; emphasis original). Their embrace constitutes an intimate act by which subjective boundaries "melt" into mutually "necessary" relationality. That which most threatened Clayton's sobriety is here recast as that which is most helpful, and the logic of individual success or failure is suspended to afford ground for "basic survival." Their hug manifests a "non-erotic openness" that moves each beyond "complacency in oneself" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 177). As Derrida explains, the "excessive or exceeded relation to the other" requires a "step beyond repression" (*Specters* 26), a step that transgresses social and political norms of address. Yet to touch the symbolically unmediated Other, according to Levinas, is to betray alterity (*Time* 80-95). Touching in the phenomenological sense presupposes ontological availability, thus signaling the Other's vulnerability to pernicious forms of bodily contact. That said, the material practices of democracy and justice stem from this betrayal—from the imperative of translating "the incomparable subject into a member of society" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 158). An ethical orientation toward others cannot avoid what Sara Ahmed calls "[t]he failure of transcendence" that "constitutes the necessity of a political struggle" (*Promise* 187). Touching betrays alterity as much as it joins ethical openness to political praxis.

This moment of embodied intimacy, then, fuses the play's ethical dimensions to the urgency of its political project. If, from the standpoint of neoliberal reason, Madeleine and

Clayton's embrace is marked by "the impossibility of having content" (Bergo 81), their "step" into "impossibility" is a theatrical expression of Derrida's point that a radical democracy cannot emerge without "disjoining a certain necessity of order" (*Politics* 29). Having stepped beyond isolation, Madeleine and Clayton are learning to extend themselves in the real world collectively. Unlike the anticipatory strategies of entrepreneurial subjectivity, their "learning" inhabits the indefinite temporality of the present participle whereby contingency contours the future, since they exit the stage immediately after they hug. So begins the effortful work of community. Through the indeterminacy of Clayton and Madeleine's intimacy, the play suggests at once the necessity of ethical alterity as a response to neoliberal fragmentation as well as its inexorable deferral into the future.

Ethno-Cultural Alterity and a Democracy to Come

Water's archive of failure also contains the effects of Odessa's drug addiction, which has alienated her from Elliot, her biological son. At first blush, their estrangement anticipates my focus on family dysfunction in Chapter 3, as neoliberal discourse tends to emphasize the beneficent impact of the family. In *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper shows how neoliberal reform has institutionalized the private family as the primary site of social security; this development pairs social retrenchment with a conservative notion of the "family as the foundation of social and economic order" (49). However, there is a significant entrepreneurial dimension to Elliot and Odessa's tense relationship that makes the play's treatment of the family an appropriate object of inquiry in this chapter. Their estrangement indexes the breakdown of the private family's closed circuit of support and, in doing so, heightens the theme of intergenerational loss running through the play. Within the Ortiz family, the older generation displays ethnic attachments that exceed American cultural norms, whereas the younger generation exhibits a hybrid identity that often

pulls them in polarizing directions, at once toward and away from these norms. This intergenerational discontinuity induces feelings of cultural betrayal in the younger generation, complicating their appropriation of entrepreneurial scripts.

The issues within the Ortiz family, then, provide insight into the unique pressures that contemporary capitalism exerts on entrepreneurial subjects living in diaspora, subjects whose familial formations are more likely marked by territorial separation and intergenerational cultural loss. If, in a Levinasian framework, the obverse of betrayal is responsibility for the Other whose endless vulnerability disrupts the subject's self-presence, then the issues besetting the Ortiz family inscribe these characters within an allegorical contest between ethical and ethno-cultural alterity, on the one hand, and entrepreneurial subjectivity and cultural normativity, on the other. By linking familial conflict to themes of loss and betrayal, Hudes exposes the limits of liberal subjectivity and civil-rights projects with respect to diasporic citizens' sense of belonging. Her treatment of the multiple pressures of diasporic citizenship opens up an ethical vision of a collective future delinked from the politico-economic structures of the here and now, a future in which diasporic citizens would not be threatened by social and cultural erasure.

At the outset of the play, Odessa and Elliot could use each other's help. Elliot's habit of taking painkillers to fight his PTSD has developed into an addiction, which mirrors his mother's addiction to crack cocaine, but mother and son deal with their problems in diametrically opposed ways. As mentioned, Odessa is the administrator of the chat room. Her online avatar, Haikumom, underscores that she has rechanneled her maternal desire into helping fellow addicts stay sober. The name itself, a compound of "haiku" and "mom," pushes audiences to think more capaciously about what constitutes motherhood and family. Its significance is that it displaces the idea of maternal reproduction with the idea of aesthetic production, figuratively expanding the

scope of maternal support beyond the private family. The articulation of maternity to poetic creativity turns the online mode of address into a symbolic placeholder for embodied responsibility, enacting the semantic depth that Levinas ascribes to the poetic said.

By contrast, Elliot begins the narrative in relative isolation, refusing help for his PTSD. Not unlike Chutes&Ladders, he is unwilling to discuss his troubles, telling a solicitous Yaz: “This shit stays in the vault. You got me?” (*Water* 43). His PTSD manifests as the ghost of an innocent Iraqi man whom he killed in action, and the ghost refuses to stay in the vault, transgressing psychic; temporal; and, theatrically, spatial boundaries. Roger Luckhurst asserts that, in contemporary literature, trauma “has been conceived [. . .] around the symptom of the intrusive recurrent image, the unbidden flashback that abolishes time and *reimmerses* you in the visual field of the inaugurating instant” (147; emphasis mine). Nothing simulates the place of the Other in Levinas’s work more clearly than an onstage ghost. Its presence onstage indicates the difficulty of leaving a traumatizing past behind and reminds Elliot of his responsibility for the Other, a duty to which I return below.

Hudes makes clear that Elliot’s refusal of support is the consequence of familial trauma predating his deployment in Iraq. His relation to normative modalities of the family is broken. He identifies his aunt Ginny as his mother, for she adopted him when Odessa’s addiction made her unfit to parent. When he and Yaz, soliciting money for Ginny’s funeral, confront Odessa in public, Elliot recounts Odessa’s neglect that led to his infant sister’s death. Odessa had to give her sick daughter “a spoonful of water every five minutes” but “couldn’t sit still like that. You [Odessa] had to have your thing. That’s where I stop remembering” (*Water* 38). If his time in Iraq harmed him, so too has his biological mother. To be relational is to occupy the gap between expectation and contingency, and Elliot’s experience of depending on his mother has led him to

distrust social interdependence whereby any openness to others involves being responsible for as well as vulnerable to others. In this view, individualistic growth is not merely a method of self-extension for Elliot but one of self-protection, stanching the wounds he has sustained from simply being in the world.

By comparison, Yaz appears to be the lone figure of entrepreneurial success in the Ortiz family. She has parlayed her early interest and gift in music into a career as a Swarthmore professor. It becomes clear, though, that her preoccupation with origins and dissonance stems from a feeling of cultural *betrayal*, having disengaged from North Philly's *el barrio* at a young age because she went to private school in a different part of the city. In scene five, Elliot mocks her, surprised that she even watches "Spanish TV" (24) and teasing that she "would've pissed [her] pants" if she had gone to "[p]ublic school in *el barrio*" (26, 25). Yet Elliot underestimates the feelings of alienation with which this detachment has imbued Yaz. Having married and then divorced a wealthy white man, she explains to Elliot:

I have a mortgage on my piano. Drive two miles north? William [her ex-husband] told me every time I went to North Philly, I'd come back different. His family has Quaker Oats for DNA. They play Pictionary on New Year's. I'd sit there wishing I could scoop the blood out my veins like you scoop the seeds out a pumpkin. (25)

Yaz's credit-financed piano is a material sign of her entrepreneurial success, and the image of William's family playing Pictionary stands in contrast to Elliot and Odessa's tension, calling to mind neoconservative celebrations of family values as part and parcel of entrepreneurial success. As a normative social unit, the nuclear American family is neither altogether good nor bad, but neoliberal dispossession has made it the principal locus of social security (Cooper, *Family* 7-25). The deeper implication here is that Yaz's proximity to this classed and raced site of privilege

gave rise to her existential crisis. Parikh contends that the minority subject is “at once ex-centric to the dominant political and epistemological regimes of US culture and society but also *authorized in certain limited ways* to speak by and to that culture and society” (3; emphasis mine). Power demands consent to certain forms of life as a condition of the minority subject’s legitimization. The liminality Yaz describes, caught as she was between the familial and cultural matrices of her self and her insecurities in the presence of her ex-husband’s family, highlights the assimilatory pressures felt by institutionally underprivileged minority subjects as well as the brokenness of the norms by which they become proximate to success.

While this binary in the play between the mainstream and cultural margins appears Manichaeian, it is part of *Water*’s pedagogy to bring into relief the polarizing imperatives that shape how diasporic citizens inhabit neoliberal social worlds. Yaz’s story intimates that entrepreneurial thriving requires the rejection of cultural attachments that affect the subject’s entry into the circuits of capital accumulation. Much like Fountainhead’s inaugural message in the chat room, she mobilizes the grammar of self-investment to describe how she felt in the presence of her ex-husband’s family; that is, she reifies her and her ex-husband’s cultural and racial identities, reimagining her blood and his DNA as pumpkin seeds and Quaker Oats, respectively. The problem is that the pumpkin seeds provide a material idiom for immaterial aspects of Yaz’s character that she cannot elude. The minority citizen cannot easily slough off their cultural and/or racial heterogeneity, but they can reject the conventions of self-investment; Yaz’s transformation in the play pivots on this distinction. After Ginny’s funeral, she tells Elliot that she has put her “Steinway on craigslist” (*Water* 60) and is moving back to *el barrio*: “I’m the elder now. I stay home. I hold down the fort” (61). Selling the symbol of her entrepreneurial

success is the condition of her moving back to North Philly as well as her assuming Ginny's role as the elder within this community.

It is Ginny who, prior to her death, functions as the family's linchpin. The play repeatedly associates her with roots and gardening. As Yaz and Elliot explain in their eulogy, she was a community organizer and activist, and "[s]he grew vegetables in her garden lot and left the gate open so anyone could walk in and pick dinner off the vine" (48). That maternal figures symbolize cultural survival and togetherness is a familiar trope to scholars of Latinx literature. Yet Hudes's treatment of Ginny invites an ethical reading. Similar to Odessa's onomastic redefinition, Ginny's relation to images of gardening extends beyond the literal; she was a "woman who knew her nation's history. Its African roots. European roots. Indigenous roots. A woman who refused to be enslaved but lived to serve [. . .] And the pilgrims stopped. And they planted roots, because she was here" (49). A Puerto Rican woman whose significance to her community and family is couched in the language of a whitewashed American origin story, Ginny exemplifies what Homi Bhabha calls the minority subject's "performative interven[tion]" that disrupts "the sovereignty of the nation's *self-generation*" (211-212; emphasis original). The dominant culture of the nation perpetuates itself by citing tradition, reaffirming hegemonic narratives of the past to consolidate national identity in the present and for the future, whereas the minority subject's movement through and within the national space contests the homogeneity of such narratives and exposes them as fantasies occluding the social body's heterogeneity. Unsettling a foundational national narrative, Ginny is a figure of primary responsibility whose unflagging selflessness enables a culturally diverse set of "pilgrims" to establish roots.

Accordingly, Ginny exceeds the bounds of representation, never appearing onstage for audiences' visual consumption. She haunts the narrative through recurrent images of roots and

gardening, motifs that announce at once the possibility and elusiveness of her ethical example. Her garden full of vegetables, seemingly the result of careful attention and constant watering, contrasts Odessa's failure to give her daughter a spoonful of water. The play, in turn, sutures Yaz and Elliot to Odessa through their respective failures as gardeners, be they literal or metaphorical. When Ginny is in the hospital, Elliot tells Yaz that he forgot to water her garden (*Water* 23), and when the cousins are in Puerto Rico to scatter Ginny's ashes, Yaz reminds him that the Bonsai tree she gave him died because he "didn't water it" (56). When Yaz was younger, she "wrote a list" of future accomplishments "and dug a hole and put it in the ground and said, 'When I turn thirty, I'll dig it up and cross it all off'" (2013, 56). But she regrets such dreams now: "I didn't hold your hand when you were in the desert popping pills trying to make yourself disappear. I didn't keep Odessa away from that needle. I didn't water a single plant in Ginny's garden" (57). There is of course no unproblematic connection between Odessa's neglect and Elliot's and Yaz's, but the point is that Ginny inheres as a trace within scenes of which she is not a part. The trace's deferral of presence animates metonymic sliding, motoring signification across ostensibly discrete semantic domains. The repeated linkage of failure to images associated with Ginny, then, constitutes her example as a kind of pedagogical ideal of responsibility, one whose putative purity the surviving characters can only approach in a clumsy way. It is no surprise that the haiku poem Odessa shares in her chat room is about tending to a plant: "if you get restless / buy a hydrangea or rose / water it, wait, bloom" (12). The poem, written in the language aligned with Ginny, both evinces the rehabilitative support Odessa receives online and replaces the image of her parental neglect with a more hopeful one of other-directedness.

Yet Ginny's ethical example must remain unattainable and therefore occasion failure. She is an (im)possible figure whose roots lie simultaneously in Puerto Rico and North Philly. Just as

she inscribes a diasporic space of rootedness within the U.S., contesting dominant narratives of nationhood, so too is she, as Elliot puts it, “the most Puerto Rican motherfucker around”: “She couldn’t be buried in Philly. She had to have her ashes thrown at a waterfall in El Yunque” (24). This bifurcated rootedness calls to mind Puerto Rico’s liminal position within America, as the territory falls under the federal jurisdiction of the American government but its inhabitants cannot vote in presidential elections (a violation, it seems to me, of the Fourteenth Amendment).²⁴ At once unincorporated within and governed by the U.S., Puerto Rico does not figure into the American framework of unity across state lines. This inside-outside dichotomy brings into relief at the political level the lived experience of the diasporic citizen whose ethno-cultural attachments are discontinuous with hegemonic cultural narratives. Within the U.S., widespread norms and conventions prescribe a good deal of cultural assimilation as the condition of having a future, and while minoritarian civil-rights projects remain important and necessary, the structures of minority subjectivity often force the diasporic citizen into a position of sustained loss, demanding that they forego a measure of cultural particularity in order to mobilize politically and foster equality alongside other minority groups.

Judith Butler explains that ethics “returns us not to our acts and choices but to the region of existence that is radically unwilled, the primary inaugurating impingement on me by the Other, one that happens to me, paradoxically, in advance of my formation as ‘me’” (*Giving* 85). The self’s endowment with legal rights marks its dislocation into the socially mediated fiction of individuality, a position from which the “pre-original” past of its intimacy with the Other can only be experienced as a return that calls its subjectivity into question. For diasporic citizens, given that their ethno-cultural affiliations exceed the hegemonic culture of the country in whose juridico-legal framework their subjectivities take shape, the Levinasian binary of loss and return,

betrayal and responsibility, is an abiding drama (see Parikh 29-64).²⁵ *Water* draws attention to this issue; having relapsed after her unhappy confrontation with Elliot, Odessa hallucinates that she “must be in the terminal. Between flights. The layover [. . .] I’ve been to the airport, one time. My dad flew here from Puerto Rico. First time I met him” (2013, 51). Here, images of departure and arrival, deracination and reunion, and liminality (the airport terminal) and finality (the termination of life) blend inextricably to underscore the diasporic experience.

As a figure of ethical alterity rooted at once in America and Puerto Rico, Ginny drives the play and the issues of familial trauma and unbelonging it explores into a future that neither the text can convey nor the stage contain—one in which entrepreneurial exigencies would not supersede or oppose diasporic responsibilities and attachments. Hudes plays with time, therefore, much like DeLillo. If scattering Ginny’s ashes in Puerto Rico is meant to enact a symbolic return, punctuating her life, it is also a kind of inaugurating event that impels the surviving cousins beyond the here and now of the final scene. After ruining the trajectory of her life, Yaz couches her decision to move back to North Philly in a metaphor of gardening: “We’re in the P.R. and I’m gonna dig a new hole and I’m not putting a wish or a list in there, I’m putting a scream in there. And I’m gonna sow it like the ugliest, foulest, and most necessary seed in the world and it’s going to bloom!” (57). Her future-oriented declamation suggests that the condition of attempting to fill Ginny’s shoes and to “hold down the fort” in *North Philly* is not only the selling of her piano but also the planting of the “ugliest, foulest, most necessary seed” in *Puerto Rico*. Puerto Rico’s relation to North Philly here troubles any facile alignment of home with the nation-state. The diasporic experience of loss and return disrupts Yaz’s adherence to the protocols of entrepreneurial self-making.

Elliot's transformation is not dissimilar, as the oneiric image of Ginny motors him in the direction of a more ethical future. In Puerto Rico, he describes his latest dream to Yaz:

I turn around and expect to see him, the first guy I shot down in Iraq. But instead it's Mami Ginny. [. . .] Then she starts to cry. Then she starts to scream loud, like, "Ahhh! Ahhh!" She won't stop looking at me, but she's terrified, horrified by what she sees. And I'm touching my face like, is my lip bleeding, is there a gash on my forehead? Or is she looking through my eyes and seeing straight into my fucking soul? [. . .] I wanted Mami Odessa to relapse, Yaz. I wanted her to pick up that needle. I knew precisely what to do, what buttons to push, I engineered that shit, I might as well have pushed the thing into her vein. Because I thought, why would God take the good one? [. . .] If I stay in Philly, I'm gonna turn into it. I'm gonna be one of them. I'm already halfway there. (61)

Ginny's appearance in Elliot's dream marks the displacement of one ghost by another bearing an ethical injunction, but only his dreamscape can contain this disclosure. As I discussed in my opening chapter, Levinas deploys the figure of the face to signify the Other; the face is "an apparition and an epiphany" that does not make itself available to address, but rather, it is "a failing of all presence, [. . .] already a poverty that hides its wretchedness and calls upon me and orders me" (*Otherwise* 154, 90). The Other *qua* face bears the accusatory force generated by the betrayal of ethical responsibility, and it thereby throws into question the certainties with which the subject inhabits their lifeworld. The specter of Ginny provides a figure for this unsettling power, invading Elliot's dream as if unbound by chronological time and forcing him to recognize his mistreatment of Odessa. Yet Elliot's decision to leave Philly cautions us against reading his epiphany as a tidy resolution. In order to heal psychically and emotionally, he must depart from

where he feels most rooted. This self-regenerative movement seems entrepreneurial, but it is only through an encounter with Ginny's "terrified, horrified" face—the countenance of betrayed alterity—that he arrives at this knowledge of self and environment. Scattering her ashes in Puerto Rico, the site of his family's ethno-cultural past, rechannels his desire, instilling in him hope for a future beyond the traumatic memories and stifling routines that overdetermine his daily life.

In merely sounding these transformative notes, Hudes ends by grounding the play's ethical vision in the uneasy terrain of social and political action.²⁶ The social modalities that ethical alterity inspires always pervert it and animate the trace's ceaseless movement toward a more proximate rendering of this alterity. If this process of perennial failure were not the case, there would cease to be the potentiality of a future that might offer a corrective to the political, economic, and epistemological regimes organizing the world (see Derrida, *Adieu* 114-116). The political valency of Levinasian philosophy lies in the ethical being less an ideological schema than an irrecusable injunction to act more responsibly toward others, as well as to keep the hope for social justice alive.

In the play's final scene, even though Elliot and Yaz feel hopeful, Odessa, having relapsed, is in Philadelphia fighting for her life. Hudes stages these disparate scenes simultaneously, trafficking in a "poetics of the unthinkable" that brings into focus the distant attachments that belie the neoliberal reduction of individual life to entrepreneurial subjectivity. As the cousins are about to scatter Ginny's ashes, Odessa is downstage: "*Below them, in Philadelphia, John [Fountainhead] is done bathing Odessa. He lifts her and holds her like an angel above the bathtub*" (*Water* 61; emphasis original). With Odessa's pain diminishing the utopian energy of the cousins' return to Puerto Rico, the collapse of spatiotemporal boundaries here shows that the fraught relationships within the Ortiz family still require a good deal of

reparative *work*—the difficult work of supporting others, despite their shortcomings. Tellingly, John, a referent for entrepreneurial self-making for much of the play, is the one who cares for Odessa, the quasi-maternal figure whose kind words encouraged him to stay in the chat room. The gentle way he treats her, *as if* she were a figure of Christian transcendence, bespeaks the selflessness—patient, solicitous, and attentive to the vulnerability of others—needed to reconfigure quotidian life along collective lines.

To that end, the contrived coherence of the final scene, synchronizing the asynchronic and uniting the divided, positions audiences as all-seeing witnesses and thereby implicates them in the play's ethico-political project. This paratheatrical extension of ethical responsibility amounts to instilling audiences with what Derrida calls the “thought of the ‘perhaps’” by which an anti-neoliberal future is not anticipated so much as its possibility is announced (*Politics* 29). To think of the “perhaps” is to ride the trace's metonymic wave, dwelling “at the crossroads of chance and necessity” (*Politics* 30). For in the key of Levinasian ethics, radical alterity can only be approached with the agency of an optative verb, but this agency opens up a field of actions that make space for alterity's contingent arrival. If neoliberalism is a style as much as a set of politico-economic policies, then rethinking common habits and desires is the first step to fostering meaningful political change and greater social interdependence. Exposing the violence of neoliberal governance, *Water* urges audiences to reconsider their adherence to conventions of self-appreciation by which all of life is an investment leading to future returns. It beseeches openness to collective living and to democratic equality without assimilatory pressures.

In sum, *Cosmopolis* and *Water by the Spoonful* show how entrepreneurial failure can open up ethical visions of being and being together. They both highlight that entrepreneurial subjectivity is not simply a form of life that neoliberal reason has made intelligible; it is a series

of habits and routines by which individuals extend themselves into social worlds. To be successful, according to neoliberal reason, the entrepreneurial subject must make sound investments in their future. The pressure to mitigate the impact of future contingencies in the present transforms all of life into a capitalist game of speculation. Yet the sheer unpredictability of the future makes failure a likely outcome. In the first epigraph of this chapter, Gary Becker, one of the most influential neoliberal thinkers, acknowledges the likelihood of screwing up, but in reducing human life to human capital, his theoretical framework overlooks the complexity and messiness of social life, obscuring the fact that people are differentially inscribed within the social order. One's proximity to privilege and power determines the severity of the consequences that attend entrepreneurial failure. In this chapter, both works suggest that approaching others in a selfless, disinterested way is a potentially transformative political stance—so much so that each work can only gesture incompletely to the possibility of radical difference. If *Cosmopolis* simulates ethical openness on a formal level, refusing to close and thereby cleaving to hope for a future otherwise than neoliberalism, *Water by the Spoonful* shows how changing one's relationship with others can reconfigure one's relation to time. The future will remain unpredictable, the play tells us, but *perhaps* not so difficult and atomistic as the here and now.

Chapter 1 Endnotes

¹ My focus on Clinton is not meant to spare his successor, George W. Bush, from criticism. The Bush administration sought to overturn many of the institutions of American liberalism, privatizing Social Security as well as dismantling antipoverty programs. Partisan finger pointing aside, the neoliberal attack on collective life has exerted a great deal of ideological influence on contemporary life, often gaining legitimacy on a discursive level before any policies are enacted or reversed. As Aihwa Ong puts it, “Republicans have strengthened neoliberal’s hold on

America by casting (political) ‘liberalism’ as ‘un-American’” (2). Ong goes on to point out the “chasm that is opening up between political liberal ideals of democracy and the neoliberal rationality of individual responsibility and fate” (2).

² My understanding of political rationality draws on a Foucauldian sense of the term. As Wendy Brown explains, “a political rationality is a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship. A political rationality governs the sayable, the ineligible, and the truth criteria of these domains” (“American” 693).

³ Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of Levinas’s thought is how his ethical philosophy can dovetail with radical political movements. For Levinas, social justice has an ethical dimension to the extent that it “corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state” (*Outside* 123; emphasis original). An ethico-political project is “a vigilance totally different from *political intelligence*, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the *formalism* of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations” (*Outside* 123; emphasis mine). “Political intelligence” is another way of saying the dominant political reason, and “formalism” should call to mind the said as well as aesthetic form. In this chapter, we will see how each work’s ethico-political project resists formal capture.

⁴ As Derrida explains, “if one could *count* on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would not [sic] longer wait for anything or anyone. Law without justice” (*Specters* 212; emphasis original). By projecting into the future, a program forecloses the possibility of alterity, the arrival of the Other, in advance.

⁵ Redding argues: “Thinking is ‘useless’ not because it is autonomous from political concerns, but because it is, on the contrary, so deeply saturated and invested with the social and cultural life of its moment. Intellectual work is at its best ‘useless’ not because it claims through transcending its moment the right to be conservative but because it claims in its very immanence

the right to be radical” (11). What makes thinking useless for Redding is its audacity, its willingness to push beyond and therefore transgress the boundaries of the thinkable at a given point in time. Despite our different philosophical orientations, Redding’s understanding of radical thought resonates with what I am calling an ethico-political project. However, in this chapter, I emphasize the performative dimensions of social and political action, action that translates ethical openness into forms of disinterested care and support—modes of social interaction illegible to neoliberal reason.

⁶ While focusing on Henry and William James, Ross Posnock’s *The Trial of Curiosity* is a helpful guide to Adorno’s negative dialectics, especially how it resonates in the context of literary studies; see in particular Chapter 7 (167-192).

⁷ Michael Hardt argues that “the conditions of possibility for civil society have progressively been undermined in North America, Europe, and elsewhere” (“Withering” 27). Accordingly, we have entered a period of “postcivil society” in which a “new social regime” has supplanted the disciplinary institutions of civil society” (“Withering” 27, 40). This new regime “seeks to control the citizen as a whatever identity, or rather as an infinitely flexible placeholder for identity” (“Withering 40). The diffusion of control eclipses the particularity of discipline, and this development gives rise to a flexible form of identity that is no longer shaped within determinate loci. We might say that the popularization of debt-fuelled self-making constitutes one example of this new regime.

⁸ It is worth noting that Michiko Kakutani, the other doyen of literary criticism in popular media, called the novel’s “portrait of a millennial Manhattan [. . .] hopelessly clichéd” (n.p.). Kakutani’s and Wood’s reviews shed light on the chasm between popular reception and academic attention,

since DeLillo remains an important figure in literary-studies circles. We might add the novel's failure to be gripping, believable, and/or compelling to this study's archive of failure.

⁹ I am not, of course, the first to put pressure on Jameson's historicist arguments concerning postmodernity and the system of capitalist production to which it corresponds. Critics have pointed out that, in his landmark study of postmodernism, he limits his analysis to a fairly narrow set of artists and artworks; he thereby overlooks the social positionality of the creative individuals whose work forms the basis of the general claims he makes about the postmodern period and its aesthetic conventions. See Hoberek (113-130) and Berlant (*Cruel* 63-69).

¹⁰ In recasting the fetishized self as a second skin, I am particularly indebted to Michael Szalay's *Hip Figures*, which taught me how Haug's work might be leveraged to look at individual fantasies of escape or difference. Szalay's focus, though, is on the fetishization of blackness by white writers in the twentieth century; see, in particular, his first two chapters (1-78).

¹¹ Additionally, Leigh Claire La Berge calls attention to the multiple, and thus confusing, ways in which critics discuss capitalist abstraction. This reliance on a word that has several possible applications within a Marxian frame of analysis has made financialization a particularly difficult stage of capitalism to understand. Like Godden, she suggests that the "abstract and concrete cannot be separated" and that "finance, however defined, has multiple intersection with both" ("Rules" 101). In making this claim, she turns to the concept of "real abstraction," the Marxian concept that "necessarily links actions such as exchange or the giving of credit [. . .] to a larger social structure that appears divorced from the actions that constitute it" ("Rules" 100). Her intervention in the proliferating discourse about the complexity of contemporary finance reminds us that there is always a concrete dimension to monetary value that, in a postindustrial context, seems to float away into domains of unearthly abstraction.

¹² Strombeck's thesis is that the "separation between abstract system and embodied world, a divide that appears in one form or another throughout much of the criticism on *Cosmopolis*, is less sharp here than in the earlier novels" (149). That is, Strombeck investigates the point of contact between technology and concrete life. There is a great deal of overlap between our approaches, but Strombeck's focus is more sociological than philosophical. He draws on Bruno Latour's work, particularly *Reassembling the Social*, to look at how the agency of nonhuman objects enables Packer's fantasies of abstraction. In *Reassembling*, Latour redescribes the social as a collection of human and nonhuman actors forming contingent, sustaining, fleeting, and/or long-lasting networks. His actor-network-theory (ANT) posits "a world made of *concatenations of mediators* where each point can be said to fully act" (59; emphasis original). Latour goes on to add that nonhuman "things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, and so on" (72).

¹³ Levinas also leverages the grammar of economics to explain the self's pre-original passivity. As he puts it, "a debt" is "contracted before any freedom and before any consciousness and any present" (*Otherwise* 12).

¹⁴ My point here bears a great deal of resemblance to Joel Alden Schlosser's work on *Cosmopolis*. For Schlosser, the frequent allusions to poetry establish a counter-discourse to neoliberalism within the novel: "DeLillo's model of poetic world-making [. . .] offers literary works as bases for [. . .] counterhistories, as narratives that can contribute to the founding and sustaining of political worlds while bringing ordinary people in a shared linguistic project" (n.p.).

¹⁵ The boundary-defying agency of smell is consistent with Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of mimesis, which, I would argue, proves amenable to an ethico-political project premised on the self's ineluctable openness to alterity. Referring to the primary ways in which people engage

with others as well as with their environments, mimesis does not involve copying or appropriating styles or behaviours; more radically, it names a mode of thought and conduct that resists formalization, one that mediates between the constant flow of impressions and the embodied intellect. Horkheimer and Adorno bring the significance of mimesis into relief by comparing it to projective thought. “Mimesis imitates the environment,” they write, “but false projection makes the environment like itself” (187). Whereas mimesis threatens the integrity of the ego, projection maintains the hegemony of the ego by translating the destabilizing urge to lose oneself in imitation into suspicion of otherness. As Joseph Litvak explains, “the ego hardens itself by reminding itself obsessively and fearfully of the suicidal temptation of softness against which it has materialized: by recalling the ever-present danger of dissolution from which it has barely escaped, and with which it must in fact keep making petrifying contact” (27; see also Posnock 21). Horkheimer and Adorno imply that the act of projection, sustaining the ego against the threat of alterity, always to some extent encodes fundamental feelings of love for and fascination with others. The idea that one emotion contains its opposite constitutes a point of contact among Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of mimesis, Levinas’s philosophy, and DeLillo’s ethico-political project.

Just as the semantically laden said bears a trace of the “pre-original” saying, what Levinas calls “the unpronounceable inscription” of the self’s fundamental openness to alterity, so the social dimensions of mimesis inhere within the anti-social work of projection (*Otherwise* 185). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the capacity “to return to the object what [one] has received from it”—put simply, the capacity to think and act mimetically—is nowhere more necessary than in the context of senseless xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism (189), but we might transpose the mimetic imperative to a neoliberal context. Broadly speaking, mimesis works to reveal the

constructedness of dominant patterns of thought and behaviour, thereby indicating the possibility of alternative social arrangements and forms of life. “The possibilities of reconciliation” presaged by mimesis, Horkheimer and Adorno explain, “appears [sic] not in certainty unaffected by thought, in the preconceptual unity of perception and object, but in their considered opposition” (189). Mimesis resonates with an ethico-political project, then, because it defers the possibility of reconciling opposites. The mimetic self does not imitate in order to cancel out difference—in order, that is, to synthesize a dialectical opposition—but to maintain it, respecting the alterity of other people. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the agency of smell lies in the fact that it unsettles the ego and plunges the individual into mimetic indeterminacy, reminding the ego-driven individual of their inescapable openness to alterity.

¹⁶ Levinas often uses the word “enigma” to signify the ineluctable openness of the said. “There is a dilemma in the said,” he writes, for it is irreducible to the saying, even though it bears a trace of the saying. The “saying enigmatically and diachronically signifies transcendence” (*Otherwise* 154). The saying enables the said even though it perennially unsettles it, preventing it from hardening into a closed form of discourse that is indifferent to alterity.

¹⁷ We might also treat this scene as an opportunity to bring Levinasian ethics into conversation with Lacanian psychoanalysis. If it is through the figure of the father that the scene generates a new horizon of possibility, then psychoanalytic theory can shed light on the ethical resonance of Packer’s return to his origins. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the figure of the father is associated with the process of subjectivation, the process whereby symbolic meaning and culture come to prohibit the individual’s access to primary forms of pleasure. Its function is to “unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law” (Lacan, *Écrits* 698). The paternal function translates the individual into a socially legible subject at a cost: the installation of lack that, in turn, animates

desire. The figure of the father, then, encroaches upon the subject in order to give it a future within the community. “The paternal function introduces an order,” writes Yannis Stavrakakis, “but an order structurally different from the natural order, an order instituting human society, a certain community of meaning” (32). That is, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the condition of having a life is the imposition of dissonance between instinctual needs and cultural rules and regulations, a dissonance that no amount of refusal or transgression can overcome. This process of subjectivation would correspond, in a Levinasian framework, to the emergence of the said and thus a betrayal of the Other. However, it is only from a position within the said that a subject can act ethically. Up until this scene in the novel, Packer is conspicuously disconnected from people, adrift in his exceedingly pleasurable fantasies, so the intrusion of the figure of the father in this scene can be read as a symbolic reminder of community, of the intersubjective binds that compel sacrifice. Packer cannot transcend the social no matter how hard he tries.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that Packer does not wholly transform in these final moments of the novel. For ontologically inscribed subjects, ethical duty is always to some extent at odds with egoistic desires. Thus, while Packer does recognize the extent to which he has failed Benno in an ethical sense, he also “thought about his wife. He missed Else and wanted to talk to her, tell her she was beautiful, lie, cheat on her, live with her in middling matrimony, having dinner parties and asking what the doctor said” (206). He imagines a life of middle-class complacency and casual infidelity that his unflagging ambition and social position precluded him from having. Such a bourgeois fantasy in the final scene of the novel bespeaks the grip that notions of the good life (read: normative life) have on the minds of even the most plutocratic individuals, and these notions are, at least if Packer’s vision tells us anything, utterly bereft of ethical dimensions.

¹⁹ In *Underworld*, the main storyline proceeds backward, moving from the 90s to the 50s, but a second storyline, spanning no more than one day in 50s, interrupts this narrative at intervals.

²⁰ It is important not to confuse my use of “invagination” with a Lacanian application of the term, as critics have used it to describe the fleshy, corporeal, and orifice-filled body that exceeds the phallic order of the signifier (see Stephens 1-30). My understanding of invagination draws a good deal from Derrida’s use of the term in “The Law of Genre.” What Derrida calls “the law of the law of genre” is “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. [. . .] With the inevitable dividing of the trait that marks membership [to a genre], the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole” (“Law” 59). For Derrida, in other words, invagination names the opening of any seemingly closed category of texts (a genre) to difference and otherness. On the one hand, to discuss a given work in terms of genre is to imply that the work is not a self-enclosed textual event; on the other hand, to discuss genre in terms of a series of works is to imply that genre is governed, at once, by the logic of division and participation, exclusion and inclusion. Invagination is thus another term for *différance*, the difference and deferral that preclude self-presence. As Derrida goes on to explain, the generic mark “keeps it [the work] from closing, from identifying itself with itself” (65). The ending of *Cosmopolis* simulates this notion of invagination because it consigns the work to an endless deferral of closure, making way for the possibility of ethical difference.

²¹ In his classic study, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt shows how the novel genre came to prominence alongside emergent liberalism, with its principal tenets of individual liberty and market freedom, and contemporaneous forms of philosophical inquiry such as empiricism. He writes that the “novel is closely allied on the one hand to the realist epistemology of the modern period, and on the other to the individualism of its social structure” (62). Writing on Daniel

Defoe, whose novel *Robinson Crusoe* often takes center stage in discussions of the novel in its incipient stages, Watt suggests that “his work offers a unique demonstration of the connection between the rise of individualism in its many forms and the rise of the novel” (62). The novel genre has, for centuries now, flourished in an individualist, capitalist context, and this fact alone should soften any excitement we might have about a novel’s ethical dynamism. As I argue in this chapter, DeLillo’s novel enacts an ethico-political project, but it would be absurd to contend that *Cosmopolis*, or any artwork, literary or not, can transcend socio-historical circumstance. Nor can any artwork point the way unequivocally to a better future. That would undermine the possibility of a different future in advance. Indeed, the poetic said is not a political program; it is suggestive more than indicative, a whisper more than a shout.

²² My use of the term “affective” here is indebted to the distinction Brian Massumi draws between emotion and affect. Whereas emotion is subjective, affect is “unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective” (35; emphasis original). Massumi suggests that affect exists within rooms, worlds, and between bodies. The space of live performance is thus an exemplary locus of affective exchange.

²³ Elliot’s portmanteau prompts more reflection on how my study differs from previous failure-centred studies. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam admits that he “has tried and tried without much success to become fluent in another language,” and he leverages this example to reflect on the need for “alternative pedagogies” whereby teachers embrace “a dialogic relation to the learner” (12, 13). I am deeply sympathetic to this point. Certainly the notion of a “dialogic relation” between pedagogue and student resonates within my ethical frame of analysis, but Halberstam’s anecdote overlooks how migrants who fail to learn the official language of their adopted country have severely diminished life chances. While it hardly seems Halberstam’s

intention here to celebrate failure, that is one reading that his anecdote yields. As Mari Ruti contends, “those who have been severely marginalized are unlikely to experience their failures as anything other than failures and even more unlikely to be interested in further failure in the name of radical politics” (*Ethics* 35-36). My approach to failure in this chapter falls in between Ruti and Halberstam. Unlike Ruti, I posit a low threshold for action to count as radical political action, but like her, I think that failing to learn a second or third language is more complex than Halberstam suggests. In the present study, failure is unwilled, and it is no cause for celebration. It prompts us to consider a different system of values as well as different ways of being together.

²⁴ Jodi Kim, analyzing America’s global domination through “debt imperialism” and “metapolitical authority,” deconstructs the Fourteenth Amendment to lay bare the tension between “the apotheosis of liberal democracy and its contradictory and violent conditions of possibility” (41, 42, 45). The Fourteenth Amendment, supposedly granting equal rights to all people within its jurisdiction while absolving the government of any wrongdoing related to the expropriation of Native American land and the country’s slavery-fuelled growth, has always attested to the state’s legally sanctioned capacity to “deploy and manipulate debt [. . .] in brokering its power as both a settler colonial and an imperial state” (45). According to Kim, debt functions as a tool of imperial and settler-colonial growth, and one would have to look no further for evidence of this phenomenon than the willingness with which the Treasury issues bonds to fund various government activities.

²⁵ Critical work on diaspora has focused on the liminality of the diasporic subject. In “Out Here and Over There,” David L. Eng, attending to the masculinist and heteronormative bent of cultural nationalism as well as the challenges posed by transnational capital, argues that “queerness and diaspora” can offer a “critical methodology” that dislodges notions of home from

the nation-state; a wider sense of home can encompass multiple identity formations, sexual and racial, that take shape within and across multiple locations (32). This approach to cultural studies marks a “definitive shifting away from a politics of cultural nationalism to a politics of transnational culturalism” (43). Seen through a Levinasian lens, I would argue, Eng’s formulation inscribes the diasporic subject in an open social field *underwritten as opposed to undermined by* a form of bottomless responsibility that exceeds the hegemonic cultural narratives promulgated within the nation-state.

²⁶ Keeping in mind that this play is the second in a trilogy also cautions against isolating *Water’s* ethical dynamics from its commitment to political action. In *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, Yaz has come to occupy Ginny’s position within the community. At a press conference toward the end of the play, after her friend Augustín dies in a hospital waiting room, she delivers a rousing speech in which she summons the denizens of her neighborhood to unite and mobilize against institutional neglect (57-59).

Chapter 2: Negativity and the Gestural Sublime in Claudia Rankine's Poetry

The majesty of duty has nothing to do with enjoyment of life . . .

—Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*

An obligation to enjoyment is a patent absurdity.

—Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*

If the last chapter ends with the exigency of grounding ethical responsibility within the disfiguring reality of political action, then this chapter begins with the historically specific difficulty of inhabiting the scenes of everyday life. Social worlds have always required of individuals a measure of capitulation to emotional, behavioural, and cultural norms, but neoliberal governance, configuring the state's relation to its constituents along market-friendly lines, intensifies this pressure. In the absence of redistributive mechanisms or institutional support for labour unions, individuals who are dissatisfied with political and economic structures, with institutional inequality and fading opportunity, with hegemonic cultural narratives and projects aimed at consolidating the nation against external threats, have tenuous means of translating their negativity into effective political praxis. Alongside the vanishing possibilities of achieving collective goals a conspicuous cultural development has taken shape: the articulation of entrepreneurial virtue to positive thinking.

Happiness, optimism, and the perception of success have become unprecedentedly imbricated under neoliberalism. One would have to look no further than the frequency with which American politicians express their optimistic credos to get a preliminary sense of how political legitimacy is often purchased through the declamation of positivity, but evidence of this cultural trend abounds within the proliferating market of self-help literature, replete with bestsellers such as Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* and Martin Seligman's *Authentic*

Happiness. The expansion of social media, online venues that afford users the opportunity to either live vicariously through happier people or receive ersatz support upon sharing their problems, also bespeaks a culture obsessed with the highly personalized pursuit of happiness, one that encourages work on oneself over collective action. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction, dysphoria, and unhappiness have become emotional stigmata indicating entrepreneurial failure and an inability to keep up with the feel-good rhythms of the market.

David Harvey reminds us that “success or failure are interpreted” by neoliberal reason “in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings [. . .] rather than being attributed to any systemic property” (66). In this view, the individual has only themselves to blame for their negative feelings, a *tromp l’oeil* that obscures the dramatic reorganization of the corporate, industrial, and institutional landscape in the last thirty years. This line of thinking is evidence of another way in which neoliberal reason overlooks the difficult terrain of everyday life: it construes negativity in, to repackage Derrida’s phrase, “the absence of the signatory,” treating lived subjectivity as if it happened in a vacuum, isolated from historical injury, institutional inequality, and environmental contingencies (*Of* 41). By the same token, it delegitimizes the external forces that provoke negative feelings in the first place, especially amongst minority groups whose life chances in the present are directly affected by the state’s policy work in the past.¹ Consequently, the widespread preoccupation with happiness—from bookshelves to the workplace, self-help seminars to positive psychology—performs a conservative function and abets entrepreneurial strategies of self-making.

To be clear, emotional wellbeing is not inherently problematic, and the individual pursuit of positivity is not altogether a dubious endeavour. As we saw in the last chapter, nurturing a positive outlook on life can constitute a collective goal, one pursued by individuals in dire need

of help and support. However, the instrumentalization of positivity, coupled with the de-contextualization of negativity, satisfies the status quo at a time when a growing number of people have reason to be unhappy with neoliberal governance and pessimistic about the future. Despite a sizable market of self-help aids and a pantheon of motivational speakers promoting positive thinking as the key to success, the price on the back of a book or a ticket of admission cannot efface the structural conditions that induce a negative outlook on the world. The contemporary regime of optimism needs to be viewed through a critical lens. To the extent that positive thinking is a condition of entrepreneurial success, negative feelings can point to the flaws in the neoliberal calculus shaping everyday life, serving as indices of class discontent and racial strife within contemporary America.

The aim here is not to make the empirical claim that late capitalism engenders unhappiness, nor is it to suggest in any way that this emotion solves the issues associated with late capitalism. I make the humbler argument that attending to unhappy feelings heightens our awareness of how social norms and structural forces wound individuals. As Heather Love contends, “Texts that insist on social negativity underline the gap between aspiration and the actual” (4).² “Aspiration” is a recurrent theme in this chapter, and Love suggests that radical forms of aspiration, unrecognized by dominant patterns of thought and being, tend to find their most positive expression in negativity—as if to disclose them would be to risk censure, embarrassment, or even abuse. In this chapter, I read such emotions as unhappiness, pessimism, and sadness as forms of what Love calls “social negativity.” In a social context, negativity means both dissent and absence from the status quo; this dual meaning informs my analysis in this chapter. By turning to poetry, I suggest that emotional negativity marks a way in which individuals register what is wrong with the world and hold on to hope for a more livable future.

If the poetic said bears, in Levinas's words, "a scintillating sense of possibility undulled by definition" ("The Other in Proust" 162), then one way to approach poetry is for its denaturalizing capacity to highlight the structural sources of negativity and to rechannel desire away from conventional forms of living. To that end, this chapter turns to three books of poetry by Claudia Rankine—*The End of the Alphabet* (1998), *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014)—reading them against, and as critical responses to, the contemporary regime of optimism in America. Rankine's poetry coalesces around the central theme of emotional negativity stemming from neoliberal dispossession, the micro-oppressions of everyday life, and the spectacular violence committed against people of colour in America and abroad.³ Her poetry ultimately proffers an ethical pedagogy of responsibility, antidiscrimination, and social interdependence that opposes neoliberal reason and the biopolitical apparatuses that uphold it.

There is already a rich archive of critical work focusing on Rankine's poetry as a response to the social and economic conditions of neoliberalism. Angela Hume contextualizes Rankine's work in relation to contemporary power structures and environmental issues, arguing that it "registers the structural forces and forms of power that both racialize and subject raced bodies and environments to degradation and violence" (80). Similarly, in *Attention Equals Life*, Andrew Epstein situates Rankine within a group of post-World War II poets whose work "forces us to think about the ways in which power and capitalism shape and affect tiny details of everyday life, the micropolitics of daily interaction and economic inequality, the realities of everyday sexism and racism, the effects of consumerism and advertising on our minds and actions, and the existence of alienation in the day-to-day workplace" (11). According to Epstein, these poets train their sights on the quotidian aspects of life in order to defamiliarize unexamined routines and conventions. In her most recent work, he argues, Rankine "demonstrates that subtle

acts of racism and discrimination in private daily life exist on a continuum with, and ultimately make possible, the kind of large-scale, tragic events that have shaken American society in the past several years” (277). Such critical work indicates that Rankine’s poetry is a worthy case study for a broader discussion of the difficulties posed by neoliberalism; however, the centrality of emotional negativity within her work has received little attention and remains insufficiently analyzed. This chapter aims to rectify this lacuna.

In her poetry, Rankine identifies American optimism as a particularly insidious project, suggesting its strong connection to cultural norms:

Sad is one of those words that has given up its life for our country, it’s been a martyr for the American dream, it’s been neutralized, co-opted by our culture to suggest a tinge of discomfort that lasts the time it takes for this and then for that to happen, the time it takes to change a channel. But sadness is real because once it meant something real. It meant dignified, grave; it meant trustworthy; it meant exceptionally bad, deplorable, shameful; it meant massive, weighty, forming a compact body; it meant falling heavily; and it meant of a color: dark. It meant dark in color, to darken. It meant me. I felt sad. (*Don’t* 108)

Rankine links the regime of positive thinking to fantasies of the good life through an evocation of the channel surfer’s ostensible freedom, calling to mind an oft-voiced fear of television’s standardizing effect on viewers.⁴ Perhaps the most unequivocal expression of this fear is Adorno’s: “The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reaction and to weaken the forces of individual resistance” (“How” 216). In the spirit of Adorno’s screed against “modern mass culture,” Rankine uses channel surfing as a symbol of the social body’s atomization. She inscribes the American dream within a scene

characterized by immobility and emotional decompression: the not uncommon habit of regenerating labour power and optimism through passive spectatorship. Consider, for a moment, how she depicts the act of watching tennis on television in *Citizen*; though it “isn’t a cure for feeling, it is a clean displacement of effort, will, and disappointment” (62). For Rankine, watching television is a means of delaying the work of examining the sources of negativity; consequently, pleasure gleaned from television performs a largely regulatory function. This is one of the principal issues with which Rankine grapples in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, as she uses the image of a television to connect discrete passages. Its screen displays nothing but a face obscured by static (George W. Bush’s?) to emphasize the television itself over the content of any particular program. And in the long passage cited above, Rankine maps happiness onto the contemporary proliferation of opportunities for televisual satisfaction, the proliferation of social goods organized into serialized chunks of time that enable the easy formation of routine.

In order to legitimate her feelings against rote optimism, Rankine invokes the grammar of sacrifice and transcendence: the fate of sadness *is* a narrative of Christian martyrdom, a narrative that defies the possibility of restitution. The metaphor identifies sadness with the position of the face in Levinas’s schema, thereby intimating its inaccessibility to the economy of habit delimited by neoliberal social conditions. Through this association sadness assumes an ethical dimension, a spectral resonance that endlessly unsettles what cannot countenance emotional negativity: the American dream. Like a sign incapable of encapsulating its referent, no “tinge of discomfort” can sufficiently index the depth of this emotion, and despite the ease with which the channel can be changed, no amount of channel surfing can expunge sadness from the scene of the American dream. There is something abnormal about this negative emotion, something “massive, weighty” about it. It is sticky. Even a journey through the etymological archive leads Rankine back to the

here and now of watching television as the anodyne of negativity—but this is a return that complicates entrepreneurial agency. Presumably under the weight of sadness, the first-person pronoun slides momentarily into the objective case—“[sadness] meant me”—the slippage suggesting the impossibility of controlling one’s lifeworld so as to fully control one’s emotions. The lapse into passivity lasts one sentence—three syllables, to be precise—but its effect is to highlight the condition of non-sovereignty at the heart of everyday life, indicating the need to rethink lived subjectivity along ethical lines of care and responsibility. Yet no sooner is the ethical disclosed than the reclamation of power in the first-person subjective case overwrites it and intimates the entrepreneurial subject’s attenuated capacity to feel better.

This example, the unruly intervention of sadness in the flow of daily life, highlights the need for a conceptual apparatus attentive to the stickiness of “martyred” emotions within a culture predicated on optimism. Cultivating sustainable relationships with others tends to require a measure of cheerfulness; accordingly, such unoptimistic emotions as sadness tend to remain private and are often signaled in less explicit ways than their positive counterparts. Sara Ahmed writes of “the gestures of discomfort and alienation [that] do not register” within scenes of collective happiness: “One can feel unjustly interpellated in such occasions” (42; *Promise*). The glitch preventing the individual from identifying with the group or consenting to the terms of happiness remains unsaid, Ahmed suggests, because failing to glean pleasure from a common source amounts to failing to belong. The consequences of this failure gather weight in inverse proportion to the unhappy individual’s access to privilege and opportunity. The depressive routinely finds themselves in the position of having to grow up or learn to adapt, and by virtue of their tenuous positions within the social order, women, LGBTIQ people, immigrants and refugees, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled people tend to feel this pressure most

consistently. It is always the individual marked off in advance as different who must demonstrate the ability to adopt social norms. As Ahmed suggests, any account of negativity in a culture of hyper-optimism demands attention to the *gestural* ways in which individuals betray their disaffection for the social worlds of which they seem to be firmly a part.

When asked about the trauma of everyday interactions, especially coded forms of racism, Rankine responded that victims are often forced to “put away” their injury, even though “micro-aggressions [. . .] chip away at our right to call ourselves human beings” (Hudson and Price 12). “You put it aside because you want to stay in the room,” she said, “and you don’t want to always be arguing for your status as a human being” (12). The desire to belong and the desire to make others recognize contend in scenes fraught with harmful exchanges that never reach the spectacular heights of a scandal but flutter away for everyone except those harmed by them. Rankine continued: “At some point you must privilege your feelings and the things that you know over their comfort level, but to be honest the energy is not always there” (12). For Rankine, putting injury away is at once a survival strategy and a form of surrender, as the regularity of harm, particularly anti-black violence, weighs down the psyches and bodies of victims. As her speaker puts it at the end of *Citizen*, “I don’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending” (159). The poignant act of putting away injury in the face of persistently hurtful norms—be they institutional or social, personal or impersonal—preoccupies Rankine’s poetry.

To that end, discernible within Rankine’s poetry is what I call the “gestural sublime.” It names a mode of signification that troubles, if not altogether defies, poetic capture and semantic legibility. Conventionally, critics have construed the Kantian sublime as, to cite Gayatri Spivak’s gloss on the concept, a “big mindless thing” (“Terror” 94). Joseph Tabbi; Bruce Robbins; and, as I discussed my last chapter, Fredric Jameson have drawn a connection between cognitive failure,

on the one hand, and the scope of global capitalism, its dizzying abstractions, and the technologies undergirding its space-time compressions, on the other.⁵ While I am sympathetic to these assessments of the difficulty that contemporary economic and technological systems pose to the imagination, they cannot account for the emotional negativity that Rankine conveys in a gestural register, even as she suggests the inadequacy of poetic form to describe that negativity. The gestural sublime is the aesthetic presentation of a small, barely perceptible thing—a poetics that foregrounds its own limits even as it attempts to reach beyond them in order to inscribe fleeting displays of negativity in a culture of enforced optimism.

In *The Critique of Judgement*, one way Kant explains the sublime is that it “cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation” (92).⁶ The absence of appropriate means of conveying the “ideas of reason” means that the force of sublimity can only be felt through inadequate forms of presentation. Presenting something as sublime succeeds and fails at once, then. On the one hand, the presentation fails to place its object neatly or unproblematically within a conceptual box; on the other, it is through this failure that the presentation intimates the possibility of transcending the contextual limits of everyday life in both thought and conduct, which dominant paradigms of life keep within artificial limits. The elusiveness of that which is judged sublime animates the contextually unbounded faculty of reason, unsettling the certainties with which individuals make sense of the world. (To be clear, the Kantian faculty of reason bears no relation to neoliberal reason.)

Attending to Rankine’s treatment of emotional negativity and its gestural forms of delivery yields the insight that it is no longer tenable to limit the judgement of the sublime to

overwhelmingly large and intense phenomena, as if the faculty of reason were always animated in the face of uncountable or overwhelming vastness. To account for the banality of attritional violence under late capitalism, Lauren Berlant advances “crisis ordinariness” as a heuristic tool that directs attention away from the extraordinary and refocuses it on the domain of lived subjectivity, where individuals make daily adjustments to manage insecurity (*Cruel* 10-11). Rethinking crisis along these lines flips critical convention on its head: the point is not to expound on watershed moments with meta-subjective consequences that trickle downward but to magnify the ambiguous context of everyday life in order to see how systemic crisis is something with which people live, as if it were no crisis at all. To downsize from the epic scale of the Kantian sublime to the gestural sublime is to advocate a move similar to Berlant’s.⁷ The quotidian is disorienting territory, and Rankine’s poetry urges us to modify the concept of the sublime without jettisoning its helpfulness as a tool for understanding the moments in which life as we know it becomes senseless.

In this chapter, I advocate a recalibration of the Kantian sublime, one that allows us to attend to the inassimilable kernel of the ethical at the heart of quotidian life. The gestural sublime gives form to a hiccup in the otherwise smooth flow of lived subjectivity, a blip that echoes the simultaneous appearance and withdrawal of the trace of alterity that “signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 7). Indeed, the negativity generated by structural violence, a history of dispossession, and the attrition of life under contemporary capitalism does not register as anything more than a hiccup within a culture obsessed with positive thinking, and this seeming invisibility evokes the repertoire of gestures that Levinas adduces to describe alterity’s impingement on the self. Levinas writes that “the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder can express as the face” and thereby incite ethical conduct

(*Totality* 262). “The enigma separates the Infinite from all phenomenality,” he writes elsewhere (*Otherwise* 154). If the contemporary regime of optimism threatens to obfuscate the self’s constitutive relationality, then the vulnerability of the Other encroaches upon the self through enigmatic gestures, unsettling the hold that positive thinking has on the entrepreneurial subject’s patterns of thought and conduct. What the gestural sublime seeks to convey, then, is the enigma that awakens the self from its entrepreneurial slumber. It captures negative feelings that defy the logic of personal responsibility, feelings that demand ethical solutions.

This weak mode of signifying resonates with Levinas’s notion of the poetic said, even though Kantian moral law is immanent and by no means extra-ontological in the way that Levinas wishes to keep the ethical relation. Kantian rationality also posits an autonomous subject whose inscription within an empirically overpowering environment makes adherence to moral law a difficult task without a sublime goad. Kant writes that a “human being alone, and with him every rational creature is an *end in itself*: by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom he is the subject of the moral law, which is holy” (*CPR* 74; emphasis original).⁸ On the other hand, Levinasian philosophy posits a self-divided subject whose personhood rests on their pre-ontological relation to the Other. The silent language of the saying that precedes the intelligible said is nothing more than the self’s constitutive openness to the Other. Whereas the belief in an autonomous, self-present subject underwrites Kantian morality, the exact opposite holds for Levinasian ethics.⁹ Whereas Kant posits the absolute equality of all human beings, Levinas posits a self asymmetrically related to the Other. Levinas’s rejection of Enlightenment subjectivity has made his work attractive to an array of poststructuralist thinkers seeking to distance themselves from the idea of a monadic being of consciousness. However, if moral law encroaches upon self-interest, and if embracing moral law involves striving for an impossible

ideal, then Kantian deontology can be read alongside, as opposed to against, Levinasian ethics, as they both advocate disinterestedness and take shape in aspirational registers.¹⁰

Focusing on Levinas and Kant's ideological affinity allows us to rethink the fault line separating their work as an opportunity to read each through the other.¹¹ Reading Kant through Levinas enables us to scale down from the universal demands of moral law to the particularity of suffering—from, moreover, the categorical imperative to the self's asymmetrical relation to the Other—in order to rethink autonomy along relational lines; this scaling down refocuses the sublime on seemingly insignificant gestures that call for radical responses.¹² Reading Levinas through Kant enables us to sharpen our understanding of the poetic said and its capacity to transcode ethical energies into ontological initiatives; this sharpening involves thinking ethical disinterestedness as a project of hope and action, even if they fail to align. Since people cannot help sinking back into themselves and politics cannot help deforming aspiration, the gestural sublime should not be mistaken for something it is not. Its radical force is to denaturalize the neoliberal logic of emotional negativity *qua* individual failure. Gestures become sublime when they constitute a “strangeness which mocks knowledge” (Levinas, “The Other” 163). They become sublime when they serve as placeholders for the trace of alterity, unsettling the normative dimensions of everyday life and keeping ethical potentialities alive. In the half-light between visibility and invisibility, the gestural sublime points to the brokenness of social norms. Examples of this mode of signification include melancholic torpor, downcast eyes, sighs of exasperation, tense exhalations, broken interactions with interlocutors, and punctual moments of silence amid the cacophony of daily living. This list is not exhaustive, but it is meant to solicit attention to the many ways in which gestures give the lie to one's absorption within a scene of

everyday life. Gestures mark out a territory of signification beneath the outward show of positivity demanded by social convention.

This theoretical apparatus, examining the banal aspects of life for senseless breakdowns, affords a wider view of the critical work poetry can perform. One of contemporary poetry's main trends is a heightened attention to daily life. Jahan Ramazani explains: "The contemporary poem places itself within—not above or outside or beyond—the open-ended course of everyday experience. [. . .] Contemporary poets, typically refusing regimentation and overt order, have often patterned their poems on the natural rhythms of personal experience and the body" (xlvi). Instead of distancing itself from the quotidian, contemporary poetry pursues what Stanley Cavell calls "the uncanniness of the ordinary" (154). With the rapid advancement of technology and the increasingly knowable scale of global calamity, the micro-dimensions of everyday life have become sites of ambiguity and discovery, of actions that do not yield easy explanations. For Rankine, such attention to daily life involves investing representational language with the defamiliarizing energy of symbolic poetry, such that the simple act of watching television can index broad social malaise and lead to a meditation on sadness. For Rankine, because political-economic structures and histories of great consequence shape scenes of daily habit, the happiness-inducing strategies of personal responsibility cannot solve emotional negativity, which demands ethical modes of interaction as well as collective efforts to remake the world.

At least as far as this chapter is concerned, one problem besetting poetry is the difficulty of expressing inexpressive gestures through language, but the effort to display without over-coding the fleetingness of the gestural bespeaks the impossibility of achieving absolute separation from the dominant paradigms of contemporary life. Berlant situates her notion of cruel optimism within this drama of compelled attachment masquerading as existential necessity.

“[W]hatever the *content* of the attachment is,” she writes, “the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (*Cruel* 24; emphasis original). The inescapable reality of inhabiting a social world, even if it has become or has always been inimical to one’s flourishing, is that one cannot simply deny its existence or impact. The gestural sublime, to the extent that it is viewed as a container for alterity, mediates between the social demands of optimism and what Giorgio Agamben describes as the “muteness inherent in humankind’s very capacity for language” (78). For Agamben, “what is at issue in gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language” (78). Agamben figures the gestural as ambivalence at the heart of signification that translates into an effort to transcend language.

With its economy of language, creative juxtaposition of words, and syntactical liberties, poetry constitutes the ideal literary genre for an investigation into the gestural sublime. And the intermedial aesthetic that Rankine mobilizes in her latter two collections, combining artwork, photographs, prose sections, and conventional lines of poetry, suggests an effort to push poetic language beyond mere textuality and thereby induce a slippage of meaning. Moreover, the title of her oldest book under investigation here, *The End of the Alphabet*, anticipates this distrust of poetry’s textual moorings. Foregrounded in Rankine’s work, therefore, is the ambivalence articulated by Agamben. Her desire to convey the unsayable gives us cause to examine as sublime not only her expression of what normally counts as a gesture but also the moments when she seems to approach language with hostility or difficulty. In any case, Rankine’s focus repeatedly returns to the scenes of everyday life marked by emotional negativity—in her words, “the feelings that don’t sit comfortable inside the communal” (*Citizen* 153).

Of course, there is a risk of overinvesting gestures with significance. Sometimes a gesture is the most standardized aspect of interacting with others—for instance, the doff of the cap or the well-timed smile at a stranger. Gestures, then, need to be contextualized in order to distinguish discontent from convention. In *Sexual Future, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, Juana María Rodríguez reads queer sociality and sexual practices against heteronormativity and the hyper-visibility of white heterosexual culture, delineating “a theory of queer gesture that works in the interstices between sexual desires and political demands, between discipline and fantasy, between utopian longings and everyday failures” (7). She attributes to queer gesture the Derridean orientation to a “democracy to come” (*Specters* 81)—as she puts it, the “‘not yet’ of possibilities” (11). For Rodríguez, the gestural is a mode of queer sociality that connects the necessity of oppositional politics in the present to the hope for a queer future unmarked by the assimilatory pressures of hegemony. It is a way of inhabiting the present, with its admixture of pain and pleasure, while also holding out for something better; that is, hope motivates the political no less than the political perennially falls short of what is hoped for.

My formulation of the gestural sublime as well as my subsequent analysis of Rankine’s poetry draw strength from Rodríguez’s formulation of queer gesture. If an important aspect of neoliberal culture is the pressure to be happy and positive, and if gestures conveying negative feelings can serve as sublime responses to a world organized according to capitalist imperatives and narrow forms of nationalism, to what alternative modes of being do these gestures ultimately point? What kind of ethical stances, and what kind of political projects, do they call on readers to adopt? Answering these questions through an extended analysis of Rankine’s poetry enables us to conceive of her work as a kind of ethical discourse that takes shape in the space between the

exigencies of everyday life and the hope for a future otherwise than the present, a future that is impossible but no less necessary to imagine.

Interlude; or, Gesturing Beyond the Alphabet

The End of the Alphabet is formally and thematically unlike *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*.

It has no intermedial dimensions, instead unfolding like conventional lyric poetry across twelve subtitled sections. It does not deal explicitly with broad sociopolitical or economic issues, instead focusing on the quotidian aspects of lived subjectivity and the struggle to negotiate the aftershocks of traumatic experience. In it, Rankine's speaker, Jane, recounts the harrowing details of her migration (presumably to the U.S.), her romantic involvement with a man, her pregnancy that results in a stillborn birth, the subsequent collapse of the relationship, and her descent into depression. Throughout, she inhabits the liminal position between the reality pressing in on her and her desire to escape it, but the desired escape is radical, framed as a (failed) circumvention of language. As if echoing her own thoughts, the "day sky" tells her: "*Unhyphen the self from the part that cannot / leave the cruelty of this.*" Semantically thin for readers, the deictic "this" overwhelms meaning with ambiguity because "*it is / better to curse, Shut up, Shut up, before understanding sets in*" (32; emphasis original). If language is a source of confinement, then it is also the only means of transgressing the limits it imposes. This collection of poetry stages a confrontation between defeat and longing that often plays out on a formal level; it thereby provides a helpful entry point into a discussion of the gestural sublime vis-à-vis Rankine's treatment of unhappiness.

In the section "Overview is a Place," Jane attempts to "[r]emember a future/ from another dream" but struggles to convey her longing (5):

Assurance collapses naturally

as if each word were a dozen rare birds
 flown away. And gone

elsewhere is their guaranteed landing
 though the orphaned wish
 to be happy was never withdrawn. (6)

Rankine depicts Jane's inability to articulate her "orphaned wish" as a problem of language, as if it were an opponent and an ally at once. The above passage underscores Jane's insularity, since affixing one's wish to a chain of signifiers makes it socially available. The wish remains private because forgetting past trauma proves immensely difficult: "Ignore your own devastation and it doggedly shadows, / resurfacing" (24). Jane knows how arduous the work of healing is, for any effort to abandon past "devastation" involves confronting it. Translating the "wish / to be happy" into practice is no easy task and involves a good deal of reparative work. With her image of "each word" as "a dozen rare birds / flown away," Rankine suggests that the social agency of the signifier cannot accomplish this work for Jane, which, in turn, presents Rankine with the problem of expressing the inexpressible. Just as Jane struggles to make her private feelings communicable, so Rankine pushes language to its sublime limits.

On that point, the denotative inadequacy of language preoccupies the collection as a whole. Jane describes her stillborn baby as her "core untranslatable" (44) and later remarks that "despite what the throat holds, the body hoards more" (92). These lines echo Elaine Scarry's notion of the "unsharability" of pain (4).¹³ Jane's failure to package her suffering in words is not depicted as an individual shortcoming but as a problem with the expressive capacity of language. Rankine figures the body as a receptacle for life's many miseries, one that outweighs the

signifier's semantic tonnage. She writes that "it is always some failure / the body involves and holds you to" (92). Having a body is the condition of being exposed to pain, and pain is so individuating that it threatens to isolate Jane from the comforts of interpersonal communication. If the throat can communicate suffering through the words it holds, thereby coaxing Jane out of isolation, the body's excessive accumulation of pain overwhelms the possibility of such communication. It cannot let go of what harms it: "I am working hard to hold / what it is that cannot let go" (49). Jane tries to filter the pain she feels through the language she "holds." She displays a commitment to sociality, even though she knows its limits, and the awareness of her pain's untranslatability causes unhappiness: "I understand / and the agility to understand makes no difference: / there is this about me: *I feel bad* / as if grief needs to be and is in the end, anyway" (31; emphasis original). Grief is inexorable for Jane, as there is no escaping the distressing past. The proximal "this" suggests that Jane's trauma is omnipresent and suffocating. It is as if Jane cannot imagine a form of personhood delinked from the grief that "doggedly shadows" her. Through repeated images of Jane's pain dangling over the edge of semantic legibility, Rankine orients our attention to the primary vulnerability of the human subject.

Rankine repeatedly underscores that such vulnerability cannot be communicated with much ease or facility, since language feeds into habit and thereby becomes hollow. "Our addiction to telling," Jane asserts, "is all effort to shape what surfaces within the sane" (23). Rankine frames "telling" as a means of presenting an appropriate version of oneself for social life, but sanity has no value apart from its social mediation. To be sane is, partly, to answer the Althusserian call of interpellation and display social competence. Rankine is not advocating insanity here but questioning whether dominant social codes can effectively alleviate the kind of suffering that atomizes and isolates. Her use of the word "addiction" casts doubt upon

convention, anticipating the act of watching television upon which she meditates in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*; both serve as mere distractions from the emotions the “body hoards.”

To that end, early in *The End of the Alphabet*, Rankine writes that “fear / in sanity lives. anatomy / as dissonance” (5), and then she goes on to describe Jane as “defeat composed” (19). Rankine is concerned here with the sublimity of pain. Her line breaks in the first exhibit and oxymoron in the second establish a picture of Jane as an embodied contradiction. Composure and sanity do not soften defeat and fear but exist alongside them, as Jane adduces an acceptable version of herself for social interaction while at the same time folding under incommunicable pressure. No amount of talking can, for Jane, reach the bodily depths beneath the social fiction of sanity, where the accumulation of trauma is heaviest. Elsewhere, Rankine writes that Jane’s “voice / at any distance cannot be / heavier than her eyes” (9). At best, then, the act of “telling” can only make Jane momentarily forget that she has lost her baby. Fleeting forgetfulness aside, the intensity of Jane’s private drama prevents her from embracing the “addiction” meant to serve as an anodyne for suffering. The pain persists: “There is a lot of talking going on / masked in retelling because the feeling forgiven is too much” (92). With the word “addiction” and the prefix “re,” Rankine underscores a conservative dynamic in rote forms of interaction, thereby intimating that any attempt to progress beyond the daily vortex of unhappy memory will require an entirely new mode of address.

Levinas’s bifurcated notion of signification provides clarity here. Recall that the self’s openness to the Other is the condition of personhood, and the Other’s vulnerability motivates language. This relational matrix installs responsibility at the heart of personhood, as each human subject cannot emerge without primary relationality. Yet even though language is a necessary means of attending to the Other, it cannot help but fall short of the transcendental standard of

ethical responsibility. For Levinas and Rankine, suffering marks the end of the alphabet, a point at which the weight of pain outstrips any attempt to articulate it, but Rankine gives Levinasian ethics a distinctive treatment, in that it is Jane's pain—not the Other's—that is meant to elicit ethical patterns of thought in readers groping for semantic clarity. While Levinas notes the repression of the saying under the semantic load of language, Rankine suggests the difficulty of responding to Jane without lapsing into conventional forms of communication. At one point, Jane wonders at how “we can enter into hell and still sit down for Sunday dinner” (24). A simple pleasure of everyday life is here transformed into a tense deferral of substantively addressing the loss of Jane and her partner's baby.

Rankine extends her critique to the social niceties and formal outings that normally turn the hours between workdays into something meaningful and exciting:

At first, embarrassed, lumbering beneath the formal poses,
the well-cuffed, the combed hairs, the could-not-be-faulted
statement of ease, though utterly
and depleted, closing the door behind, for in

This, the distance—wanting and the body losing, all the time
losing, beforehand, inside. (11)

Here, Rankine stages a scene thick with etiquette and affectation. Jane's “lumbering” does not call attention to itself because it happens “beneath” the layers of formality. When actions cannot unfold in the open, visible for everyone's visual consumption, prepositions bear the heaviest expressive burden. In other words, “beneath” performs the symbolic work of smuggling Jane's discomfort into a scene where it has no opportunity for cathartic release. Rankine goes on to

indicate the weightiness of Jane's emotional load through the complete absence of signification. The blank space preceding the final two lines here evokes a deep sigh's expulsion of air, and it is further indicative of Jane's simultaneous presence and alienation that "distance" is placed in apposition to the deictic "this." The sublimity in this situation does not reside in something that is so big it defies cognition. Rather, it resides in the corporeal stickiness of trauma.

Yet Rankine recognizes the lure of normativity. It is the pull of convention that motors Jane into her fateful relationship: "[B]ecause it seemed right / love of this man would look like freedom" (15). In the next sub-poem, Jane recalls a time when being with this man felt like an end to all misery: "Imagine his unshaven face, his untrimmed nails, as all / the hurt this world could give" (16). On the page, the line break separating "all" from "the hurt" is the same as the blank space discussed above; once again Rankine leverages the absence of words to heighten the intensity of Jane's pain. The relationship did not unfold the way Jane had planned, and Rankine demands attention through a weak mode of signification: the blank page. Later, the breakdown of their relationship is conveyed through the breakdown of language:

A hunger sinking
into. Nothing Stops. And the feeling: Bound-
less. Could say: A hand. Could say: Needed. Close in
on humanistic regard. Then the waiter wanted. (36)

The paratactic flow of the words establishes a staccato rhythm here, and the line break bisecting "boundless," intimating that the feeling can be contained before undermining that possibility altogether, emphasizes the immensity of Jane's struggle to stay emotionally buoyant. Rankine affixes the potential of genuine connection between Jane and her partner to the conditional mood, but then reality encroaches upon the pair. She also juxtaposes Jane's hungry need for

genuine social attachment with the common form of hunger that brings couples to restaurants. Such unsharable hunger precludes Jane's full immersion in the scene. Epstein argues that Rankine's everyday-life poetry is "deeply committed to the inexhaustibility of the here and now rather than the metaphysical or sublime" (26). However, to the extent that Levinasian ethics and the Kantian sublime can be read alongside one another, Rankine urges readers to attend to the meta-empirical dimensions of the quotidian, the fleeting signs of vulnerability and unhappiness that cannot be transcoded into the norms governing social conduct or romance. Viewing the above passage in this way allows us to get a better purchase on Rankine's critique of neoliberal capitalism that preoccupies the latter stages of this chapter.

Ultimately, Rankine suggests that there is for Jane a pathway toward *a* future. While language's shortcomings isolate her from the comforts of interpersonal intimacy, it is also through language that she must propose a livable life. Jane considers how "to bring such need / to utterance, to arrive before words so ready. / Wringing years into syllables" (93). Rankine repeats Jane's "need" here, emphasizing the persistence of her desire to carve out a space for flourishing and hope. To that end, Rankine intimates that what Jane "needs" is a performative utterance that adequately conveys the depth of her depression and thereby opens pathways to new forms of existence and belonging, ones unpolluted by the habits and formalities that have done nothing to ease her pain. Given Rankine's use of the participle "wringing," it seems as if this utterance will contain more feeling than meaning, more expression than denotative precision. The act of wringing thus evokes a dialectical confrontation between Jane and language, recalling Agamben's aforementioned notion of gesture as "the other side of language" (78). "[T]he stronger the unsayable weighs them down," Agamben observes, the more poets struggle to express sublime otherness, whose muteness stands in opposition to language.

So too does Rankine frame this struggle as necessary and (im)possible at once. The final lines of the collection read: “I am / here in the skin of . . . otherwise) shoveling out, dryly” (100). Rankine tethers physical labour to Jane’s mission to find a felicitous mode of linguistic communication. Although the ellipsis casts doubt on the success of Jane’s project, the participle “shoveling” indicates that the work is ongoing. This image of negation that does not amount to a complete rejection of the world resonates with the irreverent hope espoused by critical theorists such as Adorno: “[A] gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, is the last hope for thought” (*Minima* 68). In figuring the work of negative dialectics as a search that could potentially bear no yield, Adorno finds an ally here in Levinas, who frames the caress as a “seiz[ure] upon nothing” that moves “towards a future never future enough”: “It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it *expresses* love, but suffers from an inability to tell it” (*Totality* 258; emphasis original). If disclosure seizes alterity and makes it the subject’s object of desire, then searching moves toward an Otherness that exceeds being and threatens its dissolution. Levinas refines this thought with his notion of the openness to alterity that all signification harbours without being able to bring it to light.

Language’s expressive failures are a principal source of Jane’s unhappiness, so to “wring[] years into syllables” is to divagate “from the beaten path,” to “search,” and to “forage.” Since Jane forms a new outlook on life through her experience of sublime and untranslatable pain, her orientation is framed as a search for a symbolic form that can convey pain *away* from the body *without* the words reflexively sliding back onto the sufferer—as if Jane’s vulnerability were a congenital condition and not the consequence of her exposure to the vagaries of life. As my discussion in this section has shown, conventional forms of sociality preoccupy Rankine’s

work. Jane's inability to perform happiness anticipates Rankine's later critique of the generalized pressure to be happy and optimistic in contemporary America. Further analysis of Rankine's poetry vis-à-vis negative emotions requires, I believe, a fuller elaboration of this cultural trend, one that ultimately serves neoliberal governance.

American Optimism and Biopolitics

Aside from Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, one of the most detailed studies on the contemporary regime of optimism is Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright-Sided*, which is part-monograph and part-work of embedded journalism. In it, she tracks the rhetoric of optimism across a number of significant nodal points within the contemporary cultural landscape, points such as breast-cancer support groups, motivational-speaking and self-help conferences, big-business mega-churches, and the growing field of positive psychology. Her labours to understand the scope of this cultural phenomenon yield the insight that positive thinking has become an ideological apparatus that promotes and propagates an entrepreneurial ethos. The kind of positive thinking emphasized by much self-help literature, for instance, requires "the constant internal work of self-monitoring" and the hyper-vigilant avoidance of "negative thoughts' charged with anxiety or doubt" (90). With regard to positive psychology, Ehrenreich points out that the "central claim [. . .] is that happiness [. . .] is not only desirable in and of itself but actually useful, leading to better health and greater success" (158-159). The danger here lies in the suggestion that optimism is a panacea for the highly specific and largely uncontrollable circumstances that imbue individuals with negative thoughts.

Accordingly, the claim that happiness is useful and will lead to success seems to serve mainstream interests. Ehrenreich corroborates this observation with much evidence; the regime of enforced optimism "has entered into a kind of symbiotic relationship with American

capitalism” and become “a means of social control in the workplace, a goad to perform at ever-higher levels” (7, 100).¹⁴ This pressure extends beyond work to reinforce social norms, as “the ultrafeminine theme of the breast cancer marketplace” sits comfortably alongside positive psychology’s “attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power” (29, 170). Positive thinking, Ehrenreich concludes, is “not only normal but normative—the way you *should* be”: “In this moral system either you look on the bright side, constantly adjusting your attitude and revising your perceptions—or you go over to the dark side” (195; emphasis original). Contemporary American optimism, in other words, contains regulatory, interpellative, and productivist dimensions, functioning no less as an incitement to embrace social norms than as a salve for precarity. As the breadth of Ehrenreich’s study indicates, American optimism permeates the dominant culture, such that no single causal link connects the pressure to be happy to everyday life. Rather, a network of institutions, sensibilities, beliefs, and power structures have transformed optimism into an ideological force in contemporary America, a point that should come as no surprise to Marxian critics.

The growing academic field of positive psychology—with its scientific underpinnings and crossover success in gaining traction with a popular readership—provides a helpful case study for my argument. To that end, I take a brief detour here through the work of one of the doyens of positive psychology, Martin Seligman. His book *Authentic Happiness* has met with enthusiastic, laudatory responses, becoming a bestseller; in it, he writes that positive psychology “aims to provide responsible answers, grounded in scientific research” (6). For much of his book, however, he relies on anecdotal evidence and appeals to traditional cultural norms in order to substantiate his thesis that positivity has a beneficial impact on one’s quality of life. For instance, he introduces readers to his “friend, Len, who [. . .] made millions as the CEO of a securities

company” but whose outward coldness made him a sub-optimal romantic partner: “I suggested that he move to Europe, where bubblyness and extroverted warmth are not so highly prized. He is today happily married to a European” (34, 35). There is in this example a manifest blindness to the differential distribution of opportunity within America, as Seligman does not acknowledge Len’s privilege. Len is wealthy and heterosexual. And given that Seligman reserves subsections of his book to point out that African Americans and Hispanics are less afflicted by depression, readers can conclude without much doubt that Len is white. Would someone with an inexpressive mien who happens to be poor, queer, and nonwhite have the same opportunity for romantic satisfaction and fulfillment? For many individuals, a move to Europe is likely unfeasible and might even sound preposterous. Indeed, Len’s mobility allows him to find a cultural landscape in which his stolidity is *more* normal.

It is obvious, of course, that the way an individual interprets external phenomena, be it positively or negatively, will shape their subsequent response, so finding silver linings and reasons to celebrate should not seem problematic. However, the above example indicates that cultural normativity mingles with Seligman’s scientific approach to happiness. As a result, *Authentic Happiness* reads less like an academic study of happiness and its effects on lived subjectivity than like a prescriptive guide to being normal and feeling happy about it. Normative lifestyles—which individuals can presumably appropriate by cultivating their capacity for optimism—remain unexamined; it is taken for granted that they are desirable. There is, correspondingly, an individualist bent to much of Seligman’s rhetoric, one that seems only to serve the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurial self-accumulation. In the span of a few pages, Seligman writes, first, that “more happiness causes more productivity and higher income” and, second, that happy people “are less self-focused” (40, 43). A contradiction arises between the

individual benefits of happiness (higher income) and the selflessness produced by it. For insecure workers, this message must resonate as a call for greater resignation to the blows of fate.

It is small wonder that Seligman invokes the grammar of the Protestant work ethic to suggest that greater happiness can “transmogrif[y] a routine job or a stalled career into a calling” (166). The Protestant work ethic, as I suggested in the opening chapter, performs a conservative function; it gives a religious cast to work, thereby discouraging the working class from criticizing capitalist power structures. The institutionalization of the work ethic poses a threat to the prospects of collective life. Seligman thus bemoans the “victimology that has swept America since the glorious beginnings of the civil rights movement,” a sense of entitlement that “threatens to overtake the rugged individualism and sense of individual responsibility that used to be this nation’s hallmark” (68). His vision of an idealized American past of individualism undercuts his cursory acknowledgement of a notable historical movement characterized by black Americans’ *collective* fight for equality. It is difficult to envision such a past without recalling the many forms of inequality that imposed limits on many Americans’ social advancement. Seligman unintentionally shows that embracing the mythos of American individualism involves overlooking the systemic oppression of minority subjects. His contradictions betray the emphasis on normativity underlying positive psychology.¹⁵

It is through this entanglement with cultural normativity that generalized optimism comes into focus as a contemporary form of biopolitical regulation. This form of control, Foucault reveals, rests principally on a porous boundary between ontology and epistemology. Generalized pressures to feel a certain way often influence the personal feelings that seem to originate within the individual subject. The two become difficult to disentangle. Understanding this unstable distinction between being and seeming requires a detour through Foucault’s work on the rise of

biopower. Foucault pithily characterizes the passage from sovereign power to biopower as a shift from “the right to take life or let live” to “the right to make live and to let die” (*Society* 241). The right to make live is not, however, the dialectical negation of the right to take life, and it does not solely involve the legal extension of rights across the domain of the nation-state. Whereas the sovereign exercised their power in an ontologically decisive way, biopower operates primarily on an epistemological plane, descending upon life and transforming individuals into subjects through overlapping discourses and procedures.

Primarily, biopower entails, on the one hand, a series of loosely coordinated disciplinary mechanisms that home in on the bodies of individuals and, on the other, regulatory controls that work centrifugally on the population as a whole. Under a biopolitical regime, power is mobile, fragmented, and pervasive. Individual life cannot escape the influence of power because it is ubiquitous, distributed across multiple sites of compulsion and subject formation—sites ranging from the household to the workplace to various other social institutions. This diffusion of power amounts to a variegated process of managing, directing, classifying, and understanding life. Biopower, that is, organizes life as much as it defines life’s conditions of knowability. The result is the inscription of life within a hegemonic framework of meaning and value, and managing it along these lines requires the gravitational pull of collective norms. As Ehrenreich shows in much detail, the wedding of positive thinking to the routine of entrepreneurial life-building means that optimism has become a biopolitical norm in contemporary America.

The norm, Foucault explains, is the principal technique of biopolitical regulation. It works on both the individual and the population as a whole: “The norm is something that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize” (*Society* 253). In other words, the norm absorbs the individual into the collective, fostering as

close a convergence as possible between the desires of the two. Due to its spooling function, the norm provides a rubric for understanding how deviating lifestyles and subject positions measure up against the mainstream; more precisely, it brings deviations into focus as such. The collective dimension of the norm does not engender greater social interdependence or equality. Quite the opposite: the norm induces hierarchies that cut across the social body. It works to measure and stigmatize no less than regulate and control. No lifestyle is intrinsically better than others but only accrues value by its proximity to the norm. According to this logic, social groups become problematic to the extent that they are perceived as threats to core values and norms.

The structural, political, and disciplinary potency of the biopolitical norm has two interrelated consequences that bear mentioning here. First, dominant moral paradigms tend to issue from hegemonic social groups and thereby obscure structures of inequality, such that subjectivity's discursive and material overdetermination often disappears from view. Second, because the biopolitical management of life and the epistemological function of the norm are inextricably linked, the other half of biopower's equation—the letting die—is rarely viewed as a systemic form of neglect; rather, the condition of failure and social death is non-normativity, or at least the inability to appropriate social norms adequately. These consequences coalesce in the belief that negativity is a personal failure.

A social order shaped by entrepreneurial principles appears more amenable to diverse forms of self-expression, thereby signaling the loosening grip of social norms on quotidian life. Such a view, of course, overlooks that neoliberal policies have done nothing to level the playing field, as wealth inequality has reached pre-World War I levels. Yet it also obscures how past forms of exclusion and dispossession continue to underwrite an individual's life chances in the present. No amount of forgetfulness can efface the impact that troubling histories have on the

present. Even though precarity continues to touch more whites, contemporary social retrenchment sustains the inequalities nurtured by years of dispossession. “The past is a life sentence,” Rankine writes in *Citizen*, “a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow” (72). She tersely expresses how the contemporary expression of biopolitical power translates into the continuation of past forms of hegemony and their attendant social and epistemological norms. Jared Sexton clarifies this Afro-pessimist line of thinking: “Rather than approaching (the theorization of) social death and (the theorization of) social life as an ‘either/or’ proposition, [. . .] why not attempt to think them as a matter of ‘both/and’?” (22). The both/and of Sexton’s rhetorical question underscores the difficulty of thinking about black life in a context that is not also one of attrition, racism, violence, institutional neglect, and indeed death. Foucault remains prescient, identifying explicit and coded forms of racism as discursive and legislative methods intrinsic to biopolitical dispensations (see *Society* 239-263). Norms often take shape along, and at the intersection of, multiple social vectors, to be sure, but Foucault’s point here has less to do with discrimination in practice. More abstractly, he implies that biopower exercises the sovereign’s “right to take life” through epistemic violence and material neglect. In administering the conditions under which *certain lives* flourish, biopower smuggles this archaic power into its operations. Letting die becomes the attritional form of taking life.

But the relation of norms to the policy work of the state is only half the story. There is a performative dimension to normativity as well. Indeed, norms are performative because they softly compel and shape subjects who subsequently take those norms for natural inclinations.¹⁶ Following Robert McRuer, who shows how able-bodiedness is not unlike gender normativity in its performative construction, I turn to a passage in Butler’s classic *Gender Trouble* but substitute “optimism” and its cognates for “gender” and its cognates: “The displacement of a

political and discursive origin of [optimism] onto a psychological ‘core’ precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the [optimistic] subject” (186; see also McRuer 1-32). Butler’s analysis of how dominant notions of gender propagate through repetitive signifying and iteration remains relevant to any study of a cultural trend that has a strong psychological component.

The need to perform positivity follows individuals around, as social groups, work environments, and private life seem to pivot on everyone’s capacity to put a smile on, to relax and take it easy, to lighten up, and to recognize that there is always a tomorrow. Such positive thinking, obfuscating the distinction between compulsion and willpower, is what Berlant and Edelman call, with a nod to Foucault, “panoptimism” (see 1-35). Indeed, one has endless opportunities to showcase their happiness, which translates into fewer opportunities to critically examine whether or not one feels genuinely good at all. In this light, positive thinking has no ontological status apart from its repetition. It may become a resource for navigating the world and limiting one’s exposure to material difficulties, but its iterative ubiquity may also compel normativity and foreclose alternatives. On this point, Ahmed considers how “the very desire for happiness that is articulated by the repetition of the word [. . .] might even censor evidence of its own failure” (*Promise* 200). I would add that it might even censor the revelation that what counts as normal is the very source of one’s wavering optimism in the first place.

But if the contemporary regime of optimism bears a resemblance to Butler’s idea that gender norms are discursively constructed, this connotative resonance should not redact their stark differences. Gender becomes more deeply entrenched in the psyche than optimism. Whereas the former is an identity, the latter tends to need an object or goal—the pursuit of which is subject to intervening contingencies and the fickleness of desire. For Butler, moreover, there is no subversion of discursive norms possible apart from resignifying and reiteration (*Gender* 194-

203). Her endorsement of escaping *through* discursively laden territory softens a good deal of the dread that Foucault's thesis of ubiquitous power instills. While Butler certainly does not posit an autonomous subject, she suggests that a good deal of agency lies in the subject who makes the most trouble out of their discursive entrapment. Yet the strategy the Butler of *Gender Trouble* espouses, subversion through reiteration and resignification, strays dangerously close to a coded celebration of entrepreneurial freedom. Although the possibility of such subversion remains a source of hope and strength for individuals who reject normativity, it is also the case that neoliberal capitalism thrives when individuals believe that their irreducible uniqueness is the surest path toward political emancipation. There is the risk of further obscuring the violence of certain social norms by advocating further embrace, especially in light of American optimism's collusion with contemporary capitalism.

The path from Foucault and Butler to Levinas is relatively straightforward, as the performative dimension of the norm evokes Levinas's fears concerning epistemology. His meditation on the face expresses this wariness most concisely. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes: "For the presence before the face, my orientation toward the other can lose the *avidity of the gaze* only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. [. . .] The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face" (50; emphasis mine). Levinas suggests a homology between the "idea of the other in me" and the "avidity of the gaze," implicating knowledge and visibility in violence. To put this idea of "avidity" in Simon Critchley's terms, the "movement of comprehension" performs a "digestion of alterity" (6). The face only remains the face to the extent that it lies beyond comprehension, and knowledge absorbs the face into the economy of sameness, thereby paving the way for harmful forms of scrutiny. The unethical movement of knowledge finds a correlate in

the regulatory effects of the norm. If the norm translates individuals into socially legibly subjects, turning their bodies into canvases upon which regulatory procedures are enacted, it also shapes how these subjects understand the social field in which they are embedded. A culture of enforced optimism forecloses the ethical by aligning emotional negativity with personal failure. It is thus difficult to envision ethical alternatives to life lived on a biopolitical stage in light of the connection Levinas makes between generosity and unknowing.

Yet Levinas's seemingly clear distinction collapses under the weight of deconstructive analysis. If the "avidity of the gaze" can become "generosity," then knowledge and ethical responsibility continually fold back into one another. Just as comprehension disappears when people become radically unknowable, so generosity turns into a determinate course of action when the needs of strangers compel disinterestedness. What is more, the pronoun "himself" inscribes the Other within sexual difference, leaving open the possibility of treating the self's asymmetrical responsibility as an ontological drama. In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida faults Levinas for failing to consider this possibility. By creating a binary between totality and alterity, Levinas precludes the other from being "other than myself"—from being, in other words, an ontologically situated figure" ("Violence" 126). Following Derrida, Jill Robbins notes "a certain intercontamination of the governing oppositions of Levinas's discourse": "If one *can* lose face, then it is always possible that the face can be a mask. [. . .] This means that the face is to some extent a face-mask or a figure-face. It also means that there can be 'face' in figure" (68; emphasis original). Robbins carves out space for thinking about the face as an excess that unsettles the sign's indexical relation to its referent. This formulation lends agency to poetic signification, which can defamiliarize the symbolically overdetermined figure.

While Levinas would later account for this aporia with his bifurcated concept of signification, split between the saying and the said, this early conceptual issue offers a point of contact between his work and Kant's. Kantian aesthetics reminds us that a surprise only works when someone brings a set of expectations to a situation. As the foregoing discussion has shown, biopolitical norms underwrite these expectations; accordingly, emotional negativity is only a personal shortcoming—and not the result of broken economic, political, and social structures—because neoliberal culture has naturalized the idea that insufficient optimism amounts to insufficient willpower. Biopolitical norms limit imagination. They provide an explanation for all failure in advance of any particular display. By contrast, the Kantian sublime induces “creative activity” because it “precludes all positive presentation” (*CJ* 177, 127). The work of imaginative creation relinquishes the pretension of knowing and circumvents the “avidity of the gaze.” Engaging Levinasian philosophy through Kantian aesthetics thus opens up ethical dimensions within art. To the extent that the face is “ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation,” as Kant writes, the effort to transcode it resembles a presentation of the sublime, whose very inadequacy bespeaks the possibility of transcending the patterns of thought and action governing daily existence (*CJ* 91). Representing suffering that defies these norms does not assimilate this suffering within a normative framework so much as expose the limits of this framework for understanding human vulnerability.

The juxtaposition of Kantian aesthetics with Levinasian ethics furnishes us with conceptual tools for approaching poetic form vis-à-vis gestures of negativity. To recall Derrida's early criticism of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics,” an ethical line of inquiry must attend to the excesses, remainders, and residues that defy comprehension *within* the field of biopolitical regulation (79-154). Despite the pressures to perform optimism, no regime of normativity can

dictate lived experience fully and comprehensively. In the biopolitical context outlined in this section, failures inevitably occur when optimistic thinking is too difficult or no longer possible and when the future begins to look less like a reward for one's hard work than a continuation of pain, discrimination, and exploitation. It follows that ethical generosity, "incapable of approaching the other with empty hands," involves reading these failures without assimilating them into the entrepreneurial logic of neoliberal reason. In Rankine's poetry, gestures of negativity assume sublime proportions because they give the lie to the culture of enforced optimism. They indicate the need to revise social arrangements along ethical lines, thereby resonating in the key of hope.

In order to track the gestural sublime in Rankine's most recent work, in the following section I read her poetry alongside Frantz Fanon's insights about race in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon's text remains a classic for the way it links forms of racism to the everyday experience of living within a racialized body. Whereas race does not factor heavily into the work of Kant or Levinas, Fanon's psychoanalytically inflected work on blackness and interpellation provides a nodal point among Rankine's gestural aesthetics, Levinasian ethics, and the Kantian sublime. Recent critical work has juxtaposed Fanon with Deleuze and Guattari (Musser) or with Lacan (Stephens). I do not seek to undermine either of these approaches to Fanon but simply note that his oft-referenced chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," is a remarkable record of *broken*, and therefore gestural, interactions with a world inimical to nonwhite flourishing (89-119). Just as Rankine exposes neoliberal reason's blindness to the meta-subjective causes of emotional negativity, so Fanon describes racism as a social force that induces silence and an awkward relation to oneself—as a force, moreover, that forecloses opportunities for interpersonal communication and understanding.¹⁷

Rankine, Fanon, and the Gestural Sublime

While *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* are both subtitled “An American Lyric,” they put unusual demands on the genre, adducing an intermedial, collage-like aesthetic that incorporates photography, visual art, and blocks of prose. Both collections explore, among other themes, the collusion of neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy, as Rankine brings a range of subjects into conversation, from far-reaching issues such as the problems with privatized healthcare, nationalist panopticism in the wake of 9/11, the state’s pathetically slow response to Hurricane Katrina, and anti-black violence to easily overlooked forms of violence and suffering such as racist micro-aggressions, anhedonia, and loneliness. For Rankine, the large-scale issues are connected to small ones that seem insignificant by comparison. Discussing *Citizen*, Rankine offered the following explanation of the preoccupations that led her to write: “I wanted to track [the spate of anti-black violence] back and say, well, if people in their daily lives begin by believing and saying these small things, they will add up to major, major aggressions against people just because of the color of their skin. And so the book tracks the small to the large” (qtd. in Epstein 278). According to Rankine, it is only by attending to the “small” dramas of everyday life that we can fully appreciate the scope of institutional and racist violence.

In *Don't*, Rankine writes about the presidential election of George W. Bush, “who can’t remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas” (21). Such news makes Rankine’s speaker “lose hope. However Bush came to have won, he would still be winning ten days later and we would still be in the throes of our American optimism” (21). Rankine’s repetition of “still” foregrounds the difficulty of mobilizing the resources of hope. It connects the “small to the large,” underlining how the killing of an innocent black man profoundly affects the everyday life of citizen-subjects who feel a

disproportionate amount of insecurity. In a conversation with Berlant, Rankine shared the anecdote of a tense confrontation between strangers “exhaust[ing]” her “curating abilities” (Berlant, “Claudia” 46). Charting a path through life, Rankine seems to say, involves organizing fragments of experience and emotion into an intelligible whole. This is an activity that presumably requires a certain amount of energy and vivacity. Yet the capacity to curate falters for Rankine’s speaker under the pressure of what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (6). Rankine writes that “[t]he sadness is not really about George W. or our American optimism; the sadness lives in the recognition that a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered” (*Don’t* 23). For Rankine, sadness unfolds privately as well as “alongside” the structural and physical forms of violence that cause it in the first place. She suggests that life and its attenuation are imbricated for the most precarious citizen-subjects. This blurry boundary between simply existing and what Berlant calls “slow death” urges us to read her poetry’s gestural forms of negativity as responses to the world at large (*Cruel* 95-117). Rankine’s speakers understand the enormity of large-scale violence all too well, whether it be the alarming scope of anti-black discrimination or the harmful effects of neoliberal governance, so what she presents as sublime is the “small,” the easily overlooked ways her speakers gesture toward the brokenness of dominant sociopolitical and economic structures.

In *Citizen*, Rankine’s abiding concern with quotidian forms of harm is manifest in her reflections on a series of YouTube videos in which Hennessy Youngman advises black artists to parlay their anger into commercially successful art. Anger *tout court* may not sell, so the thinking goes, but black anger does. Yet the commodification of anger does not attend to the

“actual anger” that is “built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color” (24). No amount of success in the market can efface the trauma of daily discrimination, and unlike anger reified into something sellable, the “other kind of anger in time can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness” (24). Rankine treats loneliness not as a refusal or inability to be social but as a product of being social. It issues from and inflects one’s social intercourse with others. The implication is that “every brown or black person” straddles the line between social silence and erasure, on the one hand, and hyper-visibility and confinement within stereotypes, on the other. The anger this condition provokes “both clarifies and disappoints” and prompts action that is “accompanied by disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived” (24). Rankine’s speaker thinks that this “disappointment” “might break you apart” or “illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers” (24). Rankine works down from righteous anger and vociferous passion to self-censure and -dissolution, the individual’s breaking apart. While Youngman advocates an entrepreneurial strategy, Rankine directs our attention to suffering couched in silence, which is decidedly unmarketable.

Descending from the large to the small, the audible to the inaudible, Rankine’s response to Youngman also puts pressure on the lyric tradition to which she claims her work belongs. Lyric poetry features speakers conveying highly emotional responses to circumambient phenomena, but illumination in Rankine’s work bears no resemblance to the “moments of sudden illumination” that Charles Altieri associates with the lyric mode (5).¹⁸ While the lyric mode has undergone transformations across time and place, recalling its popularization by nineteenth-century Romantic poets—such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley—

allows us to see Rankine's intervention in a clearer light. This is not an arbitrary comparison, for during the Romantic period, the lyric eclipsed narrative and dramatic poetry as the dominant poetic form, overturning the hierarchy established by Aristotle (Abrams, *The Mirror* 21-26). As Raymond Williams explains, the passage from feudalism to emergent capitalist formations made the pastoral countryside a site of lyric inspiration for the poet sick of city life (*The Country* 13-34). Williams traces the prehistory of what has come to be known as the Romantic poet's fascination with nature. What M.H. Abrams calls "the greater Romantic lyric" involves "a determinate speaker" who "achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem" ("Structure" 527-528).¹⁹

Yet Rankine rejects this transformative fantasy of escape followed by epiphany. She turns Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (562) into the social erasure of nonwhite bodies—or, as she puts it, "the weight of nonexistence" (*Citizen* 139). In his final "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth anticipates Rankine with his claim that "our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings" (562), but he frames feeling's relation to thought as the precursor to enlightening forms of expression. If, for Wordsworth, feeling produces something positive, for Rankine, feeling produces something negative, a pregnant silence or a scarcely perceptible gesture. The effect of Rankine's intervention in the lyric tradition is to undercut the traditional relationship between speaker and environment, showing how institutional racism and daily micro-oppressions are not prompts for but impediments to expression.²⁰

Anthony Reed, situating Rankine within a web of black experimental writers, suggests that her work exemplifies a "postlyric" aesthetic, one that "uses certain recognizable lyric strategies in ways that disrupt the genre's hermeneutic enclosure, which figures the expression

and experiences of a singular intending consciousness that is in turn metonymic for race” (98). The postlyric draws on lyric form as much as it contests it, denying the speaker’s privilege as a representative of a larger community. Whereas traditional lyric poetry rests on the idea that the speaker is nothing less than a sovereign subject, the postlyric “plays the idea of a coherent self as fantasy, stressing that the raced, language-enmeshed self is always both public and private” (107). Reed attends closely to the commodification of black culture and its attendant dissemination to a nonblack audience that is disconnected and indifferent to the conditions of black life. This capitalist process of delinking the object of consumption from the realities in which it was produced follows, and to some extent abets, the generalizing logic of racism. By contrast, the postlyric disrupts capitalist abstraction. Its refusal of a metonymic association between speaker and community is also a refusal to speak for and as the black community, as if it were a homogenous group of individuals. Instead, the postlyric attends to the speaker’s inescapable embeddedness in the social field, “produc[ing] insights that the speaker knows cannot be universal” (Hume 97).

There is no universal insight for a naïve speaker in Rankine’s poetry, or even an evanescent flash of revelation, but the steady and poignant accumulation of knowledge about the perennial attrition of nonwhite life in a white supremacist world. Accordingly, performing optimism under such duress is no small feat. Rankine intimates that what the social order needs most is not the preternaturally gifted poet in the mold of Wordsworth but a shared commitment to an ethics of care and responsibility. Reflecting on the negative feelings that translate into silence—“the go-along-to-get-along tongue pushing your tongue aside”—Rankine’s speaker yearns to make the feeling “known and this brings on the moment you recognize as desire” (*Citizen* 154, 153). By staging this contest between the desire to share and the tongue pushed

aside, Rankine reinscribes the presentation of sublimity along gestural lines, linking barely expressed but deeply felt emotions to hope. In her hands, the ego-dissolving sublime becomes an anti-neoliberal form of longing—a longing for the displacement of entrepreneurial interests by a collective concern for the wellbeing of others. If irresponsibility denotes for Levinas the self forgetting that its relation to the Other is the condition of personhood, it denotes for Rankine the injustice of economic and social inequality, underwritten by histories of dispossession and abetted by ubiquitous micro-aggressions, that perpetuates divides within the American social body and abroad.

Rankine's inflection on lyric poetry mirrors her concerns with the failure of everyday utterances to capture the weight of social and historical oppression. For Rankine, the social erasure of nonwhite life does not merely happen in spite of but through language, a kind of hiding in plain sight that recalls her treatment of language in *The End of the Alphabet*. As she writes in *Citizen*,

Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in a neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid—what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted, there, altered to hide or disguise—words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains. (69)

Here, Rankine doubts verbal and linguistic communication's ability to offer a reprieve or escape from nonwhite suffering, since it is what distinguishes and epistemologically fixes nonwhite bodies in the first place. As Lacanian psychoanalysis shows, the signifier inducts individuals into the social order, keeping them bound to the world in socially legislated ways, but racism works

to overcode the body, thereby creating undue amounts of anxiety in its human targets. If elsewhere in *Citizen* Rankine lists the names of recent victims of anti-black violence, recognizing the urgency of political action (134-135), the passage cited above suggests that those most harmed by language are forced to inhabit a difficult position from which gesturing with eyes and hands often functions as their most expansive articulation of pain. That the eye and hands “translate everything and nothing” indicates that subaltern suffering can only signify as an absence in a world inimical to nonwhite flourishing. Rankine evokes the Levinasian trace, as it were, with this gestural form of communication that defies intelligibility.

Fanon’s discussion of racialization is helpful for understanding the connection between language and social erasure. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he calls the moment a white child identifies him as black a “suffocating reification”: “I am an object among other objects” (89). Interpellation causes Fanon to feel that he has been stripped of his personhood, as it is a relatively straightforward path from subjectivation to essentialism, from racialization to ontological destiny. Put starkly, Fanon views interpellation as a force that mutilates nonwhite bodies with “an epidermal racial schema” (92).²¹ He goes on to describe how “the white man” has “woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories (91); that “my body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning” (93); that the “world amputated my enthusiasm” (94). With his emphasis on the epistemological construction of race, Fanon implies that this fiction is disfiguring for everyone involved. He shows, as Michelle Ann Stephens explains, “the ways this epidermalizing call interpellates both the white child and the black man in a symbolic order of difference filled with racial meanings” (21). The call anchors the addressor and the addressee to definite positions on a social grid where no form of contact between people can pass without a layer of epistemological mediation. If meaning forecloses the

possibility of ethical openness, then it is also the case that the “racially devalued” subject—to borrow Walter Mignolo’s words—has no enemy to confront (162).²² Telling the white child off, say, cannot overturn a legacy of racist thinking. As Rankine puts it elsewhere in *Citizen*, “the length of the silence becom[es] a living” (112). In a social world overdetermined by colonial epistemes, hegemonic discourses, and histories of oppression, the victims of racism have little opportunity for effectively expressing their sense of mistreatment and injustice.

In *Citizen*, the condition of black life described by Fanon receives distinctive treatment through ironic denaturalization: “When the waitress hands your friend the card she took from you, you laugh and ask what else her privilege gets her? Oh, my perfect life, she answers. Then you both are laughing so hard, everyone in the restaurant smiles” (148). With her speaker’s socially unacceptable response to public belittlement and the ensuing laughter, Rankine parodies the culture of enforced optimism, displaying how “laughing” things off absorbs everyone’s capacity to examine the patterns of thought that lead to such an awkward and unpalatable social interaction in the first place. The people in the restaurant appear to manage contingency with their smiles, a reaction that defers a meaningful confrontation with the persistence of discrimination in daily life.

Even when Rankine does not write with explicit irony, her deployment of laughter is rarely an action to be taken at face value. In “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Rankine describes her and a friend laughing at the latter’s admission that, upon giving birth to her son, she thought, “I have to get him out of this country”; it was the “laughter of vulnerability, fear recognition and an absurd stuckness” (“Condition” n.p.). Laughter is here fringed with, if not a front for, a set of negative feelings that give the lie to its ostensible expression of happiness and insouciance. Rankine intimates that being black in America means living in a state of irony,

as it were, in which conflicting emotions and thoughts do not jostle so much as uncomfortably coexist. Paul de Man explains that “any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative” (179). If optimistic thinking works as a kind of narrative of national unity in contemporary America, drawing everyone into the atomistic routine of looking on the bright side and finding silver linings, then the irony of black life, according to Rankine, subverts the consistency and unity of that narrative.

Rankine also echoes Fanon with her reflections on one of the most visible venues of American life: sports. It is no secret that television has led to the commercial oversaturation of sporting events. The spectacle of televised sports has turned athletes into prominent public personas and powerful ambassadors for such brands as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok. Accordingly, the modern athlete constitutes a prominent example of good entrepreneurial self-making, parlaying their physical gifts into material comfort and cultural influence. While watching Serena Williams play tennis, however, Rankine’s speaker cannot help but focus on what goes unsaid and unseen. Receiving unfair treatment from judges and over-critical appraisals from pundits, Williams is “caught within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary” (*Citizen* 32). According to Rankine’s speaker, black bodies are persistently made to feel insecure and inferior, such that everyday forms of oppression often pass by unnoticed.

Rankine juxtaposes this section of prose with an illustration of a body—presumably Williams’s—bent over as if out of breath, with colourful flowers blossoming atop its back. The prose serves as a caption, contextualizing the body’s pose. It is not just a body tired from physical exertion but a body tired from the unremitting burden of coded racism: “Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is

to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background” (32). Rankine gives the beautiful flowers a negative connotation, tethering physical exertion to the experience of racism. Yet to see them as the consequences of a black body being “hemmed in” is to recognize them as evidence of survival. Growing out of a body trying to catch its breath, the flowers symbolize resilience and hope.

The illustration calls to mind Christina Sharpe’s meditation on the word “aspiration.” For Sharpe, aspiration is both a black mode of surviving the overwhelming present and the work of imagining an anti-racist future. She links this concept to “wake work,” which takes shape similarly at the intersection of multiple lines of meaning; at once, wake denotes consciousness, the trail in the water left by a ship, and the practice of mourning the dead. The ambiguity of the term suggests that survival and violence are mutually internal for black diasporic subjects (see Mariner). For Sharpe, wake work constitutes a critical methodology for “imagin[ing] otherwise” (18). Accordingly, to aspire is to feel the impact of the unequal present and the dehumanizing past as bodily exhaustion and to “reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of *being* in the wake as consciousness” (131). Such work involves “rupturing” the colonialist and Enlightenment episteme and thereby rethinking subjectivity along interdependent lines (18). While my line of inquiry is different from Sharpe’s, they resonate with one another to some degree. With my juxtaposition of Kantian sublimity and Levinasian ethics, I discern a similar dynamic at play in Rankine’s work. Levinas writes of “breath” as both “freedom” and “exposure,” yoking the simple act of drawing air into the lungs to ethnicity (*Otherwise* 180). The continuation of life keeps responsibility and hope alive. Similarly, just as the body survives underneath the semiotics

of racism for both Rankine and Sharpe, so they both articulate an ethical vision of the future that eschews the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject.

Prefiguring Sharpe's idea of "wake work," Fanon's most poignant reflections on the limits of Enlightenment subjectivity provide a point of contact among the disparate strands of my discussion. Like Rankine, he too adduces a gestural mode of signifying to describe the burden of being confined to a position on the social grid for no other reason than the colour of his skin: "I tried to get up but the eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep" (119). Silence and weeping accompany Fanon's realization that he is compelled to serve as the white world's dialectical negation, a position from which his skin colour always (and erroneously) serves as evidence of his inferiority.²³ Fanon's growing awareness of the limits placed on black subjects motivates his rejection of racist epistemologies, a rejection that involves denying Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity, since it is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the two. He asserts that "the starry sky that left Kant in awe has long revealed its secrets to us. And moral law has doubts about itself" (202).

Instead of the autonomous subject beholden to deontological principles, Fanon proposes a quasi-Levinasian form of sociality by which "a genuine communication can be born" (206): "I pursue something other than life, insofar as I am fighting for the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognitions" (193). He punctuates his study with a series of questions intimating that the most sublime aspects of human life are the surprises and contingencies of sharing space with others: "Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?" (206). In the sense that Fanon gives it, discovery requires approaching the other as if they were an Other, a radically unknowable human being whose

vulnerability becomes the grounds for recognition. His form of touching carries with it the connotations of the Levinasian caress—which “seeks *what is not yet*” (*Totality* 258; emphasis original)—a form of generosity, solicitude, and hope. For Fanon, then, if the sublime is to carry any conceptual weight beyond its association with that which reminds the ego-driven subject of their smallness and subordination to moral law, it must be seen as a prompt for collective forms of life that make living an unpredictable ride for each and every subject.

Rankine concludes *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* with a similar call for a non-harmful modality of collective life, and she too envisions a radical future through interpersonal contact. Following Paul Celan, she writes that “the poem was no different from a handshake. [. . .] The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This *conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence* perhaps has everything to do with being alive” (130; emphasis mine). Rankine’s image of the poem *qua* handshake reinscribes a previous passage—“I am here. / And I am still lonely” (119)—within an intersubjective context, capturing to some extent Fanon’s hope for “reciprocal relations” unmoored from racial meaning. Accordingly, the poem’s referential function is secondary to its social function, performing the double duty of affirming one presence and reaching out to another. Commenting on this poem, Reed writes that the “subject” is not “some entity of whose presence the poem is evidence” but “the poem itself”: “The gift is the moment of expression rather than the expression itself” (112). Any attempt to attribute the poem to an author or speaker fails because of its liminal position between individuals. It belongs to no one in particular, accumulating social value only to the extent that it is recognized intersubjectively. To blur the lines between the “solidity of presence” and its “offering” is to scramble the neoliberal calculus of entrepreneurial autonomy (and Enlightenment

notions of autonomy as well), emphasizing instead the ineluctable and necessary connectedness of human life. If the handshake enacted by the poem “has everything to do with being alive,” then Rankine articulates a relational concept of being and thereby sounds a Levinasian note.

That the deictic “here” carries the greatest semantic burden makes the Levinasian note all the more audible. Consider the paradox of its usage in the social transaction described by Rankine. It delineates a determinate context for insiders and an ambiguous one for outsiders. Only the individuals co-inhabiting a given space at a given time can make sense of deictic terminology, which otherwise fails to index any knowable referent. (On that point, her use of “here” as intersubjective deixis departs from her use of “this,” in *The End*, to underline Jane’s insularity.) Presumably “here” refers to where Rankine’s speaker is occupying space, or where Rankine herself is writing, but the very mutability of the word allows it to float from scene to scene. It serves as a malleable sign for a different speaker or writer and a different addressee or audience. Regardless of what it denotes, it connotes proximity, binding interlocutors to a common yet fleeting referent. It flips on its head the antinomy plaguing people of colour under contemporary capitalist conditions. On the one hand, its contextual specificity opposes the neoliberal logic that views individuals as abstract stocks that can increase or decrease in value; on the other hand, its democratic availability disentangles any center-margin binary established through language. The ad hoc function of such a term, then, is the exact opposite of how racial meaning works to anchor individuals epistemologically to subject positions.

Given that racial devaluation happens through language for both Fanon and Rankine, prompting each to write about the harrowing silences that presuppositions about race engender, Rankine’s use of deictic terminology imbues the scene it delimits with a greater ethical charge. Resting on the “here” of sociality, which signifies minimally and equivocally, Rankine’s poem—

and, to the extent that the genre “is no different from a handshake,” poetry in general—evokes Levinas’s notion of the “here I am” that signifies no more than the self’s openness to the Other, a position that the self cannot evacuate without lapsing into irresponsibility (*Otherwise* 142-145). “Here I am” is an “enormous response” to the Other’s abjection, a “relaxation of virility without cowardice” that marks the divestment of egoistic pursuits in the service of intersubjective life (*Otherwise* 185). Rankine allegorizes the Levinasian opening to the Other with her image of a handshake that coaxes individuals out of their loneliness, wherever they might be. This tellingly gestural image provides a salutary alternative to a life lived underneath the crushing weight of racism and neoliberal dispossession. It articulates a hopeful vision of interdependent life-making, something done relationally and not alone.

Coda

In this chapter, I have read Claudia Rankine’s poetry against the contemporary regime of optimism in America. The ubiquitous pressure to perform positivity amounts to a culture incapable of viewing sadness, pessimism, and emotional negativity as anything but a form of entrepreneurial failure. To be negative is to manifest evidence of a personal shortcoming, and such logic serves neoliberal capitalism while hampering the emergence of robust counter-discourses about the structural forms of violence that make happiness a difficult prospect in the first place. Rankine highlights how soft and slow forms of violence can engender emotional negativity. Across three collections of poetry, she shows how unhappy individuals, those who cannot or will not embrace the superficial positivity swirling about them, often express their negativity in gestural modes of signification that go unremarked and unnoticed. In Rankine’s poetry, these broken interactions with the world hold out hope for a more livable world, one delinked from neoliberal imperatives, institutional racism, and everyday micro-oppressions

against people of colour. To account for this dimension of her work, I have juxtaposed Levinasian ethics with Kantian sublimity, a move that refocuses the sublime on the vulnerability of others that tends to escape intelligibility and visual or semantic capture. Viewed within this methodological framework, Rankine's aesthetic of gestural sublimity expresses a longing for a more ethical future. Rankine gestures us toward the "opening or horizon" that José Esteben Muñoz, in his discussion of "queer futurity," describes as a "relational and collective modality of endurance and support" (91). Indeed, as Rankine's poetry exhibits, to be relational in any radical sense of the word requires a future otherwise than neoliberalism, a dazzling future in which there would be no greater luxury than being with and for others.

Chapter 2 Endnotes

¹ For a detailed discussion of how coded forms of racism in the past underpin contemporary inequality—such as, for instance, lenders' refusal to underwrite mortgages for people of colour in the early years of suburban expansion—see Lipsitz.

² Sara Ahmed provides additional inspiration here:

We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but *to learn by how we are affected by what comes near*, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource. I think what is underestimated by affirmative ethics is the *difficulty* of giving our attention to—and sustaining out attention—on certain forms of suffering. (216; emphasis original)

Tarrying with the negative provides critical distance from patterns of thought that view bad feelings *tout court* as undesirable without examining their sources.

³ In this chapter, I shuttle between “black,” on the one hand, and “people of colour” and “nonwhite,” on the other, seemingly at random. I try to use the more specific term “black” when Rankine is clearly referring to specific issues that affect black people in the U.S. and, conversely, the more ecumenical terms when Rankine is less clear.

⁴ There exists a good deal of critical work on television and other related media’s effect on everyday life; see Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Kenneth Rogers’s *The Attention Complex*, and David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram.” Wallace, furthermore, focuses on the deleterious effects of mass media and popular culture in his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, in which one film is so fascinating that it paralyzes viewers, who subsequently die of starvation.

⁵ While I discussed Jameson’s “Culture and Finance Capital” in Chapter 1, it is worth revisiting the article in the context of this discussion about sublimity. Following his early work on postmodernism, Jameson does not use the word “sublime” in his analysis of financialization but tellingly refers to the “lightninglike movements of immense quantities of money around the globe” as “incalculable” (“Culture” 252). Robbins’s term for the far-reaching effects of global capitalism is the “sweatshop sublime,” which he uses to critique, and undermine, the resiliency of belief in the Protestant work ethic. If the work ethic “suggests to people, falsely, that they’ve earned what they receive,” and therefore occludes the interdependence on which capitalism rests—underpaid labourers in distant lands making cheap products for first-world consumers—then “the sweatshop sublime rightly forces upon us this knowledge of social interdependence” (*Perpetual* 106). Last, of the technologies that connect disparate zones of exploitation and consumption, Tabbi claims that there “could hardly be a better contemporary occasion for the sublime than the excessive production of technology itself” (16).

⁶ If unclear, for parenthetical citations I use the abbreviation “*CPR*” to refer to *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and “*CJ*” to refer to *The Critique of Judgement*.

⁷ Recently, Timothy Morton has tried to rethink the Kantian and Burkean sublimities along the lines initially laid out by Longinus, whose ur-conception of sublimity has, at first blush, much more purchase in aesthetically oriented discussions (“Sublime”).

⁸ For helpful exegeses on Kant’s moral philosophy, see Allison and Reath.

⁹ For Kant, it should be noted, heteronomy is not, as it is for Levinas, the heteronomous accusation of the Other beyond being; rather, it is the disfiguring influence of empirical phenomena on the subject’s will and capacity to act morally (see *CPR* 55-57; Levinas, *Totality* 196). Kant’s view of heteronomy, however, aligns with Levinas’s critique of ego-centric desire. An example of heteronomy as such is the compulsory positivity that I delineate in this chapter. By contrast, true autonomy and obligation are imbricated in Kant’s schema, autonomy being the capacity to act morally independent of the empirical conditions that overdetermine desire. For a fuller discussion about the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy within Kant’s philosophy, see Sensen.

¹⁰ Mari Ruti also thinks Levinas alongside Kant. She points out that Levinas’s concept of the self-divided subject makes his work more attractive for post-structuralist thinkers because it steers clear of the tenuous Kantian idea that an autonomous subject can actually know what moral conduct, universally applicable, actually is. In practice, the problem with Kant’s idea is that it underestimates how difficult it is to know beyond all doubt that one’s moral conduct is not relativistic. To that end, she concludes that “Levinas succeeds where the Kantian approach [. . .] arguably fails, namely in his ability to address the key question of human suffering” (*Between* 20). However, Ruti concedes that the categorical imperative “alerts me to situations where my

conduct might be driven by what Kant calls ‘pathological’ determinants [. . .] by urging me to repeatedly return to the question of whether others could be expected to make the same choices as I do” (*Between* 20). Discussions of the two thinkers such as Ruti’s provide an opportunity to treat Kant and Levinas as critics of each other’s ethical projects as well as collaborators. Each has a robust notion of obligation and duty, and each defines ethical conduct as endless and in contradistinction to self-interested desire. If Kant’s noumenal selfhood is unachievable but only approachable through the subject acting in accordance with moral law, then Levinas’s relational self is the unachievable endpoint of ethical responsibility.

¹¹ I am not alone in making this connection between the Kantian sublime and Levinasian ethics. See, for instance, Alford (“Emmanuel”).

¹² It is fruitful to point out that my attempt to recalibrate the Kantian sublime is a response to the rote way of thinking Kantian sublimity—that is, as something so overwhelming that it brings the smallness of the subject’s empirically bounded life into sharp focus. Yet there is precedent in Kant’s own writing for my inflection, even though it is rarely discussed. He writes of the

[f]alsehood, ingratitude, injustice, the puerility of the ends which we ourselves look upon as great and momentous, and to company which man inflicts upon his brother man all imaginable evils—these all so contradict the idea of what men might be if they only would, and are so at variance with our active wish to see them better, that, to avoid hating where we cannot love, it seems but a slight sacrifice to forego all the joys of fellowship with out kind. This *sadness* [is directed to the evils] which they [others] inflict upon themselves [. . .] is sublime because it is founded on ideas[.] (*CJ* 129; emphasis mine)

This act of self-banishment from human society seems insignificant. What appears to make it sublime for Kant is its motivation by a moral feeling that runs counter to desire. Since the presence of others stimulates, heteronomously, the desire for human companionship, when one's social world has fallen into moral disarray, acting autonomously and in accordance with moral law involves denying oneself the pleasures of human community. Leaving the social behind, however, is not so easy, especially in a day in age full of technologically mediated opportunities to communicate.

¹³ Virginia Woolf seems to have anticipated Scarry's observation, writing as early as 1930 that "there is no record" of the "daily drama of the body": "The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (194). As my argument in this chapter suggests, a culture of compulsory optimism turns the incommunicability of pain into the social impossibility of expressing it as anything but a personal failure.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Sarah Brouillette shows how the contemporary popularity of self-branding strategies and the institutionalization of positivity and fun at the white-collar workplace can be traced back to the work of Abraham Maslow on self-actualization, particularly his idea that productivity reaches its peak when workers can connect their labour power to their need for creative self-fulfillment. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, as America underwent a massive process of de-industrialization and a concomitant replacement of blue-collar with white-collar jobs, organizational culture drew on such findings. Most surprising about this connection is that much of the early work on self-actualization turned to artists and their *antisocial* dispositions as a guiding light; according to the work of Frank Barron, a Maslow acolyte, "these people tended to describe themselves as pessimistic, bitter, dissatisfied,

emotional, unstable, demanding, anxious, and temperamental” (Brouillette 108). This confusing genesis of what is now a culture of compulsory optimism at the workplace intimates that positive thinking and feeling good about oneself serve for the most part as psychological salves against the precarious nature of contemporary work.

¹⁵ Within the broader field of psychology, such critics as Barbara Held have faulted Seligman and other like-minded positive psychologists for overlooking the contradictions at the heart of their work. Attending to bold claims made by Seligman—that unrealistic optimism tends to bear tangible fruit—she notes an unacknowledged “conflict between the objectivity that is required for scientific knowing and the positive (pragmatic) bias that is preferred for everyday knowing” (30). In other words, efforts to ground the alleged salutary effects of optimism in a scientific framework have obfuscated the distinction between the empirical underpinnings of positive psychology and its applicability to everyday life. The unintended consequence is that an anti-objectivist dimension rears its head within much of this sub-discipline’s literature, even though its proponents consistently legitimate their work by proclaiming their objectivist bona fides. The empirical research favours the claim that optimism yields beneficial practical results, such as higher incomes and longer lifespans, so *ipso facto* the individual should recognize the pitfalls of negativity, even if they have perfectly legitimate reasons to think negatively. In this light, “fake it till you make it” presents itself as the unspoken motto of positive psychologists of Seligman’s ilk, but the glaringly unacknowledged aspect of this sub-discipline is that no one’s income or lifespan exists in a vacuum. Just as abstract national wealth is misleading without a consideration of wealth inequality, so any list of measurable improvements to one’s quality of life requires an account of the normative desires, habits, and sensibilities—in short, the biopolitical norms—that coalesce to make certain lifestyles more comfortable than others. If the work of improving one’s

life involves appropriating social norms, then unrealistic optimism compromises one's critical capacity to see those very norms as the sources of their negativity. In a social order shaped by neoliberal governance, positive psychology's scientific claims cannot help but reinforce and promulgate entrepreneurial virtues.

¹⁶ This obfuscation between inside and outside, volition and external compulsion, will call to mind Foucault's notion of panopticism. Adapted from Jeremy Bentham's invention for enclosed penal institutions, a panoptic arrangement delineates a field of hypervisibility in which no life can pass unseen. Within a biopolitical dispensation, the work of surveillance is no longer exercised from a central location; rather, the mobile and pervasive norm performs the work of surveillance. The norm is, as it were, the organizing apparatus of a biopolitical dispensation, designating the primary expression of power regulating conduct. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it," writes Foucault, "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-203).

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault unsettles his previous conclusions about the disciplinary function of panopticism. He conceived this series of lectures from 1977-1978 as a kind of watershed moment in his thought. Revising the ideas he elaborated in *Discipline and Punish*, he draws a line between apparatuses of discipline and apparatuses of security. Whereas the former focuses on the bodies of individuals, the latter focuses on the population as a whole, and modern society is one of security and not discipline. Accordingly, the "idea of the panopticon" is "completely archaic, since the panoptic mechanism basically involves putting someone in the center [. . .] who will be able to make its sovereignty function over all the

individuals [. . .] within this machine of power” (66). That said, Foucault is reluctant to insist on a complete separation between disciplinary and security mechanisms. Discipline still functions within a society of control and security; it just takes different forms: “Mechanisms of security do not replace disciplinary mechanisms,” but there is “a series of complex edifices in which, of course, the techniques themselves change and are perfected, or anyway become more complicated” (8). Disciplinary apparatuses persist but in more diffuse ways.

¹⁷ It is also helpful here to keep in mind W.E.B. Du Bois’s critique from 1903 that white supremacy forces black American to live a “double consciousness,” at once aware of themselves as selves and aware of how the hegemonic culture perceives them (1-7).

¹⁸ Two of Altieri’s observations—that a trap for contemporary poets is a culturally dominant willingness to “flee into forms of extreme privacy” (16) and that genuine selfhood “is one poets are tempted to posit as always beyond language (22)—resonate with my analysis of Rankine’s work. However, as I explain, illumination for Rankine is not “sudden” and therefore transformative but results from the accumulation of pain. There is no personal transcendence at the heart of Rankine’s poetry.

¹⁹ For M.H. Abrams, the critical embrace of lyric poetry followed its ascent, and he describes this phenomenon as the “displacement of the mimetic and pragmatic by the expressive view of art in English criticism” (*The Mirror* 22). He goes on to assert that, by the early nineteenth century, “[t]he evolution is complete, from mimetic poet, assigned the minimal role of holding a mirror up to nature, through the pragmatic poet who, whatever his natural gifts, is ultimately measured by his capacity to satisfy the public taste, to Carlyle’s Poet as Hero [the lyric poet]” (*The Mirror* 26). As Williams and Abrams show, understanding the lyric poetry’s ascent as the dominant mode of poetic delivery requires historicization. With regard to Rankine’s poetry, it is

worth noting here Jasper Bernes's astute point that, since "the lyric is fundamentally about address, and if address means, in the end, relations between persons, then historical inquiry into the modern lyric and modern forms of lyric address implies inquiry into the changing status of social relations in societies where capitalist relations [. . .] predominate" (52).

²⁰ See Hume for an excellent discussion of how Rankine's work participates in while standing apart from the lyric tradition (92-108).

²¹ It is helpful to recall here the speech that Baby Suggs gives in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Talking to an all-black parish, Suggs declaims,

we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love the, Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together. Stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. [. . .] This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. (103-104)

Suggs uses the term flesh to undercut the racializing gaze, treating it as a pre-racial ontology of black life that resonates alongside Fanon's discussion of interpellation.

²² Drawing on Fanon's work, Mignolo advocates a strategy of "epistemic disobedience" as a means of circumventing the racist histories that are difficult to excise from Western epistemology. He links the work of disobedience to a broader project of "decolonial thinking" that pivots upon "the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the

epistemic rights of the racially devalued” (162). That is, he calls for an episteme from below, one that issues from the Global South as well as from the historical sites of colonial depredation.

²³ Fanon’s “eviscerated silence” that translates into gestural signification—and, further, the line of inquiry I pursue in this chapter—simultaneously evokes and departs from Fred Moten’s analysis of the audio and phonographic elements of black performance that resist the objectification of black selfhood. For Moten, a project of black resistance can be located in a distinctly black musical tradition and history of sonic excess; see *In the Break* (1-24).

Chapter 3: Dwelling with(out) Others: Family Dysfunction in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.

—Anthony Kennedy, *Obergefell v. Hodges*

The access to the world is produced in a movement that starts from the utopia of the dwelling and traverses a space to effect a primordial grasp, to seize and to take away. The uncertain future of the element is suspended. The element is fixed between the four walls of the home, is calmed in possession.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

“Brad Carrigan, American” is a satirical short story by George Saunders that bridges last chapter’s focus, enforced optimism, and this chapter’s, the neoliberal emphasis on family values. The story tracks the vicissitudes of the titular Brad’s home life, but in postmodern style, Saunders distances readers from the narrative by presenting the story as a television show, with commercial breaks punctuating each scene. Saunders does not hold back on the mockery: streets are named after the animals they displaced—Eiderdown Path, Leaping Fawn Way, Bullfrog Terrace, and Waddling Gosling Place—and main characters, such as Doris, Brad’s wife, and Chief Wayne, a caricatured Native American, search for lessons in the forgettable moments of daily life, often concluding that no form of existence is better than suburban American life, its abundance of amenities unparalleled by any other country in the world. On the surface, there is no reason for anyone in Brad’s world to be unhappy, and through such heavy-handed didacticism Brad’s home life assumes exemplary status, its trajectory ultimately decided by the need to maintain good ratings and satisfy the average viewer’s taste. Indeed, at the outset, the “[g]rave crisis” is “the impending possible cancellation” (*In* 121; emphasis original). In Brad’s world, change happens according to the demands of the market, and a life that fails to meet these demands drops out of view altogether.

Yet Brad has trouble sticking to the happiness script. He is, Doris tells him, a “downer” who needs to “lighten up” (*In* 131, 134). His emotional negativity becomes most pronounced when his backyard is transformed, presumably by a god-like showrunner desperate to keep their show on the air, into a “vast field of charred human remains” (125). And the corpses can talk, informing Brad that they are “Belstonians” whose traditional homeland has been invaded by a “cartel of military/industrial leaders from the south” (127). Intruding upon his idyllic suburban life, the undead Belstonians induce an ethical awakening in Brad, forcing upon him an awareness of the “brutal, nightmarish things going on around the world” (128). Seeing how his bourgeois doldrums pale in comparison to the suffering of distant others, he begins to take action. He offers to donate excess corn to starving Filipino children, the victims of an explosion at the trash dump whose contents constituted their only sustenance; he refuses to let his family banish an HIV-infected African baby, another mysterious apparition in the Carrigan household, from sight and mind; and to protect the Belstonians from the elements, he drags them inside. These acts upset the rhythms of daily existence in Brad’s home, ultimately leading to rewrites: Chief Wayne becomes Doris’s partner, while Brad is written off the show. As Doris explains, “we’re now free to raise our future children in a hopeful atmosphere, where the predominant mode is gratitude” (150). The show need not fail, and the American family’s blind optimism need not come under scrutiny. But for Doris and her new family, their future requires Brad’s disappearance from the scene of American plenty.

Saunders’s unsubtle short story constitutes a helpful case study for a broader inquiry into the nuclear family’s centrality to neoliberal governance, which weds an economic emphasis on the family as the primary form of social security to a neoconservative belief in the family as the centre of moral instruction. By “nuclear family,” I mean the private, heteropatriarchal social unit

that encompasses, or at least plans to encompass, no less than two generations of kin. While Saunders strikes a satirical note with Doris's final comments, her objection to Brad's conduct reflects the kind of family-first thinking that has enjoyed an increasing amount of political purchase in the last forty years. To put the wellbeing of others before the wellbeing of the family, a healthy family being no less than a microcosm of a healthy nation, is to threaten the future.

This conservative line of thinking is by no means peripheral to contemporary capitalist structures and their ideological underpinnings. Melinda Cooper notes a "collaboration between neoliberals and social conservatives" (*Family* 9), and David Harvey identifies an "unholy alliance between big business and conservative Christians backed by the neoconservatives" (*Brief* 50). The political potency of these partnerships means that neoliberal economics cannot be isolated from social conservatism without overlooking a great deal of violence. Many critics have already pointed out that neoliberal welfare reform is indissociable from a campaign to pathologize the families applying for benefits, as the effort to slash welfare subsidies united budget-conscious neoliberals and family-oriented conservatives.¹ Perhaps nothing illustrates this phenomenon of strange bedfellows more than the Republican Party's capacity to absorb free-market libertarians and anti-choice activists. That said, neoliberal policy work has been a point of consensus between America's two major political parties; in eliminating publicly funded forms of protection, social retrenchment and anti-tax legislation serve to prop up the private family.² Whereas the New Deal empowered a number of political actors to fight for forms of social security that delinked protection from the private family, the dismantling of the welfare state and the concomitant turn to monetarist economic policies have mostly nipped this progressive project in the bud; with the support of neoconservatives and the Christian right, the neoliberal program

of upward redistribution has reestablished the family as the fundamental building block of the social order.³

If the private family is at the core of neoliberalism, both materially and ideologically, then failure in the form of family dysfunction becomes a necessary object of inquiry in this critical project seeking to unearth anti-neoliberal visions in contemporary literature. If entrepreneurial success depends in any measure on the family as a locus of privilege and security, then how might literary works that foreground family dysfunction disclose an ethics that moves beyond the family to propose alternative forms of intimacy? The point here is not to invalidate the family as a site of intimacy or to reveal it as pernicious social unit, although it can certainly be that. For minority subjects, oftentimes the family is the only site of cultural transmission insulated from assimilatory pressures. The fact that people remain emotionally invested in their families is not inherently problematic.

What is problematic is the power concealed by social norms that appear natural. Lee Edelman's polemic against the child in *No Future*, for instance, is not a screed against particular children but a critique of the abstract child around which heteronormativity and its ideological hold on the future coalesce (1-66). Similarly, to critique the family is not to reproach this or that family but to question the ideological apotheosis of family values. In displacing the burden of social protection from the state to individuals, neoliberal policies promote private wealth and thus the family as the most dependable form of security against the contingencies of the market. By exacerbating the hold the private family has on individual life, neoliberal governance perpetuates, and reproduces on a wider scale, the forms of harm and domination that traditionally unfold amongst kin—violence such as, but not limited to, physical and verbal abuse; adultery; gaslighting; rape; parental neglect; normative pressures; homophobia and other kinds of bigotry;

compulsory loyalty; emotional trauma; and gendered labour that goes unnoticed, unappreciated, and unpaid. The concept of the private family, moreover, insists on firm distinctions between inside and outside, and this in a country in which few people can reasonably disavow the fact that they are beneficiaries of other people's misery. The point of my inquiry into family dysfunction, then, is to cast a suspicious eye on a social institution that neoliberal governance has celebrated as an unassailable norm.

In this chapter, I examine Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland* (2008) and Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1993) as literary works that disclose ethical modes of sociality through dramas of family dysfunction—or, more appropriately, as works that intimate the ethical modes of life repressed by the hegemony of the private family. Given that there is no shortage of literary works dealing with bourgeois problems, what draws me to these case studies is the fact that, even though they both dramatize family failure, each moves toward an ending in which the family is reconstituted, toward an affirmation of the family, however normative or queer it may now be, as the bedrock of the future. In other words, both *Netherland* and *Angels in America* suggest the ethical limits of social worlds organized by a network of private families even as these works fail to expunge this social institution from their visions of the future. What is more, each work gets its moral centre of gravity from a white man, the hegemon of the conventional family, often relegating women and people of colour to the margins: in *Netherland*, narrator Hans van den Broek, a Dutch equities analyst working in New York, is left to fend for himself when his wife, following 9/11, returns to England with their son; and in *Angels*, Prior Walter, a gay man dying of AIDS, is initially a tragic figure who becomes the central piece in the play's comedic (in the Shakespearean sense of the word) reconstruction of the family along non-normative lines.

Despite its queer inflection, the play's reconstructed family reflects the racial and gendered structures of inequality that it ostensibly seeks to transcend.

The argument could be made, then, that neither *Netherland* nor *Angels* works to unsettle the hold that the private family has on contemporary life. Criticism of these works, whether or not their treatment of the family is openly acknowledged, has noted an underlying conservatism in each. Writing about *Netherland*, Zadie Smith argues that “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” (“Two Paths”). And *Angels*, David Savran notes, “has been accommodated with stunning ease to the hegemonic ideology not just of the theatre-going public, but of the democratic majority—an ideology that has become the *new* American religion—liberal pluralism” (219). If, according to Smith, *Netherland* exemplifies the ethico-political inadequacy of the realist novel, *Angels*, Savran tells us, fails to link its identity politics to an understanding of class inequality, thus presenting images of tolerance that neoliberal structures have rechanneled to profitable ends. Concern for the future bubbles to the surface of each critique—for Smith, concern for the future of the novel, should it fail to eschew its realist conventions; and for Savran, concern for the future of theatre, should it no longer articulate an oppositional political stance.⁴

Yet the present study is also concerned for the future: in dramatizing family dysfunction and the subsequent effort to recreate a better version of this social institution, these works show how the family puts the Other under erasure. These works illustrate how the foreclosure of responsibility is a structural feature of the private family. Offering no more than a glimpse of alternative social arrangements, these works bespeak the need to envision a future delinked from the private family as currently constituted, a future in which belonging to a family would not

coextend with ethical blindness or apathy. As I contend in the following section, this line of inquiry requires a phenomenological understanding of the family—that is, one that foregrounds this social institution as a principal site of embodied engagement with the world—an understanding that brings into relief how the private family can induce a myopic view of responsibility and commitment.

After the two readings that constitute its bulk, this chapter culminates with a brief coda that brings John Ashberry's poem "Alcove" (2009) into the fold, in order to think through the unique challenge that pandemics pose to critical work on the family. The recent spread of COVID-19, a virus that causes potentially deadly respiratory disease, has highlighted the global state of human interdependence. But if many have interpreted social distancing measures as a command to embrace a fortress mentality, protecting themselves and their immediate family against the threat of a socially transmitted virus, Ashberry's poem intimates that, in times of crisis, the comforts and safeties of the private home need to be coupled with an expansive sense of social responsibility and publicness. Ultimately, this chapter echoes Sophie Lewis's recent call "to overthrow [. . .] 'the family'": "Let's hold one another hospitable, explode notions of hereditary parentage, and multiply, real, loving solidarities. Let us build a care commune based on comradeship, a world sustained by kith and kind more than by kin" (26). As I aim to show, *Netherland*, *Angels*, and "Alcove" intimate that ethical futures will depend in no small part on remaking the private family.

The Dwelling

To explore the constellation of time, the private family, and ethics, I turn to Levinas's chapter on "the dwelling," in *Totality and Infinity* (152-174), a point in his work where he is most phenomenological and most critical of what philosophers in the phenomenological tradition take

for granted. Levinas replaces the Heideggerian notion of “thrownness,” which refers to the conscious self’s irreducibly atomistic origin (see Heidegger 219-235), with the dwelling. Inhabiting the dwelling marks for Levinas the self’s accession to consciousness through a process of *individuation*, whereby the self becomes separated from both the elements threatening it and the Other. “Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain,” writes Levinas (*Totality* 152). It is only in and through the “event of dwelling” that the self attains the capacity for private thought and thereby comes to understand itself as a temporally inscribed being with a future (*Totality* 153). This concept, shifting the focus from “living in” to “living from” the world, moves phenomenology into a distinctly ethical register: whereas thrownness marks the limit of the individual’s capacity to theorize their existential provenance, the dwelling, with its architectural resonance, understands any limit to self-understanding as nothing more than a proverbial wall, a wall separating the self from the Other. If “the withdrawal from the elements” establishes personhood, then private life can only be lived as an opening onto the world, unfolding on the border between intimacy and understanding, on the one hand, and insecurity and mystery, on the other (*Totality* 153). For Levinas, this constitutive openness couples privacy inextricably to a form of publicness, since privacy can only be maintained if individuals secure the dwelling, their interiority, from the dangerous uncertainty of the elements to which other people are subjected.

The threat posed by the elements, however, can imbue individuals with existential fear, such that they no longer see privacy and hospitality as mutually internal but feel compelled to choose between them. According to Levinas, “the disquieting future of the element” can induce ethical blindness; the result is a solipsistic mode of conduct that turns the goods furnished by nature, the very means of prolonging life, into private possessions (*Totality* 158). Possession

“removes being from change” and “affirms its power over time, over what belongs to nobody—over the future” (*Totality* 160). Securing privacy through possession abets an illusory feeling of control over the unknowable future. The dwelling thus installs the capacity for hospitality at the heart of personhood no more than it introduces the temptation of egoism. As Lisa Guenther explains, Levinas understands “both the temptation to build a wall around oneself, and the unethical and unjust implications of acting on this temptation” (62). Guenther’s object of inquiry is contemporary home ownership and its implication in a carceral regime that works to racialize and then imprison certain segments of the underclass. Levinas’s architectural notion of interiority, I believe, maps more broadly onto the problems vis-à-vis the private family laid out thus far (62). He understands how cleaving to a private social unit leads to unethical behaviour, obscuring alternative forms of sociality.

To illustrate how the existential fear of the elements conspires with neoconservative emphases on family values, “Brad Carrigan, American” remains a helpful case study. While I have emphasized repeatedly how neoliberal rationality, discipline, and temporality are concatenated, Saunders’s satirical short story illustrates how the cultural emphasis on family values underpins these connections. Brad’s inability to banish the abject sufferers from his mind becomes a personal failure, one that jeopardizes the wellbeing of his family and sets a dangerous precedent in his community: “What right does he have to be worrying about the problems of the world when he can’t even make his own wife happy? How arrogant is that? Maybe a man’s first responsibility is to make a viable home. If everybody made a viable home, the world would be a connected network of viable homes” (*In* 134). The neoconservative logic of family values forecloses other-directed action, turning hospitality into a form of neglect as well as the Other into a source of fear. According to Sara Ahmed, fear serves a political function by “announcing a

threat to life itself” and thereby “project[ing] us from the present into a future” in which the threat will have vanished (*Cultural* 64, 65). Indeed, Saunders’s sudden shift to the conditional mood—“the world *would*”—underscores the temporal aspect of family-first thinking. And after Brad is written off the show, Doris’s relief brings this temporal dimension into sharp relief, corresponding to what, according to Levinas, the dwelling accomplishes: “a perpetual postponement” of insecurity that “opens the very dimension of time” (*Totality* 165). Such overlap, the fearful egotism of the dwelling with family-first patterns of thought, shows how family-values rhetoric works to induce fear.

Elsewhere, in a journalistic vein, Saunders maintains his ironic tone by ventriloquizing the “American Middle Class”: “We have SUVs and PlayStations and plenty to eat, we roam the earth expecting respect and receiving it, [. . .] and we shall live out the full measure of our days amidst happiness and plenty” (*Braindead* 134). Saunders attributes these patterns of thought to nationalistic Americans living along the America-Mexico border, but we could just as well stretch this mode of thinking across the country to include anyone for whom unlimited commerce and buying opportunities prove the superiority of American-style liberalism. No considerable leap of imagination is required to understand how such thinking induces conservatism, even during an advanced stage of capitalism when all signs point to wealth’s upward flight. In the context of family values, the consequence seems to be something akin to Doris’s relief at Brad’s expulsion. That is, anxiously protecting the family conjures up threats to its future that only the private family can overcome. This emotional overinvestment amounts to a form of misrecognition that draws attention away from the neoliberal structures that make life, no matter the strength of the family, increasingly precarious.⁵

A number of critics have outlined how the private family works as a disciplinary institution within contemporary America. Kathi Weeks points out that “family ethics [. . .] serv[es] various family-values campaigns as a tool of political-economic discipline” (64).⁶ Such campaigns are only the most visible instantiations of a regulatory phenomenon that has shown the capacity to absorb and, to no small extent, neutralize oppositional political stances. Lisa Duggan’s concept of “homonormativity,” for instance, understands the increasing legitimacy of gay culture as a result of gay subjects embracing normative modes of kinship and thereby engaging in “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (50). In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar extends this link between gay subjects and neoliberal norms to the rhetoric and practices of nationalism after 9/11. President Bush’s Manichean declamation—“[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address”)—not only set the stage for a long and deadly “War on Terror” but also, Puar contends, generated the agonistic conditions under which homonormative subjects could accrue sociopolitical capital as they espoused nationalist rhetoric (37-77). As Frederick Engels and Antonio Gramsci pointed out during earlier stages of capitalism, and as these contemporary critics underscore, the private family’s imbrication with the state, the *oikos* with the *polis*, is not incidental but vital, constructing a social base of normative constituents and consumers who affirm the hegemonic nation’s core principles no less than their labour generates surplus value for capital.⁷

Levinas’s concept of the dwelling denaturalizes the private family’s place as the fundamental building block of a healthy social order. For Levinas, the individual’s capacity to either diminish the suffering of others or sink into possessive egoism has been granted by the Other: “I must have been in relation with something I do not live from. This event is the relation

with the Other who welcomes me in the Home, the discreet presence of the Feminine” (*Totality* 170). The language Levinas employs here reflects the gendered division of power that heteronormative institutions have typically upheld. As I suggested in my opening chapter, such language is a problem in Levinas’s work, and feminist philosophers and critics have duly taken him to task for this insensitivity.⁸ This notable issue aside, the concept of the dwelling, generating two countervailing possibilities (ethics and egoism), demands a deconstructive understanding. “The absolute, absolutely originary welcome,” writes Derrida, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, “takes place in a place that cannot be appropriated, in an open ‘interiority’ whose hospitality the master or owner receives before himself then wishing to give it” (45). The interiority of the dwelling owes its existence to that which remains exterior, and a radical form of hospitality precedes private ownership; in this light, it is important to keep in mind that, for Levinas, the emergence of private thought is both a spatial “withdrawal” and a temporal “event.” Inhabiting the dwelling, then, retains a spatiotemporal quality, exteriority combined with diachrony, that belies its most recognizable quality, interiority combined with synchrony. The confluence of these opposites intimates that possessive egoism relies on a structure of repression in order to function in good conscience, which means that the return of the repressed is always possible when the routines that sustain egoism’s psychic hegemony are interrupted by failure.⁹

In Saunders’s short story, great distance is collapsed to reveal a global system whereby one family’s privilege is another’s misery, and Brad’s consequent exposure to abject suffering paves the way for a return of the repressed, forcing him to acknowledge his constitutive responsibility for others. Brad comes to understand himself as what Bruce Robbins calls a “beneficiary,” someone whose privileged existence cannot be delinked from economic structures of inequality (*Beneficiary* 1-32), and what Michael Rothberg calls an “implicated subject,” a

“morally compromised person” who is “most definitely attached [. . .] to consequential political and economic dynamics” (33). These notions of guilty subjectivity—a subject whose guiltiness emerges not through an act of hostility but through their privileged position within systems of domination and exploitation—resonate with Levinas’s formulation of possessive egoism as “violence,” a violence of irresponsibility that coextends with the very forms of life for which the private family is lauded and idealized (*Totality* 171).

The idea of egoism *qua* violence thus scrambles the calculus of family-values rhetoric. If family-first patterns of thought generate fears that can only be overcome by an increased investment in the privacy of the dwelling, Levinas suggests that what this form of harm reduction does more than anything else is increase the private family’s implication in the harm suffered by others. Ethical patterns of thought require a great deal of self-questioning, a careful examination into one’s place in a regime of violence. It is no wonder that Brad’s banishment from the private home is the condition of the family’s continuation. The other characters view Brad’s empathy for “an HIV-positive baby” from Africa as irrational: “[W]e had nothing to do with the deeply unfortunate occurrence that occurred to this baby back wherever its crude regressive culture is located” (*In* 147, 148). Conserving the family along normative lines can lead to indifference when faced with the overwhelming scale of human suffering.

According to Levinas, ethical conduct involves abandoning possessiveness altogether: “I must know how to *give* what I possess” (*Totality* 171; emphasis original). It is possible to glean from this formulation conclusions that uphold, as opposed to undermine, the politico-economic status quo: on the one hand, Levinas seems to suggest that only individuals who own private property have the capacity to act ethically. On the other, the formula for ethical conduct seems no different than liberal forms of charity that have come largely to supplant welfare in the U.S.

These are misreadings. First, in a Levinasian framework, no one—neither the poor nor the dispossessed—escapes relationality; no one, therefore, is barred from the capacity to act ethically. That said, the centrality of home ownership and the family to neoliberal logics makes the private dwelling a particularly significant site of inquiry into the contemporary modes of existence that pivot on the repression of the self’s constitutive responsibility for the Other.

And second, what Levinas means by “giving” is more radical than charity, instead entailing a complete revision of social and economic life. “Limitation is produced only within a totality,” writes Levinas, “whereas the relation with the Other breaks the ceiling of the totality” (*Totality* 171). This relation, installing responsibility at the heart of personhood, precedes and exceeds the liberal regime of possessiveness, which is no more than a “limitation.” Honouring the transcendence of the Other translates quickly into an imperative to transgress social norms in order to recognize the horizons of ontological possibility: “The other is not opposed to me as a freedom other than, but similar to my own, and consequently hostile to my own. [. . .] No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home” (*Totality* 171, 172). Levinas understands the need to situate giving within a social formation, but he also recognizes that the molar dispensations within which individual life takes shapes work to impose artificial limits on the possible. “Giving” moves well beyond the norm of giving established by neoliberal governance. It is not for Levinas a punctual form of charity but a mode of living that labours to extend the comforts of the dwelling outward to the wider human community.

If the individual is not the dialectical negation of other people but their co-participant in an ontological field permeated by existential contingency, then no family can deny that they belong to a broader social field than the private confines of the dwelling. Abandoning

possessiveness entails radically recasting oneself in relation to other people; it entails eschewing the habit of putting the members of one's private dwelling before all other social commitments and responsibilities; and it entails supporting a politico-economic system that distributes resources evenly across the social body, both within and beyond the legal domain of the state. The link between ethics and justice—between one's responsibility for the Other and one's concern, opened up by the appearance of the third party, for equality—offers one way of pursuing this radical recasting of oneself and one's conception of the private family.¹⁰ As I pointed out in my opening section, the third party complicates the unidirectionality of ethical responsibility, calling for the *letter*—calling, in other words, for forms of justice that capture the spirit of each individual's duty to others (Levinas, *Otherwise* 157). By triangulating ethical responsibility, the third party introduces the imperative to see oneself as part of, and a participant in, an illimitable human community. Levinas, Guenther contends, is “a thinker of the relation between ethical responsibility and economic justice” (74). The pursuit of economic equality, requiring a vision of the private and the public as imbricated, allows a group of individuals inhabiting a dwelling, the private family, to work toward a future without abandoning their constitutive and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other.¹¹

Taken to its most radical conclusion, however, this pursuit would entail nothing less than an altogether different mode of family life, a libidinal disinvestment in the private family as it is commonly conceived, invoked, and practiced under neoliberalism. In Saunders's short story, as Brad is ushered away from his former home and into a “gray space” of temporary non-existence, the difficulty of this ethico-political project overwhelms him. “One must,” he thinks, “struggle single-mindedly” against the temptations of possessive egoism in order to “retain this feeling of pity”: “If he can, whoever he becomes will inherit this feeling, and be driven to act on it, and will

not, as Brad now sees he has done, waste his life on accumulation, trivia, self-protection, and vanity” (*In* 154). Perhaps Brad will reemerge in a new dwelling, but without retaining a sense of ethical responsibility he will commit the same errors as before; he will slide back into what, elsewhere, Saunders calls the “new braindeadness” (*Braindead* 12). Without a vision of economic justice in which the danger of the elements is softened not privately but collectively, the private family will remain a social institution by which neoliberal reason is internalized.

For Levinas, such a vision emerges from what he calls the “teaching” of the Other, whose hospitality paved the way for the self’s emergence and, subsequently, whose countenance lies behind the needs of the ontologically vulnerable. Such teaching is the condition of language and representation, which for Levinas do not begin “in the presence of a thing exposed to my violence” but “in my possibility of calling this violence into question” (*Totality* 172). Thus, when Levinas explains that this originary teaching leads the subject to “discover[] itself as a violence” and to become “ashamed of its naïveté (*Totality* 171), we are authorized to not think of teaching in the conventional sense but of something along the lines of an innate capacity for critical thought—the capacity to see one’s life as a form of violence, even if that violence does not unfold within the walls of the private home. Levinas outlines a critical mode of phenomenology that values hospitality over epistemology.¹² The phenomenology of the dwelling foregrounds the imperative to remain skeptical in the face of all that presents itself to the subject’s grasp, which forecloses ethical openness in its pursuit of mastery and knowledge. Daily existence is rich with ethical potentialities, as I have contended, but it can just as easily become a sandbox for possessive egoism and entrepreneurial fantasy, hence the focus on failure’s epiphanic quality.

This notion of teaching qua criticism becomes more helpful when our focus shifts from “Brad Carrigan, American” to a much more earnest treatment of the private family, for it urges

us to bring a critical eye to bear on literary works whose ethico-political credentials are tenuous at best. If Saunders's postmodern irony, equating normative American life with a television show, performs the task of criticism for readers, the same cannot be said for Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*—a modally realist novel that, in James Wood's estimation, is "exquisitely written" ("Beyond") and that, according to Smith's ambivalent appraisal, "seems perfectly done" ("Two Paths"). For Wood, craft seems to outweigh ethico-political concerns, and this is precisely what worries Smith about O'Neill's novel, that its "lyrical realism" signals both a refusal to address what is most exigent in contemporary life and a retreat into the comforts of belletristic style (Smith).¹³ David James offers a bridge between these two positions, grouping O'Neill with contemporary "writers who are seeking to reconcile virtuosity in craft with the ethical imperative to animate our understanding of selves and situations other than our own" (849). For James, works by these writers fall under the category of the "crystalline novel" (848), a term he gleans from Iris Murdoch, for they abandon postmodern form for a style more akin to modernist realism, "visualizing what's ethically profitable about paying closer attention to everyday perceptions" (872). Resolving the tension between Wood's formalism and Smith's anxiety, James is right to characterize the novel's ethical dimensions along phenomenological lines.

Yet the positive relationship that James posits between formal beauty and an ethical investment in quotidian life's phenomenological density needs to be approached in a critical spirit. In *Netherland*, the narrator Hans justifies this approach by calling himself "a political-ethical idiot" (100). We might leaven James's analysis of the "crystalline novel," then, with Bruce Robbins's contention that *Netherland* belongs to a group of 9/11 novels that "retreat into domesticity" in "the face of large-scale impersonal violence" ("Worldling" 1097). Robbins's analysis reflects John Duvall and Robert Marzek's assessment of 9/11 novels—a category that

includes Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007)—as “an American literature that has retreated from politics into domesticity” (384). The family drama at the centre of *Netherland*, these accounts suggest, dampens its ethical energies. Yet there is fecund middle ground between James's and Robbins's respective analyses, as the family drama in *Netherland* opens onto much broader concerns such as the inequalities exacerbated by global capitalism. To the extent that Levinas's concept of the dwelling maps onto the private family, the novel's ethics needs to read as a struggle between vision and blindness, one that is indexed to the fluctuating stability of Hans's domestic life.

In O'Neill's words, *Netherland* “is deeply involved with a quest for vision” and “much of the drama involves perception, or misperception” (Reilly 15). On that note, the novel is indebted to literary works that foreground the flawed nature of perception—works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and V.S. Naipaul's *Guerrillas* (1975).¹⁴ Each of these antecedent novels underscores the way in which the entwinement of visibility and epistemology bespeaks power imbalance and works to generate blind spots, gaps, and elisions. But what O'Neill's description leaves out is that all of the perceiving and misperceiving within the novel happens within the context of a quasi-Odyssean journey of spousal estrangement followed by rapprochement. Moving Levinas's phenomenology of the dwelling to the centre of our analysis allows us to note how the social hegemony of the private family inflects the narrator Hans's interpretation of visual phenomena. His desire to reconstitute his family blocks the full expression of the ethical possibilities glimpsed through the aperture opened up by dysfunction, and it is this ethical failure on a narrative level that shifts the

burden of criticism outward to the reader, hailing them as a subject capable of abandoning possessiveness in the service of ethico-political justice.

Vision and Blindness in *Netherland*

While critics have evinced a tendency to place *Netherland* alongside other 9/11 novels, what sets the novel apart from the pack is its governing mood of dislocation and alienation. O'Neill, after all, is a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Ireland, and the narrator Hans is a Dutch expat and equities analyst whose work takes him first to London and then to New York City, where he lives until 2003 and where much of the narrative unfolds.¹⁵ If this professional itinerancy bespeaks the privilege he possesses on the world stage, it nevertheless strips him of a sense of belonging, and the patterns of thought that flow from this uprootedness—what he (and perhaps O'Neill, too) wants us to recognize as his expatriate's capacity for wonder and naiveté—mediate our engagement with the events in the novel.

Told by Hans as a long flashback, the main narrative also seems disconnected from the life he is living in the novel's opening pages. At the outset, Hans has reunited with his wife and son in London circa 2006, admitting that he has done his "best to look away from New York" (4). The sudden and unexpected news that his former friend Chuck Ramkissoon has been murdered precipitates Hans's recollections. For much of the novel, he recalls the time he spent in New York following 9/11 and his wife's decampment for London—a time when he took up cricket, his favourite sport, again and subsequently met Chuck, a Trinidadian immigrant whose relentless striving for entrepreneurial success captivates and disgusts Hans by turns. O'Neill's frequent allusions to homelessness and unbelonging lead Sarah L. Wasserman to conclude that *Netherland* stands out amongst 9/11 novels as one that "prizes distance over intimacy, mutability over memory, and the transnational over the national" (251).

While Wasserman's analysis is convincing, I want to insist against placing too much value on the novel's analeptic structure, which would preclude a serious consideration of how the cause-and-effect relationships that unfold chronologically shape Hans's character arc. To some extent, the distance between the scene of recollection and the recollected scene underpins Wasserman's argument that the novel "sets out not simply to look again at 9/11 but to look away" (253). This distance threatens any inquiry into the glimpses of ethical potentiality disclosed by failure, since the curatorial effect of memory has already made the disorienting present into the intelligible past. Yet the novel opens with Hans doubting the ability of "memory's repetitive mower" to "cut[] the grassy past to manageable proportions." For Hans, "it keeps growing back" (O'Neill, *Netherland* 4). Hans suggests that his attempts to manage the past only serve to make it more unmanageable. Hans—and, by extension, O'Neill—encourages us to treat his recollections as if the gap between past and present were not significant at all.

The novel also gives readers plenty of reason to locate Hans's "quest for vision" in the context of family dysfunction. America having become an "'ideologically diseased' country" is his wife Rachel's alibi for moving back to London with their son, but Hans soon realizes that "it was me, not terror, she was fleeing" (O'Neill, *Netherland* 95, 30). At first blush, the circumstances of this separation, having less to do with national tragedy than with simmering marital discord, seem to reduce 9/11 to nothing more than a gripping backdrop for bourgeois drama. The attacks displace the family, forcing them into a hotel, but they do nothing so much as shine a light on preexisting problems, the kind of problems that beset families whose affluence and privilege insulate them from the attritional violence of poverty and discrimination, respectively. The novel seems to confirm Robbins's point that "[m]ost novels do not train our eyes to look very high or very low, or for that matter very far away" ("Wordling" 1096).

However, family dysfunction ultimately imbues the novel with a worldly quality, opening it up to ethico-political issues that outweigh the private drama unfolding within the dwelling.

Rachel's return to London is the condition of Hans taking up cricket again, and a cricket match is where he first meets Chuck, albeit under unusual circumstances. A gun is brandished after a fight erupts, and Chuck abandons his role as the match's umpire to pontificate about the importance of the sport, calling it nothing less than "a lesson in civility" (O'Neill, *Netherland* 15). Because cricket is largely an overlooked sport in America, Chuck proceeds to tell everyone that "we have an extra responsibility to the play the game right" (15). Chuck, Hans will learn, is long winded, and his speech soon becomes a meditation on race and visibility:

Every summer the parks of this city are taken over by hundreds of cricketers but somehow nobody notices. It's like we're invisible. Now that's nothing new for those of us who are black or brown. [. . .] You want a taste of how it feels to be a black man in this country. Put on the white clothes of a cricketer. Put on white to feel black. (16)

While the effect of his speech is to underscore Hans's racial privilege amongst immigrants of colour, Chuck is at least partly wrong here. For racism operates on a visual plane, making nonwhite bodies hyper-visible. According to Hortense Spillers, the nonwhite body "does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (67). As we saw last chapter, the visibility generated by the "brush of discourse" can give rise to a series of negative feelings. Moreover, a prominent feature of post-9/11 American jingoism was (and continues to be) a regime of surveillance that racialized and abetted discrimination against "black or brown" people. Catherine Zimmer writes of the "production and targeting of racialized subjects that has been at the core of state surveillance in the United States, from slavery to

immigration policy to the ‘War on Terror’” (22-23). *Pace* Chuck, dominant discourses and surveillance practices weaponize visual difference against nonwhite people.¹⁶ Viewed from the perspective of class, though, Chuck’s comments resonate with Marx’s simple observation about the commodity’s occlusion of the labour that produced it. The intersection of class inequality and racial inequality means that visibility and invisibility do not form a binary opposition but are mutually internal. This point becomes especially clear when a consideration of racism within America’s borders is supplemented with a consideration of post-Fordist capitalism’s global reach. How is invisibility bound up with the visual order of the post-9/11 surveillance state, which worked overtime to make visual difference suspicious and threatening?

To grasp the implications of Chuck’s musings about race, it is worth returning to the motivating factor behind Rachel’s return to London—namely, 9/11 as well as the subsequent “War on Terror”—and how coverage of the attacks bore out this relationship between the seen and the unseen. 9/11 was, of course, a remarkably visual event, and the media coverage of the Twin Towers collapsing made these images omnipresent in the days and weeks following the attacks. The event was experienced and continues to be re-experienced primarily through the mediation of television and computer screens. Slavoj Žižek likens this video footage to the “ultimate Hitchcockian blot,” a comparison that speaks as much to the media’s expansion of the visual field as it does to the media’s production of blindness and myopia (*Welcome* 17). The function of the blot is to fictionalize what is inassimilable to the visual field and thereby uphold the psychic structure of repression that constitutes the order of the visual in the first place. Just as the ego maintains its hegemony by interpreting the return of the repressed as an aberration, so the repetition of the Twin Towers collapsing allowed Western viewers to see the attacks as “a

nightmarish unreal spectre” (23).¹⁷ In this light, the mediatization of 9/11 has precluded critical thought on the constitutive antagonisms and inequalities that sustain the global economic order.

The thrust of Žižek’s intervention is that moments of crisis pave the way for a consideration of the social, political, and economic structures underpinning the norms that determine the visual field’s intelligibility. When the visual field has become unrecognizable, tainted by something that does not belong to it, the potential exists for onlookers to understand how visibility and invisibility are imbricated. The Twin Towers stood at the center of global capitalism, serving as the main hub of daily transactions with global implications as well as symbols of America’s economic dominance. Their place in the middle of the most recognizable skyline in the world, making the city’s numerous skyscrapers look insignificant by comparison, demanded so much attention that the argument could be made that these twin colossi provided an architectural idiom for the way in which global capitalism works to keep misery out of sight and thus out of mind. As Arundhati Roy puts it, “globalization” is “like a light that shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it’s no longer possible to see it” (qtd in Bunting).

Roy’s suggestive metaphor all but compels an inquiry into the effect globalization’s light has on subjective perception, for Hans is not only a beneficiary of globalization’s selective light but an active participant in it. His work as an equities analyst involves him in the process of capitalist abstraction by which certain parts of the world are legible only in the context of an oil stock’s potential for growth or decline. Like the forward-thinking entrepreneur, Hans must “express reliable opinions about the current and future valuation of certain oil and gas stocks” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 51). Yet Hans’s ability to evaluate stocks relies on a form of blindness particular to finance capital. As Marx explains, “interest-bearing capital”—which can be

anything from credit to stocks and bonds—constitutes “mystification in the most flagrant form” in that “it no longer bears any marks of its origin” (*Capital: Volume III*, 516). Hans’s participation in the exchange of interest-bearing capital makes him what Marx would call a “money capitalist,” someone whose work sustains the capitalist order at the same time that it shields them from this system’s ugliest dimensions.

The money capitalist who trades in capital *qua* commodity—that is, a commodity whose capacity to increase in value *is* its use-value—occupies a relatively passive position within the capitalist order. Their blindness is not akin to the alienation the worker experiences; rather, it is the consequence of their alienation from the deplorable scenes of value-creating labour and the processes by which the “functioning capitalist,” in Marx’s terms, “extort[s]” surplus-value: “Everything that happens in between [stock buying and dividend reaping] is obliterated” (*Capital: Volume III*, 516, 471). As I explained in Chapter 1, the growth of finance capital does not mean that value no longer has concrete origins; it means that these origins disappear from view. Working in the business of stock analysis, especially when the stocks in question belong to multinational oil companies, thus amounts to participation in what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” a form of violence that transpires at a glacial pace, one that cannot be neatly packed for audiences accustomed to tragedy as spectacle (2). Because of this pace, the cause-and-effect relationships that shape slow violence are decidedly difficult to track.

O’Neill dramatizes the flawed vision of the equities analyst by sending Hans beyond New York City’s concrete borders. When Hans takes the train to meet “a group of investors” in Albany, he notices that the speed at which the train travels has the “effect [. . .] of canceling out centuries” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 59). Perhaps, he thinks, a childhood in Holland, where trees grow in “tame copses,” has primed him to “feel lost” when looking at “New York forests” (59).

However, O'Neill has prepared readers to interpret this passage in a different light: a few days before the trip Hans receives from Chuck a letter reminding him that he is "a member of the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians" (58). Chuck's use of problematic nomenclature seems less an effect of his anxiety to distinguish his Indian heritage—he is "a descendent of indentured laborers" (18)—than of his desire to assimilate, but his letter also sets the stage for Hans's reductive engagement with visual phenomena. Hans seems to see in the forests beyond New York the absence of time, as if the centre of global capitalism from which he travels is the primary bearer of human history. The ease with which he overlooks the ongoing violence of settler colonialism corresponds with his well-paid ability to overlook the violence of the oil industry.

Understanding the imbrication of vision and blindness here requires further attention to the social and phenomenological abstractions wrought by capitalist production, particularly the role monetary wealth plays in this process. Hans's vision of a landscape without history finds a surprising ally in Marx's notion of primitive accumulation as the prehistory of capitalist production. The chronology of primitive accumulation posited by Marx—that is, its status as an originary form of violence that enables the formal subsumption of labour—has its critics. David Harvey and Rosa Luxemburg underscore the "continuity of primitive accumulation" alongside contemporary forms of capitalism (Harvey, *Companion* 309), and in the context of settler colonialism, Glen Sean Coulthard points out "the *persistent* role that unconcealed violent dispossession continues to play in the reproduction of colonial and capitalist social relations" (9; emphasis original).¹⁸ These critiques of Marx's timeline of dispossession illuminate how Hans's vision is bound up with, and not distinct from, the blindness abetted by his job.

In his earliest meditation on “an accumulation prior to labour and not sprung out of it” (*Grundrisse*, 504), Marx lays considerable emphasis on the generative role the money capitalist plays in the formation of industrial capitalism. “It is inherent in the concept of capital,” Marx writes, “that it begins with *money* and hence with wealth existing in the form of money”: “The monetary wealth which becomes transformed into capital in the proper sense, into industrial capital, is rather the mobile wealth piled up through usury [. . .] and through mercantile profits” (505, 504; emphasis original). Given how Harvey, Luxemburg, and Coulthard revise the concept of originary dispossession, this passage demands transposition into Hans’s neoliberal context, for one of the conditions of industrial production’s continuation in the highly exploitable domains of the Global South is the accumulation of monetary wealth within the major metropolitan nodes of global capitalism. The argument can be made that Hans’s role in the continuation of primitive accumulation plays no small part in shaping his abstract engagement with visual phenomena. Just as he remains insulated from the people whose lifeworlds the oil industry jeopardizes and in many cases ruins, so he projects, while firmly ensconced in a speeding train, the absence of history onto New York’s forests.

Family Dysfunction and Cricket

The brief detour through the constellation of 9/11, finance capitalism, and invisibility yields two related insights. First, it hardly seems a coincidence that the dissolution of Hans’s marriage happens at a moment of great professional success: “Inside the business, I had the beginnings of a reputation as a guru: on the Friday of the week Rachel declared her intent to leave for London, *Institutional Investor* ranked me number four in my sector” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 26). That O’Neill crosses the international reach of Hans’s profession with the private drama of the dwelling, in a sense collapsing the global into the domestic, need not be read as a shortcoming

but as a commentary on how the private family is implicated in a globalized system of value extraction. Though a source of unhappiness, domestic turmoil allows Hans to cultivate an ethical mode of seeing, one that does not reduce sites of exploitation to good or bad investment opportunities. Chuck, for example, introduces him to a side of New York that “was initially undetectable” (146). This expansion of Hans’s field of vision is not insignificant, since his job requires a certain amount of ethical apathy and allows him to live an existence that is equal parts affluent and myopic. Even though Hans’s reunion with Rachel is evidence of this optical project remaining incomplete by the end of the novel, the relationship between family dysfunction and ethics resonates with Levinas’s phenomenology of the dwelling, suggesting that ethical futures will greatly depend on rethinking the private family.

The second insight is that Hans’s attachment to cricket cannot be dismissed from a serious discussion of the novel’s ethico-political dimensions. For Hans, the sport “calls almost for a naturalist’s attentiveness: the ability to locate, in a mostly static herd of white clothed men, the significant action. It’s a question of looking” (149). But unlike equities analysis, with its grid of profitability spread across the map of the world, what seems to fascinate Hans most about cricket is the contingency endemic to playing a sport in nature: “The nature of earth, like the nature of air, is subject to change” (148). If success as an equities analyst involves locating the most stable companies in which to invest, success on the cricket field forces one to embrace unexpectedness. Hans describes a cricket match at one point as embodying a “pulmonary rhythm, as if the field breathed through its luminous visitors” (9). Hans values cricket, then, for two seemingly contradictory reasons: first, the sport requires shrewd “attentiveness” from both the player and the onlooker, which calls to mind the critico-pedagogical phenomenology of the dwelling. Second, the sport strips the player of their sovereignty, confining them to a passive

position from which they must nevertheless learn to act. The sport delimits a shared space within which individual actions have meaning as well as meaningful consequences. Cricket seems to offer Hans a utopia, if not a concrete model, of the commons, a sport where collectivity and personal satisfaction meet, where one's responsibility extends both to others as individuals and to other individuals as part of a meta-subjective whole.

That Hans sees the sport in this way accounts for the division between him and Chuck that becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses. The strength of Chuck's hold on Hans stems from a difference of upbringing and opportunity. Chuck has enjoyed none of the privileges that Hans has, and this inequality has ostensibly ignited in him a Gatsby-like desire to assimilate through accumulation. Nothing illustrates this desire more than a scene in which Chuck shows Hans an American quarter before launching into a disquisition on the greatness of America's symbol of freedom, the bald eagle, which adorns the quarter (75). Accordingly, over the course of the novel, we learn that Chuck has, in Wasserman's words, an "instrumental relationship to cricket" (259). Chuck sees the sport as a business opportunity, a chance to popularize the sport in America by first capitalizing off of moneyed entrepreneurs from both the West Indies and South Asia, immigrants with disposable income for whom cricket is the first and only sport they love. He wants to build a "sports arena" where "eight thousand spectators" would pay "fifty dollars" each to see "the greatest cricket teams in the world" (O'Neill, *Netherland* 79). "I'm talking about advertising," he tells Hans: "I'm talking about year-round consumption of food and drink in the bar-restaurant" (79). Hans's reluctance to pass judgement means that their divergence of opinion is more suggested than denoted; for example, Chuck takes Hans to the site of his imagined cricket arena—which Chuck plans to call, unironically, "Bald Eagle Field"—and they see signs that read "PRIVATE PROPERTY and NO ENTRY and KEEP OFF" (146).

Cricket does not appeal to Hans as a source of great profit. He even goes as far as to call it a game of “men imagining an environment of justice” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 121). His not infrequent feelings of alienation encourage us to take this comment at face value, and while Hans’s descriptions of cricket may seem *sui generis*, they echo C.L.R. James’s sentiments about cricket in *Beyond a Boundary*, a part-memoir, part-meditation on the game of cricket. O’Neill has written glowingly about James’s book, calling it the latter’s “greatest,” so it is by no means a stretch to conclude that he has drawn inspiration and strength for Hans’s encomiums from the book (“Bowling”). In it, James goes to great lengths to compare cricket to art; at one point, he writes that cricket is “first and foremost a dramatic spectacle” (196), and then he proceeds to link its “pure artistic appeal” to “significant form” in painting (202).

Painter Vanessa and critic Clive Bell, members of the famed Bloomsbury group, lay claim to the strongest association with significant form. The art critic who calls form significant or the painter who approaches the canvas with this concept in mind believes in form’s capacity to transcend mere representation and lend the static painting a mobile quality. According to James, cricket embodies significant form because, in presenting “harmonious action,” it “gives us a heightened sense of capacity,” and the sport’s formally transcendent quality makes it a “common possession” (207, 202, 208). In James’s hands, cricket’s significant form assumes democratic dimensions, minimizing the differences that divide players and spectators and instead opening up grounds for sharing, community, and equality. The effort to consider ethical responsibility, which is asymmetrical and resists formalization, alongside political equality, which requires form and structure, has preoccupied this study. In line with this abiding concern, James’s democratic understanding of cricket’s beauty recentres the issue of form, its importance as much as the difficulties it poses when discussed alongside the ethical relation.

What James emphasizes is that form need not threaten difference. The implications of cricket's significant form crystallize in an earlier passage of *Beyond*, one that prefigures Hans's musings on the sport and thereby helps to frame an ethico-political understanding of cricket's place in *Netherland*. On the cricket field, James explains, "all was changed":

We were a motley crew. The children of some white officials and white businessmen, middle-class blacks and mulattos, Chinese boys, some of whose parents still spoke broken English, Indian boys, some of whose parents could speak no English at all, and some poor black boys who had won exhibitions or whose parents had stared and toiled on plots of agricultural land and were spending their hard-earned money on giving the eldest boy an education. [. . .] We learned to play with the team, which meant subordinating your personal inclination, and even interests, to the good of the whole. (25)

Notice that James does not associate cricket with assimilation or homogeneity—unlike Chuck—but with coordination amongst people whose ethnic origins and class positions are heterogeneous. For James, cricket delimits a space of community that does not entail a hierarchy of humanness. It provides room for commonality across cultural difference, and it temporarily effaces the artificiality of class difference. James thus lays the groundwork for a serious consideration of cricket as a social form that challenges the socio-political status quo in the U.S.—especially after 9/11, when jingoistic rhetoric flooded the dominant national discourse.

Yet the challenge that cricket *qua* fugitive social form poses intimates the importance of keeping the ethical relation at the centre of analysis. If cricket affords temporary space for a community of equals within and against a broader political formation, then the critical capacity to recognize the injustice of social inequality beyond the cricket field falls to the subject whose

freedom is constituted through and by “the event of the dwelling” (Levinas, *Totality* 153). Levinas explains that “[t]o be free is to build a world in which one could be free” (*Totality* 165). The event of individuation by which consciousness and agency take shape endows the self with the power to address the state of their lifeworld in an ethical or egoistic manner. The phenomenology of the dwelling holds out the possibility for a form of hospitality and, by extension, a social form that emerges from “my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 159). It is in these ethico-political terms that Hans’s “quest for vision” demands to be thought, since the “environment of justice” that he sees in cricket starkly opposes the narrow form of nationalism—discriminatory; war-mongering; and as George Bush encouraging his constituents to keep shopping suggests, consumerist—that took shape after 9/11.

In fact, cricket in *Netherland* affords a cosmopolitan view of post-9/11 New York in which intimacy and alterity converge, as O’Neill refuses to reduce notions of home and otherness to a binary opposition. Recounting the day he first met Chuck, Hans admits that he took the sport up again “out of loneliness” and soon became “the only white man” on the field, as his teammates “variously originated from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 10). Hans is quick to underline his anomalous status within the amateur cricket league he joins, but he is just as quick to point out that cricket is not merely a timely diversion but also the activity that he most associates with his childhood in Holland—with, that is, “the young man who got a hundred runs in Amsterlveen with a flurry of cuts, who took that diving catch at second slip in Rotterdam, who lucked into a hat trick at the Haagse Cricket Club” (49). The version of himself that comes to mind when playing cricket is his “mothered self” (50). The unsubtle Freudian overtones here preempt psychoanalytically inflected criticism, but they do not preclude the rather simple, if significant, observation that the private

family, a social unit comprised of multiple generations, need not foreclose one's ethically oriented participation in the wellbeing of a wider human community.

It is through cricket as ethical social form, then, that O'Neill gestures toward the importance of making room for alterity without dominating it. On the one hand, playing cricket in New York introduces Hans to an ethnically and racially diverse community of cricketers who maintain their cultural particularity in the face of mainstream pressure to assimilate; on the other, it allows him to reconnect with core aspects of his personhood, reanimating a strong sense of home that is difficult to square with his growing awareness of difference on the cricket field. As in Chapter 1, this intersection of different cultures and histories brings to mind Homi Bhabha's work on the lived experience of culture, the way in which it challenges dominant narratives of nationhood (Bhabha 199-244). For Hans, cricket enables a heightened form of self-understanding that cannot be disentangled from the social heterogeneity it forces him to acknowledge, and this paradoxical imbrication of private and public provides an ethico-political image of community that contradicts the vociferous nativist rhetoric to which 9/11 gave rise.

The images associated with cricket must be read against the images associated with the private family. O'Neill comes closest to an outright critique of the family with his descriptions of Hans's technologically mediated attempts to stay in touch. After Rachel returns to London with their son, Hans, stuck in New York during the week, "traveled" there "night after night" with the help of Google Earth, but his "fall from the stratosphere" proves unsatisfying:

It was always a clear and beautiful day—and wintry, if I correctly recall, with the trees pale brown and the shadows long. From the balloonist's vantage point, aloft at a few hundred meters, the scene was depthless. My son's dormer was visible

and the blue inflated pool and the red BMW; but there was no way to see more, or deeper, I was stuck. (O'Neill, *Netherland* 123-124)

There is no starker image in the novel of the connection Levinas draws between egoistic conservatism and the private dwelling. In Chapter 1, I investigated the positive effects the chat room has on the recovering drug addicts in *Water by the Spoonful*, but in the above passage, Hans engages with nothing but static imagery, which offers little solace, a cruel substitute for human contact. The point here is not to criticize Hans's investment in domesticity in itself but to highlight the visual dimensions of this investment in a novel so preoccupied with optics. Hans can only see a series of possessions with any clarity. The timeless quality of the images provided by Google Earth exacerbates his feelings of abandonment, deprivation, and homelessness.

In light of this scene, the way in which Hans, after saving his marriage, describes his decision to quit playing cricket is striking; according to Hans, it “would feel *unnatural* [. . .] to separate myself from my family” in order to play (186; emphasis mine). Attributing Hans's use of the word “unnatural” to thoughtless word choice or the duties of family life would amount to stifling the ethico-political significance of “earthly cricket” (148). If there is no hint of irony when O'Neill elevates Hans's innocent musings about cricket to the status of profound insight, then Hans's curious diction demands attention to the private family as a structure of repression (O'Neill, *Netherland* 148). “Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world,” explains Levinas, “but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling” (*Totality* 153). Because the dwelling serves as a primary orientation device in the individual's engagement with the world beyond privacy, the point of Levinas's ethico-phenomenological insight here is that feelings of hospitality or egoism inflect one's interpretation of visual and/or public phenomena. What appears unnatural from inside the dwelling—from inside, that is, the

ostensibly happy family—is anything but when dysfunction thrusts Hans into social relations that he would not otherwise develop. The more Hans shuttles between the past and the present, in other words, the more the natural-unnatural binary comes apart, losing its objective veneer as the appearance of naturalness comes to depend on Hans’s domestic vantage point.

The retreat from ethics signaled by the reconstitution of the family becomes most clear in the final pages of *Netherland*, when Hans leaves the present for the past one last time. Reunited with his family and riding the London eye with them at sundown, Hans’s mind “drifts” to “another sundown, to New York, to my mother” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 255). Aboard the Staten Island Ferry, Hans and his mother gaze upon the Manhattan skyline, “a world concentrated most glamorously of all [. . .] in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers going up above all others, on one of which [. . .] the sun began to make a brilliant yellow mess” (255). The abstract terms in which Hans couches the Twin Towers seem to be for effect, to be sure, but also the *effect* of Hans’s psychic state upon reaching the “top” of the London Eye’s “celestial circuit” with his family; for just before drifting into the past, Hans notes that

a prefabricated symbolism attaches itself to this slow climb to the zenith, and we [he and Rachel] are not so foolishly ironic, or confident, as to miss the opportunity to glimpse significantly into the eyes of the other and share the thought that occurs to all at this summit, which is, of course, that they have made it thus far, to a point where they can see horizons previously unseen, and the old earth reveals itself newly. (254)

The juxtaposition of “prefabricated symbolism” and eye contact between spouses suggests that returning to normality has reawakened Hans’s flawed mode of looking.

Accordingly, Hans's insistence on the limits of "memory's repetitive mower" —on which I have based my analysis up to this point—disappears from his final recollection (4); about the "pink watery sunset" above the "lilac acres" Hans claims that "[f]actual assertions can be made": "I can state that I wasn't the only one of us to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw—the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light" (255-256). The symbolic excess of this image outstrips memory's metaphorical mower, for the natural-unnatural binary drops out of view altogether, replaced as it is by the grammar of transcendence. In this final recollection, Hans inscribes imagery associated with Christian belief—Hans and his mother *qua* Madonna and Child—over top of the "mothered self" he associates with cricket. In doing so, he reaffirms the family as a sacrosanct institution, one hooked up to God and to capitalism. This image couches the hyper-visibility of the Twin Towers in a layer of abstraction, thereby underscoring Hans's inability to link his visions of justice on the cricket field to a serious consideration of these towers' centrality to a global system whose exploitative operations reach far and wide.

Netherland contains no greater expression of globalization's selective light than this final image.

Overshadowed by these final pages, of course, is the ethico-political energy linked to cricket, the horizontal relationality and democratic sociality enabled by the sport's significant form. From the "prefabricated symbolism" of spousal rapprochement to Hans's description of "a people risen in light"—it seems as if the resuscitated intimacy of the private family has led Hans to find value in abstraction once again. Hans's circular arc brings us back to the imbrication of phenomenological and capitalist forms of abstraction. As Marx contends while discussing "the abstraction of the category 'labour,' 'labour as such,' labour pure and simple" (*Grundrisse* 105),

this abstraction of labour as such is not *merely the mental product* of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a *form of*

society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in a *specific form*. (104; emphasis mine)

Visual and mental abstractions cannot be isolated from capitalist abstraction, but then again the effects of capitalist abstraction can be traced to the visual and mental abstractions that assume natural dimensions. Put differently, “indifference” to the specificity of labour is a phenomenological condition at the same time that it is conditioned by untrammelled capitalist production. Marx’s historical materialism folds the individual’s phenomenological engagement with the world into a “form of society” in which certain phenomenological norms prevail. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that returning to London has not forced Hans to change jobs; he has *merely* taken up his old post at his transcontinental firm.

The point here is to underscore the coincidence of Hans’s reconstituted family with certain forms of visual abstraction (“the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers”). The abstract visual norms that Hans develops as a stock analyst become difficult to jettison when a return to family life restores his ability to see his work in a self-righteous light. Perhaps no image of the nuclear family is more enduring than that of the patriarch working hard to sustain the health and happiness of kin. The private family’s centripetal pull seems, in other words, to extinguish Hans’s capacity to overcome the epistemological abstractions that organize his visual field. Marx remains helpful. In noting how a specific “form of society” can induce “indifference” to the “specific form” of labour, Marx knows that social forms and therefore abstractions are an ineluctable fact of human life; at the same time, he recognizes that abstractions are not created

equal. The very possibility of acknowledging a particular form of labour implies that distinguishing between communally oriented and exploitative social forms is a critical procedure first and foremost.¹⁹

As Anna Kornbluh explains, Marx posits “ungrounded social organization—form without content—as the essence of human experience” (21). “Form without content” denotes Kornbluh’s poststructuralist framing of Marxist materialism, one that leaves the structuralist understanding of his base-superstructure model behind. Abstraction need not induce fear. Such an understanding of Marx is similar to what deconstructive practice has in mind when leveraging the letter’s groundlessness to challenge intellectual and social norms. The confluence of the signifier’s abstraction and social abstraction is, moreover, what Levinas has in mind when he claims that language “puts in common a world hitherto mine” (*Totality* 174). The ethical finds its most impactful expression in a political gesture that seems to exceed the letter, that remakes the bounds of the dwelling, that aims to reconstitute a network of private dwellings along the lines of a commune. It is helpful to note here that what is implied in Marx is more explicit in Levinas: the possibility of wielding language in the service of the Other—of marrying ethics to politics, openness to address—begins with the innate capacity to critique oneself as well as to question social and political norms. Ethico-political address involves something of a “quest for vision.”

O’Neill leaves it up to reader-critics to complete this quest. For in closing with Hans united with his family atop the London Eye—in the final paragraph, Hans “look[s] from him [his son] to Rachel and again to him” before “turn[ing] to look for what it is we’re supposed to be seeing” (O’Neill, *Netherland* 256)—*Netherland* equivocates about what Hans’s journey has yielded. It ends right where it began, not only with the family members ensconced in feelings of love and joy but with Hans no wiser than he was when Rachel left him after 9/11. Right before

its closing lines, however, the novel lapses momentarily into postmodern self-awareness, recognizing itself as a story told to an audience. After recounting his quasi-transcendent experience with his mother, Hans shifts into the second person, reaching beyond the text and hailing readers as witnesses: “You only had to look at our faces” (256). In reaching outward and drawing readers into a common world, Hans tacitly acknowledges the mediation of the letter, but he simultaneously conjures away the awareness of instability and the possibilities for remediation that accompany this acknowledgement. If we were there, Hans asserts, we would support his “[f]actual assertions.” Hans thus invokes “you” in bad faith, calling on readers not so much as critics but as a credulous audience. The reader is thereby gently goaded into consensus.

Yet capitulation to Hans’s narratorial authority obscures the ethico-political dimensions of *Netherland*. No novel can escape the keen and discerning eyes of its reader, of course, but Hans’s meta-diegetic address brings the imperative of reading with a critical eye into sharper relief. If there is anything to learn from Eve Sedgwick’s analysis of the “performative scene”—which not only involves the performers but “a ‘they’ of witness” (70, 69)—it is that a great deal of authority rests with the seemingly passive spectator, the one interpellated as nothing more than a witness. The presence of a passive witness ratifies the performative event—hence Sedgwick’s example of the wedding ceremony—but as soon as the spectator-witness rejects passivity and, concomitantly, the state of affairs that this performative event will effect, alternative and previously unforeseen possibilities begin to emerge. Sedgwick’s analysis of the performative scene resonates with O’Neill’s own realization in *Blood-Dark Track* (2001), his “family history” wherein he reconstructs the lives of his grandfathers, that the historical record, seemingly firm and stable, cannot escape the “strange mercilessness of the disobliged reader”

(115). The reader-critic who refuses to take Hans's word as final can, accordingly, glean a series of potent images from the novel, images that urge us to think otherwise than neoliberalism.

We might punctuate this discussion by focusing on a sight that challenges Hans's hermeneutic abstractions, a sight that is anything but transcendent and instead highlights global inequality. The scene in question unfolds, perhaps unsurprisingly, when Hans fills in for Rachel's absentee boyfriend on a trip to India with their son. On this trip, he learns that her boyfriend has "jilted" her (O'Neill, *Netherland* 224). Consequently, the trip is filled with tense exchanges, broken dialogue, and a good deal of awkwardness—in short, dysfunction *par excellence*—and Hans notes at one point that "very often [Rachel's] eyes were closed" (221). It is in the context of Rachel's reticence to communicate and Hans's eagerness to fix their relationship that he sets off with their son for a "nature reserve" (229). There, from a car inching "through the mountain forest" (230), Hans sees men "walking by the side of the road":

They were on their way to work. They walked not in groups but alone, in a broken single file. They were almost *unnoticeable*, and when they were noticeable, it was only for an instant. Some of these men wore a shirt; some did not. They were small and thin and poor and dark-skinned, with thin arms and thin legs. They were men walking in the forest and the darkness. (230; emphasis mine)

Here, the visual field exceeds Hans's visual norms, as his capacity for poetic aggrandizement falters in the face of abject poverty. Instead of Hans imposing his metaphorical abstractions on the visual field, this image of men walking "in a broken single file" seems to impose itself on him, thereby shaping his description. His staccato-like repetition of "and" and "thin" marks this passage as uncharacteristic, displacing the mellifluous lyricism and varied diction that define his voice for much of the novel.

Hans then admits that he “keep[s] on seeing these men”: “I do not think of Chuck as one of them, even though, with his very dark skin, he could have been one of them. I think of Chuck as the Chuck I saw. But whenever I see these men I always end up seeing Chuck” (230). This passage is by no means unproblematic, for Hans bases his connection on nothing more than the visibility of race, a reflex that strays dangerously close to the colonialist’s gaze that, according to both Claudia Benthien and Sylvia Wynter, was pivotal in shifting the dominant register of human difference from anatomy to epidermis.²⁰ That these men remind him of Chuck is evidence of Hans’s narrow scope of experience as well as his limited relationship with Chuck. To Rachel’s claim that he “exoticiz[ed] Chuck Ramkissoon,” Hans asserts categorically that “Chuck was a friend, not an anthropological curiosity” (166, 167). But Hans seems to be reassuring no one more than himself; indeed, Hans’s relationship with Chuck is framed by the latter’s curious mixture of openness and secrecy, ostentation and reticence, volubility and silence. Hans rarely sees Chuck in any other context than one in which the latter is reaching for something for which Hans has never had to reach on account of his affluence and privilege.

Yet the link Hans draws between Chuck and the Indian men opens the novel up to a set of worldly concerns while simultaneously paving the way for local forms of action. On the one hand, the sight of these men shuffling to work compels Hans to recognize how historical forces conspire on a world stage, conspire both against many people and in favour of certain people. To acknowledge the lottery of birth is to acknowledge how little one’s life chances have to do with anything absolute, fixed, earned, or deserved. To be sure, this worldly enlargement of scope makes ethico-political action decidedly more difficult, fuzzy, and vertiginous. When injustice is conceived on a global scale, a course of action becomes decidedly more difficult to devise. The ethical agent, no matter the scale of their commitments, cannot avoid the many constraints that

muffle the impact of any one individual's actions and decisions. The enormity of the problem can cause doubt and resignation to creep into one's political calculus, and inaction becomes a more justifiable political stance.

On the other hand, though racial homogeneity underpins the aforementioned link, the fact that Chuck brings the worldly home, as it were, for Hans evinces the phenomenological individual's capacity to synthesize momentarily the vastly different scales of injustice. "Think globally, act locally" is not a perfect slogan for this kind of synthesis; like any slogan, it operates in the abstract and can just as easily inspire narrow forms of nationalism as it can lead to well-intentioned efforts to reduce one's carbon footprint. Yet this slogan goes some way toward capturing the ethico-political significance of the connection Hans makes. The connection is consequential because it intimates that a global form of justice, however impossible at this stage of capitalism it may be to imagine, will ultimately be rooted in the groundless ground of the ethical, the deformatizing responsibility that exceeds juridico-legal frameworks while subtending their most just iterations. Levinas's concept of the dwelling, articulating ethics to meaningful change, illustrates the local dimension of the ethical epiphany. While Hans's relation to Chuck never reaches a point of selfless responsibility, Chuck is nevertheless the central figure in Hans's return to cricket—the sport that provides a model of equality in difference; that forces players to commit to a common goal; and that offers Hans in particular solace, community, and a sense of personal fulfillment when his home life is in tatters. Chuck lies at the heart of an amateur sporting world dramatizing for Hans the need to reconsider his commitment to the private dwelling in the service of a broader set of social commitments.

Reading O'Neill's novel in this way rescues its ethico-political dimensions from oblivion, diminishing the unassailable sanctity of the private family that its final pages put forward. In a

similar vein, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* urges its audience to bring a critical spirit to bear on its pseudo-Odyssean ending, one that sharp-eyed critics have taken to task for the ease with which it accommodates a centrist vision of liberal inclusiveness. The play's evocation of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (253-264) extends the imperative to read and think critically beyond the proscenium, though, and critics have paid insufficient attention to how Benjamin's work shapes *Angels*. Much like the narrative arc of *Netherland*, the family dysfunction that precedes the reconstituted family in the play's final scene discloses ethico-political dynamics that oppose the neoliberal regime of the private dwelling. The aim of the next section is to supplement critical appraisals of *Angels* by paying close attention to the multiple dramas of family dysfunction that drive the play to its forward-looking conclusion.

Family Dysfunction, the Letter, and the Spirit of the Law in *Angels in America*

In the time period that organizes this study's selection of primary texts, no American play has garnered more attention, adulation, and careful criticism than *Angels in America*, so much so that it merited an HBO adaptation by Mike Nichols. Divisible into two standalone parts, "Millennium Approaches" and "Perestroika," the play is set in the mid-80s at the height of the AIDS crisis and the Reagan administration's nefarious indifference to it. The simplest way of describing the play is that it follows a cast of characters, most of whom are gay, as they navigate this crisis—a cast comprised of Prior Walter, a WASP dying of AIDS whose arc involves becoming a prophet, visiting heaven, rejecting the prophecy of stasis, and returning to earth at the end of "Perestroika" to preach the importance of hope, futurity, and forgiveness; Louis Ironson, a Jewish man who abandons his partner, Prior, when constant exposure to a dying body becomes too much to handle; Belize, a black nurse and former drag queen who often puts characters like Louis in check for their blindness to racial privilege; Roy Cohn, a closeted right-wing Jewish

lawyer whose career highlights include leading the infamous Joseph McCarthy's charge against communists as well as prosecuting Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for treason; Joe Pitt, a Mormon lawyer who begins the play in the closet before getting involved with Louis; Harper, Joe's unhappy and Valium-dependent wife; and Hannah, Joe's mother who begins the play homophobic before discovering same-sex desires of her own.

As these brief descriptions suggest, the play is not just about the AIDS crisis; its thematic concerns are manifold and at times even contradictory, a list that includes cultural difference, racial strife, the pain of living in the closet, the pressures of organized religion, the difficulties of living in diaspora, and family discord. The breadth of this list suggests that Kushner pulls the play thin at times, and such capaciousness has indeed made *Angels* an easy target for critics, especially those wary of any commitment to identity politics that is not counterbalanced with a commitment to class politics. Post-Fordist production, after all, has turned the celebration of difference into a goldmine. As mentioned, the most incisive critic of the play is David Savran, who views the "new definition of family" adduced in the final scene of the play as an affirmation of a liberal pluralist project that, in turn, has worked toward "reaffirming a fundamental conservative hegemony" (209, 220). A careful investigation into Kushner's treatment of family dysfunction, however, yields a different conclusion. On the one hand, the play's multiple figurations of the family—Jewish and Mormon families, Joe and Harper's loveless marriage, the Reagan family, America as a family, Roy Cohn's duplicitous invocations of the family, the queer reinscriptions of the biblical Jacob story, and the "new" family of outsiders at the end—underscore the instability of this social category, lending *Angels* its most potent theatrical dimension; as Josette Féral explains, theatricality "is the result of a series of cleavages (inscribed by the artist and recognized by the spectator) aimed at making a disjunction in systems of

signification, in order to substitute other, more fluid ones” (10). On the other hand, *Angels* recognizes that any configuration of the family works to silence, obscure, and repress at the same time that it opens up a space for belonging. Balancing both of these commitments at once, *Angels* affirms the need for social justice as much as the need to remain critical of the social forms by which justice is envisioned.

The play’s ambivalence about the future stems from its most obvious philosophical inspiration: Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” For Kushner, Benjamin’s importance lies in imbuing “‘scientific’ disciplines” such as Marxism and psychoanalysis with a “Kabbalist-inflected mysticism and a dark, apocalyptic spirituality” (Kushner 286). Indeed, Benjamin juxtaposes a Judaic notion of messianic time with the practice of historical materialism, freeing a Marxian understanding of class struggle from a naïve belief in historical progress as emancipatory. In the play, Prior calling his “wine-dark” lesion a “kiss of the angel of death” (27) as well as The Angel’s negative view of human progress issue from the most famous section of Benjamin’s “Theses”:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. *Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe* which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his

back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-258; emphasis mine)

Benjamin offers a sobering picture of progress, which in his view coextends with “wreckage.” It is small wonder, then, that The Angel gives Prior the “Tome of Immobility, of respite, of cessation” (265). Yet Benjamin links an ethics of commemorating the dead to the inevitability of progress—to the inevitability, we might say, of the letter. What the angel cannot accomplish is left to us, the mortal “we” that Benjamin hails as historical materialists. The historical materialist, according to Benjamin, beholds history’s wreckage in order “to blast open the continuum of history” (262). If it is no surprise that The Angel approaches Prior with the prophecy of stasis, it is equally unsurprising that Prior rejects this prophecy and demands a future, for the refusal of progress amounts to the refusal of one’s ethical responsibilities.

The path from Benjamin to Levinas is relatively straightforward here, and teasing out their similarities will clarify Kushner’s project at the outset of this section. After his chapter on the dwelling, Levinas writes: “Between subjectivity shut up in its interiority and the subjectivity poorly heard in history there is the attendance of the subjectivity that speaks” (*Totality* 182). For Levinas, the Other is the dead whom Benjamin’s angel would like to “awaken,” and the obverse of this formulation is that the individual inhabiting the dwelling must perform the difficult work of “mak[ing] whole what has been smashed.” In *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Levinas writes that the “difficult freedom of being Jewish” involves becoming a “man of the Torah” who “transforms being into human history” (*Nine* 39). Masculinist inflection aside, what Levinas means is that progress ceases to be a “single catastrophe” and instead becomes “human history” to the extent that the ontologically bound individual, understanding that the ethical law subtends the law in its most (im)mediate sense, works to dislodge human life from the political and epistemological

norms that devalue collective forms of living. Such is why Levinas can move rather swiftly from claiming that the “temptation of temptation is the temptation of knowledge” (*Nine* 33)—the temptation, that is, of the *logos* and thus the letter—to asserting that the “world is here so that the ethical order has the possibility of being fulfilled” (*Nine* 41). Boldly approaching the future is just as important as remaining critical of progress; right in the middle of this “difficult” intersection of duties is where we can locate Kushner’s ambivalent treatment of the family.

No sooner does the play begin than Kushner’s treatment of the family as a flawed, imperfect social form starts to crystallize. In the opening scene, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz breaks off his eulogy for the deceased Sarah Ironson to express disbelief and bemusement at the “goyische name[]” of her grandson: “Eric? This is a Jewish name?” (16). This brief pause gives an ironic inflection to the rest of his speech in which he praises the strength of the deceased who “fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in this melting pot where nothing melted. [. . .] You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl” (16; emphasis original). Chemelwitz emphasizes intergenerational continuity in the face of evidence evincing the effects the dominant gentile culture has had on the Jewish community. This opening monologue establishes the dramatic agon between constancy and change that will shape the play’s most theatrical moments—namely, The Angel’s insistence that Prior accept the prophecy and his refusal.

The disclosure of Prior’s Kaposi Sarcoma lesion not long after this funeral scene leads Jonathan Freedman to note an “equation between the sexually transgressive and the Jewish” (43)—an equation, that is, between Jewish otherness and sexual otherness, between Sarah Ironson’s death and the deadliness of AIDS. While I hope to nuance Freedman’s point below, at this point in the play there is just as much evidence to conclude the opposite. For Louis cannot

express himself as Jewish and gay simultaneously to members of his family. Shortly before we learn that Prior has AIDS, he gently mocks Louis for playing “butch” in front of his family: “Lou, not Louis, because if you say Louis they’ll hear the sibilant S” (25-26). That belonging to a family involves hiding one’s true identity is nothing new to queer people, of course, but this point bears emphasis when discussing a play that juggles multiple forms of difference. At the outset of the play, that is, Kushner presents the family as a social formation incapable both of resisting change (gentile culture) and of making space for a different form of difference (Louis’s sexuality). Whereas Chemelwitz articulates the need to preserve a sense of Jewish difference, Louis’s foreshortened name brings into sharp relief the limits of the dwelling as a place of acceptance and belonging.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Louis ultimately winds up in a sexual relationship with Joe Pitt. Despite their political differences, Louis being a Democrat and Joe a Republican, Joe’s experiences reflect Louis’s. The relationship between the normative family structure and the closet has affected Joe more severely, though, for he has been in the closet for much of his life. When he finally comes out to Hannah, she refuses to acknowledge his sexuality. He pleads with her to “[s]ay something” (81), and she responds by reducing his admission to a boy acting out for attention: “You’re old enough to understand that your father didn’t love you without *being ridiculous*” (82; emphasis mine). So far beyond the bounds of possibility, his sexuality does not even register with her as a sin, and instead she chides him for the “sin” of drinking (82). While Joe’s reluctance to embrace his sexuality is due in large part to the religious beliefs he holds, what unites him with Louis is that, for both of them, the family constitutes a source of shame about their sexuality.

These examples make the ease with which Prior and Belize inhabit the world as openly gay men all the more noteworthy. On the one hand, Louis and Joe stand out for jilting their partners, and given their political ideals, their actions are particularly hypocritical: whereas Louis believes in the prospect of political equality, Joe believes in the beneficent agency of American law. On the other hand, as proud gay men, Prior and Belize form the play's moral center of gravity, attesting to a set of ethical principles that subtend and exceed the official version of the law. Andrea Most points out that the play forwards "a subtle but insistent embrace [. . .] of stability of identity as a necessary precursor to moral action" (234). Indeed, the play insists on gay authenticity, with Belize and Prior bearing this message most visibly, even though it trafficks heavily in Brechtian alienation strategies on a formal level. (In his "Playwright's Notes" appearing before the published version of "Perestroika," Kushner writes that "it's OK if the wires [holding up the Angel] show" and then instructs directors to "[e]schew sentiment!" [141-142].) Given the play's unwavering focus on families as well as symbols of the family, Belize's and Prior's openness about their sexuality needs to be understood in this context.

Each has a tenuous or non-existent relation to their family. Belize has no backstory involving a family, which makes him a kind of surrogate parent to the other characters. He is a nurse and confidant, someone to whom the other characters turn in times of need, even the ghastly Roy Cohn. For much of the play, Belize embodies the historical materialist about whom Benjamin writes. He criticizes Louis for being "just like that angel, too far off the earth to pick out the details" (228). For Belize, America cannot be reduced to a "chain of events" called progress; rather, it is nothing more than a "single catastrophe." "It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying," he says to Louis (228). Belize's experiences have taught him that the reality of inequality does not bear out the rhetoric of democratic equality, the rhetoric that Louis finds

appealing. Comparing America to England, Louis contends that “it’s the racial destiny of the Brits that matter to them, not their political destiny, whereas in America . . .” (97). This is much more than an insensitive gaffe by Louis, for it ripples through the play as a warning against all-encompassing theses about progress and change. Notably, Belize’s rebuttal takes shape as an antebellum tale of family betrayal, an ironic allegory about America. The story ends with illicit lovers, a white woman and a black man, “discuss[ing] the nature of love;” and “her face is reflecting the flames of the burning plantation—you know, the way white people do—and his black face is dark in the night and she says to him, ‘Thaddeus, real love isn’t ever ambivalent’” (102). The irony, of course, is that this relationship is shot through with inequality; the story is less a hopeful one of racial reconciliation than a reminder of persistent inequality—a reminder that America remains a dysfunctional family.

Prior has no immediate family either—but his family is, as Louis explains, “an old old family. The Walters go back to the Mayflower and beyond” (57). Prior, that is, has no connection to family as a site of lived experience and sociality but retains a symbolic connection to the nation’s first families. During one of his febrile episodes of delirium, Prior is visited by his ancestors, Prior 1 and Prior 2, and they commend him for being recognized as a prophet. To Prior 2’s congratulatory message, “It’s a great honor for the family” (94), Prior 1 points out: “He hasn’t got a family” (94). “I meant for the Walters,” Prior 2 responds, “for the family in the larger sense” (94). Walter’s exceptionally WASP family tree allows Kushner to symbolically queer the American mainstream. Kushner thus oscillates between the lived experience of family (Joe’s and Louis’s actual families) and abstract symbols of this social formation (family “in the larger sense”). The more family becomes a symbol unmoored from a determinate referent, the more amenable it becomes to subversive reiteration.

We might call this approach to the family Derridean, since this social institution takes on a positive cast to the extent that it can be recast symbolically to accommodate gay people. The play makes clear that classic figurations of the family offer gay people plenty of imaginative material with which to reimagine their difference along reparative lines. Much of this queer reimagining involves the biblical story of Jacob. Before coming out, Joe tells Harper about his “book of Bible stories”: “There was picture I’d look at twenty times every day: Jacob wrestles with the angel. [. . .] Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is . . . a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course” (55). As both the son who stole his brother Esau’s birthright and the father of the Israelites, Jacob provides a potent example of symbolic instability, signaling the possibility of remaking the family from within. To that end, he functions as a kind of gay imago for Joe, who has less religious reverence for the story than erotic desire for the angel. Subsequently, this queer reenvisioning of the Jacob story reaches its transgressive climax in Hannah discovering that she too has same-sex desire. The “[h]ermaphroditically [e]quipped” Angel, whom Kushner’s stage directions identify with feminine pronouns, “*kisses her [Hannah] on the forehead and then the lips—a long, hot kiss*” (175, 252; emphasis original). Kushner reinscribes the classic tale of Jacob wrestling with the angel as one in which The Angel helps Hannah come out of the closet. Such authentic expression of her sexual identity is in line with Hannah’s transformation over the course of the play, as she goes from Joe’s bigoted mother to a maternal figure who looks after and counsels Prior.

These examples of the reimagined family, enabling characters to embrace their sexuality openly, stand out against a backdrop of political violence and deceit. While Ronald Reagan’s mission to cut housing subsidies and decrease hospital beds looms over any play about a public health crisis that struck major cities the hardest, Kushner urges audiences to recognize how the

Reagan administration's most egregious actions cannot be delinked from its propagation and enforcement of social norms. In one scene, Louis invokes Reagan in the context of the nuclear family, telling a still-closeted Joe that the Reagans are "not really a *family*": "they don't ever even speak to each other except through their agents" (77; emphasis original). There is no greater symbol for the intersection of social conservatism and neoliberalism than the Reagan family. In Reagan's "California's Blueprint for National Welfare Reform," drafted in the 70s when he was still the Governor of California, a section is entitled "Family Responsibility," and the first sentence of this section emphasizes "the role of the family as the basic unit in society" (Reagan 55). What follows is a list of proposals that unite budget-cutting imperatives to the grammar of family responsibility. One proposal recommends greater cooperation from single mothers in identifying absentee fathers as a condition of receiving welfare benefits (55-56), and another recommends greater fund allocation to agencies tasked with locating absentee fathers in order to make the latter assume the burden that the state would otherwise have to shoulder (57-58).

These proposals, essentially recommending that the non-normativity of recipient families become more visible and thus more open to scrutiny, prefigured the policy initiatives pursued by Reagan's presidential administration, which made the private family the site of its most dramatic interventions in the social body. By pathologizing welfare recipients, specifically female-led families of colour, in order to redirect benefits to what Reagan's "blueprint" calls the "truly needy" (56), the administration abetted mainstream fears of racial and sexual otherness—a form of discursive violence that paved the way for the marriage between neoliberal disinvestment and conservative social values. As Laura Briggs points out, "the neoliberal withdrawal of state support for impoverished people, families, and communities was accomplished to a significant extent through a narrative about race and reproduction;" and this narrative reanimated "an old

culture of poverty tale in which poverty was caused by bad mothers” (9).²¹ During Reagan’s eight years in the White House, the image of the black “welfare queen” and the moral panic over “crack babies” became principal justifications for shrinking the welfare state; in this context, the fact that AIDS was spreading throughout the gay community undoubtedly made the administration’s attack on public healthcare more palatable to mainstream America. This political calculus, taking shape at the intersection of conservative bigotry and neoliberal budget cutting, has had lasting effects; since the 1980s, Cooper points out, “welfare has been transformed from a redistributive program into an immense federal apparatus for policing the private family responsibilities of the poor” (*Family* 21).²² There is nothing innocent, then, about the Reagan family as the picture of perfection.

Primarily, Kushner brings this political sophistry into relief through Roy Cohn, the politically influential lawyer whom Louis calls the “polestar of human evil” (Kushner 227). Roy’s actions throughout *Angels* dramatize metonymically how the Reagan administration suffused political violence with socially conservative rhetoric. A pathological liar, Roy openly admits to fabricating the truth for much of his career, the result being that his lies “turn[] out to be true!” (161). Over the course of the play, Roy’s mendacity includes his clumsy attempt to seduce an unwitting Joe, as he tells the latter that the “most precious asset in life [. . .] is the ability to be a good son” (62); his boasts about his primary role in turning Ethel Rosenberg from one of “our little Jewish mamas” into a treasonous villain (114); and his denial of his sexuality: “Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man [. . .] who fucks around with guys” (52). Roy’s insincere references to family relations are consistent with his refusal to acknowledge his sexuality, providing a stark counter-example to the other characters’ efforts to reimagine the family as a space of gay authenticity. With the figure of Roy, a synecdoche for the

American legal system, Kushner draws a link between political power and social normativity, between the functioning of the law and the social norms that force gay people into closet.²³ The implication is that the official law, though violent, biased, and tendentious, is not grounded upon firm foundations but rests precariously on a constitutive set of elisions and repressions.

Thus, the homology Freedman sees between Jewish otherness and non-normative sexuality has less to do with lived experience than with the play's insistence on an ethical law (the spirit) subtending and exceeding the letter of the law. This insistence is significant to the play's investment in reimagining the family. After invoking the Reagan family, Louis proceeds to figure Reagan as the patriarch of America in order to reflect on the shame he feels from his unethical abandonment of Prior. Haltingly, he tells Joe that "[s]ometimes, even if it scares you to death, you have to be willing to break the law" (79), before considering his behaviour as a symptom of a country whose commander in chief is a bigot: "Maybe we are free. To do whatever. Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan's children" (80). The Judaic undertones are unmistakable here, as Louis draws a link between the private family and the nation while intimating that a primary form of law outruns these social configurations.²⁴ If he has acted according to the morals encoded in Reagan's policy work and his indifference to the AIDS crisis, that does not change the fact that he has violated ethical principles that exceed the behavioural norms of liberal America. This notion of a law preceding the letter of the law takes on an embodied dimension when the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg—Roy's "Jewish mama[]"—speaks through Louis and recites the Kaddish for a dead Roy (254-257). Neither the paradigmatic nuclear family nor the image of "Reagan's children" can absorb this hauntological example of kinship. With the return of the repressed

Jewish mother, the most difficult act of responsibility and forgiveness in the play is inscribed within a drama of family dysfunction.

In light of these rival models of the family, the play's ambivalence about this social formation maps onto the dialectical relationship between form (the letter) and formlessness (ethics) at the heart of Levinas's concept of the dwelling. If the private family's emergence through an event of separation means that ethical conduct involves transgressing the bounds of the dwelling, the family is nevertheless the most common symbol of political community—a community bound by the *letter* of the law. Democracy's association with tropes of family, friendship, and other endogenous loyalties, which join people together through an act of separation, delimits a space of belonging while threatening the respect for difference, a major tenet of democratic theory. Against this backdrop, reimagining the family capitulates to the dominant fictions of nationhood and political visibility while at the same time holding out hope for a more democratic political community. In the play's final scene, Prior proclaims: "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens" (280). Here, the formation of what Freedman calls "a postnuclear family made up of quarreling outsiders" mediates the effort to claim a measure of political power and fight for equality (57). As Prior's use of the future auxiliary makes clear, the play's valedictory image of the family constitutes a bold political stance, which does not entail abandoning the ethical dynamics the play has disclosed throughout. In pointing toward the future, Prior also emphasizes the need to keep an eye on the past and to honour the dead. This paradoxical relation to time keeps Benjamin's and Levinas's Judaically inflected philosophies close by.

According to Freedman, however, the play's final scene evinces the "abandonment of Jewish difference and all that comes with it" (41). The play completes its Odyssean circle, beginning and then ending with a family marked by difference, only to silence the "questions of Jewish identity it has bravely raised" (41). Freedman notes that the play resolves its apocalyptic vision into a Shakespearean comedy, and accordingly, "a Christian thematic surfaces that stresses grace and rebirth. [. . .] Both these forms have notorious difficulties in reckoning with the figure of the Jew" (55). Freedman's focus is ethnic heterogeneity, so it is understandable why the final scene provokes this argument; after all, Prior, the WASP *par excellence*, bears the play's message of hope, while Louis is nothing more than—to cite Freedman one last time—"a cultural stereotype" (55). Without overturning Freedman's point, we might draw strength from historian Lila Corwin Berman's polemical call to treat "Jewishness as an interpretive mode," which would "upend empiricism" and mean "releasing Jewishness from the claims of specific bodies and spaces" (276, 285). Berman's aim is not to discredit the study of people who identify as Jewish but to outline a new methodological approach that could operate alongside more common ones, an approach that would "dismantle the foundationalist discourses of Jewishness" (285). The risk here is obvious, but important to note nonetheless: dislodging Jewishness from specific people could transform it into something akin to a brand, one that an entrepreneurial subject could put on or slough off as they see fit. Yet the critique of foundationalism and empiricism resonates with Kushner's emphasis on an ethical law subtending the political, Levinas's phenomenology of the dwelling that cautions against the temptation of possessive egoism, and Benjamin's messianic notion of time.

Berman gives us permission to turn our attention away from determinate figurations of Jewish difference within the play and instead look for something more akin to a Judaic spirit, one that Kushner identifies in Benjamin's work. The final section of Benjamin's "Theses" reads:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter. (264)

The figure of the historical materialist has morphed into the figure of the Jew. Benjamin at once honours the specificity of Talmudic scholarship while freeing it from an empirically Jewish context. The good historical materialist, that is, approaches history in a similar vein as the "Jews" who "were prohibited from investigating the future." It is thus evident that the thrust of these final lines is also the thrust of Prior's final words: that failing to approach the future in an ethical spirit of remembrance drains the future of all hope.

In this light, the final scene of *Angels* sounds a decidedly ambivalent note. If it is aware of the need to mount an offensive against political violence that hides behind mainstream cultural values, it also seems to recognize that the fight for power is rarely consistent with one's responsibility for the Other, that the spirit and the letter of the law are always to some extent at odds. Put differently, Prior's Benjaminian message, announcing the need to claim a future without forgetting the past, encapsulates how the stage on which to enact political struggles marks a departure from the ethical relation that conditions these struggles in the first place. "Representation," Levinas reminds us, "is a privileged conditioned, absorbing its condition"

(*Totality* 153)—by which he means that the act of addressing the other as if it were the Other presupposes the Other’s primary impingement on the self, the radical interdependence that eludes semantic capture. Levinas’s point is that the exercise of agency, which does not only refer to the scene of intersubjective address but political action too, can never close the gap between the non-sovereign condition of human life and the forms of lived subjectivity that human life takes. Accordingly, the characters’ queer reconfiguration of the family, giving them a much healthier and hopeful orientation toward the future, marks a compromise that avoids political quietism and inaction. The fight for social justice rarely unfolds without an admixture of idealism and compromise, and it will therefore require, *Angels* suggests, the use of broken social forms as a means to a greater end.

Recognizing the impossibility of acting according to ethical principles at all times does not, however, discount the reminder at the heart of Prior’s ambivalent message: that social norms conspire with political power to make life less livable—and with regard to the AIDS crisis, much deadlier—for certain groups of people. In following his Benjaminian insistence on remembrance, one cannot help noting that Kushner devotes much time to exposing the problems with the private family in the lead up to the play’s final scene. Not least of these problems is the family’s association with the nation. Ethel Rosenberg, after all, was executed in the service of the nation, in order to protect America against “communist subversives” and contain the flow of foreign influence. But less dramatically, Kushner shows how pain, suffering, and dissatisfaction are unequally distributed within the family. He juxtaposes a scene in which Harper rues the powerlessness of women in Mormon households with one in which Joe lies in bed with Louis, who playfully recasts a Mormon origin story as a tale of cruising (192-207). It is also easy to overlook the fact that the play’s greatest example of justice unfolds in the context of family

dysfunction, for Prior owes his life to Louis and Belize stealing Roy's AZT medication in the same scene in which Ethel recites the Kaddish (254-257). The coincidence of Ethel's return and vigilante redistribution points to the possibility of linking ethically motivated conduct to economic justice. While *Angels* raises several questions about the regime of the private family that it cannot quite answer, it also suggests that this regime by no means constitutes the horizon of social possibility.

This critical energy is more important than ever. After *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court case that ruled against states banning same-sex marriage, the limits of a social order organized according to a network of private families have crystallized. To be clear, marriage equality was long overdue, and most objections to same-sex marriage are nothing less than shameful bigotry. There is plenty of reason to think that the normalization of same-sex marriage will play a major role in cleansing the social body of homophobia. However, although marriage equality constitutes a landmark victory for LGBTIQ people who have been denied a right that their heterosexual allies have enjoyed for centuries, it is important not to neglect the fact that monogamous marriage hardly encapsulates the illimitable ways in which people act queerly; express their sexuality; and form sexual, romantic, and/or family bonds. That marriage is deeply entrenched in consumerism is also a sign that marriage equality has done very little to address the role that class position plays in determining queer people's life chances. Consider, then, the rhetorical celebration of the family running through the majority opinion of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Anthony Kennedy, who penned the opinion, asserts that "marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations" (3). He goes on to point out that "the Nation's traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order" (16). Though the observation is correct, its tone and thrust sound alarm bells in anyone sensitive to the social order's injustice.

According to Roderick A. Ferguson, “the marriage right” is “an example of legal agency that confers personhood and narrows the intimate universes and social capacities produced by racial and sexual minorities” (“Question” 2). The law extends and grants agency in limited ways, foreclosing alternative “genres of intimacy” that exceed the norms of personhood established by the law (“Question” 11). Ferguson links marriage equality to the “contraction of intimacy options” experienced by black communities in the transition from enslavement to legal personhood. Ferguson provides a stark reminder of the law’s role in establishing social norms and thereby making alternatives seem aberrant, immoral, and déclassé. Marriage equality rightly constitutes an important step to fostering a democratic body politic where cultural and racial privilege do not triumph over a fundamental sense of equality, no matter how people choose to live or organize their lives. Yet monogamous marriage is only one “genre of intimacy” amongst many others. As Derrida makes clear in *The Politics of Friendship*, social possibility surpasses the ontic domain of sociality established by the law, be it the informal law of the household or the formal law that delineates national boundaries. We lose sight of this deconstructive insight, and what it says about the potential for social and economic justice, when we cease to find fault in the neoliberal regime of the private family. The dwelling is an opening and a foreclosure.

Coda: Family Dysfunction, Ethics, and Economic Justice in the Era of COVID-19.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the major case studies in this chapter resolve the narrative arcs opened up by family dysfunction with a reinvestment in domesticity, for life is more bearable when entrepreneurial subjects, mostly adrift in a capitalist world that demands sound personal investments, can latch onto dependable social relations that feel permanent and that make space for minor outbursts, inconsistencies, and screw ups. The weight of habit, which not only gets heavier with private possessions, mortgages, and kids but also with the psychic

payoffs that these things or little people bring, goes some way toward absorbing the anxieties of contemporary life. The stakes of failing outside in an unwallled space are far greater than at the dinner table, moreover, and sometimes all one needs is to feel that their failures will not dramatically affect the shape of tomorrow. Levinas is right to spotlight how the threat of the elements can induce possessive egoism, but “elements” hardly does justice to the multiple assaults that neoliberal capitalism visits upon the psyches and the bodies of entrepreneurial subjects, and we could insist on even more specificity here, since race, gender, sexuality, and ability determine the force of this violence. The dwelling is an opening and a foreclosure, indeed, but it is also the space to which one returns for rest and relaxation, and it often contains the people to whom one turns for support and intimacy unmediated by the profit motive.

Water by the Spoonful has already suggested this much to us, and it does not take a particularly incisive critic to recognize that the dwelling is a place for unwinding. But the comfort of normativity is what makes unwilled and unexpected experiences of failure helpful objects of inquiry in teasing out the ethical dimensions of contemporary literature. In *Netherland*, if family dysfunction gives Hans permission to pick up an old sport, to reconnect with his “mothered self,” it also lays the groundwork for a serious consideration of his white, bourgeois privilege, as well as his blindness to the consequences of the industry to which his work connects him. There is a problem with the world when one’s temporary estrangement from their partner and child teaches them more about injustice than the nightly news. But if family reconciliation at the end of O’Neill’s novel signals a complete return to normality, the queer reimagining of the family at the end of *Angels in America* seems to augur a less discriminatory and decidedly more democratic social order. Time, however, has shown us that political struggles routed through normative institutions cannot effect radical change, even though the end result—a family that

makes room for sexual difference—cannot be discounted as an important step. Aligning itself with Benjamin’s historical materialist allows *Angels* to retain “a *weak* Messianic power,” as it gestures weakly to the possibility of channeling the spirit of the law—the ethical—beyond domesticity and into a fight for economic justice (Benjamin 254; emphasis original).

But what to do when a pandemic strikes? The spread of COVID-19 has all but put an end to public sociality, which has made life immensely difficult for people whose family life is tense and abusive. The problems posed by the pandemic unsettle, if not attenuate, the central concern of this chapter: the longer that following stay-at-home protocols remains the most responsible form of conduct, the dimmer the prospect of rethinking the dwelling along ethical lines seems to grow. In the first week of what was nearly a worldwide lockdown, the rapacity with which people hoarded hand sanitizer and toilet paper—to say nothing about their shopping carts brimming with every non-perishable food item imaginable—evinced the quickness with which possessive egoism can reach its fullest expression during times of panic. Canned goods for the family are important, of course, but buying stuff clearly feels good too. That said, amid the horrible spread of the virus, silver linings can still be found; for instance, we now know how much power the proletariat has. A worldwide collective work stoppage could bring global capitalism to its knees.²⁵ Moreover, the virus has brought global interdependence into sharp relief, and hopefully the response is not more bigotry or nationalism for the wrong reasons.

In closing, I bring this spirit to bear on John Ashberry’s poem “Alcove” in order to emphasize that domestic life need not foreclose an ethical vision of justice:

Is it possible that spring could be
 once more approaching? We forget each time
 what a mindless business it is, porous like sleep,

adrift on the horizon, refusing to take sides, “mugwump
 of the final hour,” lest an agenda—horrors!—be imputed to it,
 and the whole point of its being spring collapse
 like a hole dug in sand. It’s breathy, though,
 you have to say that for it.

And should further seasons coagulate
 into years, like spilled, dried paint, why,
 who’s to say we weren’t provident? We indeed
 looked out for others as though they mattered, and they,
 catching the spirit, came home with us, spent the night
 in an alcove from which their breathing could be heard clearly.
 But it’s not over yet. Terrible incidents happen
 daily. That’s how we get around obstacles. (1)

The narrative of the poem is fairly straightforward, beginning with the restful contemplation of the changing season and ending with the vague recognition of violence beyond the confines of the dwelling. The opening stanza interpellates and then transports readers into a scene of domestic life, which is no longer a dream or an aspiration but a mode of living and an interpretive mode. That spring is “once more approaching,” in other words, is less important than the speaker’s capacity to forget the season’s promiscuous boons. “We forget each time” evinces how great ease over an extended period of time can turn possessive egoism into forgetful egoism, for when the dwelling need not change, the world outside need not assume threatening proportions. The collective “we” of the poem could not be further from a modernist sensibility

and from T.S. Eliot's uncanny admixture of life and death in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*: "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land" (1.1-2). The comforts of domestic life seem to have lulled the speaker into a somnambulant state, but the poem's icons of daily existence—namely, sleep, paint, and alcove—suggest that any sluggishness is less zombie-like than the effect of domestic normativity. Over time rebirth loses its wondrous veneer. Spring will come again and again and again.

And yet, in this opening stanza the speaker displays an awareness of political discourse and debate unfolding beyond the private dwelling. Their level of engagement with the meta-subjective issues of the time is ambiguous. Perhaps the speaker watches the nightly news or reads the paper with equal parts interest and indifference. The poem is the first in Ashberry's 2009 collection, *Planisphere*, so perhaps the wariness of an "agenda" stems from the fact that a prominent talking point had become the financial and imperialist motivations behind the Iraq War, or maybe the sub-prime-mortgage crisis is the newsworthy topic of the day and the "mindless business" is none other than predatory lending. This latter conclusion makes sense alongside the frequent allusions to domesticity and inequality littered throughout the collection. For instance, "Something It Wasn't" begins with the following lines: "Better homes and gardens for many / but for the rest, we are not so sure" (95). "Some Had Lunch" begins with an expression of monetary overload—"All this random money, committed money"—only to end with a reminder that recessions hurt certain people more than others: "Others will benefit from your ritual cleansing / as they have before, / and go on ahead" (92). The gloomiest commentary on the sub-prime-mortgage crisis can be found in the poem "Default Mode." The title itself mobilizes two distinct meanings of "default," a noun that refers to the status quo and a verb that means failure to pay one's debts. The inequality exacerbated by the crisis, Ashberry suggests, is

consistent with the preceding structures of inequality. The final stanza of the poem juxtaposes rival sentiments about America; the first line—“They were living in America but it’s all over”—gives way to resignation: “They were living in American the same old same old” (18). In any case, the reason for the speaker’s lapse into irony is less significant in “Alcove” than the lapse itself, for the latter shows that no amount of easy living can entirely eliminate one’s sense that they are embedded in something—a city, a country, and/or the planet—much bigger and broader than the ambit of their quotidian life.

This sense of one’s smallness, however, need not induce ethical conduct. The transition from the first to the second stanza seems like “a panting, a trembling of substantiality” with ethical implications (Levinas, *Otherwise* 180), but it simply dramatizes the speaker’s ironic edge transforming into defensiveness. The rhetorical question—“who’s to say [. . .]?”—acts as a justification for a life lived according to the norm, and there is a methodology to the speaker’s argument; through the magic of what we might call domestic hermeneutics, the prospect of a future is reified into “paint,” a consumable good that can either be put to use or spilled and left to dry. The speaker seems incapable of expressing the passage of time without the mediation of a bourgeois sensibility; their inability to imagine life otherwise than consumerist attenuates their subsequent message of hospitality—be the message euphemistic or not. The case could be made that treating people “as though they mattered” encodes an instrumental approach to social relations. But who’s to blame them? Contemporary life demands such an approach. The Kantian dictum—treat people not as a means to an end but as an end in themselves—rarely holds when the work week makes one question whether they even matter.

A more damning reading would understand the speaker’s vague assertion of hospitality as evidence of conservatism. Only the willfully blind can deny the systemic inequalities

underwriting everyday sociality. Since its inception in 2013, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has drawn heterogeneous people into common cause and worked to fight this inequality, especially in light of the repeated examples of police brutality against unarmed black people. BLM has made the subject of “mattering” an ethico-political issue, and the conservative backlash, encapsulated in the counter-slogan “All Lives Matter,” has displayed an aggressive unwillingness to remake society along more equal lines. In this context, the speaker’s vague assertion of approaching ethno-racially ambiguous people “as though they mattered” seems to flirt with the rhetorically misleading slogan of the conservative opposition to BLM. Institutional discrimination and histories of dispossession provide overwhelming evidence that America is white supremacist. Better social arrangements will rely on making the victims of this politico-economic dispossession matter.

A more charitable reading, one that resonates with how life is actually lived in communities and in cities, is that no one can treat everyone “as though they mattered.” The impossibility of treating everyone as if they matter is why no account of Levinasian ethics is complete without his notion of the third party. The arrival of the third party on the scene of ethical relationality makes justice and all the phenomena associated with it necessary: “comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice” (*Otherwise* 157). For Levinas, political systems and structures—institutions of the letter—translate the asymmetry of the ethical relation into equality. With his notion of possessive egoism, though, Levinas also recognizes that the beneficiaries of systemic inequality have a difficult time disabusing themselves of the fiction of sovereign subjectivity. Indeed, Ashberry’s speaker cannot find fault in their actions. Justice

does not figure into their calculus of sociability, and the freedom to tip the scale of importance from oneself to other people seems indissociable from lyric subjectivity. In the social landscape of Ashberry's poem, punctual and fleeting acts of hospitality do not come from a place of radical selflessness; they simply feed one's belief in their own goodness.

Yet even though hospitality abets the speaker's narcissism, treating others "as though they mattered" seems to be a tacit acknowledgement of privilege. That is, "we" know that "we" have the good luck and fortune to enjoy the comforts of the private dwelling, and "we" know that "we" are embedded in a broader sphere of social relations in which "[t]errible incidents / happen daily." In the face of this daily terror, the easy relationality within the dwelling certainly feels like a boon. The collective "we" of the poem enjoy a space in which gentleness and solicitude triumph over instrumentality. The image of the guest(s) sleeping in "an alcove from which their breathing could be heard clearly" suggests peace and repose. Perhaps, then, not discrediting narcissistic forms of hospitality *tout court* is politically useful. Perhaps self-righteousness is psychically helpful to the extent that it upends political quietism. After all, the speaker is willing to open up their dwelling, and what the vagueness of the poem suggests is that a self-centered approach to selflessness need not latch onto narrow-minded religious principles or other forms of intolerance that often taint and undermine the act of giving. Ethical relationality disappears from view when self-satisfied forms of help are the order of the day, to be sure, but the speaker's sense of their dwelling's place within the public scheme of things cannot be discounted when *social* distancing protocols are misinterpreted as permission to forget one's constitutive sociality.

Of course, there is nothing stopping the "we" of "Alcove" from cleaving to routine, and "we" certainly do not experience the kind of self-interruption or failure that opens up pathways to political action. In fact, the poem's image of domestic calm makes clear that the difficulties

associated with contemporary life happen elsewhere, probably offloaded onto more precarious communities or outsourced abroad. In a poem that comes later in the collection, the speaker addresses readers more directly, shifting into the imperative mood: “approach the galvanized front door / in a spirit of lisping experiment. / Imagine what life inside could be while you are outside” (123). The title of this poem is “Trespassing,” which folds back onto as well as amplifies the quiet recognition of inequality in “Alcove.” Interpellated by the speaker in each poem, we are asked to consider how the intimate sociality within the alcove is of a piece with the lawlessness of trespassing. How might social inequality motivate trespassing? More radically, how might the private dwelling be a form of trespass itself? These are questions about the law, and whether a deeper set of ethical duties subtend the *naturalized* right to own property—duties to which, in an American context, Indigenous claims on stolen land attest. Holding onto these rival images of peace and need, privilege and dispossession, the letter and the spirit of the law, does not guarantee that “we” will begin to see them as imbricated and then fight for redistributive and reparative forms of justice. Yet this balancing act is necessary for the creation of democratic social imaginaries. When pandemics send us inside and discourage social openness, the comforts of the dwelling come into sharper relief. Working to extend these comforts equally across the social body can subsequently form a pivotal part of a much more ambitious project of remaking the world.

Chapter 3 Endnotes

¹ Scholarly work on the discrimination hiding behind welfare reform is abundant; see Briggs; Cooper, *Family Values*; Chappell; Cruikshank; Duggan.

² One cannot forget that Bill Clinton signed into existence the Defense of Marriage Act, which up until recently gave individual states the freedom not to recognize same-sex marriages recognized in other states.

³ Melinda Cooper's *Family Values* is the most helpful resource for understanding the private family's place at the heart of neoliberal reform. "At various moments between the 1960s and 1980s," she writes, "poverty activists, welfare militants, feminists, AIDS activists, and public-interest lawyers articulated a novel politics of redistribution that delinked risk protection from the sexual division of labor and social insurance from sexual normativity" (21). The aims pursued by these groups were anathema to both neoliberals and neoconservatives, hence their willingness to form a right-wing coalition: "While neoliberals called for an ongoing reduction in budget allocations dedicated to welfare—intent on undercutting any possibility that the social wage might compete with the free-market wage—neoconservatives endorsed an expanding role for the state in the regulation of sexuality" (49).

Wendy Brown provides the most helpful definition of neoconservatism, writing that,

while many neoconservatives decry the "social engineering" they attribute to socialism and liberal democratic egalitarian projects such as affirmative action, integration, and poverty reduction, neoconservatism no more rejects state-led behaviorism than neoliberalism does. Rather, it identifies the state, including law, with the task of setting the moral-religious compass for society, and indeed the world. This endorsement of state power, and attribution of moral authority to the state, is at odds with liberalism in every sense of the word. ("American" 697)

Important to keep in mind, then, is the fact that neoconservatives do not eschew “social engineering” at all; rather, they believe that the appropriate site of state intervention is the personal life of its constituents.

⁴ Savran, that is, does not discern in *Angels* what Jill Dolan would call a “utopian performative.” According to Dolan, these performatives “make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better” (6).

⁵ In Lauren Berlant’s memorable words, “recognition is the misrecognition you can bear” (*Cruel* 26). The recognition of one’s place within a social scene is a mode of subconscious orientation that makes one’s desires and actions feel natural, as if they were not socially mediated in the first place. To call recognition “misrecognition” is to affirm that some amount of blindness to this social mediation is necessary for the smooth functioning of subjectivity. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains how subjects overlook the contradictions of the Symbolic order through Imaginary misrecognition.

⁶ As Foucault explains, the generalization of market logics and family values go curiously hand in hand under neoliberalism. For neoliberals, “the mother-child relationship” is an investment concretely characterized by the time spent by the mother with the child, the quality of the care she gives, the affection she shows, the vigilance with which she follows its development, its education, and not only its scholastic but also its physical progress, the way in which she not only gives it food but also imparts a particular style to eating patterns, and the relationship she has with its eating[.] [.] .] And what will this investment constitute? It will constitute a human capital, the child’s human capital, which will produce an income. (*Birth* 243-244).

As a site of subjectivation, discipline, and moral instruction, the family fosters acquiescence to both entrepreneurial routine and enforced optimism, the foci of this study's previous chapters. For Foucault, discipline channels willpower toward productive and normative ends, making alternatives difficult to envision. If capital prolongs its existence by projecting into the future, seeking ever-new ways of realizing itself on an ever-wider scale, under capitalist modernity the ideal function of the family is to adapt its members to this temporal mode.

⁷ I am thinking of Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Although addressing a different form of capitalist production, Fordist as opposed to post-Fordist, Gramsci understands how capital and sexual normativity conspire:

The new industrialism wants monogamy: it wants the man as a worker not to squander his nervous energies in the disorderly and stimulating pursuit of occasional sexual satisfaction. The employee who goes to work after a night of "excess" is not good for his work. The exaltation of passion cannot be reconciled with the timed movements of productive motion connected with the most perfected automatism. (304-305)

Gramsci has Henry Ford in mind. Ford is often credited with revolutionizing industrial production, introducing a highly compartmentalized assembly line into the production process—hence the term "Fordism"—and Gramsci calls our attention to the other side of this equation, pointing out that Ford believed that marriage and monogamy led to better worker productivity.

⁸ Luce Irigaray notes that, in *Totality and Infinity*, the ethical subject is tacitly coded as masculine. This granting of the subject position to masculinity leaves the object position to femininity: "Beloved woman. Not female lover. Necessarily an object, not a subject with a relation, like his, to time" (194). Here, Irigaray addresses Levinas's contempt for the physical

manifestation of *Eros* in sexual partners—not the feminine figure that paves the way for the emergence of the subject in the dwelling. Nevertheless, Irigaray brings into relief Levinas's problematic use of gendered signifiers in *Totality and Infinity*.

Discussing Irigaray's simultaneous debt to and contention with Levinas, Tina Chanter tracks Levinas's shift of emphasis from femininity to maternity—two culturally overdetermined images of female difference—in the passage from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. Chanter contends: “It is not, perhaps, too extreme to accuse Levinas of expressing the traditional denigration and deification of the feminine in the restricted possibilities he extends to the feminine. Do we not find an insistence on the domestication of women in Levinas's portrait of the feminine in habitation?” (199). Chanter then tempers her criticism somewhat: “[W]e should not allow ourselves to be blinded by the obvious case that can and should be made against Levinas to the extent of ignoring the contribution of his thinking through the problem of sexual difference” (208). Levinas's notion of alterity as that which is not the dialectical negation but constitutive of the self paves the way, Chanter suggests, for Irigaray's notion of female difference. In order for female difference to be truly heterogeneous, Irigaray contends, it must depart from the registers of meaning that commonly enshroud the figure of the woman—a task that would leave female difference, in Chanter's words, “literally incomprehensible” (208).

⁹ As Derrida explains, social hegemony is grounded on a series of repressed alternatives and therefore always threatened by the return of the repressed:

When one speaks of hegemony—that is, the relation of forces—the laws of structure are tendential; they are determined not [. . .] in terms of *yes or no*, hence in terms of simple exclusion, but in those of differential force, *more or less*. It is fitting here to emphasize the impossibility of a *sheer* exclusion in order to account

for effects of repression, hence for returns of that which should not return: symptoms and disavowals that this very law can produce and reproduce, never failing in fact to do so. (*Politics* 293; emphasis original)

¹⁰ It is important to always keep in mind Levinas's distinction between the saying and the said, but it is equally important to keep in mind that the self's constitutive openness to the Other (the saying) is the precursor to a form of address that enacts responsibility (the said). The saying and the said map onto ethics and justice, respectively.

¹¹ As Levinas explains, "justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest" (*Otherwise* 159). Justice, in other words, does not completely alleviate the self of its responsibility for the Other but works in concert with and supplements each individual's ethical duty. As he goes on to assert, the "forgetting of self moves justice" (159). Enacting one's ethical duties "moves" justice, motivating egalitarian projects.

¹² The chapter following one on the dwelling bears this observation out, as Levinas contends: "Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other" (*Totality* 178). Attentiveness and skepticism—these two forms of thought are a through line across Levinas's work. For Levinas, ethically oriented change is largely the effect of these critical methods of thinking.

¹³ Smith's anxiety finds an ally in Fredric Jameson. For Jameson, the realist novel's mimetic ambitions—in the Aristotelian sense of mimesis—make it fundamentally anti-utopian; it "has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and to change" (*Antinomies* 5). Given his Marxian methodology, Jameson treats the realist novel as a historically specific form that flourished in the nineteenth

century, a form that has bequeathed its modal progeny, the contemporary realist novel, nothing more than “an odd assortment of random tools and techniques” (*Antinomies* 10).

¹⁴ The comparison between O’Neill and Naipaul is frequently made (see Reilly 1; Wood, “Beyond”), and O’Neill himself admits that “his novel is derivative of “*Gatsby*” and that he initially “fantasized it would be like a *Heart of Darkness* in reverse” (Reilly 13). Interestingly, Wood seems to thin that Naipaul’s *House of Mr. Biswas* (1961) is the strongest candidate for drawing a connection between Naipaul and O’Neill. Chuck Ramkissoon certainly bears some resemblance to the constantly reaching Mr. Biswas. However, *Netherland* is told from Hans’s perspective, and this makes *Guerillas* the strongest candidate for an investigation into O’Neill’s indebtedness to Naipaul. In *Guerillas*, the British characters constantly struggle to see clearly, unaccustomed as they are to the political volatility within the Caribbean country in which they are living, a country that is notionally Trinidad. In her first encounter with Jimmy Ahmed, British expat Jane finds him “buttoned up, tense, unreadable” (8). Her inability to “read” Jimmy proves to be a fatal flaw of sorts, as the novel ends with him killing her.

¹⁵ In *Blood-Dark Track*, his novelistic history of his grandfathers’ troubling lives in Ireland and Turkey, respectively, O’Neill writes that his immediate family “came to a permanent halt” in The Hague “after a series of migrations that had bounced us like a skipping roulette ball through South Africa, Mozambique, Syria, Turkey and Iran” (6). With his formative years mostly spent in The Hague, O’Neill’s early life bears a resemblance to his protagonist Hans’s childhood. Interestingly, O’Neill states in his preface to the newest edition of *Blood-Dark Tracks* that, in his mind, the latter is more of a 9/11 book than *Netherland* (xiii). Since the book in question recounts the contemporaneous imprisonments of O’Neill’s Irish and Turkish grandfathers in the early 40s, it is difficult to see the writer’s point. Upon reading the book, which ends with O’Neill

meditating on the intersection of blindness and sight during times of extreme political volatility (300-333), one gets a better purchase on what O'Neill means by insisting that this is his 9/11 book. What O'Neill means is that partisan politics and ethno-political extremism can give shape to a deeply flawed moral outlook and thereby encourage a vision of oneself as righteous and beyond reproach. O'Neill seems to have in mind the terrorists who carried out the attacks of 9/11. That a book about his Irish grandfather's political extremism and his Turkish grandfather's political quietism can throw 9/11 into greater relief is indicative of the ethical quagmire into which his investigation of his family past has sent him hurtling.

¹⁶ Critical work that attends simultaneously to racial inequality and the contemporary expansion of surveillance regimes is growing apace. Imani Perry points out that "racialized practices of surveillance are significantly different from general practices of surveillance (91), and Simone Browne argues that these "racialized practices of surveillance" work to make a "hypervisible racial subject" (54).

¹⁷ Freud's tripartite schema of the psyche clarifies why the return of the repressed is interpreted by the ego as an aberration. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud explains how, through the interlinked processes of repression and sublimation, libidinal energy is translated into self-love (the ego) and a moral conscience (the superego)—the main pillars of an individual's social existence. The return of the repressed upends the mental norms established by the ego in its capitulation to the demands of the community.

¹⁸ In the *Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg overturns Marx's chronology of violence that has primitive accumulation belonging to capital's prehistory. For Luxemburg, capital continues to grow through violent dispossession. Yet Luxemburg locates this violence on a global scale, pointing out how it unfolds abroad.

¹⁹ The idea that some amount of mediated abstraction is ineluctable can be traced back to Marx's earliest work. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx writes of mankind's "self-mediated *birth*," which "is nothing more than the creation of man through human labour" (357; emphasis original). For Marx, the category of the human emerges through the mediation of labour; to speak of mankind, in other words, is to speak of an abstraction.

²⁰ "As early as the seventeenth century," Benthien writes, "visually differentiated skin color becomes the primary characteristic by which ethnic difference is defined" (145). Benthien's findings align with Wynter's observation that the early-modern encounter between European colonialists and Indigenous others paved the way for a major epistemic shift in how human difference was parsed, a shift from anatomy to physiognomy, sexual difference to racial difference (355-371).

²¹ Briggs's main focus is the politics of adoption. Adoption, she argues, has been important to national and international politics out of proportion to its numerical significance" (5). In her account, adoption is a principal site of the neoliberal state's tacit enforcement of hierarchies of humanness. Nonwhite parents are more likely to lose their children to child protective services, and nonwhite children are far less likely to be racially matched with new parents. Pertinent to my discussion of Reagan is Briggs's assertion that, "[i]n the 1980s, crack babies became the poster child for the War on Drugs, a tremendously successful effort in Reagan-era America to demonize the poor and push back racial justice claims" (8). The discriminatory politics underpinning welfare reform, as well as the moral panic over "crack babies," reverberate into the present, informing the contemporary practice of transracial adoption. Kathryn A. Mariner paints a sobering picture:

While transracial adoption is so often portrayed as joyful and heartwarming, it involves various heartbreaks, which are rooted firmly in its often invisible conditions of possibility: racial discrimination and segregation, economic abandonment, the devaluation of Black families and Black motherhood. These structural factors result in a highly precarious practice of family making, shot through with risk and loss. (18)

²² Barbara Cruikshank would call these disciplinary reforms “technologies of citizenship,” her Foucauldian term referring to “the means by which government works *through* rather than against the subjectivities of citizens” (69; emphasis original). Indeed, welfare reform is consistent with a broader project of constituting entrepreneurial subjects whose main source of social security is the private family.

²³ The scene in which Roy denies his sexual orientation to his doctor brings into relief this connection between political power and social normativity. To his doctor, Roy says: “I have clout. A lot. I can pick up this phone, punch fifteen numbers, and you know who will be on the other end in under give minutes, Henry?” (51). When Henry replies, “The President” (51), Roy says: “Even better, Henry. His wife” (51). As both a lawyer and a pathological liar, Roy works to uphold anti-gay laws and the attendant images of normative family life.

²⁴ Louis’s anxious mediation on the law that precedes the official law of the land calls to mind a Philip Roth short story, “Eli, the Fanatic,” in which the titular character, a lawyer, is tasked with convincing the head of a Yeshiva to move the school beyond the bounds of Woodenton, the suburban community in which “a good healthy relationship” exists between “modern Jews and Protestants” (277). As this anxious affirmation of peaceful relations suggests, the real reason behind Eli’s mission is the fear that a community of Orthodox Jews, Holocaust survivors or not,

will bring into focus the very Jewish difference that the Jewish families of Woodenton have worked assiduously to minimize. Tzuref, the head of the Yeshiva and Holocaust survivor, upends Eli's invocation of zoning law by asking, "When is the law that is the law not the law?" (251). The scandalous irony of the short story is that the Jews of this suburban community hide their intolerance behind the letter of the law.

²⁵ Of course, some arch-capitalists have profited a good deal from the pandemic. In *Billionaire Bonanza 2020*, the Institute for Policy Studies's most recent report on economic inequality, Chuck Collins, Omar Ocampo, and Sophia Paslaski call these businesspeople "Pandemic Profiteers" (11-16). Unsurprisingly, the notoriously tax-averse Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, tops the list of those whose fortunes have improved as a result of social distancing.

Coda: Failure as Praxis; or, Agency Interruption

So far as I can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself. Some would call that an ethics.

—Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Reason is the one-for-the-other!

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

When I began writing this study of failure, there were plenty of warning signs indicating that the federal administration would make life exceedingly difficult for vast numbers of its populace.

The election of Donald Trump, highlighting the absence of integrity in American politics, undermined what was left of America's anemic liberal credentials. Emboldening bigots across the country, Trump's hateful rhetoric has allowed George W. Bush, a key figure in this study's archive of neoliberal presidents, to refashion himself as the avuncular good guy within the Republican party. Trump's presidency has laid bare the contradictions on which neoliberal policy rests. His monetarist tax plan, which continues to alleviate the tax burden shouldered by the richest Americans; his proposed budget cuts to such essential services as education, ecumenical access to good schooling being more expensive than a lottery-style voucher system; and his superficial efforts to rework free-trade agreements enact the fiscal austerity and logic of upward redistribution at the core of neoliberal thinking. Meanwhile, he completes the neoliberal alchemy of freedom and oppression with his fascist immigration policies, unabashed racism, support for embattled police departments, and refusal to fight transphobic domestic laws.

And yet, no one could have predicted the confluence of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protest movement. The deadly spread of the virus has exposed the scope of executive incompetence. Trump's lack of respect for the virus—he seems committed to his point that most people just get the “sniffles”—has kept people at work and lines of consumerism open. He

couches his unwillingness to mandate the wearing of masks in the grammar of free choice. This may be the language of liberalism, free trade, and the First Amendment, but it is difficult to square celebrations of freedom with his neofascist agenda. If Trump's plummeting approval ratings throughout this crisis tell us anything, it is that Americans might in fact want something "presidential" from their president, a commitment to principles that transcend his business-as-usual approach.

Meanwhile, the recent rise in support for Black Lives Matter, after Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were killed, has provoked an earnest, and long overdue, discussion about white supremacy, which the Trump administration will not acknowledge. This discussion about the unequal distribution of life chances across racial lines resonates alongside Claudia Rankine's preoccupation with the daily micro-aggressions experienced by people of colour, on which I focused in Chapter 2. For Rankine, quotidian forms of violence often go unnoticed by everyone but the victim. This experience of violence without hope for justice gives rise to a gestural plane of signification, as the victim has few opportunities for the explicit expression of their unhappiness within a culture of enforced optimism. It is thus heartening to note the increasing purchase of Black Lives Matter, a development that presages a growing acceptance of emotional negativity as a legitimate response to inequality. However, it is equally disheartening to note that the state has doubled down on violent measures of suppression in response to the protest movement. As I write this sentence, federal agents in unmarked cars are rounding up protestors. Redolent of a police state, such law-enforcement procedures overstep the bounds of the law, ultimately exposing the law's groundlessness and the series of repressions by which it retains its hold on citizen-subjects.

The state's illegitimate efforts to quell the current protest movement attest to the fact that a desire for radical change unsettles the legitimacy of the law and the social order it upholds. When the enforcement of the law no longer bears any relation to the letter of the law, to say nothing of its spirit, the "excessive or exceeded relation to the other" opens up as a distinct alternative (Derrida, *Specters* 26). This is not to say that the Trump administration will perform an about face, that significantly less funding will be routed to police departments, or that socialist economic policies will suddenly become the order of the day, as if that were even possible. Rather, no politico-economic order can be established without foreshortening the horizon of social possibility, and times of crisis and institutional failure reveal that what seems impossible or unthinkable, an altogether heterogeneous order, only seems that way by virtue of the law itself. The law reveals its constitutive repressions as it ceases to function smoothly. The protest movement demonstrates that citizen-subjects, vulnerable to the excesses of the law, are far better theoreticians of social possibility than elected officials and lawmakers.

The protest movement also shows that change will have to come from below. In this study, I have examined contemporary American literature in order to locate the ethical alternatives disclosed by the failure of order on a quotidian level. It can be difficult to conceive of order on such a small scale when the nightly news is replete with evidence of the federal government bungling its duty to its constituents. Yet entrepreneurial subjectivity (Chapter 1), enforced optimism (Chapter 2), and neoconservative family values (Chapter 3) are species of the neoliberal genus, part and parcel of the state's adoption of monetarist economic policies. Neoliberal culture abets egoistic pursuits that turn the individual away from their constitutive sociality, their relation to alterity that exceeds the ontic structures within which their daily existence unfolds. For Levinas, the individual belongs to a plane of human interdependence that

precedes the formation of an ego, and ethical responsibility is a radical mode of sociality that impels them beyond the normative routines that give their life meaning in the here and now. And just as the excesses of the state disclose its slippery hold on the possible, so failures that transpire in zones of ordinariness constitute what Levinas calls “an interruption of essence” (*Otherwise* 44), spotlighting the ethical dimension of sociality obscured by daily routine.

Accordingly, my analysis has unfolded according to a belief in the pedagogical role that literature can play. Deconstruction is the method that comes closest to characterizing my ethical mode of critique, but it is worth revisiting Levinas’s notion of the “poetic said” to understand literature’s capacity to theorize sociality along ethical lines. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas adduces two distinct modes of signification, the saying and the said, in order to distinguish ethical openness, asymmetry, and responsibility from legible forms of action and discourse. The saying and the said exist in a relation of *différance* whereby the said differs from the saying and therefore defers the fulfillment of ethical responsibility. Yet, contrary to Robert Eaglestone’s contention that “[Levinas’s] position on language and his position on aesthetics cannot go together” (130), Levinas writes of a “an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. This possibility is laid bare in the poetic said and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum” (*Otherwise* 169-170). Literature can unsettle the hold that dominant modes of reason have on its audiences, drawing the reader-critic into its subversive project. My case studies route their subversion of the said through dramas of failure, and my interpretations have sought to amplify the anti-neoliberal work performed by literary representations of failure.

Put differently, it is the underlying belief of this project that literature doubles as ethical discourse, which Levinas aligns with a mode of skepticism that refuses the aim of much

philosophical thought to totalize and thereby extinguish alterity. As he explains, “skepticism does not so much signify the possible breakup of structures as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning, that for their accord repression can already be necessary. It reminds us of the, in a very broad sense, political character of all logical rationalism, the alliance of logic with politics” (*Otherwise* 171). Nowhere did I address more directly logic’s association with politics and repression than in Chapter 1, in which I argued that performing badly in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Water by the Spoonful* disrupts the neoliberal alignment of human life with entrepreneurship. In each text, characters have to bungle the entrepreneurial protocols of self-appreciation in order to embrace new modes of existence. Abandoning the egoism of entrepreneurship for social interdependence translates ethical openness into an emergent political formation that contests neoliberal rationality. In this light, skepticism retains hope for a social order otherwise than neoliberalism.

As my brief overview of Chapter 1 suggests, my case studies traffic in unwilling dramas of failure that interrupt the flow of daily life. This focus on accidental failure has distinguished my approach from such studies as Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* in which failure is often framed as heroic, a willful form of self-negation or of dissent from the status quo. In closing, however, I want to explore failure as a mode of living whereby the individual critiques the standards of life established by neoliberal culture. Failure as praxis is what I call “agency interruption”—a term that hardly rolls off the tongue. Agency interruption is a helpful term, not only because it calls to mind the “interruption” that features prominently in Levinasian thought but also because its awkwardness evokes the difficult work of skeptical reduction by which the cognitive subject attends to the “trace of sincerity” embedded in everyday forms of communication and address (Levinas, *Otherwise* 152).

On the surface, agency interruption bears little resemblance to the forms of failure at the core of this study, but it overlaps with my case studies in rejecting neoliberal rationality as the arbiter of human possibility.¹

Agency interruption translates the feeling that one is wrongly interpellated into a commitment to living life otherwise than neoliberal. It is not a self-shattering or an embodiment of the social death drive; rather, it mobilizes the belief that one's openness to alterity constitutes the most authentic expression of selfhood. What Levinas calls "the surplus of the epiphany of the other" provides an alternative to the psychoanalytic alignment of desire with lack (*Totality* 221). For Levinas, desire is more Deleuzian than Lacanian; it is not a narcissistic revolution but additive, moving the desiring subject toward the Other. Accordingly, the individual engaged in this mode of life embraces the collaborative nature of humanness. They keep their satisfaction of entrepreneurial protocols within narrow limits while cultivating a sense of self that exists apart from the market; they resent the pressure to perform happiness while cherishing genuine moments of laughter and mirth; and they recognize the political violence hiding behind celebrations of the private family while working to carve out spaces of intimacy. In short, agency interruption names the patient work of freeing oneself from neoliberal overdetermination in the service of others.

This valedictory exercise constitutes no more than an offshoot from the main chapters of this study. The point, ultimately, is to honour the specificity of neoliberal violence both within and beyond the American nation-state. The biopolitical forces of the world attempt to claim us when we are nothing more than nonhuman zygotes, and one consequence of this Foucauldian reality is that the performance of agency interruption varies from person to person across the social field. The online circulation of a letter to be published in *Harper's* October 2020 issue

brings this last point into relief. The letter—signed by a motley crew that includes tenured faculty members of private universities; Man Booker Prize winners such as Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie; J.K. Rowling, now the world’s most notorious transphobe; and David Frum, speechwriter for George W. Bush, whose greatest contribution to the elision of human complexity is the phrase “Axis of Evil” that he coined for his former warmongering boss—criticizes “a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity” (“Letter” n.p.). While the letter strikes a reactionary note, equating “cancel culture” with something akin to McCarthyism, its call for open debate is rather innocuous. The trouble, I think, lies more in the messengers. If *Harper’s* comes calling, one can rest assured that their free speech is not under threat. That this letter became topical in the same week in which ICE announced that students from abroad could have their visas revoked (a plan later rescinded) is evidence that agency interruption will require different things of different people.

In order to delineate what agency interruption looks like in practice, I turn to Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), a work of autotheory that links autobiographical writing with theoretical skepticism. Though still a burgeoning object of academic inquiry, autotheory has attracted nevertheless a healthy amount of attention. Lauren Fournier, for example, locates autotheory in a genealogy of feminist art, viewing it as the latest expression of feminist artists working to untie themselves from patriarchal and capitalist knots. In her introduction to a recent special issue of *Arizona Quarterly*, Robyn Wiegman notes that autotheory routes “idioms of the ordinary” through critical theory (6). On the one hand, this mode of self-narration rescues individual life from its dissolution in the abstract signifier or historical record; on the other, it gives critical theory a renewed sense of legitimacy. Later in this issue, Ralph Clare echoes

Wiegman's point, using *The Argonauts* to contend that autotheorists "self-consciously and practically construct an ethical or sincere self in a critical manner" (86). These critics suggest that what distinguishes autotheory is its practitioners' theoretically laden orientation to the self, one that holds onto the particularity of the self without lapsing into an uncritical celebration of sovereign subjectivity.

It is Nelson's critical orientation to the self that lends *The Argonauts* to a discussion of agency interruption. Throughout her slim book, Nelson demonstrates an affinity for critical theorists and philosophers whose work is widely read in the Humanities, many of whom have come up in this study: Deleuze, Sedgwick, Edelman, Butler, and Irigaray. A name that is missing from her archive of influences is Levinas, though his preoccupations certainly align with the ethos of autotheory. At one point Nelson draws strength from Butler's Levinasian-inspired work, writing that "we are *for another or by virtue of another* [. . .] *from the start always*" (60; emphasis original). This point accords with Levinas's emphasis on the particularity of the ethical subject, even though his notion of humanism extends beyond the norm of the human, which posits a self-present subject whose authenticity is a private matter of introspection. To act authentically is to act responsibly and, in the process, to transcend self-enclosed subjectivity. For Levinas, the individual lacks self-presence, for they are always already involved in a drama that transgresses the egoistic frame of sovereign subjectivity. Nelson performs agency interruption, accordingly, because she works to particularize the self while at the same time proposing ethical alternatives to everyday life as it is commonly lived and fantasized.

Nelson reveals early on that the title of her book comes from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, "in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase 'I love you' is like 'the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name'" (Nelson 5). As

Nelson recounts her relationship with Harry Dodge, Harry's struggle to transition, and her pregnancy, Barthes's take on resignifying allows her to conceive of her life along reparative lines, as a process of ceaseless making and remaking—no matter how normative her maternal desires and commitment to monogamy may superficially appear. On that note, *The Argonauts* could have easily featured in Chapter 3, in which I looked at literary works that foreground family dysfunction—a notable form of failure, I contended, given the family-values rhetoric that has grown apace alongside the dismantling of the welfare state. My argument was that these works—namely, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*—dramatize broken families and, in the process, reveal how the private family puts the Other under erasure. Reconceiving the family as queer is somewhat problematic in Kushner's play, so Nelson's treatment of the queer family goes some way to providing a corrective to Kushner's male-centric vision of the post-nuclear family.

Yet the instability of language has a more practical effect on Nelson's meditations on the self, especially in the context of this closing discussion of agency interruption. Language's groundlessness offers her the means to investigate the tension between writing the self, whereby ink is spilt in order to represent a life, and the self who writes, the self whose time spent writing means time spent away from loved ones; as she wryly explains, "*I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write*" (37; emphasis original). The written word cannot descend upon a stable self because the latter is on the move, involved in a life that no syntactically structured phrase can adequately capture or catch up to. This aporia is not an impasse for Nelson but an opportunity to write (about) the impasse. She casts doubt on the transparency of the signifier even as she labours to hold on to something ephemeral through it.

One of the most deeply felt evocations of this issue occurs in the context of Nelson's relationship with Harry, which makes her question and rethink her relationship with writing. Much of what Nelson shares about their romantic involvement concerns Harry's transition. While she frames his transition as a personal journey, she also relates how it compelled her to silence her fears and to act generously. In one paragraph, Nelson explains how she felt she was "delivering a gift" when she would "push in the nearly-two-inch-long needle, and plunge the golden, oily T into deep muscle mass" (52). In the next paragraph, the modicum of freedom this non-reciprocal gift has extended to Harry makes Nelson feel constrained by the act of writing:

And now, after living beside you all these years, and watching your wheel of a mind bring forth an art of pure wildness—as I labor grimly on these sentences, wondering all the while if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness (fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to *argument*, however loose)—I'm no longer sure which of us is more at home in the world, which of us more free. (52; emphasis original)

Nelson is far from performing metafictional playfulness here. After the preceding paragraph, this one strikes an earnest note. It spreads out ambiguously in two directions at once. She fears that the dominant culture's appetite for categorization will dull the category defiance Harry has made of his life. She also expresses ethical anxiety about semantic coherence. Does writing trap and classify the Other as much as, or in exactly the same way in which, hegemony does? Nelson does not merely question her reliability as a narrator; she questions the reliability of narrative altogether. That the juxtaposition of paragraphs unsettles her authority suggests that writing well and ethically is for Nelson bound up with living well and ethically.

For Nelson, the simultaneity of doubt and conviction translates into a both/and mode of thinking, writing, and living. The particular (self) is both the agent of the abstract (signifier) and its effect. The writer negotiates both the “evolutionary need to put everything into categories” and “the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live” (53). Nelson is both writer and mother—sometimes by turns and sometimes at once. Writing both addresses the Other and underlines “the discomfiting fact that relation can never be achieved in a simple fashion through writing, if it can be achieved at all” (76). Nelson writes both to make something new and to revisit well-worn ideas, “not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life” (112). The hold identity politics has on popular discourse can be both frustrating—especially when the fact that someone is a lesbian is “so blinding for some, that whatever words come out of her mouth [. . .] certain listeners hear only one thing: *lesbian*”—and much needed in a world in which power imbalances are skewed in favour of “great white men pontificating from the podium” (54). Eve Sedgwick is both a patronymic organizing an impressive, influential body of scholarship and the memory of a human being for whom the budding academic Nelson felt unacademic appreciation. *The Argonauts* is both Nelson’s massively successful work of autotheory and a work of careful and caring collaboration, as Nelson listens to Harry, “mechanical pencils in hand,” explain how she “might facet [her] representation of him, of [them]” (46).

Change, uncertainty, indeterminacy, descriptive failure—all of these dynamics that undermine the myth of the sovereign writer become sources of ethical value for Nelson. To read *The Argonauts* is to encounter a writer thinking with her predecessors at the same time that she is learning how to think beyond them; she experiments with a bold form of writing that is “neither native nor foreign” because language is neither altogether subjective nor altogether meta-

subjective, but private and public at once (98); she wants to write capaciously, confident in her Wittgensteinian belief that the “inexpressible may be contained (inexpressibly!) in the expressed,” even though she is wary of the temptation of narcissistic lyricism (46). That is to say, Nelson’s prose—by turns additive and revisionist, assertive and trembling, saying and unsaying—performs agency interruption, elevating skepticism to a way of life and of writing about life. Levinas identifies “an event like meditation” with “the work of justice, an entry of the diachrony of proximity, of the signifyingness of saying into the synchrony of the said” (*Otherwise* 160). The meditative subject interrupts the flow of daily life in order to entertain alternatives and to question their commitments—in order to grope toward a mode of existence that embraces alterity and reveres the epistemological limits that such an embrace entails.

Put simply, Nelson is humble. Her skeptical mode of humility falls within the ambit of what Levinas calls “weakness,” which is necessary for “the destitution and the desituation of the subject” (*Otherwise* 185). This is not to say that agency interruption demands a lack of political conviction. Nelson shows that weakness need not be an enfeebled form of living and thinking but a testament to one’s openness to the possibility of living otherwise than neoliberalism. In a world saturated by market logics, where opportunity is shrinking, ordinary people are shackled by astronomic sums of debt, and essential social services look increasingly like the privilege of the few, weakness stands in metonymic relation to bad entrepreneurship. The rhetorical apotheoses of personal responsibility, unflagging happiness, and a strong sense of family values leave little space for a serious discussion of weakness—for any discourse that would subordinate the self and the market to a concept of collective life. To approach life from a position of weakness marks one out as a failure. New visions of life are necessary and urgent, however. A respect for others as respect for the self, a robust notion of weakness, a confidence in humility—these

thoughts do not guarantee an anti-neoliberal future, since much political action will be needed.

But to relax the hold that egoism has on the self is to begin the patient work of dwelling more fully with others, and this selflessness will be needed if what comes after neoliberalism is not more of the inequality, intolerance, and insistence on going it alone that make failures of us all.

Coda Endnote

¹ Timothy Melley's notion of "agency panic," which he delineates in *Empire of Conspiracy*, inspired my term "agency interruption"—though the terms bear nothing more than a superficial resemblance. For Melley, agency panic refers to a growing fear amongst Cold War-era Americans that forces beyond their control were threatening their core freedoms.

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