

Anatomy of the City: Race, Infrastructure, and U.S. Fictions of Dependency

by

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## Dedication

To my mother, Hae Ran (Lisa) Kim

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## Abstract

This dissertation argues that city infrastructure, in the literary-cultural afterlife of 1996 U.S. welfare reform, operates as a focal point for recuperating the stigmatized condition of state dependency—a stigma commonly attached to racialized, impoverished, and disabled populations. Drawing together ethnic literary, women-of-color feminist, feminist disability, and urban sociological studies, it re-conceptualizes the pathologized cityscape disabled by anti-welfare policy, and positions dependency as an underexplored yet vital analytic for ethnic American cultural critique. Attending to infrastructure as thematic, formal, and analytic concern, I argue that writers, artists, and activists like Anna Deavere Smith, Audre Lorde, Karen Tei Yamashita, Helena María Viramontes, Samuel R. Delany, and Grace Lee Boggs *recuperate* dependency by highlighting public support systems: healthcare, transportation, education, sanitation, and food welfare. In doing so, they emphasize our contingency on human and material infrastructures alike—the often-obscured pipes, wires, roads, and labor networks that regulate metropolitan life.

As a set of fields borne from social protest, ethnic literary studies has largely prioritized the politicized subject engaged in projects of self-determination, which hinge on standard, able-bodied conceptions of autonomy. But when I sift through multi-ethnic American literatures, I find stories that prioritize *interdependency*, networks of social support, and fractured, vulnerable bodies. And I ask: How can ethnic literary and feminist disability studies, taken together, generate new conceptions of dependency in our so-called post-racial era, in which colorblind discourses of state dependency devalue racialized, impoverished, and disabled life? Through

their engagement with infrastructural support, the texts in my study register, contest, or overwrite dominant rhetorics of dependency, which selectively equate racialized and gendered deviance with state parasitism (i.e. the “illegal” migrant, the welfare queen). By deriving an aesthetics and politics of dependency from the supporting operations of literary infrastructures, my dissertation generates what I term a *crip-of-color critique* from the little explored intersection of anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist disability politics. City infrastructure, in the works I examine, operates as a figure of condensation for a counter-discourse of dependency—one that documents the disabling violence of state neglect while foregrounding a public ethics of care.

## Infrastructure and Dependency: An Introduction

But what were these mapping layers?[...] [B]elow the surface, there was the man-made grid of civil utilities: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay [...] On the surface, the complexity of layers should drown an ordinary person, but ordinary persons never bother to notice...

*Karen Tei Yamashita, Tropic of Orange*

What is it like to be stuck, day and night, dreaming of infrastructure?

*Patricia Yaeger, "Dreaming of Infrastructure"*

Networks of transit, sewage, healthcare, power—this dissertation excavates the civic support systems running throughout multi-ethnic U.S. literatures and cultures produced in the aftermath of U.S. welfare reform.<sup>1</sup> It analyzes the counterintuitive yet vital links between literary accounts of city infrastructure and punitive narratives of public dependency circulated by public policy, mass media, and canonical strands of urban sociology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.<sup>2</sup> Organized around figures like the welfare queen, the black teenage mother, the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a United States federal law understood as major welfare reform, though I also draw upon the constellation of social and economic policies, as well as their attendant narratives of dependency, that both predate and accompany this particular law. Secondary sources examining the importance of welfare reform (both the 1996 law and the policies predating it) include Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Gwendolyn Mink, ed., *Whose Welfare?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998; Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, eds., *Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge 2004); Joe Soss and Richard C. Fording, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from the Colonial Times to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> I note here that the entire field of urban sociology does not uniformly rehearse punitive accounts of inner-city residents and urban poverty—in fact, I cite urban sociologists here that critique punitive sociological endeavors.

disabled subject, and the undocumented migrant, these punitive narratives render pathological those marginal subjects reliant on state and municipal resources, as well as those post-Fordist cities that came to emblemize their dependence.

The story I tell here imagines dependency differently. I demonstrate how the works in this dissertation, through their sustained engagements with city infrastructure, *recuperate* the maligned condition of dependency commonly attached to racialized, impoverished, and disabled populations. Traversing fraught networks of transportation, education, healthcare, sanitation, and food welfare, these texts offer radically interdependent narratives of urban inhabitation, highlighting human contingency on human and material systems of support alike: the pipes, wires, roads, and labor networks that regulate metropolitan life yet so often go unnoticed. In the literary-cultural afterlife of 1996 welfare reform, such seemingly mundane infrastructures accelerate to the forefront of readerly consideration. They function as focal points for re-conceptualizing racialized myths of state parasitism, mapping dense ecologies of dependency and care, and staging democratic fantasies of undifferentiated support.

Surveying New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Detroit, cities infamous for infrastructural inequality and racial antipathy, the works in my study engage infrastructure to register and overwrite dominant rhetorics of dependency, which selectively connect racial, gendered, and corporeal deviance to myths of state parasitism. Here, city infrastructure operates as a figure of condensation for a counter-discourse of dependency—one that registers the disabling violence of state divestment while beginning to outline distributive dilemmas of public care. By amplifying the relationships of subjects to infrastructural support systems, so often

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I refer here to what Roderick Ferguson has termed “canonical sociology,” which “imagined African American culture as the site of polymorphous gender and sexual perversions and associated those perversions with moral failings typically” (*Aberrations* 20). Such canonical sociology was authored by scholars (and sometimes, policy-makers) such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Gunnar Myrdal, among others.

taken for granted, these works offer alternate mappings of contemporary U.S. cities via the human-material networks that sustain them.

In deriving an aesthetics and politics of dependency from the supporting operations of literary infrastructures, this study develops what I term a *crip of color critique* from the little-explored intersection of anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist disability politics. In so doing, it follows the call issued by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson in the 2011 anthology *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, which stresses the urgency of developing relational, coalitional, and cross-categorical analytics that can appraise how “particular populations are rendered vulnerable to processes of death and de-valuation over and against other populations” in our post-Civil Rights era (3). As scholars of the intellectual formations termed women of color feminisms<sup>3</sup> and queer of color critique,<sup>4</sup> Hong and Ferguson argue that critical optics contingent upon racial, gendered, or corporeal homogeneity cannot adequately assess the emergent technologies of racialized death produced by neocolonialism and globalization, as these technologies “can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings” (11). In other words, following the social movements of the mid-twentieth century and the adoption of anti-racism as an “official” national value, there emerged methods of managing minority difference that adhered to colorblind logics while reproducing social and

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, Hong understands women of color feminism as an intersectional analytic that does not “privilege one site of identification over another, but insists on the importance of race, class, gender, and sexuality as interlocking and mutually constitutive.” She views women of color feminist practice as not a “reified subject position,” in which an ideal revolutionary subject is privileged and prioritized, but a reading practice that “reveals the contradictions of the racialized and gendered state” (x).

<sup>4</sup> Roderick Ferguson coined this term in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, defining it as an “[interrogation] of social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique.” (149).

material violence.<sup>5</sup> These emergent methods do not adhere to the identitarian categories of race, gender, sexuality, or ability in their distribution of life-chances, but practice new cross-categorical methods of managing life and well-being.

This project focuses on one particularly salient regulatory mode: the discourse of dependency that distinguishes deserving populations from those “undeserving” of state support. This ideological regime renders expendable those segments of the population who cannot work, cannot participate in the capitalist marketplace, and have limited access to private economic support. But because dependency discourse does not discipline subjects uniformly through categories of racial, gendered, or corporeal difference, but through racial-gendered frameworks of properly (re)productive citizenship, optics invested in racial/ ethnic singularity have little purchase in this context. What’s more, nationalist and identity-based movements have historically distanced themselves from charges of dependency in the service of achieving self-determination, and as Hong and Ferguson note, have always “policed and preserved the difference between those who are able to conform to categories of normativity, respectability, and value, and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories” (2). It is only through relational analytics like women of color feminism and queer of color critique that the bogeymen of dependency discourse—the welfare queen, the single teenage mother, the “illegal immigrant,” and the disabled subject—no longer register as transparent signs of cultural failure, but become dynamic sites of critique, rupture, and transformation for an era wrought by infrastructural abandonment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jodi Melamed has termed this emergent mode “neoliberal multiculturalism,” which responds to the “reconfiguration of state powers and boundaries under global capitalism” by “portraying the United States as an ostensibly multicultural democracy and the model for the entire world, but in a way that has posited neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity” (xxi).

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Ferguson offers a similar line of analysis for the figure of the drag-queen prostitute (and other subjects that exceed the “racialized boundaries of gendered and sexual ideals”). He argues that a cross-categorical analytic mode like queer of color critique “can and must challenge that those social formations represent the

A crip of color critique thus extends the relational, post-Civil Rights optics proffered by Hong and Ferguson. Like women of color feminism and queer of color critique, it examines the “dividing line between valued and devalued” life rather than working to preserve discrete identity categories (Hong and Ferguson 3). Though a more extensive theorization of a crip of color critique forms the basis of the first chapter, I will briefly gloss three tenets here. And since I have derived this analytic from the supporting operations of imagined infrastructure, I will invoke the infrastructural imaginary in stating these tenets. First, the ostensible purpose of infrastructure is to support the functioning of cities—such networks constitute the foundational channels that enable cities to run. Following this, a crip of color critique underscores relations of social, material, and prosthetic support, whether reciprocal or parasitic, enabling or exploitative. In this way, it furthers a key insight of Disability Studies scholarship, which has long highlighted the vast networks of assistance and “nested dependencies” that enable contemporary life (Kittay, *Love’s Labor* 141). Second, infrastructure both sustains *and* disciplines city populations, coordinating the uneven distribution of resources across increasingly polarized cityscapes. As such, a crip of color critique attends to the asymmetries of support relations as well as their capacities for renewal, paying particular attention to how categories of racial, gendered, and corporeal difference determine and are determined by uneven economies of resource provision. Finally, an acknowledgement of infrastructure—and particularly, its centrality to the everyday operations of city life—solicits an acknowledgement of human dependency on support structures, and the complex social formations that infrastructure enables and maintains. A crip of color critique thus positions dependency as a node of critical departure, a horizon of aesthetic possibility, rather than a transparently pathological condition. Ultimately, a crip of color critique

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pathologies of modern society,” while demonstrating how these subjects are the products of the social and economic transformations wrought by global capitalism (11).

asks: Who is supported by infrastructure? Who is disabled by it? And which subjects, through the forceful extraction of their unseen and unvalued labor, become the scaffolding—the living infrastructure—for others' fantasies of *independence*?<sup>7</sup>

This project uses a crip of color critique to read across and through seemingly disparate ethnic literary and cultural canons, excavating the “coalitional possibilities” between ethnic American studies and feminist disability theory (Hong and Ferguson 18). Because dependency rhetoric cuts “within, as well as across,” categories of race, gender, and ability, separating valued from devalued life, I weave together works from African-, Asian-, Latinx-, and white American literatures. I examine how these texts register and negotiate the fissures across and within metropolitan communities differentially affected by the dissolution of the Keynesian welfare state. In this way, I proffer a cross-categorical analytic that responds to the emergent racial formations of a post-Civil Rights era, which heralds new (yet familiar) tactics of identity management and incorporation.

In the remainder of this introduction, I further explain my project’s recuperation of dependency in the context of welfare reform and a newly post-racial, civil rights-bearing United States. I explain how feminist disability studies enables, in many ways, this project of recuperation and transformation. Next, I describe how I employ infrastructure as method, as well as the utility and significance of city infrastructure in multi-ethnic American literatures and cultures. Finally, I give an overview of how the infrastructural imaginary of dependency plays out in each chapter.

Taken as a whole, the chapters aim to accomplish four goals: 1) First and foremost, by

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<sup>7</sup> I follow Patricia Yaeger’s lead in “Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure,” her editor’s column for the 2007 *PMLA* issue on “Cities,” in which she suggests literary critics might “chart literature’s hushed or symphonic stories of people’s massed relations to infrastructure—where it takes you, who uses it, who takes care of it, who lives near it, and who is forced to live under or do without it” (17).



prioritizing dependency, disability, and care, they highlight a gap in an ethnic American studies primarily invested in independence and self-determination. The idealization of the independent, self-determining subject, as I argue later in this introduction, dovetails with the logics of welfare reform; these dominant ideologies can work to reproduce racialized violence and poverty. They further demonstrate how dependency itself functions as a generative platform for alternate aesthetic, social, and political projects, thus illustrating how writers, artists, and activists not only recuperate this maligned condition, but frame it as a hotbed of imaginative potentiality. 2) Second, by showing how vast networks of social and material provision—grids of waste, power, welfare, transit—link various multi-ethnic American texts in a post-Civil Rights era, they demonstrate the value in reading together works usually partitioned into separate ethnic canons. In so doing, they enact a reading practice not determined by racial or ethnic sameness, but one that is based on the historical circumstances of welfare reform and the racial logics it undergirds, that is, the separation of a multi-ethnic global elite from the “undeserving” racialized poor. In other words, by elaborating an infrastructural heuristic and imaginary, they offer an alternate schema for reading across and through multi-ethnic American literature in the aftermath of Civil Rights, ethnic cultural nationalisms, and welfare reform. 3) Third, in joining ethnic American and disability studies under the rubric of dependency, these chapters further advance a burgeoning disability studies to which race and class has become central.<sup>8</sup> Following scholars

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<sup>8</sup> There are numerous scholars that have begun the work of mutually engaging disability and ethnic studies, and this sub-field continues to grow. For instance, Chris Bell, “Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010): 374—382; Cynthia Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Julie Avril Minich, *Accessible Citizenship: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); Christopher M. Bell, ed., *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Therí A. Pickens, *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

such as Nirmala Erevelles, they conceive of disability less as an identity category that one inhabits than as a ongoing process inextricable from the project of state-sanctioned neglect. That is, they theorize disablement (rather than disability) as a process that produces or increases the likelihood of disabilities for impoverished and/ or racialized populations, and frame state neglect within the discourses of disability that undoubtedly shape it. 4) Finally, in foregrounding dependency (rather than race, class, gender, or disability) as a primary site of concern, they aim to demonstrate the broader utility of theories of interdependence beyond feminist and disability studies. In other words, they illustrate the applicability of a disability analytic beyond texts, fields, or bodies traditionally understood as disabled. Theories of interdependence, in this project, enable a re-theorization of ethnic subjectivity vis-à-vis literary and cultural production, as well as a consideration of literary engagements with contemporary dilemmas of public care.

*Anatomy of the City* thus demonstrates how contemporary writers and artists engage infrastructure to productively grapple with rhetorics and figures of state parasitism, identifying narrative strategies of dependency that de-center the tried-and-true formulations of racial uplift, resistance, and self-determination. Infrastructure stages an alternate relation between ethnic American subjectivity and cultural production, one not defined by protest, self-ownership or demands for inclusion, but that, in the words of disability scholar Nirmala Erevelles, “epitomizes [a] disruptive vulnerability that refuses to disappear” (“Thinking with Disability Studies,” n. pag). The works under consideration foreground the distributed networks that constitute metropolitan life, documenting the disabling violence of state neglect and envisioning, alternately, a life-world of support for subjects and landscapes deemed disposable. Through the mapping of an infrastructural imaginary, this dissertation demonstrates how multi-ethnic American literature and culture construct the scaffolding for a rival social and narrative world.

## U.S. Fictions of Dependency

In situating dependency as a generative node for ethnic American literary and scholarly production, this project aims to rupture the U.S. fictions of dependency that congealed into ideological norms in the 1970s—1990s, and whose legacy continues to inform the present. It further aims to underscore the counter-narratives of dependency evident in ethnic American expressive cultures—narratives that have been overlooked, I argue, due to the field’s originary investments in claims of *independence*. The infrastructural imaginary I trace responds to this period of racial re-alignment and discursive transformation, in which dependency evolved into a colorblind instrument of discipline that justified the resource deprivation of the racialized poor and, relatedly, what David Harvey has termed the “organized abandonment” of racialized urban space (*Limits to Capital* 397).

But what are these fictions? In contemporary language, dependency denotes a relation of need, a subordinate and seemingly impotent condition freighted with stigma. As former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in his 1973 text *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income*, “[Dependency] is an incomplete state in life: normal in the child, abnormal in the adult. In a world where completed men and women stand on their own feet, persons who are dependent—as the buried imagery of the word denotes—hang” (17). Seven years after the publication of Moynihan’s text, the American Psychiatric Association entered “Dependent Personality Disorder” in the DSM-III, thus rendering dependency a pathological and diagnosable condition. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, California’s Proposition 187 of 1994, and even the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 all responded to this shared anxiety of state parasitism,

as funding for community and municipal services like housing, healthcare, welfare, and education dwindled or was denied outright.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, while dependency became a viable discursive strategy for both liberals and conservatives alike, there emerged another set of fictions across the narrative platforms of the novel, autobiography, documentary, and performance, in which dependency enabled other ways of knowing, living in, and surviving an increasingly hostile world. 1981's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, a seminal anthology edited by Chicana lesbian feminists Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, articulated a new politics of radical difference that exceeded the identitarian logics of 1970s feminism and ethnic nationalisms. Jaded by claims of ethnic or gendered singularity, it gathered “women who contradict each other” under the multivalent, interdependent, and infrastructural motif of *the bridge* (1). The anthology's heterogeneous group of contributors, as well as its pastiche of genres, languages, and writing styles, collaged together a multi-pronged blueprint of survival through which women of color could imagine a livable world. In a time period of post-Fordist economic restructuring, when the racial-gendered phantoms of the welfare queen and (later) the undocumented migrant mother became fodder for a politics of austerity, *This Bridge* instead envisioned a “desire for life between all of us” (Moraga 1). This vision re-imagined women-of-color feminism as not a bridge “to be walked over,” as WoC feminist labor had been used in (white) feminist movements, but as a supporting structure of collective and collaborative rejuvenation, a means of holding each other up in a world bent on their undoing (Moraga xlvi). This was a vision of reciprocal support, of mutual accommodation, wherein women of color could construct their own scaffolding through

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<sup>9</sup> For a compelling description of how the *Americans with Disabilities Act* reproduced the austere and individualist ethos of welfare reform, see Samuel Bagenstos, “The Americans with Disabilities Act as Welfare Reform.” *William and Mary Law Review* 44. 3 (2003): 921—1027.

the textual coalition of the bridge. “For the women in this book,” Moraga wrote in the 1981 preface, “I will lay my body down for that vision” (1).

These competing fictions of dependency together constitute the ground upon which this dissertation unfolds, as they mark a watershed in U.S. racial-gendered formation and its literary-cultural counterpart. With the formal abolition of legal discrimination, as well as the emergence of post-Fordist capitalism and its evolving migratory routes, the “semantic map of dependency” was made to signify anew, and mapped onto an emerging “post-racial” order (Fraser and Gordon 323).<sup>10</sup> Absent legal barriers to employment and housing opportunities, poor people of color—and black women in particular—were taken to task for their own poverty, and cast as unnecessarily reliant on the state. Further, the destructive reach of globalization and free trade, which allowed the US to outsource manufacturing labor and decimate local businesses in the so-called “developing” world, solicited a new influx of migration. This migratory class, figured disproportionately in the national imagination as Mexican/ Latinx, were similarly perceived as drains on public resources. And in an inverse move, the passing of the Americans with Disability Act in 1990, which banned discrimination against people with disabilities in the realms of employment, public accommodations, services, and telecommunications, aimed to lift the stigma of public dependency from disabled citizens—one of dependency’s predominant ciphers. As legal scholar Samuel Bagenstos aptly notes, supporters of the ADA argued for the statute’s necessity *through* the pathologization of dependency, posing such legislation as vital to weaning

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<sup>10</sup> Post-Fordism, in contrast to the industrial capitalism of Fordism, signals the rise of new forms of regulation and accumulation, and particularly what David Harvey has termed “flexible accumulation,” which “is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation. It has entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors and between geographical regions, giving rise, for example, to a vast surge in so-called ‘service-sector’ employment as well as to entirely new industrial ensembles in hitherto underdeveloped regions” (147).

disabled citizens off public assistance and sending them into the workforce. Though single-issue identity politics may have partitioned these subjects—poor black women, undocumented migrants, and disabled citizens—into separate categories of race, class, gender, and ability, the maneuvers of post-racial discourse gathered them together under the intersectional banner of dependency.

Indeed, it is the emergence of dependency as a post-Civil Rights, post-Fordist, and coalitional discursive strategy that catalyzed my initial forays into this topic, and whose recent history, rhetorical tactics, and cast of characters I will now rehearse. From the early 1970s to the 1996 welfare reform—and in our current era of escalating resource privatization—there have been a battery of assaults on public and social support services, which, as sociologist Loïc Wacquant argues, were “most ferocious” at “the municipal level” (53).<sup>11</sup> Under the pretense of fiscal crisis triggered by so-called “white flight,” U.S. cities diverted public monies away from municipal services key to underserved neighborhoods, such as housing, sanitation, transportation, education, and fire protection, and toward private development to attract affluent populations and service-based economic growth.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, municipal governments became increasingly dependent on property-tax revenues and value generated by the real estate market, and have thus transitioned from managerial to entrepreneurial modes of governance, in which cities offer incentives for investment capital such as subsidized land, physical infrastructure, and local tax abatements. The state thus works to facilitate, rather than

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<sup>11</sup> For a catalog of some of the attacks on public assistance and social insurance, see Chapter 2 in Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> For scholarship that examines the asymmetrical development of urban spaces, see John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*.

regulate, market expansion and accumulation through a process Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell have termed “roll-out neoliberalization,” an expansionist counterpart to “roll-back neoliberalism,” which refers to the “active destruction or discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and collectivist institutions” (37).<sup>13</sup> And on the national scale, policy ideologues like Charles Murray, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Lawrence Mead claimed that the “pathological” dependency of those on welfare, largely perceived as inner-city residents, could produce “the end of Western civilization” itself (Mead 237).

While dependency has a dynamic and shifting etymological history, which Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon notably charted in their 1994 article “A Genealogy of Dependency,” *Anatomy of the City* focuses on what Fraser and Gordon term its “post-industrial” uses. As opposed to pre-industrial or industrial conceptions of the term, which positioned some forms of dependency as “natural and proper,” the transition to capitalism’s post-industrial phase stripped dependency of all “positive countercurrents” and tied it explicitly to a so-called culture of poverty (Fraser and Gordon 323). This discursive apparatus, which buttressed welfare reform and the divestment of state support writ large, was engineered and disseminated by moderate liberals and conservatives alike, shaping both policy and the national racial imagination. Influential texts like Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950—1980* (1984) and Lawrence Mead’s *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (1986) advocated for major overhauls of the existing welfare system, which ranged from its complete abolishment (Murray) to establishing work as a prerequisite for aid (Mead). Waged labor, according to these authors, was

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<sup>13</sup> See Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” in *Antipode* 34.3 (July 2002): 380—404. They define “roll-out neoliberalism” as “the purposeful construction and consolidation or neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations.” (37). It further involves the production of new trade (de)regulations by institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as increased punitive measures that discipline poor and criminalized groups.

the most significant measure of independence for US citizen-subjects. Their books claimed that welfare dependency would discourage welfare's recipients from wage-earning work, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and enabling them to continue self-indulgent lifestyles.

According to “culture of poverty” theory, which thrived during the Civil Rights Movement and continued into the Reagan-Bush era, inner-city poverty persists, generation after generation, due to the “bad choices” made by African-American mothers and poor women of color (Solinger 22). Since at least Ronald Reagan's infamous 1976 invocation of the “welfare queen,” a coinage prefigured by the 1965 Moynihan Report and its critique of single black motherhood, post-industrial dependency discourse has couched its claims of irresponsibility in racialized, classed, and gendered terms. It attributes welfare dependency to cultural and individual shortcomings—the unchecked hedonism of the poor—rather than structural impediments. Having children out of wedlock, electing to work, creating matriarchal families, resisting the heteropatriarchal structure of the nuclear family—these were the choices, according to Moynihan, that led inevitably to generational welfare dependency. Moynihan's assertions marked a sea change in social commentary regarding women of color. The “employment behavior” and choices of African American women, as Rickie Solinger notes, were not pathologized as such prior to the Moynihan Report (21). But by the 1970s, the inner-city, single black mother had become the public face of the welfare state.

Other figures joined her. There was Reagan's infamous welfare queen, a dissolute woman who spends public money on Cadillacs, furs, and drugs, all the while evading employment. There was the unmarried black teenage mother, a “baby having babies,” whose unchecked and fecund sexuality would inevitably produce more drains on the state. And of course, there was the undocumented immigrant, who similarly stoked racial-gendered fears about non-white



reproduction and resource scarcity. Elderly migrants and migrant mothers, generally codified as Mexican or of the “Third World,” were imagined to cross the border for access to public health-care and Social Security funds. This litany of figures represented for many the antitheses of independence: poor, non-working, child-like, feminine. Indeed, the state’s responses to poverty and disability, parceled out respectively through public assistance programs and Social Security Insurance, implicitly disclose an ideal citizen-subject: the “waged worker, with access to a decent paying job, and without primary caretaking responsibilities” (Pokempner and Roberts 445). To that description, I would add able-bodied, normatively reproductive, and properly sexual. From the fictions circulated in the 1970s and 1980s, which themselves drew from older white supremacist, patriarchal, and ableist ideologies, dependency soon became the exclusive property of what Gloria Anzaldúa has termed “El Mundo Zurdo” (“the left-handed world”): “the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged” (196).

In an era following the abolishment of legal discrimination, public aid reform shored up the social and material violence historically levied against the nation’s most vulnerable populations, dividing a multi-ethnic global elite from the disenfranchised class of the racialized poor. As sociologist Loïc Wacquant observes, “[reform] affected only a small sector of American social spending—the outlays targeted at dispossessed families, the disabled, and the indigent—while sparing much larger programs benefiting the middle and upper classes [...]” (78). With the signing of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a federal law and major welfare reform, the U.S. fictions of dependency underpinned the large-scale decimation of the welfare state. PRWORA constituted a multi-pronged attack on the nation’s perceived drains: racialized motherhood and families, poor single mothers, poor people in general, disabled citizens, and undocumented migrants. With PRWORA, the Aid to Families

with Dependent Children (AFDC) program became Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), transitioning from an open-ended entitlement program to a block grant replete with time limits and stringent work requirements. For children, the parameters for claiming disability, and thereby SSI, tightened. For undocumented immigrants, access to federal, state, and local public services was considerably restricted, a move presaged by California's Proposition 187 in 1994. And in the spirit of promoting nuclear family formations, the newly minted law discouraged single-parent households and children born out of wedlock. Taken together, the imperatives of this legislation enforced normative standards of productivity and (re)productivity, ensconcing the self-sufficient, consumerist, and gainfully employed citizen-subject as national ideal. PRWORA marked a watershed moment in the ongoing divestment of state support, occupying the epicenter of a constellation of policy shifts spanning the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It established without question the dividing line between valued and devalued life in a post-Civil Rights United States—a distinction that hinged on the pejorative of public dependency.

This marked shift in the terrain of identity, in which racial-gendered violence could conceivably operate through a framework of liberal anti-racism, warranted a new diagnostic language, one that nationalist and identitarian movements could not provide. Soon thereafter, the critical formulations of racial formation and multiculturalism arose to assess this absence. In 1983, recent PhDs Michael Omi and Howard Winant published “By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States” in the *Socialist Review*, a 75 page essay that noted the emergence of “a new racism” in the 1980s. 11 years later, their landmark study *Racial Formation in the United States* argued for the continued relevance of race as a structuring element of social and political relations, thus intervening into a colorblind rhetorical platform that co-opted Civil Rights

referents while obscuring the persistence of racial inequality. The buzzword of “multiculturalism” too entered the critical lexicon, with scholars such as David Palumbo-Liu, Lisa Lowe, Robert Stam, Ella Shohat, and Vijay Prashad levying critiques at the apolitical institutionalization of “diversity.”<sup>14</sup> Multiculturalism, according to these scholars, operates as the ahistorical, politically empty, and commodified celebration of racial and ethnic difference, a falsely meritocratic ethos that suggests all subjects, regardless of identity or social standing, have equal access to social and economic opportunity. In academic contexts, it functioned effectively as a means of political neutralization, a strategy to quell the insurgency of student demands while avoiding substantial institutional change. The debates around multiculturalism further generated scholarly re-interpretations and recuperations of the term, in which the multiplicity of identities flattened by multicultural celebration were mobilized instead in the service of anti-racism. Prashad’s “polyculturalism,” Palumbo-Liu’s “critical multiculturalism,” and Shohat and Stam’s “polycentric multiculturalism” name a few of the efforts to re-imagine the multiculturalist imperative as a platform for genuine social and political change, rather than the empty symbolic gesture it had become.

Dependency, however, has proven less recoverable for scholars of ethnic studies, even as multiculturalism and dependency occupy opposite sides of the same post-racial coin. Certainly, scholars such as Dorothy Roberts, Cathy Cohen, Rickie Solinger, and Mimi Abramovitz have identified the ways in which dependency rhetoric works to punish poor women of color,

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<sup>14</sup> Scholarship critiquing the rise of an apolitical multiculturalism includes David Palumbo-Liu, ed., *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

disciplining them for (re)producing lives, labor, and family formations deemed criminal.<sup>15</sup> And certainly, these scholars have also addressed the myriad ways in which dependency discourse operates as a form of “new racism”—as well as new misogyny, new ableism, and new classism. But unlike multiculturalism, which was often recuperated even as it was critiqued, dependency for Ethnic Studies remains seemingly irreparable as a project of radical transformation. To this end, this study offers a sustained consideration of how the rhetoric of dependency opens up a productive, if contested, terrain for writers and cultural producers in post-racial times—a social, aesthetic, and political topography that cannot be parsed by the field’s given analytic models, but one that is under-read and ripe for excavation.

But why does Ethnic Studies remain so inhospitable to radical recuperations of dependency, and what might such a recuperation yield? While I do not intend to collapse the sub-fields of Ethnic Studies, which have their own respective objects, histories, analytic frameworks, and methods, I nonetheless contend that what unites African-, Asian-, Latinx-, and Native-American Studies is a tradition of insurgency, a history of field formation that stemmed from student demands in the late 1960s.<sup>16</sup> To begin, I turn to the insights of ethnic literary scholar María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, who identifies in postwar projects of revolutionary liberation—projects that, in part, lead to the formation of Ethnic Studies—a retrenchment of an independent “agent of transformation...one who is highly ethical, mobile, progressive, risk taking, and masculinist” (9). She argues that, despite their oppositional political goals, postwar

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3.4, May 1997: 437—465; Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from the Colonial Times to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the development of Ethnic Studies and the “interdisciplines,” see Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012).

revolutionary projects mirror the narrative trajectory of neo-colonial development projects: a liberal account of progress that prioritizes, above all, the achievement of individualism and independence. “A normative theory of human transformation and agency, then,” Saldaña-Portillo writes, “is at the heart of the discursive collusion between revolutionary and developmental discourses” (7). This collusion will become particularly relevant in chapter 2, where I demonstrate the ableist parallels between ethnic cultural nationalisms and neo-colonial urban re-development discourses, as well as the impasse of imagination that such parallels present.

As a set of fields borne from social protest, Ethnic Studies has historically privileged the resistant subject engaged in projects of self-determination, which pivot on standard, able-bodied understandings of agency and autonomy. This liberal humanist narrative has determined the terms under which “ethnics” can participate in state, academic, and corporate institutions, and indeed, the terms under which we can be conceptualized at all. To borrow an oft-cited quip from ethnic literary scholar Rey Chow, “[*T*]o be ethnic is to protest,” that is, under the multicultural imperatives of global capitalism, protesting constitutes the economically logical and socially viable vocation for [ethnics] to assume” (48—49, emphasis in original). Echoing Saldaña-Portillo’s claims, Chow notes that across Ethnic Studies, the “ethnic” has been predominantly imagined as a “[...] resistant captive engaged in a struggle toward liberation,” with liberation defined as “self-ownership and self-affirmation” (40—41). But as Chow argues, the protesting ethnic does not present a viable threat to government, academic, and corporate institutions, which have changed very little in the past forty or so years of racial and gendered inclusion. Rather than offering a platform of radical transformation, Ethnic Studies’ investments in self-ownership shore up ideals of liberal individualism. These investments work to foreclose the critical and aesthetic possibilities offered by narratives of dependency, and as I will address later

in this introduction, narratives of disability.

In rejecting self-determination as the definitive narrative of ethnic literary and cultural studies, *Anatomy of the City* builds upon the insights of Chow, Saldaña-Portillo, and Ferguson in search of an alternate ontological horizon: one in which “the ethnic” is not constituted solely through the act of protest, but embedded in and propped up by vast relational networks of assistance, power, and provision. Chapter 2, for instance, explores this possibility through the development of what I term an “infrastructural sublime,” that is, the macro-constellation of social, material, and migratory infrastructures that constitute and reshape US ethnic subjectivities in the age of global capitalism. This is not an account of individual triumph, but a story of the racialized subject’s distribution across and through innumerable interlocking systems of support. To be clear, in developing aesthetic concepts like the infra-sublime, I do not wish to dismiss the project of self-determination wholesale. Relations of oppression and resistance continue to dictate ongoing academic and activist struggles, and as such, claims to self-determination remain all too relevant in a world structured by white supremacy. My intention is rather to foreground how an ethos of interdependency yields alternate liberatory projects, in which liberation hinges not upon the achievement of self-ownership, but on the relinquishment of the self altogether. It is to foreground how storylines of *dependent* subjectivity, produced by the literary and cultural practitioners that constitute this study, interrupt the logic of disposability that casts racialized/ disabled populations and places as unproductive, parasitic, and excessive. And just as queer of color critique “[engages] nonheteronormative racial formations as the site of ruptures, critiques, and alternatives,” crip of color critique interpellates the deviant, dependent, and “crip” figures of the welfare queen (Chapters 1 and 4), the undocumented migrant (chapter 2), and the disabled subject (Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4) as narrative counter-sites that rupture normative metrics of life

value (Ferguson, *Aberrations* 18). These figures overturn the developmental narratives at the heart of both Ethnic Studies and global capitalist projects, and offer in their stead a litany of rival fictions.

### **Integrating Disability, Transforming Dependency**

For those deviant and disabled, “crip” bodies who could never entertain the myth of independence, this dissident world—El Mundo Zurdo—marks a place of refuge. And in order to excavate its hidden geographies, I look to feminist disability practitioners like Audre Lorde, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Eva Feder Kittay, whose respective writings dissipate the ideal of self-sufficiency and showcase the transformative potential of dependency relations. Following the field of feminist disability studies, this dissertation understands dependency as a social relation of need experienced by all, and to which we are universally vulnerable, albeit to varying degrees. Rather than a negative property essential to certain segments of the U.S. population, it describes a relationship that emerges between subjects and systems, a type of recurring social bond vital to our well-being. As feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay writes, “But who in any complex society is not dependent on others, for the production of our food, for our mobility, for a multitude of tasks that make it possible for each of us to function in our work and daily living?” (“When Caring is Just” 267–268). Relatedly, this project understands interdependence as an *ecology* of dependent relations, as well as a term (and act) of reclamation.

Whereas Ethnic Studies has had limited engagement with dependency as conceptual tool, scholars working at the intersections of feminist and disability theory have long interrogated dependency’s negative (because gendered, infantilized, and disabled) associations, and instead describe the cultural knowledges that an acknowledgement of dependency enables:

Our collective cultural consciousness emphatically denies the knowledge of vulnerability, contingency, and mortality. Disability insists otherwise, contradicting such phallic ideology...The body is dynamic, constantly interactive with history and environment. We evolve into disability. Our bodies need care; we all need assistance to live. An equality model of feminist theory sometimes prizes individualistic autonomy as the key to women's liberation. A feminist disability theory, however, suggests that we are better off learning to individually and collectively accommodate bodily limits and evolutions than trying to eliminate or deny them. (21)

In this excerpt from the oft-cited "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson articulates what I term an infrastructural consciousness: a recognition of the body's dependency on systems of assistance, and a relinquishment of the fantasy of self-support. As her essay makes evident, while people with cognitive and mobility impairments may have a heightened awareness of the social, material, and prosthetic supports that enable them to navigate the world, a disability perspective emphasizes a *shared* contingency on seemingly external structures of provision, as well as the open seam where body mingles with environment. Disability, in its showcasing of the body's malleability and porousness, fosters a necessary critique of liberal humanism and the autonomous subject it prioritizes. And while many disability academics and activists lobby instead for disabled claims to independence, Garland-Thomson, among many others, locates the radical potential of disability scholarship in its rejection of liberal individualism. I mobilize this strand of disability theory throughout this project in order to chart a rival narrative geography, one in which systems of social and material support occupy the foreground of readerly consideration.

Unlike Garland-Thomson, however, I connect this infrastructural imaginary explicitly to



the disciplinary rhetoric of dependency and its regulatory effects on communities of color, thereby intervening into the undeniable whiteness of disability studies. And just as Garland-Thomson mobilizes disability theory to engage feminism in a mutual transformation, so I too track the ways in which race revises even recuperated understandings of disability and dependency. Though I further elaborate this project's understanding of disability and disablement in the first chapter, I want to say at the outset that I align myself with a critical disability perspective, in which disability (however broadly imagined) is not understood as a medical condition contained by an individual body, but as a dynamic process that emerges from the body's encounters with socially engineered environments. As such, I identify the reduction of public safety nets as a form of racialized disablement, insofar as welfare reform compromises access to life-sustaining resources like education, food, and housing. Further, by engaging disability and dependency in this project on ethnic American literatures, I recover the vulnerable figures disavowed by projects of racial and ethnic solidarity, and re-imagine such figures as central to a public ethics of care. In our post-Fordist era, in which cultural beliefs about state parasitism and *inability* undergird the undoing of social, material, and prosthetic support, a re-visioning of dependency is key to asserting the value of racialized, low-income, and disabled lives. It is also key to going beyond the mere *recognition* of support networks, as disability theory prompts us to do, and identifying the *uneven* economy of assistance that deems certain subjects unworthy of support.

In the left-handed world, a dissident geography I trace throughout this dissertation, care itself becomes a social project,<sup>17</sup> an abundant resource available to all, rather than a private resource either purchased or practiced within nuclear kinship forms. As the work of caregiving is

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<sup>17</sup> I follow Alexis Pauline Gumbs's critique of what she terms the "anti-social logic of neoliberalism," which privatizes care and access to life-sustaining resources like housing, education, healthcare, and food (196).

further pushed to the margins of the state, and care itself increasingly privatized, the literary and cultural practitioners I engage envision models of nurturance that exceed the private/ public binary and affirm the value of (re)producing racialized life. And given the ways in which welfare reform operates through the demonization of racialized motherhood, in which black and brown families are deemed incapable and undeserving of support, the routing of literary, activist, and cultural production *away* from heteropatriarchal narratives and *toward* collective projects of care proves particularly significant.

Queer crip ancestor Audre Lorde preternaturally offers a re-imagining of care, dependency, and social (re)production in her now-canonical essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979), delivered to audiences at the Second Sex Conference and anthologized in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Here, she critiques the “patriarchal model of nurturance” that locates women’s social power solely in maternity and, accordingly, the proper reproduction of heteropatriarchal social formations (107). In this understanding of family, dependency is sanctioned primarily through the mother-child bond, which relegates care and its associated labors to the domestic sphere. But for Lorde, the “mutuality between women,” “systems of shared support,” and “interdependence” afforded by a “lesbian consciousness” and “consciousness of Third World Women” enable alternate forms of sociality and social reproduction, reciprocal networks of support that are not “pathological but redemptive” (106, 107). She writes: “Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the ‘I’ to ‘be,’ not in order to be used, but in order to be creative” (107). In this passage, interdependence becomes legible as liberatory ideal rather than behavioral aberrancy, a node of possibility that can (re)produce and nourish lives that were, as Lorde once famously wrote, “never meant to survive” (“A Litany for Survival”). For those women “forged in the crucible of

difference,” the occupants of El Mundo Zurdo, reciprocal support with those “outside the structures” is the only way to survive an otherwise unnavigable world (108). What Lorde terms “mutual (non-dominant)” interdependence is the condition of possibility for “true visions of our future,” a vision of unqualified support that “[defines] and [seeks] a world in which we can all flourish” (107, 108). In other words, only through interdependence and the shared engagement of difference might we access a blueprint for survival that accommodates all women, not just those with access to academic and economic resources.

Lorde’s democratic approach to care further highlights the inequities of caregiving and dependency that structure contemporary life, and the ways in which low-income women and women of color bear the burden of this asymmetry. “If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in aspects of our oppressions,” she writes, “then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?” (108). While women’s autonomy has been a primary concern in academic feminist circles, Lorde identifies what Ellen K. Feder and Eva Feder Kittay term the “very impossibility” of a “project of independence that both relies on and masks the inevitability of human dependency and the work of giving care to dependents” (*The Subject of Care 2*). In this passage, she demonstrates how the work of white feminism hinges upon a material substrate of maintenance labor, an invisible foundation both racialized and classed. For Lorde, interdependence carries multiple meanings—it can indicate an inter-relational ecology of mutual love and support, or an exploitative “interdependence” facilitated by the disregarded, devalued labor of third world women. Her distinction between ecologies of interdependence, as well as her recognition of the maintenance labor performed by

racialized women, prefigures this project's theoretical work on dependency and interdependency in colorblind times.

Focusing on the infrastructural networks that facilitate the exchange of resources across metropolitan space, I align this project with the concepts of dependency and interdependence fostered by feminist disability scholarship, in which we pay homage to the subjects and structures that enable our lives. But, following Lorde, I also contend that a critical analysis of interdependence requires acknowledging the asymmetries of power that undergird extant support ecologies. My (re)conceptions of dependency and interdependency, which emphasize how categories of minority difference shape material economies of resource distribution, operate as a compass for navigating *El Mundo Zurdo*, the left-handed world. Like Lorde, I excavate nurturing economies of interconnection that maintain, reproduce, and re-value devalued lives, while also identifying as a form of interdependence the extractive economy of global capitalism that both relies upon and erases racial-gendered labor. And in tracking an infrastructural imaginary across ethnic American literature, I interrogate hidden interdependencies that exploit minority difference and labor to masquerade as independence, while simultaneously grasping toward a horizon of undifferentiated support, a “mutual (non-dominant) interdependence” that can “breed/futures” (Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”). I argue that the literary and cultural projects I engage write into legibility those obscured relations of dependency, and in so doing, expose the uneven logic of visibility and invisibility promoted by anti-welfare narratives.

This dissertation's utopian horizon—what José Esteban Muñoz has in other contexts termed a “forward-dawning futurity”—is this vision of unqualified care and support, a “warm horizon imbued with potentiality” to which expressive culture grants us exclusive access (1). What Muñoz deems the “anticipatory illumination of art” gestures here toward a world that

freely recognizes and accommodates our need for care—our dependency on others—and renders this need possible outside of nuclear kinship’s intimate sphere (2). Following this, the works in this project illuminate a world openly structured by interdependency, a world governed by *doulia*, or a “public ethic of care”<sup>18</sup> (Kittay, *Love’s Labor* 128). A reciprocal system of nested dependencies, *doulia* not only honors the dependent’s need for caretaking, but also regards caregiving as an indispensable service worthy of protection. “Just as we have required care to survive and thrive,” writes Kittay, “so we need to provide conditions that allow others—including those who do the work of caring—to receive the care they need to survive and thrive” (*Love’s Labor* 133). And given that literature and culture constitute modes of production toward social relations that are not-yet-here, a means of inventing radical spaces of possibility, the system of social cooperation proffered by *doulia* becomes evident through the infrastructural imaginary: a poetics of support that imbues maintenance and care with a sense of overdue significance.

### **Infrastructure: Anatomy of the City**

*Infrastructure* is the primary organizing heuristic in this dissertation, defining both my critical analytic (crip of color critique) and the subject matter under consideration. Throughout my project, I examine city infrastructure as theme, narrative form, and reading practice. I look to narratives that center infrastructure as thematic concern; examine how infrastructure informs and transforms narrative structures, aesthetics, and genres; and finally, read for relations of social, prosthetic, and material support. But what do I mean by *infrastructure*? Why the infrastructural

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<sup>18</sup> Kittay contributes to a feminist dialogue on the “ethics of care,” a conversation traced back to the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

imaginary? And how might we parse the presence and significance of city infrastructure in post-Keynesian ethnic American writing? To begin, I turn to Patricia Yaeger's introductory remarks in the 2007 *PMLA* special issue on Cities, the release of which jumpstarted literary and cultural analyses of urban support networks. At its most basic level, infrastructure refers to the "equipment, facilities, services, and supporting structures needed for a city's or region's functioning" (Yaeger 15). Divided into "hard" and "soft" forms, or physical networks and institutional networks, it encompasses many of the systems listed in the epigraph above: the "man-made grid of civil utilities," "pipelines of natural gas," the "unnatural waterways of the...Department of Water and Power," and "great dank tunnels of sewage," as well as organizational systems like health care, emergency services, education, and law enforcement (Yamashita 57). As a term that entered the English language following Roosevelt's New Deal, part and parcel of modernizing impulses and the postwar welfare state, its material functions are indelibly tied to a city's well-being.<sup>19</sup>

But as Yaeger asserts, infrastructure occupies both material and symbolic registers, and constitutes a new access point for re-thinking literature "in light of contemporary urban crises"—in the context of this project, the manufactured decline of public support systems and the disproportionate impact on the racialized poor (13). Certainly, to track what she terms a "metropoetics" or a "poetics of infrastructure" is often to speak of the failure of the "nurturing city": "For the literary or cultural critic, one alternative would be to...chart literature's hushed or symphonic stories of people's massed relations to infrastructure—where it takes you, who uses it, who takes care of it, who lives near it, and who is forced to live under or do without it" (17).

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<sup>19</sup> I borrow this particular conceptualization and historicization of infrastructure from Michael Rubenstein's scholarship on public utilities in Irish modernist literature. See Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

By taking up her schema and employing infrastructure as reading method, I interrogate how ethnic American writers employ material systems of resource provision in order to detail a seemingly intractable crisis of support in contemporary U.S. cities. Here, infrastructure becomes a useful and recurring emblem for mapping economies of life value across the uneven terrain of urban capitalism. However, while Yaeger characterizes infrastructure as “present but barely visible” in poems and novels, something you have to “dig” to find, I find that in these literatures such backgrounded systems often occupy a central role (16). What was once ambient becomes palpable, and oftentimes invasive, pressing itself into readerly consciousness. In this way, the works in my study evince what performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson terms “infrastructural avowal”: the affirmation (and amplification) of public supporting structures in the governance of multi-ethnic metropolitan life (8).

The vibrancy and vitality of infrastructure in my project’s archive solicits the recognition of shared human contingencies on support structures, and the ways in which these supporting operations function as a form of bio-necropower, as object-subject relations that fold populations in and out of life.<sup>20</sup> At once a cultural imagining, a hermeneutics for interpreting welfare reform, and a knowledge project, the infrastructural imaginary forces a relinquishment of the discrete, self-supporting subject as cultural ideal, enabling us to trace the strange kinship between urban inhabitants and built environment, a co-mingling of skin and steel that, in the words of new materialist scholar Jane Bennett, can “aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us”

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<sup>20</sup> Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, Jasbir Puar argues that post-9/11 control societies are characterized not by biopower or necropower as singularities, but as twinned processes that optimize life for some populations while cathecting others to death. Though she theorizes this through the oppositional positionalities of homonationalist subject (whose life is optimized) and the terrorist body (whose body is pathologized and quarantined), I nonetheless find her conception of bio-necropolitics useful for parsing the operations of the infrastructural imaginary, in which city support systems optimize life for a multi-ethnic global elite while engineering the slow death or debility for the racialized poor. See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

(*Vibrant Matter* ix). Indeed, my conceptualization of infrastructure owes much to what has been termed the “new materialisms,” a school of theory that invites us to consider the potency of non-human “thing-materialities” and their often-disregarded impact on human life (*Vibrant Matter* ix). For Bennett and others, we do not inhabit a world of discrete subjects and objects, but of “groupings and compositions,” diverse material confederations that shift over time and derive their power from the group’s collective force (“The Force of Things” 354).

This model of co-existence enables the development of what Jackson has called an “infrastructural politics,” an “affective sphere” in which “interdependence is not imagined in compromised terms” (27, 36). Jackson continues: “To avow the supporting acts that sustain and are sustained by social actors is to avow the relational systems on which any conception of freedom rests. It is to make a self from, not despite, contingency” (36). In tracking an aesthetics and politics of dependency across the infrastructural imaginary, I follow both Bennett’s and Jackson’s respective departures from the idealization of the individual self, envisioning a world instead constituted by contingent relations and heterogeneous human-material assemblages. This is a world in which infrastructure, rather than remaining in the background, emerges as a key force in the biopolitical management of minoritarian life and the shaping of an ideal, self-supporting polity. The intensifying polarization of resource distribution, in which infrastructure props up a multi-ethnic elite while debilitating the racialized poor, speaks to its oftentimes amplified presence in ethnic American expressive culture. Infrastructure, too, carries multiple significations, some of which exceed the uneven economies of resource provision that characterize an impoverished present. As vibrant and generative matter, infrastructure also operates as a figure of condensation for alternate economies of interdependency, modes of living-in-relation that contest the ideological regime of welfare reform and its differential



valuation of human life. Infrastructure, then, both registers the material deprivation of racialized/ disabled populations while gesturing toward a potential horizon of care and support—the renewal, reproduction, and prolonging of de-valued bodies.

The vibrancy of infrastructure further signals what we might call the *materiality* of identity categories, an aspect of minority identity waylaid since the triumph of social constructivism over biological essentialism.<sup>21</sup> That is, rather than viewing race, gender, and disability as entirely conceptual or epistemological formations, effects of the perceived social world, I demonstrate how infrastructure and its aesthetic of dependency register the *impact* of resource deprivation on racialized and minoritized bodies—what Lisa Lowe has called the “material trace of history” (26). By probing the charged encounters between racialized subjects, communities, and the non-human/ object-world, my project uncovers how the construction, maintenance, or neglect of infrastructure shapes contemporary U.S. racial formation and cultural production, thoughts often sidelined in a post-racial and post-spatial world.

Indeed, I situate my project within the rhetorical contours of racial disavowal and technological fetishism, two dominant knowledge infrastructures that conditioned collective responses to globalization and “neoliberal multiculturalism,” and that adapted both to a storyline of national progress (Melamed xxi). The discourses of a post-racial and post-spatial era attempt to deliver us from the encumbrances of the material world, imagining a cyborgian and colorblind realm where the social inequalities, physical inefficiencies, and traumatic histories attached to bodies no longer matter. Of course, the coherence of these narratives hinges upon the forgetting of neoliberal assaults on municipal and social policy, which stripped cities of their supporting capacities and confined many communities to isolated urban islands.

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<sup>21</sup> For an account of what has been termed the “material turn,” see Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

Intervening into these twinned discourses, the infrastructural imaginary generates an aesthetics and politics of dependency itself, a vibrant re-materialization of the immaterial and disembodied ideal of contemporary urban citizenship. This aesthetic emphasizes the negative space surrounding and propping up city populations, animating the support mechanisms that undergird every instance of self-fashioning. Thematically, the infrastructural imaginary has its own taxonomy of concerns, i.e., racialized dependency rhetoric, the erosion of public and civic life, and the fraught project of care, as well as its own narrative strategies, i.e. the illiteracy narrative, the infrastructural sublime, and haunting as testimony. For instance, rather than the dissolution of the autonomous self in the typical postmodern narrative, or the recuperation of self-ownership in the ethnic American protest novel, in the infrastructural narrative we witness the re-constitution of many selves through their imbrication in human and non-human networks. This project thus reads the infrastructural imaginary *against the grain* of post-spatial and post-racial narratives of progress. Such a reading practice works to de-familiarize both American multi-ethnic cities and a (neo)liberal multicultural rhetoric that makes sense of such newfound diversity.

It may seem counterintuitive that something as mundane as infrastructure—roads, wires, pipes, labor networks—could render cities strange, ushering in new knowledges about racialized metropolitan space and its literary-cultural representations. To explain this de-familiarizing effect and its cultural and political imperatives, I will now turn to Colson Whitehead's 1999 novel *The Intuitionist*. Equal parts speculative fiction, alternate urban history, and neo-noir, *The Intuitionist* dreams up a metropolis wholly contingent upon the passenger elevator. Highlighting the generative and revolutionary properties of infrastructure, the novel spotlights modern technologies of support from which both city (in this case, New York) and novel unfold. Systems

of mobility—the train, the subway, and above all, the elevator—make and unmake the city, generate neighborhoods, enable metropolitan life: “[The colored neighborhood] had come into being overnight when the industrialists’ tunnels broke the surface and they laid a sign: SUBWAY STOP HERE” (243). Though the elevator is not typically understood as infrastructure, in *The Intuitionist* it is the centerpiece of the city’s networked support systems, indeed, it is the “crown jewel, the very pearl of city services” (27). Its prominence in the novel upends familiar urban tableaux and their ways of seeing. This is not the sweeping aerial view afforded by the modernist skyscrapers of Saltus and de Certeau, or the disorienting postmodern exteriority of Fredric Jameson’s Bonaventure Hotel with its “great reflective glass skin” (42). Instead, *The Intuitionist* fashions a prosthetic imaginary from the city’s network of “lower frequencies,” in which supplementary support mechanisms give rise to new social orders.

In Whitehead’s novel, the elevator functions as a device with which to re-vision the city, as well as to register (and overwrite) the racist epistemologies undergirding it. Its plot centers upon the pursuit of an unpublished manuscript prized for its prototype of the mythical “black box,” the “perfect elevator” that “will deliver us from the cities we suffer now” (61). A transparent metaphor for upward mobility and racial uplift, the “black box” operates as a site of fantasy, a sought-after machine that can transcend architectures of racism and make the city anew: “[T]here is another world beyond this one” (240). Lila Mae Watson, the novel’s protagonist, seemingly corroborates the narrative of uplift borne by the elevator; she is the first black woman employed by the city’s prestigious Department of Elevator Inspectors. But rather than endorsing the spirit of inclusion at the heart of uplift, *The Intuitionist* outlines its limits, showcasing the absorption and re-articulation of radical demands by state and capital in the wake of social gains. The novel skewers, for instance, the tokenization of Lila Mae by the Department,

who seeks to make her “an example. Of what [her] people can achieve” (115). Certainly, the apolitical, multiculturalist maneuvers of inclusion, frequently articulated as “diversity,” have been assessed and torn apart in numerous critical venues. In this way, *The Intuitionist* rehearses what we already know, and dwells at the level of social realism.

But in the novel’s mythic and speculative registers, its fantastic re-imagining of a mid-century New York City, it proffers a new mythology—a surrogate history—for our post-racial United States. Here, an imaginary of prosthetic support, the recognition of “[...] what [keeps] the city up and climbing,” grants exclusive access to radically different social worlds (the “shining city”) (243). And while this prophesied city never materializes—the novel concludes with Lila Mae’s staunch commitment to decoding the black box blueprints—*The Intuitionist* nonetheless hinges this budding revolution (the “Second Elevation”) on the “re-negotiation of our relationship to objects,” that is, on a sustained engagement with the support mechanisms that enable the city (62). Indeed, the elevator operates as shorthand for a city constituted of interdependent relations. It “[enables] the metropolis, summoning [the city and its residents] into tumultuous modernity” (158). But it also ceases to “exist without its freight... The elevator and the passenger need each other” (158, 102). These relations of mutual need envision city residents—and the infrastructures they utilize—as always only partial, fragments hinging on human and material worlds alike. Whitehead’s black box thus stages infrastructure as a conduit to alternate modes of world making, ways of envisioning city space that foreground shared dependency upon and enmeshment within municipal support networks. In this way, the novel’s prosthetic imaginary illustrates the transformative potential of infrastructure that my dissertation so centrally highlights.

In its fantastic de-familiarization of a mid-century New York City, *The Intuitionist* re-

frames public infrastructure as utopian device, a formulation not without literary-critical precedent. Literary scholar Amanda Claybaugh identifies this particular trend in the tellingly-titled article “Government is Good,” which surveys recent scholarly accounts of literature’s relationship to the modern welfare state: Bruce Robbins’ *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (2010), Michael Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism: Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (2000), and Michael Bérubé’s *Life as We Know It* (1996). While these works offer a measured response to welfare, admitting to its shortcomings while claiming its necessity, they more or less advocate for state protection, joining other progressive intellectuals in the collective “[jettisoning] of two decades of Marxist critiques of the state” (Brown, *States of Injury* 15). Insofar as my project considers literature’s relationship to welfare’s *decline*, I position it within this literary-critical conversation. And despite differences in periodization—these works by and large concern modernist literature—*Anatomy of the City* takes up some elements of these scholarly treatments. Certainly, in my conceptualization of care as social project, I examine what Bruce Robbins has termed “the common good,” a “profound shift in moral sensibility that is both a cause and effect of...the rise of the welfare state” (235). Further, like Robbins, who analyzes the patrons, institutions, and networks made visible in what he terms “upward-mobility stories,” I highlight a shared indebtedness to social, material, and prosthetic support systems, and the ways in which literature and culture render otherwise invisible systems palpable. As Michael Walzer has written, the state must be “personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (194). And akin to the heuristic developed in Michael Rubenstein’s *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (2010), which traces a continuity between the literary figuration of public utilities and the hopes invested in the Irish Free State, I

retain an interest in the “wishful thinking and utopian possibilities” embedded in infrastructure’s literary-cultural representation (9). To the extent that writers and artists can re-imagine oppressive urban geographies through figurations of public support, I find Rubenstein’s investments in infrastructure’s utopian function particularly resonant with the revisionary and revolutionary capacities of ethnic American expressive culture.

But in contrast to Robbins and Rubenstein, I also consider how literary-cultural works negotiate the welfare state as disciplinary apparatus, and the ways in which categories of minority difference are mobilized in service of public support’s frequently *punitive* regime. For low-income and communities of color, the creation, maintenance, *and* erosion of infrastructure have imposed, in a variety of ways, forms of systemic brutalization, ranging from the destruction inflicted by highway construction projects to the “constant surveillance of the state” via “regulatory agencies” like welfare offices and public housing (Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance” 29). This thematic will become particularly pertinent in chapter 2, which analyzes the Los Angeles freeway system as an imaginative counter-site that overwrite narratives of urban redevelopment and globalization, and chapter 1, which interrogates representations of regulatory welfare agencies via the discourse of racialized motherhood. So while infrastructure may serve a utopian function in post-Keynesian literary-cultural works, insofar as it allows us to imagine cities otherwise, it also registers the failed promises of an egalitarian state. It is for this reason that I examine a broad swath of infrastructural systems, both hard (i.e., the freeway) and soft (i.e., food welfare). Only by surveying numerous sites of support might I begin to parse infrastructure’s complex role in this literary-cultural landscape, both as a horizon of utopian potentiality and an instrument of state regulation.

*Anatomy of the City* thus situates infrastructure as a textured, multi-stable, and

palimpsestic site through which writers and artists negotiate the fraught project of social support and protection in colorblind times. To be clear, the aim of my project is not to cast “the state” as “good” or “bad,” which I consider beyond the scope of literary analysis. As a literary-cultural critic, my aim is instead to understand how figurations of infrastructure map out the relationships between regimes of state protection and the production of an ideal urban polity, between categories of minority difference and narratives of dependency. It is only through the charting of these relationships that we might begin to understand the complexities of resource distribution, as well as distributive dilemmas of public care, in a post-Keynesian era.

### **Methodology and Chapter Overview**

In each of this dissertation’s four chapters, I demonstrate how post-Keynesian literary-cultural works—novels, life writing, and performance—mobilize infrastructure to articulate rival and recuperative fictions of inter/ dependency. Accordingly, this dissertation is arranged around the thematic of city infrastructure: Chapter 1 deals with the soft infrastructure of municipal welfare networks, Chapter 2 with the freeway network, Chapter 3 with sanitation, and Chapter 4 with infrastructural abandonment. Each of these systems (or lack thereof) bears a particularly charged history of racial-gendered signification, ranging from the cultural memory of pulverized garbage men in the city of Memphis, to the communities of color fragmented by freeway construction, and to the neglected bodies floating in the streets of New Orleans. Thematically, all four chapters make the case for connections between literary-cultural expression and city infrastructure in the aftermath of welfare reform, foregrounding the capacity of literature and culture to re-fashion mundane municipal systems into revisionary accounts of contemporary metropolitan life. Methodologically, all four model a literary critical practice derived from

infrastructural support—an analytic practice that highlights the narrative forms, discursive strategies, and modes of critique enabled through a relinquishment of the self-supporting agent.

The first chapter addresses two primary narratives central to my project: 1) the “origin story” of disability studies as a scholarly enterprise, and 2) the welfare queen as an “origin story” for anti-welfare policies and practices. Using the conceit of the origin story as organizing metaphor and supporting infrastructure, I bridge these two seemingly unrelated narratives through a heuristic I term a *crip of color critique*: a feral enterprise derived from feminist disability theory, women of color feminisms, and materialist analysis. At once a node of coalitional possibility and a reading practice, crip of color critique highlights the punitive discourse of dependency that unites racialized, disabled, and impoverished subjects, as well as the counter-narratives of dependency and support marshaled through women of color feminist writing. I turn to canonical examples of this writing, such as Audre Lorde’s “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer” and *This Bridge Called my Back*, to map an alternate genealogy of disability studies, one that demonstrates the field’s potential affinities with women of color feminisms and ethnic American scholarship. Through detailing a crip of color critique, I set up the theoretical framework central to all of my chapters, and position this analytic as a portable heuristic transferrable to other spheres of scholarship. I then claim the welfare queen as a pivotal figure for this alternate disability studies, highlighting the medicalization of dependency and pathologization of black motherhood in anti-welfare discourse. Sapphire’s controversial novel *Push* (1996), set in a Reagan-era Harlem, provides an imaginative occasion for me to elaborate the points of affinity between critical disability, feminist disability, and women of color feminist thought. The novel’s censorious depiction of insufficient public and municipal services—public schools, welfare offices, state institutions for the disabled—invite a re-theorization of disability



via categories of racial and economic inequity, as the city's insufficient infrastructures operate as mechanisms of state-sponsored disablement. Through my analysis of *Push*, I claim the welfare queen as a central figure for a crip of color critique, and demonstrate the generative possibilities of this heuristic for disability analysis.

In chapter 2, I elaborate the infrastructural analytic central to crip of color critique through the freeway fictions of Karen Tei Yamashita and Helena María Viramontes. I examine how the Los Angeles freeway system, imagined by developmental boosterism as an emblem of technological progress and self-ownership, is re-purposed by contemporary women-of-color writers as a narrative site of counter-signification. I focus on two novels that centrally incorporate the L.A. freeway: Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), a Chicana coming-of-age novel set in the age of freeway development, and Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), a multi-ethnic ensemble novel that centrally engages with the North American Free Trade Agreement. Through their respective engagements with topics of environmental racism and "illegal" immigrant labor networks, Viramontes's *Their Dogs* and Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* relay an account of human enmeshment within—and dependency upon—systems of municipal social support, deriving a politics and aesthetics of interdependency via infrastructure's supporting operations. While *Their Dogs* and *Tropic of Orange* each depict a different Los Angeles, one before and one after the advent of globalization, they both enable an intervention into an ethnic literary studies predicated on the "idea that individuals are bounded, coherent entities" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 62). By focusing on infrastructure and support, Yamashita and Viramontes enact a critical re-orientation toward ethnic U.S. literatures, one that positions dependency as an aesthetically generative category.

The third chapter turns to sanitation-centered novels by Don DeLillo and Samuel R. Delany to examine the logic of disposability central to welfare reform. This logic justifies the deprivation and subsequent invisibility of those who cannot participate in the capitalist marketplace, whether through work, consumption, or proper (re) production. But in DeLillo's *Underworld* and Delany's *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, waste (human and otherwise) is not sequestered away from public sight, but assumes prominence, pressing itself into readerly consciousness. As opposed to theories that position waste as "matter out of place," DeLillo and Delany position garbage as constitutive of the city-body and the social body, as both material fact and political possibility (Douglas 35). Through their close encounters with refuse systems, which invite intimacies with what we cast-off, I argue that these novels imagine an ethical re-orientation to waste, one that undoes the violent logic of disposability and generates rival life-worlds of support for those deemed abject. Both works suggest an alternate orientation to trash as a means of disputing the value system upheld by global capital and its domestic counterpart, welfare reform, in which different levels of worth are ascribed to people, places, and labor. DeLillo and Delany thus depict the transformative potentialities of an openness to waste, in which the horror and loathing ascribed to abject matter dissipates, and the worth of waste can no longer be differentiated from our own.

The fourth and final chapter examines testimonies of infrastructural abandonment in the cities of New Orleans and Detroit: Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman play *Let Me Down Easy* (2009) and activist icon Grace Lee Boggs' autobiography *Living for Change* (1998). It argues that Smith and Boggs de-familiarize hypervisible scenes of neglect while foregrounding the reparative project of care, and in so doing, transform the cultural and political imperative of witnessing itself. That is, while predominant theoretical models of testimony emphasize a

paradigm of trauma, in which written or oral acts work to reveal, contain, or exorcise unimaginable violence, such models have little purchase in contexts where violence is already hypervisible, overexposed, and readily available for public consumption. Departing from trauma's paradigm of exposure, I argue that these testimonies operate instead through a modality of haunting, which renders the familiar strange and indicates "something is missing," gesturing toward the shadows covered up by dominant ways of knowing (Gordon, *Ghostly* 178). And while trauma conceives of violence as *exceptional* and event-bound, haunting allows us to consider forms of racialized violence embedded in the everyday. The testimonial work of haunting offered by Boggs and Smith, in which infrastructural ghosts signal "unresolved social violence," disconnects blighted urban tableaux from myths of cultural pathology and links them instead to processes of state divestment (Gordon, "Some Thoughts" 1). Neglect becomes legible as a form of state-sanctioned disablement: the systematic undoing of racialized populations through resource deprivation. Here, to bear witness is to disrupt the interpretive codes that condition how we perceive violence against black and brown communities, or even what we perceive *as* violence. A crip of color critique, in this context, enables us to consider forms of racialized violence beyond the spectacular, and to bring racialized disablement into our scholarly purview.

Centering the inhabitants of El Mundo Zurdo—the "colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged"—these chapters together contest the prevalent logic that attaches life value to one's capacity for productivity and self-support, a standard of value that remains unchallenged even in movements for racial, gendered, and sexual equality. They further insist that we take dependency seriously as an analytic framework and political strategy, as well as its attendant project of care, support, and reciprocity. Following this, my project asserts the

value of shared access to life-sustaining resources like food, water, healthcare, transportation, and education, a vital reminder in an era of accelerating privatization and austerity. And certainly, these concerns are central to both anti-racist and disability movements, which have historically involved expanded access to public resources, services, and spaces. Given the yoking of racial and gendered deviance to state parasitism and the subsequent decline of public support, I argue for a reconsideration of dependency as a pejorative category, and demonstrate how U.S. writers and artists have begun to light the way. Through their engagements with city infrastructure, these cultural producers rupture the capitalist ethos that differentially values lives, labor, and landscapes, and articulate a vision of unqualified and undifferentiated support.

## Chapter 1

### Crips, Black Mothers, and Welfare Queens: Toward a Crip of Color Critique

This is no longer a time of waiting. It is a time for the real work's urgencies. It is a time enhanced by an iron reclamation of what I call a burst of light—that inescapable knowledge, in the bone, of my own physical limitation.

*Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer"*

1996 was a landmark year, both for advocates of welfare reform and critical disability scholarship alike. In 1996, then-President Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a major piece of legislation designed to “end welfare as we know it.” PRWORA singlehandedly siphoned off state support to groups long perceived as parasitic: poor single mothers, undocumented migrants, and disabled citizens. It re-affirmed productivity, self-sufficiency, and economic independence as nationalist ideals, upheld by both the Right and the Left.

As the call of “welfare to work” played across television screens and print headlines, the field of Disability Studies, a field that critiqued independence as both nationalist and humanist value, gained a foothold in the literary and feminist academy. 1996 marked the year of publication for Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture*, a path-breaking work that introduced disability as a category of analysis for American literary and feminist scholarship. 1996 also ushered in Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, which similarly called for a re-orientation of feminist theorizing towards the disabled body. The following year

marked the first edition release of the *Disability Studies Reader*, now in its fourth printing, which introduced Disability Studies as “a field of study whose time has come” (1). While Garland-Thomson questioned the “liberal ideology of autonomy and independence” that characterized dominant strands of the women’s movement, and Wendell called for societal ideals that would “[acknowledge] the realities of our interdependence,” the tyrannical imposition of independence onto the nation’s most vulnerable subjects became official U.S. policy (26, 151). This field-defining wave of feminist disability scholarship arrived concurrently with the re-structuring of the U.S. social security and welfare landscape.<sup>22</sup> Yet PRWORA and its related policies have only faintly registered in disability scholarship, despite their relevance to the field’s foundational critiques of autonomous personhood and independence.<sup>23</sup>

Through the organizing metaphor of the “origin story,” this chapter puts these two moments into conversation, mapping out nodes of intellectual, social, and imaginative affinity between feminist disability analysis and ethnic American critiques of welfare reform. I interrogate two primary narratives central to my project: 1) the story that Disability Studies recounts regarding field formation, and 2) the welfare queen as an origin story for anti-welfare policy. I bridge the two through a reading practice I term a *crip of color critique*: a feral analytic linking together critical disability studies, women of color feminisms, and materialist analysis.

While these two narratives may not share an apparent relation, a crip of color critique demonstrates their mutually transformative potential. In the vein of Cathy Cohen’s pathbreaking

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<sup>22</sup> There are, of course, precursors to this work. See Mary Jo Deegan and Nancy A. Brooks, eds., *Women and Disability: The Double Handicap* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1985); Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Barbara Hillyer, *Feminism and Disability* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> This is not uniformly the case. See, for instance, Jennifer Pokempner and Dorothy Roberts, “Poverty, Welfare Reform, and the Meaning of Disability.” *Ohio State Law Journal* 62 (2001): 425—463; Sarah Parker Harris, Randall Owen, Robin Jones, and Kate Caldwell, “Does workfare policy in the United States promote the rights of people with disabilities?” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 39.1 (2013): 61—73.

article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” a crip of color critique asks: How might Disability Studies shift if the welfare queen, that emblem of defective motherhood and compromised family structure, occupied a focal point of analysis? And in turn, how might a crip of color critique highlight the little-acknowledged ways in which discourses of disability have fundamentally shaped the figure of the welfare queen? As I argue in this chapter, the welfare queen only becomes legible *as* a rhetorical figure and epistemological object *through* narratives of disability: she is defined necessarily as a *pathological* mother, a social aberrancy to be rehabilitated through workfare programs. Through her alleged *inability* to mother, work or (re)produce properly, she furnishes a useful story for global capitalism to propagate itself through the dismantling of social safety nets. In this way, the discourse of the welfare queen operates as *the* definitive disability narrative of late capitalism—a cautionary tale of state dependency that enabled the reallocation of public resources towards elite interests.

This chapter, then, is at once a theoretical manifesto for what I term a crip of color critique and a literary-cultural reframing of the welfare queen within the critical discourse of disability. Beginning with the “origin story” of Disability Studies, I then locate an alternate disability politic, or a crip of color critique, across the writings of women of color feminists in the wake and aftermath of Reagan-era reform. Eschewing Disability Studies’ usual suspects, such as the commonplace invocation of the 1990 *Americans with Disabilities Act*, I map an alternate critical genealogy across writing by women of color feminist theorists, many of whom lead lives circumscribed by disability and were openly critical of welfare reform. In short, a crip of color critique recuperates the stigmatized condition of dependency used to justify anti-welfare policy. It does so through what I term an infrastructural hermeneutic—a critical optic and reading practice that highlights the economies of support propping up metropolitan life. Finally, I

elaborate this analytic through a reading of Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push*, one of few African-American literary works that explicitly engages anti-welfare policy vis-à-vis disability. In *Push*, the mythic welfare queen assumes a primary role, intervening into the discourses of disability and pathological motherhood that frame her as the "undeserving" poor. The novel's censorious depiction of insufficient public and municipal services—public schools, welfare offices, state institutions for the disabled—further invite a re-theorization of disability via categories of racial and economic inequity, as the city's insufficient infrastructures operate as mechanisms of state-sponsored disablement. Through my analysis of *Push*, which enables me to highlight the resonances between women of color feminist, critical ethnic, and feminist disability politics, I claim the welfare queen as a central figure for a crip of color critique, and demonstrate the generative possibilities of this heuristic for disability analysis.

### **Disability Rights and Disability Justice: Toward a Crip of Color Critique**

During the initial crest of disability studies in the academy, scholars primarily linked one path-breaking piece of legislation to the riches of disability scholarship: the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. The nation's first comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities, the ADA prohibited discrimination in the spheres of employment, education, public services, public accommodations, public transportation, and telecommunications, thus rendering possible a once-unattainable level of participation in the public sphere. And as many scholars, activists, and disability advocates attest, the ADA grew out of a decades-long grassroots quest for "civil rights, equal access, and inclusion for people with disabilities" that gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 2).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The ADA was one of many achievements for disability rights activists in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See also: The Declaration of Rights of Disabled Persons in the United Kingdom (1975), the British



Given the significance of this legislation, it proves unsurprising that many disability scholars would utilize the ADA as a framing device, particularly in that prolific period of the mid-90s. The nod to the ADA, as demonstrated in the introductory pages of Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, Wendell's *The Rejected Body*, *The Disability Studies Reader*, *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, and other exemplars of first-wave disability scholarship, soon became scholarly protocol within much of the field's pioneering content.<sup>25</sup> And considering the centrality of the ADA to the field's inception in literary and feminist studies, it largely shaped the initial theorization of disability as both identity and analytic category. To review, the ADA posits disability as a legal (rather than medical) category, to which civil rights and forms of legal redress can accrue. It mandates accommodations in the contexts of employment and the public sphere as a means of mitigating entrenched social barriers. As such, it recognizes that people with disabilities are less burdened by their impairments than by the oppressive social environments that they must navigate. This identitarian model, in which disability operates as a claimable category of difference, emerged from disability activist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and further, came to inform much first-wave disability scholarship. Indeed, the field's "signature move," according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, involved moving disability away from the doctrines of medical knowledge and toward the realm of social construction and critique ("Disability Studies: A Field Emerged" 917).

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Disability Discrimination Act (1995), and the United Nations Convention of the Rights with Persons with Disabilities (2008),

<sup>25</sup> For more evidence of the ADA's shaping impact on disability studies, see Lennard Davis, "Introduction: The Need for Disability Studies," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997): 1—8; Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: Integrating Disability into Teaching and Scholarship," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: MLA Press, 2002):1—14; Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, eds David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso 1995)

This divide between medical and social models, theorized by both disability activists and scholars alike, constitutes one of the field's most well-known concepts. While disability scholars have since thoroughly critiqued the social model, citing, for instance, the false distinction between impairment and disability, I will now briefly gloss its definition in order to detail what is undoubtedly a formative theoretical concept.<sup>26</sup> In distinction to the medical model, which conceives of disability as an individualized defect to be cured or managed, the social model views disability as constructed via social processes of norm enforcement. It distinguishes between *impairment*, defined as a non-normative physiological or cognitive state, and the socio-cultural articulation of that impairment as disability.<sup>27</sup> Many scholars of the social model view the disciplinary regime of normalization, which constructs social, environmental, and cognitive barriers, as itself disabling, rather than the bare fact of physiological or cognitive difference. Anti-normativity, then, became a rallying point for scholars and activists alike, who mobilized the politics of body-mind aberrancy to form a motley alliance. As Simi Linton writes in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998):

We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes, following our guide dogs, puffing and sipping on the mouth sticks that propel our motorized chairs. We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system. We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group... What we

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Nirmala Erevelles' *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Shelley Tremain, "On the Government of Disability." *Social Theory and Practice* 27. 4 (2001): 617—636; Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the 19<sup>th</sup> century regime of normalcy and its production of disabled bodies, see Lennard Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge 2010), 3—19.

rail against are the strategies used to deprive us of rights, opportunity, and the pursuit of pleasure. (4)

This oft-cited excerpt from Linton, whose book also claims a place in the canon of first-wave scholarship, makes plain the joy and rage experienced by those coming into political consciousness. She traces the depth and the breadth of this new alliance, turning up the volume on once quiet figures peopling the periphery. What perhaps resembled a disconnected assortment of symptoms is transformed into political commonality, and medical stigma becomes the foundation for a “strong disability alliance,” one that “led to civil rights victories and the foundation of a clearly identified disabled community” (Linton 5). And yet, once more the insurgent properties of anti-normativity—the binding thread of Linton’s disabled community—are sutured to the nation-state, that primary arbiter of cultural and social normativity. Indeed, Linton’s commanding manifesto of disability pride, in which she declares a collective intent to let their “freak flag fly,” concludes with the most standard of political narratives—the assertion of inalienable rights for disabled people, that is, a declaration of “rights, opportunity, and the pursuit of pleasure.”

The ADA and disability rights movements thus largely informed the ways in which disability first became known within the literary and feminist academic world. Following this, first-wave scholarship conceptualized disability as a minority identity that could be claimed, for the sake of creating community and commanding rights. Disability Studies thus continued in the tradition of rights-based identity politics, in which disability is theorized beyond the pathologizing constraints of medical knowledge and put forth as an identifiable category of difference to which legal rights can attach. Yet, such identitarian platforms are limited in their theorizations of disability beyond, as Michael Davidson so eloquently puts it, “a Western, state-

centered model that assumes values of individual rights and equality guaranteed by legal contract” (134). Indeed, such platforms recreated some of the limitations inherent in civil rights and liberal politics, which tend to benefit only the most privileged occupants of any given identity category, organize themselves around single-issue politics, and prioritize assimilation and inclusion into dominant institutions.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, a “left framework of politics,” as Cathy Cohen writes, “makes central the interdependency among multiple systems of domination,” and displaces rights-based, single-axis struggles in favor of coalitional politics that center vulnerable populations (442). A crip of color critique, which I identify as a part of a greater shift toward what activists such as Mia Mingus and Patty Berne have termed Disability Justice, operates out of this left or radical framework.<sup>29</sup> Here, an analysis of material support, racial inequity, and economic access gains priority. And while I would never deny the necessity of the ADA or of rights-based disability activism—after all, these discourses enabled me to claim my own disability identity—I nonetheless insist on locating affinities between disability politics and the radical critiques of welfare reform launched by women of color feminist and ethnic studies scholars. To be clear, in returning to this incipient moment and shifting its focus of analysis, I do not intend to dismiss the vital, path-breaking

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<sup>28</sup> The volume of scholarship critiquing rights-based platforms is vast, but a few notable examples include Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3.4 (May 1997): 437—465; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004); Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Disability Justice is an intersectional understanding of disability that moves its politics away from a liberal or civil rights based framework. As Mingus writes in her blog *Leaving Evidence*, “[W]e need to think of access with an understanding of disability justice, moving away from an equality-based model of sameness and ‘we are just like you’ to a model of disability that embraces difference, confronts privilege and challenges what is considered ‘normal’ on every front” (“Changing the Framework”). And as Patty Berne has written in “Disability Justice—A Working Draft,” “We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated “other” from whom profits and status are extracted.”

scholarship produced by my Disability Studies forebears. I instead join an emergent turn toward a disability politics that understands the capitalist state as itself a racial-gendered apparatus of mass disablement, rather than a haven of resolution.<sup>30</sup> Following scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles, Liat Ben-Moshe, and Jasbir Puar, I aim to articulate an alternate genealogy and analytic framework for disability studies, in which I derive a theory of disability from the racial-gendered processes of public resource deprivation mobilized by and through welfare reform, as well as from the poetics of support articulated across women of color feminist writing. That is, rather than seeking to secure accommodations for those privileged enough to demand (and attain) them, then, I conceptualize disability—as Jasbir Puar and disability justice activists insist—in “terms of precarious populations,” in which disability does not constitute a deviation from an able-bodied norm, but structures the course of community life, and further, becomes the justificatory basis of resource re-allocation by state and capital (“Cost of Getting Better” 154).

And what populations are more precarious than those affected by PRWORA? Already dwelling at the margins of the paternalistic state’s dwindling beneficence, the so-called “needy families,” “single mothers,” and unqualified “aliens<sup>31</sup>” targeted by this legislation were further stripped of public empathy and material support through the rhetorical tactics of 1990s welfare reform. As Dean Spade has argued, welfare reform made plain the limits of anti-discrimination law in addressing racial, gendered, and economic violence. That is, while post-Civil Rights U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> I do not wish to posit myself as a pioneer of this approach to disability politics. For other disability and proto-disability scholarship that critiques state violence (particularly vis-à-vis institutionalization), see Irving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961); James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*. Steven Noll and James W. Trent, eds (New York: New York University Press 2004); Steven J. Taylor, *Acts of Conscience: World War II, Mental Institutions, and Religious Objectors* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*. Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> This is terminology taken directly from the document itself.

laws were ostensibly race and gender-neutral on their face, programs and policies aimed at resource distribution were and are “still mobilized by race and gender, and continue to distribute security and vulnerability across the population through those vectors” (Spade 117).

What would it mean, then, to understand disability politics in terms of the groups most vulnerable to the predations of neoliberal capital, and least supported by state infrastructure? In this context, a disability politic would pay attention to how the language of *inability*—dependency, unproductivity, cultural pathology, and so forth—underpins the accelerating erosion of public resources. This mode of analysis has been referred to as “cripping” by disability scholar Carrie Sandahl, who describes such a practice as the “[spinning] of mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects” (37). A crip of color critique would thus foreground the ways in which anti-welfare rhetoric de-values disabled populations, single mothers, needy families, and unqualified migrants through the same ableist logics, in which one’s inability to properly (re)produce and consume constitutes viable grounds for punishment. Rather than a category separate from the predations of global capital, then, discourses of disability are central to the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal logics undergirding uneven processes of profit and labor extraction. It would further highlight the linkages between systematic resource erosion and the disproportionate production of disability in low-income and racialized communities of color, insofar as one’s access to basic resources determines one’s life chances and life quality. Finally, a crip-of-color critique would proffer a nuanced perspective on welfarist systems of care, one that recognizes the violence inherent to state-regulated institutions (i.e. public psychiatric institutions, public healthcare aides, public housing, food stamp distribution, welfare offices, and child protective services), insofar as they conflate care and surveillance, while also querying privatized models of care that erode state accountability to the

public. Indeed, a crip of color critique would consider the distributive dilemma of care and material support, in which public, private, and public-private systems all prove insufficient, as one of the primary ethical conundrums of the post-Keynesian era.

But what is *disability* under the terms of crip of color critique? In other words, if my purpose is to theorize disability in relation to racial and economic inequity, what particular logics now script disability's categorical boundaries? As I suggested earlier, the social model of disability no longer offers critical traction in this context. Beyond its false distinction between impairment and disability, it fails to account for the historical and material conditions that bring disability into the world, particularly for racialized and low-income populations. Disability, under the social model, is an ahistoric and static construction, one that proffers “discursive, individual, and local” solutions for social transformation (Erevelles, *Disability and Difference* 20). A crip of color critique, on the other hand, highlights the ways in which disability is produced through institutionalized processes of material deprivation, and diverges explicitly from individualist solutions centered around financial compensation. Following this, it does not prescribe strict criteria for what “counts” as disability, as such standardized categorization often operates in service of legal redress—that is, whether or not an individual is “impaired” enough to receive accommodations.<sup>32</sup> In this way, it is in accordance with the many disability scholars who have recognized the porosity of the term.

Disability, as performance scholar Petra Kuppers has argued, is “a deeply contested term used to describe individuals (or a people?) that are in a position of difference from a center,” a “vague description” that Kuppers notes is “already problematic: how the center is defined, how

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<sup>32</sup> According to the ADA (Title 42, Sec 12102), “disability” is defined in the following terms: (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment. (ada.gov)

center and periphery interact, what fantasies they hold of one another, is different in different contexts” (5). Indeed, disability scholarship has long taken stock of the variegated bodily/cognitive states connoted by “disability,” as well as the futility of a project that might seek to delimit disability’s contours. To paraphrase Nirmala Erevelles, however, a crip of color critique views this departure from so-called normative embodiment not as a form of *being*, as minority politics would have it, but as a form of “becoming-in-the world,” a dynamic process embedded within and emergent from the historical-materialist contexts of global capitalism. In other words, a crip of color critique shifts our conceptualization of disability from *noun*—an individual or collective identity—to *verb*—the processes of disablement that discipline unsupported lives. It thus defines *disablement* as the structural processes through which certain populations are denied or limited access to life-sustaining resources.

By centering precarious populations in my conceptualization of disability, I propose a mode of disability critique that highlights and interrogates, above all, relations of material support and the post-Civil Rights rhetoric of dependency. I connect these key nodes of concern through what performance theorist Shannon Jackson has termed an “infrastructural politics,” which refers to the acknowledgement (or as Jackson puts it, “infrastructural avowal”) of the systems of human welfare—healthcare, transportation, dependent care, sanitation, education, and food welfare—that coordinate metropolitan life (21).<sup>33</sup> It locates the political project of disability critique and social action within networks of interdependent care: the survival against-all-odds of a “disruptive vulnerability that refuses to disappear” (Erevelles, “Thinking with Disability Studies”). Rather than upholding autonomous personhood as an ideal, then, a crip of color

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<sup>33</sup> Jackson explicitly connects her theorization of an infrastructural politics to the work of performance art, whereas I extend this politic to the realm of literary-cultural critique.



critique pays particular attention to material economies of support and the ways in which they distribute life chances across increasingly uneven metroscares. To revisit a question phrased at the introduction of this dissertation, it asks: Who is supported by infrastructure? Who is disabled by it? And which subjects, through the forceful extraction of their unseen and unvalued labor, become the scaffolding—the human infrastructure—for others’ fantasies of *independence*?

### **In the Interstices of the Interdisciplines: Women of Color Feminism and Disability Theory**

In articulating an infrastructural politic, a crip of color critique resonates with and draws from the thematics of material support threaded throughout canonical and contemporary works of women-of-color feminist thought. Writers such as Lorde, Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Toni Cade Bambara, and Barbara Smith mobilized the infrastructural metaphor of *bridging* to write about interdependency, “theory in the flesh,” “potent networks,” and the “personal unction” discovered “in the mirror, in the dreams, or on the path across *This Bridge*” (Bambara xxvi). While I do not wish to retro-actively impose the term “crip of color” onto these writer-activists, as none of them openly claimed the label of “crip,” I nonetheless locate salient alliances between disability and radical feminist critique in the “interstices,” as Roderick Ferguson puts it, of academic fields like ethnic, women’s, and disability studies, and of movements like the disability justice, anti-racist, and women’s movements (“Of Our Normative Strivings” 86). Following this, I use crip of color critique to both name a reading practice and coalitional possibility, rather than to describe an actual political movement (which did not exist at the time) or an ideal revolutionary subject: the disabled person of color. I want to make clear, however, that while I conceive of crip of color critique as a reading practice rather than identity category, I do not intend to evacuate disabled/ gendered/ racialized bodies wholesale; these particular embodiments

constitute the foundation upon which this reading practice takes shape. Rather, I argue that a crip-of-color critique demonstrates how nationalist ideals of independence and productivity have been defined over and against disabled, racialized, and feminized subjects, and in so doing, illuminates a potential axis of political solidarity.

At once a coalitional potentiality and critical analytic, then, a crip of color critique attends to the 1) the poetics of support mobilized by writers, artists, and activists to overwrite state narratives of dependency and pathology; 2) the ways in which infrastructure operates as a figure of condensation in literature and culture for a counter-discourse of dependency; 3) the ableist logics undergirding the erosion of public and municipal support; 4) the workings of disability, illness, and debility in canonical and contemporary writings of politicized women of color, particularly as they relate to/ are produced through systemic environmental and material deprivation; and finally, 5) the strategies of reciprocal care and endurance emergent in literary and cultural production that center, rather than disavow, the vulnerable, dependent body. Both a derivation of and framework for the texts in this study, a crip of color critique sets the terms of engagement for the works under consideration. Indeed, under the terms of crip of color critique, culture operates as a primary site of contestation, one that envisions modes of organizing and supporting racialized life in which self-sufficiency no longer registers as an ideal.

**Transforming Feminist Theory: Audre Lorde’s “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer”  
and *This Bridge Called My Back***

In her 2002 essay “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson maps out a blueprint for feminist disability studies, a then-emergent subfield that aimed to transform feminist thought through an incorporation of disability. Yet, experiences

of state violence, resource deprivation, and disability fundamentally shaped feminist theorizing decades prior to Garland-Thomson's assertion, suggesting that disability does not necessitate *integration* into feminist thought; rather, it has always been present. We witness a politics and poetics of support taking shape, for instance, in writings like Lorde's "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer."<sup>34</sup> Here, cancer becomes a political question tied to racial, gendered, and economic justice—the deadly effect of centuries of unsupported life. A collage of journal entries written during Lorde's first three years living with metastasized breast cancer, "A Burst of Light" positions Lorde's illness within the networked coordinates of U.S. systemic racism, environmental injustice, and global anti-blackness. While first-wave disability scholars theorized a disabled body divorced from the historical conditions of its own making, here Lorde's disabled body materializes explicitly as the effect of state-sanctioned violence in an era following Civil Rights movement-building and decolonization: "Sometimes the wanton cells in my liver become Bull Conner and his police dogs completely smothered, rendered impotent in Birmingham, Alabama, by a mighty avalanche of young, determined Black marchers moving across him toward their future. P.W. Botha's bloated face of apartheid squashed into the earth beneath an

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<sup>34</sup> I begin with Lorde because *The Cancer Journals* has often been taken up as an object of analysis in Disability Studies, though Lorde has rarely been considered a theorist of disability. Examples of disability scholarship engaging Lorde include C. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Cynthia Wu, "Marked Bodies, Marking Time: Reclaiming the Warrior in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 17. 2 (2002): 245—261; Diane Price Herndl, "Reconstructing the Posthuman Feminist Body: Twenty Years after Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds Brenda Brueggemann, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Sharon Snyder (New York: MLA Press, 2002): 144—155; Stella Bolaki, "Challenging Invisibility, Making Connections: Illness, Survival, and Black Struggles in Audre Lorde's Work," in *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, ed Christopher M. Bell (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011):47—74; Theri Alyce Pickens, "Pinning Down the Phantasmagorical: Discourse of Pain and the Rupture of Post-Humanism in Evelyne Accad's *The Wounded Breast* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*," in *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, ed Christopher M. Bell (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 75--94

onslaught of the slow rhythmic advance of furious Blackness” (148).<sup>35</sup> In contrast to both social and medical models, “A Burst of Light” puts forth what Paul E. Farmer, Bruce Nizeye, Sara Stulac, and Salmaan Keshavjee term a “biosocial understanding” of sickness, in which “large-scale social forces—racism, gender inequality, poverty, political violence, and war, and sometimes the very policies that address them—[...] determine who falls ill and who has access to care” (“Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine” n. pag). That is, rather than conceptualizing disease as a purely *biological* and individualized event, a biosocial understanding views cancer as an extension of broad-based racial, social, and economic inequities. For Lorde, cancer cannot be separated from the material and historical conditions that produce illness and disease disproportionately for black and brown bodies. In “A Burst of Light,” cancer is racism incarnate.

Lorde’s metastasized cancer, too, becomes part of a patchwork narrative that positions the intimate news of her diagnosis vis-à-vis her cultivation of a Black internationalist feminism and her observations of a Reagan-era New York City. Beyond the distant figures of Bull Conner and P.W. Botha, “A Burst of Light” documents how the erosion of municipal support, happening *in real time* in Lorde’s New York City, operates as a means of group-differentiated debilitation:

February 9, 1984

New York City

So. No doubt about where we are in the world’s story. It has just cost \$32,000 to complete a government-commissioned study that purports to show there is no rampant hunger in the U.S.A. I wonder if they realize *rampant* means *aggressive*.

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<sup>35</sup> Nirmala Erevelles offers this critique of first-wave disability theorizing in *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, in which she points out the tendency to imagine the social as purely a textual effect. She asks: “How can one theorize the disabled body as if it exists outside of the historical conditions that constitute its material reality?” (12)

So. The starving old women who used to sit in broken-down rooming houses waiting for a welfare check now lie under park benches and eat out of garbage bins. “I only eat fruit,” she mumbled, rummaging through the refuse bin behind Gristede’s supermarket, while her gnarled Black hands carefully cut away the rotted parts of a cantaloupe with a plastic Burger King knife. (84)

Nestled between two entries that document a sumptuous dinner with lesbian-of-color group Sapphire Sapphos and a university speaking engagement, this journal excerpt is the first entry in “A Burst of Light” following Lorde’s diagnosis on February 1<sup>st</sup>. Her sentences, once long and exuberant, describing clause after clause of “steamed fish and fried fish and fish paté,” become curt and clipped (82). Lorde does not mention her cancer by name, nor does she make explicit the relation between state narratives of denial and her own ailing body, but the connection is ever-present. In the introduction to this essay she writes: “The struggle with cancer now informs all my days, but it is only another face of the continuing battle for self-determination and survival that black women fight daily” (81). Lorde’s illness, in addition to the racist socio-medical institutions that manage that illness, do not exist in isolation from “government-commissioned” studies that spend thousands to deny a crisis of hunger rather than directing state resources towards mitigating it. When Lorde writes “No doubt where we are in the world’s story,” then, she refers to the endurance of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in Reagan’s New York City, and the ways in which racism, as a system of organized killing, operates anew through neoliberal state narratives and practices of resource re-allocation. This is an institutionalized denial of wellness that debilitates both Lorde and the “starving old women” recently denied the minimal state supports necessary to sustain life. Her cancer is thus not an individual entity contained by her body’s boundaries, but rather, one expression of the systems

that seek to delimit, contain, and exploit black life.

By articulating her illness publicly, Lorde offers somatic testimony to the processes of state-sanctioned racism that have re-organized themselves within the circuits of global capital. For Lorde, testifying to illness *as* a black woman operates as a form of political action in and of itself. Along with “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” and *The Cancer Journals*, “A Burst of Light” constitutes—in the words of Rudolph Byrd—the “first public reflection by an African American woman, and specifically a black lesbian feminist, on the nature of health, disease, mortality, and social struggle” (19). The significance of such a public declaration cannot be understated, as movements for black liberation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries typically avoided the topic of disability. Scholars of disability and African American studies have begun excavating the rationale for this obfuscation; for instance, Douglas Baynton, Therí Pickens, Joshua Lukin, and others have noted the ways in which disability was, on the one hand, historically mobilized to justify racist practices, and on the other, disavowed by black political movements in order to achieve racial uplift.<sup>36</sup> Lorde’s willingness to engage intersections of race and disability, then, enables the emergence of alternate intersectional rubrics for understanding structural violence. Here, the biosocial experience of cancer enables the emergence of infrastructural *support* as a critical analytic:

I’m glad I don’t have to turn away any more from movies about people dying of cancer. I no longer have to deny cancer as a reality in my life. As I wept over *Terms of*

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<sup>36</sup> Scholarship on the tension between black studies and disability studies includes Therí Pickens, “‘It’s a Jungle Out There: Blackness and Disability in *Monk*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 33, No. 3 (2013); Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *New Disability History*, edited by Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 33—57; *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. Christopher M. Bell, ed. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012; Joshua Lukin, “Black Disability Studies.” *Temple University Faculty Herald*, Vol. 36, No. 4: 6—10.

*Endearment* last night, I also laughed. It's hard to believe I avoided this movie for over two years.

Yet while I was watching it, involved in the situation of a young mother dying of breast cancer, I was also very aware of that standard of living, taken for granted in the film, that made the expression of her tragedy possible. Her mother's maid and the manicured garden, the unremarked but very tangible money so evident through its effects. Daughter's philandering husband is an unsuccessful English professor, but they still live in a white-shingled house with trees, not in some rack-ass tenement on the Lower East Side or in Harlem for which they pay too much rent.

Her private room in Lincoln Memorial Hospital has her mama's Renoir on the wall. There are never any Black people at all visible in that hospital in Lincoln, Nebraska, not even in the background. Now this may not make her death scenes any less touching, but it did strengthen my resolve to talk about my experiences with cancer as a Black woman. (147)

Rather than framing *Terms of Endearment* through a singular analytic like *race*, *gender*, or *class*, Lorde's analysis foregrounds relations of support, both material and social, as well as the conditions of possibility that enable one to narrate a life in the first place. For many viewers of this famously sentimental film, the "young woman dying of breast cancer" offers an individual story divorced from the social and economic coordinates that frame it; for Lorde, *Terms of Endearment* renders evident the kinds of infrastructural support systems available to those with private resources. The very *experience* of sustaining and narrating life, then, is undeniably linked to the politics of racial, gendered, and economic justice that have long eschewed disability as a category of being or analysis. Through her own experience with cancer and the medical-

industrial complex—juxtaposed with the filmic representation of cancer in *Terms of Endearment*—Lorde demonstrates the centrality of illness and disability to concerns of social liberation writ large.

And as Lorde observes, few people were more intimately acquainted with illness and disability than her political comrades—largely women of color—in feminist and anti-racist movement circles. A decade prior to the publication of Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* and Wendell’s *The Rejected Body*, the cultural, poetic and activist output of Lorde and her comrades was produced through and within the lived experience of disability: “And of course cancer is political—look at how many of our comrades have died of it during the last ten years!” (Lorde 122). Considering the prevalence of illness and cancer in movement circles, how could disability not imprint itself onto women-of-color feminist writings?

In her masterful dissertation “*We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves*,” self-identified “black queer troublemaker” Alexis Pauline Gumbs catalogues some of the poet-teacher-visionaries that transitioned before their time: Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Toni Cade Bambara, who died of cancer at the respective ages of 58, 65, 69, and 56. She then notes: “It would take pages to list all of the Black feminist theorists who are struggling with cancerous growth, fibroids, and pre-cancerous masses right now. Almost every queer Black feminist I know who is over the age of 35 has already begun to confront these health issues” (79). This catalogue of fibroids, masses, and growths, Gumbs argues, operates as itself a form of text, the archival space where “a rejection of stable employment, lack of access to healthcare, stress of exclusion from multiple communities of support...intersect and manifest” (80). The stress of group-differentiated resource deprivation, then, is literally written on the body, and disability itself becomes a black feminist textual object.



These somatic traces are everywhere in canonical and contemporary women-of-color texts and histories, as well as the evidence of their making. Gloria Anzaldúa succumbed to complications from diabetes at the age of 61. The imaginative geographies underpinning her writing—*borderlands/ la frontera* and *El Mundo Zurdo* (the “left-handed world”)—explicitly incorporate disability into their transformative space of difference: “*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (*Borderlands/ La Frontera* 3). Barbara Smith’s introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* positions black feminism as a multi-issue movement that opposes “sexual, racial, economic, and heterosexist oppression” as well as the “oppressions visited upon the physically disabled, the old and the young” (xxix). This is not a coincidence; at another point in the introduction Smith cites “sterilization abuse, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled, violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights” as part of a laundry list of black feminist concerns. The writers in *Bridge*, too, were intimately acquainted with racism as itself an apparatus of bodily debilitation. The now-canonical 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective, anthologized in *Bridge*, acknowledges concerns of sterilization abuse and health care. Poets Jo Carrillo and Chrystos write of the vulnerability of Native populations to nuclear waste, uranium mining, and environmental racism more broadly, as well as the economic exploitation of Native labor by white settlers.<sup>37</sup> Also present are the environmental stressors that shape the writing process and wear away at the body—the material conditions under which these works were produced. “Forget the room of one’s own,” Anzaldúa

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<sup>37</sup> See Carrillo’s poem “Beyond the Cliffs of Abiquiu,” which contains the following lines: “How can it be/ that the mines/ the uranium cancer causing dangerous radon gas emitting mines/ are worked over by Navajos and other assorted/ types/ and the trading posts/ are all/ all/ worked over/ by whites?” (67), and Chrystos’ essay

writes in “Speaking in Tongues,” “Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping and waking...No long stretches at the typewriter unless you’re wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter” (168). In her letter to “Third World Women writers,” who must negotiate a daily sensorium of material stressors in order to put words on the page, Anzaldúa conveys an intimacy with the apparatuses of state support—the “bus” and the “welfare line”—that shape processes of creative labor for working-class women-of-color, and that constitute ever-present obstacles for personal expression. Indeed, by testifying to the networks of support that enable as well as delimit them, the writers of *This Bridge*—as well as Lorde—solicit an infrastructural reading practice, one that foregrounds the intimate entanglements of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, public resource erosion, and disablement en masse.

Lorde’s “A Burst of Light” and *This Bridge Called My Back* thus constitute primary textual sites for identifying the relations between racial-gendered violence and state-sanctioned disablement in the emergence of anti-welfare ideology. Here, the infrastructural apparatuses of support that sustain or extinguish life assume prominence, shaping the expressive culture that buoyed women-of-color feminism and remains its primary archival trace. These works demonstrate that disability does not necessitate *integration* into feminist thought, as Garland-Thomson proffered in her 2002 essay, but has long shaped its contours.

### **Crippling the Welfare Queen**

In addition to “A Burst of Light” and *This Bridge*, the mythos of the so-called welfare queen constitutes a key narrative site wherein ableism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy intersect and manifest. Following Cathy Cohen’s path-breaking contribution to queer theory, I

mobilize crip of color critique to situate the welfare queen narrative within disability discourse, and in so doing, to envision a disability studies centered around this fraught figure. In engaging this origin story, which foregrounds state-sanctioned disablement via resource deprivation, I grapple with one of the central conundrums confronting the field of disability studies as it engages with racial and economic inequities: the imbrication of disability with histories and processes of racialized violence. Or, as Nirmala Erevelles has provocatively asked, “How is disability celebrated if its very existence is linked to the violence of social/ economic conditions of capitalism?” (17). As Lorde demonstrates in “A Burst of Light,” limited access to material and social resources leads to the proliferation of disability, illness, and debilitation in racialized and low-income communities: this is undeniable. Yet, this disabling relationship has often been obscured through the positive reclamation of disability in rights-oriented movements, which reject outright the theorization of disability as limit.

This project does not offer an easy resolution to this conundrum, and theorizes disability as *both* an embodied archive of state-sanctioned violence and as a “potential site for collective reimagining,” that is, as a generative platform for articulating political and aesthetic projects centered around vulnerability, bodily renewal, and support (Kafer 9). In this way, I echo Tobin Siebers’s assertion that “disability studies needs to account for both the negative and positive valences of disability, to resist the negative by advocating the positive and to resist the positive by acknowledging the negative” (5). Siebers’s claim creates space for scholars to examine disability within contexts of racialized state violence. In the afterlives of U.S. welfare reform, disability constitutes a multivalent site that testifies to the material deprivation enacted by anti-welfare policy, and yet also generates theories of *interdependence* that contest its governing logics.

In the state-authored narratives of welfare reform, disability also occupied a central role, particularly through the figuration of the welfare queen. While feminist scholars have thoroughly outlined the racial, gendered, and classed elements of the welfare queen narrative, I argue that this narrative gains much of its traction through the negative invocation of disability. In other words, it is through the discourse of pathological black motherhood—a “lazy” mother unable to provide for herself and her children—that racialized, impoverished, and vulnerable lives were rendered undeserving of public support. PRWORA, as Sanford F. Schram observes, contributed considerably to the “medicalization” of welfare, as the act “helped accelerate the tendency to construct welfare dependency as an illness, thereby transforming welfare into a set of therapeutic interventions designed to cure people of a malady” (59). In other words, the dominant ideology of welfare dependency framed the need for public assistance *as itself* a disability, one subject to state management and cure.

To begin this analysis, let me briefly gloss the history of the welfare queen as mythical figure.<sup>38</sup> Twenty years prior to the passage of PRWORA, Ronald Reagan famously coined the term of “welfare queen” during a 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. His depiction of a derelict spendthrift from Chicago’s South Side with “3 new cars, a full length mink coat, and [a] take estimated at a million dollars,” a woman who had allegedly posed at one time as a mother of 14 children to obtain state benefits, inaugurated a particular discourse of policy reform that would breed anti-welfare slogans like predecessor George H.W. Bush’s “cross-generational dependency” and the oft-invoked “welfare as a way of life” (qtd in Crafton, “The Incremental Revolution”). Far from an isolated incident, Reagan’s catchphrase gained immediate legibility due to its invocation of deviant black motherhood, a national mythology

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<sup>38</sup> The welfare queen mythos (as imagined by Reagan) was derived from the criminal legacy of Linda Taylor, the real-life embodiment of a pathological stereotype.

given credibility and momentum by Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*.<sup>39</sup> Moynihan's decree, penned following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, linked the endurance of urban black poverty to the matriarchal structure of black families—a crisis he (in)famously termed a “tangle of pathology.” Households headed by single black mothers, the Report argued, were not viable in a national culture founded upon and structured by heteropatriarchy, that is, the cultural logic that idealizes the patriarchal nuclear family as primary social unit. And as Rickie Solinger has argued, the welfare queen operates as a continuation of Moynihan's deviant matriarch, a state narrative of racial-gendered pathology that obstructed the full implementation of civil rights for African Americans and wore away at existing structures of public support.<sup>40</sup>

The discursive maneuvers of welfare reform distinguished black women and children from the category of the “deserving poor” through narratives of familial, cultural, and behavioral degeneracy. While popular images of “the poor” were not explicitly racialized prior to the passage of civil rights legislation, by the mid-1980s the single black mother had emerged as the quintessential welfare recipient and poverty incarnate, reinvigorating “age-old stereotypes of African Americans' [...] economic irresponsibility, perverse propensity, and cultural dependency” (Abdur-Rahman 136).<sup>41</sup> The racialization of welfare in the 1960s—1990s, as Dorothy Roberts observes, explains why the initial justification for welfare proffered during the Progressive era—to provide assistance for poor or widowed mothers—was emptied of its persuasive power: “While mothers' aid at the outset of this century supported white women in

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<sup>39</sup> As scholars such as Ange-Marie Hancock have noted, welfare reform was not an entirely conservative affair. Indeed, PRWORA was supported by Democrats and Republicans alike.

<sup>40</sup> See Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> As Solinger points out in *Beggars and Choosers*, one study on media representation of the poor indicates that in 1964, only 27% of images of “the poor” in newspapers were African American, while in 1966 it had jumped to 53% and by 1967 72% of the images of “the poor” were African American (143).

exchange for their valuable caretaking, welfare reform at the end of the century castigates Black single mothers whose work in the home is devalued” (“Welfare and Black Citizenship” 1576). A means of eroding civil rights and affirmative action, the discourse of the welfare queen further worked to curtail poor black women’s increased access to public assistance, a right recently afforded through the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. By 1966, as Helene Slessarev observes, “a flurry of conservative candidates, including Ronald Reagan, won elective office...arguing that government should do less, not more, and that strong civil rights enforcement threatened white liberty” (11). That is, as soon as black women and children were included in the category of public assistance, assistance itself became the target of willful obstruction.

Following the era of Civil Rights, the welfare queen mythology reproduced racialized violence primarily through the rhetoric of personal responsibility, which attributed the economic stagnancy of African-Americans to cultural deviancy and individual failures, thus justifying the withdrawal of public resources from the public. “The figure of the Welfare Queen,” writes Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “allowed lawmakers to make the neoliberal argument that health, well-being, education etc. were individual tasks, not community concerns, and that they were failing because of the individual bad choices of poor mothers, not because of the divestment of state support” (220). The state discourse of personal responsibility, Gumbs observes, further imagined black life as the “production of false and negative value,” in which black mothers birth black children primarily as a means of siphoning public resources, and the (re)production and maintenance of black life is considered injurious to society at large (236). The narrative of the welfare queen, then, conflated black motherhood with state parasitism and the (re)production of valuelessness, papering over the violence of state divestment with narratives of individual blame.

Alongside the rhetorical mainstays of anti-blackness and misogyny, the language of disability, pathology, and disease wrote the welfare queen into public legibility. The political values of industry and individualism, touted by Reagan-era and Clinton-era administrations alike, were defined over and against the undeservingness of the profligate welfare queen, who functioned as an icon of laziness, wanton hyper-fertility, and state dependency. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs observes, the Reagan-era discourse around racialized reproduction cast black teenage motherhood as itself a disease, one that justified the “wars on poverty and drugs that combined to situate disease and enmity in the bodies of poor women” (206). In *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*, Linda Singer identifies how, at the beginning of the HIV/ AIDS crisis, teenage and single motherhood were explicitly framed as epidemics, a characterization that later justified an uptick in punishment and surveillance of young women of color—and an attendant denial of health services. The black mother as disease, Gumbs argues, “[posed] a threat on privileged populations through tax burdens, crime, and the general erosion of quality of life,” representing a path of infection that moved from “oppressed” sites to privileged ones (207). Represented as epidemic and threat, teenage motherhood served an important rhetorical function insofar as it enabled the re-allocation of health resources away from the nation’s most vulnerable. In other words, the narrative of black motherhood as *itself* disabling to the nation writ large rendered welfare reform palatable.

The seeming illegitimacy of racialized reproduction and black motherhood, in which black women could not function as proper mothers or produce valued life, further translated into the belief that women on welfare should work.<sup>42</sup> “Race-laden press coverage and public

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<sup>42</sup> As Premilla Nadasen notes in *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*, “Liberals, conservatives, and many radicals concurred that jobs programs would solve the problem of rising welfare rolls and the long-term problem of poverty” (136).

discussions of black migration, ‘illegitimacy,’ promiscuity and laziness,” writes Premilla Nadasen, “transformed the program from one supporting the right of single mothers to stay home to one encouraging work outside the home” (xvi). Defined against the ideal of the productive, able-bodied worker, the welfare queen as “lazy” parasite offered yet another stereotype steeped in ableist language. And certainly, the myth of the idle welfare recipient dominated the public imagination. Describing a 1966 “Walk for Decent Welfare” in Columbus, Ohio, a march made up of approximately 35 people, Nadasen details how bystanders “heckled and harassed the Ohio marchers, calling them bums and chanting ‘work, work, work’” (1). Similarly, at a welfare rights protest in Boston, “construction workers dropped lunch leftovers and containers of water on demonstrators and called out ‘We work, why don’t you try it?’” (Nadasen 136). Welfare rights activists (i.e., the National Welfare Rights Organization) countered claims of laziness, arguing that mothering *was* work. They pointed to statistics, gathered in 1972 by the Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization, that indicated only “15.9 percent of the AFDC recipient population was able-bodied” (Hancock 42). While decried by liberals and conservatives alike, the black mother’s seeming *inability* to work offered the perfect “cover story,” to use Wahneema Lubiano’s coinage, for the dismantling of government assistance.<sup>43</sup>

This particular line of logic demonstrates how disability, rather than signaling a *lack* of utility, rendered poor black women particularly useful to the expansion of global capitalism, which is contingent upon resource privatization. In her reading of Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Nirmala Erevelles forges a similar relationship between blackness and disability. While, as Erevelles writes, “the dominant

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<sup>43</sup> Lubiano defines cover stories as narratives that “cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that redirects our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen if the *seen* is to function as the *scene* for a different drama. One story provides a cover that allows another story (or stories) to slink out of sight” (324).



paradigm has conceived of disabled bodies as having little economic value except in the very limited contexts where their extra-ordinariness was made hypervisible,” in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” it is in “becoming disabled that the black body is at the height of its profitability” (*Disability and Difference* 39). For Erevelles, the “scenes of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” enacted in the Middle Passage rendered the black body a commodity *through* acts of purposeful disablement (Spillers 67). And because Spillers’s essay refers to the grammar of enslavement through which black mothering becomes the reproduction of valuelessness, its insights directly address the welfare queen/ black mother and the social function she serves. It is through the cover story of welfare mother as both unfit mother and unfit worker—the conjoining of blackness and disability—that black women became most useful to capitalism. That is, in becoming disabled through the pejorative language of idleness, dependency, and disease, the welfare mother as mythical figure enabled the uneven distribution of resources to continue unabated.

As the origin story for accelerating resource privatization, the welfare queen thus constitutes one of the most significant disability narratives in an era of late capital, in which state violence against racialized populations is justified through ableist understandings of productivity and properly (re)productive behaviors. Given her centrality to the rhetorical operations of global capital and its domestic counterpart, welfare reform, and further, the centrality of disability to her mythology, I claim her as a primary figure for a crip of color critique.

## The Radical Potential of Disability Politics? Reclaiming the Welfare Queen in Sapphire's *Push* (1996)

To perform this second act of recovery, I turn to Sapphire's *Push*, a hugely controversial novel set amongst the eroding infrastructural supports of Reagan-era New York City.<sup>44</sup> While dominant narratives of single black motherhood—circulated through mass media, political rhetoric, state policy, and federal legislation—utilize the language of cultural pathology to devalue black lives, Sapphire's *Push* renders *particularly* evident the relationship of disability to anti-welfare rhetoric, as well as the usefulness of a critical disability politic to overturning that rhetoric's operative logics. The novel demonstrates how infrastructural erosion operates as itself a form of disablement, yet also renders evident how a critical disability politic can discredit the nationalist values embedded in and reaffirmed by anti-welfare policy. The welfare queen as a figure of disability, then, gestures towards alternate modes of sociality and (re)production—ways of organizing life that contest the reproduction of abjection for racialized and disabled bodies. By re-affirming the value inherent to these lives, Sapphire creates—in the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs—"a rival social world adverse to the violence of capital" (193).

As Michelle Jarman has noted, the novel's protagonist—sixteen-year old Claireece Precious Jones—is "[haunted] by disability," as she must navigate the conjoined forces of "poverty, sexual abuse, illiteracy, obesity, HIV, and having a daughter with Down Syndrome" (164). Precious is the product of relentless abuse to a nearly absurd degree; twice raped and impregnated by her father, tormented daily by her mother, and warehoused by educational and

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<sup>44</sup> Both Sapphire's *Push* and its movie adaptation, Lee Daniels' *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, have been subject to critique for their over-the-top portrayals of black poverty. For instance, Justin Marble referred to *Precious* as "poverty porn," and Armond White termed the film a "post-hip-hop freak show" ("Not So Precious," "Pride & Precious"). And in *Telling Incest*, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges note that Sapphire's novel proves "scandalizing because it features luridly brutal and brutalized subjects" (125).

social services, she amplifies the violence of patriarchy, racism, and state neglect besieging black urban communities in the aftermath of Civil Rights. And as a crip of color critique highlights, *Push* entangles disability with the mechanisms of state violence specific to Reagan-era reform: the insufficient public infrastructures, agencies, and municipal services that allegedly aim to support vulnerable populations, but in fact reproduce poverty. Insofar as *Push* articulates a critical disability politic, it is a disability politic grounded in the acknowledgement of state repression and its reproduction of social abjection for racialized populations.

Akin to moments in “A Burst of Light” and Anzaldúa’s “Speaking in Tongues,” *Push* foregrounds an intimacy with state apparatuses of support that function, in the words of Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, as the novel’s “dramatic core” (133). The prominence of “sites of public service: public schools, welfare offices, shelters, hospitals and the like” invite an infrastructural reading practice—the key maneuver of crip of color critique—that highlights relations of social and material support (Abdur-Rahman 133). Indeed, the narrative arc of *Push* details the protagonist developing alternate forms of literacy from her engagement with the actively disabling public infrastructures of New York’s Harlem, as well as the self-actualizing, “humane, [and] fail-safe communal infrastructures” of Each One Teach One, a community-based adult learning center attended by other marginalized women of color (Abdur-Rahman 133). *Push* recounts its teenaged protagonist’s harrowing journey through Harlem’s educational and social welfare systems, using the figure of the single black mother/ welfare queen to map the purposeful failures of public infrastructure and state regulatory agencies.

A literacy narrative *par exemplar*, the novel is organized around Precious’s gradual acquisition of reading and writing skills in spite of her sub-par public education. And while the literacy narrative may evoke mythical associations with progress and self-ownership, or the

“easy and unfounded assumption that better literacy necessarily leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement,” *Push* in fact disarticulates the simple association of education (and its correlate, hard work) with social mobility (Eldred and Mortenson 512). Rather, it “crips” the genre by foregrounding the public institutions that reproduce *illiteracy* in vulnerable populations, thus re-formatting the form of the literacy bildungsroman to serve alternate political ends.

Particularly in the context of U.S. race relations, the acquisition of literacy has often been linked to the domestication and assimilation of minority populations. Henry Louis Gates, in his introduction to *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, recounts the story of Phillis Wheatley, whose display of *reason* through poetry composition earned her entry into the category of the human.<sup>45</sup> Presaging disability critiques of rationality as the baseline through which humanness is determined, Gates notes that “writing,” in the system of Enlightenment-era values, “was not an activity of mind, rather, it was a commodity [slaves] were forced to trade for their humanity” (9). Similarly, Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black* comments upon the formatting of literature to serve normalizing and moralizing ends. “Liberal ideology,” Ferguson writes, “has often presented literature as a mechanism by which marginalized groups can bid for the normative positions of state and civil society” (25). Precious’s acquisition of literacy, however, does not grant her such a position; at the novel’s conclusion she is farther from the dream of social mobility than ever before. Rather, her narrative of literacy presents reading and writing as avenues of insurgency, a means by which she can overwrite the anti-welfare discourse that decries the “dependency” of the city’s most vulnerable. In this way, she answers a key question

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<sup>45</sup> As Gates notes, in the Enlightenment era *writing* was seen as the “*visible* sign of reason,” and within a Cartesian value system that privileged reason “over all human characteristics,” black people were “‘reasonable,’ and hence ‘men,’ if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of the ‘arts and sciences’” (8).

posed by Madhu Dubey in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*: “What pragmatic and symbolic functions, if any, can literacy perform for the disadvantaged black population that obsessively preoccupies purveyors of urban crisis—the so-called black urban underclass?” (56) If narratives of development—like the literacy narrative and the bildungsroman—involve the proper suturing of a subject to the nation-state, in *Push* literacy and “progress” are instead deployed to expose the violence of state infrastructural systems, which produce the disabilities they seek to expunge while simultaneously upholding ideals of able-bodiedness.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, while *Push* has frequently been read as a linear progress narrative, I contend that the novel functions equally as an account of anti-progress and socioeconomic stagnancy.<sup>47</sup> That is, while the protagonist gains a sense of interiority through the acquisition of literacy, her prospects for socioeconomic mobility or even survival nonetheless remain foreclosed by the novel’s conclusion. The novel, then, espouses a disability politic that highlights the structural reproduction of irrationality and illiteracy—what many might read as unquestioned signs of adult incompetency—through insufficient state infrastructures. Rather than regarding literacy as a transparent quality tied to reason and, by extension, humanity, Sapphire’s *Push* foregrounds the *material conditions of possibility* for literacy itself, and how the reduction of public services, including but not limited to public education, produces the seeming “irrationality” conveyed by adult illiteracy. In other words, if disability is a “historical event,” as Nirmala Erevelles argues,

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<sup>46</sup> As Lisa Lowe has argued in *Immigrant Acts*, “Just as the English novel was a central cultural institution in British colonial education and contributed to the formation of subjects in the British colonies of India, Nigeria, and Jamaica, so we can observe this legacy of cultural authority in the relationship between the American novel from *The Scarlet Letter* to *The Sound and the Fury* and the literary and cultural traditions of African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos/ Latinos, and Asian Americans in the United States” (100).

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Elizabeth McNeil, “Un-‘freak’ing Black Female Selfhood: Grotesque-Erotic Agency and Ecofeminist Unity in Sapphire’s *Push*,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 37, No. 4 (Winter 2012): 11—27; Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

then *Push* narrates how Precious comes to be “[haunted] by disability” through a purposeful reduction in public support (Erevelles 26, Jarman 164).

Infrastructure thus functions in the novel as an apparatus of systemic disablement, one that delimits social and economic opportunities for those populations dependent on municipal services. Indeed, the punitive logics of New York’s public educational system constitute the initial framework through which readers come to know Precious’s world: “I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder. She’s retarded. I had got left back in the second grade, too, when I was seven, ‘cause I couldn’t read (and I still peed on myself)” (1). These opening lines document the interrelation between family trauma and insufficient state support, or the perpetuation of abuse by a system not only unable to offer necessary interventions into clear cases of trauma, but that also worsens Precious’s home life through the punishment of “[leaving] back.” Despite Precious’s clear signs of aptitude (“My grades is good”) and her enthusiasm about school (“‘N I really do want to learn”), she is nonetheless suspended from school due to her two teenage pregnancies, thereby exposing the ethos of an educational system centered around individual punishment rather than development (8, 5). The erosion of public support is thus depicted as one of the most significant channels through which racial-gendered violence reproduces itself.

As a realist novel in the protest tradition, *Push* foregrounds the seismic economic shifts shaping U.S. cities that have increasingly compromised public services for the city’s most vulnerable. In his pathbreaking *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification in the Revanchist City*, geographer Neil Smith identifies gentrification (with New York City as his primary test case) as an effect of and contributor to “the restructuring of national and urban economies in advanced

capitalist countries toward services, recreation and consumption” and away from the maintenance of public infrastructure (7). As both *The New Urban Frontier* and *Push* indicate, the twinned forces of gentrification and divestment share an ecological relation, as capital investment in Manhattan is simultaneously yoked to a decline of social expenditures in Harlem. Precious identifies this uneven distribution of resources in her writing journal, where she records a subway trip from Harlem to Manhattan: “[...] but from our red bricks in piles/ of usta be buildings/ and windows of black/ broke glass eyes/ we come to building bad/ but not *so* bad/ street cleaner/ then we come to a place/ of/ everything is fine/ big glass windows/ stores/ white people/ fur/ blue jeans/ it’s a different city” (127). This journey enables a different kind of literacy, in which she “reads” the cityscape in terms of economic inequality and uneven development.

Part of Precious’s journey, then, involves an increasing literacy of public infrastructural systems themselves, and the ways in which they are structured to either enable or delimit access to life-sustaining resources. For instance, the novel’s climactic moment—where Precious declares to her mother that she has been raped—also introduces us to New York City Mayor Edward Koch, a mayor “deeply indebted to private developers for campaign contributions” (Dubey 60). “I don’t even think,” Precious narrates, “my feets just take me back to Harlem Hospital. You know Koch wanna close it, say niggers don’t need no hospital all to theyself” (74). In addition to the school and the welfare office, the public hospital is depicted by the text as an impoverished site intended to manage, rather than support, the urban poor. And as Precious notes, even this resource-starved site is jeopardized by privatizing forces. The overworked nurses (“It’s like they tired”) treat Precious with contempt: “I’m a problem got to be got out their

face...Nurse say lots of people get out hospital wif no place to go, calm down, you not so special” (77).

By illuminating an infrastructural ecology of disablement, *Push* routes conversations regarding the “urban underclass” away from the explanatory nexus of “family, race, and culture” and toward the workings of “inequality, power, and exploitation” (Katz 8). In terms of disability, it identifies eroding public supports as the *cause* of the cultural, behavioral, and familial “pathology” decried by Moynihan and his ilk. Precious’s illiteracy, recurrent trauma, and unsupported pregnancies are implicitly facilitated by inadequate social and public service systems, which then subsequently foreclose access to social mobility. In other words, infrastructure and dwindling public resources *produce* the signs of seeming pathology that then transform into the mythology of the welfare queen.

The ubiquity of disability in *Push*, whether congenital (i.e., Lil Mongo, Precious’s daughter) or state-sponsored (i.e., Precious’s illiteracy), registers the ways in which anti-welfare rhetoric in the 1980s—1990s mobilized able-bodied nationalist ideals, defined over and against the pathological black mother, in order to achieve political ends. Claireece Precious Jones, of course, knows these state narratives of pathology quite well and repeats them back to her reader: “I know who I am. I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, find a job for” (31). The novel unfolds in a contrapuntal fashion, with Precious both documenting and overwriting the public storylines that empty her life and her children’s life of value. As Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman notes, *Push* is “structured dialogically”: Precious’s “autobiographical account of her life” intersects with and contests the “‘official,’ state-generated record of her life,” represented by her “file,” the “tesses,” and welfare mythology (142—143). Though seemingly oppositional, both storylines overlap at



the site of disability. Both the state-authored file and Precious's textual repossession of that file depict an intimate connection between disability and black motherhood—albeit to differing political and social ends.

Stolen from her social service worker's office drawer, Precious's file contains medical diagnoses and standardized test data as the structuring elements of her life story (118). In this way, it reproduces the diagnostic frame of disability's medical model in making sense of Precious's experiences. Her file is, further, not a story of progress, but a declension narrative: though Precious is a "phenomenal" success at Each One Teach One, her "TABE test scores are disappointingly low...She scored 2.8 on her last test" (118). It concludes with an account of Precious's health history and an indictment of her public dependency: "She has a history of sexual abuse and is HIV positive...The client seems to view the social service system and its proponents as her enemies, and yet while she mentions independent living, seems to envision social services, AFDC, as taking care of her forever" (120). Using her TABE scores and diagnoses as indicators of a valueless life, Precious's file arranges the material of her life experience into a justificatory narrative undergirding her transition from Each One Teach One into a workfare program. Precious's disabilities, registered through her low test scores, her "obvious intellectual limitations," sexual trauma, HIV diagnosis, and state dependency, indicate that the state should not continue its investment in her, but rather funnel her into low-paying domestic work (119). In the state-authored version of Precious's story, disability functions as a justification for the expendability of young black mothers. Through the narrative frameworks of disease, idleness, and dependency, black mothers and children are cast as state parasites, as "[vampires] sucking the system's blood" (31).

In Precious's self-authored narrative, however, disability becomes key to the recuperation of the welfare queen as a figure of insurgency—a figure who re-affirms the value of racialized, impoverished, and disabled lives. One of the key ways in which the novel fosters a critical disability politic is through its exploration of Precious's relationship with her baby daughter, whose disability functions as a cipher for Precious's own compromised self-worth. "In many ways," writes Michelle Jarman, "Mongo's disability, her lack of support and the negative assumptions about her abilities—by Mary, the social workers, Toosie—all function to mirror Precious's own life prior to *Each One Teach One*" (182). Precious mourns her daughter's disability, yet recognizes how the systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and ableism work together to condemn them both: "She don't love me. I wonder how she could love Little Mongo (thas my daughter). Mongo sound Spanish don't it? Yeah, thas why I chose it, but what it is is short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin'" (34). As Jarman has argued, Precious's ableist conceptions of her daughter—as not only *having* Down Syndrome but *being* Down Syndrome—reflect her assessment of her own circumscribed potential, as well as the static nature of her life circumstances. Reliant on state support, both she and Mongo are embedded in oppressive state systems—the welfare office, the public school, the psychiatric institution—that retrench their poverty. Just as Precious attends a school that prioritizes punishment over education, so Mongo is kept in a "retard house" where "she lay on floor in pee clothes" (132). Through the paralleling of Precious's life experience with Mongo's, *Push* highlights the ways in which the "social, political, and cultural practices" of resource erosion work to "[keep] seemingly different groups of people in strikingly similar marginalized positions" (James and Wu 4). In this way, it demonstrates how a value system that idealizes a productive, economically independent, and

able-bodied subject similarly works to empty both Precious and her disabled daughter of life worth. Yet in bridging the systems of ableism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy *through* a fraught mother-daughter relationship, the novel also generates possibilities for an insurgent alliance between critical disability and women-of-color feminist politics.

The potential for such an alliance surfaces most clearly in the novel's ethos of caregiving, expressed through its critique of workfare as well as its endorsement of communal, informal infrastructures such as Each One Teach One. In both its condemnation of welfarist systems of care and its depiction of alternatives, *Push* exposes state infrastructures and social supports as always imbued with violence, and further, as devaluing the actual life-sustaining labor of caring, teaching, and mothering. For instance, after Precious discovers her social worker's intention to place her as a home attendant, she pens a journal entry detailing the exploitative economy of workfare:

If I'm working twelve hours a day, sleeping in peoples houses like what Rhonda usta do, who will take care of Abdul? The ol white peoples had her there all day and night, "on call," they call it. But you only get pay for 8 hours (is the other 16 hours slavery?) so that's  $8 \times \$3.35 = \$26.80$  dollars a day, but then you is not really getting that much cause you is working more than eight hours a day. You is working 24 hours a day and  $\$26.80$  divided by 24 is  $\$1.12$ ...Home attendints usually work six days a week. I would only see Abdul on Sundays? When would I go to school? Why I gotta change white woman's diaper and then take money from that and go pay a baby sitter to change my baby's diaper? And what about school? (121)

Considering the diagnostic language of Precious's state file, workfare is presented as a means of rehabilitating a young black mother's seeming profligacy. In this way, the file organizes the raw

material of Precious's life into a curative narrative, which once again replicates the medical model and its attempted resolution of so-called "impairments." Workfare is presented as a means of "curing" the welfare queen's pathology, while simultaneously creating a conduit for cheap domestic labor. But Precious's journal entry ruptures the smooth rhetorical operations of workfare initiatives, both identifying the paltry pay-scale that works to *devalue* caring labor as well as the nonsensical economy of caregiving—i.e., the diaper exchange narrated above—that workfare necessitates. The nationalist ideal of work, mobilized by anti-welfare pundits to justify resource deprivation, is depicted as a purposeful conduit towards socioeconomic stagnancy, not self-sufficiency, and further, is imagined as a contemporary approximation of slave labor.

In contradistinction to the value systems espoused by the state and workfare, the classroom of Each One Teach One generates an economy of care that constitutes the novel's primary vision for social recuperation. Through its unflinching depiction of public hospitals, schools, and welfare offices, *Push* places no faith in the capacity of state agencies and institutions to generate a livable world for the so-called "underclass." A community-based program designed to compensate for public infrastructural shortcomings, Each One Teach One offers an informal support network for Precious, one comprised of other young women of color struggling toward literacy. The empathetic Ms. Rain leads Precious and her classmates in both acquisition of language and, relatedly, the capacity to interpret and articulate their own experiences on their own terms. An openly lesbian poet, she dismisses the narratives of racial uplift authored by the state and by black nationalism, both of which identify the heteropatriarchal family and nation as primary sites of redemption. She instead fosters a classroom community that operates as a non-hierarchical network of fictive kin, in which the participants are not bound by blood ties but instead by what Chela Sandoval has termed "affinities inside of difference," a

fostering of “differential consciousness” in which no single identity or ideology is prioritized (362).

Their differences and multiply marginalized experiences are, in the end, honored through an anthology collectively authored by Precious and her classmates, a multi-voiced, multi-genre collection titled *Life Stories* that evokes the textual coalitions forged by *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Home Girls*, and *Making Face, Making Soul/ Haciendo Caras*. Indeed, much has been written about the Each One Teach One as a site that “opens a space for sexual and familial diversity within the African American cultural context” (Abdur-Rahman 141).<sup>48</sup> Rather than privileging the nuclear family as a fail-safe solution, Precious and her classmates proffer interdependent models of sociality that critique the tyranny of the family and its privatized model of care. This is particularly salient considering the thematic of incest and child abuse that propels *Push* forward; in Sapphire’s novel, family does not offer a safe haven but constitutes another domain of violence.

In the Each One Teach One classroom, life-sustaining resources like education, housing and welfare are not contingent upon deservedness or work ethic, but are openly available to all. This ethos of interdependence and shared support—of care evenly distributed across identity lines—is part and parcel of the critical disability politic that the novel invites. I have already parsed out some of the the ways in which *Push* creates potential affinities between critical disability and women-of-color feminist politics: its critique of “work” and waged labor as primary measure of human value; its illustration of ableism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy as mutually constitutive; and its “cripping” of the literacy narrative. Adding to

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<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*. Durham, Duke University Press 2012; Susana M. Morris, *Close Kin and Distant Relatives: The Paradox of Respectability in Black Women’s Literature*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014; and Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

this list, I identify the communal ethos of care fostered by Each One Teach One as another potential node of alliance. Though disability as *embodiment* does not figure directly into this formulation, a disability analytic has foregrounded the relations of support—teaching, parenting, nursing, tending—that make more life possible.<sup>49</sup> And by framing caring relations within the context of a degraded welfare state, in which state *paternalism* converts care into surveillance and punishment, *Push* enables the development of an disability ethos of care vis-à-vis contemporary conditions of racial-gendered inequity.

The novel frames caregiving as a form of social insurgency, a means of imprinting worth onto the pathologized body and producing alternate narratives of life value. The classroom of Each One Teach One constitutes a site of *dangerous* knowledge production, one in which young, impoverished women of color unlearn the lessons of global capital and welfare reform, which teaches them that they are expendable, dependent, and above all, undeserving of care. Here, the affective and material labor of teaching, mothering, and friendship is prioritized, imbued with value, and given in abundance. Care work is not forcefully extracted by the state and awarded a paltry wage, but rather, freely exchanged amongst Ms Rain and Precious’s classmates:

These girls is my friends. I been like the baby in a way ‘cause I was only 16 first day I walk in. They visit at hospital when I had Abdul and take up a collection when Mama kick me out and bring stuff to 1/2way house for me—clothes, cassette player, tuna fish, and Cambull soup, and stuff. They and Ms Rain is my friends and family. (95)

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<sup>49</sup> For additional work on disability and an ethics of care, see Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. New York: Routledge, 1998; *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, eds. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002; Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

Rather than a bridge “to be walked over,” the support labor provided by Ms Rain, Precious, and her classmates ensures the survival of their chosen kinship network—not elderly white folk in New York City, not workfare initiatives (Moraga xxxvii). In this way, the women of Each One Teach One enact Audre Lorde’s avowal of mutual support in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”: “For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive” (95). Ms Rain, Precious, and her classmates direct their caring energies toward each other, attending to the material, social and creative needs of the body. The novel meticulously catalogues these efforts and items, ensuring that they do not go unnoticed: “clothes, cassette player, tuna fish, and Cambull soup.” The women of Each One Teach One provide the necessary support networks that both state and family have denied them, routing their caring labor away from the initiatives of workfare reform and the heteropatriarchal family and toward mutual survival. *Push* thus details a politic of support—what I develop in Chapter 2 as an infrastructural politic—that contests the idealization of the self-sufficient worker *and* the heteropatriarchal family. It instead identifies the project of social recuperation as the re-valuation of caring labor, the creation of chosen support networks, and the unqualified distribution of life-sustaining resources.

### **Conclusion**

Through the framework of the illiteracy narrative and the radical space of the community classroom, Sapphire’s *Push* offers a counter-discourse of public dependency in which the black mother/ welfare queen constitutes a key site of neoliberal critique—one that demands accountability for the purposeful failures of state infrastructure; ruptures the prestige conferred upon productivity and waged labor; and grants value to the intersubjective labor of care work,

mothering, and teaching. In so doing, the novel reveals the violent contradictions upon which the ableist values of rationality, work, and productivity depend, and queries popular accounts of individual triumph and self-sufficiency. Rather than “curing” a defective mother through the draconian service of workfare, then, or proving one’s humanity through public displays of rationality, *Push* demonstrates how black motherhood and welfare queendom generate a rival value system altogether: one that propagates interdependent economies of support and nurtures crip ways of being.

The mythical welfare queen, epitomized by Sapphire’s Claireece Precious Jones, thus highlights the affinities between women of color feminist, critical ethnic, and critical disability politics, a kinship similarly made evident in writings by Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa. To return to Garland-Thomson, disability does not necessitate *integration* into feminist thought, rather, it has long been present. This is an alliance not contingent on biological or national sameness, but rather, on a shared “marginalized relation to power” (Cohen, “Punks” 482).

By accounting for the social, historical, and material contexts that occasioned the welfare queen’s emergence and iconic presence, a crip of color critique proffers a radical feminist disability analytic that lobbies not for disability rights, but that responds to the accelerating regime of resource privatization—a regime that disproportionately affects women of color. Indeed, a crip of color critique aligns itself with what Cathy Cohen has termed a “politics of deviance,” which turns away from the unfulfilled promise of access offered through respectability politics and highlights instead the “transformative potential found in deviant practice”: the social pathologies emblemized by the figure of the poor, single black mother (“Politics of Deviance” 30). Only by recognizing the links between the marginalization of welfare queens and disabled subjects can we develop critical analytics that “[confront] the linked



yet varied sites of power in this country” (Cohen, “Punks” 482). It is through such unlikely coalitions, this project argues, that we can contest the violence of resource deprivation through an infrastructural analytic of support. In the next chapter, I further elaborate this analytic of support through the freeway fictions of Helena María Viramontes and Karen Tei Yamashita. Here, I examine the ways in which these writers propagate an aesthetics and politics of interdependency in response to two dominant narratives of in/ dependence: 1) ethnic self-determination as liberatory telos and 2) the “illegal” immigrant as national parasite.

## Chapter 2

### Fictions of the Freeway: Narrating Interdependency in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

Every time we merge with traffic we join our community  
in a wordless creed: belief in individual freedom, in a  
technological liberation from place and circumstance, in a  
democracy of personal mobility... The L.A. freeway is the  
cathedral of its time and place.

David Brodsky, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Freeway"

In *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*, literary scholar Raúl Homero Villa relays the monumental significance of the Los Angeles freeway network: "...[T]he complex of freeways was, to many observers, the singular architectural and engineering monument of the city's contemporary public image. What the towering skyline is to Manhattan, the tangle of freeways is to Los Angeles" (Villa 84). The freeway, as Villa observes, was vital to a discourse of developmental boosterism that gained momentum throughout the Cold War era. Publications like the American Automobile Association's *Westways* magazine, *Los Angeles Magazine*, and *National Geographic* sang the praises of the hypermobile California lifestyle and the expressway metropolis. As the *Westways* editors wrote, "By night or by day the city of Los Angeles betrays a restless vitality, a rejection of stasis and a penchant for movement. Its architecture, the curve and trajectory of its freeways betokens a shaping of purpose" (36). Far from claiming an exceptional viewpoint, *Westways* magazine mirrored the sentiments of other well-circulated and contemporaneous cultural narratives. From Disneyland's *Autopia* ride to Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, the open road in the

postwar L.A. imaginary functioned as a narrative site of self-determination: an emblem of self-ownership, automobility, and autonomous, unfettered personhood.

Written well after the initial surge of autopian optimism, Helena María Viramontes's 2008 novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* imagine the freeway differently. Viramontes's *Their Dogs* offers an account of freeway construction in 1960s—1970s East Los Angeles, in which the creation of the expressway metropolis does not “[betoken] a shaping of purpose,” but rends apart Chicana/o community. Rather than denoting failure or decline, however, the fractured landscapes of *Their Dogs* generate an infrastructural counter-imaginary, one that offers alternate mappings of East L.A. via the support networks on which it depends. Similarly, Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* mobilizes the freeway to generate a counter-narrative of globalization, in which the material substrate of global capital—its laboring immigrant bodies, systems of infrastructure, and uneven circuits of exchange—assumes prominence. Her account of a post-NAFTA Los Angeles highlights the supporting operations that enable cities, as well as transnational economies, to run. As one might expect, these infrastructural ecologies of support diverge from the dominant urban imaginaries offered by Los Angeles metropolitan growth coalitions and glossy lifestyle magazines.<sup>50</sup> But they also diverge from the narrative of self-ownership so central to ethnic American literary studies.

To revisit the insights of Rey Chow, ethnic subjectivity has largely been conceptualized in terms of the teleological protest narrative. Here, the subject as “resistant captive” engages in a linear “struggle toward liberation,” an endpoint imagined as “self-ownership and self-affirmation

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<sup>50</sup> For an extended explanation of the metropolitan growth coalition, see Harvey Molotch's “The City as Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82.2 (September 1976): 309—332.

in both individual and collective senses” (40—41). This is, in many ways, the ur-narrative of ethnic American studies: the recovery of a sovereign, self-determining subject through practices of resistance.

Through their literary re-framings of the Los Angeles freeway network, I argue that Viramontes and Yamashita posit a different relationship between ethnic subjectivity and literary narrative, one that prioritizes the avenues afforded by bodily vulnerability, non-autonomous personhood, and the shared need for assistance. Rather than rehearsing the plot arc of the protest narrative, Viramontes’s *Their Dogs* and Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* relay an account of human enmeshment within—and dependency upon—systems of social support, deriving a politics and aesthetics of interdependency via infrastructure’s supporting operations. Through Viramontes, I address the ethos of self-determination central to ethnic cultural nationalisms and Ethnic Studies, and through Yamashita, the subject of the parasitic “illegal immigrant” that emerged in the advent of global capital. The freeway network, in this analysis, joins these seemingly distinct historical moments via the axis of dependence—both the *independence* idealized by postwar revolutionary movements, as well as the alleged dependence of new U.S. immigrants. While these novels each depict a different Los Angeles, one before and one following the advent of globalization, they both enable an intervention into an ethnic American literary studies predicated on the idea that “individuals are bounded, coherent entities,” exploring instead the possibilities of porous, distributed, and dependent personhood (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 62).

This chapter is comprised of two primary sections. First, I situate Viramontes’s novel-*vis-à-vis* the celebratory discourses of Chicana/o cultural nationalism and Los Angeles freeway expansion. Both nationalism and freeway boosterism rely upon ableist rhetorics to champion,

respectively, a unified Chicana/o community and a unified Los Angeles region. In contrast, *Their Dogs* centers disability in its figuration of East L.A., thereby offering an account of Chicana/o urban life incommensurate with the still-resonant discourse of cultural nationalism. Then, I turn to *Tropic of Orange*, which narrates a Los Angeles newly transformed by the flows of free trade. Following an analysis of its infrastructural form, I situate the novel vis-à-vis the dominant discourses of public dependency and multiculturalism, which emerged to discipline racial difference in a rapidly globalizing L.A. *Tropic of Orange* discredits these regulatory narratives through its development of an infrastructural counter-imaginary, which reverses the thought-system that casts the immigrant laborer as parasite and excavates the complexities of contemporary racial formation.<sup>51</sup> The Los Angeles freeway as narrative site enables both Yamashita and Viramontes to generate insurgent accounts of interdependency, which rupture the ideology of individualism upheld by ethnic cultural nationalisms, urban re-development schemes, and neoliberal policies of trade deregulation. By focusing on infrastructure and support, they enact a critical re-orientation toward ethnic U.S. literatures, one that positions dependency as an aesthetically generative category.

### **Crippling East Los Angeles: Enabling Environmental Justice in Helena María**

#### **Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them***

In Helena María Viramontes's East Los Angeles, the construction of the 710 and Pomona 60 produces a fractured, maligned, and thoroughly disabled urban environment. Viramontes's

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<sup>51</sup> Racial formation describes the sociohistorical processes through which racial categories arise and attain meaning. It is comprised of “micro-level” interactions, such as self-identification and conversational exchange, and “macro-level” phenomena, such as collective political action and shared ideologies; race is an uneven and de-centered social assemblage whose wide range of effects shifts over time and supervenes on ongoing struggles between dominant and peripheral groups (Omi and Winant 58—59).

novel *Their Dogs Came with Them*, a Chicana coming-of-age narrative set in the age of freeway expansion, employs images of bodily mutilation to dramatize the effects of urban displacement. Freeways “[amputate] the streets into stumped dead ends”; an unfinished overpass “[resembles] a mangled limb”; and nearly every character carries the somatic imprint of prolonged systemic neglect (33, 169). Yet, while disability operates as shorthand for communal and geographic rupture in this historic Chicana/o enclave, it does not act as mere “narrative prosthesis.”<sup>52</sup> Rather, it grants key entry to the novel’s formal and political concerns.

In Viramontes’s novel, the conditions of environmental injustice invite critiques of self-sustaining personhood, as individual and social bodies become the sum of their disabling entanglements with the cityscape. Yet at the same time that the novel’s disabled bodies offer their testimony to urban re-development’s destructive force, they also become the foundation for a politic and aesthetic of interdependency.<sup>53</sup> Rather than mobilizing narrative toward claims of self-determination or community coherency, then, *Their Dogs Came with Them* derives narrative and political strategies from the fractured landscape of East Los Angeles, evoking a disability politic that highlights our shared need for assistance.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout this section, I demonstrate how the novel’s infrastructural counter-imaginary underpins an account of human-environmental interpenetration, as well as a material politic of

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<sup>1</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). Narrative prosthesis, according to Mitchell and Snyder, refers to the use of disability as an “opportunistic metaphorical device” in American literature, in which the representation of disability operates as simple narrative shorthand rather than a reflection of disability’s lived realities (47).

<sup>53</sup> See the chapter “Body as Testimony” in Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Here, Yaeger theorizes a kind of somatic testimony in which bodies operate as living archives.

<sup>54</sup> See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation,” in *PMLA* 120.2 (March 2005): 522–527; Lennard Davis, “Dependency and Justice,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 1.2 (October 2007): 1–4.

care. In contrast to the revolutionary imperatives of Chicana/o cultural nationalism, Viramontes's novel derives a politic and aesthetic from the debilitating effects of environmental racism, an enmeshment of skin and smog that suggests the impossibility of self-ownership. Then, I shift from discussing disabling state infrastructures (the freeway) to informal infrastructures of care, developing further the novel's politic of interdependency. Here, I examine how *Their Dogs* figures the communal networks of material support both paved over and necessitated by freeway construction. Rather than disavowing racialized, impoverished, and/ or disabled lives, the novel highlights the support systems that enable their endurance. In so doing, it proffers a narrative of ethnic American subjectivity centered around disabled embodiment.

### **Freeway Boosterism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Discourse of Ability**

Set between the years of 1960—1970, *Their Dogs Came with Them* documents the everyday lives of several young characters growing up in the midst of freeway expansion and Chicana/o cultural nationalism, two discourses central to the novel that I will briefly gloss. In particular, I highlight how both urban redevelopment and Chicana/o nationalism idealize able-bodied subjects and communities, yoking the health of the region/ nation to the health of the body. While freeway expansion devastated communities of color, and in contrast, cultural nationalism vied for the survival of Chicana/o community, both discourses nonetheless mobilize ableist metaphors of bodily wholeness to advocate for their respective sites: the city of Los Angeles and the Chicana/o spiritual homeland of Aztlàn.

Traveling toward East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, freeway users encounter the concrete jumble known colloquially as “the stack,” a “four-freeway interchange” that funnels “547,300 cars a day through the Eastside” (Brady 168). Together, East L.A. and Boyle Heights,

the historic Chicana/o enclaves that host *Their Dogs*, contain no fewer than six major freeway systems. Between 1953 and 1972, East Los Angeles became “home to more freeways than any place in the country,” despite decades of complaints by local residents (Bullard and Johnson 18). As scholars like Raúl Homero Villa, Eric Avila, and Rodolfo Acuña have noted, these networks upended Chicana/o community in the postwar period, disrupting families, businesses, and neighborhood life.<sup>55</sup>

To justify these intrusions into Chicana/o neighborhoods, urban planners seized upon the medical language of blight. Conflating racial difference with physical disability, the rhetoric of blight envisions racialized and/ or low-income neighborhoods as diseased sites waiting for excision. Indeed, the predominant urban-planning discourses of 1940s Los Angeles, which advocated both slum clearance and highway construction, cast professional planners as “surgeon generals” vying for the “physical, economic, and moral health of the metropolitan body” (Goodman 67, Villa 71). *Their Dogs* makes reference to such medically inflected policing by way of the Quarantine Authority, a fictional state entity that imposes on Eastsiders a mandatory neighborhood-wide curfew, ostensibly to contain a rabies outbreak. The casting of racialized neighborhoods as public health hazards, as the Quarantine Authority aptly demonstrates, subtends the regulation of these communities as well as their elimination.

Described by the editors of *Westways* magazine as the “sinews of a supercity,” the burgeoning freeway network was, in contrast, cast in terms of physical hyper-ability (27). Espousing a similar rhetoric, architecture critic Reyner Banham’s 1971 text *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*—the “academic codex of the freeway faithful”—celebrates the

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<sup>55</sup> See Villa’s *Barrio-Logos*; Rodolfo Acuña’s *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River 1945--1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, 1984); and Eric Avila’s *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in The Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).



heightened sense of physical mobility the freeway imparts (Villa 84). It argues for mobility as itself a type of language, stating, “the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diverse urban texture” (23). And in accordance with this ableist rhetoric, the freeway was further imagined as a mechanism of regional cohesion. Expansionist boosters touted the freeway system as the unifying thread of the Los Angeles metropole, one that solidified a disjunctive collection of neighborhoods and towns into a cohesive whole. “Before an inch of concrete could be laid down,” writes Mary Pat Brady, the region’s “scalar imaginary” underwent a dramatic renovation, in which neighborhoods like Boyle Heights, Long Beach, and Pasadena became “mere nodules on a vertical and greatly expanded scaffold imaginary where the region claimed larger and overriding significance” (174). The freeway, then, was envisioned as vital to Los Angeles, as it maintained the health and physical integrity of the city-region.

Arising at the tail end of freeway expansion, Chicana/o cultural nationalism similarly traded on metaphors of physical ability to articulate communal cohesion. A call for ethnic liberation grounded in decolonization, the Chicana/o Movement (El Movimiento) promoted ethnic and spiritual unity, identifying “the pre-Columbian Mexica (Aztec) homeland of Aztlàn as the basis for Chicana/o claims to cultural and political self determination” (Minich 35). *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlàn*, a manifesto penned in 1969 by the poets Alurista and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, articulated the ideas that would come to define Chicana/o nationalism. And akin to freeway boosterism, Chicana/o nationalist rhetoric similarly idealizes an able-bodied subject and community.

In *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo identifies the ideological overlap between postwar revolutionary projects and neo-colonial development projects, both of which were informed by a

“normative theory of human transformation and agency” (7). “Even as revolutionary moments in the Americas constituted themselves against the capitalist models of national development prescribed by U.S. and international agencies,” Saldaña-Portillo writes, “those movements nevertheless articulated a liberal, developmentalist model of revolutionary subjectivity and consciousness in response” (7). The ideal subject of such developmental models is “mobile, progressive, risk taking, and masculinist,” regardless of the actual embodiment of the agent undertaking a developmental strategy (Saldaña-Portillo 9). *El Plan Espiritual* explicitly celebrates such a revolutionary subject. The document’s privileged subject was not only “male, working-class, heterosexual and racially marked as Indian/ mestizo,” but as Julie Avril Minich observes, also endowed with the “capacity for physical labor” (Yarbro-Bejarano 277, Minich 36). “Aztlàn,” *El Plan* states, “belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops” (1). Evoking images of laboring bodies, Chicana/o nationalism envisioned a unified homeland peopled by hale, able-bodied subjects.

*Their Dogs Came with Them* suggests, alternately, that a just social order cannot lay claim to bodily integrity—that integrity is, in fact, a fiction. Foregrounding the toxicity generated by freeway expansion, Viramontes’s novel instead charts the possibilities of political projects and narrative forms grounded in human-environmental interpenetration. As Stacy Alaimo has argued, the “recognition that human bodies, human health, and human rights are interconnected with the material, often toxic flows of particular places” profoundly affects the ideologies of movements such as cultural nationalism, civil rights, and identity politics, which are predicated upon the individual as a bounded, singular subject (23). Following this, *Their Dogs* intervenes into the imaginaries of urban re-development and cultural nationalism by centering the disabled figures and environments excised from idealized visions of Los Angeles.

The novel presents a set of characters—mainly young women—irrevocably shaped by the “material, often toxic flows” of environmental racism. Viramontes’s cast features Ermila, an orphaned teenager who finds solace in her women’s social circle: the “F-Troop”; Ana, a mixed-race, low-paid administrative worker who looks after her troubled brother, Ben; Turtle, a trans-masculine gang member of the McBride Boys and recently-turned homeless drifter; and Tranquilina, a Christ-like religious worker who, alongside her parents, runs a charitable ministry on the Eastside. As some of the Eastside’s most vulnerable and impoverished residents, these characters cannot find affirmation in the Movement’s idealization of an abstract and cohesive community. These are the inhabitants of Anzaldúa’s “El Mundo Zurdo”: “the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged” (218).

Given Viramontes’s documented dedication to Chicana and women-of-color feminisms, one might expect skepticism toward an undeniably masculinist movement, which often sidelined feminist concerns to promote “*la familia de la raza*” (Ramirez 19). Indeed, much in *Their Dogs* critiques nationalist discourse. The novel features characters who are notably *bad* political subjects, and who dismiss the project of protest central to the Chicana/o Movement. After her initial introduction, Turtle comes across a “Che Guevara wannabe” with a “brown beret flopped on his head,” a figure we later identify as Ben (17).<sup>56</sup> This encounter broadcasts contempt for nationalist devotees, writing off the iconic brown beret with a simple declaration: “What a loser” (17). Later, we learn that Ben only dons the beret after meeting an attractive USC student at the MEChA table, who hands it to him as a gift (118). “Confused and terrified by the antiwar salvo of chanting and pro-civil rights demonstrations,” the mixed-race Ben refuses “to be clearly defined as a Chicano” (118). And though Ermila and her teenage friends attend Garfield High, a

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<sup>56</sup> Though *Their Dogs* figures Turtle as trans-masculine, I use feminine pronouns to remain consistent with the novel, which uses “she” and “her” in reference to Turtle.

key site of the burgeoning student movement, they pointedly do not identify as “politically active” (49). They attend a single meeting of the “Young Citizens for Community Action” for “the fun of it,” “ditching school, rabble-rousing, everyone else thinking they held up banners or raised fists to demand a better education, declare Chicano Power” (49—50). In contrast to the ethnic subject constituted *through* protest, Viramontes’s characters gesture toward the limitations of protest as a mechanism of cultural solidarity; they explicitly seek out other modes of inhabiting the world.

Rather than the independent “agent of transformation,” then, *Their Dogs* traffics in ethnic subjects, communities, and landscapes constituted by their disabling encounters with environmental racism. Through the novel’s temporal and spatial formal aspects, as well as its content, Viramontes generates an infrastructural counter-imaginary that evokes the destructive process of freeway construction. In an interview, she describes the stories comprising the novel as “[multiplying] like freeway interchanges,” likening its structure to “freeway intersections” (Interview, *La Bloga*). *Their Dogs* toggles unpredictably between 1960 and 1970, featuring an inconsistent, stuttering temporality that parallels the fractures and fissures divvying up the urban landscape. It unfolds through a process of recursion, with each character arc resting loosely on the scaffolding of another. And though the storylines stack one upon the other, much like the Eastside’s four-freeway “stack” they “touch and intersect but never precisely connect” (177). Through these nodal points, *Their Dogs* records the subplots and sites of its characters’ respective lives, which become increasingly intertwined as the story progresses. Characters traverse the same streets, pass the same landmarks, and share memories of the same geographic touchstones: the unevenly demolished block on First St; Whittier Boulevard, the “main cruising drag of the Eastside”; and the freshly-built intersection connecting the 710 and the Pomona 60

(50).

While the novel's first section documents a series of passing daytime encounters, by its final section the characters are collectively linked through a dual murder: one gang-related, one state-sanctioned. On the eve of his return to Reynosa, Ermila's love-struck cousin Nacho locks Ermila's boyfriend, the gangbanger Alfonso, in a lifeguard booth. Enraged, Alfonso commands his gang, the McBride Boys, to "waste" Nacho, and encourages Turtle to deliver the final blow. While combing the Eastside streets for Ben, who has gone missing, Ana and Tranquilina come across Nacho's slain body. They then witness Turtle's untimely death by Quarantine Authority officers, who have been ordered to aerially observe and shoot all "undomesticated mammals" (54).

In the novel's somber ending, we mourn the material and social costs of environmental racism, which rend apart body, landscape, and community. Rather than narrating a "resistant captive" grasping toward self-ownership, then, the novel registers the dispersal of the ethnic subject across a toxic environment, and the vulnerability of brown bodies within a predatory landscape (Chow 40). By de-centering community, individual, and territorial unity as the foundation for a progressive Chicana/o politic, Viramontes's novel diverges from the dominant rhetorics of cultural nationalism, and brings disability into the orbit of ethnic cultural production and critique.

### **A Disabled Somatics of Place**

Envisioned in postwar L.A. iconography as an instrument of hyper-ability and hyper-mobility, in *Their Dogs* the freeway instead initiates a cycle of debilitating exchange between the local environment and its inhabitants. Freeway construction and its aftermath generate what I

term a *disabled somatics of place*, wherein the violated, ruptured bodies of people and landscape invite a heightened transference of matter, and human and environment begin to mirror one another. Laden with leaky imagery, *Their Dogs* traffics in partial pieces, fragmented figures, and open forms as a means of illustrating the porous interface linking human and environmental elements. This interface assumes the form of “tar feet,” “tar-smudged” faces, “tobacco-stained” hands, human indentations on chairs and books, landscapes with “cesarean scars,” and rotting houses featuring curling “tongues of paint” (4, 5, 325, 14). Through the disabled somatics of place, an aesthetic mode in which disability operates as environmental ambience rather than individual attribute, *Their Dogs* proffers a narrative world centrally defined by disabled embodiment. Yet, the novel’s collective of disabled bodies do not function as signs of “political failure and decline,” as the protest narrative might suggest, but as sites of knowledge production in their own right (Minich 34). While the disabled somatics of place may recall the oft-critiqued characterization of disability as pathology, impairment, or lack, the novel works to situate disability as a generative site, one that 1) intervenes into a Chicana/o nationalism predicated on a false bodily integrity, 2) gives narrative form and urgency to the slow violence of environmental racism, and 3) complicates the dominant theoretical models governing disabled subjectivity.

Akin to the eco-materialist focus on the significance of non-human agents—what new materialist critic Jane Bennett terms the “force of things”—Viramontes’s novel redraws the lines of relation between people and their surroundings, indicating a mutual and debilitating exchange.<sup>57</sup> That is, the fragments, leaks, and disappearances that constitute the disabled somatics of place signal the interpenetration of human and landscape, and further, emblemize the violence enacted through ostensibly “neutral” urban policy. This porous transit evokes what

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<sup>57</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Stacy Alaimo terms “trans-corporeality,” an ontological model in which “the human is always enmeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). Recognition of our porous condition, Alaimo contends, will foster an “environmental ethos” that cultivates a “tangible sense of connection to the material world” (16). And in acknowledging human contingency on the “more-than-human world,” this ethos implicitly dispels the fantasy of self-ownership. Rather, it suggests that a more just social order must begin by acknowledging the body’s permeability.

In *Their Dogs*, human-environmental interconnection is envisioned through and intensified by the phenomenon of environmental racism, a disabling transit between body and landscape. While eco-materialist critics insist upon recognizing our enmeshment with the environment, and similarly, Disability Studies scholars “remind us that all bodies are shaped by their environments at the moment of conception,” Viramontes’s novel suggests that such reminders of human-environmental interdependency prove unnecessary and unexceptional for her Eastside characters (Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation” 524). Figuring a city steeped in pollutant byproducts, Viramontes employs dirty and invasive imagery to highlight the racially uneven consequences of urban re-development and the disproportionate toxic load borne by racialized communities. Indeed, communities of color, according to environmental justice scholars such as Robert D. Bullard, “are subjected to a disproportionately large number of health and environmental risks in their neighborhoods...and on their jobs” (Bullard, *Confronting* 10). Race further impacts “accessibility to health care” and the proximity of “freeways, sewage treatment plants...and other noxious facilities” to neighborhoods (Bullard, “Threat” 23). And for those subject to such pernicious effects, the porous transit between human and landscape--which fosters a “tangible sense of connection to the material world”—is all-too-often incapacitating.

Yet, while studies of environmental racism invariably reference disability to denote

environmental harm, few, if any, address the phenomenon from a critical disability perspective. In these primarily sociological studies, which seek to “quantify, measure, and ‘prove’ that environmental racism exists,” disability figures as a constitutive feature of environmental racism, but is treated simply as a transparent measure of inequity (Sze, “Not by Politics” 33). In contrast, Viramontes’s novel enables a consideration of disability vis-à-vis environmental racism that goes beyond quantifiable evidence. In *Their Dogs*, disability operates as a mechanism of knowledge production and cultural critique. The novel posits modes of narrating and “knowing” the Eastside barrio grounded in disabled experience, and of narrating and knowing disability via the Eastside barrio. In this way, *Their Dogs* demonstrates some of the political labors specific to literary fiction: the excavation of occluded systems of knowledge, and the imaginative recuperation of fragmentary, peripheral, or ephemeral information absent from historical record.

Across a range of physiological and psychological states, disability is a definitive characteristic of Viramontes’s Eastside community. The landscape and residents alike bear the stigma of poverty-induced environmental stress: years of manual labor, inadequate health infrastructures, forced displacement, and freeway construction. Subject to an erratic upbringing and a traumatic truck accident, once-promising student Ben Brady grapples with waves of an undisclosed mental illness. He struggles to secure adequate care at the public hospital system, which can only offer him “72 hours” worth of medical attention, thereby signaling the inadequacy of public infrastructure aimed at supporting Eastsiders (90). Lollie, one of Ermila’s high school girlfriends, endures “degrees of deafness” due to the “bombarding pinions of earsplitting stitching” at her mother’s garment factory (188) And though one never learns the occupation of Ermila’s Grandfather Zumaya, references to his “hunchback stuffed with endless scolding” and “steel-tip leather boots” suggest a lifetime’s worth of stiffening labor (10).



With its leaky cache of images, *Their Dogs* gives form, momentum, and story to the quiet, quotidian theater of environmental racism. The novel's disabled somatics of place, which generate an alternate conceptual map of East Los Angeles, operate as a form of testimony: a living archive in which the body itself operates as documentation. This aesthetic mode materializes the often-imperceptible and slow-moving intrusions of toxic exposure, which, in Viramontes's novel, are quite literally written on the body. It renders material the microscopic, slow-paced, and everyday intrusions not easily captured through narrative representation, the toxic everyday theorized by literary critic Rob Nixon as "slow violence."<sup>58</sup> These miasmatic phenomena become concrete through the novel's figurations of disabled landscapes, bodies, and their ever-constant transit. The toxic byproducts of freeway construction circulate throughout the novel and the bodies of Eastside residents, narrativizing the freeway's often-invisible, slow-paced effects on community health. Clouds of dirt, exhaust, and noise permeate both domestic interiors and public spaces, subjecting Eastsiders to a constant and inevitably lethal onslaught of contaminants. The residents of First Street, for example, must endure the "black fumes of the bulldozer exhaust hovering over the new pavements," the "jackhammering blasts and cacophony of earthmovers," and "floodlights [jetting] through the drawn blinds, drone of engines in and out of the hours" (8, 27, 75). Schoolchildren enjoy recess under the haze of a smog alert, and Ermila's grandmother breathes air "too thick to filter through her lungs," indicating future ill health (129). Fractured, overwhelming, and often threatening, the novel's environment presses itself upon the reader's consciousness, and the background matter of East L.A. accelerates to the

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<sup>58</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Nixon defines "slow violence" as a "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). He particularly focuses on the problem of representation presented by slow violence, as we as a culture seem to respond primarily to instances of spectacular, instantaneous violence. The medium of literature, Nixon argues, is ideal for materializing and narrativizing such slow-acting phenomena, and thus inciting us into action.

fore, “[becoming] available for progressive acts of reading and perhaps even for change” (Yaeger, *Dirt* 30—31). While sociological studies of environmental racism cast disability as mere *metric* of injustice, in *Their Dogs* disability instead functions as a platform for epistemological and social transformation.

The disabled somatics of place, too, solicit a revision of the dominant paradigms that have come to govern the field of Disability Studies. For many scholars, disability theorizing has frequently “[worked] from the assumption that disability is a minority subject position,” and thus conceives of disability as “*any* departure from an unstated physical and functional norm” (Barker and Murray 229). In *Their Dogs*, however, disability *is* the norm, and mass disablement a symptom of prolonged physical duress and insufficient infrastructural support. Conceptions of disabled embodiment grounded in minority identity are thus contested by Viramontes’s Eastside, in which the confluence of racism, sexism, and poverty render disability nearly ubiquitous. In turn, the ubiquity of disability in the novel foregrounds the relation between systemic racism and the creation of disability, positing disability as a standard feature of low-income and racialized communities. Rather than a static category of identity, disability operates here as a “historical event,” one embedded in processes of neocolonialism, structural racism, and urban displacement (Erevelles 27). Indeed, the “eventness” of disability in *Their Dogs* is inextricably linked to postwar urban re-development, a form of neo-colonial displacement that fractured landscape and community alike. Disability functions as atmosphere, as ambience, as an event that unfolds through the interpenetration of human and environment. The disabled somatics of place, then, demonstrate once more how “trans-corporeality” provokes a re-conceptualization of identity categories. And through the disabled somatics of place, *Their Dogs* compels us to reconsider the

theoretical parameters of disability as category, and demonstrates how environmental racism solicits new theories of disabled embodiment.

Shaped by a public infrastructural system more invested in the flow of capital than the wellbeing of the least powerful, the disabled bodies and landscapes of *Their Dogs* offer a “space for reading the way that *bios* is determined by history,” as well as the disabling transit between body and landscape amplified by processes of environmental racism (Yaeger, *Dirt* 221). Though East Los Angeles is rent-through and covered-up by freeway construction, these bodies testify to the intrusions of a metropolitan order governed by white supremacy. And further, in offering an epistemology of somatic witness, *Their Dogs* reconfigures the way we think about ethnic American subjectivity vis-à-vis literary production. The disabling traffic between human and “more-than-human nature” narrates a Chicana/o subject and community that is not self-contained and self-affirming, but rather, violated and transformed by the toxic flows of city life (Alaimo 2).

### **Infrastructures of Care as Environmental Justice**

Given the concentration of disabled figures in Viramontes’s East Los Angeles, how does the novel figure the process of healing, or even simply managing the onslaught of environmental duress? Notably, this is not a rehabilitative narrative in which one “overcomes” disability, an ableist storyline thoroughly critiqued by disability scholars. Viramontes refuses to organize the chaotic material of environmental crisis into a linear narrative of healing, as such a narrative would paper over the ongoing toxicity generated through systemic racism.

To begin, *Their Dogs* suggests that the debilitating processes of environmental racism necessitate alternate forms of social, political, and cultural expression—narratives that, in short, go beyond the teleological narrative of self-ownership. To be clear, while I do not wish to

dismiss the project of Chicana/o self-determination, and in fact insist upon its continuing relevance, I nonetheless contend that social justice models—and “progressive” models of literary interpretation, for that matter—cannot be wholly conditioned by the binary of protest/complicity. And so, rather than mapping the barrio exclusively in terms of “blight” or resistance, *Their Dogs* charts the relations of care that underpin neighborhood life. It exhumes the sites and figures that salve environmental racism while critiquing the conditions that necessitate these informal support networks in the first place. The novel figures ostensibly public infrastructures, such as the freeway and the General Hospital, as contributing to the community’s ill health, and in turn, constructs an alternate infrastructural imaginary by underscoring informal systems of support. In short, it envisions environmental and social justice in terms of interdependency; here, environmental justice entails enabling the survival of vulnerable life.<sup>59</sup>

To articulate a politic of interdependence, *Their Dogs* foregrounds the marginal figures and sites that simply make life more possible: Ermila’s social circle; an elderly woman’s nurturing blue house; Turtle’s sibling bond with Luis Lil Lizard; and Tranquilina’s charitable ministry. These informal safety nets, which I term *infrastructures of care*, have received scant attention in the novel’s critical reception, despite underpinning what I identify as its primary vision of social recuperation. However, even these safety nets do not escape critique, and raise a battery of questions: Does the lack of adequate public infrastructure force Eastsiders to construct informal support structures, thereby generating an extra burden of labor? Do these informal infrastructures allow the city to shirk its responsibilities, thereby coercing its residents to make do with fewer and fewer resources? The novel’s ambivalence toward some of these informal

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<sup>59</sup> The official and oft-cited definition of Environmental Justice, borrowed here from the Environmental Protection Agency, is “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>).

networks, such as Tranquilina's ministry, provokes reflection on the dilemma of state care in an era wrought by infrastructural abandonment. On the one hand, state infrastructures and safety nets work to discipline the racialized poor—they are inherently mechanisms of systematic violence. Yet, on the other hand, informal infrastructures and privatized models of care erode state accountability to the public, enabling the continuation of public infrastructural neglect. Through its ambivalent figuration of informal infrastructure, *Their Dogs* complicates the roles that nurturing elders and local charities serve in impoverished urban communities, thus disallowing any easy romanticization of “community.”

Though the novel offers no easy remedies, it nonetheless elicits reflection on the supporting operations of East Los Angeles, and the ways in which subjects and communities simply cannot make do without safety nets. Indeed, as Mitchum Huehls argues, the Eastsiders in the novel have “immediate material [needs]” that must be addressed one way or another (162). Most significantly, it hinges survival upon an acknowledgement of the self/ community as multiply determined and embedded in wider webs of support. Indeed, the only “independent” subject in the novel, Turtle Gamboa, inevitably perishes. Stripped of home, resources, family, and friends, she simply cannot survive.

*Their Dogs* foregrounds care as, above all, a social project, rather than a private endeavor relegated to the domestic sphere. And in contrast to the widespread de-valuation of care work, which leads in part to the “asymmetries of care relations,” *Their Dogs* pays proper homage to the sites and figures that provide support. The novel foregrounds Freudian “anaclitic love,” or what Judith Butler describes as “the type of love that is characterized by the need for support or by the love of those who support” (Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 344, Butler and Jackson). And certainly, anaclitic love on a “wider social scale” guides much of the affective

force behind the novel's intimate descriptions of Chicana/o urban life (Jackson 36). Viramontes offers a paean, a "kind of praise-song for laboring Chicana/os," for the nannies, housekeepers, nursing aides, and garment workers that sustain the city's everyday operations (Brady 181). While such laboring figures often occupy the margins of consideration, here they emerge made of "gut and grist and a gleam of determination as blinding as a California sun" (176).

In parallel, *Their Dogs* begins with an elegy for the elder Chavela's house, which provides much-needed refuge for the neighborhood's children. It is also one of the first houses targeted for destruction by the project of freeway expansion. At this initial scene of displacement, we observe Chavela organizing her belongings into boxes and inventorying her life: "**cobijas**, one note said; **Cosa del baño**, said another. **No good dresses. Josie's typewriter. Fotos**" (5, emphasis in original). Her exhaustive list lends detail and texture to a house marked for removal, a seemingly marginal site that nonetheless gives sanctuary to the neighborhood's children. Ermila, then identified as the "Zumaya child," visits with Chavela to escape the disciplinarian atmosphere of her grandparents' house, luxuriating in the old woman's company (5). Following Chavela's removal, Ermila feels a "slow swelling lump of desire for Chavela and the blue house on First Street with its damp scent of tobacco and burnt out matchsticks" (144). Associated throughout the novel with ferns and hibiscus, Chavela tends a small yard with a "lemon tree that yielded lemons every other year," "potted ferns" that "[hang] from the shanty arbor built by a married man she had once loved," and "shrubs of bursting red hibiscus bushes that bloomed lush and rich as only ancient deep-rooted hibiscus shrubs can do" (7). Her yard anchors intimate histories; indeed, the "earthmovers" do not only displace people, they also uproot "vast networks of affiliations and place-linked memories" (Brady 178) Though she, and later Ermila, attempt to commit the details of her beloved house to memory, Chavela warns

Ermila to always “pay attention,” because “displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes or earthmovers” (8). Through this piece of counsel, she suggests that land and property can never serve as the foundation for a communal politic, implicitly challenging the mythological ideal of Aztlàn, the nationalist spiritual homeland. Instead of lobbying for “solid tierra,” then, Chavela offers restorative gestures that reinforce the value of racialized, impoverished, and disabled life.

While the novel figures social and environmental support as vital to Viramontes’s Eastside, it also problematizes the systematic privatization of care that has come to transform East L.A.’s landscape. Much in *Their Dogs* meditates on the problem of offering love and shelter in a place where protective acts are anathema. The absence of truly supportive public infrastructures for Eastsiders, then, yields informal infrastructures, represented in part by Chavela’s house and Tranquilina’s charitable ministry. Peopled on its peripheries by “congealed squatters like scabs on a wound,” East L.A.’s unsupported populace gives rise to what Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch term “zones of dependence,” urban sites “dominated by service clients and their professional helpers” (Viramontes 276, Dear and Wolch 60). Accelerated by welfare state restructuring in the 1970s, community care has undergone a “programmatic deinstitutionalization of social support,” and the labor of care “is increasingly provided by a diverse, non-government human service sector, made up of a panoply of voluntary and for-profit agencies” (Gleeson 153). This transition exemplifies the shifting of public responsibility to the private sphere; indeed, “any ‘contracting out’ of human services by the state is a form of privatization, irrespective of whether the supplier is motivated by profit or by altruism” (Gleeson 153). Viramontes’s East L.A. teems with the latest incarnation of community care. In addition to the Little Brothers of the Poor Rest Home where Turtle gulps “lukewarm broth” and the Sacred

Heart Church where migratory laborers gather in search of employment, Tranquilina, Mama, and Papa Tomás run a ministry that doles out both spiritual and physical sustenance to the Eastside's most impoverished, dependent, and disabled residents (18). They index the apparatus of charity that emerges in the absence of public support.

Grappling with the conundrum of public care in the midst of welfare re-structuring, Viramontes's figuration of their charitable ministry expresses both hesitation regarding and recognition of their work's necessity. Tranquilina, the primary figure in their trinity of caretaking, carries reservations about the ministry, despite laboring tirelessly to provide "simmering beef cocido," comfort, and attention to parishioners (84). "The constant flow of pitiless doubters and forever larger supply of ravished believers" strains Tranquilina's vigilance, her dedication now "buried in layers of decaying convictions" (31) Her efforts to shift the ministry sermon to topics of immediate material concern--the "quarantine and the roadblocks"—are met with Mama's refusal, as their church "had no room for a discussion regarding government rules" (86). Though Mama and Papa Tomás cling to the idea of spiritual uplift for Eastsiders, Tranquilina recognizes that the ministry operates best as an instrument of bodily rejuvenation. She knows that, for the down-and-out parishioners, "their ministry was no better than another bottle of Thunderbird wine, a quick fix of heroin, another prescription drug for temporal relief" (97).

Regardless, Tranquilina remains dedicated to meeting the yawning material need of the Eastside: "Even with assassinations, assaults, and the slaughter of planet and people, [her] love for this world remained a conflicted, loyal love...Because everything happened here on these sidewalks or muddy swamps of vacant lots or in deep back alleys, not up in the heavens of God" (34). At thirty-three years of age, she is explicitly associated with Christ, and commits herself to



the earthly concerns of the Eastside. Yoking herself to the ministry's needy in an intercorporeal relation, Tranquilina believes that "boundaries didn't exist between her life and their lives," and desires to be "their nourishment, their milk and muscle" (97, 37). Like Chavela, Tranquilina practices a politic of care for the dependent body, administering to some of its most basic, sensuous needs. And yet, in expressing frustration regarding the sheer volume of parishioners, she also implicitly critiques the injustices of environmental racism and the systemic production of disability that necessitates informal infrastructure.

Chavela and Tranquilina thus exemplify a politic grounded in the condition of bodily and environmental vulnerability. They assert value for life that is destitute, deviant, and defenseless, both acknowledging and salving the conditions that perpetuate mass disablement for the racialized urban poor. Invested in the salvaging of life value, Tranquilina's politic of care surfaces most clearly in the novel's violent conclusion. Searching futilely for Ben, Tranquilina and Ana encounter Nacho's lifeless body, recently "wasted" by Turtle: "And then like a *déjà vu*, Turtle recognized the woman who bent over the boy, removed her cape, a superman's cape, and pillowed it under the boy's mess of black water" (324). Devastated by Nacho's death, Tranquilina soon bears witness to another thoughtless killing. Turtle, mistaken by the Quarantine Authority helicopters as an "undomesticated mammal," is gunned down:

Turtle's chest burned down to her belly. Although she stood in the shower of rain, her face flamed something fierce. She dropped to her knees, quietly, into a puddle of oily water. Someone cradled her, held her as tight and strong as her brother, held all of her together until sleep came to her fully welcomed. *We'rrrrre not doggggs!* Tranquilina roared in the direction of the shooters. (324)

Faced with two lifeless bodies, Tranquilina “[rearranges] the boy in an effort to make him comfortable in his eternal sleep, just as she had done with the other boy lying a few yards away” (325). In this moment, she becomes the sum of their fatal entanglements with the cityscape, embodying their injuries in an act of intense empathy: “Absolutely drenched in the black waters of blood and torrents of rain, Tranquilina couldn’t delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well” (325).

While scholars like Hsuan Hsu, Sarah Wald, and Alicia Muñoz have interpreted the final scene as a gesture of resistance, prioritizing Tranquilina’s “[refusal] to halt” before the Quarantine Authority, I identify it as a reenactment of the famous *Pietà* scene, the ultimate gesture of care (Wald 325).<sup>60</sup> Instead of adjusting the story to fit a protest narrative, then, I prioritize the apparatus of support that the novel itself highlights. Here, Tranquilina transforms into the mourning Mary and gives tribute to bodies considered either invisible or disposable. The representation of violence inflicted upon the racialized urban poor is largely either nonexistent or victim blaming, and those slain at the hands of state-sanctioned violence rarely paid vigil.<sup>61</sup> This absence of empathy speaks to the systematic devaluation of life that is the work of environmental racism; after all, in the words of Judith Butler, “for [life] to be regarded as valuable, it has to first be regarded as grievable” (Butler, “A Carefully Crafted F\*ck You”). For Tranquilina, the social project of care necessitates abolishing the logic that prioritizes some bodies and some neighborhoods over others, indeed, the logic underpinning freeway construction. To move

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<sup>60</sup> See Hsuan Hsu’s “Fatal Contiguities”; Sarah Wald’s “Refusing to Halt: Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*”; and Alicia Muñoz’s “Articulating a Geography of Pain: Metaphor, Memory and Movement in Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*.”

<sup>61</sup> The black, brown, and disabled lives lost to state-imposed violence are rarely paid vigil in mainstream media outlets, though social media campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #ICan’tBreathe have garnered attention in a number of underground and mainstream spheres and are doing the crucial work of grieving black/ brown lives.

toward care as a social project—a politic of interdependency—we must begin with grief, with the recognition that no subject or landscape is inherently disposable.

While Viramontes's Chicana coming-of-age novel might initially call to mind the ethnic protest narrative or the quintessential narrative of development—the *bildungsroman*—it ultimately eschews the agential subject of resistance of Chicana/o cultural nationalism, and relatedly, the subject of self-ownership idealized by ethnic American studies. It closes with a tableau of grief and interpersonal empathy, an image in accordance with its politic and aesthetic of interdependency: the social project of care and the disabled somatics of place. As such, Viramontes's novel solicits alternate paths for ethnic American literary and disability scholarship. It both models and calls for stories that accommodate the debilitating reality of environmental racism, and in so doing, proffers a transformative disability politic that incorporates considerations of race, neo-colonialism, state violence, and urban displacement. Through its critique of state-sponsored infrastructures and its emphasis on informal infrastructures of care, *Their Dogs* disarticulates the relation of protest linking ethnic subjectivity and cultural production. Instead, it offers an infrastructural imaginary that testifies to the undervalued labor of care and the slow violence of racialized disablement, foregrounding the supporting operations that enable Eastsiders to endure.

### **Toward an Infrastructural Sublime: Sounding the Freeway in Karen Tei Yamashita's**

#### ***Tropic of Orange***

Set thirty years after the surge of freeway construction described in *Their Dogs*, Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* depicts a Los Angeles freeway embedded in the sweeping infrastructural networks of global capital. While *Tropic* and *Their Dogs* engage two distinct

historical periods, the novels nonetheless both turn to the freeway as a symbolically saturated site to engage key overlapping concerns. Akin to *Their Dogs*, Yamashita's *Tropic* addresses the limitations of traditional protest narratives, gesturing beyond self-determination as liberatory telos. For instance, when a cataclysmic freeway accident enables L.A.'s homeless to re-purpose a "mile-long abandoned car lot" into a miniature city, Yamashita describes how this peaceful revolution is quickly co-opted, filtered, and compromised by the media channels that package all public spectacles (122). Television stations begin a round-the-clock broadcast of the homeless encampment, profiting off this spectacle through predatory advertisements for "1-800 lawyers" (189). In this way, Yamashita demonstrates how protest itself is easily colonized by the logics of the market, and made to function within its commercial circuits. Rather than a site of political protest or self-determination, in *Tropic of Orange* the freeway becomes a mechanism for mapping the innumerable support networks that set Los Angeles into motion—an infrastructural sensibility derived from the surreal melodies of L.A. traffic.

Commuters traveling down L.A.'s Harbor Freeway (the 110) in Yamashita's novel encounter an unusual sight: a "sooty homeless man on an overpass" wielding a conductor's baton and converting traffic into symphony (35). Manzanar Murakami, the freeway's maestro, translates a multi-layered Los Angeles into musical composition: "Each of the maps was a layer of music, a clef, an instrument, a change of measure, a coda" (57). L.A.'s hidden layers begin "with the very geology of the land," the "man-made grid of civil utilities" meshing with the "historic grid of land usage and property" (57). By sounding together the systems that undergird a globalizing Los Angeles—the municipal, geological, and historic grids that "ordinary persons never bother to notice"—Manzanar excavates the oft-invisible infrastructures that regulate metropolitan life, and upon which its residents unwittingly depend (57).

Manzanar's sonic composition transforms the static grid of the city into an interdependent ensemble of moving parts both material and human, a dynamic cartography that diverges from the one-dimensional maps cluttering the novel. One particular map—torn from "*Quartz City* or some such title"—frustrates another of Yamashita's characters, Buzzworm, a "big black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet" and South Central native (81). Pondering the map, Buzzworm imagines a string of possible alternatives: "Might as well show...what kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where...which houses on welfare; which houses making more than twenty thou a year; which houses had young couples with children" (81). Though he intuits the city's interlinking racial and economic geographies, Buzzworm yearns for a mapping practice that can reflect L.A. in its totality: "If someone could put down all the layers of the real map," he reflects, "maybe [I] could get the real picture" (81). Manzanar's freeway symphony offers a means of mapping the city's layers. It renders audible a stratiform Los Angeles, and invites the reader to hear the underlying networks of labor, maintenance, and civic support that the novel itself amplifies.

Taking my cue from Manzanar's mapping practice, I argue that *Tropic of Orange* derives a politic and aesthetic of *interdependency* from infrastructure's supporting operations. I attend to infrastructure as formal strategy, thematic concern, and reading practice, and in so doing, bypass the analytic categories of resistance, protest, and self-determination so predominant in ethnic American literary criticism. Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* imagines another paradigm for understanding ethnic subjectivity in the age of globalization—one that posits the impossibility of self-ownership.

Infrastructure typically refers to the underground grids listed in Manzanar's map—"the man-made grid of civil utilities," "pipelines of natural gas," "great dank tunnels of sewage," and

of course, the freeway network—which enable the city to function as a whole (57). Often relegated to the background of literary and cultural concern, in *Tropic of Orange* these infrastructures become gargantuan, fantastic, and sublime, imposing themselves upon the reader’s consciousness. Accordingly, I chart the novel’s infrastructural effects in three ways. First, I examine how the novel itself assumes the form of multi-layered city infrastructure, which enables a departure from the protest novel. Then, I demonstrate how *Tropic* amplifies the disavowed support networks that undergird Los Angeles and prop up its racial and economic geographies. Finally, following this exploration of the novel’s dense, multi-scalar support ecology, I argue that *Tropic* brings us to what I term the *infrastructural sublime*: an overpowering awareness of our enmeshment in a webbed systemic infinity, which ranges from the molecular vibrations of concrete and steel to the panoramic vistas of the global economy. Through an exploration of the novel’s aesthetics and politics of interdependency, I aim to demonstrate the utility of a crip of color critique beyond the purview of disabled embodiment, and toward an alternate ontological horizon: one in which “the ethnic” is not constituted solely through the act of protest, but embedded in and propped up by vast relational networks of assistance, power, and provision.

### **Form as Infrastructure, Infrastructure as Form**

How does *Tropic of Orange* wield infrastructure to map a new set of relations between ethnic American subjectivity and literary production, shifting narrative aims from self-governance to interdependency, from the “protestant ethnic” to the infrastructural sublime? And how might its infrastructural form differ from previous iterations of the ethnic American novel?

Rey Chow identifies the predominant narrative of contemporary ethnic struggle as a “linear plot” that advances from “oppression...to self-awakening...to ultimate liberation,” a staunchly modernist account that replicates the Lukácsian model of class consciousness (39). While Chow continues her line of argument to situate ethnic protest within late capitalism, positing protest as vital (rather than antagonistic to) capitalist structures, I focus here on the teleological account of liberation she identifies as central to modern ethnic subjectivity.<sup>62</sup> In drawing upon the formal properties of multi-layered infrastructural networks, Yamashita’s novel diverges from this timeworn plotline of development. Imagining ethnic American narrative in terms of interdependency, *Tropic of Orange* overwrites the liberatory account of struggle in four primary ways: 1) It features an ensemble of equally weighted characters whose interlinked storylines bypass the goal of self-ownership, 2) its plot and narrative structure assume the form of multi-layered infrastructural grids, rather than telescoping into a linear arc, 3) it imagines ethnic subjectivity as an “effect” that emerges from an interplay among historic, laboring, and migratory grids, rather than a self-contained identity made legible through the act of protest, and 4) it acknowledges shared contingency on social and prosthetic networks of support.

To exemplify the teleological account of ethnic struggle, I turn to what is arguably the un-narrative of race and infrastructure in the postwar era: Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*.<sup>63</sup> From his position beneath a Harlem basement, Ellison’s protagonist harnesses New

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<sup>62</sup> Reading Lukács vis-à-vis Max Weber, Chow contextualizes the narrative of contemporary ethnic struggle within the “economic and ideological workings” of late capitalism (48). In this context, the act of protest—inextricable from ethnic subjectivity—is aimed toward the acquisition of “worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation,” rather than emancipation (48). While Lukács “idealize[s] protest by essentializing it as human,” Chow argues that, in the age of globalization, what is “proclaimed to be human must also increasingly take on the significance of a commodity” (48). That is, ethnic struggle, and the narrative of resistance and protest it espouses, is central to capitalism.

<sup>63</sup> It is necessary here to briefly gloss how I use “race” and “ethnicity,” terms notoriously difficult to distinguish. Academics have long debated this particular distinction, with some claiming that a difference ought to be maintained and others insisting upon their mutually constitutive nature. Some scholars identify race as a variety of ethnicity; see, for instance, Stuart Hall’s “New Ethnicities” in Ali Rattansi and James Donald, eds. “Race,”

York's electrical grid to power the novel's central scene, that is, the pilfering of electricity from Monopolated Light and Power—a calculated “act of sabotage” that gives life to 1,369 light bulbs (7). This aesthetic retreat unbinds the Invisible Man from the constraints of black masculinity; aboveground, the protagonist observes, “there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern” (576). Underground, he seeks to escape spaces conditioned by racialized power, which sets a restrictive range of expressive possibility and renders invisible those who cannot conform. Taken together, the narrative elements of Ellison's *Invisible Man* cohere into an account of the protesting ethnic. Frequently cited as a contemporary example of the *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age narrative that traces a protagonist's development from youth to maturity, *Invisible Man* assumes a linear plot progression that, in detailing the travails of a single life, produces in its readers an intimacy with the titular character. Further, in accordance with the protest narrative, the siphoning of infrastructural energy functions as an act of individuation, a gesture of resistance that brings the margins to light.<sup>64</sup>

In Yamashita's novel, infrastructure constitutes an imaginary onto itself, rather than operating as a singular mechanism of protest. Here, multi-layered grids supplant the linear arc of

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*Culture, and Difference* (London 1992). Others, most notably Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, argue for race as a primary analytic and system of organization. And still others, like Rey Chow in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, claim that it may prove more “productive” *not* to “insist on an absolute distinction between the two terms at all times, for the simple reason they are...mutually implicated” (23). The distinction, when made, is primarily understood as a difference between cultural features and “biological” features. Ethnic affiliation arises from shared cultural traits, such as similar language, food, and clothing. Race, on the other hand, is understood as a system of hierarchical classification based on perceived phenotypic difference. Both are commonly understood as socially constructed rather than innate.

In my analysis of *Tropic of Orange*, I treat the terms as mutually constitutive, as the novel itself attends to the discursively slippery and continuously shifting nature of race and ethnicity, as well as the “fuzziness” inherent in racial/ ethnic categories. Further, I use “ethnic studies” or “ethnic literary studies” to indicate scholarship on race and ethnicity, and deploy the term “ethnic studies” to refer to a specific set of fields and a critical genealogy.

<sup>64</sup> While my reading may impose upon *Invisible Man* more weight than it can carry—that is, while I may force Ellison's novel to do more work that it should or can—I nonetheless address the novel because of its canonical position in literary studies of race and ethnicity, and because it exemplifies the narrative of protest so central to ethnic subjectivity and cultural production.



ethnic struggle, and the narrative elements of character, temporality, setting, and plot are re-  
visioned through the matrix-like form of city networks. In its approach to characterization,  
*Tropic of Orange* de-prioritizes individual expressive acts. Rather than centering on one  
protagonist, its 49 chapters distribute evenly across seven characters. The novel interweaves the  
storylines of seven characters traveling towards, away from, or around Los Angeles, who hail  
from different locations in the global economy. There's Manzanar Murakami, a formerly  
interned Japanese-American surgeon-turned-homeless maestro; Gabriel Balboa, a Chicano news  
reporter who owns a second home in Mazatlán; Emi Sakai, a perpetually aroused Japanese-  
American TV producer and Gabriel's girlfriend; Rafaela Cortes, Gabriel's Mazatlán housekeeper  
and part-time student of globalization theory; Bobby Ngu, Rafaela's distant husband and  
Chinese-Singaporean expat posing as Vietnamese refugee; Arcangel, a Global South prophet and  
performance artist based on border brujo Guillermo Gómez-Peña; and Buzzworm, an African-  
American "Angel of Mercy" armed with a Walkman, a watch collection, and a deeply  
progressive social agenda.

This multi-perspectival story, comprised of shifting points-of-view and distinct narrative  
voices, plots a cross-section of Los Angeles—its homeless population, its professional classes,  
its ghettoized residents, and its migrant laborers—through a dispersal of focalization. Moving  
from third person narration (Rafaela Cortes, Buzzworm, Manzanar) to second-person (Bobby  
Ngu) and then to the "I" formation (Gabriel Balboa), *Tropic's* disjunctive narrative generates  
numerous and varying "maps" of Los Angeles, with the effect of city and novel arising from the  
interplay among "mapping layers" (56). The novel's constant motion between characters further  
imparts a sense of urban chaos, surges of unceasing energy that taper into seven ambiguous  
endings. Indeed, some early readers of the novel, as Yamashita notes, found *Tropic* dissatisfying

due to its lack of resolution. Signaling a departure from the developmental plot of ethnic subjectivity, *Tropic*'s character grid does not formally lend itself to a *telos*, but gestures in a multiplicity of directions.

Regarding its temporal and spatial dimensions, infrastructure organizes the novel's informational flows. As Yamashita herself observed, the novel began as a spreadsheet on the software Lotus, and was driven initially by form rather than content: "[T]here was here a structure before there was a book" ("Latitude"). The published *Tropic of Orange* builds its multi-perspectival narrative upon the grid-like (infra)structure of the spreadsheet, a form reproduced in its spatialized table of contents:

HyperContexts				Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Sunday
Summer Solstice	Diamond Lane	Cultural Diversity	The Eternal Buzz	Artificial Intelligence	Queen of Angels	Pacific Rim	
<b>Rafaela Cortes</b>	<b>Midday</b> -Not Too Far from Mazatlán chapter 1	<b>Morning</b> -En México chapter 10	<b>Daylight</b> -The Cornfield chapter 18	<b>Dusk</b> -To the Border chapter 24	<b>Dawn</b> -The Other Side chapter 30	<b>Nightfall</b> -Aztlán chapter 38	<b>Midnight</b> -The Line chapter 45
<b>Bobby Ngu</b>	<b>Benefits</b> -Koreatown chapter 2	<b>Car Payment Due</b> -Tijuana via Singapore chapter 12	<b>Second Mortgage</b> -Chinatown chapter 15	<b>Life Insurance</b> -L.A./L.J. chapter 26	<b>Visa Card</b> -Final Destination chapter 34	<b>Social Security</b> -I-5 chapter 40	<b>American Express</b> -Mi Casa/Su Casa chapter 49
<b>Emi</b>	<b>Weather Report</b> -Westside chapter 3	<b>NewsNow</b> -Hollywood South chapter 9	<b>Disaster Movie Week</b> -Hiro's Sushi chapter 20	<b>Live on Air</b> -El A chapter 27	<b>Promos</b> -World Wide Web chapter 29	<b>Prime Time</b> -Last Stop chapter 41	<b>Commercial Break</b> -The Big Sleep chapter 44
<b>Buzzworm</b>	<b>Station ID</b> -Jefferson & Normandie chapter 4	<b>Oldies</b> -This Old Hood chapter 13	<b>LA X</b> -Margarita's Corner chapter 16	<b>You Give Us 22 Minutes</b> -The World chapter 22	<b>AM/FM</b> -FreeZone chapter 31	<b>The Car Show</b> -Front Line chapter 37	<b>Hour 25</b> -Into the Boxes chapter 48
<b>Manzanar Murakami</b>	<b>Traffic Window</b> -Harbor Freeway chapter 5	<b>Rideshare</b> -Downtown Interchange chapter 8	<b>The Hour of the Trucks</b> -The Freeway Canyon chapter 19	<b>Lane Change</b> -Avoiding the Harbor chapter 28	<b>Jam</b> -Greater L.A. chapter 35	<b>Drive-By</b> -Virtually Everywhere chapter 42	<b>SigAlert</b> -The Rim chapter 46
<b>Gabriel Balboa</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b> -Downtown chapter 6	<b>Budgets</b> -Skirting Downtown chapter 14	<b>The Interview</b> -Manzanar chapter 17	<b>Time &amp; a Half</b> -Limousine Way chapter 25	<b>Overtime</b> -El Zócalo chapter 32	<b>Working Weekend</b> -Dirt Shoulder chapter 39	<b>Deadline</b> -Over the Net chapter 43
<b>Arcangel</b>	<b>To Wake</b> -Marketplace chapter 7	<b>To Wash</b> -On the Tropic chapter 11	<b>To Eat</b> -La Cantina de Miseria y Hambre chapter 21	<b>To Labor</b> -East & West Forever chapter 23	<b>To Dream</b> -America chapter 33	<b>To Perform</b> -Angel's Flight chapter 36	<b>To Die</b> -Pacific Rim Auditorium chapter 47

Figure 1. *Tropic of Orange* Table of Contents

Labeled “HyperContexts,” a nod to the internet’s rhizomatic pathways, the table of contents projects a novel organized by time on its x-axis and character on its y-axis. The meshing of time grid with character grid evokes the calculated crossing of roads, pipes, and wires that structure a city’s chaotic flows. It systematizes the zany material of Yamashita’s genre-bending novel into a mathematical whole, with each storyline supported by and embedded in a wider narrative web. And if infrastructures, according to Brian Larkin, “are material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space,” Yamashita’s chart likewise structures narrative and informational exchange over the imagined space of Los Angeles, with each character tracing a different map of L.A.’s socially and economically stratified cityscape (327). Further, given the mathematical precision of the “HyperContexts” chart, no single voice dominates the story—a democratization of perspective that parallels the novel’s disavowal of “official” L.A. maps.

Infrastructure further provides an organizing framework for envisioning the ethnic subject in a globalizing age. *Tropic* imagines ethnic American subjectivity as a networked effect, which derives its meaning from interactions among grids of migration, labor, and history. Yamashita’s diverse cast of characters signal the multi-ethnic composition of Los Angeles, as well as the shifting grounds of race and ethnicity in the era of global capital. Occupying an array of subject positions—and blurring the distinctions between and within race, ethnicity, and racial/ethnic categories—the novel’s seven characters register the dynamic nature of racial and ethnic subjectivities, which are simultaneously embedded in historic infrastructures and re-shaped by the flows of free trade. The image of the freeway as a “great root system” signals the novel’s interest in the evolving routes of migration, goods, and labor precipitated by the demands of global capital, and the ways in which these circuits interact with histories of immigration,

colonization, and displacement in the global city of Los Angeles (37).<sup>65</sup> Rather than reaffirming the vision of multicultural celebration promoted in dominant accounts of L.A., Yamashita explores the “root system” of extra-national labor underlying the city’s shifting racial and ethnic formations, and the ways in which regional trading agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement transform “developing” nations into substructures propping up wealthier nations.<sup>66</sup> The novel’s multi-layered structure thus outlines the story of a Los Angeles newly transformed by the flows of free trade, and the concomitant reconfigurations of global and metropolitan infrastructural networks.

Literary scholars have frequently acknowledged Yamashita’s unusual representations of globalization, which, in *Tropic of Orange*, draw upon the generic conventions of magical realism, disaster fiction, noir, and postmodern satire to figure the re-mixed landscapes of a deregulated world economy. “Yamashita’s plots always begin,” writes Caroline Rody, “with someone on the move, someone whose footsteps set global changes in motion” (200). In *Tropic of Orange*, the largest “footprint” is left by an orange travelling north from Mazatlán to Los Angeles, whose border-crossing journey re-imagines multi-national integration, a geographic clash similarly figured through the interweaving of Global North genres (noir, disaster fiction) with Global South (magical realism). This mystical fruit carries with it the Tropic of Cancer, whose latitudinal shift drags Mexico into California. As it travels up the coast, bullets bend, streets expand and contract, time stutters, and Manzanar conducts, capturing even the “endless

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<sup>65</sup> I borrow this well-trafficked term from Saskia Sassen, who uses it to describe cities whose economic significance and activity are extra-national. These are cities that are nodes in a dense global network of informational activity, and that evince a high level of economic inequality due to an increasing professional/specialized service class.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, the government sponsored report *LA 2000: A City for the Future*, commissioned by mayor Tom Bradley, which presents Los Angeles as an ideal multicultural metropolis given its strategic position between several major crossroads. There are, of course, many figurations of Los Angeles as multicultural paradise; see, for example, Lisa Lowe’s analysis in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*.

jam of shrieking notes” produced by a massive accident on the Harbor Freeway (55). Over the course of a week, Yamashita’s novel charts the lives of its seven characters as they navigate the warped topography produced by the mutual imbrication of Global North and South, a clash further re-enacted in a wrestling match between contenders SUPERNAFTA and El Gran Mojado (“The Great Wetback”), Arcangel’s alter ego. While Arcangel prepares to meet his rival, the mass of homeless lining the freeway’s underpasses re-purpose the “mile-long abandoned car lot”—a result of the accident—into a utopian mini-city (122). For a fleeting moment, freeway infrastructure becomes a theatrical site upon which different versions of the global city are heard and felt. Once a symbol of racial, spatial, and economic division, it becomes a site of democratic fantasy, a social safety net that offers undifferentiated support.

The freeway’s “vital materiality,” figured as a “great root system, an organic living entity,” offers a compelling reminder that the built environment does not function merely as static background, but is animated by volatile circuits of social meaning (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 14, Yamashita 37). Acknowledging how infrastructure can “aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us,” *Tropic of Orange* narrates an account of environmental contingency, an acknowledgement of ourselves as always only partial, a fragment hinging on human and material worlds alike (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* x). By highlighting infrastructure, the novel figures for us the “ground” against which ethnic American subjectivity takes shape, underscoring the multiple networks that tie individual to community, community to city, and city to globe.

### **The Politics of Infrastructure in a Global Los Angeles**

An increasingly porous city in the throes of multi-national integration, Yamashita’s Los Angeles is transformed by an accelerating influx of products, people, labor, and capital. The shift

in the city's racial/ ethnic composition is managed by the contemporaneous discourses of multicultural celebration and public dependency, which I will briefly gloss below. While these discourses work to discipline racial difference in a majority-minority Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange* reaches beyond these rhetorical abstractions to trace the material underpinnings of a re-configured world and city economy. Multiculturalism, a key term in the 1990s world of ethnic studies, refers to the apolitical celebration, historical flattening, and commodification of cultural and ethnic difference. The discourse of public dependency, which *Tropic* recuperates via its vision of *interdependency*, frames racialized and low-income subjects as “undeserving” figures parasitic upon the state. I examine how *Tropic of Orange* dispels both multiculturalism and dependency discourse via its politic of infrastructure: a re-materialization of the disavowed civic, historic, migratory, and labor networks that undergird Los Angeles and prop up its racial and economic geographies.

The novel's politic of infrastructure engages with three interrelated moments: 1) the North American Free Trade Agreement, 2) California's Proposition 187, and 3) the emergence of multicultural rhetoric. While *Tropic* comments on the reverberations of globalization writ large, it primarily focuses on the North American Free Trade Agreement as shorthand for global capitalism's characteristic features: the deregulation of trade, the outsourcing of labor, the exploitation of the floating wage scale, and the decimation of local business in “developing” countries. The easing of trade regulations accelerated the cross-border flow of products, information, and capital, while simultaneously intensifying militarization along the U.S.- Mexico border. And as scholars like Mike Davis and Grace Kyungwon Hong have noted, the free-flow of goods and people across the U.S.-Mexico border was accompanied by increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, which “[caused] people to blame the economic recessions not on capital re-

organization and transnational corporate policies, but on Mexican immigrants, who were ostensibly taking American jobs while draining the United States of its scarce social service and welfare resources” (Hong 135). This wave of antipathy, which reached fever pitch with the passing of California’s Proposition 187, imagined racialized immigrants as parasitic to the nation-state. Passed in 1994, Proposition 187 (also known as the “Save Our State” initiative) denied undocumented migrants access to public services like health care, public education, and welfare, ostensibly in order to curtail excess dependency on the state’s resources. Dependency rhetoric thus divided L.A.’s racialized population into two distinct categories: deserving subjects and undeserving dependents.

The putative celebration of the “deserving” ethnic, the discourse of multiculturalism is exemplified through Los Angeles’s self-proclaimed title of “world city,” bestowed by former mayor Tom Bradley. In the 1988 plan *LA 2000: A City for the Future*, Bradley portrays L.A. as a multicultural paradise where cultures from across the globe can meet and mingle. Yet, as Lisa Lowe argues, this “aestheticization of multiculturalism” is contingent upon obscuring “material histories of racialization, segregation, and economic violence” (30). Extending Lowe’s argument, Jodi Melamed terms the fusing of anti-racism to the project of global capital “neoliberal multiculturalism,” which refers to the “[portrayal] of the United States as an ostensibly multicultural democracy and the model for the entire world, but in a way that has posited neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity” (xxi). The multicultural fantasy critiqued by Lowe and Melamed rests upon willfully forgetting the asymmetrical distribution of material resources on the basis of racial difference, as well as the violent historic and economic conditions that force migration to the United States.

Unsurprisingly, *Tropic of Orange* skewers multicultural celebration. Over a plate of restaurant sushi, Emi states, “Cultural diversity is bullshit... You’re invisible. I’m invisible. It’s just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card” (128). She then confronts a clueless woman enamored with L.A.’s diverse restaurant culture, what she terms a “true celebration of an international world” (129). This scene parodies the multicultural ethos, in which global interconnectivity translates primarily to increased consumer access to cultural products: tea, ginger, raw fish. And though Yamashita’s novel features a pointedly multi-ethnic cast, thereby seemingly inviting multicultural celebration, it also underscores the divide between “deserving” ethnics—hypermobility, moneyed, and ostensibly self-sufficient global citizens, and undeserving dependents—undocumented migrants, homeless vagrants, the racialized poor. On one side of this divide stands Emi Sakai and Gabriel Balboa, a professional interracial couple, and on the other side, Bobby Ngu, Rafaela Cortes, Arcangel, Buzzworm, and Manzanar Murakami. Highlighting the increasing social stratification of Los Angeles, the novel’s collection of multi-ethnic characters foregrounds the changing configurations of race and ethnicity in the era of global capital, in which “[p]rivileged and stigmatized identities no longer mesh *perfectly* with a color line” (Melamed 86).<sup>67</sup> The line dividing *Tropic*’s diverse cast is thus a symptom of capital’s *selective* incorporation of racial difference, wherein “self-sufficient” consumers (of any color) are celebrated, and an indigent population, overwhelmingly black and brown, is punished—

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<sup>67</sup> In the 1970s and 80s, Los Angeles underwent a period of “selective de-industrialization” that occurred almost simultaneously with a period of re-industrialization (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* 201). During this time, manufacturing jobs disappeared entirely, as did labor unions, and the blue-collar sector of Los Angeles—many of who were women and minorities—faced mass unemployment. During this time, L.A. witnessed the growth of a professional class, which necessitated a large low-wage labor force in order to sustain them. The polarization of wealth became increasingly stark in the 1980s, with affluent household incomes (\$50,000 and above) nearly tripling, incomes below the poverty line (\$15,000 and below) increasing by a third, and those in the middle lessening by a half (Davis, *City of Quartz* 7).



contained in ghettos, barrios, and prisons, exploited for cheap labor, and cast as parasitic on the state.

Multiculturalism thus functions as yet another static, superficial grid—a one-dimensional map of racial difference. In response, *Tropic*'s politic of infrastructure excavates the obscured historical and material conditions underpinning the discourse of multiculturalism and its celebration of “cultural diversity.” Yamashita's Los Angeles emerges from layers of accumulated histories—immigration policy, de facto segregation, and urban re-development—that undergird the shifting racial formations shaped by globalization. Drawing upon magical realism's fantastic properties, the novel amplifies the histories that prop up Angelenos and shape city life. In *Tropic of Orange*, infrastructure materializes—as gargantuan and threatening—to the “undeserving” residents it does not support. Accordingly, when the Harbor Freeway balloons due to the orange's space-warping properties, Buzzworm, a character particularly sensitive to freeway expansion, calls Emi's attention to its inexplicable growth:

“Can't you see it? Where we are. Harbor Freeway. It's growing. Stretched this way and that. In fact, this whole business from Pico-Union on one side to East L.A. this side and South Central over here, it's pushing out. Damn if it's not growing into everything! If it don't stop, it could be the whole enchilada.”

“Kerry, what's he talking about? Do you see something?”

Kerry shook his head.

“Look, there might be some video distortion, but reality is reality. Are you all right?”

Buzzworm wondered about this reality. If they didn't see it, they didn't see it.

Like the homeboy said, anyone on the ground'd know. These folks weren't on the ground. They were on-line or somewhere on the waves.

(189—190)

Expanding into the neighborhoods of Pico-Union, East Los Angeles, and South Central, the 110's bizarre growth hearkens back to the destructive paths cut through low-income, racialized communities during the height of freeway expansion.<sup>68</sup> Buzzworm, in a previous section, summons this history through his memory of bureaucrats “[widening] the freeway” through his neighborhood (82). Fixated on broadcasting round-the-clock coverage of the impromptu homeless encampment, Emi and her news crew cannot sense the changing freeway. A TV reporter invested in turning revolution into entertainment, and who identifies with the affluent Los Angeles Westside, Emi spends the novel unaware of the material world's inconveniences (175). Positioned “online or somewhere on the waves,” she is unable to discern the palpable, “on-the-ground,” and harmful effects of a freeway expanding past its limit. For hypermobile and moneyed characters like Emi, the freeway never attains *thingness*. But for Buzzworm, a figure who “[walks] the hood every day,” it attains a menacing materiality (26). In *Tropic of Orange*, then, one's awareness of infrastructure functions as a barometer of vulnerability in a metropolitan ecology ruttled with power asymmetries.

In addition to excavating the material histories, differentiated subjects, and asymmetrical geographies disappeared through multiculturalism's flattening rhetoric, *Tropic's* politic of infrastructure contests the discourse of dependency intensified by NAFTA-induced immigration.

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<sup>68</sup> Displaying what L.A. historian Scott Kurashige terms “the two-sided face of postwar development,” the growth of the freeway system re-patterned Los Angeles' lifestyles and landscapes, facilitating the exportation of wealth to the suburbs while splitting the social and economic fabric of the inner city (240). As Scott Kurashige, Raúl Villa, George Lipsitz, and numerous other scholars have noted, the unfolding of the freeways devastated communities of color, many of whom viewed themselves as “the sacrificial lambs of freeway planners” (Kurashige 241).

*Tropic of Orange* registers the impact of NAFTA on both sides of the border, from the “international breast milk” shipped northward to LAX, emblematic of the increasing feminization of the immigrant labor force, to the American beers, sodas, hamburgers, and catsup flooding the menu at the “Cantina de Miseria y Hambre” (91, 131). A “new form of colonialism,” NAFTA allows transnational corporations access to cross-border pools of labor and consumer markets, devastating local businesses and amplifying poverty (Thoma 7). Accordingly, it forces the migration of working populations to the U.S. and Canada in search of precarious employment.

Exemplified by Proposition 187, discourses of dependency frame these workers as parasitic to the nation-state, thereby obscuring the necessary labor they perform for capital. Drawing from AbdouMaliq Simone, I borrow the formulation of “*people as infrastructure*” and extend it to describe the undervalued labor force who fulfill the mundane tasks maintaining a techno-fetishistic global economy (407, emphasis in original).<sup>69</sup> In Yamashita’s novel, the system of maintenance labor (“Cleaning up. Keeping up”) is represented by undocumented migrants Bobby Ngu and Rafaela Cortes (79). Partners in a janitorial business prior to their split, Bobby and Rafaela perform the material work required by an ostensibly dematerialized world of wireless communication and transaction. They “[w]ipe up the conference tables. Dust everything. Wipe down the computer monitors. Vacuum staples and hole punches and donuts out of carpets” (16). Yet, during her time in Los Angeles, Rafaela feels the weight of dependency discourse: “But she [Rafaela] kept talking, saying we’re not wanted here. Nobody respects our work. Say we cost money. Live on welfare. It’s a lie” (80). As *Tropic of Orange* demonstrates,

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<sup>69</sup> I use the notion of “people as infrastructure” differently from Simone, who originally used it to describe the “economic collaboration among [Johannesburg] residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life” (407).

workers such as Bobby and Rafaela are not external to the system or parasitic on it. Rather, they provide the manual labor that allows it to run.

As the novel foregrounds the global economy's maintenance substrate, we view capital's privileged citizens—ostensibly autonomous individuals—as enmeshed in a network of support, rather than the reverse. In highlighting the low-wage, racialized labor networks that support global and metropolitan capital, *Tropic*'s politic of infrastructure re-materializes the disembodied “dominant narrative” of globalization, recuperating the category of dependency mobilized to discredit migrant laborers. This dominant narrative emphasizes the hypermobility of capital and a new international class, as well as the phenomena of time-space compression<sup>70</sup> ensuing from advanced telecommunications and modes of transit (Leorke 103). For proponents of this narrative, globalization inserts us into an efficient cyborgian realm wherein technological prostheses free us from the encumbrances of the material world. Yet, as sociologist Saskia Sassen argues, the global economy cannot be disconnected from the local sites and material flows that set it into motion. As such, *Tropic* traces the material flows that circulate within this cross-border region: both “waves of floating paper money: pesos and dollars and reals, all floating across effortlessly” and “oranges, bananas, corn, lettuce, guarachis...electrodomestics, live-in domestics, living domestics, gardeners, dishwashers...undocumented, illegals, aliens” (200; 162).

The novel's re-centering of low-wage labor thereby fleshes out globalization's dominant narrative, which omits the work of racialized immigrant women as well as the work of laborers overseas. Sassen identifies the dominant construct of “global economy” as selectively pieced

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<sup>70</sup> See David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, which coined the term “time-space compression” to refer to the condensation of space through advanced technologies of telecommunication and transit, a shift concomitant with the increasing rate of capital turnover.

together through an overvaluation of corporate culture and a disavowal of non-expert jobs that, for many, do not register as part of the same system. The externalization of low-wage labor hinges upon the racialization of this labor force, that is, the framing of immigration and ethnicity as *other*. “Although these types of workers and jobs are never represented as part of the global economy,” Sassen writes, “they are in fact *part of the infrastructure* of jobs involved in running and implementing the global economic system” (81, emphasis mine). And so, through Arcangel’s eyes we see—in poetic detail—the brown and black laboring bodies that comprise the global economy’s unseen layers:

Haitian farmers burning and slashing cane,  
workers stirring molasses into white gold.

Guatemalans loading trucks with  
crates of bananas and corn.

Indians, who mined tin in the Cerro Rico  
and saltpeter from the Atacama desert,  
chewing coca and drinking aguardiente to  
dull the pain of their labor.

...

He saw  
the mother in Idaho peeling a banana for her child. (145)

Arcangel’s aesthetic practice stems from his critiques of the U.S.-Mexico border, which he summons in his poetic condemnation of the villain SUPERNAFTA. A spokesperson for the Global South’s laboring poor, he speaks of the expansive grid of manual labor, what he terms “noble work,” that sources raw materials for consumption in the United States (143). This

exchange is noticeably uneven; Arcangel juxtaposes the notoriously brutal work of sugarcane cutting and tin mining with the effortless act of “peeling a banana.” In return for sinking the entirety of labor power into “draining their/ homeland of its natural wealth,” the workers receive “progress/ technology/ loans,” exchanging material goods for the dematerialized rhetoric of development (146).

With the re-entry of “hidden and cheap” racialized bodies onto the stage of the global economy, we view the system of multinational capitalism as a parasitic ecology, wherein the devalued labor of allegedly “dependent” subjects sustains global citizens (Yamashita 200). Through its politic of infrastructure, *Tropic* reverses the thought-system that imagines the low-wage laborer as a welfare burden and the global citizen as a self-governing ideal, positioning the two as mutually imbricated. It further dispels the multicultural rhetoric that obscures the division of ethnic subjects into “deserving” and “undeserving” categories, as well as the violent economic conditions that force migration to the United States. Far from the static maps bemoaned by Buzzworm, *Tropic* plots the shifting and dynamic coordinates of ethnic subjectivity in an era of global capital.

### **The Infrastructural Sublime**

Grids of labor, migratory grids, historic grids, gridlock—*Tropic of Orange* narrates the innumerable interlinking layers that, taken together, generate the “effect” of a multi-ethnic city and novel. As many scholars of Yamashita’s work note, Manzanar is particularly attuned to the infrastructural web that the novel itself illuminates, and so I return here to his traffic symphony. Echoing his aesthetic practice, our recognition of these vast networks brings us to the infrastructural sublime: an overwhelming sense of our enmeshment in and dependency upon a webbed systemic infinity.

By accessing these maps through his symphonic opus, Manzanar approaches the Kantian mathematical sublime, in which “the mind, overwhelmed by number, uses evidence of its own unifying perception to amalgamate the overwhelming many into the heroic one” (Yaeger 15). And while Kant speaks to the impossibility of apprehending infinity, stating, “the mere ability even to think [the infinite] as a *whole* indicates a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses,” Manzanar’s transcendent mind carries the capacity to grasp L.A.’s innumerable layers, and does so through musical composition: “*There are maps and there are maps and there are maps*. The uncanny thing was that he could see them all at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (Kant 551, Yamashita 56). His symphony, in short, lends access to the infrastructural sublime: the recognition of the infinite social, historic, and civic grids that prop up city and residents alike. His is not a narrative of self-ownership; rather, it is a narrative of the self’s dispersal across and contingency upon human and material worlds.

From an aggregate of individual, interacting movements arises the emergent phenomenon of freeway symphony, a gestalt formation not reducible to the sum of its parts, but rather, a “great writhing concrete dinosaur” that supervenes on localized flows of traffic (37). As single cells, the agents in this organism—the drivers who trundle en masse—cannot map or predict traffic patterns. They “[take] advantage unknowingly” of a momentary lag on the congested freeway, an occurrence that appears random to an agent embedded in the formation it comprises (34). Traffic exemplifies a self-organized complex system; it assumes the form of a Deleuzoguattarian assemblage, a confederation of diverse bodies with no central point of governance. As a systemic totality, the assemblage’s massed energies produce a unique effect “distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone” (Bennett 24).

Traffic's overall effect, although comprised of individual drivers acting of their own accord, in turn affects the commutes of each constituent: "People in this traffic could count themselves lucky. They might reach their destinations ten to fifteen minutes early" (34). Using music as an interface, Manzanar renders freeway traffic as palpable form, outlining the "contours of the swarm" from a jumble of parts (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 32).

Although *Tropic* foregrounds the singularity of Manzanar's vision, referring to him as a "conductor" seems misleading, given that he does not exert his will onto the freeway. On the contrary, the freeway sings itself through Manzanar. When he assumes his concrete podium, the "vibration running through cement and steel" flows through his being, and his body becomes a node of amplification for "the great heartbeat of a great city" (34, 35). The collective pulse of traffic possesses him, inducing a succession of measured gestures punctuated by tears. In "[making] infrastructure sing," he demonstrates how the song itself—and his role as musical conduit—hinge on numerous systems of support: the interplay of cars, the vibratory properties of concrete and steel structures, the "man-made grid of civil utilities" (Yaeger 17, 57). Manzanar's perception of the "complexity of layers" comprising the city that again, "ordinary persons never bother to notice," elicits awareness of our contingency on support systems, and presents both individual and city as multiply determined (57). This vision requires a mesh of supporting actors whose travels provide for him the foundation of a musical ecology. Rather than subjects distinct from and deliberately acting upon their surroundings, Manzanar and the drivers are inextricably embedded in and continuous with it; they simultaneously move with the whole and constitute its parts. His traffic symphony thus relays a multi-sited account of agency, wherein our capacity to act hinges on a multiplicity of entities both external to and conjoined with us.



The concept of distributed agency thus posits a model of subjectivity in which every body, human and non-human, is always influenced, permeated, or supported by a configuration of other networked bodies.<sup>71</sup> In this sense, the “toast to a borderless future” given in performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *New World Border*, one of the novel’s three epigraphs, can also be framed in terms of the “borderless” subject. We toast to a future where the discrete and self-determining subject no longer registers as an ideal. A multi-sited concept of agency further enables us to chart the interdependent relations linking subjects, environments, communities, and cities. And yet, open borders, liquid identities, and interdependent networks do not guarantee a seamlessly integrated Los Angeles/ Tijuana/ Mazatlán. On the contrary, we see how cross-border and inner-city “support networks” also support social and economic disparity, and the ways in which borders, while porous, are unevenly so (259).

Yamashita’s novel thus reminds us that the processes that obscure particular infrastructural networks—the low-wage laboring substrate, the freeway as a mechanism of racial inequality—also reproduce the materially and racially uneven topographies that characterize city and globe. That is, the sense of interconnectivity imparted by the infrastructural sublime does not imply reciprocal sustenance or apolitical world harmony. As El Gran Mojado points out, “We are not the world” (259). The novel instead compels us to acknowledge the linkages and asymmetries between supported and unsupported subjects, between deserving and undeserving ethnics, asymmetries misrepresented or obscured by the discourses of dependency and

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<sup>71</sup> I draw this conception of agency from Jane Bennett’s notion of distributive agency, which “does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits. To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings, for an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: it vibrates and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected. This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes” (32).

multiculturalism. And this, indeed, is the political function of the infrastructural sublime: to give narrative form and urgency to the asymmetrical support relations precipitated by globalization—the material, laboring, yet disavowed support economy papered over by the dominant narratives of dependency and multiculturalism.

Despite the breadth of Manzanar's musical consciousness, his symphony is largely a private one; he "sees and hears things nobody else sees" (157). Near the close of the novel, however, the singularity of his vision becomes less exceptional:

Little by little, Manzanar began to sense a new kind of grid, this one not defined by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself and others like him. He found himself at the heart of an expanding symphony of which he was not the only conductor. On a distant overpass, he could make out the odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton. And beyond that, another homeless person had also taken up the baton. And across the city, on overpasses and street corners, from balconies and park benches, people held branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks, and conducted...Manzanar nodded to himself. Not bad. (238)

At the center of yet another connective web, Manzanar witnesses the dissemination of his once-unique practice across the spectrum of L.A.'s homeless. Presumably, they too can see traffic as symphony, and below that, the infrastructural grids that support metropolitan life. Considering the characters' enmeshment in systems beyond their control, as well as its divergence from the ethnic protest narrative, *Tropic of Orange* seemingly occludes many viable paths to political action. And yet, with the dispersal of the "heroic one" into the "overwhelming many," a move that makes a thousand new mapmakers, the novel suggests the political import of Manzanar's vision.

By framing metropolitan life in terms of interdependency, and foregrounding the social and prosthetic systems propping up *all* subjects, *Tropic of Orange* discredits the pernicious myth of self-governance attributed to global capital's beneficiaries, and of self-ownership as a liberatory *telos*. Instead, the novel's aesthetic and politic of interdependency gives rise to an ethnic subject and literary narrative indebted to infrastructure, thereby charting new coordinates for ethnic American literary critique. This is not an account of the "protestant ethnic"; this is an account of the infrastructural sublime. Here, liberation hinges not upon the achievement of self-ownership, but on the relinquishment of the "independent" self altogether—that is, on the recognition of the material support systems that enable endurance. Satisfied with his legacy, Manzanar "[lets] his arms drop. There was no need to conduct the music any longer. The entire city had sprouted grassroots conductors of every sort" (254). Together, they use music to map the interdependencies of worlds.

### **Conclusion**

For Viramontes and Yamashita, the Los Angeles freeway becomes a multivalent site of counter-signification, constituting an alternate horizon for ethnic subjectivity and narrative, as well as for disability critique. As I demonstrate in the readings above, their re-visioned freeways engender a politics and aesthetics of interdependency, yielding formulations such as the social project of care, disabled somatics of place, politic of infrastructure, and the infrastructural sublime. Viramontes and Yamashita generate rival and recuperative accounts of dependency, in which they envision a narrative life-world that centers disabled, dependent, and vulnerable populations, and write into legibility the hidden dependencies of global capital. Infrastructure thus provides a narrative occasion to revise the governing storyline of the self-determining,

“protestant” ethnic—here, the ethnic subject is enmeshed in a webbed systemic infinity; fractured by predatory landscapes; and dispersed across vast networks of support, labor, history, and assistance. It further enables stretching disability critique beyond the category of minority identity, and perhaps even beyond the scope of representation itself.

The freeway presents, then, a narrative occasion to theorize ethnic American literature outside the purview of self-determination, a framework that has less and less traction in an era of dwindling public support. In this chapter, I framed the freeway as a guiding figure for an ethos of interdependency, and through my analysis of *Tropic*, began the work of stretching crip of color critique beyond legibly disabled bodies. In Chapter 3 I continue this work by engaging the logic of disposability central to welfare reform, a logic that justifies the invisibility and deprivation of those who cannot participate in the capitalist marketplace, whether through work, consumption, or proper (re)production. Here, a crip of color critique shifts from the disabling effects of infrastructure to the logic that justifies resource and public service erosion. Turning to sanitation-centric texts by Don DeLillo and Samuel Delany, I examine how these engagements with waste management systems imagine an ethical re-orientation to waste, one that undoes the violent logic of disposability and generates rival life-worlds of support.

### Chapter 3

## Intimacies with Waste: Sanitation, Containment, and Disposability in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and Samuel Delany's *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*

Come meditate on trash and swill odors and become the waste that connects us with the earth.

Gerald Vizenor, *Landfill Meditations*

Unlike the iconic overpasses and interchanges of the Los Angeles freeway system, New York's sanitation system—a complex network of solid waste transfer points, sewage canals, and dumping sites—largely remains tucked out of view. The invisibility of sanitation infrastructure underscores the privacy of waste, that is, the cultural imperative to dispose our discards in cordoned off restrooms and trash bins, to separate ourselves from evidence of physical need. Privacy, along with hygiene, is a primary aim of sanitation. The efficient removal of filth, writes Gay Hawkins, was sanitation's "great modernist promise," uplifting both the individual body and the city-as-body: "Here was a technology that would purify urban space, that would allow populations physical and moral escape from the unacceptable... All those other spaces for things we don't want to face—prisons, madhouses, hospitals, dumps, *drains*—remind us of the place of secrecy in public knowledge" (41). Under the progressive logic of sanitation, civic order necessitates the containment—and the secrecy—of waste.

New York City, too, conceals its wasted humans. In "Unearthing the Secrets of New York's Mass Graves," a recent *New York Times* feature, Nina Bernstein relays the story of Hart Island, an "uninhabited strip of land off the coast of the Bronx" where over a million New

Yorkers came to “the same anonymous end” (n. pag). The island plays host to over a million unclaimed bodies, belonging primarily to those who lived their last days as wards of the state or medical specimens, and who largely perished within state institutions and structures: hospitals, nursing homes, subway, train, and bus stations. Anonymity is key here—the island is off-limits to the public. There are no gravestones marking the 101-acre potter’s field, only numbered trenches. Though the island’s dead are not uniformly indigent—Bernstein recounts the story of the wealthy Ruth Proskauer Smith, who came to rest in Trench 359 after her body was donated to medical science—the *Times* article identifies the majority of the dead as those “too old, too poor, or too isolated to defend themselves” (n. pag). And indeed, the island speaks to the large rents in public and municipal safety nets that lead so many to a common grave. Hart Island, Bernstein writes, “hides wrongdoing by some of the very individuals and institutions charged with protecting New Yorkers, including court-appointed guardians and nursing homes” (n. pag). In a system where families are largely expected to assume the burden of burial, the island conveys the inadequacies of public systems designed to support the city’s most vulnerable, and the wide-scale re-routing of caring labor to the private sphere. At first subjected to the system, these marginalized bodies are then subjected to a logic of disposability—the categorization of indigent populations *as* human waste, and their subsequent consignment, even in death, to invisibility.

This chapter analyzes imaginative accounts of sanitation infrastructure in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) and Samuel R. Delany’s *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012) that outline, reverse, and challenge this violent logic. In these novels, waste (human and otherwise) is not sequestered away from public sight, but assumes prominence, pressing itself into readerly consciousness. These works invite a sustained intimacy with waste, and in so doing, reveal a shared “contingency and interdependency” with what is cast-off, and, in the words of

Gay Hawkins, “[provoke] different engagements with the world, different ways of living with shit” (Hawkins 48—49). In their close encounters with refuse economies, these works intervene into dominant understandings of waste reproduced by the narrative circuits of global capitalism: the belief that lives, labor, and landscapes can be differentially valued or emptied of value; the equation of waste with feelings of loathing, horror, and shame; and the belief that “wasted” or blighted spaces denote capitalism’s *failure*. As opposed to theories that position waste as “matter out of place,” DeLillo and Delany position garbage as constitutive of the city-body and the social body, as both material fact and political possibility (Douglas 44). Here, waste is connective tissue, the binding matter that supports cities, communities, geographies, economies, and histories. In turning attention to the maintenance networks that manage our crude output, both works invite a formal openness to waste as a primary means of undoing the logic of disposability that renders waste—both human and otherwise—invisible.

I engage this dominant narrative of waste, that is, the categorization of people and places as disposable, because of its centrality to U.S. welfare reform and the systematic deprivation of “expendable” populations. Both writers position their accounts of sanitation vis-à-vis the privatization of municipal waste management systems, the accelerating decline of city social services, and Reagan-era politics of sexual respectability and disgust. All three historical moments add up to a violent calculus of life value, in which the lives of those dependent on public support systems, as well as those who eschew “proper” sexual conduct, are emptied of worth.

As writers brought up in New York City, DeLillo and Delany undoubtedly share a familiarity with the problematics of garbage and waste in late 20<sup>th</sup> century urban life. Taken together, the two works span over a century, with DeLillo depicting waste as the “secret history,

the underhistory” of postwar America, and Delany, as a writer of speculative fiction, following the trail of waste far into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both respond to the key economic and social transformations of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era, which also constitutes a point of temporal and thematic overlap (DeLillo 791). Further, both authors mobilize waste management in order to contest a repressive belief-system of autonomy, propriety, and profit, in which the pathologization of certain populations and spaces justifies their expendability, and evidence of vulnerability and blight must be forcibly hidden.

There are, however, key distinctions in the authors’ respective representations. DeLillo depicts waste management as a figure of condensation for the social, spatial, and racial transformations of multi-national capitalism and its ecological production of poverty and profit. Following the journey of his Italian-Irish-American protagonist, Nick Costanza Shay, from an immigrant 1950s Bronx to an air-conditioned Phoenix, Arizona, DeLillo’s representation of waste containment is mapped onto postwar narratives of urban crisis and Nick’s own absorption into whiteness. Delany, on the other hand, situates *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* in a gay black male community known as “the Dump,” and organizes his narrative around a longstanding, interracial partnership between two garbage men. Through his ecstatic accounts of piss play, public sex, and coprophagia, he imagines waste “management” as a dynamic process of erotic affirmation, multi-and inter-racial communion, and collective caregiving.

This chapter proceeds in two parts, beginning with an analysis of *Underworld* and its “underhistory” of garbage in postwar America, then shifting to *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* and its joyful experimentation with erotic abjection. I open my discussion with DeLillo’s novel to establish waste management as proxy for the racialized logic of disposability—that is, the purposeful relegation of certain populations to the status of waste—and to affirm the



centrality of this logic to economic systems of profit and extraction. My exploration of *Underworld* thus extends the parasitic vision of global interdependence articulated in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), shifting focus to the ecological relationship between the devastated inner-city and its suburban counterpart. Here, I suggest that the systematic wasting of the Bronx enables the hygienic purity of suburban Phoenix, which is in some small part dependent upon the profits reaped from the multi-national "Waste Containment" corporation (DeLillo 162). I then consider the insurgent possibilities afforded by a *confrontation* with waste, contesting the civic, social, and economic order contingent upon its containment.

DeLillo only gestures toward these disruptive possibilities in the final pages of *Underworld*, but Delany's *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* centrally takes up intimate, erotic, and queer engagements with refuse, as well as the alternate modes of sociality and conviviality these engagements allow.<sup>72</sup> While DeLillo makes plain the violence enacted by a paranoid system of waste containment, which subjects entire groups of people to systematic deprivation, Delany's utopian representation of a diverse collective literally bound by shit, piss, and cum envisions what a social order adverse to the logic of disposability and containment might actually look like. Reading the two works together, I demonstrate how contemporary literature attuned to waste's insurgencies foregrounds disposability as a governing (yet concealed) logic of global capitalism and welfare reform, and further, imagines ways of relating to waste that might overturn this very logic.

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<sup>72</sup> In "Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity," Jasbir Puar defines conviviality as such: "Conviviality is an ethical orientation that rewrites a Levinasian taking up of the ontology of the Other by arguing that there is no absolute self or other, rather bodies that come together and dissipate through intensifications and vulnerabilities" (169).

### **Close Encounters: Architectures of Waste in DeLillo's *Underworld***

While New York City may sequester away its waste, garbage is an open, odorous spectacle for Don DeLillo's waste management agents, and a spectacle that commands collective attention. For Jesse Detwiler, garbage archaeologist, analyst, and guerrilla, cities do not produce waste; rather, waste produces cities: "...[G]arbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste... Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics" (287). In DeLillo's panoramic, disjunctive treatment of an American half-century (1950s—1990s), garbage is a central force. Narrative threads are recursive, discontinuous, elliptical. They refuse to add up to a cohesive whole, but garbage remains constant. It makes up the connective tissue that links a rapidly changing Bronx, New York, to the "squat-box structures" of Phoenix, Arizona; and to the downwind nuclear test sites of Utah, Nevada, and formerly Soviet Kazakhstan (85).

At its surface level, DeLillo's reverent treatment of garbage presents an affront to the ordering rationale of city life, a rationale in which waste elimination signals civilized modernity. But beyond the challenge to systems of propriety and order, well-trod territory in waste scholarship, the narrative maps afforded by *Underworld's* sanitation infrastructures outline an emergent and intensified logic of disposability, one precipitated by post-Fordist, Reagan-era economic restructuring.<sup>73</sup> At the center of *Underworld* is a pre-occupation with the "wasting" of racialized cityscapes—emblemized by the Bronx—by the flight of capital outside of the borough. Yet, rather than illustrating the Bronx as an isolated island unable to weather the post-

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<sup>73</sup> For instance, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection.

Fordist storm, and thereby echoing the discourse of the failure of “personal responsibility,” *Underworld* places the Bronx in ecological relation to its “devil twin,” the bastions of suburban wealth and white supremacy supported by the demise of the industrial city (791). The thematic of waste management, then, resonates with the literal containment of the Bronx as imagined space of vice and contagion, and uncovers the internal logic of global capital, in which value and profit are produced in necessary relation to waste.

By placing waste and sanitation infrastructures at the center of *Underworld*, DeLillo both registers and inverts the logic of disposability central to multi-national capitalism: the uneven attribution of value to people and places, and the systematic deprivation of those deemed dependent, poor, and unproductive. In other words, rather than framing zones of disposability as external to or drains upon the production of value, DeLillo’s novel demonstrates how capitalist processes purposefully *produce* disposable people and places, then relegate them to invisibility. *Underworld* foregrounds the dependency of global capitalism and white supremacy upon the racialized category of waste. Here, waste is internal to the processes of transnational capital rather than the externalized byproduct of consumption. In other words, rather than theorizing waste as the *negation* of value, *Underworld* imagines waste as a vital site for the *production* of value—a re-articulation of background as figure.

Waste is, further, the novel’s organizing principle; clutter characterizes both its form and content. Rather than the “single narrative sweep” of postwar history, the novel unfolds across six non-linear sections, one epilogue, and the segregated “Manx Martin” sub-plot, segments of which are threaded throughout the novel and bookended by solid black pages (82). Stringing together Cold War paranoia, the 1974 New York garbage strike, and the emergence of cyberspace, and dotted with appearances by J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, Lenny Bruce, and

Jackie Gleason, its overall effect parallels the junkyards and landfills that populate the novel, and its narration of postwar history becomes “the hell reek of every perishable object thrown together” (104). *Underworld* ranges broadly and even haphazardly as it delivers its reader from the 1951 World Series pennant match—whose winning baseball provides a through-line as an alternately talismanic and worthless object—to the towering, architectural heaps of the Fresh Kills landfill on New York’s Staten Island.

Within the novel’s excess, it most centrally tells the story of brothers Nick and Matt Shay and their flight from the rapidly deteriorating Bronx to the hygienic landscapes of the Sunbelt suburbs. The brothers respectively deal in “weapons and waste”; Matt initially works as an atomic weapons engineer, later opting to study third world poverty. Nick, the novel’s protagonist, gives two decades of labor to a multi-national garbage corporation (791).

*Underworld* tracks Nick’s ascension through the corporate ranks, and recursively loops back to his sordid past in 1950s immigrant Bronx. And while Nick aims to dissociate himself from his old neighborhood, even re-locating his ailing mother to an air-conditioned room in Phoenix, it nonetheless becomes the site of repeated psychic returns: “The only ghosts I let in were local ones, the smoky traces of people I knew and the dinge of my own somber shadow, New York ghosts in every case” (82).

Thus the Bronx, in both its 1950s and 1990s iterations, exerts a kind of gravitational pull throughout the novel. In it, we become acquainted with Albert Bronzini, Matt Shay’s former chess mentor and ex-husband to Klara Sax, an artist acclaimed for transforming abandoned WWII bombers into desert art installations. Though he lives now in a building marked with “specimens of urban spoor—spray paint, piss, saliva,” Bronzini insists he is “too rooted to leave” (211, 212). The Bronx of the 1980s—1990s also houses Sisters Edgar and Gracie, who function

as the charitable arm of the gutted community; the scavenging child Esmeralda; and Ismael Muñoz, a gay, HIV-positive graffiti muralist who embodies Reagan-era fear and stigma. In *Underworld*, the Bronx's eroding cityscapes document the social and economic shifts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, wherein New York City hemorrhaged a half million jobs, and its population fled to the suburban periphery and new centers of service-economy prosperity (i.e., Phoenix, Arizona).<sup>74</sup> And as I will detail in the next section, these cityscapes further bear witness to the process of municipal support erosion, that is, the slow evaporation of basic services like garbage collection and electricity, and the subsequent infrastructural isolation of Bronx residents.

### **Waste Containment and the Biopolitics of Disposability**

Much of the scholarship on DeLillo's *Underworld* explores its extensive engagement with waste management. Ruth Helyer ties *Underworld* to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, in which the garbage forced to the margins of the social order return to haunt us, "insisting on revealing itself as part of us" (988). David Evans, on the other hand, reads *Underworld* as the *end* of garbage—that is, if garbage is what remains after "all the utility has been abstracted from an object," then the re-commodification and re-insertion of garbage into capital's rubric of value, described at several points throughout the novel, signals an era where everything has utility (108). Others apply a psychoanalytic lens to the thematic of waste containment, examining Nick Shay's repression of unsavory elements from his Bronx past, such as his accidental murder of George Manza. For instance, Mark Osteen writes: "Just as his company works to package and restrict hazardous waste, so Nick tries to contain his memories within carefully guarded boundaries that nevertheless permit traces of his internal poisons to leach from his psychic

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<sup>74</sup> See Alejandro Portes and Saskia Sassen-Koob, "Making it Underground: Comparative Material on the Informal Sector in Western Market Economies."

subterranean and taint his life” (226). And still other critics, like Gay Hawkins and Patricia Yaeger, link the thematic of waste to environmental and sublime aesthetics.<sup>75</sup>

However, little work has related the novel’s preoccupation with waste to questions of state neglect and racialized disposability, though some scholars have begun to untangle its engagements with postwar U.S. racial formation. For instance, the scholarship closest to my own investments in the novel probes the relationship of global capital to its wasted landscapes. Todd McGowan characterizes waste as “the only thing that does not fit into the economy that produces it,” thus inaccurately imagining waste as capitalism’s limit and outside (138). And as Thomas Heise observes, part of the efficacy of *Underworld* is its “[suturing] together of . . . black and white spaces” through “the polarizing logic of capital” (228). Yet, what much of this scholarship shares, save for Heise, is a limited engagement with the evacuation of value from marginalized populations, the function of waste *within* post-Civil Rights regimes of racialized state violence, and the retraction of the U.S. social state in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. My reading of DeLillo’s project, in contradistinction, centralizes the concerns of racialized disposability and state neglect, as they vitally inform DeLillo’s narrative panorama of waste, garbage, and abjection.

To situate this reading of *Underworld*, it is necessary to contextualize the novel within broader discussions of racialized disposability and the making of “human waste” in ethnic American studies. In the past two decades, scholars such as Henry Giroux, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Lisa Marie Cacho have commented upon the ways in which global capitalism, post-Fordist restructuring, and the retraction of the social safety net have rendered redundant entire segments of the U.S. population. Under the new global economy, the category of waste no longer applies exclusively to inert material objects, but has extended to encompass humans, and particularly

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<sup>75</sup> See Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* and Patricia Yaeger, “The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or, Rubbish Ecology.”

those populations who cannot take part in the activity of the marketplace, who cannot work, and who remain dependent on larger social structures for basic material needs.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the absence of work productivity and the marker of dependency are vital to the making of human disposability, that is, the systematic relegation of people to the status of waste. Cacho, drawing upon Orlando Patterson's concept of social death, further argues that these vulnerable populations—often comprised of criminalized people of color—cannot be “incorporated into rights-based politics,” as they are legally recognized as rightless (8). The racialized rightless, writes Cacho, “do not have the option to be law abiding, which is always the pre-requisite for political rights, legal recognition, and resource redistribution in the United States” (8). Divested of the right to legal recourse, these portions of the U.S. population are seen as empty of social value, and become the ground against which value itself becomes legible.

Of the many exciting conceptualizations of race, waste, and human value in a post-Civil-Rights United States, most pertinent to my discussion of DeLillo's Bronx is Henry Giroux's theorization of the *biopolitics of disposability*. Giroux's take on biopolitics, written in response to the horrific aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, deals explicitly with the relationship of disposability to the retraction of social safety nets for the racialized poor and disabled. Through the “coupling of the market state with the racial state” over the past five decades, the U.S. state has expressed a set of biopolitical commitments that modify key understandings of biopower conceptualized by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (175).<sup>77</sup> Rather than relegating inhabitants of an increasingly militarized state to death camps, as in Agamben's formulation, or producing and managing life in the general sense, as in Hardt and

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<sup>76</sup> For an extensive explanation of the making of human waste within the context of global capital, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2004)

<sup>77</sup> According to Giroux, this involves the erosion of welfare and social support, the intensification of mass incarceration and anti-immigrant policies, and the modeling of urban public schools after prisons

Negri's, these new commitments call for a more specific and *relational* understanding of biopolitics that pays attention to how some lives are granted value over others.

The biopolitics of disposability, as Giroux writes, is the “central commitment” by a neoliberal state to “remove or make invisible those individuals and groups who are either seen as a drain or stand in the way of market freedoms, free trade, consumerism, and the neoconservative dream of an American empire...[T]he poor, especially people of color, not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life's tragedies but are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society” (175). In other words, the U.S. state has divested itself of responsibility for those individuals and groups most in need of social support, choosing instead to relegate these populations to zones of invisibility while simultaneously maximizing the financial privileges of capital's elite class. Indeed, Giroux links the *making* of disposability to ongoing attacks on “big government” and the social state, which have weakened or dismantled outright public services furnished to protect the state's most vulnerable citizens.<sup>78</sup> Lacking access to life-sustaining resources like housing, healthcare, education, or transportation, entire populations are “considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves” (Giroux 174). Both “unproductive consumers” and “marked by the trappings of race, poverty, dependence, and disability,” these groups are classified as wasted humans, and an “unwelcome reminder that the once vaunted social state no longer exists” (Giroux 187, 186). To maintain social and civic order, they must be rendered absent from public view.

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<sup>78</sup> I should note that, for racialized populations in the United States, access to state benefits and supports has never been a fully secure enterprise. As George Lipsitz observes: “During the New Deal, both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely channeled to whites. The Federal Housing Act of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA's) “confidential” city surveys and appraisers' manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color” (372).



DeLillo's Bronx of the 1980s and 1990s embodies the urban zones of disposability that the "new hyper-neoliberalism" theorized by Giroux simultaneously 1) creates, 2) conceals, and 3) contains (Giroux 175). These are the three elements of disposability that I will explore in relationship to *Underworld*, which bears witness to an emergent global capitalism centrally invested in the management of waste. And while Giroux links his biopolitics of disposability to the George W. Bush administration and its particular brand of malign neglect, the Bush presidency was part and parcel of *ongoing* assaults on the U.S. social state, weakened over decades of privatization and divestment. The South Bronx of the 1970s, as Julie Sze observes, was particularly victimized by "government's active creation of the 'problem' [of urban crisis], especially through overt and covert policies of planned shrinkage and benign neglect" (69). In a 1976 issue of the *New York Times*, housing commissioner Roger Starr promoted the concept of "planned shrinkage," in which the city would reduce its investments in distressed neighborhoods and re-route the majority of its resources to areas "that remain alive" ("Making New York Smaller"). To that end, Starr proposed closing subway stations, firehouses, and schools in the most devastated parts of the South Bronx. Though Starr was condemned and ultimately removed for his remarks, they nonetheless articulated a policy the city "had already begun years earlier" (Sze 69). Through the deliberate dismantling of public resources to a struggling community—and the simultaneous re-routing of resources elsewhere—the city of New York assisted in creating its own urban zones of disposability.

The recent history of garbage service, which constitutes a vital narrative thread in *Underworld*, offers in miniature the transformation of social and municipal services in favor of an unchecked capitalism, a politics of market fundamentalism that "wages war against any viable notion of the democratic social" (Giroux 183). "Garbage," as Julie Sze writes, "is a key theme

and ideological symbol, as well as a litmus test for policies that gauge attitudes toward the public and private spheres” (286). In *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*, Sze demonstrates how the “ever-shrinking responsibility to any idea of the public” played out in the field of New York’s garbage politics (120). While New Yorkers a century ago remained suspicious of private contractors, now even the municipal handling of residential waste—the last bastion of public waste management—is regularly contracted out to transnational waste companies. No longer merely the byproduct of consumerism, garbage itself has become a valuable commodity for multinationals, who render it a commercial export for transfer to rural or international landfills.

Evidence of public service erosion and waste privatization is ever-present in *Underworld*’s Reagan-Bush era Bronx, as is an emergent citywide ethos of punishing the poor. The novel, for instance, describes the fortified caging of restaurant garbage as protection from “derelicts,” a draconian gesture that establishes the garbage as private “property” (283—284). In the Bronx, sisters Edgar and Gracie offer a support structure for the Bronx’s largely unsupported poor, disabled, and infirm residents. However, akin to the “zones of dependence” detailed in Viramontes’s *Their Dogs*, it is a structure that simultaneously embodies the privatization of community care in the aftermath of welfare state restructuring. Though their work of “[visiting] the home bound, [running] a shelter for the homeless, [...] [collecting] food for the hungry,” Edgar and Gracie provide necessary respite for the Bronx’s needy. Their charity, however, indexes the contracting out of public support services to a pluralistic, non-governmental sector, and the intensifying indifference of government to society’s “dependents” (240). Further, Gracie and Edgar regularly observe the neglectful visits of municipal workers to the “landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits”: “City workers came periodically to excavate

the site and they stood warily by the great earth machines, the pumpkin-mudded backhoes and dozers, like infantry-men huddled near advancing tanks. But soon they left, they always left with holes half dug, pieces of equipment discarded, Styrofoam cups, pepperoni pizzas” (238—239). In contrast to Nick Shay’s utter reverence of waste management, which he likens to worship (“Waste is a religious thing”), the workers assigned to maintain the Bronx’s waste perform their tasks with a minimum of effort, and in fact contribute to the systematic trashing of the neighborhood (88).

The “unlinking” of this Bronx neighborhood from the “usual services,” and thus its increasing isolation from the rest of the city, becomes particularly evident when a young child physically powers a World War II generator in order to watch TV (812). The Rube Goldberg-esque device, which involves hooking a bicycle to a “wheezing drive belt” to a generator to a television, signals the kind of effort that must be expended for even the most passive of enjoyments (812). To borrow a thread of argument from *Tropic of Orange*, if one’s awareness of infrastructure functions as a metric of vulnerability (and disposability) in cityscapes rutted with power asymmetries, then the residents of “the Wall” are hyper-aware of their severely limited access to even the most everyday of support structures.

A counterpart to the erosion of municipal services, Nick Shay and the multi-national Waste Containment company emblemize the “ever-shrinking responsibility to any idea of the public” evident in the arena of garbage politics (Sze 120). For Nick and his colleagues, the mysterious work of waste management becomes the hypervisible stuff of religious reverence: “We designed and managed landfills. We were waste brokers. We arranged shipments of hazardous waste across the oceans of the world. We were the Church Fathers of waste in all its transmutations” (102). During a detour to Staten Island, Nick’s co-worker Brian Glassic senses a

“poetic balance” between the Fresh Kills landfill and a newly constructed World Trade Center, that symbol of U.S. economic hegemony: “Bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships, all the great works of transport, trade and linkage were directed in the end to this culminating structure” (184). Both the WTC and Fresh Kills, for Glassic, function as primary nodes within the vast infrastructural networks that enable the blossoming of rabid, deregulated economic exchange.

But as Nick discovers in his first days with the company, which he joins in 1978, this transnational system of interconnection facilitates the reproduction of disposability on a global scale, illustrating the gravity and reach of a logic that privileges market freedom over any sense of the public good. A conversation between a young Nick Shay and his mentor, landfill engineer Simeon Biggs or “Sims,” gives shape to the how and why of environmental racism, the process by which racialized landscapes become designated as sites of disposability:

“I thought terrible substances were dumped routinely in LDCs.”

An LDC, I’d just found out, was a less developed country in the language of banks and other global entities.

“Those little dark-skinned countries. Yes, it’s a nasty business that’s getting bigger all the time. A country will take a fee amounting to four times its gross national product to accept a shipment of toxic waste. What happens after that? We don’t want to know.” (278)

A nod to the infamous 1991 Lawrence Summers memo, in which the then-World Bank president endorsed the so-called impeccable “economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country,” the exchange shared by Nick and Sims demonstrates the differential values ascribed to people, places, and labor by market logics, and the purposeful *production* of

blight by companies hired ostensibly to *contain* waste. Sims further gives voice to the corporate ethos that designates low-income and communities of color as dirty, disempowered, and vulnerable to the will of the market. This dumping ethos is mirrored in a segment set in 1950s New York, when one character explains his clandestine dumping operation for local businesses: “Drive it to the Bronx. There’s a tower of garbage under the Whitestone Bridge somewhere. I fling the trash out the door and press the gas pedal hard” (362). As these exchanges illustrate, local and global economies *necessitate* the category of waste in order to function; they require zones of disposability like the abstract “LDCs” in order to generate profit, and in fact directly contribute to the making of these zones *as such*. Rather than designating “those little dark-skinned countries” or the Bronx as entities responsible for their own blight, then, *Underworld’s* account of garbage service—both multi-national and municipal—situates such sites within larger ecologies of waste and worth, in which their utility is contingent upon their disposability.

While the novel positions disposability as central to an emergent global capitalism, Sims’s telling line—“What happens after that? We don’t want to know”—indicates the necessity of concealment to the success of these operations. That is, in order to continue the project of malign neglect, zones of disposability must be rendered invisible. This spirit of secrecy, too, is echoed in the Summers World Bank memo, in which he writes “*Just between you and me...shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?*” (emphasis mine) For both Giroux and DeLillo, waste is what we do not want to acknowledge, what we cannot acknowledge, because it reveals to us the violence of a multi-national capitalism that thrives on a system of disposability: one that creates waste (both people and places) in order to condemn it.

In *Underworld*, the work of waste management operates as both material and metaphor, illustrating the secrecy of a dirty industry that contributes to capital's increasingly polarized landscapes, the concealed logic of capital that generates both blight and wealth, and the profitable trashing of places that have no means of protection. Brian Glassic feels the tremor of this knowledge when he contemplates "three thousand acres of mountained garbage," the Fresh Kills landfill, a mountain that was "here, unconcealed, but no one saw it or thought about it" (185). He interprets this sublime encounter with waste as "the challenge he craved, the assault on his complacency and vague shame" (185). To "understand all this," to "penetrate this secret," is to locate the landfill within a broader, interconnected economy of waste management, the expanding infrastructural network of deregulated capital of which Waste Containment is a part (185). Standing at the edge of Fresh Kills, the most monumental site of waste containment, Brian acknowledges his implication in a system of violence, if only momentarily, and the landfill as a crucible of this secret knowledge.

In DeLillo's novel, the project of containment works to sanitize waste as epistemological threat, to shroud it within a "cloud of unknowing" (273). Throughout *Underworld*, characters practice forms of containment as a means of concealing, or otherwise managing, the dangerous knowledge of waste. Waste multiples everywhere, and the question soon becomes "how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us" (184). Sister Edgar, who feels open contempt for the populations she serves, is fixated upon her own protection from waste, obsessively washing her hands and outfitting them with latex gloves. "[C]ondomed ten times over," she feels "shielded from organic menace" but also "sinfully complicit with some process she only half understood, the force in the world, the array of systems that displaces religious faith with paranoia" (241). Threatened by the potential insurgencies of dirty knowledge, Edgar views the

circulation of information, particularly through television and popular media, as an epidemic: “[I]f you can see it, you can catch it. There’s a pathogenic element in a passing glance” (812).

For many of *Underworld*’s characters, waste is purposefully de-linked from systems of information, history, and social context, a disaggregation from meaning that operates as itself a form of containment. During a 1974 garbage strike, in which the labor of sanitation *itself* is contested and put on display, artist Klara Sax observes a towering mound of garbage, “stacked in identical black plastic bags,” and further, saw “how everyone agreed together not to notice” (388). Here we sense the quotidian threat of waste, as well as the shared consensus to press it into the background of consciousness. In another instance, the open spectacle of disposability works to aestheticize poverty while simultaneously divorcing it from history. The *South Bronx Surreal*, a European tour bus that winds through the Bronx, showcases the abandoned remnants of an industrial inner-city—the “boarded shops,” “closed factories,” and “derelict tenements”—while simultaneously evacuating them from social context, the forces of history that yield urban degradation (247). These urban relics thus constitute “a mass of unique details that fail to add up to a single story” (*Guernica*). Through touristic spectacle, urban zones of disposability become naturalized and normalized, rather than crucibles of violence.

While the project of waste containment occupies multiple characters throughout the novel, for Nick Shay containment and concealment become a singular obsession, functioning as vocation, personal lifestyle, and borderline religion. In addition to designing and managing landfills at work, he meticulously sorts his home garbage, treating his waste like sacred matter and making it anew through the project of recycling: “We rinsed out old bottles and put them in their proper bins. We faithfully removed the crinkly paper from our cereal boxes. It was like preparing a pharaoh for his death and burial. We wanted to do the small things right” (119). And

while Nick ostensibly surrounds himself with garbage, he only does so under the condition of estrangement. This sense of organization and boundary-making extends to his personhood; he views himself as “a country of one. There’s a certain distance in my makeup,” conveying his distance from meaningful personal relations as well as deeper currents of knowledge (275). In contrast to the rubbish heaps that litter New York, Nick Shay luxuriates in the grid-like order of suburban Phoenix (184). He has left the Bronx for this suburban expanse, the post-Fordist antidote to the old borough’s crumbling industrial facades.

From the elevated vantage point of Waste Containment’s “shimmering bronze tower,” Nick admires the “miscellaneous miles of squat-box structures where you took your hearing aid to be fixed or shopped for pool supplies, the self-replicating stretch [he] traveled every day,” and tells himself “how much [he] likes this place, with its downtown hush and its office towers separated by open space” (85). Centered around a service economy, Phoenix epitomizes the kind of insular, hyper-specialized city that adheres to Nick’s “sense of order and command” (89, 806, 810). Perhaps most of all, he “[likes] the way history did not run loose here. They segregated visible history. They caged it, funded and bronzed it, they enshrined it carefully in museums and plazas and memorial parks” (86). The city’s careful compartmentalization of space enables Nick to separate himself from the historical forces undergirding his flight from the Bronx, and that also produced suburban Phoenix as a sanitized, homogeneous sanctuary. He refuses to discuss his upbringing at length with his wife, Marian, though he recognizes “the old loud Bronx” as “the ding of [his] own somber shadow” (82). For Nick, Phoenix is a space protected from visible zones of disposability that carry a “secret history, an underhistory” (741). It is, above all, a place where he attempts to keep himself protected from the dirty knowledge of the Bronx and



his integral role within violent systems of disposability—his personal imperative to create, conceal, and contain garbage.

### **The Possessive Investment in Whiteness**

As the novel suggests, the relational ecology of waste links the decaying Bronx to the pristine Phoenix; the latter space thrives and is *dependent upon* the containment, concealment, and expendability of wasted humans—the racialized and low-income communities that cannot participate in the multi-national economy spearheaded by companies like Waste Containment and its sprawling sanitation infrastructures. In many ways, this connection is quite literal. For Nick in particular, Phoenix generates value because it is *not* the Bronx—its worth is generated from its distance from the category of disposability. His re-location to Phoenix further indexes a larger national history of internal migration; the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a population shift from older, industrialized urban cores to either edge cities or service-oriented cities in the Sunbelt. And as Julie Sze observes, the rise of multi-national garbage corporations, headquartered in places like Phoenix, contributes directly to the increased trashing and environmental degradation of racialized and low-income communities in the Bronx, greater Phoenix, and elsewhere. Sze writes: “There are many potential problems in placing residential garbage handling in the hands of multinationals: structural, political, and environmental. Chief among these is the fact that corporations that own both waste transfer stations and landfills...see garbage as a valuable product, and thus have no incentive to reduce the amount of garbage handled in order to cut into their profit margins” (125). DeLillo illustrates for his readers, too, the multi-national fallout of this noxious pollution: the liberal heaps of garbage littering the Bronx, and the Kazakh children missing arms, eyes, and teeth due to waste’s transnational traffic. Nick

Shay, then, makes his living from the production and management of wasted humans—the trashing, containment, and forced invisibility of powerless people and places. His seamless integration into this pernicious economy of waste, one that links the Bronx, the Phoenix, and the former Soviet Union, thus underscores the novel’s most oft-repeated mantra: “everything is connected in the end” (289, 408, 465, 826).

Nick’s dominant position within this economy, in which “spaces of blight and wealth...[fall] and [rise] in lockstep with each other,” is further dependent upon what George Lipsitz has termed the “possessive investment in whiteness,” or the willful allocation of resources and positive value afforded to individuals and groups through the system of white supremacy (Heise 228). While little of the current scholarship on *Underworld* deals explicitly with whiteness as category, DeLillo’s novel undoubtedly foregrounds the linkages between waste containment and postwar histories of racialization, in which blackness and whiteness are assigned value in relation to one another. Nowhere is this relational system more apparent than in the fluctuating value of the 1951 World Series winning baseball, an object whose price and aura corresponds with the identity of whomever possesses it. Though the authenticity of the object remains in question throughout the novel, its primary identifier a smudge of green “near the Spalding trademark,” it is first caught by Cotter Martin, a young African American boy from Harlem (131, 809). Cotter’s absent father, Manx, initially doubts the legitimacy of the ball, but ends up stealing and selling it to white bystander Charles Wainwright for “a ten, two fives, another ten, two singles, a quarter, two nickels and a tiddlywink dime” (652). However, when the ball lands in Nick’s hands for the hefty sum of \$34,500, Cotter and Manx have been erased from the line of possession, and from history altogether. Lundy claims Wainwright, an “advertising executive,” as the original owner. His whiteness and occupation, it is implied, lend the ball its

legitimacy, aura, and value (181). As the ball crosses back and forth across racial lines, it stutters between the categories of trash and relic—whiteness, ultimately, is what grants it value. In DeLillo's novel, white supremacy designates a mastery over waste, that is, the ability to profit from, manage, and contain waste rather than being categorized *as such*. It is, in short, the power to transform a cast-off ball into a rare collectible.

Central to DeLillo's "underhistory" of postwar America is the shifting category of whiteness, and in particular the system of suburbanization that enabled some formerly ethnic immigrant groups—for instance, the Italians and Irish that contribute to Nick's own heritage—entrance to the institution of white supremacy. As Lipsitz argues, the construction of a "new 'white' identity in the suburbs" necessitated the construction of urban zones of disposability (373). Suburban expansion came at the expense of the inner city, by way of "urban renewal" programs that "[helped] destroy ethnically specific European-American inner city neighborhoods" (373). During the Cold War period, a once "complex system of races," Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, "had given way to a strict scheme of black and white... The 'ethnic' experience of European immigrant assimilation and mobility, meanwhile, became the standard against which blacks were measured—and found wanting" (111). The value of whiteness, then, incentivizes Nick's self-imposed exile from his childhood home, to become the "winner" of an emergent biopolitical system that, again, works to "privilege *some* lives over others" (Giroux 181). His fixation upon waste containment further extends to his decision to flee the city following a stint in reform school, gaining entrance to a job and a suburb lined with "oleanders and palms and tree trunks limed white—white against the sun" (86). DeLillo makes evident the incentive structure for attaining unmarked whiteness; Klara Sax's father, for instance, omits the *c-h* from his original surname "Sachs" to mark distance from "the grating sound... with its

breadth of reference, its guttural history and culture, those heavy hallway smells and accents,” embracing “the unknown x, mark of mister anonymous” (483). And whiteness, throughout the novel, is not only tied to wealth and property but survival itself—as Sims flippantly remarks, “[Y]ou can survive and endure and prosper if they let you. But you have to be white before they let you” (98).

DeLillo’s foregrounding of whiteness as category of property and value—his marking of a formerly unmarked identity—thus grants additional contours to the otherwise concealed logic of disposability, which papers over the system of white supremacy and its investments in blighted, low-income inner cities. In other words, to showcase whiteness is to disrupt a discourse that “demonizes people of color for being victimized by [de-industrialization, economic restructuring, and neoconservative attacks on the welfare state], while hiding the privileges of whiteness” (Lipsitz 379). The interlocking narratives of the Bronx and Phoenix thus demonstrate how whiteness and its attendant socio-spatial formations require racialized zones of disposability. They demonstrate that, in fact, the value of suburban whiteness is *contingent* upon and produced by the trashing of the blighted inner-city.<sup>79</sup>

### **Waste Un-Contained: Disrupting Disposability**

*Underworld*, then, tells a counter-narrative of dependency through the intimate channels of waste management: the dependency of capital upon the explicit and conscious production of

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<sup>79</sup> I recognize that the Bronx and Phoenix have radically distinct histories and ethnic demographics, and so it may seem disingenuous to read them together as part of the “same” metropolitan history. Nonetheless, in the 1970s there were documented waves of migration from older industrial cities/ neighborhoods (like the Bronx) to rapidly expanding service-oriented Sunbelt cities (like Phoenix, Houston, Atlanta), that Nick’s own migration indexes. It is for this reason that I read them together as city and suburb, even though they are not part of the same metropolitan area—they were nonetheless bound together through larger, nation-wide migratory waves that corresponded with the expansion of suburbanization.

disposability, and the centrality of waste to systems of value. It outlines the contours of this biopolitical regime, foregrounding the logic of disposability through an inversion of its working categories. But does it also suggest strategies for short-circuiting this logic, for rupturing it, for articulating otherwise? How might we think outside a system of value that constitutes the foundational terms upon which contemporary American life operates, that delineates the dividing line between survival and expendability?

As DeLillo demonstrates, Nick Shay is deeply invested in political and economic hegemony and his own ascendant position within this value system; for instance, as a youth in the Bronx, he “defends” his territory against incoming African-American families, and on one occasion severely beats a young black boy, after which his friend JuJu smears “frozen dog shit” into the “guy’s head, into his hair and ears,” literally marking him as waste (715). Though Nick undoubtedly reaps the material privileges of white, middle-class masculinity—when we first meet him he is “driving a Lexus through a rustling wind”—he nonetheless feels marginalized by his lost connection to his old Bronx neighborhood, to the “days of disarray when [he] walked real streets and did things slap bang and felt angry and ready all the time” (63, 810). As Thomas Heise argues, Nick has reconstructed a story of the last half-century in which “the middle-class subject is the loser of the postwar era,” and has demonstrated that “he will not lose his grip on his privileged position no matter what the cost” (237, 238). Invested in the retrenchment of broad-based social and economic inequalities, Nick’s narrative thread concludes with a misplaced nostalgia for a Bronx that enabled a violent white masculinity. This same impulse is underscored by Nick’s meticulous sorting and categorization of garbage. His story of obsessive containment and sorting speaks to a life beholden to the system of disposability, a life centered around boundaries, categorization, and differential value.

But Nick nonetheless points us to a node of possible rupture in that logic, to a “miracle” in the Bronx suffused with “suffering and faith and openness of emotion” (808). His son, Jeff, who views Nick’s old neighborhood as an “American gulag,” shares with Nick and Marian an event archived on the web, an apparition on a billboard of a raped and murdered young girl (807). DeLillo then delivers us to an account of the event: the girl is Esmeralda, a seemingly feral child who “forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags behind bodegas” (810). Her killer has violated her body and thrown it off a roof, a gesture that categorizes Esmeralda as human waste, part of the vast disenfranchised army of unsupported lives. Soon afterward, rumors begin circulating about a miraculous image that appears, intermittently, on an “advertising sign scaffolded high above the river bank,” a billboard meant to “attract the doped-over glances of commuters on the trains that run incessantly down from the northern suburbs into the thick of Manhattan money and glut” (818). Sisters Edgar and Gracie, singularly devastated by Esmeralda’s death, venture to the site where Esmeralda’s phantom has appeared, palimpsestically, over a Minute Maid advertisement. The ad depicts a “vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from top right into a goblet that is handheld at lower left—the perfectly formed hand of a female caucasian of the middle suburbs” (820). “Six ounce cans of Minute Maid” line the bottom border, “a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they have personality” (820). At first Edgar and Gracie only see the advertisement, but following the rustle of the subway train, Esmeralda appears:

The headlights sweep the billboard and she hears a sound from the crowd, a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnameable painful elation. A blurred sort of whoop, the holler of unstoppable belief. Because when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the

murdered girl. A dozen women clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a spirit, a  
godsbreath passing through the crowd.

*Esmeralda.*

*Esmeralda.* (821)

After viewing the apparition once more, Gracie re-iterates her suspicion—“it’s just the undersheet”—but Sister Edgar “feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy” (822). The once-buffered, hyper-hygienic nun “yanks off” her latex gloves, donned to protect herself from the populations she serves, and “shakes hands,” chest-thumping and embracing her fellow inhabitants of the Wall (822). Once partitioned from the Bronx’s environment, Sister Edgar becomes “nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd” (823).

The phantom of Esmeralda thus gestures towards three nodes of rupture in the logic of disposability: 1) It foregrounds the ecology of waste connecting the “middle suburbs” to the inner city, 2) It memorializes and thus grants value to populations relegated to invisibility, and 3) It contests the practice of containment that ascribes different values, and thus different freedoms, to the uneven landscapes of global capital. When Esmeralda’s likeness appears upon the “perfectly formed hand of a female caucasian,” the inner-city Bronx and the “northern suburbs” are positioned as interdependent nodes within the same economic system, underscoring the embeddedness of urban waste in suburban landscapes simultaneously built upon their containment and expendability. By placing a culture’s waste at its center rather than its periphery, the apparition disallows strategies of containment that partition middle-class suburbanites from inner-city zones of disposability. Esmeralda’s placement on a billboard targeted at “suburban commuters” traveling into the “thick of Manhattan money and glut,”

commuters who would otherwise pass directly over the Bronx, prohibits the physical concealment of the Bronx and its violated populations, thereby forcing the commuters to contend with the material conditions of urban life. Her phantom further provokes reflection on the city infrastructures—like the subway train—that systematically enforce the invisibility of wasted landscapes, and build concealment into the city’s architecture itself. Like Brian Glassic at the edge of the Fresh Kills landfill, Esmeralda’s phantom conveys the secret knowledge of waste—the implication of seemingly passive commuters within a system of violent disposability.

Secondly, the billboard apparition offers a form of tribute to the throwaway bodies whose deaths often operate as a matter of indifference. The public display of mourning, wonder, and stunned elation grants these lives weight and worth. In so doing, it reverses the logic of disposability that claimed Esmeralda’s life while rehearsing the coming-together of residents who recognize their lives as mutually implicated in one another. Indeed, *Underworld* foregrounds informal memorialization as a vital means of paying tribute to children marked as disposable. For instance, presaging Esmeralda’s spectral image is the public memorial known locally as the Wall, a “graffiti façade” covered with blue and pink angels marking the deaths of local children (239). Each angel has a name, a date, and a cause of death, reciting the casualties of a system that seeks to contain and expend its urban poor: “TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, abandonment at birth—left in dumpster, forgot in car, left in Glad Bag stormy night” (239). In the absence of formal obituaries or organized mourning, the Wall operates as both archive and memorial.

Finally, Esmeralda’s spectral appearance compels Sister Edgar to forgo her obsessive hygienic practices, a meticulous partitioning of the self that reflects Nick Shay’s own organizational neuroses. Affronted by Esmeralda’s image in a suburban ad-scape—and with it,



the secret knowledge of waste—Edgar peels off her ever-present latex gloves and embraces the people who she once viewed as sites of contamination. Sister Edgar, as Kathryn Ludwig has convincingly argued, “[accepts] the vulnerability and openness of difference over the false security of sameness,” recognizing her own life as implicated within the lives of those whom she serves (87). She feels “inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic” (DeLillo 823). Her claims to an autonomous, partitioned self utterly dissolve as she becomes a “disembodied self in liquid form, pouring into the crowd” (823). Contesting the logic of disposability, then, necessitates a letting-go of the contained, bounded self. It necessitates a formal openness to waste, an embrace of what we cast-off, and a refusal to differentiate its value and worth from our own.

### **The Erotics of Waste in Samuel Delany’s *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders***

While *Underworld* only gestures toward the insurgent possibilities enabled by an intimacy with waste, Samuel R. Delany’s *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* lovingly details, over the space of 804 pages, a visionary life-world organized around sexual, racial, and economic abjection. And while DeLillo spotlights the operations of waste otherwise concealed in a global capitalist system, Delany imagines waste as generative in another way altogether—in *Through the Valley*, waste constitutes the foundation for an ethos of care, reciprocal support, and unequivocal joy. As a node of erotic affinity, it unites and upholds a community made up of capital’s expendable others: the queer, racialized, poor, and frequently disabled inhabitants of The Dump. A privately funded utopia “dedicated to the betterment of the lives of black gay men and those of all races and creeds connected to them by elective and non-elective affinities,” the mostly-subsidized Dump operates as both economic and sexual haven for its inhabitants, who

joyfully and unabashedly engage in the most stigmatized of sexual acts: golden showers, shit-eating, snot-eating, piss-drinking, S&M, bare-backing, and public orgies (232). Disability, too, is an inextricable part of this queer utopia; the novel depicts piss orgies centered around ASL (American Sign Language), as well as regular dalliances with a disabled man whose urine bag and hose occupy central roles in sexual play. The erotic pastimes of the Dump's inhabitants are situated well outside of Gayle Rubin's "charmed circle" of normative heterosexuality; indeed, much of the novel's sexual exchange revolves around the consumption of literal human waste in every imaginable configuration.<sup>80</sup> In the life-world of *Through the Valley*, however, these acts are not legible in terms of pathology; they work to strengthen communal, interpersonal, and intercorporeal bonds, re-formatting abjection altogether.

*Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* constructs models of support, care, and collectivity—perhaps counter-intuitively—from these intimacies with waste. Rather than signifying pathology or excess, waste enables the renewal and affirmation of de-valued populations; as a system of sexual and communal exchange it allows for the rejuvenation and reproduction of their collective life. In short, Delany's novel envisions waste as itself a material and prosthetic support system that undergirds the production of radically different life-worlds.

### **Re-formatting Abjection**

To begin this analysis, let me rehearse my understanding of abjection as it operates within *Through the Valley*. In many ways, Delany's novel engages directly with the objects of disgust designated as *abject* in Julia Kristeva's oft-cited work, *Powers of Horror*—the "piece of

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<sup>80</sup> See Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex," in which she establishes a "charmed circle" of approved sexual practices, orientations, and habits: i.e., heterosexuality, sex within marriage, monogamous sex, procreative sex, and so forth. She distinguishes this from "the outer limits," which contains deviant sex acts, practices, and habits, i.e. homosexuality, sex with manufactured objects, public sex, and so forth (108—109).

filth, waste, or dung” that violates the fiction of a “clean and proper” body (2, 8). According to Kristeva, human wastes such as semen, urine, feces, and vomit incite disgust because they challenge the strict partition between self and other upon which subjectivity depends, reminding us of the superficial and easily penetrable barriers that separate the body from the not-so-outside world. The abject challenges “identity, system, order” through its radical ambiguity. As a liminal form, it signifies both the “self and not-self,” thereby demonstrating the inherent instability of subjectivity (Kristeva 4). If one wishes to maintain the body’s cohesion and order, the abject must be cordoned off, repressed, or rejected outright—the feeling of disgust when affronted with abject material signals the attempt to expel that material residue from our being.

Many scholars have extended this theory of abjection to an expanded terrain of the body politic to encompass the loathed or ghettoized Others of a given social body —those segments of the population that ostensibly disrupt or challenge the cohesion of normative social systems. In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, Darieck Scott foregrounds blackness as “one of the go-to figures for referencing the abject”; blackness is “consumed by a history of abjection, and is itself a form of abjection” (12, 5). Bringing race and sexuality to bear on an “all-too-typically deracinated” concept, he links “blackness-in/ as-abjection” to formative histories of domination, history, and defeat, and argues for the emergence of a counter-intuitive (black) power in African-American literary representations of sexual humiliation (14). In texts by Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, and Samuel Delany, among others, a “vulnerability to penetration” is depicted not as a surrender to power, but rather, as a “willed enactment of powerlessness that encodes a power of its own—a kind of skill set that includes pleasures in introjecting and assimilating the alien... a sense of intimacy acquired even in situations of coerced pain, a transformation, through harm, of

the foreign into one's own" (Scott 30). In Scott's theorizations, the abject no longer signifies defeat or excess—what must be cast off from a dominant social body—but re-formats the terrain of power altogether, imagining alternate ways of being in relation with others, the forging of heretofore-unimaginable intimacies with the not-self. Further, being-in/ as-abjection signals the radical shattering of cohesive selfhood, it denotes a subjectivity that "cannot claim its subjecthood (much less its agency), an 'I' without clear demarcation or referent" (Scott 257). Delany's *Through the Valley* similarly engages in the work of re-visioning the abject—both in terms of abjected populations and matter—and the production of a set of social relations that exceed the logic of disposability. Its characters build their lives upon a joyful "assimilation of the foreign into one's own," practicing a willing abdication of selfhood in favor of the connective, intercorporeal pleasures of waste.

*Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* centrally depicts the lifelong partnership between Eric Jeffers and Morgan "Shit" Haskell, which covers a period of approximately 70 years, extending from 2007 until sometime in the 2080s. At its most surface level, their relationship is constructed in and through a series of oppositions: Eric is white and brought up by a black stepfather, Shit is black and raised by a white father; Eric spends a significant portion of the novel poring over Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* whereas Shit is mostly illiterate; Eric hails from a solidly working-class background while Shit bears the signs of impoverishment (missing teeth, overly worn clothes, bare feet). What binds them together, at least initially, is a shared love of snot-eating as sexual practice; this later dilates outward into an ethos built upon a shared intimacy with abjection. They first meet when Eric relocates from his stepfather's Atlanta condo to his mother's home in Diamond Harbor, a fictional small town located on the Georgia coast. Their initial encounter, an impromptu orgy in a public restroom at Turpens Truck Stop, offers a

framework for the rest of the novel, which explores the problematics of desiring abject matter and persons alongside the “world-making publicness” generated by public sexual culture (Warner 177). *Through the Valley* then follows Shit and Eric through a series of occupations: garbage men in Diamond Harbor, managers of pornographic theater and cruising zone the Opera, and finally, handymen at a lesbian artists’ colony on Gilead Island.

Though the novel is loosely structured by some temporal markers and significant events, it is mostly episodic, experiential, and repetitive, accumulating a lifetime of everyday habits and practices over its 800 pages. In the background Delany details world historical happenings—the legalization of same-sex marriage, colonies on the Moon and Mars, terrorist nuclear attacks in Los Angeles and Mumbai, the advent of e-readers. In the foreground he renders, in thick description, the copious amounts of kinky sex that make up his characters’ everyday lives. In this way, *Through the Valley* merges two of what Delany terms the “paraliterary genres”—speculative/ science-fiction and pornography—and in so doing, envisions a future horizon for the queer, racialized, and disabled abject. This future is a temporal impossibility within the logic of disposability, which prescribes no future for those marked as human waste. In relation to José Muñoz’s formulations of queer futurity, abjection operates in Delany’s novel as a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present... [it is] an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility toward another world” (1). Delany thus offers a speculative rendering of an abject (but not necessarily abjected) future, populated entirely by the dependent, disabled, and racialized subjects excised by global capital.

The erotic nurturing of disposable life constitutes an affront to the value system of neoliberal capital, which subjects abjected populations to resource deprivation and the gutting of social services. Though the novel begins in 2007 and highlights the historic inauguration of

President Barack Obama, it nonetheless grapples with the ongoing legacies of the Reagan administration, which operates as social and historical backdrop for many of Delany's other works, i.e. the novel *The Mad Man* (1994), the *Return to Nevèryön* series (1979—1987), and the graphic novel memoir *Bread & Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York* (1999). As Simon Dickel and Michael Bucher write, *The Mad Man* and *Bread & Wine* reflect upon a “period of aggravated and sustained homelessness in the U.S.,” a crisis “willfully exacerbated by the social politics of the Reagan administration,” which combined “federal cutbacks to low-income housing” with the widespread de-institutionalization of mental health patients in the “absence of effective alternative care” (289). In *The Mad Man*, Delany responds to these neo-conservative developments by framing homelessness as sexually desirable, thereby re-inscribing the homeless body within the realm of the social/ political.<sup>81</sup>

This representative strategy continues in *Through the Valley*. Like *The Mad Man*'s protagonist John Marr, Eric shares an intense attraction to homeless or visibly impoverished men. Prior to encountering Shit, he regularly meets homeless men under a highway bridge for cock-sucking and rimming, the latter of which he particularly enjoys because of the men's limited access to toilet paper. And while the novel's unflinching depiction of abject queer sex and interclass contact offers an implicit challenge to Reagan-era sexual and economic conservatism, *Through the Valley* presents its most explicit critique through the character of Ronald Reagan Bodin, an opinionated black Republican and insufferable boyfriend to Eric's mother, Barb.<sup>82</sup> Bodin, perhaps unsurprisingly, carries an almost caricatured set of values: he prioritizes money, status, and prestige. A businessman by trade, he holds Eric and his vocation in

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<sup>81</sup> See Dorothea Löbbermann, “Fashion/ ing Statements: Reading Homeless Bodies in Contemporary Fiction,” *Expositions* 5.1 (2011): 62—69.

<sup>82</sup> “Interclass contact” is a term coined by Delany, for a more extensive explanation see *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

contempt, astonished that his girlfriend's son wants to work as a "refuse maintenance engineer...in case you ain't sure, that's a fuckin shit shoveler!" (132). Bodin also expresses qualms about living with a gay teenager, so when he and Barb move in together, Eric continues his residency with Shit and Dynamite, Shit's father and their shared sexual third. Ronald Reagan Bodin is the socio-political counterpoint to the Dump's ostensible utopia; he emblemizes the Reagan administration's set of values.

The Dump, in turn, is framed as a haven from the violence of disposability administered by Reagan-era social policies. Founded in 1984, the "week of the announcement of the HTLV-III virus (HIV)," its establishment is prompted in part by the administration's appalling response to the AIDS crisis, and as its highly subsidized social support systems imply, the gutting of the public safety net that disproportionately affected poor people of color (232). Indeed, in order to gain entrance, a potential Dump resident has to be "gay and homeless and not smoke. And black, pretty much mostly" (120). Due to the support of the Kyle Foundation, Eric, Shit, and the rest of the Dump community enjoy free access to housing, food, and healthcare, a semi-socialist set-up that attends to the material needs of the body and the making of a livable world.

The value system upheld by the Dump, and embodied by Eric, Shit, Dynamite, and its other inhabitants, constitutes a social and political otherwise to the Reagan-Bush-Clinton administrations and their systematic undoing of municipal and social support. In contrast to the logic of disposability exposed in DeLillo's *Underworld*, the Dump generates an ethos that *prioritizes* wasted humans, human waste, and the socially abject. As literary scholar Timothy Griffiths observes, "one might imagine that the research question that occupies Delany in much of his work, but particularly here, is what would happen if we put the abject at the center of the utopia?" (308). It is important to note here that the Dump, while depicted in many ways as an

oasis for black gay men, is not a purely optimistic space without contradictions or complications. The incestuous, intergenerational relationship between Shit and Dynamite, as well as the institutionalization of utopia itself (the Dump, as I previously mentioned, enjoys the private financial backing of the Robert Kyle Foundation) bracket a “critical meta-utopianism,” in which Delany outlines the contours of an affirmative black/ queer world while “leaving its ragged hem apparent” (Griffiths 306, 314). The embrace of waste and pathology, as the novel makes clear, can generate other systems of violence within an otherwise idealized space.

One of the primary complications of the Dump, and a complication that warrants further attention, is the explicit and troubling absence of women from its parameters. While Dump inhabitants may share social affinities with women—indeed, Eric maintains an affirmative, communicative, and loving relationship with his mother throughout his residency—they are nonetheless excluded from the protective safety net afforded by Robert Kyle, which embraces nearly every other abjected social identity (class, race, sexuality, and disability). The Dump, in the words of Kristeva, quite literally “vomits the mother,” and all other women (maternal or otherwise), from its boundaries (47).<sup>83</sup> Indeed, while Darieck Scott may reference blackness as a “go-to figure” for the abject, the original figure of abjection, as described in *Powers of Horror*, is the maternal body and one’s earliest affective affiliations with it (5). In Kristeva’s model of the abject, the infant’s attachment to maternal origins must be violently abjected as a prerequisite for becoming an autonomous, speaking human subject. She writes: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (10). In other words, the horror of

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<sup>83</sup> With this citation, I do not intend to collapse the category of “woman” with the category of “mother,” I instead aim to draw attention to the primary figure of abjection as distinctly maternal.



abjection is fundamentally the horror of maternal dependency, that is, the horror of the body as subject to and imbricated in another.

While I read *Through the Valley* as a celebration of intercorporeal dependency, and its re-formatting of abjection as evidence towards that reading, the Dump nonetheless ejects from its orbit a fundamental site of abjection—the maternal (and feminine) body—as well as the subsequent re-formatting of that site within the circuits of desire, care, collectivity, and support. That is, while the Dump imagines abjected wastes/ bodies as the *basis* for liberatory, post-Keynesian social collectivities, it retrenches oppressive social norms regarding gender, in which women and feminine subjects cannot—by definition—participate. This, of course, circumscribes the liberatory potential articulated through the novel’s re-framing of the abject, as only masculine-bodied subjects have access to Delany’s utopian horizon. Absent women or feminine bodies, the project of re-imagining abjection remains woefully incomplete.

Keeping these caveats in mind, I focus nonetheless on the utopian feelings that suffuse *Through the Valley*, because they allow us to “see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,” into a potential life-world in which the abject is a primary organizing principle (Muñoz 1). Here, the abject is drained of its incitement to horror, and re-imagined as the connective tissue of a deviant, interdependent social collectivity. I am primarily interested in the project of definition, of outlining this particular system of values, in which waste is not seen as a negation of value but a possibility for generating other modes of being-together, for forging alternate relations with what is otherwise deemed disposable.

One of the most explicit ways the novel re-signifies the abject, and maps out alternate relations to it, is by framing human waste and wasted humans as erotic, desirable, and yet also part of everyday life. Both the Dump and greater Diamond Harbor feature built-in structures for

the explicit accommodation of abject sexual practices. In other words, these are geographies structured around the centrality of pathologized bodies and sexualities. There's the freestanding Men's Room in Dump Corners, which boasts an explicitly designated area for "Tearoom Cruising"; the Runcible Opera House and pornographic theater, a cruising zone classified as a historic site by the Robert Kyle-dominated Chamber of Commerce; the Slide, a local bar outfitted with an eighteen-foot-long urinal and piss cage; and the public john at Turpens Truck Stop, where the core cast of *Through the Valley* first meet. Even the Dump's local doctor, Dr. Greene, refuses to pathologize the erotic consumption of waste; when he sees Eric and Shit eating each other's snot, he replies: "I see you two are bolstering each other's immune systems. That's good—yes, that's good" (588).

Eric is particularly attracted to signs of social abjection and bodily deviance; he hungers after "dick cheese," stale urine, and the perspiration left from a period free of washing or from living on the streets. When first encountering his soon-to-be lifelong friends, partners, and lovers at Turpens, he feels especially aroused by the sight of missing teeth and pockmarked skin. In many ways, Eric's fetishization of the socially abject can be read as a problematic romanticization of poverty and disability, another way of flattening these complex lived experiences into a one-dimensional eroticism. But *Through the Valley*, rather than exclusively placing these abjected bodies and subjects within the realm of the erotic, integrates them into the larger social fabric of the novel—in addition to sexual objects, they are partners, friends, confidants, part of a broader collectivity and life-long support network. What was once deemed socially abject now becomes part of the continuum of everyday life; abjection and waste no longer signify as transgressive or external to the social order. Rather, they are part of the vital materials through which life is lived, enjoyed, and made.

The eroticization of waste thus enables the forging of a cross-categorical, interclass social collectivity, one in which the object is no longer understood as external to the social/ political, but as central to the forging of an alternate erotic collectivity. “The sexual acts that Delany describes,” writes Steven Shaviro, “involve, and create, forms of *affiliation* between people. These affiliations are grounded in bodily pleasures, in the pleasures of sharing, and in the multiple ways that people can find mutually enabling forms of contact” (n. pag). *Through the Valley* narrates the coming-together of queer, poor, often disabled, and often racialized subjects through a doing-together of pathologized practices, and through these practices, narrates the decades-long building of a life, a community, and a collectivity. And while the Dump, as a designated haven for black gay men, may initially seem defined by the static categories of identity politics, Delany’s loving narrations of Dump sociality depict a community that regularly crosses boundaries of race, class, and ability to powerful effect (232). In various sexual configurations we encounter Shit and Eric; Dynamite, Shit’s white father and lover; Jay MacAmon, a blond, bearded, and tattooed boatman; Jay’s partner “Mex,” a stout, non-speaking Chicano who communicates through American Sign Language; Black Bull, a domineering black leather top; Whiteboy, his white bottom and slave; Big Man, a “black kid” with a “withered leg,” “crutch,” and “personal urine bag”; and Dr. Greene, the Dump’s black physician who offers medical advice uncircumscribed by notions of sexual propriety (286).

While this diversity may initially appear as an empty multiculturalist gesture, this particular grouping of characters gestures toward another way of organizing social life, and of understanding social coalition. The plurality of identities in the Dump, with their contradictory and varied relations to power, suggests the insufficiency of a single-axis of identification for capturing the complexity of their collectivity. Eric himself expresses a disdain for single-issue

identity politics, and the constraints placed upon individual subjects by identity labels: “But that’s why I don’t want nobody callin’ me gay. I’d rather they called me a fuckin’, cocksuckin’, piss-drinkin’, shit-eatin’ scumbag...than fuckin’ *gay!* At least that gets my dick hard” (19).

Rather than embracing the singular category of gay sexuality, which designates a broad spectrum of subjects with a broad spectrum of sexual practices, Eric identifies himself most strongly with his love for erotic abjection, as do many of his comrades in the Dump. In this way, the Dump community, and Eric and Shit’s immediate circle of friends in particular, models a non-identitarian form of coalition, one that values a collectivity that suggests affective and social, rather than biological or cultural, foundations for alliance. This is a queer, disabled, and racialized social formation that comes into being *through* (not in spite of) the abject, a collectivity that does not demand inclusion in an already existing social order but necessitates the production of another queer/ disabled life-world altogether—the love of s/Shit, as Eric realizes, carries world-making potentiality: “He wanted to tell [Shit] that they were making a world, a county, a city together, and that it was wonderful. Shit was the reason he slept through the night, that he woke and slipped from the covers” (574—575).

### **The Work of Maintenance, Support, and Care**

Within this queer/ disabled life-world, a world that prioritizes collective joy, affirmation, and care, the work of maintenance and public support—represented by Shit, Eric, and Dynamite’s regular garbage runs—becomes vital to the operations of collective human life; maintenance enables people to live together en masse. In other words, the novel’s revisioning of the abject necessitates a re-valuation of our relationship to waste management, labor often taken for granted at best and disdained at worst. In the world outside the Dump, as Ronald Reagan

Bodin makes evident, sanitation and maintenance labor carries very little value; the workers are often equated with the garbage they regularly handle. Clem, an acquaintance of Eric's mother, further relates Eric's occupation to a potential failure of heterosexuality: "You'd want a job where some nice young ladies might look at you and say, well, what a fine young fellow he is. He'd make a real good provider—you know: someone with prospects. A good person to start a family with" (102). Work, as Clem's formulation suggests, does not constitute an endpoint in and of itself, but operates as a conduit that grants access to particular social arrangements—some better, some worse. But Eric has no interest in perpetuating *this* particular social arrangement, a heterosexist capitalist form of sociality organized through patriarchal reproduction. He views maintenance labor as a conduit toward another way of living altogether, one that prioritizes the public good: "People need to get their garbage collected, don't they?" (102)

Eric's admiration of sanitation work becomes most evident in moments of what José Muñoz via Ernest Bloch terms "astonished contemplation," a mode of utopian feeling that "helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness" (5).<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Eric views garbage collection with a kind of unprecedented astonishment and reverence, a mode of wonder that positions such labor as more significant to collective human life than city administration:

"Maybe it just reminds me how important you all are—you and Dynamite, I mean."

"Huh?" Shit moved his legs a little.

"You guys are the fuckin' garbage men, Shit. I mean, supposed lightning hit the mayor of the city. It wouldn't make no major difference how things went. Ever' body would dotter on, doin' more or less what they do anyway, til they got a new one. I

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<sup>84</sup> In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz uses philosopher Ernst Bloch's three-volume *Principle of Hope* as a foundation for his own theory of queer futurity.

can't even *remember* who's mayor! But suppose all the garbage men upped and disappeared—Randal and Tad and you and Aim and Dynamite and Al and me...you couldn't even have no city here. Pretty soon people wouldn't even be able to negotiate the place. The smell and the junk would take over everything, and everybody would have to move away! Inside of a couple of months, they'd have to close this whole place up and go look for a new spot." [...] (237)

This passage describes an everyday act, the collecting of garbage, that signals another mode of being in the world—a way of relating to waste, maintenance work, and collective city life that re-shuffles extant hierarchies of significance. It gestures toward a form of sociality that is not beholden to the reproduction of heteropatriarchy and the nuclear family—the re-inscription of what Jack Halberstam has termed “straight time”—but that prioritizes the regular maintenance and upkeep of Diamond Harbor’s broader public, which includes the residents of the Dump, Ronald Reagan Bodin, and many others besides.<sup>85</sup> This is a cyclical temporality and mode of living, not a linear progression toward more or better, but the regular, predictable, even boring preservation of everyday life. Eric’s astonished contemplation of sanitation work articulates a value system that centers Freudian anaclitic love, or what Judith Butler has described as “the type of love characterized by the need for support or by the love of those who support.”<sup>86</sup> In contrast to Nick Shay’s involvement with the multi-national Waste Containment corporation, he views his work with trash as a small-scale means of “[making] people feel better,” framing waste management as as inherent to the maintenance of communal bonds, a shared wellbeing, and collective caregiving (203). As Eric puts it, “I just wanna be a good person—do stuff that doesn’t

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<sup>85</sup> See J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*.

<sup>86</sup> Judith Butler and Shannon Jackson, “What Makes Performance Possible?” (lecture, Colorado College, October 2009).

harm anybody. Do stuff that helps them. Dynamite's a good person. That's why he takes care of Morgan—and why he collects the garbage" (204).

Eric's ecological perspective on the work of maintenance thus demonstrates the transformative capacities of waste and its management; he articulates a relationship to waste that frames his own subjectivity as part and parcel of Diamond Harbor's greater support system. That is, his own intimacies with waste signal a dissipation of autonomous selfhood and its integration into a broader social, municipal, and material ecology. Here, the self *becomes* support, a part of city infrastructure: "Every time I finish collecting the day's garbage, I [Eric] feel like I won—like everybody around here has won because of me and...Morgan and Dynamite. I like workin' the route. I like to do it, 'cause it's useful" (203). This articulation of self-as-infrastructure exemplifies another key aspect of the novel's abject ethos; the subject who cannot "claim its subjecthood" in the "space, the place" of the abject (literalized here as the Dump) instead claims a counter-intuitive power by merging with other bodies, other social, laboring, and erotic networks, in order to work towards "ever-greater configurations of positive affects" (Shaviro, Scott 257).

The residents of the Dump aim to provide sexual, social, and community support for one another, with the erotic shading into the quotidian everyday of Dump life, the "quarter-lit world where sex and affection both were accepted" (550). They nourish each other's bodily and psychic needs, freely exchanging snot, shit, piss, and semen to enhance each other's sexual satisfaction, while also feeding each other (actual food in addition to bodily fluids), taking out the garbage, providing transportation, and throwing Christmas parties. While Kristeva's abject frames bodily fluids as inherent sources of disgust, Delany's novel foregrounds another possible association with waste—that of care-work in which administration to the body is central; this is a

kind of work that necessitates intimacy with the abject. *Through the Valley*'s ethos of the abject, then, dismisses the horror and loathing associated with the work of care, with the material labor of tending to physical bodies and their needs. It foregrounds strategies of bodily renewal, of recreating, renewing and recharging bodies, and of mobilizing available resources toward the project of collective support.

The dissipation of the self through the intercorporeal, interdependent pleasures of Dump life illuminate a worldview further elaborated by Baruch Spinoza's Enlightenment-era philosophical treatise *Ethics*. Spinoza, as Steven Shaviro observes, "is something like the tutelary spirit of the novel" (n. pag). It is not uncommon for Delany to use his fictional work to explore intellectual concepts; his 1976 novel *Trouble on Triton*, Joshua Burnett Yu writes, "uses far science fiction to explore Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia" (n. pag). Similarly, *Through the Valley* mobilizes pornography and speculative fiction to examine Spinoza's theory of substance monism and its implications for queer/ disabled collectivity. Toward the middle of the book, gay elder Mama Grace lends Eric a copy of *Ethics*, giving him a summation of Spinoza's effect on Grace's own life—the revelation that he "was free to do anything that did not hurt others that strengthened me and helped me in the one thing we are all put on this earth to do: *help one another*" (468). Spinoza, according to Mama Grace, imagined a "universe constituted entirely of and by its god...God cannot be a being apart from the rest of the universe who looks in on it and thinks about it and wishes it to be one way rather than the other" (466). Or as Eric puts it, "Everybody's related to everybody and everything—even trees and mosquitos and minnows flickin' around in Runcible Creek. That's kinda reassuring, I think" (393). Offering an amendment to Cartesian dualism, Spinoza's *Ethics* offers a monistic metaphysics that views God and Nature as one and the same. And as God is made of a singular substance, everything that



exists is either a God or a mode of God, with modes defined as “things that...are dependent on other things” (Hampe, Renz, and Schnepf 6). Following this, all things, people included, exercise only a distributed form of agency; they are “determined in their being and their action,” have “no free will,” and cannot act with “absolute spontaneity” (Hampe, Renz, and Schnepf 6). Like Manzanar’s sublime infrastructural vision, *Through the Valley*’s Spinozistic ethos conveys an understanding of human subjectivity in which each subject is a dependent being, one contingent upon the actions of other human and non-human agents—a selfhood constituted by and embedded within larger social, material, and prosthetic networks. Each mode, too, is an assemblage of extensive parts, which are circulated with, exchanged between, and strengthened by other modes. And while Eric spends a good portion of the novel puzzling over *Ethics* without ever fully figuring it out, *Through the Valley* makes it clear that Eric, Shit, and the rest of the Dump residents enact a Spinozistic philosophy through their building of erotic and social support systems, and further, their connectivity with waste.

*Ethics* and *Through the Valley* thus impart an understanding of the world that denies the existence of any separation between human beings and the rest of nature, and, by extension, between human beings and abject waste. Indeed, Shit establishes this connection while offering his own interpretation of a Spinozistic framework:

“I mean, you’re all I ever wanted—and when I’m messin’ around with someone else, it’s like you’re always tellin me, from that book of yours, that I’m fuckin’ with another part of you or the world or the universe and—I guess—God. ‘Cause everything’s a part of everything else, and that’s why I always come home extra horny. And I always got you there to hump and hang onto your dick and nuzzle on your nuts and stick my fingers up your asshole and smell your farts under the covers and take a leak in your mouth and hug

onto you and breathe in how your breath smells in the mornin' before you wake up and I lick inside your nose and rub my dick all over your butt and getting' it in and hangin' onto you. Or just suck your damned dick. And it's mine to hold onto pretty much whenever I want." Another breath. "Wow..." (678)

Shit's loving declaration to Eric, stated near the novel's conclusion, renders evident the transformative power of waste in a Spinozistic framework, which emphasizes an intimacy, intercorporeality, and interdependence with one's surrounding modes. His effervescent, run-on sentences, unbroken by punctuation, enact through grammar the interpenetration of his body's with Eric's, the joyful and co-affirmative mingling of their gas, their genitals, and their fluids. This passage describes an intimacy with the abject that does not shatter the self, but that empowers it, that makes life more possible. Their life-long relationship, and their relationship with Shit's father, Dynamite, act out the micro-social formations that Elizabeth Freeman terms queer kinship, a "set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another" (298). Eric and Shit revel in the vulnerable parts of each other, those bodily openings that blur inside from outside, and together, mobilize waste as a connective tissue to build kinship networks. Thus connected, they form a confederate body, an assemblage, that enhances each other's power by virtue of *being* connected.

For Eric, Shit, and the other residents of the Dump, this is the counterintuitive power of the abject, revealed through a prolonged intimacy with waste—the empowerment and affirmation granted through socio-erotic support networks, and the knowledge imparted by an openness to one's vulnerability and dependency. The offering of flesh and fluid, too, operates as a form of care—care for others, and care for the self:

“I’m pissin’ in ‘im now,” Dynamite said. Though he hadn’t been, the cock head in Eric’s throat erupted hot urine, as it pulled forward in Eric’s mouth. It pushed forward again. Eric gulped.

On his third gulp, Eric thought: Jesus, why the fuck am I so happy doing this...?

Because, in every glittering extremity of Eric’s body, he was.

[...] Eric squeezed Dynamite’s rough hand—and drank.

Dynamite squeezed back. “You okay...?” Eric coughed, and a dribble ran down and under his jaw.

Eric nodded. And went on drinking. (290, 291)

The act of drinking another person’s piss, an erotic practice defined through its proximity to bodily abjection, is depicted here as a loving gesture, a granting of sexual joy emptied of shame. Dynamite takes care to ensure Eric’s consent and pleasure, imbuing a potentially crass scene with a sense of trust and mutual affirmation, an opening up of Dynamite’s most vulnerable parts to a willing, considerate, and responsible recipient. Indeed, a shared intimacy with waste—a giving and receiving of bodily fluids without shame—is one of the primary ways that the men of the Dump practice a vast care for each other, a loving and considerate “being for others” (*Motion of Light* 183). And this, ultimately, is the novel’s ethos—the necessity of living, being, and caring for others, enacted through the giving and receiving of abject fluids. This, for Delany, is the space of the abject, and the work of waste management: the building of socio-erotic networks that affirm, support, and empower those deemed disposable, and through them, the imagining of affirmative ways of being, living, and feeling-together with waste.

## Conclusion

Through the abject channels of waste management and sanitation infrastructure, Don DeLillo and Samuel Delany outline the secret knowledges afforded by an intimacy with waste—*Underworld* details the violent logic of disposability undergirding multi-national capitalism, and *Through the Valley* details the counter-intuitive powers embedded in human vulnerability and socio-erotic collectivity. Both works suggest an alternate orientation to trash as a means of disputing the value system upheld by global capital and its domestic counterpart, welfare reform, in which different levels of worth are ascribed to people, places, and labor. DeLillo and Delany depict the transformative potentialities of an openness to waste, in which the horror and loathing ascribed to abject matter dissipates, and the worth of waste can no longer be differentiated from our own. For Delany, this openness to waste enables the flourishing of abject life-worlds, in which waste itself becomes a support system that upholds dense ecologies of dependency and care, and that enables democratic fantasies of undifferentiated support. For that, ultimately, is the transformative potential of waste—a dissipating of the individual self in favor of intercorporeal and interdependent pleasures, in which the dependent, vulnerable self disdained by the logics of disposability becomes a connective node in a life-world of support and renewal.

Waste management, in this chapter, illuminated the biopolitics of disposability at the heart of welfare reform, while envisioning wasted humans and landscapes as generative, rather than marginal, sites—for profit and value, on the one hand, and for forms of abject collectivity, on the other. In the fourth and final chapter, I engage extensively with the absent or decaying infrastructures compromised by logics of disposability, as well as with the modes of testimonial witnessing transformed by infrastructural absence.

## Chapter 4

### Unsupported Lives: Witnessing Disability and Infrastructural Neglect in Detroit and New Orleans

Without staff, stuff, space, and systems, nothing can be done.

*Paul Farmer, "Diary"*

Andrew Moore's 2010 photo book *Detroit Disassembled*, a glossy treatment of the city's post-industrial tableaux, trades on an iconography of urban ruin. Part of a burgeoning cottage industry of Detroit documentaries, photobooks, weblogs, and think pieces, its narrative shape and strategy prove predictable: disjointed collages of empty factory floors, unused classrooms, and decaying transit hubs presented as both elegy and homage. Though *Detroit Disassembled* traffics in images of absent infrastructure—after all, it features Michigan's hollowed-out Grand Central Station, the Mecca of urban exploration—the unsupported lives of many current-day Detroiters remain unacknowledged, as do the historical and material underpinnings of Moore's panoramas. The evacuation of history and human presence is endemic to these Detroit image-worlds. As John Patrick Leary observes, "So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins...and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city" (*Guernica*, n. pag). And so, while absent or decaying infrastructure remains a hallmark of Detroit's image industry, it functions ultimately as an empty symbol: full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. How, then, does one bear witness to infrastructural neglect while attending to its origins? What's more, how does one bear witness

when such an act acknowledges shared vulnerability, gradual disablement, and dependence on infrastructure, all of which counter national commitments to individualism and spectacle? How do we navigate racialized urban sites already overdetermined by narrative and oversaturated with meaning? And what is unearthed when we filter through the noise?

This chapter analyzes testimonies of infrastructural neglect in Detroit and New Orleans that illuminate racialized regimes of disablement and, in so doing, transform the cultural imperative of bearing witness. One predominant model of witnessing, for instance, links testimony to a paradigm of trauma, in which written or oral acts of witnessing work to reveal, contain, or exorcise inconceivable violence.<sup>87</sup> Through testimony, as it is commonly theorized, one publicly attests to experiences of injustice, and in so doing, seeks out the acknowledgement, containment, or resolution of past wrongs. Here, the political imperative of witnessing is one of exposure, in which witnessing brings to light otherwise obscured experiences of oppression. In another model, the one I advance, attention is centered on the fraught condition of *overexposure*, rather than the uncovering of hidden oppression. To theorize this condition of overexposure, I explore Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman healthcare play *Let Me Down Easy* (2009) and Detroit activist icon Grace Lee Boggs' autobiography *Living for Change* (1998) in order to foreground another kind of relation. The intersections of blackness and disability present in these testimonies exceed critical rubrics centered around revelation, containment, and therapeutic cure. The story of infrastructural neglect in Detroit and New Orleans is not unknown, unseen, or psychically concealed. If anything, it is overly public, and tied to racist tropes of cultural

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<sup>87</sup> See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

inadequacy. Like the too-familiar husk of the Michigan Grand Central Station, an image now cultural wallpaper, it is a story we think we already know.

Departing from trauma's paradigm of exposure, these testimonies operate instead through a modality of haunting. Sociologist Avery Gordon defines haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordon, "Some Thoughts" 1). As opposed to grasping at the inexpressible, then, haunting renders the familiar strange and indicates "something is missing;" it gestures toward the shadows covered up by dominant ways of knowing (Gordon, *Ghostly* 178). And while trauma conceives of violence as *exceptional* and event-bound, haunting allows us to consider forms of racialized violence embedded in the everyday. The testimonial work of haunting offered by Boggs and Smith, in which infrastructural ghosts signal "unresolved social violence," disconnects blighted urban tableaux from myths of cultural pathology and links them instead to processes of state divestment. Neglect becomes legible as a form of state-sanctioned disablement: the systematic undoing of racialized populations through resource deprivation, and the casting of disability as a dynamic biopolitical process.<sup>88</sup>

Through their engagements with compromised systems of healthcare, nutrition, and education, I argue that Anna Deavere Smith and Grace Lee Boggs practice modes of witnessing that de-naturalize infrastructural neglect, gesturing toward social projects of endurance, sustenance, and reciprocal care. To *denaturalize*, or "to make unnatural," is to short-circuit the myth machine that oversimplifies neglect and to imagine otherwise—it is testimony that makes strange, rather than makes public. And in drawing our attention to compromised infrastructural

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<sup>88</sup> At the intersection of race and disability, disability can be perceived as a biopolitical project rather than a discrete minority identity, a "becoming rather than a being." See: Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011)

systems and the people dependent on them, Smith and Boggs elicit alternate ways of knowing hyper-mythologized cities. In other words, they enable us to view the city through the lens of infrastructural support, rather than through the lens of pathology, abandonment, or cultural failure. To see New Orleans and Detroit in terms of infrastructure, as these works do, is to recognize the support networks upon which we all depend. It is further to acknowledge the larger systemic forces at play, such as the divestment of state resources, that reproduce patterns of entrenched poverty, and that lead to compromised health and ability. While representations of racialized death have mobilized protests nationwide, this chapter asks us to consider racialized disability via infrastructural abandonment as a form of state-sanctioned violence, and highlights the work of testimony in rendering neglect legible *as such*.

Throughout this chapter, I will chart how these works render neglect strange in order to cultivate a public ethos of care, as well as the strangely conflicting and ableist tactics they deploy during this process of denaturalization. Indeed, these works are not without their limitations. They also “witness” the fraught process of witnessing hypervisible sites and subjects. In these testimonial interventions—attempts to render empathic and present those stripped of empathy and presence—we observe the deployment of contradictory narrative strategies that reproduce invisibility through hypervisibility, or that manage systemic neglect through an Emersonian ethos of self-reliance. These moments of friction, in which accounts of disablement are managed by assertions of hyper-ability, reveal vulnerability while simultaneously working to discipline it. Taken together, these testimonial accounts narrate the complexities of witnessing “slow violence” imposed upon racialized communities, which involves negotiating a warped field of vision simultaneously singular and overdetermined and yet “anything but transparent and



referential” (Gordon, *Ghostly* 25).<sup>89</sup> In these texts, to bear witness is to disrupt the interpretive codes that condition this visual plane—that is, to disrupt how we see and interpret violence against black and brown bodies, or even what we conceive of *as* violence. And also in these texts, we see how bearing witness involves the creation of other management tactics, narrative strategies that simultaneously foreground vulnerability and place it at a safe distance. Rather than attempting to resolve these discordant threads, I hold them in tandem to demonstrate that witnessing slow violence against racialized subjects involves “[telling] more than one story at a time” (Gordon, *Ghostly* 25). Through mapping this narrative palimpsest, I aim to grant multiple layers<sup>90</sup> to the tired, one-dimensional tale of infrastructural decay.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. First, I develop a model of witnessing that pointedly diverges from trauma’s paradigm of revelation. Derived from sociologist Avery Gordon’s concept of *haunting*, this model describes a mode of witnessing not grounded in the private, psychic life of trauma, but that instead produces new knowledges about the overwhelming everyday. Then, I put this framework in conversation with the texts that prompted its theorization. Both texts provide new ways of knowing quotidian forms of violence, and in so doing, prompt a consideration of state-sanctioned regimes of racialized disablement. Their depiction of disablement further enables a reconsideration of some of the governing principles of disability studies, which has only begun to address questions of environmental racism. And both works grapple with the conundrums of care in a rapidly privatizing nation, in which systems of

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<sup>89</sup> See *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, in which literary scholar Rob Nixon coins the term “slow violence” to grapples with the representational challenges of a type of violence drawn out over an extended period of time, for instance, the “long dyings” of “climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification”—events do not yield to narrative convention or closure (2).

<sup>90</sup> Following Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, I aim to grant “complex personhood” to subjects testifying to infrastructural neglect, rather than simply attempting to collapse their stories into one linear narrative. “Complex personhood,” according to Gordon, “means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (5).

state care are inherently violent, and yet their absence only intensifies the precarity of our nation's most vulnerable. Through their engagement with insufficient support systems, and their attempts to imagine otherwise, Boggs and Smith outline the contours of care as a social project, a shared responsibility, rather than a practice relegated to the private sphere.

### **Haunted by Infrastructure: The Testimonial Imperative**

By dredging up the institutional phantoms of Detroit and New Orleans, I invite us into an encounter with infrastructural ghosts—sites and structures we simultaneously see and not-see, and that linger on despite their expulsion from city life. Infrastructural remains—empty wards, burst levees, crumbling schools, stations, factories—haunt the image-worlds of Detroit and New Orleans, constituting a visual landscape of ruin consumed by a voracious public. And I ask: if we imagine these abandoned structures as ghostly presences rather than transparent signs of decline, what unexpected narratives might we encounter?

While many studies of testimony take up trauma as a primary analytic, I contend that Smith's *Let Me Down Easy* and Boggs' *Living for Change* operate instead through a modality of *haunting*. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon defines haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”; indeed, it is “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known” (xvi). Haunting renders the familiar strange and indicates “something is missing<sup>91</sup>”; it gestures toward the shadows covered up by dominant ways of knowing. Rather than grasping at the invisible or the unknowable, that is, the domain of trauma, modalities of haunting widen our field of vision, allowing us to sense

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<sup>91</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2008) 178.

what is just outside of view. And while trauma conceives of violence as *exceptional*, haunting allows us to consider forms of racialized violence embedded in the everyday. Most significantly, haunting solicits an *excavation* of meaning. It compels us to name the forces that disappear subjects, communities, and sites, and to ask what these ghostly sites and structures might otherwise tell us.

A modality of haunting, of making the everyday strange, thus counters the condition of *hypervisibility* commonly attached to racialized tableaux of urban decay. Circulated and re-circulated through mass media channels, images of black and brown figures perishing in Katrina's waters, or of abandoned cityscapes implicitly "ruined" by black and brown communities, arrive already enframed within a narrow field of interpretive possibility.<sup>92</sup> Hypervisibility is the condition of appearing as pure surface, as a site, figure, or structure that does not surprise but instead supports hegemonic ways of knowing. These dominant epistemologies, "inextricably wedded" to the "mediums of public image making and visibility," prop up entrenched myths, "systematically rendering" racialized and low-income communities "apparently *privately* poor, uneducated, ill, and disenfranchised" (Gordon, *Ghostly* 17). That is, instead of acknowledging the systematic erosion of social and public service sectors, the "staggering indifference to human suffering" displayed by the U.S. state, and historic patterns of racial discrimination in housing and employment, hypervisibility upholds the established interpretive codes that posit poverty, unemployment, social instability, and property negligence as transparent symptoms of a compromised culture (Herbert 2005). For instance, in sociological debates regarding the "urban underclass" during the 1970s—1990s, the most influential sphere

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<sup>92</sup> I follow Maurice O. Wallace's concept of enframement in this argument, which he defines via black masculinity. Wallace understands "enframement" as the process through which a "racialist gaze congeals black male bodies into statted rigidities, arresting representation at the threshold of human being" (7).

of discussion highlighted the “behavior and values of the poor” and the production of a “culture of dependency” by federal social programs (Sugrue 4). Policy ideologues like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and E. Franklin Frazier linked protracted poverty to the prevalence of matriarchal, single-parent family structures. Other scholars identified the “‘excesses’ of Black Power and the rise of affirmative action,” as well as the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, as primary catalysts for white suburbanization and urban divestment (Sugrue 4). According to this logic, abandoned and failing urban environments signal poor decision-making on an individual and cultural level, rather than the erosion of state support.

Detroit and New Orleans, cities emblematic of the “urban crisis,” have regularly been filtered through this narrow interpretive schema, alongside other plotlines that paper over the nuances of infrastructural abandonment. Detroit’s 1967 rebellion and incompetent black leadership—exemplified by mayors Coleman Young and the infamous Kwame Kilpatrick—are frequently invoked to explain its current compromised state.<sup>93</sup> And while elegiac photobooks like Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* do not explicitly draw upon anti-black tropes of irresponsibility, preferring instead to evacuate the black population wholesale, they nonetheless in their lamentations uphold a capitalist logic that posits “‘growth’ and ‘development’” as the only visual “measures of vitality” (Leary, “Detroitism”). In parallel, the recently popular storyline of urban renaissance—what John Patrick Leary terms the “Detroit Utopia” and Nicole Dawkins links to a “D.I.Y.”<sup>94</sup> mentality—hinges the city’s rebirth on the recent influx of a

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<sup>93</sup> While I do not intend to under-emphasize the role of municipal corruption in the production of Detroit’s current jeopardized state, I nonetheless identify the tendency to place blame solely on these iconic city figureheads, rather than searching for the entrenched and systemic processes of state divestment that reproduce and maintain seemingly intractable city-wide poverty.

<sup>94</sup> See Nicole Dawkins, “Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit,” *Utopian Studies* 22.2 (2011): 261—284.

mostly-white entrepreneurial and “creative class” (Leary, “Detroitism”).<sup>95</sup> The dominant narratives of post-industrial Detroit, in sum, either erase or blame racialized, low-income communities for a cityscape of ruin, imagine this cityscape as a “blank slate” abundantly available to urban “pioneers,” and identify revitalization as the sole province of largely white and economically mobile entrepreneurs.

Unsurprisingly, media depictions of a storm-weathered New Orleans mobilized similar storylines of blame. Coverage of Katrina framed the storm’s largely black survivors as looters, whose reckless actions implicitly warranted and justified negative outcomes for community and city alike.<sup>96</sup> As Lakshmi Fjord writes: “The epidemic of significations about African Americans’ inabilities to plan ahead or to respond to the crisis except with violence and self-interest gave ‘evidence’ to a plotline that not only delayed humanitarian aid, but proved so ubiquitous and compelling that residents of New Orleans themselves believed it” (12). Certainly these narratives of the “undeserving” poor have impressed themselves upon the national imagination and justified the further dismantling of public safety nets. And while a comprehensive survey of Detroit and New Orleans in popular and scholarly representation exceeds this chapter’s scope, the tropes of racialized poverty rehearsed above offer a cross-section of a pervasive, ubiquitous mythology—one that depicts urban decay as just desserts, and in so doing, renders underserved communities as undeserving of empathy, aid, and support.

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<sup>95</sup> A coinage, subject to much criticism, offered by U.S. economist Richard Florida in his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. Florida identifies the so-called creative class as the primary driving economic force in post-Fordist cities; it is made up of professionals working in the areas of science, engineering, computer programming, education, design, media, finance, healthcare, and the arts.

<sup>96</sup> See Tania Ralli, “Who’s a Looter?: In Storm’s Aftermath, Pictures Kick Up a Different Kind of Tempest,” *New York Times* (New York) 5 Sept 2005: C6; Joseph B. Treaster and N.R. Kleinfield, “New Orleans is Inundated as 2 Levees Fail,” *New York Times* (New York) 31 Aug 2005: A1, among others.

What else, then, comes into view when we contend with infrastructural ghosts, when we allow them to draw us in and tell us something different? A modality of haunting, as Gordon argues, does not traffic in the unknowable, invisible, or seemingly inexpressible: the domain of trauma. To provide some context for my reading, trauma refers to events of such tremendous horror that they struggle to materialize in memory and representation. Traumatic events resist the sense-making operations of language, involving its subject in a recursive loop of psychic delay and obsession, a struggle with one's own memory that evades resolution. And while theorists have conceptualized trauma as inherently unyielding to representation, survivors are regardless "urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it" (Gilmore 7). Indeed, testimony has a fraught and intimate relationship with trauma. It contains trauma's fundamental ambivalence: both its seeming resistance to articulation as well as the necessity of containing trauma through the act of witnessing. And yet trauma as paradigm proves inadequate for hypervisible sites, structures, and experiences—that which *should* provoke horror but more often generate contempt. Mass media narrations of New Orleans and Detroit traffic in a sort of illegibility, in which protracted events like entrenched poverty and federal abandonment become unreadable as violence and instead function as cultural wallpaper. Rather than yielding public empathy or resolution, a sense of *something-to-be-done*, all-too-often these images hinder aid and even bolster neo-conservative policy reform, thereby working to intensify the violence depicted. In instances of hypervisibility, the paradigm of trauma loses its critical traction.

Alternately, haunting offers new ways of knowing and seeing what is seemingly familiar and utterly knowable. This is a form of testimony not grounded in the psychic, private life of trauma; it is instead a filter for what Lauren Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness," a term that

describes trauma and crisis as not “exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10). The testimonies under consideration index worlds in which systematic material deprivation has become part of the everyday fabric. Extracting new knowledge from everyday crisis, a modality of haunting trains focus on those moments “when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving...when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done” (Gordon, *Ghostly* xvi). This is a form of testimony that compels its audience to meditate seriously on the conditions of infrastructural neglect, rather than attaching these conditions to the logics of hypervisibility. Granting infrastructure our sustained attention, as Smith and Boggs compel us to do, highlights gradual processes of racial violence occluded by social protest movements, and trains our focus on racialized disablement—that is, the slow violence inflicted by state-sanctioned neglect.

The testimonial imperative of haunting, as my texts will further elaborate, produces new knowledge about crisis and neglect in four primary ways: 1) It frames the insufficiency of public services and support systems as a form of disabling slow violence against largely racialized populations, thereby framing neglect *as* a form of violence and state-sanctioned disablement; 2) It enables us to see seemingly spectacular, “natural,” and immediate events (such as Hurricane Katrina) as long in the making; 3) It casts infrastructural neglect as key to what Henry Giroux terms the “biopolitics of disposability,” in which the neoliberal state does not only let die, but actively marks portions of the population as disposable; and 4) In framing neglect *as* violence, it accordingly foregrounds the necessary and reparative work of care. Following the ethos of care as a social responsibility, the infrastructural hermeneutic emphasizes the necessity of access to resources like food, education and healthcare. Indeed, figures of care and nurturance anchor both

texts, and recast “crisis” as the systemic divestment from social and public support systems. In these texts, crisis emerges from of a culture of indifference, rather than from a “culture of poverty” or “dependency.” And while each testimony articulates a different, competing, and sometimes fraught vision of what care entails, both texts nonetheless insist upon the inherent value of vulnerable life, and on the crucial work of enabling its endurance. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how each text enacts the testimonial imperative of haunting, and in so doing, ruptures the disabling logic of the neoliberal state, which operates through the deprivation of life-sustaining resources like food, healthcare, education, and housing.

### **Ghosts of Charity Hospital: New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, and Anna Deavere Smith’s**

#### ***Let Me Down Easy***

On August 29, 2005, New Orleans’s underfunded levee system gave way to the waters of Hurricane Katrina. In the four days that followed, over 30,000 primarily black and transit-dependent New Orleanians crowded both the Superdome and the Convention Center, deprived of water, food, proper sanitation, medical attention, and federal aid. The fallout of Katrina dismantled any lingering fantasy of inhabiting a post-racial, colorblind society. With Katrina’s arrival, the longstanding racial and economic fissures dividing both city and nation accelerated to the foreground, as the paltry reserves of public assistance and emergency support for resource-starved residents illuminated racism as a system of “organized killing” (Lee xiv). A crisis of representation soon followed landfall, as political and media rhetoric placed blame for disastrous consequences on “the inabilities of the unevacuated” (Fjord 8). And as recorded in the U.S. House of Representatives Katrina Report, “A Failure of Initiative,” then-president George Bush hinged his management of the disaster, strangely enough, on media footage. He received



criticism for an “unusual reliance on news reports to obtain information on what was happening on the ground in the days immediately following landfall,” rather than consulting “reports in situ or satellite images” (qtd. in Fjord 8). The federal government’s stunning indifference to its most vulnerable subjects ramped up the numbers of dead and disabled, generating horrific tableaux of malign neglect: elderly dead slumped in wheelchairs and shrouded in blankets, crowds searching for high ground, an “emaciated black woman” propelled on a mattress through “fetid [waters]” in search of medical care (Fink 34). As many policy and media critics have argued, Katrina was less a “natural” disaster than one generated through a constellation of failures: of infrastructure, reportage, emergency prevention, federal assistance, evacuation, and initiative. The aftermath of the storm made plain the impotency of eroded public and state support systems, as well as the consequences wrought by a culture of indifference.

It is within this saturated discursive field that I situate Anna Deavere Smith’s testimony “Heavy Sense of Resignation,” part of her one-woman healthcare play *Let Me Down Easy*. Akin to her much-lauded productions *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994) and *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), *Let Me Down Easy* blends the categories of ethnography, journalism, documentary, and social commentary to create a distinct theatrical practice. In piecing together a play, Smith conducts interviews with a range of subjects, meticulously studies the footage, then enacts on stage the contents of each testimony, embodying with precision the mannerisms, gestures, voice, and language unique to her interviewees. She offers a re-mediation of personal narrative through performance, in which she acts as both ventriloquist and curator. In this way, her performances operate through a mode of double witnessing that formally enacts the estrangement and denaturalization central to the testimonial work of haunting—Smith becomes legible not as a solo performer, but as an heteroglossic, dispersed network of voices and personae, woven

together in an interdependent narrative structure. In other words, she herself operates as a kind of infrastructure, supporting the circulation of and unexpected encounters between various testimonial agents.

Smith's productions possess a collage-like quality, in which the juxtaposition of multiple and oftentimes conflicting perspectives do not formally lend themselves to a narrative resolution, but rather gesture in a multiplicity of directions. And as Cherise Smith notes, the efficacy of her performances lies in this juxtaposition rather than their narrative content—audiences are “transfixed” by the contrast between “various figures who, under most circumstances, would not find themselves near one another and Smith's very noticeable transformation from one character to the next” (135).<sup>97</sup> In *Let Me Down Easy*, Smith produces a multi-faceted, multi-voiced depiction of contemporary healthcare in the United States and abroad, bringing together perspectives from patients, providers, and the care system writ large. Her subjects include physicians, athletes, patients in the Yale-New Haven hospital system, celebrities like supermodel Lauren Hutton and cyclist Lance Armstrong, clergymen dedicated to easing one's transition from life, and a rodeo bull rider, all reflecting on their experiences with healthcare, mortality, and physical vulnerability.

As documented on the PBS.org website, where I streamed *Let Me Down Easy*, the play features a minimal set up: a long table with chairs, a couch, and four large mirrors slanted above the stage.<sup>98</sup> Smith indicates shifts in personae with brief musical interludes and changes in props—switching a pair of glasses for a suit jacket, for instance, or taking a teacup from a stage

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<sup>97</sup> And as Cherise Smith and others have noted, the ease with which she occupies different identities is no doubt facilitated by her embodiment as a light-skinned black woman.

<sup>98</sup> Part of the *Great Performances* series, the PBS production was recorded in February 2011 at the Kreeger Theater at Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater in Washington, DC. This performance launched a national tour that closed on September 2011.

assistant. These props accumulate and clutter the stage as her performance progresses, leaving traces of each character as she moves onto the next. Cataloguing nineteen characters over the course of an hour and a half, her performance sketches a cross-section of the healthcare sphere and its related social, philosophical, and material concerns. As a result, *Let Me Down Easy* offers a multi-faceted, multi-voiced depiction of contemporary healthcare infrastructure in the United States and abroad, addressing both resource-rich and resource-strapped systems. And through recounting a broad spectrum of experience, Smith provokes reflection on many of care's existing inequities: the unequal accessibility to healthcare across racial and economic lines, the differential valuation of lives as measured by healthcare discrepancies, and the vital work of care that, outside of the medical-industrial complex, remains rarely acknowledged.

Out of all nineteen characters, Smith notes, her audience gravitates most toward Dr. Kiersta Kurtz-Burke, who she identifies as the play's "most popular character" (Interview, pbs.org). Kurtz-Burke's testimony proves so resonant, in fact, that "Heavy Sense of Resignation" is also performed as an individual piece, which is how I first encountered it. A physician at New Orleans's Charity Hospital, Dr. Kurtz-Burke's interview recounts a longstanding institutional affiliation as medical student and then doctor, a tenure that culminated with Hurricane Katrina. One can understand why Kurtz-Burke's character proves so compelling. She recounts, with horror, stories of patient mistreatment by doctors, and in turn, expresses an unflagging commitment to providing the best possible care for New Orleans's most disenfranchised. "Every single patient that comes through that door," she says, "has gotten the short end of the stick in life, period. But through my interactions with them, I [can] treat them like they were the Saudi Arabian princess coming to the Mayo Clinic. There's absolutely no reason why I can't give everybody top of the line best medical care." While Kurtz-Burke's rhetoric may display traces of

a white savior complex, her self-proclaimed “privileged” perspective nonetheless creates a point of entry for Smith’s audiences, who, as Smith herself observes, have the time and resources to patronize the theater (Interview, pbs.org). Indeed, the cultivation of white and/or middle-class empathy<sup>99</sup> is part of her work’s social mission, which has garnered Smith some criticism. In a review of *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, theater critic John Lahr noted this feature of her practice, republishing a note written to one of her dramaturges: “It is crucial that whites find points of identification. Points of empathy with *themselves*” (qtd. in Jackson 280). Dr. Kurtz-Burke no doubt functions as this point of empathy and identification, one that bears witness and grants front-row access to the underfunded, insecure sphere of public healthcare. For audiences who have likely never experienced infrastructural abandonment firsthand, her interview renders, with affective force, how experiences of neglect and contempt accumulate over time to shatter both self and community.

But as Smith’s audience—and many of us—will recall, Hurricane Katrina was not depicted as a gradual, accumulative process, the inevitable product of decades of federal abandonment. Instead, a crisis of representation soon followed landfall, as media and political rhetoric placed blame for disastrous consequences on the *inabilities* of the unevacuated—that is, on the inability of survivors to escape or appropriately weather the storm. As Lakshmi Fjord has argued, the language of disability was frequently mobilized in depictions of storm-survivors, depictions that then justified the withholding of humanitarian aid as well as the deployment of military troops. Indeed, the visual flood of Katrina footage arrived pre-programmed with a set of interpretive codes—time-worn templates that arranged the raw data of the storm into racist

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<sup>99</sup> For a discussion on white empathy and ethnic expressive culture, see David Palumbo-Liu’s introduction to *The Ethnic Canon*, in which he problematizes the classroom use of ethnic literature to cultivate white empathy and identification with other cultures, thereby enabling them to encounter racial and ethnic difference at a safe distance. He further emphasizes the value in producing white discomfort through encounters with ethnic literature.

narratives of looting, rioting, and seemingly irrational violence. The presentation of storm footage encoded Katrina as pure surface, a collection of sites, figures, and structures that did not surprise but instead supported dominant ways of knowing.

In Kurtz-Burke's testimony, however, disability occupies a different register, in which her sustained consideration of an infrastructural ghost—the flooded shell of Charity Hospital—forces her audience to reckon with the violence of state divestment, the systems of public support that have gradually slipped out from underneath us but leave traces of “unrepressed social violence” everywhere (Gordon, *Ghostly* xvi). Here, disability is both everywhere and nowhere, exploding the dominant models that have come to govern our understanding of disability as category. To review, the medical model views disability as the property of an individual body. It is a problem to be cured or managed by medical intervention. In contrast, many scholars of disability studies have conceptualized disability as another type of minority identity to be reclaimed, accommodated, and celebrated. Disability should not uniformly be cured or managed through medical intervention, rather, our culture should learn to accommodate and accept a wide variety of bodily variation.

But rather than the property of an individual subject, or a re-claimed minority identity, disability here operates as a kind of environmental ambiance, a spectral presence always on the verge of unfolding. The play's hospital setting further invokes the specter of medical knowledge and its violent regulation of the pathologized, non-normative body. And here, the hospital *itself* produces disability, rather than working to manage or “cure” it. Indeed, Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke's depiction of Charity as an underserved and underserving institution bears witness to the healthcare discrepancies that produce and sustain disability disproportionately for the racialized poor.

A charismatic, witty, and empathetic character, Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke captivates her listeners and compels us also to reflect on the infrastructural support, or lack thereof, for racialized and impoverished communities. Her account begins with wry humor: “You have people who start out as an *ass*, and they end up as an *ass*. And they may even wind up a Bigger. Ass.” In a semi-singsong, standing upright, Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke punctuates every *ass* by cocking her head pointedly to the side. She continues: “the Biggest Ass I ever met in my training experience (*pause*)? God, there’s so many (*audience laughter*).” Between recalling the typical ass-like characteristics of Charity medical students and residents, she settles on a particular offender, a second-year resident who was “fully intending to [...] set up, you know, a very fancy—because he was *constantly* talking about, you know, ‘Oh, when I get out, I’m not gonna have *these* kind of patients.’ Translation: poor, black, no prenatal care, blah blah blah.” An OB-GYN with clear disregard for those under his watch, the second-year resident furnishes Kurtz-Burke with a devastating story, one that unquestionably depicts the insufficiencies of public care as a form of racial-gendered violence:

One night we were on call, and a young woman came in to the hospital with pelvic inflammatory disease, so he and I went to the emergency room, and it’s tremendously painful to be examined when you have fulminant, um, pelvic inflammatory disease and...she was thirteen (*audience murmurs*). But she was there with an aunt, and her aunt was not in the room. In fact, if I remember it right, this guy made her aunt leave the room, and he did a pelvic exam on her, and she was so...screaming out, and in so much pain, and so, and he said to her, I wanna...I wanna...I wanna get it right (*pause*) Oh! (*Licks her lips, slaps knee in disbelief*). “What’s your problem? Don’t tell me you haven’t had something BIGGER (*audience gasps, Smith pauses*) then these two fingers (*thrusts*

*two fingers upward*) up there, or you wouldn't have gotten this to begin with." (*Throws hands down in disbelief*). (Transcribed by me, pbs.org)

When Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke delivers this story, her tone shifts quickly from humor to outrage. Her posture conveys the gravity of the situation: she sits upright in an armchair, her hands tightly clasped, eyes wide. Prior to delivering the resident's devastating line, she gives a pregnant pause, indicating the need to accurately bear witness. This is an act of unquestionable violence, one born of contempt and indifference, and bolstered by dominant ways of knowing the racialized poor. The hypervisible myths attached to poor black communities, and particularly to poor black women—myths of irresponsibility and hypersexuality, of being unrapeable—undergird the resident's callous assertion. He evokes racialized and gendered narratives of blame, suggesting that this young woman's seemingly reckless and premature sexual behavior warrants her pain, though he in fact worsens the harm present. Through her outraged delivery, Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke discredits the resident's knowledge of his patient, and frames that knowledge instead as a paltry justification for inadequate, and actively harmful, medical care: "I was so shocked and so, um, and crestfallen, and just...beat myself up afterwards that I didn't do, I don't know what, *punch him*." And when contrasted to the testimony prior, an account of excellent service recounted by the Associate Dean of the Yale Medical School, such healthcare inequities are rendered knowable as processes of ongoing violence that are not disconnected from Hurricane Katrina. The violence of this biomedical encounter, then, is positioned as part and parcel of the state neglect that intensified the storm's effects.

Certainly, it is not new to connect Katrina's fallout to endemic neglect. As the data shows, \$71 million dollars evaporated from the budget of the Army Corps of Engineers in 2005,

denying necessary improvements to the city's levee system.<sup>100</sup> Local, state, and federal emergency response systems collapsed in Katrina's wake, both unprepared and unwilling to navigate a disaster of such unprecedented scale. Further, despite advance warnings, mayor Roy Nagin failed to prepare an adequate evacuation plan for transit-dependent New Orleanians threatened by "The Big One," a storm long-anticipated by scientists, meteorologists, government officials, and policy analysts. Countless scholars, environmental justice activists, policy analysts, and media critics (as well as director Spike Lee) have pointed to the cracks in the (infra) structure that exacerbated Katrina's landfall and aftermath, framing the storm as a quintessential example of environmental racism.

But Kurtz-Burke's interview goes beyond the causal narratives yielded by data. By testifying to a longstanding culture of indifference, cumulative instances of abandonment and contempt not easily quantified, she transforms the spectacle of Katrina into a meditative account of what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence," a form of violence "that is neither spectacular or instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive...an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all" (2).<sup>101</sup> While testimony performs the social and political work of revealing unseen violence, Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke testifies to a kind of attritional harm that is not self-evident upon revelation, but must be made legible *as such* through the act of witnessing. Like the "incremental and accretive" nature of slow violence, her testimony gradually builds up to her recounting of Katrina. She nestles it within the context of the many "asses" she encounters during her medical training, "privileged students who "come from all over to train at Charity"

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<sup>100</sup> See Mtangulizi Sanyika, "Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans: The Struggle for Justice, Equity, and Democracy," in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*, eds Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009): 153—212.

<sup>101</sup> According to Nixon, aesthetic and literary expression crucially give imaginative form to threats that seem beyond narrative convention, and in so doing, enable us to conceptualize and thus mobilize against ostensibly inconceivable harms.



that carry “their own baggage about what Charity is, and what the Charity population is.” In recalling her experience with these “asses” during her hospital tenure, doctors-in-training with their own “racism and classism,” Kurtz-Burke’s interview testifies to the scope and reach of the systemic indifference made evident in Katrina’s wake. This is a neglect that extends beyond levees built of sand and inadequate emergency systems; it carries through and structures all spheres of public life—before, during, and beyond Katrina.

By the time Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke broaches Katrina, she has already conditioned her audience to a narrative of contempt, indifference, and neglect: “Well of course, FEMA knew we were here, we were in constant contact with FEMA but my patients really did sense [that FEMA wasn’t coming] and that part made me ashamed, and I thought, ‘You know what, it must feel like this your *whole life*. Just that feeling that we have to do for ourselves because nobody’s gonna come and get us.” And when the hurricane appears, it becomes just “one more thing” in a lifetime of anticipated disappointment. This, perhaps, is the piece’s epiphany—that the patients and nurses “knew we were gonna be the last ones out, they knew that the patients in the private hospitals had private helicopters [...] it wasn’t a shock to anybody, but the fact that it wasn’t a shock to people was so *shocking* to me.” What feels so traumatic to her is the stuff of crisis ordinariness, an event not exceptional or spectacular but simply embedded in the fabric of everyday life. And so, rather than linking Katrina’s grisly aftermath to the “inabilities of the unevacuated,” or even to the cracks in the levees, Kurtz-Burke’s testimony ties it to something far more capacious, pervasive, and all-encompassing: a vast, state-sponsored sensorium of indifference and neglect, one that shows up in gestures both quotidian and insidious, that has conditioned poor New Orleanians to their own disposability, that eats away at systems of support, that predates Katrina and will surpass it. Indeed, in a testimony ostensibly *about*

Hurricane Katrina, the storm does not make its entrance until halfway through the piece, at which point Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke openly questions her ability to give care in the face of such overwhelming abandonment.

This culture of indifference ultimately negates Smith-as-Kurtz-Burke's insistence on her agency and capacity to give care, a realization that reveals infrastructural neglect as integral to the biopolitics of disposability. After recounting her favorite part of working at Charity, her ability to give everyone "top of the line best medical care," her voice lowers, strained with sadness: "But...that got kind of difficult. When things started to deteriorate around here during Hurricane Katrina and that whole veneer—that whole veneer that you could take care of poor people [...] as well as you could take care of rich people—that veneer just fell." Five days after the storm made landfall, Kurtz-Burke, her fellow physicians, and staff nurses worked in temperatures of "106 degrees" with "*no lights*" and were reduced to feeding patients "very small portions of food." And while Kurtz-Burke attempts to keep a "stiff upper lip," by the fifth day she recognizes: "Well, you know what? We are gonna give [our patients] the best *possible* care, but (*shakes head in resignation*) we can't make FEMA or the government come get us." She concludes her testimony with the realization that the federal apparatus of neglect negates her ability to do her job— to care for those who have "gotten the short end of the stick in life." In its transformation into a mechanism of neglect, the state has cannibalized its own safety nets. While it once had some semblance of a public support system, it now casts its most vulnerable members beyond the scope of human concern, while simultaneously generating rewards for global and metropolitan capital's beneficiaries (the patients at private hospitals). This, according to Henry Giroux, is the biopolitics of disposability, a confluence of the racial state and market state that renders superfluous those who cannot participate in consumer capitalism. Under this

regime, the state actively fosters insecurity, and in the case of Charity, it empties the few extant public safety nets of their capacity for care and support, ultimately extinguishing them altogether.

### **Haunting as Care**

Given the demise of Charity following Katrina, Kurtz-Burke's testimony functions doubly as a ghost story, a recollection of a time when a once-lauded public hospital serviced the poor residents of New Orleans. And while her account seems to evacuate hope by gesturing to the magnitude of indifference, as Avery Gordon argues, in a "gracious but careful reckoning with [a] ghost," one can "locate some elements of a practice for moving towards eliminating the conditions that produced the haunting in the first place" (Gordon, "Some Thoughts" 5). She is undoubtedly haunted: by her callous resident, the screaming girl, her privileged colleagues, the Charity patients waiting for government rescue. But when we listen carefully to her account, we not only view Katrina as "one more thing" in a landscape of crisis; we can also identify elements that might quiet the ghost.

But what are these elements? The first, and most apparent, is Kurtz-Burke's democratic perspective on care itself. Her vision of undifferentiated support contests the biopolitics of disposability, in which differentiation between lives operates as a foundational logic. A figure of care in a landscape strewn with neglect, Kurtz-Burke simply makes life more possible; she offers much needed support for New Orleans's unsupported.

*Let Me Down Easy*, too, makes luminous examples of figures of care. In addition to Dr. Kurtz-Burke, there's Trudy Howell, the compassionate director of Chance Orphanage in Johannesburg, which houses HIV+ children orphaned by the AIDS virus. While orphanages do

not uniformly function as bastions of care, under Howell's watch Chance gives sanctuary to those under the grimmest of circumstances. The segment "Gloves" further champions this largely undervalued work. Featuring Lorraine Coleman, retired schoolteacher and Smith's aunt, it recalls a loving gesture granted daily by Coleman's mother. Lacking gloves in winter, Coleman and her sisters rush home from school to greet their mother, who places their cold hands underneath her arms. This gesture comes to emblemize care and comfort for Coleman, and when her partner Clarence passes, she laments to an elderly woman in her church: "Oh Effie, I wish my mother were here, so I could put my hands underneath her arms." In a moment of grace, Miss Effie lovingly reproduces the gesture given so freely by Coleman's mother. Ranging from institutionalized forms of care (the hospital, the orphanage) to informal gestures, Smith's production testifies to the enabling work that eases the hurt of a hostile world. It excavates and highlights the "something there for each of us" that "[helps] us through a difficult time" (Interview, pbs.org).

Her interview further pays homage to the material labors of care and bodily maintenance that so often go unacknowledged. In this way, Kurtz-Burke elaborates a vision of social recuperation grounded in *interdependency* and a public ethos of care—a vision very much aligned with disability politics, which again, have long highlighted the "vast networks of assistance and provision that make modern life possible" (L. Davis, "Dependency and Justice" 4). As Eva Feder Kittay, Carol Gilligan, and many other feminist scholars have argued, care work, in its association with the feminine sphere, carries very little social or material value in an economy that does not recognize or adequately compensate "women's work." Further, African-American women, who have historically assumed the labor of dependent care for economically mobile (and largely white) women, often shoulder the burden of "shadow work" in post-

industrial service economies, in which they carry out tasks essential to social reproduction but receive little compensation in return (Spelman 340). The nurses on the floor, who Kurtz-Burke identifies as “100% [...] African-American,” perform the crucial work of social reproduction, what Evelyn Nakano Glenn defines as “the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical, beings” (117). Multiply devalued in a patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist world, their maintenance labor greases the wheels of Charity Hospital and enables the more valued labor of Dr. Kurtz-Burke and her privileged colleagues.

But in the context of Hurricane Katrina, the work of simply recreating people as physical beings becomes equally as—if not more—important than the handsomely paid work of medical “expertise.” Crucial to the day-to-day survival of people under extreme distress, the labor of Charity’s nurses assumes prominence in Kurtz-Burke’s testimony: “They just went about their business, every nurse on that floor worked for six days, in that heat, with no power, with flashlights. They never missed a vital sign, they never missed a urine output, they never missed a trick, and with a heavy sense of resignation.” She bears witness to the unacknowledged work of life maintenance, to the labor and lives that do not register as valuable, and insists upon the significance of both. Indeed, to eliminate the conditions that produced the ghost, the shell of Charity Hospital cannibalized by a neoliberal state, one must testify to the labor of care, and re-value the supporting operations that enable the endurance of the city’s most vulnerable.

Kurtz-Burke’s testimony thus lays bare the components of witnessing-as-haunting. In soliciting our sustained consideration of compromised infrastructure, in this case Charity Hospital, it de-familiarizes the hypervisible landscape of a storm-weathered New Orleans, offering us new ways of knowing and seeing that which seems utterly knowable. Her account gives narrative form and urgency to the slow violence of infrastructural neglect, which accrues

over time to disable both subject and community. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Kurtz-Burke gestures toward a practice that might soothe the ghost of neglect: the re-valuation of lives and labor relegated to the shadows. “Because ultimately,” as Gordon writes, “haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation” (*Ghostly Matters* 208). Haunting, then, is also the work of care: the recreation of a physical being diminished through a lifetime of systemic indifference and abandonment, the sustaining of life regardless of its perceived value, and the offering of support in the absence of infrastructure.

### **The Garden in the Machine: Detroit, Urban Agriculture, and Grace Lee Boggs’s *Living for Change***

In the final chapter of *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (1998), Chinese-American activist elder Grace Lee Boggs articulates her vision for a revitalized Detroit: “To save the city, we have to bring the country back into the city” (253). For Boggs and a growing network of food justice activists, grassroots urban gardening allows Detroit residents to transform “more than eight thousand vacant lots” into sites of community sustenance, addressing food and infrastructural insecurity through practices of “collective self-reliance” (252). Authored by the city’s best-known Chinese-American activist elder, *Living for Change* narrates Detroit through a collage of lived experience. It documents over a half century of involvement in many of the postwar era’s major social justice movements, including collaborations with figures like Marxist theoretician C.L.R. James, eco-feminist pioneer Vandana Shiva, and Jimmy Boggs, former Chrysler worker and Boggs’s life partner. 83 years old at the time of publication, Boggs has

sustained her consideration of Detroit over decades of residence, recording in detail the fallout of state divestment and de-industrialization.

*Living for Change* testifies to the disabling apparatus of neglect in Detroit and calls for the transformation of place through agricultural recovery. “[...] For the thousands of Detroiters affected by cutbacks in welfare and food stamps,” Boggs writes, “an alternative food system based on locally grown, processed, and marketed food is urgently needed.” (256). Indeed, the final chapter positions *Living for Change* as what feminist critic Sidonie Smith terms an “autobiographical manifesto,” in which Boggs leverages her “authority of experience” to envision and prescribe an urban-agrarian future for Detroit. For Boggs and a growing network of food justice activists, urban gardening allows Detroiters to address food and infrastructural insecurity through the creation of informal support networks, enabling the creation of a “Healthy Detroit” through practices of “collective self-reliance” (256). Indeed, *Living for Change* posits the urban garden as a new type of municipal support system, which fills in for the failing infrastructures and municipal services that have come to emblemize the “horror” of Detroit. Through her narrated gardens, Boggs gestures toward the insufficiencies of infrastructure that haunt Detroit’s urban gardens: cuts to food stamp benefits, complicated and time-consuming welfare application procedures, and unreliable public transportation systems, which deliver transit-dependent Detroiters to the few full-service grocery stores in the city’s 138 square miles.

Akin to Smith’s *Let Me Down Easy*, Boggs’s *Living for Change* forces our sustained consideration of compromised public infrastructure as a mechanism of mass disablement, and in so doing, elicit new ways of knowing a hypervisible and racialized city. To repeat my earlier formulation, it enables us to view the city through the lens of infrastructure, rather than through the lens of pathology, abandonment, or individual failing. Much like the ghost story of Charity

Hospital, Boggs invites us into an encounter with the infrastructural ghosts of Detroit, turning up the volume on the quotidian violence that compromises those dependent on the city's support systems.

### **Witnessing Disablement in Detroit**

*Living for Change* encapsulates how the urban garden both marks and disavows the disabling process of infrastructural abandonment.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, for those city populations who depend upon municipal services, infrastructural neglect operates as a form of mass disablement, insofar as it erodes one's access to life-sustaining resources. And if the city, as Patricia Yaeger asserts, is "above all a place that gives shelter," one that "must be nurturing for its inhabitants to survive," then infrastructural neglect also disables the city, rendering it unable to sustain its population (18). Yet, despite the magnitude of neglect and its production of disability en masse, the specter of black disability remains largely avoided in scholarly and popular discourse. As Henry Giroux argues in his analysis of Hurricane Katrina, "many people in the United States" simply "do not want to see" the disabled and disabling environments yielded by a culture of indifference (177).

In Detroit, the confluence of unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, capital and state divestment, compounded by years of housing discrimination, de-industrialization, and racial segregation, has yielded a disabled and disabling environment. Scholars of urban sociology and history have thoroughly documented these ills, though have not framed them in terms of

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<sup>102</sup> The urban garden, in my formulation, approximates the function of Sigmund Freud's fetish, which describes a non-living object that has taken on sexual meaning in order to ward off castration anxiety—that is, the fear that arises when a young boy sees his mother's genitals for the first time. The fetish thus doubly signifies both the woman's phallus and lack of phallus.



disability.<sup>103</sup> However, a growing number of scholars have begun to link inadequate infrastructure, alongside reduced access to healthy food and employment, to the compromised health of Detroiters. Sociologist Monica M. White, among other scholars of food and environmental justice, explicitly links “poverty-induced challenges,” i.e., “reduced city services, poor-quality education, high rates of unemployment, crime, housing foreclosures, and little or no access to healthy food,” to the “food insecurity and subsequent diet-related illnesses for people in Detroit” (14—15). Indeed, as White argues, the inadequate life support networks available to Detroiters necessitate urban gardening, which she presents as a form of political resistance. One in five residents, she notes, lacks access to a private vehicle, a significant obstacle in a city lacking reliable public transportation. Without a car, many residents cannot obtain secure employment, much less gain access to life-sustaining resources like healthcare or food. And considering the inaccessibility of full-service grocery stores and the concomitant over-accessibility of liquor stores, fringe food retailers, and fast-food outlets, the city of Detroit substantially decreases the life chances of residents dependent on its public support systems.

Detroit’s inadequate support structures, detailed in *Living for Change*, further call for a re-assessment of disability as an analytic category. Particularly, they suggest the ways in which cities transformed by environmental racism might necessitate a departure from some of disability studies’s conceptual foundations. Here, considerations of disability shift from the individual, rights-bearing subject to broader regimes of disablement. Indeed, cities like Detroit require us to read against the grain of established theory, which—at least in the first-wave of disability studies—privileged a model of social minority identity, a one that “promotes the value of

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<sup>103</sup> See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); among others.

individual rights and equality guaranteed by legal contract” (Davidson 135).<sup>104</sup> But Detroit, with its many bureaucratic and infrastructural inefficiencies, illuminates some of the limitations of that legal contract, the ADA, in promoting a more just world for people with disabilities. Last summer, the city of Detroit spent tens of thousands of dollars installing curb cuts, the placement of which lead to much confusion and dismay. The Detroit News reports: “Some [ramps] face brick walls...On many corners, sidewalks end after the ramps.” Built to comply with ADA regulations, the absurdly placed accommodations signal the inefficiencies of disability legislation in an underserved city with little bureaucratic transparency. Geared toward protection of the individual subject, legal measures like the ADA are less effective in a context where disability is a systemic and far-reaching process, one inflected by categories of race, gender, and class, and produced and reproduced en masse by the built environment itself. Rather than naming a category of identity or making claims to legal personhood, then, here a disability analytic entails testifying to the social and material conditions—like wealth inequality and subsequent infrastructural neglect—that produce disability disproportionately within vulnerable populations. That is, it pays attention to how disability *happens*, how it is made, how it comes into the world—this is a dynamic process, one shaped by, for example, how many resources one has or where one lives.

And certainly, *Living for Change* attests to *how* disability is produced and reproduced in Detroit. Boggs’s documentation of Detroit’s failing schools, brutal police force, inadequate welfare systems, and waste-filled lots testifies to the accumulative processes that, over time,

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<sup>104</sup> I want to note here that there are other scholars who have similarly moved away from this minority identity model in the field of feminist disability studies. See, for instance, Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

jeopardize health and life quality for Detroiters en masse. Indeed, the high levels of food insecurity, asthma, diabetes, cancer, and infant mortality in the city have been described, in sum, as a “public health emergency.” Spanning the early 1970s to the mid-90s, the autobiography’s latter half critiques numerous “urban institutions” that are “all falling apart”: “American schools...which...have become an industry”; the brutal police “decoy system” known as “STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets)”; and the “tearing down...of hospitals” by General Motors (176, 178, 179). And following the devastating processes of de-industrialization and suburbanization, she describes the “cheese lines” of the Reagan years, where “every Thursday, in neighborhoods across the city, tens of thousands of Detroiters lined up in the snow and the sleet to get the cheese and other commodities they needed to survive” (209). In her depiction of inadequate and actively harmful infrastructures, as well as the residents dependent on scanty public provisions, Boggs intervenes into dominant discourses that prefer to either attribute poverty to cultural pathology or ignore the population altogether. In this way, *Living for Change* offers a reversal of the discourse of dependency that distinguishes between deserving and “undeserving” subjects. Ostensibly the reason for cutbacks to welfare programs and public services, here, dependency is presented as the result of capital and state divestment—we witness communities mired in municipal systems unwilling or unable to support them.

These insufficient infrastructures produce the conditions for urban gardening and similar community-based cooperatives, justifying for Boggs the creation of what I term “D.I.Y. infrastructure.” For Boggs and her late husband Jimmy, these informal infrastructures prove crucial, as we cannot “expect the government or corporations to do the work that is needed to keep up our communities and to provide for our elementary safety and security” (219). The abandonment of Detroit by both state and capital, according to Boggs, requires going beyond the

oppositional practices of rebellion and toward the generative practices of revolution. She writes: “We need a new vision of the city as the organized cooperative form that people can use to serve one another more effectively...redefining and recivilizing the city as a collection of communities” (223). Further, as “[c]orporations [abandoned] cities and/or [blackmailed] city governments by demanding tax abatements and other concessions,” thus “making it increasingly difficult for municipalities to supply normal city services,” Boggs narrates the need to accordingly “rid ourselves of the capitalist values and institutions which have brought us to this state of powerlessness—or suffer the same mutilation [...]” (178, 181). And as the word “mutilation” indicates, Boggs begins to frame Detroit’s ills in terms of physical health, couching her anti-state and anti-capital critiques in the language of debilitation. The chapter “Beyond Rebellion” documents a shift in Boggs’s political aims, which follow the urban rebellions of the late 1960s. Once grounded in Marxist ideologies, she comes to prioritize establishing a “Healthy Detroit” through the principles of environmental justice, which dispute the disproportionate exposure of poor people and people of color to environmental risk (250). The devastation of Detroit, then, becomes legible through the compromised bodies of Detroiters—bodies that testify to a metropolitan order constituted by uneven relations of support.

### **The Autobiographical Manifesto: Detroit’s Urban-Agrarian Future**

In response to systemic resource deprivation, the final chapter of *Living for Change* envisions Detroit as a future “Garden of Eden,” a self-sustaining site that produces its own resources from scratch. The final chapter thus shifts from the genre of testimony to the genre of autobiographical manifesto, an explicitly political type of life writing that contests violent histories and politics, propelling its subject into a future of her own imagining (438). Boggs

establishes her “‘authority’ of experience” in the text’s initial chapters, which narrate decades of involvement in major postwar social movements. In so doing, she “invites the reader’s belief in the story” while laying the groundwork for her communitarian vision and, most importantly, its successful reception by its audience (Smith and Watson 33). The genres of testimony and manifesto are not mutually exclusive. Through testimony, Boggs bears witness to the environmental injustice of infrastructural neglect, and through the genre of manifesto, forcefully advocates strategies for resolving environmental injustice. In place of Detroit’s failing infrastructures, she proposes instead a “*human infrastructure* of discipline and trust for a new cooperative economy,” one that supports “community sustainability” and a “Healthy Detroit” (261, emphasis mine).

Boggs’s vision for a future Detroit centrally emphasizes physical wellbeing—her activist practice, she states, “grows people as well as vegetables” (233). The autobiography’s final pages promote the labor of care and of daily life maintenance: basic sustenance, feeding and being fed, socializing children, and keeping up the community. While the feminized and racialized work of care is often undervalued, in Boggs’s autobiography, maintenance labor becomes the foundation for revolution. Plotting in meticulous detail a blueprint for Detroit’s renewal, the final chapters of *Living for Change* function as a guide for Detroiters to sustain, maintain, and socialize the community at large: instructions to “[produce] for our own needs, [grow] our own food,” “thus setting an example of productive work for our youth” (267—268). And as manifesto, *Living for Change* itself enacts the work of social reproduction advocated through the garden—that is, the work of intergenerational maintenance as well as daily life maintenance. Boggs explicitly names this function on the book’s final page: “[...] I know that if I were to fall ill or die tomorrow, there is a new generation already in place struggling for their own dreams of a better world, which will

contain many of the ingredients of the vision that Jimmy and I have struggled to bring to life—and also expand it” (272). As the autobiographical manifesto “[positions] the subject in a potentially liberated future,” one distanced from the conditions of the present, so Boggs dictates the ideal physical and social configuration *of* that future—that is, what she thinks the future should look like. She prescribes, circulates, and reproduces her future vision via the autobiographical act (Smith 438).

The work of reproduction dictated through Boggs’s narrated garden further extends beyond her autobiography and into a viral afterlife. Snippets of *Living for Change*, the various mantras repeated throughout the book, circulate both in digital and analog forms, spreading information through pamphlets, newsletters, speeches, tweets, and Tumblr, slogans like: “What Time is it On the Clock of the World?” (232). As a set of easily digestible memes, Boggs’s philosophy of community-based economies has spread rhizomatically across city, state, and nation—a life and mission parceled out in slogan.

Indeed, Boggs has come to serve as an unofficial ambassador for the city of Detroit, who present urban gardening as a grassroots solution to protracted urban crisis. A left-wing media darling, she has interviewed on PBS’s *Tavis Smiley Show*, enjoys regular interview appearances on *Democracy Now!*, and has co-authored a book, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, which features a foreword by actor Danny Glover. She has served on panels with radical icons like Angela Davis, Vandana Shiva, and Immanuel Wallerstein, and is also the subject of a well-received documentary, Grace Lee’s *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, which, like *Let Me Down Easy*, is available to stream on pbs.org. Urban gardening figures largely into her public image, which counters the mythology of Detroit as evacuated of human presence, as well as the assumption that “growth”

and “development” constitute the only viable signs of urban vitality. And through the urban garden as symbolic and material site, she articulates a narrative of overcoming neglect through practices of community preservation and reciprocal sustenance.

Boggs’s urban-agrarian vision and its viral circulation thus advocate an alternative mode of social reproduction that sustains and supports unsupported lives. It contests the reproduction of material insecurity for racialized communities, as well as the differential valuing of life, labor, and landscapes. Her gardens, at least on paper, aim to renew the lives that are overlooked, or—if the frequent casting of Detroit as a “blank slate” is any indication—not even registered as lives. In her urban imaginary, Detroit’s future is firmly rooted in the garden, and nurturing intimacies are freely shared. Envisioned as open sites of social and culture exchange, her gardens model relations of care not contingent on biological kinship ties. Boggs’s concept of “community” is fundamentally “multicultural and intergenerational,” a collection of people “united in [their] conviction that revitalizing Detroit begins with producing [their] own food in community gardens and developing community markets. So we cooperate, interact, overlap, interlock” (252). By offering sustenance through the garden as urban commons, Boggs promotes community support systems that contest the uneven distribution of resources, as well as the relegation of care to the family and private sphere. Through its detailed autobiographical witnessing, *Living for Change* intervenes into the ruinscape that detach decaying infrastructure from lived experience. It highlights the residues of violence left by infrastructural phantoms, dredging up the ghosts of infrastructure that produce disabling environments. And through the narrated garden, it offers alternate economies of life value and (re) production that contest the racially uneven processes of resource deprivation.

### **“Local Self-Government” and the Rhetoric of Self-Sufficiency**

Through testimony, Boggs witnesses how a lack of support propagates patterns of poverty and disablement en masse. And through manifesto, she advocates a D.I.Y. infrastructure that sustains unsupported populations. And now, I want to map a third way in which Boggs enables us to view Detroit through the lens of support. Indeed, *Living for Change* produces alternate ways of knowing the city that depart from the dominant discourses of urban crisis. But it also produces ways of knowing Detroit that collaborate with the ethos of self-sufficiency advocated by neoliberal capitalism.

Just as haunting involves “telling more than one story at a time,” *Living for Change* also hinges the worth of racialized life on its capacity for physical labor and self-support (Gordon 25). Certainly, Boggs envisions the garden as a municipal support system for unsupported Detroiters. She presents it a site of resistance against the forces of privatization that render entire populations disposable, emptying them of life value. And certainly, *Living for Change* compels me to consider how Boggs’s garden promotes transformative relations of support, care, and dependency, insisting on the worth of all life. But it also compels me to question the ableist rhetoric that props up this undoubtedly feminist vision of care—a vision that asserts the value of black and brown lives, but couches this value in the language of self-sufficiency.

Boggs mobilizes this language in her description of the garden, claiming that the only “realistic perspective for cities like Detroit is collective self-reliance and making do with our own resources” (265—66). Emphasizing “local Self-Government,” she writes: “The freedom to make important choices begins with producing your own food and other basic necessities so that you are not dependent on external forces beyond your control” (262). This statement is shot through with individualistic desire, espousing the merits of consumer choice, autonomy, self-



support, and self-improvement. And certainly, her call for self-support dovetails nicely with the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism—policies, practices, and ideologies that benefit transnational corporations and trade entities through measures of austerity, which limit the amount of tax dollars allotted to the public. In Boggs’s garden, Black and Brown Lives Matter, but only under certain conditions: that they work, that they do not demand material resources but create them out of thin air, and that they do not make claims on the state or on capital. Through assertions of physical ability, her narrated garden effectively disciplines the specter of black disability produced through infrastructural neglect.

Departing from narratives of pathology or abandonment, *Living for Change* thus offers multiple ways of reading the city of Detroit through the lens of infrastructural support. To reiterate: it testifies to infrastructural neglect, propagates future visions of D.I.Y. support, and disciplines disability through claims of self-support. While these storylines may seem at odds, I hold these strands together and trace the tensions that inhere. Boggs’s gardens both mark and hold at a distance infrastructural ghosts, the phantoms of municipal support that leave traces of “unrepressed social violence” everywhere (Gordon, *Ghostly* xvi). As such, her autobiography allows us to chart the tensions across multiple, simultaneous, and conflicting realities: the undeniable need for social and material sustenance, the inadequacies of city infrastructure to meet that need, the informal networks that arise to sustain unsupported lives, and the ableist rhetorics that allow certain visions of care to circulate widely. Indeed, it demonstrates the shared need for care and support, but it also encapsulates the problems inherent to the available systems that distribute care and support: whether they are state-sponsored or Do It Yourself. *Living for Change*, then, does not offer a tidy narrative of resolution, or a one-dimensional account of urban resistance. Instead, it shows us the ways in which processes of racialization, de-industrialization,

and state divestment unevenly expose vulnerable populations to harm, while simultaneously hinging the value of racialized life on the performance of ability.

### Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have aimed to map a mode of testimonial witness that does not pivot on a paradigm of exposure, but rather, opens up new ways of knowing. This mode of witnessing renders state divestment legible as disabling violence, and thus enables us to conceptualize racial violence beyond the instantaneous and spectacular. And further, given that testimony operates as a kind of speech-act, a form of communication that “[stretches] the word beyond its expository limits and in the direction of the world,” the solicitation of action, resolution, or at the very least, acknowledgement of violence, is a crucial part of witnessing as social and political project (Yaeger, *Dirt* 233). As campaigns against racist violence have historically catalyzed around visually spectacular instances of harm, there exists a need to lend narrative form to the quotidian, slow racial violence that might not otherwise register as significant.<sup>105</sup>

In soliciting our sustained attention to infrastructural inadequacies, *Let Me Down Easy* and *Living for Change* give narrative form, meaning, and urgency to the slow, disabling forces of neglect. A modality of testimonial haunting thus enables us to sift through the hypervisible and historically opaque tableaux of ruin pornography. It demonstrates that entrenched poverty cannot be attributed to cultural failings, but rather to the routing of resources away from those who

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<sup>105</sup> Certainly Emmett Till’s bloated face condensed into a single figure the “overt white supremacy and state terrorism” organized against the threat of black masculinity, and through its potent horror, galvanized the modern civil rights movement (Giroux 173). And more recently, the brutal deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice at the hands of state police have incited nation-wide demonstrations decrying the devaluation of black and brown lives, united under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter.

cannot entertain fantasies of self-sufficiency. Witnessing-as-haunting dredges up the ghosts of infrastructure that once supported metropolitan life and that, in their absence, produce disabled and disabling environments. It foregrounds the necessity of social and material support networks, and the fraught but vital work of care in a brutally racist world. It also enables us to hold in tandem multiple storylines, mapping out the inconsistencies and contradictions of community support in a post-Keynesian era. And finally, it teaches us what might quiet the ghost of neglect: the re-valuation of lives, labor, and landscapes otherwise relegated to the shadows.

## Coda: To Cure or to Care for the City?

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.

*Henri Le Febvre, Le Droit à la Ville*

They will have to destroy this city once we deliver the black box. The current bones will not accommodate the marrow of the device. They will have to raze the city and cart off the rubble to less popular boroughs and start anew. What will it look like. The shining city will possess untold arms and a thousand eyes, mutability itself, constructed of yet-unconjured plastics. It will float, fly, fall, have no need of steel armature, have a liquid spine, no spine at all. Astronomer-architects will lay out the heliopolis so that it charts the progress of the stars through heaven.

*Colson Whitehead, The Intuitionist*

The infrastructural counter-imaginaries detailed within these pages, fashioned from a metropolitan network of “lower frequencies,” have aimed to furnish new conceptual maps for navigating multi-ethnic U.S. literatures and cultures following 1996 welfare reform. By reading metropolitan life through the lens of infrastructural support, these maps offer detailed alternatives to frameworks centered around self-determination as liberatory *telos*—frameworks ill-equipped to contend with the stultifying individualistic values of a neoliberal state. Oriented toward an urban otherwise, they endeavor to reach beyond the “prison house” of the “here-and-now” and toward future modes of social collectivity, conviviality, and undifferentiated support (Muñoz 1). To revisit the prophetic text *Theoretical Elevators*, a text embedded within Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999), these maps do not only document the impoverished state of

“official” state infrastructures, they also extend longingly toward potential life-worlds of social, material, and prosthetic support: “[T]here is another world beyond this one” (240).

In this project I have argued for infrastructure—in its formal, thematic, and analytical dimensions—as a multi-valent site for the recuperation, and transformation, of dependency as a maligned condition. Through an infrastructural heuristic I termed a crip of color critique, I highlighted dependency as an underutilized (yet vital) analytic for ethnic American studies, as well as a node of potential alliance between critical ethnic and disability scholarship. In this way, I aimed to develop a mode of analysis that could not only offer significant purchase across the fields of ethnic American and feminist disability studies, but could also offer substantial alternatives to the governing ethos of a post-Keynesian era—an ethos that prioritizes hyper-productivity, flexibility, and self-sufficiency above all. Of course, critiques of neoliberalism (a capacious, often ill-defined term) have long been rehearsed across a multitude of disciplines. My project, in distinction, endeavors to range beyond the realm of neoliberal critique to outline the contours of a *rival* politics and aesthetics. It aims not only to showcase dependency as a property experienced by all (though, of course, to diverse ends and varying degrees), but also as a world-making property in and of itself, an insurgent site of aesthetic, narrative, and political possibility.

But as I teased out the threads of infrastructure and inter/ dependency, detailing concepts like the infrastructural sublime, a disabled somatics of place, the illiteracy narrative, and haunting as testimony, I encountered an unexpected vision of social recuperation that extended across multiple texts and chapters: the project of care and its re-valuation. Over the course of four chapters, I detailed the multiple tableaux of caring labor that contested the reproduction of social abjection for disposable populations. The labor of care repeatedly emerged as a counterpart to dependency, the logical extension of its politics and aesthetics. Yet, I remain

unsatisfied with my own explorations of care as insurgent project. In the remainder of this coda, I want to elaborate some of the issues regarding care that my texts invite, both in terms of the current scholarly literature on care and potential future directions for this project. In other words, what exactly do I mean by care and caring labor, and how does my own understanding of care measure up to other scholarly definitions? What do I envision as the relationship between care and dependency, especially given the conflicts between their respective scholarly literatures? How might I extend questions of care and dependency into other realms of literary-cultural analysis? And finally, how might *caring* for the city and its unsupported residents diverge from another dominant mode of urban management—that of *cure*?

As I have glossed earlier in this project, the rhetoric of “blight” is, at its foundation, a curative one. It frames cities, or at least portions of cities, as diseased/ disabled bodies in need of medical intervention. In the immediate postwar period, Raúl Villa observes, “‘blight’ emerged as the mantra of [Los Angeles] redevelopment boosters, who drew on the pseudoscientific rhetoric of professional planners self-designated as ‘surgeon generals’ in battle for the physical, economic, and moral health of the metropolitan body” (71). The health of the metropolitan body, in this formulation, corresponded with the “potential aggregate benefits of increasing growth and surplus accumulation (job development, increased tax revenues with rising real estate values and the like)” (Villa 71). John Patrick Leary identifies a similar shared understanding of urban wellbeing, in which “‘growth’ and ‘development’” constitute “the only measures of vitality” (“Detroitism” n.pag). These dominant perspectives on “healthy” cities highlight the particular points of overlap between capitalist urbanism and ableism, and further evince what D. Asher Ghertner, in his work on slum clearance in Delhi, has termed a “*green aesthetic*—a distinct observational grid (or legibility) for making normative assessments of social space” (148). In

other words, urban “cures” translate to private capital accumulation, market expansion, and real estate development—a healthy, normative metropolitan body is one that can attract investment capital. This particular curative discourse comes into even sharper relief when we consider the increasing medicalization of poverty in the aftermath of PRWORA, in which “whole neighborhoods of people are seen as other, that is, as sick and in need of treatment” (Schram 85). Across a multiplicity of sites, narratives of health, disability, disease and contamination have proven powerful mechanisms in promoting a capitalist urbanism grounded in entrepreneurial management.

Delving into my project’s archive, however, we observe the unfolding of an alternate disability politic across contemporary imagined cityscapes, one in which cure—usually administered via excision, deprivation, or demolition—is thoroughly subject to critique. In their literary-cultural depictions of post-Reagan cities, the writers, artists, and activists under consideration instead provide inroads toward a social ethos of care, while simultaneously grappling with distributive dilemmas of public care in an era of accelerating austerity. Infrastructure, as both narrative theme and formal concern, has enabled writers such as Viramontes, Smith, Boggs, Delany, and Sapphire to envision glimpses of a nurturing city, however brief, fleeting, or fragmentary. They grasp toward what I have repeatedly termed “care as a social project.” In this way, they provide tentative answers to Patricia Yaeger’s initial query in “Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure”: “How can we shelter or care for, how can we nurture, the ruined city in the belly of the text?” (9)

But what do I mean by care as a social project, and what is its relationship to disability and dependency in the afterlife of U.S. welfare reform? To begin, I have primarily derived my understanding of care as a social project from three sources: 1) Eva Feder Kittay’s concept of

*doulia*, or what she terms a public ethics of care; 2) Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s concept of the black mother as a queer figure, one who reproduces a “rival social world adverse to the violence of capital”; and 3) The collected scenes of caregiving and maintenance labor assembled from the texts themselves (193). To begin, in a world governed by *doulia*, care is not an asymmetrical, paternalistic, or potentially domineering relationship between two unequals, as it has been rightfully theorized in certain strands of disability studies.<sup>106</sup> Rather, it is a network of support relations, a system of “nested dependencies” invested in social and material renewal. Further, *doulia* advocates not only for the recognition of shared dependencies and caring networks in our everyday lives, but also for the need to support care workers, so they too can “survive and thrive” (*Love’s Labor* 133). Turning to Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s “*We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves*,” I situate Kittay’s concept of *doulia* vis-à-vis the racialized, impoverished, and disabled populations who allegedly justify “the anti-social logic of neoliberalism,” which “operates through the deprivation of public social resources such as education, food, and housing” (196). Black mothering, in Gumbs’s formulation, was a feminist praxis utilized by Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis deVeaux and Barbara Smith to disrupt this logic. Here, mothering enabled these feminists and poets to imagine the renewal of black life as something other than the reproduction of social abjection. Taking these texts together, I view the social project of care as the open accessibility to and deservedness of public social resources, as well as the framing of care work as valuable and central to political insurgency. It is, further, the purposeful renewal of vulnerable populations *through* unmitigated, equitable access to these resources, which are no longer paywalled luxuries. In this vision, the labor of care is equitably

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<sup>106</sup> For instance, as Christine Kelly writes, “In the context of disability, care is haunted by the specters of institutionalization, medicalization, and paternalistic charities which, in varying degrees past and present, systematically marginalize people with disabilities” (562).



distributed and framed as a collective social effort, rather than a gender-specific labor relegated to the private, domestic sphere.

As I envision it, care is a set of practices, gestures, and labors that make life (and bodies) more possible; it is a process of maintenance and renewal that, in the words of Elizabeth Freeman, “[grant] a future, but one with an uninevitable form” (299). In this way, care as a social project discredits the biopolitics of disposability that haunt this project’s cityscapes, a violent logic that prescribes *no future* for the city’s most vulnerable populations, whether through debilitation, death, or institutionalization. At its best, care stems from the value-free recognition of bodies as dependent and vulnerable, and the willingness to orient one’s world around that recognition. And certainly, the texts in this dissertation have gestured—in complex ways—toward this seemingly impossible horizon. Delany’s *Through the Nest of the Spiders*, for instance, re-formats abjection as care, in which human waste and its intercorporeal pleasures becomes the binding tissue for a joyful, affirming social collectivity, rejuvenated by the very items (and humans) that culture casts off. In Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Tranquilina’s charitable ministry and Chavela’s blue house operate as sites of renewal for East Los Angeles’s most impoverished residents, providing some modicum of support in a place where protective acts are largely anathema. Smith’s *Let Me Down Easy*, as well as Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, pay homage to the seemingly menial caring labors that so often go unnoticed, the work of maintenance multiply devalued in a white supremacist, ableist, and heteropatriarchal world. And Grace Lee Boggs, champion of urban agriculture, articulates the urgency of communal care and social renewal through the genre of manifesto, through which she underscores the necessity of D.I.Y. infrastructure.

While these texts relay alternate narratives of care for those deemed dependent, they also demonstrate the ways in which care, particularly in a post-Keynesian era, is a particularly fraught project. Certainly, it is not the role of literature and culture to provide practical solutions to dilemmas of care, nor do I charge these works with suggesting the best course of action.

“Alternative cultural forms,” as Lisa Lowe writes, “do not offer havens of resolution...Some cultural forms succeed in making it possible to live and inhabit alternatives...some permit us to imagine what we still have yet to live” (Lowe x). Following Lowe, the alternative cultural forms I examine narrativize the “ways in which the law, labor exploitation, racialization...gendering,” and ableism “work to prohibit alternatives” to inequitable regimes of care (Lowe x). And in imagining and inhabiting alternatives to these regimes, they further highlight the limitations of their own projects of imagined renewal.

Smith’s “Heavy Sense of Recognition,” for instance, demonstrates the inability of even well-intentioned (and well-positioned) subjects to furnish care in the face of overwhelming neglect, and the ways in which caring labors can themselves become forms of state-sanctioned violence. Kurtz-Burke attempts to work *within* public institutions to overturn, in some small way, the systematic debilitation of New Orleans’s racialized poor, but her individual agency is nonetheless stymied by the state’s vast sensorium of indifference. Both Viramontes and DeLillo index the apparatus of charity that emerges in the absence of state support, and both articulate a sense of ambivalence and, on occasion, outright critique of these third-party providers. Delany’s queer black utopia, while it revels in abject people and practices, can only exist through private capital and the exclusion of women. Finally, Boggs’s prefigurative political vision hinges the worth of racialized life on the performance of ability, framing her gardens through the language of self-sufficiency. Taken together, these works outline a primary tension within the

contemporary landscape of care and resource distribution, and indeed, the primary tension animating my project. On the one hand, institutionalized care can operate as part of larger systems of state violence, yet on the other hand, the privatization of care labors—whether through the private institutions of family or personal capital—yields a state without any social responsibility. I will not attempt to resolve this seemingly unresolvable tension; rather, I aim to keep these dilemmas in mind and elaborate their complexities as I move forward. What questions do these texts raise in their attempts to forge, in the words of Gumbs, “a livable world (256)?” What can they tell us about the creative task of valuing and renewing unsupported lives? And what might it ultimately mean to care for, rather than cure, the city—to nurture it in “the belly of the text?”

Further, in a project centered around discourses and counter-discourses of dependency, where is care situated in relation? Throughout my work, care and dependency have shared a reciprocal relationship, and I have shown them as mutually imbricated in one another. I should note, however, that the respective scholarly literatures on care and dependency have developed along distinct tracts. Given this history, I will further elaborate the connections I forge between these two concepts, and why I see the social project of care as part of a radical disability politic. As Michael Fine and Caroline Glendinning observe, “Research on ‘care,’ initially linked to feminism during the early 1980s, has revealed and exposed to public gaze what was hitherto assumed to be a ‘natural’ female activity” (602). And some disability activists, as they point out, have taken issue with some of the assumptions embedded in this particular discourse of care: that disabled subjects are a burden to be managed, that they require empowerment from an external party, that an individualized (see also: medical) model of care is centered; and that the

lives of carers, rather than the cared-for, take precedence.<sup>107</sup> Dependency, on the other hand, has been studied across the realms of sociology, political science, philosophy, and medical policy, which theorize it in terms of its typology, its causes, and its (perhaps unwarranted) negative connotations. Fine and Glendinning argue that these “contrasting perspectives”—between some disability activists and some care ethicists, between the denigration of dependence and the idealization of independence—have lead social theory to separate the “carers” from the “cared-for,” without any sense that they are “exploring and explaining different aspects of the same phenomenon” (601). But if we imagine care labor as “the product or outcome of the relationship between two or more people,” rather than a “unidirectional activity in which an active care-giver does something to a passive and dependent recipient,” then we can view dependency and care as mutually implicated in one another (Fine and Glendinning 617). To follow the insights of Jonathan Herring, “[I]t is more accurate to acknowledge the networks of care that we live in, rather than dividing us up into providers and recipients of care. All of us fall into both categories” (11). As I discovered over the course of this project, my exploration of infrastructural support networks—state-sponsored, informal, or some admixture of the two—highlighted and even *necessitated* the linkage between discourses of care and dependency, and positioned them as fundamentally “different aspects of the same phenomenon.” A life-world centered around the social project of care is simultaneously a world that honors the vulnerable, dependent, and disabled subject.

Following this, I view the social project of care as part and parcel of a radical disability politic, and one of the vital insights offered by a crip of color critique. However, this too requires

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<sup>107</sup> See also Teppo Kröger, “Care research and disability studies: Nothing in common?”; Christine Kelly, “Making ‘care’ accessible: Personal assistance for disabled people and the politics of language”; Jonathan Herring, “The Disability Critique of Care.”

additional clarification, given the initial tensions between disability rights activists and care ethicists. While disability scholars have long highlighted the vast networks of assistance that enable any sense of independence, some scholars and activists have taken offense to what they view as the paternalistic tone of feminist care ethics. As activist Richard Woods contends, “The concept of care seems to many disabled people a tool through which others are able to dominate and manage our lives” (qtd in Shakespeare 63). Prominent disability scholar Tom Shakespeare, in his aversion to caring discourse, offers the language of “help” as a possible substitution, which refers to reciprocal and mutual caring relations amongst groups. Vic Finkelstein and others mobilize the term of “support,” and still others offer “assistance” as proxy for care. Yet, as Teppo Kröger observes, “these concepts seem to bring nothing dramatically new with them. All of them have been in regular use by care researchers for a long time and have been used as near equivalents to care” (407). Indeed, part of the tension between disability rights activists and care ethicists, Jonathan Herring argues, might stem from a fundamental misrecognition of the nuances of care scholarship. Joan Tronto, for instance, has “been clear that a central part of care is responsiveness: consideration of the position of others as they see it and responding to the way they want it” (Herring 8).<sup>108</sup> Both Kröger and Herring identify “an important uniting force” between care ethics and disability studies, one centered around the governing ideal of independence, “with linked themes of self sufficiency and...economic productivity,” as a narrative used to devalue disabled subjects and those in caring relationships.<sup>109</sup> (Herring 13). Indeed, it is this resonance between disability studies and care ethics that I have carried with me throughout the project, and that has shaped a crip of color critique as an analytic framework. It is,

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<sup>108</sup> See Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>109</sup> I should note that many of the cited critiques of care are furnished by disability rights activists with a vested interest in the concept of independence and independent living.

further, the cornerstone of a social project of care, which imagines people as always partial and vulnerable, fragments embedded in and constituted by broader networks of support, simultaneously caring and cared-for.

Now that I have elaborated the social project of care vis-à-vis my selected texts and the field of disability studies, what other analytic sites might be enriched by these considerations? In other words, in what other ways might I extend my formulation of caring for, rather than curing, contemporary cities? First and foremost, this project would benefit from a literary-cultural analysis of water infrastructure and its attendant socio-ethical concerns. Over the course of writing this dissertation, I have lived through and observed two water crises that, while local, have generated national attention. In 2014, the city of Flint—under the decree of emergency management—changed its water source from the treated Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the contaminated, corrosive, and lead-filled Flint River. In the same year, the Detroit city government shut off the water supply of 15,000 households, due to delinquency on past bills. Water infrastructure, and access to that supply, has become a primary site through which racial, environmental, and social conflicts play out. Water forces us to contend, in the most fundamental of ways, with the fraught discourse of *deservedness*. Secondly, I plan to explore in more detail the crises of healthcare infrastructure that bring into sharp relief the affinities between critical ethnic, disability, and women-of-color feminist politics. Finally, I aim to situate infrastructure within a more transnational framework; after all, it was the overseas reach of transportation and communication infrastructures that enabled the emergence of global capital (and its domestic arm, welfare reform). Water, sanitation, and healthcare are ideal sites for this expansion, as they encapsulate crises of support across both domestic and international domains.

As I carry *Anatomy of the City* into its future incarnations, I hope that it will too prove useful for other scholars, other disciplines, and other ways of being. I view it as an apparatus of amplification, one that turns up the volume on support relations, nested dependencies, and “strange affinities” between fields—that is, the “complexity of layers” that “ordinary persons never bother to notice” (Yamashita 57). It is, above all, an invitation to shelter the post-Keynesian city “in the belly of the text,” and to see it anew through the lens of infrastructure.

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