Fail Epics: Gender, Race, and the Narration of Institutional Failure

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Katie L Bashore

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Jigna Desai

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Introduction

*Fail Epics: Gender, Race, and the Narration of Institutional Failure*

Everywhere around us we see evidence of institutional failure: government malfeasance, fraud and corruption in the banking industry, the collapse of mass access to higher education, home foreclosures, rising rates of poverty and houselessness, swelling prison populations, and failed military endeavors, among other examples. One can argue that the crisis management strategies engineered by various statist and imperialist entities in light of recent disastrous events create the conditions under which institutions face erosive restructuring. While valid, such an analysis does not allow us to explore the complex ways that people grapple with these circumstances. “Fail Epics” is invested in developing a cultural study of institutional failure, the narration of which is integral to how subjects see themselves as part of their political modernity.

As such, I argue that the story we tell about institutional failure is just as important as the contexts from which it emerges. This dissertation critiques the rhetorics through which we name and assess institutional failure. It explores how the languages of injury, loss, abandonment, and betrayal, so commonly used to articulate failure, liberalize the themes of precarity that have long animated the lives of the racially and sexually marginalized: the poor, criminalized, undocumented, and unprotected. To broadly attribute the precarious nature of life is not merely to trespass on these histories but to occult them, rendering certain, minoritized experiences of and reactions to institutional failure something wholly unrecognizable, even uncanny, to contemporary formulations of injustice. In turn, I contend that the narration of institutional failure reproduces normative

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1The articulation of some of these instances may be found in Wendy Brown’s “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservativism, and De-Democratization,” Political Theory, vol. 34, no. 6 (Dec., 2006): 690-714.
notions of violence and injury that, nevertheless, do not go uncontested. This dissertation illuminates the ways that common representations of institutional failure—in popular political nonfiction, critical text, television, and news media—implicitly center particular experiences that do not allow us to more robustly examine the traumatic effects of power or the politics by which lives come to matter.

When I say “institutional failure,” I am referring to the various ways that institutions break down, outwear their metaphors, or are simply unable to act as guarantor of the “good life” many Americans believe is their birthright. It is outside the scope of this project to trace the implosion of our core animating structures. Instead, my interest is in understanding how the institution is imagined, indeed narrated, as unjust—as harming, injuring, or traumatizing—and how, from such a narration, causality is constructed. As such, this project is a cultural study of the narrativization of institutional failure, as it reveals a range of modern anxieties and, more importantly, desires. By “narrativization” I mean the storytelling that gives a context its meaning. Whereas the term, borrowed here from literary criticism, means the interpretation of certain “real” events as stories, I use it to imply the particular rhetorical framework we develop around a given instance of institutional failure. Rather than uphold a firm distinction between the material nature of the things being described and the fictionality of their description, I suggest a symbiotic process by which institutions are contingent upon their human infrastructure while the frameworks through which we speak of them are linked to certain objectives of power that play out in institutional spaces.

But it is not these politics alone that interest me. The argument of this dissertation is ultimately an ethical one. In suggesting that these narrations reproduce hegemonic
notions of violence and injury, I aim to problematize the effects of storytelling on our ability to understand institutional violence as having a deeper root in the systemic oppression of populations of color, queered by the demands of a white hetero-reproductive nationalism that drive institutions... of marriage, education, religion, military, etc. It would once have been anathema for the majority of Americans to see themselves as debilitated by institutions but now that a system of governance has emerged to injure, so as to galvanize, populations, more people find themselves staking such claims. But as our knowledges of institutional failure are filled out by normative experiences, gendered and racialized histories of such things are either entirely eclipsed or carefully scaffolded within a white ontology. Thus, the foregrounding of normative experiences is premised on gendered/racialized erasure. I explore the tensions of this dynamic between presence and absence throughout my project and importantly allude to the labor such a struggle performs for the US racial state. In this introduction, I further explain my terms and methodologies but begin with my own storytelling of this project’s emergence. Importantly, I hope to make clear that the overall intervention of my work is with questioning the reliance we as scholars have on certain intellectual paradigms that may not enable us to see the limitations within how we produce meaning.

The Story of “Fail Epics”- Moving Away from Neoliberalism as Explanans to Tackling the Problematic of ‘Narrative Normativity’

This project emerges from a particular constellation of intellectual, political, and cultural observations. I defended my prospectus in fall 2011, proposing a dissertation project on campus safety. At the time, I was interested in understanding how campus safety regimes do two key, interrelated things: prompt campus populations to police themselves and perpetuate the colonizing mission of the public university through a
covert mechanism of spatial regulation. I was interested in understanding how the “neoliberal university” continues to engage in exclusionary practices, despite the preponderance of mission statements professing the merits of diversity. Following Rod Ferguson in *The Reorder of Things,* I proposed that, through the appropriation of social justice rhetoric and an ostensible commitment to the liberal arts, the contemporary public university alibies its injustices. Specifically, in the name of “safety,” students are asked to inhabit campus space defensively—modulating their own behaviors and those of others that pose a threat to “civility.”

Terms such as “safety” and “civility” are not immediately problematic but are linked to certain social ideals, bodies, and modes of conduct. In the post-9/11 moment, “safety” sanctioned a variety of policies and behaviors enacted in the name of protecting the white, western, democratic ideals that stood in for “civility.” In the current moment, safety means neutralizing dissenting bodies that pose a threat to the post-racial multiculturalism espoused by the academy. Safety, then, is not only about policing the borders of public universities from the encroachment of persons deemed “outside” or “other than” the institution but also patrolling certain bodies and political vernaculars in classrooms. In sum, the project intended to argue that campus safety regimes stealthily preserve university space for the reproduction of white hetero-capitalism.

I was especially interested in the nuances of conduct. Inspired by emerging scholarship on biopolitics, I sought to elaborate what I called the “student-consumer-

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subject” hailed by these policies.\(^3\) It seemed the “student-consumer-subject” was a quintessential biopolitical subject. As Michele Foucault makes clear in his late life lectures, the circumstances of late capitalism expose subjects to certain risks against which governments provide little to no protections. Being a subject in late capitalism requires one to assume an undue degree of responsibility for life outcomes. One accrues value by remaining vigilant amidst such uncertainty, and thus, by administering to the self as would an institution or government. This particular subject, *homo economicus*, scapegoats the shortcomings of a disenfranchised state as its own inability to self-regulate.\(^4\) The student-consumer-subject succeeds in the neoliberal university, where resources are limited and the conditions of debt prevail. Following Aihwa Ong, its flexibility as, at once, aiding in the university’s debt obligations and, in this case, acting as border patrol, primes it for conscription into the nation-building projects of the university.\(^5\)

This entity does the “dirty work” of the neoliberal academy by normalizing its actions. And most egregiously so, as one of the core things I explored in that project were the release of “Timely Warnings” at my home institution that promoted awareness of crimes committed in and around the campus area. Using geosocial technologies, such as Google maps, and up-to-the-minute phone, email, and Twitter alerts to document crimes, the system appealed to a largely millennial student base that routinely uses social media as a primary mean of communication. The concept behind the alert system is to harness the speed of such technologies for the quick dissemination of knowledge. Yet beyond the

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“who, what, when, and where,” these dispatches offered little contextual information, thereby dissuading critical engagement. Further, most crime reports contained loaded racial/gendered descriptors—“a black man in a hooded sweatshirt”; “a black man who spoke in an East African accent.” The routine and systematic nature of these dispatches, coupled with a dearth of information, seemed to communicate that persons who vaguely fit these descriptions were to be held suspect.6

I still believe that this is a worthwhile subject to address, but as I wrote, I noticed a key problem with my analysis. I had presumed a stable and finite distinction between the “student-consumer-subject” that occupied the proper space of the university and a polymorphously queered Other that stood outside, though at times infiltrated, its boundaries. Such a binary did not allow for me to consider the incoherencies within the university community. In fact, it was not until the Whose University? Collective made clear the fraught positionality of the precarious university subject that I understood the problematic of the contemporary public university to be inadequately theorized as “neoliberalism.” As the Collective makes clear, the university uses the presence of certain “diverse” student bodies to validate its progressivism while nevertheless refusing to provide programming, services, and aid that actually make higher education more broadly accessible. The ambivalence felt by the many students, staff, and faculty who contribute to the Collective provides overwhelming evidence that the contemporary

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6 This information was collected from emails generated by the University of Minnesota Timely Warning Alert System, particularly between the years 2008-2010. The alerts continue, but many of the identifying information has amended to address accusations of racism from the student body. Interestingly, the addition of the phrase, “the victim reports…” has been added to ostensibly resolve, or indeed justify, the use of racial depicters. By couching signifiers that may lead to racial profiling within the context of a victim’s traumatic recollection, the University absolves itself of any direct responsibility of racist reporting.
moment sees a resurgence of what Dylan Rodriguez calls the “genocidal” politics of higher education.⁷

Writing “in excess of the problematic” of the “neoliberal university,” Rodriguez argues that narrations of “multiculturalism and pluralism are essential to both the contemporary formulation of neoliberalism and the historical distensions of racial/colonial genocide” that predate the emergence of austerity regimes in the academy.⁸ Institutions of higher education “remain constituted by […] gendered racist, apartheid, colonial foundations.”⁹ His argument, that neoliberalism is, first and foremost, a racial phenomenon, is echoed by Jodi Melamed in Represent and Destroy, where the discourse of social neutrality—we are all equal under capitalism—becomes the logical efficacy by which certain (nonwhite, non-heteropatriarchal) populations are evacuated from institutional spaces and indeed effaced from “the social text.”¹⁰ The academy does not presume a singular entrepreneurial student-subject but instead creates a complex hierarchy of human “suffering, entrapment, and vulnerability” that are linked to recognition, access, resource allocation, and tenure.¹¹ For it was in the name of protecting the multicultural civil society of the public university that indigenous scholar-activist, Steven Salaita was summarily terminated for issuing a critique of Israeli apartheid that was understood as having the potential to rebuff pro-Zionist funders of his resident academy. Yet it was also in the name of such inclusivity that Abigail Fisher nearly successfully protested her rejection from the University of Texas on the grounds of

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⁸ Ibid, 812.
⁹ Ibid.
¹¹ Rodriguez, 813.
“discrimination” against a white person—a case that was actually heard by the United States Supreme Court.  

In that instance of reading, I realized two things. Firstly, I gleaned that the university is not an enclosed site with a linear history but a context for the articulation of discursive and material practices that aid in the ordering of populations. Secondly, I observed that there was a marked absence in the critical literature around the university that questioned the resistance many of us have to critiquing neoliberalism’s paradigmatic exclusions. More broadly, I noted that there is an imperative to name the university as problematic but a struggle to talk about how, precisely, it is such a profound site of violence. Following Christopher Newfield’s argument in Unmaking the Public University, higher education is frequently the object of public commenting because of its attachment to middle class ideologies of socioeconomic mobility. For this reason, it takes prominence in both the discourses of the left and the right as either guaranteeing or threatening mass democratization. Thus the university exists as an actuality—it is a bricks and mortar structure—but also symbolically—as a horizon onto which a future might be thought and willed. The university remains a highly contested site of debate about all matter of things related to modern experience, few of which pertain, exclusively, to knowledge as such.  

Along these lines, Claire Hemmings’ work in Why Stories Matter is instructive. Institutional politics, such as the ones elaborated above, prompt response but the nature of that storytelling expands to include particular objectives. In her example, feminists

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12 For a good primer on the Salaita controversy, see “Steven Salaita: I will Always Condemn Injustice, No Matter the State of My Employment,” The Nation (November 2015). For information related to the case referenced, see “Is Affirmative Action Finished?” The Atlantic (December 2015).
often retell the story of their institutionality so as to resolve the internal contradictions that may threaten the coherency of the discipline. There are always more “ethically accountable and potentially more politically transformative” ways of narrating our existence within institutional spaces, she writes; but, storytelling is, ultimately, an inevitability of being an “instituted” subject. However much the coordinates change—from the family to the medical complex to the academy—we narrate our presence within, and as part of, the spaces that hail us. Given how central the academy is to the structure of US civil society, it makes sense that it becomes a context to discuss a variety of interrelated systems of power and structures.

Thinking more broadly, storytelling is what emerges in the absences left by power. Here, I am thinking through Derrida’s work on writing, where the languages of the subject bracket the essence they are said to capture and, thus, require additional explanation. There is, therefore, a strong affinity between storytelling and failure, in this case, of subjects. But institutions are also a crucial part of this. Wendy Brown expands this observation in States of Injury where subjects harness the institutional relationship to avoid a more sobering encounter with the constitutive essence of their being, writing “the tendency to externalize political disappointment by blaming failures on the character of power ‘out there,’” skirts a realization that disappointment’s “cause is in our own psychic and social ranks.” The sheer volume of discourse about the academy suggests that this is one such site for the expression of deeper political anxieties and desires. Though as I

want to be clear, critiques of the university are not collectively or reducibly about personal political hang-ups; the point I am advancing is that the academy becomes a context for the narration of a variety of grievances that are, in some instances, “ethically accountable” and “politically transformative” but, at other turns, reactionary.

Overwhelmingly, there is a consensus that higher education is failing its publics. These conditions are amplified, in particular, by a set of very recognizable, at times interrelated, failures: student loan debt, degree inflation, and restrictions on academic freedom. Like other national debt dramas, students are graduating with more debt than the worth of their degree—likely devalued by the number of undergraduates enrolled in a given program. That itself is a university-mediated crisis. Colleges and universities themselves rely on student dollars and continue to encourage enrollment at skyrocketing costs, despite a sharp decrease in annual family incomes. Federal grants and support for postsecondary education cannot keep up with the costs associated with higher education, even though the government continues to benefit from income tax revenue generated from college graduates. Drawing awareness to these and other such exploitative conditions is often met with hostility, as the freedom to speak openly about institutional politics is hampered by a conservative administrative presence coopting those very same languages of “freedom” for a narrow notion of civility.

These circumstances merit commenting, but to again echo Rodriguez’s observation, do not fully capture some of the more foundational violences of the public university. For instance, international student debt rarely becomes part of the national discourse. International student dollars subsidize university debt; yet as these students are recruited at tuition rates that can double those of in-state residents, there is no
programming to ensure a seamless transition. So called “non-traditional” students, whether differently abled, first generation, poor, older and/or single parents, are often unaccounted for by a structure that presumes a normative trajectory, beginning with the completion of secondary education. The resonances between the university and other sites of human failure, such as the prison, remain unexplored as well. Prison labor contributes to the defrayment of university costs, as much of the furniture in classrooms and dormitories is constructed by incarcerated individuals who are working for very little or completely unremunerated. These problems may be discussed, but they rarely receive the same importance as something like loan debt. What I have surmised is that this is because the context of capitalism, and specifically neoliberalism, has taken precedence as a kind of primary trauma to which most things can be traced.

Neoliberalism is understood to be foundational and encompassing of other violences. In the narratives surrounding the university I explored most—namely, those coming from the left—neoliberalism is named as the condition of failure. Even in the more conservative iterations of university failure, class bias is suggested, as “elitism” or “entitlement” of the underserved are reasons as to why postsecondary institutions are becoming exclusive. There is something about the salience of class as the primary modality through which social realities are made manifestly troublesome. Perhaps this is because neoliberalism is most recognizable as a socioeconomic phenomenon. Yet the application of “market logic to all arenas of life” is not to argue that other systems of power are to be subjugated to capitalism. As I mention above, scholars, such as

17 This understanding of “neoliberalism” comes from Wendy Brown in “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” Theory and Event (7:1), 2003, 2-3.
Melamed, understand neoliberalism within the ideological architecture of the racial state or rather deracialized multiculturalism as the “spirit of neoliberalism” itself.

In her manuscript about the uneven distribution of social exposure, *Social Death*, Lisa Cacho observes that neoliberalism amplifies longstanding problems of nation, race, and empire. It brings into relief the contradictions of liberal democracy by publicizing, naturalizing, and universalizing values of economic emancipation that “make indigent groups of color unable to prove they experience discrimination.”18 Worse, it scapegoats the continual failures of this system onto the people made most vulnerable. She writes, “If everyone is an ‘entrepreneur’ of him or herself, then individuals cannot be exploited by capital. As ‘entrepreneurs’ of themselves, individuals exploit *themselves* and should take ‘personal responsibility’ for doing so.”19 By this logic, the socioeconomically underserved become the larger threat to democracy, and being poor is criminalized. Rendering such folks available for public scrutiny and ridicule becomes common citizenship practice, furthering the point that Saidiya Hartman makes in *Scenes of Subjection*: that Black death is always already the context for relatively privileged forms of life making.20 The overreliance on neoliberalism as “explanans” eclipses that critique.

Beyond the university, I saw a political climate formed around failure and one that, as I will argue, made many of the same narrative elisions as explored above. One of the most important overarching contexts of this dissertation project is the 2008 recession, or, more precisely, the post-recession and its reception by populist movements. Prior to the time of writing, I witnessed the Tea Party Movement espouse a very conservative

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19 Cacho, 19.
interpretation of institutional failure. Over the course of my pre-dissertation years, they grew support for an ever expanding agenda that included protesting tax increases and universal healthcare, touting American exceptionalism, and advocating for xenophobic anti-immigration legislation, among other things, as they make clear in their “15 Non-negotiable Core Beliefs,” which I name below:

Illegal aliens are here illegally. Pro-domestic employment is indispensable. A strong military is essential. Special interests must be eliminated. Gun ownership is sacred. Government must be downsized. The national budget must be balanced. Deficit spending must end. Bailout and stimulus plans are illegal. Reducing personal income taxes is a must. Reducing business income taxes is mandatory. Political offices must be available to average citizens. Intrusive government must be stopped. English as our core language is required. Traditional family values are encouraged.21

The agenda paints a picture of a nation led astray by Keynesianism and progressive social ideals. Calling themselves “Patriots for People’s Rule,” they seek to overcome failure by returning to “the path of the Founding Fathers.” However unclear their tactical strategy, the Tea Party has been quite successful securing seats in the House and the Senate, and their growing appeal among the white working and lower middle classes suggests that, in some sense, they are responding to the very failures of a capitalistic democracy that progressives critique as well.

Except that, for the Tea Party, the confrontation with the limits of power almost always involves classic transference and narrative reversals. Following Audre Lorde in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” power harms everyone; no one is living authentically under hierarchy, and the same systems that oppress minorities

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can fail more socially mobile populations as well.\textsuperscript{22} Given how widely this most recent recession has, as Guy Standing explains, “precaritized” people across class, race, and gender divisions, there is no time like the present for precisely that kind of integrated analysis.\textsuperscript{23} Yet in their discourse, the breakdown of the middle class family is due in part to the ratification of marriage equality. So-called “entitlement programs” scapegoat how overspending for military endeavors and tax breaks for corporations and the wealthiest citizens among us actually bankrupted the economy. Causality may be even vaguer than this but most usually alibis what are reactionary responses to the loss of power.

What we see in these more conservative iterations of failure is a “constitutive anxiety,” a tacit realization that the unearned privileges awarded to the beneficiaries of the US nation-state have been artificially imputed by a system that shores up and consolidates the normative authority of whiteness, cismasculinity, heterosexuality, ability, capital, etc., through the subjugation of people of color, of women and gender minorities, of LGBTQ populations, of differently able bodied-minded individuals, of the poor, and the disenfranchised. The claim to power is flimsy, and becomes even more obvious as the institutions charged with upholding the guise of normativity are unable to deliver on their promises. But as the investment in nationalism remains strong, that fear is redirected into hateful rhetoric and genocidal logics that serve to carefully deselect certain persons—the ones ultimately blamed for the failures that impact them the most—from the nation and mark them for social death. The Tea Party thus owes most of its success, and especially its political influence, to producing a context for whites limning a boundary between race privilege and economic precarity—brought about by neoliberal

reform and institutional restructuring—in order to narrate causality as what Hamilton Carroll calls “affirmative reaction,” where the privileged claim minority status—through rhetorics of vulnerability and disenfranchisement—in order to monger resources and avoid a more direct confrontation with power.24

It would be tempting to simply state that the anxieties of power loss expressed by something like the Tea Party Movement reveal a strong current of anti-intellectualism among the US right. It does, but it also indicates something that Berlant describes as a “scandal of ex-privilege.” Feminist scholar, Amy Brandzel explains in her book, Against Citizenship: The Violence of the Normative that a “scandal of ex-privilege” is when “‘iconic citizens’ […] relentlessly tell the stories of their loss.”25 The process involves feeling nostalgic about a past where immigrants, persons of color, and gender minorities did not have civil rights and feeling cruelly optimistic about a future where tougher policy reforms secure a dying influence. As this narrative takes precedence, the claims of inequality lodged by people who are female, gender variant, trans*, gay, lesbian, of color, immigrant, of refugee status, of low socioeconomic status, are rendered bogus. The recent results of the 2016 election testify to the power of this illogic. Now President-elect Donald Trump’s platform appealed to the many white—often formerly democratic—working class male voters of America who felt unheard by the so-called metropolitan political elite ruling Washington, DC.

Promising to bring back industries that have long been subcontracted overseas and taking a strong stance against “political correctness,” Trump secured his election. He

25 This idea is restated from Lauren Berlant’s work in Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex, particularly the introduction, “The Intimate Public Sphere.”
did not find success by convincing people that he could make good on his promises of building an apartheid wall between the United States and Mexico or trying Hillary Clinton for treason. He won by holding space for the articulation of that narrative. As Berlant writes in a recent op-ed, it did not matter that Trump had no perceivable platform or presidential plan; what mattered is that the white uneducated class—who are in a sense precaritized—felt ignored and, in the words of Michael Moore, “used the ballot as an anger management strategy.”\footnote{Michael Moore, \textit{TrumpLand}, Digital, directed by Michael Moore (2016: Dog Eat Dog Films), Film.} While I, in part, honor the real place of pain from which many of these voters acted, I also have limited sympathy for what their nostalgia (“Make America Great Again”) encodes: a desire for a “great American past” where citizenship was reserved for white propertied men. Moreover, the fact that they won an election and were not subjected to the myriad forms of voter suppression that disenfranchised many Black and/or immigrant subjects demonstrates that their relative social and political mobility has not been that significantly hampered.

There would be enough to write an entire dissertation around the conservative response to institutional failure, especially as a racialized/gendered phenomenon. But the more progressive responses are just as interesting to me. Also emerging at the time of writing was a more leftist populist movement that, in many ways, acted as a foil to the Tea Party Movement. The Occupy Movement emerged in the early 2010s, mobilizing around a frustration with social and economic disparities, exacerbated by corporate corruption and the failure of policy makers to create reform. The slogan, “We are the 99%” became synonymous with the movement, making a very clear claim that the majority of Americans feel and often are measurably disempowered. The movement, largely leftist in nature, owes much of its strategy to the Arab Spring; as Brown has
observed, that revolution organized around similar themes of ending political corruption and economic inequality. The methodological link, however interesting, is also an imaginative one.

Here, 99% consolidates various complaints under a rubric that seeks out similarities in experiences while also making a racialized/colonized context of struggle its tactical analogy. The potency of a mass collective of precaritized subjects is considerable; what better way to reclaim the terms on which failure happens by casting a wide net. But as many critics of the Occupy Movement point out, the platform became articulated along a fundamentally economic axis, such that more particularized violences were not being addressed by a mantra that refers almost exclusively to the inequality of tax brackets and financial policy and in fact, teeters on a sentiment of “all lives matter.” From these observations, I gleaned that, while there is a very palpable discontent in the country, the actions taken and frameworks devised to name and address that are often limited in scope—and sometimes intentionally so. Here, again, political articulations of failure—even in a more mindful capacity—do not quite capture the ways that the narrativization of institutional failure is told from a relatively privileged perspective or one that, again, denotes neoliberalism as the primary site of human de/valuation and institutional violence.

In many ways, a disadvantaged white conservativism and a disparaged white progressivism are two sides of a “neoliberal coin” that conceal and deprivilege white injury. Thus keeping Brandzel’s critique in mind, I knew that I wanted to write a dissertation that focused on narrative normativity, irrespective of the contexts in which it

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emerged. The problem I began to see is not that neoliberalism presented brand new social conditions that demanded consideration as such but also scaffolded very historic problematics of representation in naming the problems of power. Even in our more critical moments and through some of the most circulated leftist analytics, the problematic of modern subjectivity cannot be fully named without producing certain exclusions or differential valuations of who becomes a subject worthy of commenting in a particular context.

As I looked culturally, I saw just how abundant normative narratives were being harnessed to name conditions that are not fully material but are rather affectively perceived. In April 2012, *The Atlantic* published an article by Ron Fournier and Sophie Quinton, entitled, “How America Lost Its Trust in Our Greatest Institutions” that named institutional failure as being far more endemic than what is actually happening at the level of policy. As Professor of Sociology, Laura Hansen, is quoted, “‘We have lost our gods; […]. We lost faith in the media: Remember Walter Cronkite? We lost it in our culture: You can’t point to a movie star who might inspire us, because we know too much about them. We lost it in politics, because we know too much about politicians’ lives. We’ve lost it—that basic sense of trust and confidence—in everything.”  

The above analysis may help us understand where much of this sense of ennui emerges, but the point is that the feelings are there.

A 2016 Gallup poll reveals that the number of Americans feeling lacking or no confidence in core national institutions is the highest it has been since 1987, particularly

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with respect to religion, the military, and public education. Distrust in banks and the Supreme Court peaked between the years of 2011-2013, temporarily dipped in 2014, and has been increasing by at least 1-2% since 2015. Suspicion of news media and congress rose at a similar rate of increase, but concern for the trustworthiness of police and the medical system—both of which spiked in 2013—have slightly declined. Nevertheless, disappointment with the criminal justice system has increased, as have frustrations with Health Maintenance Organizations. Some of this statistical variance may be due in part to how people feel connected to what particular institutions represent or promise, although they do not feel satisfied with the current policy approaches.29

Whatever the variances suggest, Gallup reports that 2016 marks the third straight year that American’s faith in institutions dropped below 33%. Nevertheless, hopefulness in the free market has increased to 43%. Jim Norton of the Gallup Foundation writes:

Americans clearly lack confidence in the institutions that affect their daily lives: the schools responsible for educating the nation’s children; the houses of worship that are expected to provide spiritual guidance; the banks that are supposed to protect Americans’ earnings; the U.S. Congress elected to represent the nation’s interests; and the news media that claims to exist to keep them informed. Even as Americans regain confidence in the economy and are no longer in the depths of dissatisfaction with the way things are going in the nation, they remain reluctant to put much faith in these institutions at the core of American society. 30

Fournier and Quinton are concerned by these statistics, similar to the ones they cite from a poll conducted four years earlier, stating:

When people trust their institutions, they’re better able to solve common problems. Research shows that school principals are much more likely to turn around struggling schools in places where people have a history of

working together and getting involved in their children’s education. Communities bonded by friendships formed at church are more likely to vote, volunteer, and perform everyday good deeds like helping someone find a job. And governments find it easier to persuade the public to make sacrifices for the common good when people trust that their political leaders have the community’s best interests at heart.  

As they argue, the positive affective relationship we form with institutions is just as important as their ability to accomplish what we charge them to do. The task of shifting this negative affectivity around institutions is imperative, the authors aver, because it is impossible to create human life without them, commenting:

The first institution was the first family. The tribe was the first community. The first tribe’s leader was the first politician, and its elders were the first legislature. Its guards, the first police force. Its storyteller, a teacher. Humans are coded to create communities, communities beget institutions. The statement says a lot. In situating the emergence of the institution—an utterly modern formation—in a vaguely premodern context, the authors argue for the ahistoricality of institutions and naturalize them—and presumably all attendant violences—as the inevitability of human interaction. Human is the operative word here. As I made clear throughout my discussion of the academy, human is an exclusive term that refers to white life and experience—if not explicitly, as white people, then what it sanctions, as white ideals. “Human” life is unimaginable without the institution because the institution has ordered that life not only internally but externally, acting as both a suture between population and normative ideology and border between propriety and impropriety—subjects who belong and those who do not. No articulation of “humanness” or “human concern” ever included modernity’s others.

32 Ibid.
I comment more extensively on the institution in the subsequent section. For now, I want to point out the perceived newness of this phenomenon. The Gallup Poll reviewed compares the late 2010s to early time periods, where institutional malaise is notably lower. It would follow that the results show what many critics of neoliberalism suggest: that this marks a particularly watershed moment in US modernity where capitalist democracy has reached a certain breaking point. But I want to clarify that the Poll is gauging feelings, and that is significant for two key reasons. Firstly, emotion gauges something greater than thing being felt or perceived, and secondly, emotions are deeply linked to systems of governmentality. And here is where I finally landed on the major primary claim of this dissertation: institutional failure is as much about narrative interpretation as it is about material conditions. That is, in part, concerning, because affect has been very powerful in determining social value.

In her work on the cultural politics of emotion, Sara Ahmed argues for the economical nature of affect. Simply put, “affective economies” describe how emotions circulate between bodies and signs. More specifically, “affective economies” describe how emotions intensify around an event and then continue to accumulate meaning through the continued circulation of discourses related to that event. As emotions gain social currency, they “surface” individual and collective bodies in alignment with particular political rationalities, while distancing others in turn. The emotions around institutional failure lament the loss of certain ideals and expectations that were not liberally enjoyed; the more critical responses we have at our disposal to analyze these emotions and reframe institutional failure as a normative problematic at times produce

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their own affect that still does not glimpse a crucial fact: institutional failure has long been the animating condition of the poor, the criminalized, the undocumented, and the unprotected. It is not new to this moment, however much it is marked as such. Starting the critique with neoliberalism does some important work of pushing back on the misinterpretation of institutional liabilities and political economic systems, but it also implicitly agrees that the direness of institutional circumstance arises from the contemporary moment.

The story of institutional failure could really begin at the outset of nation-building, but that is not the objective of this project. The point I explore is how the narratives we produce around institutional failure are often myopic and occulting of certain differences in how we become constituted by the crises named. Neither the conditions on which institutional failure is felt, nor the critical vocabulary given to frame it, quite glimpse the ethico-politics of naming and narrating failure. As I explain more in-depth in my first chapter, there are certain compelling conditions for the narration of failure across levels of culture. To synopsize, regimes of governance do, in fact, debilitate populations, so as to compel normative action.

Narrating failure in the context of personal or collective struggle is often necessary for redress—the key entry point into citizenship. Yet, the terms of injury, of precariousness, and of woundedness are often either coopted from or analogized through the socially marginalized, making their more historic institutional vulnerabilities somewhat illegible. Not coincidentally, this occurs at a time when the US nation-state has adopted a certain post-racial mantra for shirking accountability. If we are all raced equally, none of us are raced at all; if we are all exposed equally, none of us are exposed
particularly—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Thus through intellectual experience and particular political and cultural observation, this dissertation was born to address how the narrativization of institutional failure produces certain elisions that disallow us from having a fuller understanding of just how violent and oppressive institutions actually are.

*Stories, Veracity, Dominance, Desire: An Architecture of Narrative Normativity*

To speak of stories and storytelling is to enter into a long tradition of the cultural study of narrative as central to the architecture of social reality. Structuralists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, have argued for the fundamentalism of narrative as “myth,” the connective glue between a person and its culture from which normative knowledges derive. Post-structuralists, such as Georges Bataille, have countered this point, citing the “absence of myth” as the compelling condition of narration, whereby storytelling represents a response to chaos, lack, and incoherency. Whatever the case, I argue that narrative persists as a form of life-making and operates discursively, as a proliferation of meaning and sense-making that is always already part of the process of power/knowledge production. People experience their world through/as story.34

This project focuses on storytelling as cultural representation and as a contest over how to define the themes of modernity. I use “stories” as the overall narrative that people tell about a particular instance of institutional failure. I use “narrativization” or “narrating” to indicate the manner in which that story creates a commonsense understanding of whatever is being named or described in the story. Stories (are) matter. According to Paul DeMan, they are the “metaphor of the moment,” the terms by which

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34 These observations are made mainly from my readings of Franco Rella’s *The Myth of the Other: Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault, Bataille* (Washington: Maisonneuve Press), 1994.
something is made into common knowledge.\textsuperscript{35} As linguistic subjects, writing or narrating is our entry point into the world. It is therefore always lacking a certain authenticity, but it is nevertheless what sticks and what orders. Evidence is always secondary to the framework, or “gloss,” of a story. And for this reason, narrative scholar, Hayden White argues, they cannot be assessed for their veracity but rather for their logic and utility, that is in a sense, shifting.\textsuperscript{36}

Advocating for the semiological approach to the study of text, or story, White advocates that our reading practices “moot the question of the text’s reliability as witness to events of phenomena extrinsic to it, […] pass over the question of the text’s “honesty,” its objectivity, and […] regard its ideological aspect less as a product (whether or self-interest or group interest, whether or conscious or unconscious impulses) than as a process.”\textsuperscript{37} Stories produce and reproduce their significance through “the establishment of a mental set towards the world in which certain sign systems are privileged as necessary, even natural, ways of recognizing a ‘meaning’ in things and others are suppressed, ignored, or hidden in the very process of representing a world to consciousness.”\textsuperscript{38} Narratives will not always be consistent, and it is possible for a person or even a state to narrate incoherencies throughout the duration of their lifetime. Although White’s objective is to trouble the delinking of history and narrative—whereby history, seen as objective, is disavowed of its narrative context—he makes the critical suggestion that narrative is where we see people grapple with the events going on around


\textsuperscript{36} White, Hayden V, \textit{The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation}, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 1987.

\textsuperscript{37} White, 192.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
them. Following Peter Brooks, all narrative contains a plot—an organization of events into a framework. From the narrativization of events, we can infer a historiography and, beyond that, a desire for particular kinds of representation.39

Despite how central narrative is to modern existence, it is also that which is strategically forgotten, so that it exists as a truth that was there all along. As Jean-Francois Lyotard explains, “[A] culture that gives precedence to the narrative form doubtless has a need for special procedures to authorize its narratives than it has to remember its past.”40 The point is profound beyond the ways Lyotard intended it; it is less important for subjects to confront the conditions of their existence than it is for them to be “right” or to hold sway over how we understand a given reality. In turn, narratives, or stories, find themselves in “an immanent relation to the systematics of power, which are at work within the communal narrative-matrix of inter-subjectivity” (McQuillan 25).41 Narratives are, as Foucault would argue, discourse—a primary way of thinking and producing meaning in line with the objectives of power.

This is what makes the normalization of the narrative context potentially dangerous and definitely exclusive. If we cannot see the important linkages to power, then we may naturalize realities that aid in the devaluation of others. Indeed, when we cannot see something like the explanation of terrorism as “cultural pathology” as linked to a desire to locate violence within Arabness or Islam itself, such that any and all persons affiliated with those designations are potential terrorists, then we may become dulled to the civilian deaths that result from US military aggression in the Middle East.

Moreover, when we circulate images and representations of Black criminality or simply fail to report on the many instances of Black trans* women’s deaths, we fail to see the logic by which the lacking regard for Black life is intentional. Thus a large part of this project is understanding the extent to which narratives perform the work of power.

What kind of resistant reading practice should one thus develop? Post-colonial theorists, such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha have long been interested in the process of reading narrative-qua-discourse for what it cannot represent: the fullness of an account or the complexity by which people take on a narrative guise. This project similarly calls attention to narrative silences and elisions but does not ultimately attend to them in their own right. The choice is somewhat methodological but also theoretical. I follow Foucault’s understanding that what is not immediately distributed or authorized by discourse is nevertheless an integral part of that discourse and the “strategies that underlie and permeate” it. I continuously point to moments of understatement as constituting what Derrida calls a “hauntology,” or a persistence within a text that is neither fully absent nor fully present but has the power to unseat a claim being made.

There is an important link to history, or specifically ontology, here. Our ability to reproduce narrative is what situates us in relationship to a sociality, or more specifically, the telling of that sociality. For example, if I position myself as someone who pulled herself up by her bootstraps, I reproduce a core narrative of US exceptionalism that guarantees me membership within the nation. The more this narrative circulates and is countenanced by others, the more real the nation becomes not just as a horizon onto

which certain ideals may be willed but as a thing with human substance and history. But if we follow the Derridean idea that the languages of the self reduce and suppress some complex and hierarchical relationalities, then there exists a subtext to stories that makes a telling incomplete—that makes an ontology, the story of being unto a moment or nation or ideal, differential. In my analysis, what is often suppressed is what has historically not been granted representation or sufficient headspace—the racialized and gendered experiences that call into question the centrality of (white) life.

The story of institutional failure is linked to national subjectivity, particularly as crisis becomes the most recognizable myth of contemporary modern existence. Telling the story of institutional failure can be pointedly critical work, particularly when it reminds of histories of exclusionary and violent practices in the assignment of human value. But, more often than not, institutional failure is a way of reconciling with the loss of a national metaphor by producing something else in its place. Even more critical assessments of failure—namely those that call attention to flawed governmentalities like neoliberalism—have the tendency to produce a totalizing claim that settles the play the difference in favor of one, core analysis or explanation.

Although power is what I ultimately name as the condition and effect of storytelling, I contemplate the story itself as a scene of desire. We experience stories through affective intensities, and we often tell or listen to them in order to feel that we belong to something. The story of institutional failure is one riddled with pain; it reminds us of our limits and causes us to feel injury, loss, abandonment, and even betrayal. Yet inasmuch as these “bad feelings” may cause discomfort, they also create opportunity for the reassertion of one’s ideals, identity, and purpose. The institutional narrative is never
stable and must be constantly reiterated. Pleasure is produced when we name and assess these conditions and, importantly, when we make them a part of our life narratives. Although the encounter with failure can be painful, the relief it often provides is considerable. And following Bataille, it may even speak to a modern death drive—the desire to see the self represented at its limit, death, so that it may be made real. To tell the story of failure is, perhaps, to engage in a form of masochism.  

But as I will argue, telling the story of institutional failure is not always or necessarily about satiating a masochistic attachment to normativity. Quite the contrary. The pleasure taken in telling a story of institutional failure is also about reestablishing proximities between social groups. One of the challenges of the contemporary moment is the liberalization of precarity. Modern regimes of governance produce normative subjects by subcontracting the labor of regulation to those persons. In particular, by removing certain (already limited) social and economic protections but by exposing populations to greater political and economic risk, systems of governance do, in fact, precaritize populations. In turn, more and more people compete not only for physical resources and economic capital but cultural forms of recognition as well. The normative majority finds themselves positioned in the place of the historically marginalized, making what are otherwise longstanding and ongoing experiences with exposure and vulnerability for some appear novel to all. Stories and storytelling become part of the process of normalizing vulnerability as a metaphor for privileged existence.

In this project, I am more interested in the less obviously egregious stories of institutional failure. There, the story of institutional failure is stretched benevolently to

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44 My readings are derived from Margaret Iversen’s work in *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, (University Park: Penn State UP), 2007.
include non-normative and historically marginalized populations. Nevertheless, I argue, the stories told are still minoritizing, particularly in the assumptions they make and the genealogy they construct. The conditions that make certain white lives precarious may intersect with but are not ultimately the same reasons that make other(ed) gendered and racialized lives vulnerable. Inclusive narratives can thus produce their own exclusions. In short, there is no meta-narrative or mythology to which the totality of human experience with respect to institutional failure can be traced. The stories we tell matter, Hemmings might say, precisely because they reveal a fantasy or desire for the thing that will tell the final truth of—make the ultimate pronouncement on—who we are. This exists, as I explore, in both critical and cultural narratives.

**Narrativization, Late Liberalism, and the Ethical Stakes of Narrative Normativity**

If stories are the object of my analysis, narrativization is the mechanism by which those stories are made substantive. Indeed, I argue that institutional failure becomes remarkable the moment it is cast in a nationalist drama. Narrativization names the process by which a particular event is given a context. It is the condition of assimilating knowledge and, as such, is unavoidable. White argues for the ubiquity of narrativization, writing, “To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.”45 In concurrence, Roland Barthes avers that narrative is an ur-force, “simply there, like life itself.”46 But as Judith Roof notes, “narrative is not ‘simply there’; its shapes, assumptions, and operations manifest a complex, naturalized process of organization, relation, and

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connection." Narrative provides the illusion of the system it names, and without it, there can be no sensibility of time, space, and presence. Most importantly, then, narrativizing is linked to power, and the mandates of a social system that compels us to name what it cannot provide or guarantee.

Following Lacan, narrativization is what emerges the moment we become symbolic subjects. To give an account of oneself is to write a discourse that, following Derrida, endlessly defers us from completion; the linguistic markers that give meaning to our lives, while provisionally necessary, cannot name the totality they describe. As such, we add more language, more explanation, and more narration. The compulsion to narrate is not personal but rather ideological, argues Barthes; we internalize the command proffered by power to give an account of ourselves that approximates the expectations made of us. In this way, we could understand Althusser’s notion of interpellation as a process of narration. But, as Judith Butler makes clear in *Bodies That Matter*, narrative accounting does not complete the process of instantiation but creates additional contexts for elaboration. For Butler, narrative is a social scene. When hailed, the subject “cites,” or defers their essence unto a normative construct of gender, that then stands in for them. In this way, it is the “other” whose “hail” initiates the chain of signification, and it is the “other,” who, through his interpellative call, momentarily establishes the parameters of intelligibility. The contexts in which narrative unfurls are therefore contingent, as are the logics through which narratives gain traction.\(^4^8\)

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When we narrate, it is, as mentioned above, because of an absence left by power. This moment of institutional failure, caused by the various crises of modern democracy and capitalism, is no different. However much I caution against the standard periodization of modernity, I am willing to grant that there is something very material about the 2010s being a period of protracted crisis… or that it is at least heralded as such because of the number of heretofore privileged subjects finding themselves experiencing vulnerability for the first time. To say that the current moment is understood by many to be a time of crisis is not to argue for a certain urgency that people feel but rather the way people have normalized the sudden and unpredictable destructive effects of power. This is Lauren Berlant’s argument in *Cruel Optimism*. In it, she tracks certain affective intensities that emerge around political events – that one could deduce as crisis-making—without presuming their dramatic impact. Instead, through tracing the redaction of the historical present through “proprioceptive shifts,” Berlant explores how crisis is incorporated into everyday forms of life making and accounting practices. The idea that there exists a turbulent world outside human intention does not deter subjects but rather becomes ground for the construction of new narratives that try to capture and assemble fact into a historical arc that might be said to have been there all along.

According to David Harvey, “what is so striking about [crisis] is not so much the wholesale reconfiguration of physical landscapes but the dramatic changes in ways of thought and understanding, of institutional and dominant ideologies, of political allegiances and processes, of political subjectivities, of technologies and organizational

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forms, of social relations, of the cultural customs and tastes that inform daily life.”51 In short, it is the narrative context we give to crisis that resonates. This is perhaps true of any crisis period, as Harvey has long pointed out, “crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism,” for “it is in the course of crises that the instabilities of capitalism are confronted, reshaped, and re-engineered to create a new version of what [life and power] is about.”

Thus it is not only ourselves around which we produce a discourse but the coordinates of our lives—including institutions. Similarly to Max Weber, I push back against the connotation of institutions with “the status quo”—that their perceived function is to merely sustain the established order.52 Instead, I see institutions as reference points in the broader dramas of modernity. This is not to diminish their significance as material sites with longstanding histories but rather to honor their place within cultural imaginaries. Perhaps now, in this moment of crisis, the institution takes on even greater significance as a context from which to narrate the conditions of a life hampered by the very things that are supposed to give it meaning and essence and around which the institution acts as guarantor.

I chose to focus my critique on unpacking instances of narrative normativity. As I use the phrase, narrative normativity signals the reproduction of dominant—and at times violent—social norms through accounts that variously appear matter-of-fact, critical, and/ or well-intended. I am very much inspired by the queer and feminist scholarship on leftist complicities—particularly the work of Jack Halberstam, Lisa Duggan, Judith


This critical turn in predominantly queer feminist theorizing emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 moment and the war of terror to point out the collusion between certain US gay and lesbian subjects and the US nation-state. Specifically, these scholars theorize that the incorporation sexual civil rights comes at a moment when the claims of US democracy are called into question by its military engagements and carceral practices. The “homonormative” citizen arises in this moment where the massive human rights violences perpetrated against largely brown and black populations that would call US democracy into question are alibied by measures that position it as shelter for the aggrieved. The progressivist narrative of US history is invoked by claims that “love won” or “it gets better.” Sexual progressivism cleaves to US exceptionalism, and the pairing becomes the ground on which discrimination is projected onto other cultures.

What continues to strike me about this critique is how readily normative narratives becomes circulated among progressives as the only imaginable horizon for the articulation of a leftist politics. Chandan Reddy’s concept of “legitimate violence” is helpful here; as “violence that one cannot refuse,” many queer subjects find themselves conscripted into supporting efforts toward marriage equality or Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, despite however much they expand the powers of the state to define queer life, because they exist as some of the only possible horizons for the acknowledgement of queer existence. If we contemplate Hemmings’ point that it is impossible not to narrate, then it follows that many of the forms our narrating assumes do place us in discomforting

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positions. Additionally, I have been struck by some of the push-back these critiques have received. Scott Morgensen, in particular, reminds that the emphasis given to the post-9/11 moment as historical rupture does not always allow us to see the ways that racial exclusion has always already been the foundation of membership to the nation.\(^{55}\) In short, the critiques proffered by these scholars allow us to grasp the at times coercive nature of narration as particularly trenchant in certain historical moments but as a continuous aspect of citizenship making.

The narration of failure, in particular, and its various iterations—of injury, of loss, of precarity— as a mode of belonging has been a persistent aspect of US national cultures. As Lauren Berlant argues in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, suffering is a key to how US citizenship is constituted in a political system that relies on social hierarchy to function. To be “counted” as part of the nation, one must be identified and, subsequently, positioned. And as such, she writes, “the experience of social hierarchy is intensely individuating, yet it also makes people public and generic: it turns them into *kinds* of people who are both attached to and underdescribed by the identities that organize them.”\(^{56}\) She here describes a phenomenon not unlike Derrida’s dual concepts of *différance* and *erasure*. We are never completely part of nation, as our route into belonging—identity— always already defers our presence in its inability to fully capture the complexity of our material realities. In turn, we cling to markers that, while provisionally necessary, are epistemically violent and, worse, relationally dependent. Berlant goes on, “this paradox of partial legibility is behind much of the political and personal anger that arises in scenes of misrecognition in everyday life—at work, on the

\(^{55}\) See Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2011.

\(^{56}\) Berlant, *Queen of America*, 1.
street, at home, under the law, and even in aesthetic experience.” There is something unremarkable, indeed prosaic, about “citizen trauma,” even as it presents a compelling politics.\textsuperscript{57} As Berlant observes, its “public rhetoric has become so pervasive and competitive in the United States that it obscures basic differences among modes of identity, hierarchy, and violence. Mass national pain threatens to turn into banality, a crumbling archive of dead signs and tired plots.”\textsuperscript{58}

Yet this takes on a particular valance under the systems of power through which life currently takes shape. Late liberalism, as feminist anthropologist, Elizabeth Povinelli coins it, describes a particular set of social conditions and governmentalities devised around personal, political, and institutional failures. In \textit{Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism}, Povinelli suggests another phase of liberalism beyond the neoliberal that turns its attention toward and revises its official policies around inequality and state violence. Povinelli defines late liberalism as “the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements,” adding that “in a broader sense late liberalism is a belated response to the challenge of social difference and the alternative social worlds and projects potentially sheltered there.”\textsuperscript{59}

The initial promises of an earlier neoliberal period—to redistribute wealth and value through market solutions—have reached their breaking points in the uneven flows of global capital and transnational labor/migration, the question of the border, and the (de)composition of citizenship. These circumstances call into question the legitimacy of

\textsuperscript{57} Berlant, 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 2-3.
democracy to persist as the dominant political metaphor for freedom, justice, and equality. Late liberalism sees constituencies as “failed” in light of political and economic circumstances that question the state’s legitimacy. It administers to the myriad ways that people, in light of more recent events, are responding to the dissolution of the modern welfare state. It develops regimes of governance that mediate life through what Povinelli calls the “tenses of abandonment”—the making live, letting live, making die, and letting die that (re)construct human value through various points of dysfunction. As Jasbir Puar has argued elsewhere, power has found its strategic situation in disaster, where crisis prompts the development of new methodologies of survival/capacitation or increases social attrition/debilitation, from which population aggregates are established.

Late liberalism takes precedence through the ways that subjects claim injury, or narrate themselves as failed. And to be clear, this process is a way of establishing social value by prioritizing narrative claims. Late liberalism is a pernicious social eugenics in sheep’s clothing. Modern liberal states could not sustain the claim to democracy while engaging in facially discriminative practices. That constitutive anxiety is resolved by adopting new “formal or informal policies of cultural recognition as a strategy for addressing the challenge of internal and external differences.” The state finds a legitimating context for its violence by shifting its rhetorical position. Late liberalism maintains its pretense toward inclusion by “bracketing” the “tense of the other,” in turn suffocating the terms on which one is able to name their history. Thus the same system of governance that compels us to feel failed, and to necessarily name how we are failed in order to achieve legitimacy, also functions to silence the Other. The discursive cultures of

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60 Povinelli, ibid.
the racial state function alibi its violences and eschew its accountability to the parties it has long injured.

Although not officially sponsored by the state, the sentiment, “all lives matter” is one such instance where we see this scapegoating occur. Police and even white supremacist organizations have very successfully appropriated the “black lives matter” mantra to imagine the precariousness of white life. More egregious sentiments, such as “police lives matter,” are intended to diminish the activism of “black lives matter” as reverse discrimination. More apolitical claims that “everyone counts, everyone matters” are intended to create certain affinities between Black and white experience as fundamentally human, thus claiming a moral superiority that is absent in nuanced claims. In any case, these declarations are representative of a late liberal attempt to (re)narrative injustice and the threat to human life as universally shared and experienced. Through a post-racial relationality that equates the state-sponsored killing of Black and Brown persons with the supposed risks faced by racially plural/neutral police officers, white life is sanctified, while institutional failure can be anything from the symbolic colonization of people of color in the press to limited funds for patrols.

Narrativization, and particularly, deeply affective narrativization that entertains life and death scenarios, is common practice. “Epic” portrayals of great loss, injury, abandonment, and betrayal make clear that conditions are unjust in ways that monger sympathy—and indeed human value—for those who have not been historically jeopardized by the whims of white heterocapitalism or machinations of the disciplinary bureaucratic state order. We see this in the examples I elaborate above. But here I want to focus on the issue of de/valuation and, extendedly, myopia. To be clear, the social
conditions of late liberalism mandate that we narrate through precariousness. Yet the question remains, is it possible to talk about a life at risk without stampeding another’s claim to the same thing?

In *Social Death*, Lisa Cacho argues that the frames of recognition through which we are able to name the injustices done to us by institutions and other such relays of power operate on a constitutive exclusion. To seek redress, and moreover, to have our injuries acknowledged and codified depends upon there being someone else who is rightfully failed. She explains:

> The production and ascription of human value are both violent and relational, both differential and contextual. Value is ascribed through explicitly or implicitly disavowing relationships to the already devalued and disciplined categories of deviance and nonnormativity. When we distinguish ourselves from unlawful and outlawed status categories, we implicitly insist that these socio-legal categories are not only necessary but should be reserved and preserved for the ‘genuinely’ lazy (welfare recipients), ‘undoubtedly’ immoral (marrying for citizenship), and ‘truly’ dangerous (gang violence). When we reject these criminalized others of color, we leave less room for questioning why such status categories are automatically and categorically devalued. While these tactics may be politically strategic and even necessary at times, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that they work because a sympathetic public can register that some people are the wrong targets of legitimate laws. They work only if a sympathetic public already accepts that discrimination against not valued others is legitimate and necessary.\(^6^1\)

Cacho is thinking specifically of the ways that we seek recognition and redress for often legally codified injuries. But I believe that the points work here as well. Institutional failure is, as she explains elsewhere, a “symbolic colonization,” where the terms by which we are able to conceive of the institution as failing are also those that control the terms on which we are able to explore difference or name it as a center condition of

\(^{61}\) *Cacho, Social Death*, 18.
being.\textsuperscript{62} Even if our narratives of institutional failure seek to incorporate, rather than rank, experiences of differently constituted subjects, the sense that this “shouldn’t be happening” fails to comprehend how injustices have, do, and continue to happen—to particular subjects—and happen in order to make the conditions of normative belonging remarkable, especially when they go awry.

I would be remiss not to discuss the centrality of post-racialism as an additional enabling condition of contemporary narrativization. Post-racialism, colorblind multiculturalism, or neoliberal multiculturalism are synonymous terminologies that ostensibly advocate for the importance of diverse representation and recognition under state forms but also delegitimate anti-racisms that address the material disparities and structural encumbrances linked to US racial formation. As Catherine Squires argues in \textit{The Post-Racial Mystique}, post-racialism has many reference points in the concealment of discrimination. Squires frames post-racialism as mystique, a problematic that disguises its own naming.\textsuperscript{63} Echoing Melamed, post-racialism operates as the official antiracism of the US state and national cultures, filling out for us how we are supposed to encounter race as well as how we are permitted certain liberties when race is made a non-issue. The narration of institutional failure is not always explicitly a manifestation of post-racialism in its more pernicious state—the total denial of racial difference and, worse, making a discussion of racism, racist. But it is strategically amnesic or at least willfully ignorant of not only how differently we encounter contexts of institutional failure but the historical dimensions of our relationship with those systems.

\textsuperscript{62} Here, Cacho makes reference to Isabel Molina’s work on Latinas and the media.
In fact, the central argument of this project is that the narration of institutional failure is myopic and occulting and that even more than producing normative notions of violence and injury, participates in a long standing erasure of the conditions that make lives legible. I am in direct citation of Afro-pessimist thinking in arguing that the narration of institutional failure, so central to modern life making, relies on the erasure of Black life and experience. Social eugenics, and more specifically, institutional racism, is the more appropriate context of institutional failure. Even before the neoliberal moment, populations of color were being disserviced by institutions that made white life remarkable through Black exclusion—i.e. through marriage and property rights. Yet this context is often omitted, as Sylvia Wynter explains that humanism privileges white, western, and heteromasculinist life as paradigmatic—intentionally suppressing that which would disrupt it as universal reference point as variously unhuman, subhuman, and overall, outside the realm of consideration.64

As such, she writes against the “human genres” that emerged out of the enlightenment to reinforce what is human and what is invariably other. Wynter writes of a process where the discovery of the “self” (and its cultures) was the moment the “Other” was created and, as Saidiya Hartman explains, was made to “function as the signifier of the symbolic death to our present conception of the human being. This other, called an alien, a stranger, if not entirely a different species, was ‘place[ed] outside the ‘sanctified universe of obligation,’ and thus deemed disposable.” An unnatural distinction, the world created by man is one full of narratives and analytics that repeat, so as to naturalize, this fundamental distinction. It is not merely through grand and encompassing physical

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colonization that this elision occurs but through narrative as well; hegemony goes to work by controlling the terms on which we can name and assess a given situation. I believe that the narrativization of institutional failure is an occasion for this distinction to be made over again. The “human genres” of neoliberalism, of failure, precariousness, and so forth, provide a context for the human to be rediscovered, rehistoricized, and reiterated, through logics of appropriation.

Indeed, when the languages of debility, injury, harm, and injustice are reserved for white experiences, and/or when the temporal dimensions of institutional failure locate and contain it within the contemporary moment, we are unable to see certain longer histories of failure and to assess how the failure of racialized/gendered subjects is the condition on which the institution is allowed to persist in the first place. For narrative, and narrativization, is about creating order out of something. It is about creating substance and producing meaning, historicity, and providing a sensibility to a given context. I do not believe that even our critical narratives have the ability to hold sufficient space for the exploration of institutional failure as something that is essential to the constitution of a white modernity.

Notes on the Methodological Context and Stakes of this Project

Despite a marked lacking reference to “women” and, at times, even to “gender,” I want to be clear that this is a project that was born out of an education in Feminist Studies that exceeds a decade of learning. The study of failure within Feminist Studies has a long history. In fact, the manner by which feminists are able to prove the ruse of gender is by pointing out where, in Judith Butler’s words, its work “invariably fails to complete.”65

The process of denaturalizing patriarchy and other such related norms of power was by

naming their *failure* to capture an essence, a whole, a totality. The trace, or what must be subjugated in order for a given subjectivity or ideological construct of gender to appear whole, was often the concern of these critiques—namely because its persistence as an uncontainable excess could topple the totalizing claims of hegemony. But for critical race and post-colonial feminists, such as Gayatri Spivak, that trace is doubly subjugated. Even marginalized genders—i.e. white femininities—are implicitly contrasted to the captures that produce women of color as substrata. Spivak and others have advocated putting critical pressure on the accepted frameworks of feminist critique for, despite their contribution to theorizing power, they also reproduce it. That approach inspires my work here: what do our critiques fail to capture, and how do they reproduce the erasure or elision of lives that have never been fully enshrined by the paradigms of modernity?66

Beyond that basic critique, this project is centrally engaged with a group of feminist theorists that have emerged to take on the nuances of the contemporary moment as playing out longstanding histories of human de/valuation. Cited throughout this project, those scholars include Jodi Melamed, Lisa Cacho, and Elizabeth Povinelli. I see them as contributing to a tradition of Afro-pessimist feminist thinking that critiques the production of “human genres” as inherently raced and gendered white and heteromasculinist. Their questions, concerning how we respond to institutional racism, present a sobering response: that we move beyond the social, civil and legal structures of recognition that presume, require, or impute human status differentially. As I engage them, they help to explain the need to disavowal ourselves of the assumption that institutions are designed or may be made to better serve our purposes. When we inveigh an institutional practice, it is usually because we seek solution; following the line of

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66 This is in reference to “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
thinking developed in those works, however, I argue for greater ambivalence around the institutional purpose.

Moreover, I cite them to understand the limitations of critical discourses as a refusal to engage, directly, with the limitations attendant to modern thought and theorizing. Within gender and sexuality studies, it has become common practice to rely on certain paradigms, such as neoliberalism, or modes of conduct, such as biopolitics, to explain a range of contemporary social practices and their effects. But these critical placeholders often produce exclusions that they are unable to explain or for which they are unable to hold space. This project therefore joins a scholarly tradition exemplified by those authors that takes on an insurrectionary, if loving, approach to the studies of modernity coming from the academic left.

Much of this analysis concerns the appending of minoritized interests to dominant ones—whether it is through the white appropriation of racialized rhetorics that also encodes a denial of racialized pain or if it is through analogizing experiences so as to generalize the violences of neoliberalism. This project also borrows from the work of scholars, such as Chandan Reddy, who have explored the strategic acknowledgement of difference as an opportunity for states and their actors to determine how race will be “known, placed, naturalized, and used” to actualize white injury and alibi state violence. I explore both explicit and less-than-obvious examples of where we see this play out. I owe a great deal of my inspiration to Lauren Berlant’s work in Cruel Optimism, where she explores the construction of precariousness across social positionalities that involves both a recognition and denial of the failure of power.

One text in particular is often cited when I discuss this dissertation project. Published in 2011, Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* argues for failure’s place within social justice projects as an “alternative way of knowing and being” that is not “optimistic” or “mired” in a “nihilistic critical dead end”\(^{68}\) but instead promotes the understanding that, “[u]nder certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”\(^{69}\) This is not my understanding of failure. At times, Halberstam’s project seems to revisit a tired trope from postmodernism. Why fear the reality that our lives are the contingent effect of various discursive practices that disperse and disseminate meaning across incommensurate sites? At other junctures, it also seems to make a noncommittal materialist critique. Why heed the biopolitical call to continue engaging in modes of productivity and resiliency that only further the objectives of capitalism? His argument suggests that queers have always failed and proffer an indispensable blueprint for survival to those who find themselves impossibly tethered to the cruel optimism of the late liberal US nation-state. But in doing so, he forgets how those queers may not see the political or theoretical value of being “unmade.” Making queer/ed lives or methodologies available as a metaphor or tactical strategy especially goes against the grain of this project.

The methodology I espouse is, broadly, a cultural/literary approach that utilizes the tools of rhetorical analysis. I offer symptomatic readings of my various sites of inquiry, that I engage as “text.” I pull my understanding of “text” from Edward Said’s work in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. There, Said argues for an approach to

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\(^{69}\) Halberstam, 2.
cultural study that resists the formulaic conventions of a disciplinary practice as well as
the trendiness of certain theoretical paradigms. The context itself, and the questions we
ask of it, notes Said, should determine the nature of the response. As such, Said argues
for an awareness of how the text has many complex and complicating attachments to the
material worlds into which it may be read. Proceeding from one methodological approach
or predetermining analytical importance may dull critical sensibilities. The approach
appeals to me, of course, as I search for ways to critique power that cannot be simplified
to a concern for neoliberalism. Moreover, my questions are not predetermined
disciplinary expectations or even methodological approach.

My chapters variously read through the lenses of theory, literary and media
studies, auto-ethnography, and historical materialism. Nevertheless, I do not want to
portray Feminist Studies as having no internal logic or, as Brown might say, a “there
there.” Whatever my entry point, my questions are centrally invested in a core feminist
concern: what are the politics by which lives comes to matter differently or not at all?
What are the logics of power operative in a given situation that create the conditions of
human de/valuation? Where are the complicities within our own critical assessments?
How has the attempt to ascertain, or indeed determine, the grounds on which institutional
failure occurs created—even if unintentionally—a hierarchy of suffering? How is
causality established in ways that do not attend to longstanding histories of devastation in
ways that are not only myopic but deprivileging of the whiteness that is often doing the
claiming? Feminist scholar, bell hooks, notes that feminism is a movement to end sexist

71 This is derived from the argument that Wendy Brown makes in “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,”
where the loss of woman as proper disciplinary object is argued to have led to the field’s identity crisis. To
lack a “there, there,” is to have no discernible objective goal.
oppression, or more specifically the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. In that truest definition, this is an avowedly feminist studies project.\footnote{bell hooks, “Feminism: A Transformational Politic,” \textit{Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference} (1990): 185-193.}

\textit{How to Read this Dissertation}

This dissertation is organized into two parts: the first, a response to critical narratives of institutional failure and, the second, a response to cultural narratives of the same. Chapters one and two explore the construction of failure narratives within particular institutional locales or at least as they are curated within an intellectual or academic context. Chapter One, “Narrating Crisis Ordinary from the Left: Institutional Failure in Popular Progressive Text,” picks up on the discussion had earlier on in this chapter around neoliberalism. Many leftist intellectuals both within and outside the academy heavily rely on neoliberalism as an explanation for myriad injustices that can be traced to a problematic of governance. I am not the first to tackle institutional failure or to remark on its centrality to the practices of citizenship.

However, the popular works of political nonfiction that I engage frame institutional failure as a contemporary phenomenon and one that is inherently linked to the over-privileging of market ideology. I argue two things in response: that the perceived “newness” of this phenomenon relies on the implicit denial that institutional failure distends from racial/colonial systems of power and, secondly, that the critical analytics of neoliberalism (precariousness, precarity) cannot fully capture these more pernicious forms of violence. In some respect, then, the articulation of institutional failure is part and parcel of a culture of colorblind racism that has devalued difference in a way that ultimately allows for the discursive prerogative of whiteness to go unremarked. The chapter ends with some discussion of the various appropriations of Black Lives Matter as
evidencing discomfort with critical race critique that must be resolved through appropriation or analogy.

The second chapter, “Failure Redux: Trigger Warnings and the Re-articulation of Academic Feminist Failure under Austerity Regimes” builds from observations made in the first chapter. Since Bill Readings wrote that the academy was in “ruins” the moment it became a profit-seeking institution in the late twentieth century, failure talk within the liberal arts became common. The prospect of being rendered disposable under a system that defined value based on marketable competencies caused many within the humanities to anxiously reflect on their field’s longevity. In particular, feminist studies practitioners narrated various resistances to as well as reservations about their lacking “there, there” that was made all too apparent by accounting logics into which feminist analytics—of intersectionality—could not be easily translated. The loss of “woman” was thus lamented. And many centered that complaint in the persistent critique from feminists of color, who named and criticized the implicit whiteness of the category, “woman” as a failure in and of itself.

The whiteness of the field was never fully addressed in the subsequent decades but rather eclipsed as the “neoliberalization” of the academy arrested critical attentions. The whiteness of the field—as a point of contention—continues to be occulted by discussions of neoliberal failure that seem to demand broad and encompassing critiques of academic precarity irrespective of intra-disciplinary dramas. Yet Feminist Studies’ struggles with whiteness persist. The debate around trigger warnings encapsulates many of these points. Many feminist studies practitioners use the pervasiveness of discursive violence to advocate for the proscription of certain “obscene” materials that may offend
or even wound vulnerable persons. Trigger warnings may not always pinpoint materials as unilaterally problematic, but they act as a rallying point under which we can air collective grievances, and, for this reason, I caution against them. Trigger warnings construct a methodological “there, there”—establishing the terms on which feminist knowledge production will occur and to what avail. But the points at which we are failed are at once varied and often predate the neoliberal moment; a fuller discussion of those conditions is prohibited by a mechanism that makes the discussion of violence, violent. In these more recent conversations, academic failure is posited as something more complex than just neoliberalism; but, the response engineered to confront that violence nevertheless prioritizes the vantage point of white feminism and its points of dysfunction.

The first two chapters unpack the narrative strategies of the left, perhaps frustratingly in a moment when the right’s narration of failure demands response. Nevertheless, I want to delink narrative normativity from conservativism so that we might better grasp the narrativization of institutional failure as part of the governmentality of late liberalism and the post-racial multiculturalism from which we cannot so easily unthink ourselves. The subsequent chapters, “Economies of [Institutional] Abandonment: Misery, Desire, and Belonging in AMC’s The Walking Dead” and “The Rightful Place of Failure: Orange is the New Black and the Spectacle of Black Death” are two quintessential cultural studies in how institutional failure is imagined by nominally liberal or at least consciously social and politically competent entities.

The first of the two chapters looks at the popular television serial, The Walking Dead, as a metaphor of institutional failure that erases the conditions under which white
injury might be held accountable to its overwriting. The zombie apocalypse creates an ostensible tabula rasa for race-neutral claims to institutional abandonment to emerge unproblematically. The core narrative is clear: social hierarchy is not the will of the people but rather the structure of institutions; in their absence, we can finally be “human” or, rather, post-human. The show makes certain attempts at being socially conscious in its casting, although ultimately centers its plot development on its protagonist, a former police officer who spends the better part of the series articulating a nostalgia for the “old order.” As such, the hollowing out of the institution and its lacking human infrastructure create the conditions of a post-racialist fantasy where even something like the prison becomes a scene of white death.

The chapter then turns its attention to the ambivalence of Black characters on the show and, particularly, the death of the Black child. The present absence of Black children, and their deaths, haunts a narrative whose plot develops around the discovery of safer spaces for the children of protagonist, Rick Grimes, to live out a normal-enough life. For brief periods of time, certain Black parents mourning the loss of their children offer a counter-narrative to the show’s discourse. Radically out of sync with the pace of the narrative, they call attention to the social politics of racialized anguish and persist within a temporality that is markedly “anti-social”—i.e. not future intending nor backwards looking, but counter hegemonic. Ultimately, their commitment to their pain fades as they learn to “give up their ghosts” and mourn the same social that founds Rick’s cruel optimism. Although I am tempted to read these characters’ reconciliation with Rick as evidencing an arc of Black exclusion, I argue that their narrative detours are jolting enough to remain significant.
If *The Walking Dead* represents an evacuation of the institutional politics/histories that may give us a critical sensibility, then *Orange is the New Black* is an abundant portrayal of those same politics/histories with the explicit purpose of critical viewing. Producer, Jenji Kohman, calls the series her “activism” and explains that the goal of the show is to make viewers more aware of the gendered violences of the prison industrial complex. The show grants especial attention to the backstories of its racially diverse cast, allowing viewers to see the trajectory of institutional failures that landed each character a prison term. Nevertheless, critics argue, the show does not escape its own critique; racial stereotyping abounds, and the narrative itself is told through the lens of white and upper crust protagonist, Piper Coleman.

Piper’s bungling colorblind anti-racism may be the connective tissue between the “realistic” narrative and a predominantly white audience reluctant to admit their complicity with carceral injustice. Yet this interpellative gesture is also a distancing mechanism, where sympathetic viewers can absolve their prejudices in Piper’s humorous—and even at times discomforting—myopia. Moreover, as one critique notes, the show is a white savior narrative for the new millennium where one privileged woman’s stint in prison provides necessary insight into the broader structural injustices governing the lives of women who are poor and/or of color. Without this presence, notes Kohman, it would lack viewer appeal.

The chapter ends by focuses on the death of inmate Poussey Washington, who lost her life at the hands of an officer during a hunger strike that turned hostile. Poussey’s passing is exceptional; as a member of the Black middle class, her non-violent drug offense, however common, is not established as cultural pathology but rather personal
recklessness. The room made for her humanization is not radical but rather in an effort to make Black suffering amenable to a white viewing audience who can see their own life narratives reflected in her mistakes. The spectacular nature of her passing captured on screen led many to call the episode “trauma porn” while inviting sentiments of deep regret for her passing. Viewers have surplus sympathy for her death, as the factors that downplay her blackness—class privilege, education, and world travels—are also those that make her more proximate to whiteness. Her death is that of an unexpected martyr for those aggressed in the struggle against prison privatization; as a supplement to whiteness, Poussey becomes an almost “post-racial (wo)man’s burden,” sacrificing herself for the plight of the institutionally betrayed. Thus even when we have a narrative that emphasizes the color of institutional failure, it is nevertheless mediated through white(washed) injury.

Each chapter also centers a particular affect, respectively: injury/precariousness, loss, abandonment, and betrayal. I do not always explore these sentiments as structures in their own right, as Sara Ahmed urges us to do. Instead, I see them as scaffolding claims of narrative normativity. Precariousness describes the condition of living on the brink or edge of certain destruction. In contemporary articulations of institutional failure, being injured or precaritized typically means having vulnerability unexpectedly thrust upon you without guarantee of resolve. Yet, precariousness may more accurately describe being barred from certain official statuses that offer redress; mongering the affect of precariousness for the newly injured does not allow us to conceptualize precarity as the condition of being minoritized. Similarly, the loss expressed by many in this moment is a lament of prior modes that were never fully inclusive. Indeed, to express loss, one must
have had standing. These affects encapsulate the narrative rendering of institutional failure I explore in the first two chapters.

Abandonment and betrayal pervade cultural discourses and are harnessed through similarly occulting logics. To be abandoned is to be unrecognized. It is to go without what is promised to others. It is similar to betrayal in that abandonment can often be the result of banking on a promise that never comes into fruition, but abandonment does not necessarily engender an economy of blame, where there are discernible entities responsible for one’s misfortune. Instead, abandonment is a more protracted experience with a fuzzy causality. The politics of abandonment often occur at different scales from the state to the community to the family and are most usually the affective capture at which one could narrate the experiences of the unstatused, the migrant laborer or the refugee. But in the context in which I explore it, abandonment is an analytic through which to first imagine and then air grievances about the fragility of white life under an unstable political economic system.

Betrayal encodes a more precise victimology. Being betrayed may mean feeling abandoned, but it also involves being injured and feeling loss with respect to having something taken away from you or lacking something that is guaranteed to others. Betrayal is what many feel when crucial information is withheld or when a politician, corporation, or government leads people under false pretenses. As I discuss it, betrayal is when an opportunity emerges for actionable critique. Betrayal is what happens when the criminal justice system is revealed to disproportionately oppress minoritized populations with the fewest structural protections. Yet as I argue, that feeling of injustice is pluralized, as the failures of that system are found to be broader and linked to the
oppression of white individuals—the acclaimed documentary series, *Making a Murder*, would further evidence this point. Thus the reference to affect helps to make clear the many valances through which institutional is narrated.

I conclude here with a brief discussion of my title. The titling of this project, “Fail Epic” is a reversal of the colloquial phrase, “epic failure,” a hyperbolic description of anything from a flop at the box office to a slip on a pavement to a foiled party plan. There is something tongue-in-cheek about saying “epic failure,” as it often names an event unworthy of such a dramatic description. I play on those words not to diminish the significance of what is being claimed in these instances but rather to point out the ways that institutional failure becomes the scandal of privileged life while failing to capture some of the more egregious histories and politics of institutional aggression toward minoritized populations.

As Lauren Berlant puts it, the shock of the contemporary moment is that “crisis finally hit the middle class” who have not been prepared to face such obstacles. There is a certain irony to narrating institutional failure but there is also something very serious about the prioritization of hegemonic reference points. Plotting failure along a white trajectory dulls us to the reality that what is being named as new is not novel. This dissertation is thus an examination of what happens when the hegemonic comes to occupy the category of difference. It is interested in asking why that happens but more concerned with how and to what avail. As I argue, the new occupation of normativity—the obsession with feeling precaritized, vulnerable, injured, or lost—is part of a longstanding and ongoing process of determining which lives are worthy of commenting and which must be withheld in the excesses of modernity.
“Narrating ‘Crisis Ordinary’ From the Left:
Institutional Failure in Popular Progressive Text”

*Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming. [...] The extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure. In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least. [...] While people comfort themselves with stories about beating the system or being defeated by it, they ‘continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly and obsolete forms.’”

In this chapter, I explore Lauren Berlant’s concept of “crisis ordinariness” as it produces within even the US liberal mainstream a sense of precariousness that must be narratively elaborated. US cultures find themselves disorganized by the chaotic conditions of late capitalism. The realization that our life meaning and purpose is bound to something that wounds is cause for crisis. Thus when crisis presents, it is in response to something that is already in motion. Crisis is, therefore, a time of reflexivity—an opportunity to retell our story, often to resolve the contradictions of life making from which we are not fully able to extricate ourselves. I argue that narrative emerges in what Berlant calls “the impasse induced by crisis.” As people “tread water,” or scramble to find modes of living on in light of proliferating pressures and a lack of guarantees, they become inventive. They seek explanations for why things exist as they do. More

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74 “Crisis ordinariness” is Berlant’s term for the normalization of crisis. Crisis is a new mode of political, economic, and cultural organization, such that it cannot be seen as exceptional to these processes. People are, therefore, living in a suspended state of chaos where life is reduced to its essential management. She elsewhere describes this as a post-traumatic state of existence. The potentially ableist reading of cultures as “post-traumatic” may diminish, in importance and significance, the specific somatic and neurological experience of trauma.
specifically, they remap their social ontologies in order to make the things that seem out of their control, but to which they remain tethered, intentional.  

Historically, the story of crisis has been one of exceptionalism where one’s fitness for (re)instantiation within the nation, community, family or any other such horizon of identification that had been temporarily disturbed was premised on personal triumph, an ability to overcome the odds. Although this persists, it is increasingly becoming the case that one’s belonging to this particular moment is based upon one’s ability to be perennially injured by it. People now seek out an explanation that buttresses their claim to feeling utterly failed by what should in theory support them and to have the documentable injuries to prove it. This, of course, requires us to think about what constitutes an injury, how it is named, codified, and how it is recognized—particularly as injurious claims are established through logics of comparative devaluation. The rhetoric of conservative politics becomes the clearest example of how injury acts as the new social covenant. Whether victims demoralized by institutional policies or rouge defectors rejecting them, the American right is a rich case study of the failure ethos. But in this chapter, I explore how progressive text produces a historical present based on a different sense of collective woundedness that is nevertheless myopic about the critical differences in how we experience, or more importantly, become constituted by crisis.

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75 I work with the language of ontology to suggest that the stories people tell are meta-historical in nature. When people tell the story of their present, they are seeking to gain control of those conditions, prior to their emergence as reality—as something that was there all along. The disruptiveness of this moment occasions a retelling, especially as that retelling holds out the possibility for recognition and re-legitimation.

76 These positionalities are ones described by Guy Standing in *The Precariat: the New Dangerous Class.*
I argue that the documentation of institutional failure is a way of siting crisis that emplots a white ontology. The crisis conditions of late capitalism are often problematized through/as instances of human devaluation—and rightfully so. Yet the tendency to extrapolate certain universals about the precariousness of life itself from instances of racialized violence or abandonment occults the conditions out of which such violence stems while also making whiteness necessary to its critique. Critiques of neoliberalism, and, in particular, the language of “precariousness” versus “precarity” represents the left’s struggle to distinguish particularized experiences of racialized oppression from the more general (sic: universal) circumstances out of which they arise. I suggest that this struggle is due in part to the fact that these manifestations do not share the same basis. I end by contemplating the desire for these rather grand and encompassing narratives of failure and pointing to some of the ethical conundrums—namely in recognition—that arise from our practices of naming and narrating institutional failure. It is not that I disagree with the assessments I explore below but rather that I become concerned with their meta-discursive implications and, in particular, their tendency to tell the story of (white) injury vis-à-vis a displaced racialized context. As a whole, this chapter responds to ways that neoliberalism has arrested feminist attentions as the dominant metaphor of our political modernity. I intend to prove that the overreliance on neoliberalism as a critical placeholder does not permit us to engage the more intersectional complexity of these politics.

77 Emplotment is a term used by scholar of narrative, Hayden White, to describe the filter through which certain realities become known and circulated as truth. I use the term here as a verb, to suggest that institutional failure becomes a context for the representation of a particular reality that takes on the totalizing guise of truth. And moreover to indicate that it is through such an emplotment that history is made. This term allows me to suggest that there is a certain materiality to what is being narrated but that the particular sequencing and assembly of events within the life experiences of the privileged constitute a sensibility that cannot widely be shared.
It Starts with Neoliberalism: *Shock Doctrine* and the Onset of Institutional Crisis

Any strategy based on exploiting the window of opportunity opened by a traumatic shock relies heavily on the element of surprise. A state of shock, by definition, is a moment when there is a gap between fast-moving events and the information that exists to explain them. [...]. Without a story, we are, as many of us [are] intensely vulnerable to those people who are ready to take advantage of the chaos for their own ends. As soon as we have a new narrative that offers a perspective on the shocking events, we become reoriented and the world begins to make sense once again. (Naomi Klein. *Shock Doctrine*).\(^78\)

It is summer 2010, a week after my sister’s early August nuptials, and my mother and I are recovering from the stressful affair “down the shore.” She is reading the recently published, *Shock Doctrine*, by Naomi Klein, and continuously interrupting my revisiting of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* to relay various anecdotes about the mishandling of Katrina. Hiding my exhaustion behind virtually effacing sunglasses, I beat her to every punch. I rightfully predict that Klein will identify the shift toward neoliberal economic policy as reason for the fallout. More precisely, she will, and does, claim that neoliberal ideologies extolling the merits of supply-side economics and free market reforms have limited elasticity in light of social realities. Neoliberalism does not create conditions of unfettered opportunity but rather provides governing bodies a rationale for the radical neglect of historically underserved populations.

“Reducing all arenas of life to market logic”\(^79\) or rather, reducing people to cash value, creates a new legitimating context for racialized capitalism where the uneven exposure to risk and vulnerability long faced by poor, urban populations of color is conveniently written off as a matter of personal, rather than of structural, unaccountability. In turn, such populations are abandoned on the grounds of their alleged


unproductivity, for as many of us in the liberal arts are want to say, neoliberalism assigns worth to people based upon their profitability. In short, neoliberalism is a social order that makes its people assume the risk of a disenfranchised state and the whims of a newly privatized economy where corporate authority prevails over human sustainability. However much the American public fails to realize this, they could not contend with the fact that Katrina—a natural disaster that should have claimed its victims in equal measure—disproportionately impacted poor African American communities of the southern gulf and that those very same communities continue to disproportionately suffer in the aftermath. I assume that this is the shock: that our social sensibilities are ideologically manufactured. And worse, that this fiction is carried out through the institutions that should by design serve, rather than fail, their publics.

Resting my book on the arm of my beach chair, I further elaborate to her the dehumanizing effects of neoliberalism. This is a system, I tell her, where one’s ability to ward off certain literal and figurative death depends upon personal finances—something that is tough when the conditions of your life are, as Berlant would say, impediments to your flourishing: i.e. when you are bankrupted by a poor education system, inadequate access to nutritious food and health care, incarceration, lacking status, or to put it more bluntly, when you are poor and/or undocumented and/or of color. Katrina laid bare the core mythology of neoliberalism—namely that its pronouncement to have wiped clean the slate of social difference as a barrier to progress in fact reproduces old divisions as governing bodies use this as an excuse to actively divest from areas and populations that have been long underserved by the state and global capitalism.
As Klein argues, the architects of neoliberalism championed (what we now might call) its post-racial mystique.\textsuperscript{80} Under a system of governance that displaces the structuring binaries of the Keynesian welfare state with one core division between productive/unproductive citizens, more kinds of people may, in theory, find themselves “folded into” citizenship. \textsuperscript{81}However, people are \textit{historically-constituted} subjects, marked by longstanding social struggle and neglect that make it impossible to be enterprising under such terms. The neoliberal era is thus marked by fantasy, deceit, and the bracketing of the social problematics it names but does not resolve. As Lisa Duggan reminds, the “master terms and categories of Liberalism are [ultimately] rhetorical; they do not […] describe the ‘real’ world, but rather provide only one way of understanding and organizing collective life”—especially by hiding stark inequalities of wealth and power as “private” matter rather than as part of the “public” life of the state and capital.\textsuperscript{82} So duped are we into the myth of emancipated subjectivity and the merits of financial autonomy neoliberalism touts that even when we do not privilege from them, they continue to be the framework through which many people evaluate theirs and other’s lives.

But then the real shock of Klein’s doctrine. Klein departs from her analysis of the differential impacts of neoliberalism to suggest that, overall, the US state and transnational corporations are in league against the American public by creating and/or harnessing the crisis zeitgeist produced by late capitalism in order to divert our attentions from the seedier and underhanded projects of contemporary US empire. Neoliberalism


\textsuperscript{81} “Folding into” is a process of conditional incorporation described by Jasbir Puar in \textit{Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times}, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007.

\textsuperscript{82} Lisa Duggan, \textit{Twilight of Equality?}, 5.
mechanizes our various anxieties concerning personal security. In particular, neoliberalism converts the helplessness people feel concerning their financial debt into a lust for domestic and international warfare. But according to Klein, shock (socio)economics is not scandalizing in its politics of human de/valuation alone but rather in its duplicitousness.

She writes of the usurpation of Keynesian democratic ideas by neoliberalism, “The dirty secret of the neoliberal era is that these ideas were never defeated in a great battle of ideas, nor were they voted down in elections. They were shocked out of the way at key political junctures.”83 In short, the crises of environment, natural disaster, war, fuel, food shortage, and national debt create a fertile ground for the application of new economic policies that offer fast and applicable free-market solutions to problems that seem impossibly out of control. I concur, in part, that neoliberalism marks a radical shift in governance that mechanizes the fear produced by unprecedented and unexpected events to ensure complicity. Additionally, I agree that this political-economic praxis has transformed the core institutions that disseminate its logics—education, military, the family, and so forth. Nevertheless, I notice that Klein is at a loss to develop this critique without a white reference point or, more specifically, without a meta-narrative that links neoliberalism’s numerous offenses through a commentary about the pillaging of public resources that ultimately places all of us, and our planet, at risk.

Klein’s analysis is certainly not without validity or scholarly backing. In his often deft and accessible critiques, anthropologist, David Graeber,84 argues that neoliberalism has been effective in remaining unseen because of its points of emergence in the

83 Klein, 542.
management other crises. Elsewhere, David Harvey suggests that it is the contradiction between practice and belief that is to blame for the replacement of democracy with securitization/militarization. Neoliberalism is invested in economic, but not necessarily personal, freedom. In order for markets to remain undisturbed by human interest, they must be governed by authoritarian rule that supplants a welfare state model with a draconian sovereign one. The paternalistic state that was supposed to disappear under neoliberal reform is merely reduced to what Louis Althusser would call its most repressive capacities: military, executive, and carceral forces that terrorize the most vulnerable persons within its reign. Citizens are persuaded into exchanging their social securities for speculative endeavors because they are told that they have more flexibility

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85 In more public ways, neoliberal capitalism was hailed as a humanistic alternative to state socialism in China and the Eastern Bloc. More covertly, South America became a testing ground for free market reforms to the tune of mass human rights violations and genocidal atrocities. But the real paradigm, he argues, was the 1975 New York financial crisis, where private creditors that emerged to manage the city’s near-fiscal default in the absence of federal support, formed an administrative body that immediately began chipping away at the public good. One heard little about the radical defunding of the city’s free university, the rolling back of pensions and job security, the dismantling of municipal unions or the massive tax cuts to transnational businesses and real estate developers. Instead, New York itself was monetized as a world tourist destination so as to save it from economic implosion. Massive tourism campaigns brought dollars to the city but also justified the gentrification of neighborhoods and the conditions under which financially strapped areas such as the Bronx were institutionally abandoned—limiting funds for everything from schools to fire stations. As Klein might argue, the vast American and even international public were “awed” by the clean-up, such that they did not immediately recognize it as a war on the poor—particularly the poor of color.

The 1980s third world debt crisis is yet another key point of emergence for the surreptitious enactment of integrated global neoliberal reform. Borrowing agencies, such as IMF and the World Bank, created loan conditions that were impossible to manage, except through accepting the terms of a slow pay-off program—a structural adjustment program—that would offer some relief and tax credit from opening local markets to foreign trade and investment. The results were infrastructurally devastating, with major hits to social services, causing an increase in global health epidemics and resource shortages. Yet, as Klein points out, the orthodoxy of personal accountability disallows many from seeing these circumstances as anything other than the result of cultural pathologies or the corruption of local governments. Consumers in the North are additionally myopic about their own dependencies on third world economic devastation, as such geographic regions have become centers for the production of cheaply and inhumanely produced goods and tourism such citizens demand. Third world debt remains one of the most compelling conditions for the creation of market solutions that directly benefit privileged consumers. As Klein laments, subjects remain willfully ignorant of these conditions and, especially, of their disappearing democracy. Under the reforms of the 1990s, governments were particularly subordinated to the interests of various funding and moral agencies that defer to private investors.
under global corporate rather than nation-state authority, despite the fact that the corporations that hold sway over much of the public’s financial debt are highly bureaucratized while limited in liabilities.86

People’s material vulnerability increases as corporations shirk responsibility by displacing blame for their inevitable failings on the most downwardly mobile and insecure populations that do the bulk of their basic labor. Thus by amplifying extant social antipathies, especially with respect to job loss and immigration, neoliberalism resolves its outstanding ideological contradictions. This is Aviva Chomsky’s argument in They Take Our Jobs!: 20 Other Myths About Illegal Immigration.87 The discourses of risk and insecurity that instill fear in Americans are absolutely linked to transnational projects of nation-building and empire, xenophobia and state-sponsored racism. Perhaps most ironically, then, neoliberalism is not possible without the supremacist nationalism Klein abhors.

The points she makes about crisis mongering are also in line with the observations Michel Foucault makes in his late life lectures on biopolitics.88 Neoliberal regimes of governance enact biopolitical forms of control, threatening populations with the insecurity of resource depletion to compel normative actions. Under such conditions, citizens organize their lives around warding off the threat of destitution by engaging in practices that determine their fitness for life, or as Jasbir Puar might say, their

87 Chomsky addresses many of the myths surrounding “illegal immigration” as part and parcel of a long history of using gender, race, and ethnicity as grounds for exclusion from the nation-state. It is, therefore, part of the architecture of nation-building to promote such myths and to preserve social, economic, and political power for those aligned with white-normativity.
capaciousness. Subjects thus find themselves immediately exposed to threats for which the state once served as intermediary, and energies are expended managing what are now the crisis conditions of everyday life itself. As Klein observes, people are shocked into desiring solutions from which they have no immediate benefit, even if destruction (of Others, of environment) is apparent, because our entire ethos is constructed around producing every field of activity as a potential market to ward off personal losses.

Thus what gives me pause about the argument Klein develops is not its commentary on but its framing of neoliberalism as the root from which all other problems extend. Hers echoes so many other criticisms that use the spectacle/specter of racialized injury to elaborate the violences of the neoliberal epoch, almost as a wakeup call to a broader American public. To be sure, this is a text that begins its narrative with Katrina—an episode in American history that revealed something deeper about the nature of US democracy than its gross interpretation under/as neoliberalism.

I appreciate the critical minefield that is the Katrina moment, particularly for the ways it can reveal the basis of our fraught assumptions. It is indeed difficult to communicate the gradual wearing away of the body politic under neoliberalism when crisis has, as Berlant observes, become “ordinary.” And no doubt neoliberalism amplifies official and cultural hostilities toward historically marginalized communities that merit critical attention. But when we use these lives and experiences to demarcate an era and, moreover, to see the life outcomes of the privileged reflected in them, we miss the point. In fact, such accounts of a dialectical present are often myopic about the ways in which we are differently constituted as subjects.

According to Klein’s analysis, the failures of Katrina were the inability of the government and aid agencies to respond to the destruction. It was not the fact that people of color were for centuries subject to redlining and forced to live in areas of the city that are more vulnerable to disaster. To engage this point, Klein would have to admit that the problem of Katrina was not the mishandling of resources but the more historical conditions of settler nationalism. Moreover, she would have to admit that the Katrina moment was not jarring but standard operating procedure for how the state has always treated racialized/colonial subjects.

If we follow an Afro pessimist line of thinking, the populations of color that represent the extreme, documentable effects of neoliberal failure remain outside the scope they frame.\(^9\) In Klein’s reading, Katrina is at once exceptional—in that it did not impact everyone—and foundational—in that it represents the total dysfunction of a system in which we are all implicated. In both cases, those populations of color most devastated by Katrina cannot be reconciled to the overall objectives of critique because their injuries act as an index for broader commenting. The question I have here is ethical and goes beyond this example. How does the common, progressive narration of crisis produce normative notions of violence and injury by failing to describe or apprehend the ways that the shock of the current moment has been the longtime animating condition of the underserved and the unrecognized? Most importantly, how are the narratives we find ourselves producing about our “collective” institutional insecurity in particular not only myopic about but occulting of those differences? And lastly, do our critical placeholders—namely,

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neoliberalism—and vocabularies—of failure, of precarity—actually create the conditions of this overwriting?

This chapter mines two additional texts of popular political non-fiction that address institutional failure. Similarly to Klein, these texts seek out totalizing explanations for what is at stake in the current crisis moment. I am interested in how many of these accounts struggle to name the ways that late capitalism is wounding of populations while also remaining conscious of the varying degrees to which this occurs. Under a system of governance that debilitates, so as to constitute, populations worthy of recognition, being aware of and seeking redress for one’s injury is a mechanism of survival. But two things are at issue there. Firstly, the impulse to feel injured depends upon there being some context of legibility. Injury is a legally and historically codified concept and one that, under the current state model, is seeing resurgence. Secondly, injury is rarely remarkable without reference to racialized rhetorics of pain and vulnerability. The analogous operation that occurs within this moment precludes the ability for those more impacted to have their injuries accounted for, if that is even the goal.

In making this assessment, I am not arguing that certain populations have greater entitlement to claiming injury or can tell a more authentic story about institutional failure. Instead, I am arguing that these narratives produce a historical sensibility of the crisis-mediated present that catalogues institutional failure along a white trajectory where the pain and suffering of the racialized Other emerges only as counterpoint or springboard. In identifying the sub-alternizing implications of progressive liberal storytelling, I am not wholesale dismissing their valid points. Rather, I am trying to identify how the framing
and periodization of the current moment is not all-encompassing. Lastly, I question the persistent desire for white injury in these narratives as a key way that belonging is negotiated in the absence of certain social and economic guarantees. In particular, I contemplate “All Lives Matter” as a moment for the construction of white injury where literal and figurative Black mortality becomes ground for the construction of an institutionally failed subjectivity that conceals both its appropriation and antipathies.

Throughout, I argue that institutional failure constructs a privileged social ontology.91

**Scrambling to Go On:** *Twilight of the Elites, From Crisis Mentality to Failure Talk*

What we must confront in the post-crisis era is [...] grave. No longer is ours a ruling majority that has lost sight of the plight of a hated or invisible minority. The ratio has flipped. The majority of Americans now feel deeply as if they have been relegated to minority status. We are all subprime now. We now see ourselves ruled by a remote class. They may not wear flowing robes or carry miters, but they are marked in their own way as separate and distinct. The distance between those who will be bailed out and those who will not is the ultimate social distance, and it has grown so vast it now strains the bonds of representation that hold the republic and its people together. (Hayes. *Twilight of the Elites*).92

This is a dissertation about institutional failure. That concept seems fairly straightforward, especially in the contemporary moment, when public discourse is saturated with news of government malfeasance, a tanking public education system, bank bailouts, shrinking subsidies, broken families, endless wars, swelling prison populations, and so on. We see the effects of this reflected particularly in contemporary media. One need

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91 Readers may ponder my decision to begin this chapter with an analysis of *Shock Doctrine*, particularly as it is not immediately readable as a commentary on institutional failure. To be clear, the narrative of institutional failure is epiphenomenal to the context from which it is said to emerge. In leftist discourse, institutional failure is commonly discussed as an effect of the neoliberalization of institutions. For example, the failure of higher education is due, in part, to the implementation of austerity measures. The failure of financial industries is due, in part, to their deregulation. Klein’s text sets the stage for a critique of neoliberalism that denotes the ways the left most often explains both the failure of institutions as well as the false consciousness we develop around their role in our lives. Most importantly, her text represents the common timeline to which many critiques direct themselves—the rupture of the neoliberal moment from whence new realities of power proceed. I include her book here for how constructs the historical exceptionalism of the neoliberal era in ways that I will go on to critique.

only preview a current television line-up—*The Walking Dead, Falling Skies, Revolution*—or scan the recent theater releases—*White House Down, Ender’s Game, World War Z, The Purge, Mad Max: Fury Road*—to see that such failure is abundantly perceived. The plot is familiar: life as we know it has abated in the wake of a zombie apocalypse, a technological breakdown, an unprecedented natural disaster, an alien invasion, prophesies of doom, or some other such millennial narrative that becomes parable for a range of modern political anxieties.

Yet institutional failure is hardly the latest invention of the culture industry. Christopher Hayes notes that the “fail decade” has been punctuated by a series of real events whose management by various statist and imperialist entities created the conditions under which institutions faced erosive financial and social restructuring. But as he explains, it is not merely the power these governing bodies wield that accounts for such pervasive malaise; it is the narrative authority we grant to certain philosophies that expands the domain of normative power against the interests of a more egalitarian democracy. In *The Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy*, Hayes surveys the current course of core US institutions, as they fail to provide the stability necessary for many to pursue their version of the “American Dream.” It is difficult to reconcile the promise that institutions will serve in their capacity as guarantor with the stark realities around us—fraud and corruption in the banking industry, the collapse of mass access to higher education, the drop in real income for the middle class, home foreclosures, rising rates of poverty and houselessness, and staggering unemployment rates, among myriad other factors.
While people are too keen to attribute these failures to governmental or corporate corruption, Hayes more astutely notes that the cause is much broader, ideological, and affective. As his argument goes, the dominant mythologies of neoliberalism to which we remain tethered—exceptionalism, post-racial multiculturalism, and especially meritocracy—could not explain away their de-democratizing effects—debt, militarization, and the slow and uneven bankrupting of the public domain along raced, classed, and gendered lines. This “systemic deception” produced within the American public a lack of faith in the basic tenets of liberalism and, more pointedly, in the state, its political representation, and its core institutions. But it is precisely these ill-feeling and ultimately destructive ideologies—namely, for Hayes, meritocracy—that become impossible to dispense with because they’ve long supplied us the social and symbolic meanings of what Berlant calls “the good life,” the standard metric through which we understand our lives and actions to have value. Given what we are confronted with, it is no longer feasible to argue that “trying hard enough” will automatically confer status or that privilege is somehow earned. Yet we persist in our faith of the contrary, however implausible. This creates a kind of impasse between founding principle and what is reflected materially that produces a range of unsettled feelings—apathy, denial, rage, and even what Berlant would call a cruel optimism—which foment a massive distrust of institutional and political leadership, where the social distortions of meritocracy are most visibly manifest.

According to this analysis, folks are reacting to the loss of a national metaphor or, more precisely, the dawn of an apocalyptic nationalism—perhaps as Klein portends.

93 See Cruel Optimism, where “the good life” is described as the fantasy of future rewards for present efforts.
Hayes thus predicts that the “most destructive effect of the fail decade” will be its impact on “the very mental habits we use to form about the world.” The cultural psychosis he diagnoses is perhaps best framed as a bungling narcissism. The dominant narrative of failure laments the paradoxes of liberal ideology as they manifest in institutional reforms, but only inasmuch as they mitigate mobility, access, and power. The calling out of institutional leaders under these terms does not necessarily gesture toward structural critique, he warns, but reiterates something more akin to betrayal, an affect that readily speaks into being subjects and objects of obligation. Yet for Hayes, those actually obliged to change the course of institutions are the elites running them. For, as elected figures who serve the people, it is they to whom we entrust our good faith and hope for the future. That is both the problematic and his solution. But I would argue that prevailing discontent only partially points to the culpability of elite bodies and that the frustrations they code have a more diffuse social economy not fully encapsulated by Hayes’ critique.

For, as they are typically framed, institutions, such as schools, family, banks, etc., are relays for democracy, white heteropatriarchy, capital, and so forth. Thinking conventionally, one goes to school to earn a degree that will guarantee upward mobility; one invests in the institution of marriage to secure paternal bloodlines and financial assets; one entrusts one’s money to institutions of financial capital in order to sustain or amass new wealth. And as it is generally perceived, institutions fail when they can no longer create this synthesis among the abstractions of capital, the fictions of liberal democracy, and the materiality of privilege. For example, institutions of higher education

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94 Hayes, 106.
“fail” when the four year degree is devalued by academic inflation and no longer confers class, gender and/or race status; family “fails” when it becomes ideologically disarticulated from nation and state and no longer serves a proprietary function; financial institutions “fail” when market buoyancy, disrupted by periods of slow or unpredictable growth, raises the price of basic commodities and makes taken-for-granted ideals like home ownership impossible for many.

And in these moments when institutional failure is deemed to have occurred, the onus of responsibility broadly falls on laws, communities, individual actors, and aspects of institutionalism: transnational populations of color and affirmative action laws in the context of the academy; populations and constitutional amendments calling for or decrying equality in the context of marriage; banks, brokers, and default mortgagers in the context of financial capital. But let me be clear. Responsibility, cast widely, is not evenly shared. Institutional failure unfolds in the cultural landscape of “post-racial” America, where discrimination against the trans-national communities of color disproportionately impacted by these events is said to have resolved itself through precisely the mechanisms that create and rely on inequality to function—though, ironically, these communities often serve as reference to measure just how egregious are the impacts of institutional mismanagement. This suggests to me that there is much to remain suspicious about in regards to how crisis is named and organized as an episteme.

In fact, this project goes as far as to suggest that institutional failure is a narrative response to the crisis conditions of late liberalism that uses various affective tenses, such as loss, abandonment, departure, and betrayal, to recuperate value to persons and ideals that have not been historically jeopardized by the machinations of racialized capitalism or
the whims of the disciplinary-bureaucratic state order. The narratives constructed to merit our greatest sympathies are too often those that reflect back to us a collective sense of normalcy that is otherwise in question. The problem is that, in making these stories the foreground of our analyses, we ontologize institutional failure within a normative spatio-temporality that erases the histories and current conditions of crisis for those whose failure has always been far more consequential, if aberrant. When the critique of academic failure is limited to accessibility, we misunderstand, for example, how institutions of higher education further participate in and indeed alibi the criminalization of the undocumented through initiatives like The Dream Act. When the housing crisis signals to us the limits of upward mobility, we undermine how houselessness—particularly among populations of color—is an ongoing effect of U.S. settler colonialism. When we focus our attention on the low standard for minimum wage as an impediment to flourishing, we forget how transnational economies of causalized labor are sustaining of those very living ideals. These are just a few examples of something that is much larger than this project alone: the problematic of how we make ourselves intelligible under the illusion of a disappearing social order.

Hayes’ book reminds us that the compulsion to narrate the conditions of failure emerges from a desire to overcome the ideological contradictions of US nationalism. If Klein’s text explains how crisis becomes normalized to deflect our attentions from the failures of neoliberalism, Hayes’ text describes what occurs when, in Klein’s words, “the shock wears off,” we hold institutions accountable to their hypothetical promises. Even when the metaphors have so clearly outworn their elasticity, people attempt to recuperate their losses precisely in line with what has failed them. But in calling for better
institutional practices and a return to a more “responsible” meritocracy, Hayes engages in his own cruel optimism—faith in the illusion that institutions are designed objectively, to service populations irrespective of sociological differences. Moreover, in sympathizing with the disgruntled American, Hayes does not do enough to disentangle the compulsion to mythologize from the ethical implications of such storytelling. Namely, he does not confront how the “fail decade” only makes sense within a white genealogy where the failures of neoliberalism are measurable vis-à-vis the memory of a great American past to which few belonged in the first place.

To assert, as Hayes does in the passage that anchors this section, that the “ratio has flipped” is to assume that social hierarchies can so easily be undone and, moreover, that their historical trace can be effaced. Hayes’ attention to the intersections of race, class, and gender throughout suggests that he has some awareness for how the feeling of having been failed by institutions plays out differently. And it is important to note that Hayes has a sense of people’s affective relationship to institutional failure versus the material realities that might constitute those feelings. Nevertheless, in his pursuit to unravel why it is that many of us are attached to injury, and moreover locate that pain institutionally, he presumes precisely what he ought to critique: that this anxiety is rooted in the loss of a mythical norm.

I intentionally use Audre Lorde’s language here. As Lorde explains, we can only approximate the norms that govern our lives. In a sense, we are all living inauthentic existences and are done an injustice by adhering to expectations that can never be fulfilled. But the true danger of the mythical norm, she writes, is the way it punishes those it doubly negates. Thus while norms create fictions that wear thin under the

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96 Hayes, 215.
pressures of a faltering economy, thereby creating a condition where the ruse of privilege becomes apparent to those who find themselves represented by it, norms also—and more violently—have made the lives of the marginalized unremarkable, insignificant, and forgettable. There is a strategic amnesia at play here—a willingness to acknowledge the mythology of the good life but not how it is conditioned by the effacement of another’s existence. What we see in these failure narratives is not a revelation but a lament—a will to reinhabit the lie, and a series of symbolic gestures to quickly recuperate loss so as defer that ultimate moment of truth: that our historical context is premised upon an ontological forgetting. We only go so far in seeing institutions as failed. Hayes does no better in ultimately arguing for a more representative meritocracy.

Creating a Collective Consciousness: The Insecure American and the Sedimentation of Failure as a Leftist Discourse

Americans’ preoccupations with security have enabled a concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, a withering of civil liberties for the many, a withdrawal of public support and compassion for our most vulnerable, and a turn to quick fixes of consumerist pleasure and self-imprisonment behind walls and surveillance technology. The result is a social, political, and economic environment that makes us all less secure.

(Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson, The Insecure American).

People are confronting the limits of their political modernity, more specifically brought about by the burgeoning excesses of modern power dialectics. The categories of thought (citizen, subject) and conditions of possibility (labor, education, finance) that uphold the US nation-state as enclosure are proving not only logically inconsistent but unable to produce the social value they describe and to which we hold institutions accountable for delivering. Hayes, and extendedly Klein, are correct in naming a

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97 See Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”
disjuncture between material reality and cultural mythology that seeks to resolve itself through the development of what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” or affective glosses that make those circumstances legible as something else. I have named those glosses throughout this project as injury, loss, abandonment, and betrayal. Structures of feeling, Williams writes, are “social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available.”99 They are attempts, or narrative claims, on a present that has yet to be decided. They refer to a complex nexus of power, social relations, and experiences and, above all, represent an effort to reproduce meaning where it has been lost or suspended. The present moment proliferates with such structures of feeling, chief among them, precarity, that seek to (re)produce the intelligibility of the world as one that is openly hostile to its people.

This is certainly the sentiment cultivated in the anthology, *The Insecure American*. Editors of the anthology, Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson argue that contemporary American life is characterized by insecurity—an affective response to the material conditions of the new economy. Theirs is a critique well-supported by statistical evidence and anecdote that confirms neoliberalism as causing the disruption that makes many Americans not only feel but be precarious. I find myself nodding along to many of their critical points, but the entire framing gives me pause. Rendering the neoliberal moment one of exceptional violence that builds on but mostly radically departs from prior modes of governance installs a historical trajectory that somewhat presume the neutrality of democracy itself or at least the relative non-violence of earlier models. In

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their analysis, the poor, the criminalized, the undocumented, and the unprotected are named the “most vulnerable,” an extra-exceptional distinction that also implies comparative analysis to a main, or original, group whose injuries at once substantiate and are substantiated by/through the latter. What I want to suggest is that this story is not necessarily inaccurate but produces a structure of feeling in insecurity, or precarity, that betrays a racial politics of naming.

Besteman and Gusterson ground their critique in observations of institutional failure. They relay the story of Steve Schober, an industrial designer for Maytag who lost his job and pension when the company moved operations out of state and overseas and re-employed a non-unionized workforce. The editors use Schober’s history as an index for critique where the “great American society”—characterized by the booming industrial economy of mid-century America—was gradually eroded by the advent of finance capitalism—characterized by the outsourcing of union jobs and the advent of the transnational corporation. The shift they describe in American culture is at once economic and ethical. What was once a society that distributed wealth and prospects across the middle class is now a “plutonomy” that concentrates wealth among a few while establishing competition for limited and increasingly dwindling resources for the rest. Individual risk increases as community sensibility erodes, and everyone from politicians to financial corporations mechanize this fear for their own aggrandizement. Consumerism is posited as the route out of unhappiness, and debt thus becomes an essential way of managing the new human condition.

As they offer numbers which imply a growing and inclusive class of vulnerable citizens, the editors are clear to remark that there are others affected differently… those
for whom the conditions of debt and “scrambling on” are not new but a continued variation on a historical theme. Calling these populations “the most vulnerable,” Besteman and Gusterson write this of “the other America” whose distress amplifies:

If the middle class is increasingly pinched, things are even worse in the financial underworld of the poor. Offshoring, union busting, the rising use of undocumented workers, the transition from a manufacturing to a service economy, and the delinking of corporate profit from employee compensation have pushed rising numbers of Americans into poverty and created an increasingly insecure world for the working class, the working poor, and the very poor.  

It is not merely job security or debt that concern these people but health injustice, institutional abandonment, and incarceration—what we might again call extra-exceptional cases of institutional failure in the form of abuse and outright neglect. I am in concurrence that the neoliberal era is marked by the highest incarceration rates to date, disproportionately impacting poor communities of color. As the authors cite, the United States makes up only 5 percent of the world’s population, yet 25 percent of the carceral population.  

Statistics indicating that the number of Americans living in extreme poverty increased by 26 percent or that one in every six children lives below the poverty lines suggests that the color line has in fact shifted along a neoliberal axis. Yet the way that these populations are represented here is as exception, rather than telling of the more constitutive conditions of democracy. In arguing that conditions have worsened, the authors imply that there was a moment where things were in relative balance and, moreover create a condition where these extreme instances of injustice become a barometer for just how badly things have shifted in general. I grow concerned that exemplifying the conditions of poverty allows space for appropriation and a general

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100 Besterman and Gusterson, 9.
102 Ibid, 15.
misunderstanding of how marginality is not a by-product of neoliberalism but a foundational current of US democracy.

In her contribution to the anthology, *Democracy in What State*, Wendy Brown argues that:

> liberal democracy, Euro-Atlantic modernity’s dominant form, is only one variant of the sharing of political power connoted by the venerable Greek term. *Demos + cracy* = rule of the people and contrasts with aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny, and also with a condition of being colonized or occupied. [N]o compelling argument can be made that democracy inherently entails representation, constitutions, deliberation, participation, free markets, rights, universality, or even equality.\(^{103}\)

The metonymic associations we make with democracy—individual freedoms, namely—are just that, values construed around a form of governance ruled by the people. Calling democracy an empty signifier, Brown impresses that neoliberalism is a gross interpretation that “has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principles of constitutionalism, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy.”\(^{104}\) The co-constitutive forces of securitization and globalization further create a context in which the power of the “demos”—literally the people—is transferred onto corporations, global lenders, and various performance metrics and evaluative structures. This moment is one that sees an especially pernicious erosion of a people-centered, humanistic political rationality.

But she also counters with an interesting point. It is impossible for many of us to conceive of democracy without the presence of an “a priori free moral subject” born out of Western enlightenment. She writes, “the white masculine, and colonial face of this

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\(^{104}\) Brown, 47.
subject has permitted and perpetuated democracy’s hierarchies, exclusions, and subordinating violences across the entirety of its modern existence.”105 There may be, thus, an unfreedom that rests at the heart of democracy. Sovereignty is linked and expressed through social orders that are at once repressive and based in hierarchy. This last point is crucial. It begs the question can there be a democracy imaginable without reference to an/Other that stands outside its boundaries, and more importantly, can there be a critique of the failures of that system and its institutions that does not repeat that foundational violence? To be most clear, can we speak of the insecurities of neoliberal America and the ways that it renders subjects vulnerable while being inclusive of the violences incurred by those “most vulnerable” because historically unaccounted for/as subjects? Do those persons and their histories follow a similar historical arc that makes the neoliberal moment as exceptional as it reads to scholars like Besteman and Gusterson, or have they lived in “the other America,” outside the national narrative, variously referenced but never fully included? Haven’t these subjects always been vulnerable, insecure, have not been presumed to occupy human status under other forms of democracy?

The inability to fully reconcile “the most vulnerable” to these critiques is significant. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman argues that this other American—the Black American—shores up and consolidates the terms on which normative citizenship is codified. Specifically, Hartman argues that it is against the specter of Black death—whether civil, discursive, or physical—that (white) citizenship becomes knowable. She begins her work in the time of slavery, noting that the subjugation of slaves—to what Hortense Spillers elsewhere calls “flesh”—evidenced their inhumanity.

105 Ibid, 52.
Even instances of pleasure—singing, dancing, laughing, desiring—became ground for other kinds of comparative devaluation. And freedom offered no such resolution. In fact, this violence followed formerly enslaved populations into freedom, as “travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual” characterized their freedom. Hartman depicts a reality that might be more in keeping with the many examples of Black death that permeate the contemporary sociopolitical landscape, such as disproportionate incarceration rates or lethal police force that presumes, a priori, the criminality of Black persons. Hartman explains that Black persons make up a different demography, whose social contract hinges on the exchange of conditional labor and civil securities for subordination and contingent loyalty/protections. If the insecurity of Americans arises from a violation of the social contract, and the faith entrusted to institutions, then we would have to entertain the possibility that there exist other such relationships with the racial state that differently violate the grounds on which a person becomes institutionally insecure, unstatused, or unprotected.

I want to suggest that Hartman’s point applies to ostensibly progressive critiques. Although with a different intention in mind, these “most vulnerable” citizens are recruited to make white injuries more legible. The objective is to say something along the lines of “if it is bad for people like Steve Schober, it must be really bad for poor communities of color.” This can be an important rhetorical strategy to garner acknowledgement of conditions that have gone long unrecognized. But the analogy does not hold because the kind of injury Steve Schober may be experiencing has a different context that emerges in the loss of a Great America—characterized by Fordism and the

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New Deal—that was never unproblematic for these other/ed populations. No doubt the conditions for marginalized subjects have been amplified under neoliberalism, but the historical antecedents of the flawed present are not the same. A narrative that starts its lament with the loss of domestic industry or the chipping away of the welfare state cannot quite capture that important difference.

This is not to argue that material insecurities have not increased or created new classes of people. It is not to argue that what many people experience now is illusion. Guy Standing’s work in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* is particularly instructive to this end. In it, he argues that there is a growing number of people throughout the world living and working precariously that cannot be described, unilaterally, as oppressed. The “precariat,” a new laboring class of vulnerable, itinerant workers, often lack economic securities as well as community and/or state benefits. Calling them denizens, rather than fully integrated citizens cashing in on the benefits otherwise promised by work and status, they retain some official standing, despite not having a job title or permanent location. Into this category can fall “temporary career-less workers, migrant denizens, criminalized strugglers, welfare claimants” who are variously “precaritized.”¹⁰⁷

Throughout, Standing is clear that this assemblage of bodies is not a collective corpus but one with complex entry points and lines of flight. Although I balk somewhat at his understanding that a range of persons can be “precaritized” while not belonging to that specific stratification, I understand the point that risk has, according to Foucault, become a key techne in the management of populations. But I urge us to think about this thematically—why people narrate, rather than what they are narrating; or, more

precisely, how they are able to make their claims legible. As I explore in the next section, this new precariat implicitly references certain gendered-racialized colonial experiences in naming its own demise.

Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*, Hayes’ *Twilight of the Elites*, and Besteman and Gusterson’s *The Insecure American* represent three parts of a common progressive argument that prioritizes the economic as the point of crisis. While neoliberalism produces new sociological situations, critiques of neoliberalism are articulated through class and citizenship categories that make white-normative experiences ubiquitous. There is great critical import in these texts. But so long as capitalism is posited as the root cause of institutional failure, the reality that institutions remain constituted by gendered racist, apartheid, and colonial foundations and the larger structures of social eugenics and settler colonialism from which they distend, will go unremarked. The rubrics of precarity into which many of us read our life experiences may be additionally linked to state violence. What I want to landscape in the subsequent section is how the narration of institutional failure, via the claim to injury, is actually a key technology of the racial state.

**The Governance of Precarity and the Limits of Injury for Documenting Institutional Failure**

Modern liberal democracies do, in fact, thrive on human insecurities that prompt the elaboration of injury. As mentioned in a previous section, subjects governed by biopolitical regimes of power assume responsibility for managing the risks to which they are exposed through measures that increase their vulnerability—whether it is managing debt through taking out more loans, reducing the threat of perceived harm by modulating one’s behavior or relinquishing certain civil liberties, or even acquiescing to exploitative
labor conditions for the sake of maintaining employment. This response is born out of more than just material conditions and rather the needs and demands of the state itself.

Jasbir Puar attributes this to a shift in the strategic situation of power. The disciplinary regimes of older liberalisms have been supplanted by what Deleuze terms “control societies”; subjugation occurs not through repression and punishment but through regimes of conduct.\textsuperscript{108} In her example, the timeliness of this shift with the rise of medicalized power/knowledges creates the conditions under which debility—literally, the body’s deterioration which must be vigilantly managed—becomes a defining feature of a subject’s potential viability, and indeed profitability. Naming injury, qua debilitation, is the first step to resuscitating life.\textsuperscript{109} But, given the aims of this project, I remain most convinced by Chandan Reddy’s claim in \textit{Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State} that precariousness and the culture of injury it effects curiously emerge in a moment when the state has re-organized itself as a counterviolence, positioning its core institutions as shelters for the aggrieved in ways that elide the violent erasures upon which that movement actually depends.\textsuperscript{110} We might instead question what the claims of injury that I argue pepper the narratives of institutional failure do to alibi the injustices of the racial state by making its trace illegible.

What people are narrating may not even be a social reality but is an expression of the governmentality through which they are compelled. The compulsion to feel failed—and to seek recognition of that failure—has a context in late liberalism. In \textit{Economies of


\textsuperscript{109} See Puar, “Coda”

Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism, feminist anthropologist, Elizabeth Povinelli, suggests another phase of liberalism beyond the neoliberal that turns its attention toward and revises its official policies around inequality and state violence. Povinelli defines late liberalism as “the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements,” adding that “in a broader sense late liberalism is a belated response to the challenge of social difference and the alternative social worlds and projects potentially sheltered there.” The initial promises of an earlier neoliberal period—to redistribute wealth and value through market solutions—have reached their breaking points in the uneven flows of global capital and transnational labor/migration, the question of the border, and the (de)composition of citizenship. These circumstances call into question the legitimacy of democracy to persist as the dominant political metaphor for freedom, justice, and equality. In turn, late liberalism works with progressive political grammars to reconcile the objectives of democracy to social justice struggle—in the hopes of restoring democracy to the state. Its objective is to frame the limits placed on freedom and the barriers to justice as a “problematic” of governance, requiring revisions in official policies and practices to be more open and incorporating of heretofore unrecognized populations and their grievances. In this sense, late liberalism expands, rather than reduces, the parameters of state sovereignty—and often in ways that collide with progressive, or at the very least reformist, interests. Late liberalism sees constituencies as “failed” in light of political and economic circumstances that question the state’s legitimacy.

111 Povinelli, 25.
Late liberalism administers to the myriad ways that people, in light of more recent events, are responding to the dissolution of the modern welfare state. It develops regimes of governance that mediate life through what Povinelli calls the “tenses of abandonment”—the making live, letting live, making die, and letting die that (re)construct human value through various points of dysfunction. As Jasbir Puar has argued elsewhere, power has found its strategic situation in disaster, where crisis prompts the development of new methodologies of survival/capacitation or increases social attrition/debilitation, from which population aggregates are established. Late liberalism accomplishes, obliquely, what other orders have done more explicitly. Thus although the crisis conditions of late liberal capitalism ostensibly trouble the governing authority of the state and its institutional apparatuses, they have, in fact, been productive of new mechanisms of identification and ascription that increase the operation of normative power within those sites. Feelings of failure—or loss, abandonment, departure, and betrayal—which become manifest in the narratives surrounding the contemporary institutional encounter may speak to the impasses of liberal ideology—as proposed by Hayes—and certainly match the crisis standpoint of late liberalism—as implied by Povinelli’s analysis—but are also key interpellative strategies of the US racial state.

Most pointedly, Povinelli is clear that this is a form of governance that truncates its critique. Modern liberal states could not sustain the claim to democracy with facially racist practices on the books—like anti-miscegenation laws or Jim Crow segregation. That constitutive anxiety is resolved by adopting new “formal or informal policies of cultural recognition as a strategy for addressing the challenge of internal and external...
differences.”

By changing its rhetoric, the state does not correct upon its aggressions but rather stifles their critique. For example, as many of us study, things like Jim Crow racism never go away; it emerges through other legitimating contexts of power, like the prison industrial complex, or the social conditions of labor, schooling, and zoning. Thus late liberalism maintains its pretense toward inclusion by bracketing the “tense of the other,” suffocating the terms on which the marginalized are able to name their history by controlling memory and affect.

Thus the same system of governance that compels us to feel failed, and to necessarily name how we are failed in order to achieve legitimacy, also functions to silence the Other.

Under these conditions, only privileged injury is legible precisely because it is necessary to managing difference. To this end, Jodi Melamed’s work in Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Captialism is particularly instructive. Melamed tells us that modern hegemonies require biopolitical rationalities in order to function successfully. Since the racial break, liberalisms have played a key role in the racial project of the state by controlling the themes and meanings through which racial differences come to matter as political and cultural realities. The historically latest period she describes, neoliberal multiculturalism, witnesses the production of liberal antiracisms that disguise the reality that neoliberalism remains a form of racial capitalism and nation-building.

In lieu of race, neoliberal multiculturalism speaks the language of “difference.” However vague, difference is the apotheosis of liberal antiracism that succeeds in folding race into the projects of global capitalism and nation-building such that it becomes

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112 Ibid, 25.
113 Ibid, 29.
inconsequential as a marker of value. For difference assumes “incalculably diverse peoples, cultures, economies, things, and relations for insertion into neoliberalism,” ideologically transmuting historically grounded realities into “ethical, moral, technical, and political stances toward differences with what benefits neoliberal agendas.”114 Thus not only does neoliberal multiculturalism evacuate difference of its sociopolitics, it makes it descriptively available to a range of claims and subject positions heretofore organized under a different onto-epistemological order. In Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity, Hamilton Carroll argues that the very kind of narrative idioms which characterize the dominant discourses of things like institutional failure make use of “minority rhetorics.”115 Cast as victimized, made vulnerable, and wounded by the conditions of the present moment, the privileged comes to occupy the tense of “difference” once reserved for naming the conditions of structural oppression. It is not simply that these vocabularies lose their radical sensibilities but that they make the conditions of ongoing, systemic suffering indiscernible. As Lisa Cacho has elsewhere demonstrated, this can make certain experiences of and reactions to violence something wholly unrecognizable, even uncanny, to contemporary formulations of (in)justice.116

I am therefore trying to understand the compelling logic of these narrations of institutional failure symptomatically, as something greater than the material conditions they describe. I am interested in the implications of siting institutional failure and, more specifically, how the framework of failure, which at times seems so linked to a desire to restore humanity to those (arguably) made institutionally vulnerable, actually shares the

114 Ibid, 43.
grammar of the late liberal racial state. The argument that I am advancing is the popularity of institutional failure as a narrative device has a context of emergence in late liberalism. These narratives are not personal or idiosyncratic reflections on the conditions of capital but function systematically to perform a certain labor for the racial state whose attempts to monopolize the rationality through which we understand crisis demands an injured subject—namely, one who converts injury into new ground to consume, produce, and expand state interests.

In light of this, I want to suggest that narratives of institutional failure are attempts to reclaim an otherwise withheld historical belonging. If, as Puar claims, power does not presume its subject, then it is through these mechanisms of recognition that value is determined. Yet as I have intimated all along, precariousness is only so pliable a metaphor. We must recall that recognition is a differential operation. Reading along with Lisa Cacho’s argument in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, value is accumulated through negation. About which she writes, “recuperating value always requires rejecting the other Other. Ascribing readily recognized value always requires the devaluation of an/other” and, importantly, “that other is almost always poor, racialized, criminalized, segregated, legally vulnerable, and unprotected.”

Institutions promise to confer recognition in the form of rights and entitlements which, under the crisis conditions of late liberalism, have become increasingly rarified.

The charge of institutional failure suggests this as its primary complaint. But institutions have historically operated to differentially construct human value through various racialized, classed, and gendered logics of exclusion and, as Rod Ferguson

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117 Ibid, 17.
convincingly argues, strategies of conditional incorporation. It is myopic to assume that there was a time when institutions did not fail certain subjects (often to the benefit of others, as Cacho suggests) or that the residue of those histories does not endure in more contemporary institutional configurations as well as in how—and whom—they are perceived to fail. Perhaps this is what gives institutional failure its point of interest; an opportunity to restrict not only the history but the discursive context of power—to channel, or “monger,” the effects of crisis, as it were, into narrative frameworks that work against the grain of precisely this kind of critique.

I am deeply sympathetic to the ways that life under late capitalism is exhausting, and as Berlant has argued, debilitating for many different kinds of people. But in the progressive texts I have explored, the claim to precarity becomes almost a pure space from which to document the conditions of crisis. While I believe that affect provides some barometer of how people are, in fact, responding to shifts in their material environments, these feelings are not always commensurate with social realities. When it does become apparent that social vulnerability has increased and expanded to different communities, there is insufficient effort toward understanding the unevenness of these experiences. Scholars have attempted to create frameworks that address these nuances. The languages of “precariousness” and “precarity” have been developed to at once acknowledge the ways that many different kinds of people experience vulnerability but perhaps not in a core constitutive or historical sense. They are worth addressing here.

Theories of the precarious nature of life began to emerge in the post-9/11 academy, of which Judith Butler’s work stands out in particular. In Precarious Life: The

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Powers of Mourning and Violence, Butler argues that the value of our lives is ultimately contingent. When political circumstances are such that not even basic forms of safety can be guaranteed by the very institutional bodies committed to upholding the sanctity of life, people rely on other mechanisms to recruit sympathy—to have their humanity acknowledged and restored.\(^\text{119}\) And because there is no intrinsic value to one’s life, other than what is artificially imputed, the means by which a life is made viable are performative and thus necessarily reiterative. In the period Butler considers, the continuous circulation of narratives about wounded or dead patriots serves to reconfirm both the geopolitical limits of the nation-state and the body politic that constitutes it. These conditions are structuring, argues Sara Ahmed in “Affective Economies,” making it necessary to operate under the sign of the sympathist in order to be afforded legibility as human. Of course, as Jasbir Puar makes clear in Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, there are certain figures whose difference cannot be incorporated into the fold of the nation because it serves as negative reference. In short, there is a politics to who can be “grieved” and thus accounted for as human that has a historical reference point in colonialism and the ongoing politics of US empire. From this example, we glean that feelings are fundamentally social, in that they emerge as institutional and collective practices, and material, in that they produce a system of signs and significations that, in Ahmed’s words, have the potential to “surface bodies” within/as political collectivities. While myriad, the frames of recognition such structures produce out of the conditions of a seemingly boundless present create the semblance of normativity, such that we cannot regard feeling without questioning the circumstances of power out of which it emerges.

\(^\text{119}\) See Judith Butler, Precarious Life, especially, “Explanation and Exoneration, or What we can Hear”
Something about precariousness has stuck as the dominant metaphor for loss far beyond the timeframe Butler observes. If anything, Hayes’ manuscript is a testament to the evolution in thinking precariousness beyond the frames of war that characterized the cultural themes of the previous decade. In Cruel Optimism Berlant relocates precariousness, largely, in the culmination of events leading to the most recent recession, writing:

Current recession congeals decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era. The intensification of these processes, which reshapes conventions of racial, gendered, sexual, economic, and nation-based subordination, has also increased the probability that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people.\(^\text{120}\)

“Precarity talk” is not only social commentary but a reflection on individual and community assessments of harm. In a separate roundtable discussion on the topic, Berlant notes that the taxonomy of precariousness broadly captures the ways in which we are routinely confronted with risk, as such things as surveillance, disaster, and fear become “eventilized,” or turned into a common sense ordinariness that conceals its immanence. She observes that precariousness can be an existential problem (“we are all contingent beings, and life proceeds without guarantees, just with more or less reliable infrastructures of continuity”); an ongoing economic problem (“first, that capitalism thrives on instability; second, that capitalist forms of labor make bodies and minds precarious,” “flourishing while wearing out the corpus whether by speeding up or slowing down”); a problem of the reproduction of life (“as it is mandated by structures of capitalism”); and “a way to recognize and organize the ongoing class or group

\(^{120}\) Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 11.
antagonisms, nostalgias, and demands that symbolize the causes, effects, and future of the postwar good life fantasy.” However broad and indeed nebulous are the descriptive uses of precariousness, they conceal one important dimension: the unequal distribution of social vulnerability and exposure whose phenomenology exceeds—both historically and politically—these more current hailings of precariousness.\textsuperscript{121}

In fact, Berlant quips that the “crisis” of precariousness happens in the moment when the longtime political and economic realities of the underserved and socially neglected finally hit the white middle class. While the current conditions of crisis are inadequate to the flourishing of many, fewer have been subject to systematic forms of social attenuation, or what Berlants calls “slow death,” the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering. The way in which precariousness is claimed does not seek to point out these complex relationalities but instead works toward their consolidation into motile identity categories—the wounded, the oppressed, or the injured—that cloak the complex ways power actually works contemporarily. I wonder if institutional failure might function like so many of these other meditations on life, constrained by the conditions of liberal capitalism, as they seek refuge and meaning in the very narrative forms that perpetrate the violences they might otherwise seek to undo. By which I mean to ask, how are the terms by which we are made recognizable burdened by the dynamics and objectives of power?

Scholars have further sought to disentangle the vulnerability that is a function of governance from the vulnerability that part of a social eugenics through a distinction between biopolitical and necropolitical realities. Much of the critique I have made is

echoed in the critique of Foucaultian theories of biopower. To remind, Foucault theorized the governance of life as the tactical strategy of the neoliberal state. Although death subtends life, both in terms of how it is affirmed and the ends to which it is managed, biopolitical subjects are fully constituted, legible agents whose value inheres in their ability to “go on”—i.e. to consume. As Achilles Mbembe has argued, certain other subjects are more valuable dead, disappeared, or disposable. These necropolitical subjects persist under parallel rules of governance that do not defer but rather amplify the erosion of life. Although neoliberalism is the force behind these life outcomes, they cannot be reconciled as necessarily co-constitutive because they are not coterminous. Although scholars have critiqued the facile distinction between biopolitical and necropolitical realities to instead argue for their interarticulation, there remains a need to elaborate the vulnerabilities of the “ontologically dead” at a different capture.

But it is precisely this need that is impossible, for language does not presume its other. Moreover, the imaginaries of loss and failure that have in the past named social disparities now conceal them. Readers may disagree that what I have described throughout constitutes an appropriation of minoritized rhetorics, especially as the aim of these progressivist texts is to understand where such logics of appropriation and denial stem. Yet I believe that the attempt to provide a totalizing analysis of social vulnerability, even when it acknowledges differences in experiences, can be depoliticizing in a different way. In fact, I wonder how the post-racial mystique that dominates popular US imaginaries has dulled our attention to difference by promoting cultural sensibilities that consolidate social realities under broad rubrics where histories of oppression are subjugated to the “new.” Arguably, the political sense of these claims is comparably less

damaging then, say, the outright denial of racialized injustice by something like the Trump campaign. Yet these accounts nevertheless perform some erasure in their insistence that there is a singular force under which we all persist and can share in that persistence.

#AllLives[Don’t]Matter: Institutional Failure is Not a Shared Experience

The contemporary moment is unique in that it has opened a conversation about the aspects of mainstream political and economic cultures that harm. Many have taken the opportunity to debate more tangible instances of institutional failure as a way of addressing these heady problematics. Yet however much we might say the conditions of mass disillusionment grant us a unique opportunity to address the heretofore unnamed violences of our founding rationalities, we see a refusal to fully confront that reality. The point that I am advancing is that certain narratives on the left participate in this deferral. I understand the political importance and, moreover, the inevitability of naming institutional failure and elaborating its injuries; we live under a system of governance that at once produces this effect and makes it necessary to articulating our survival. However, we need to demand more nuanced critiques of how differently those neoliberal regimes work to produce non-conterminous effects. We need critiques that do not presume a shared experience of failure but are instead attentive to the uneven histories of failure that make this moment remarkable.

My persistent critique—that these leftist narratives are at once myopic and occulting of difference—captures a key aspect of this project’s overall claim: that there is a normative politics to how we—any and all of us—narrate institutional failure. This project is in conversation with Black feminist thought that calls attention to the systematic erasure of Black life in categories of modern thought and analysis. Here I am
thinking specifically of Hortense Spillers, Evelyn Hammonds, and especially Sylvia Wynter. In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” Wynter reminds that “human,” and its attendant concerns and meanings, disappears into itself an entire politics of being—namely that “human” is constituted and qualified through the exclusion of gendered and racialized matter. We might even say that “human” “fails” to capture the totality of being. Or even that to “be” human or claim human status fetishizes Blackness, or more specifically, racialized death. If human injustice is at the heart of institutional failure, then it necessarily excludes a range of experience with institutional violence and, additionally, a range of sociologies produced by a failure that is more endemic than it is symptomatic. So long as our critiques accept such a premise, we never accurately comprehend what Wynter calls the realities of “modernity’s structurally marginalized, genetically dysselected, and ‘narratively condemned’ populations.”

But there exists a social movement that attempts to relocate the failure of our core institutions in Black life. Black Lives Matter calls attention to both the current state violence and constitutive violence of being Black in U.S.—and, in particular, to be subject to its institutional abuses. To be sure, Alicia Garza writes that “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”


for the celebration and humanization of Black lives.” The issues that the Black Lives Matter movement takes up concern institutional failure—not only with criminal justice abuses but educational, health, and housing disparities. The emphasis on the historical nature of these persistent problems posits Black precarity at a different capture… one that does not begin in the crisis conditions of neoliberalism, however much it is intensified by them.

The Black Lives Matter platform does not, then, exist in sync with the culture of failure that surrounds it. It emerges from a long history of Black activism that deals with the problematic of unfreedom elaborated above. Its capture point is, therefore, different. The violences it illuminates tell a different story about neoliberalism that does not lament its failed promises or the inability of institutions to serve Black populations. Rather, it points to myopia of those arguments. As such, it causes discomfort in some people in ways that suggest we are not interested in hearing all narratives of institutional failure, particularly the ones that unsettle mass claims to precariousness. The platform of Black Lives Matter is almost uncanny in that sense, revealing the constitutive limitations of democracy itself.

Yet this movement to establish the specificity of failure is vehemently opposed, namely by its stated opposition, All Lives Matter. The handle, #AllLivesMatter, is most notably a conservative campaign to undermine #BlackLivesMatter by emphasizing race neutral claims to a shared humanity that conceal important differences in how people are constituted as subjects, at best, and alibi state violence, at worst. When it emerged on social media in 2015, many were quick to rightfully point out its tactic racism. In fact, President Barak Obama explained as late as August 2016 that “Black lives matter” is an
important sentiment that speaks to the ongoing issue of institutional racism and does not insinuate that other struggles do not matter, as supporters of “all lives matter” might claim. Nor does “all lives matter” already capture the essence of “Black lives matter” which opposes itself to a universalism that comes to stand in for white experience. Meanwhile, current Republican Presidential Candidate, Donald Trump, called Black Lives Matter “divisive” and even terrorist, making the unsubstantiated claim that it has instigated the killing of law enforcement. During an early democratic primary debate, nominees Bernie Sanders and Hilary Clinton were asked where they stood on the issue. The question became an opportunity for the potential nominees to elaborate their stances on mass incarceration and criminal justice reform, but was not simply a springboard.

Indeed, they were responding to a key way that many Americans articulate a political subjectivity, and mostly along an “all lives matter” axis. A recent Pew Research poll revealed that while support for Black Lives Matter is as high as 65%, roughly 1/3 of Americans do not understand the objectives of the movement, and some 42% of conservatives and 25% of independents state that they do not support it. In sum, only about four in ten Americans participating in the study support Black Lives Matter, with as many as 78% of U.S. voters stating that an All Lives Matter creed come closest to their personal political beliefs. These statistics are a telling index of where people stand more broadly on the kinds of institutionalized failures they are willing to acknowledge.

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126 Boyer, “Obama Defends.”
And as I will go on to argue, it is not merely conservatives who deny or efface the matter of Black lives.\textsuperscript{127}

The All Lives Matter campaign actively and implicitly denies the naming of this violence, precisely because it promotes a generalized claim to precarity/vulnerability that is, for many people, a key vehicle for recognition and redress. Although its anti-Blackness is not always explicit—particularly when the message is that Black, among all other lives, matter—it is apparent in the ways that it seeks to confound critiques of racialized violence through appeals to a post-racial humanism. A constitutive anxiety thus subtends the sentiment, all lives matter. If we follow Hartman’s claim that it is through and against the spectacle of Blackness that white life gains its meaning, then we might say that All Lives Matter conceals a real fear that Blackness does not merely act as a discarded receptacle for the accumulation of white meaning—a point against which whiteness as value/valuable may be determined—but actually threatens to undo certain experiential claims.

The massive resistance to the movement is evidence of the anxiety it produces within what Berlant calls, “iconic citizens.”\textsuperscript{128} The handle, #alllivesmatter, and its various iterations, including “blue lives matter,” represent discursively violent disavowals of racialized experience through seemingly innocuous appeals to universality. But, as Judith Butler cautions, “If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, ‘all lives matter,’ then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of ‘all

\textsuperscript{127} These statistics were culled from a recent Pew Research Poll, which can be found at the following website, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/08/how-americans-view-the-black-lives-matter-movement/
\textsuperscript{128} See Lauren Berlant. The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Iconic citizens are those persons referenced by social, political, and legal discourses as normative. Iconic citizens are most recognizable as white middle class men but would now include other class and sex privileged subjects as well.
“All lives matter” is a response conditioned by histories of racial/colonial genocide and US racial apartheid: “Under such perceptual conditions built up through the history of racism, it becomes increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of black lives as status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of ‘human life’ they defend.” Its moral chauvinism conveniently makes calls for the specificity of oppression socially regressive.

This erasure comes easy, as Butler explains, “Under such perceptual conditions built up through the history of racism, it becomes increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of black lives as status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of ‘human life’ they defend.” There is a refusal to hear, never mind acknowledge, “Black lives matter,” because it reveals the economy of precarity. But Berlant notes in a recent op-ed, in a social text so laden with affect, where people “feel” failed, such facts do not have impact.

The denial of Black Lives Matter animates the problematic I have tried to grasp throughout this analysis: that we are only able to recognize a context and instances of institutional failure when they have a white reference point. Black lives matter points to instances of violence that cannot be countenanced by white experiences because they are the condition on which white experience is written and against which white injury is legitimated. Most intellectuals on the left accept this critical premise. However, few are willing to see the less obvious iterations of a universalizing logic. In her response to the misunderstanding and misuse of Black Lives Matter, Garza notes that appropriation has occurred in liberal circuits as well. In recent months, we have seen the emergence of

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Ibid
other campaigns that do not seek to subsume but nevertheless analogize Black pain. Slogans, such as “brown lives matter” and “trans* lives matter” point out important violences but rarely give credit to their reference.

This echoes a point made recently by trans* legal scholar and activist, Dean Spade, that Black struggle is most often the reference point for the articulation of a left politics. In the piece I mention, Spade and collaborator, Morgan Bassichis note the pervasiveness of an unacknowledged anti-blackness in contemporary queer politics, particularly surrounding marriage equality. Quoting Jared Sexton from “People of Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” they note:

Every attempt to defend the rights and liberties of the latest victims of state repression will fail to make substantial gains insofar as it forfeits or sidelines the fate of blacks, the prototypical targets of the panoply of police practices and the juridical infrastructure built up around them. Without blacks on board, the only viable political option and the only effective defense against the intensifying cross fire will involve greater alliance with anti-black civil society and further capitulation to the magnification of state power.  

Here, the authors are thinking more in line with the official forms of redress and codification of injury that use a civil rights framework as a basis for political action that superordinates sexuality as the “new” condition of oppression. Nevertheless, the broader point applies: when we assume that the moment of black struggle has passed, such that racialized violence can be counted among the many indiscretions of the US nation-state, we ignore how “the legal, social, political and emotional structures of slavery have been re-inscribed throughout an allegedly post-slavery society (and its global neoliberal dominion), highlighting how anti-blackness constitutes the condition of possibility for the

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United States itself.” And, as such, how an anti-blackness has always been the prevailing condition of institutionality.

All lives matter perhaps represents an extreme attempt to gear the state of discourse around institutional violence toward white lives and injury. In so doing, it defers the moment of Black acknowledgement—and, thus, for this project, the ways that Black failure antedates and presupposes what we lament as institutional failure. But what I have hoped is evident is that aspects of this “all lives (implicitly) matter” credo inflect left politics. I do not equate the impact of saying something like “trans* lives matter” to the pronouncement that “police lives matter” but rather suggest a shared logical basis where the confrontation with racialized injustice is, to varying extents, avoided. So long as the basic categories of modern thought and analysis are bound to a constitutive anti-Blackness, none of us are outside the politics I elaborate here. However, certain measures of accountability can be taken to shift the focus.

As I observed in the introduction to this project, institutional failure is not merely a material reality but a narrative one. Following the work of narrative scholar, Hayden White, I argue that what we acknowledge about an event or happenstance is not its content but its context. And, moreover, that contextualization presupposes its own outcome. We tell stories that reflect our truth and ensure our survival. What interests me about institutional failure is that it is one such occasion to name the crisis conditions of neoliberalism to various personal and political ends. Most of us on the academic left can observe something like the political right’s discourse as such an attempt to arrive at a present one has already created. Yet few of us can see the intersection of the common progressive narratives we disseminate with what we find so problematic—the
reproduction of whiteness. The fervor for creating new vocabularies and grand or totalizing optics—of crisis, of failure, of insecurity— to capture what we find troubling about in this moment may conceal a desire for presence that is premised upon racialized erasure.

This chapter perhaps best represents something I mention in the introduction to this project: that institutional failure is a mythology that gives modernity a social sensibility. Here I am thinking about Bataille’s work on mythology. Bataille argues that myth is a form of communication about the totality of a societal organism—a meaning that is irreducible to its commensurate parts. I think it is possible to argue that failure is operating at the level of myth, in that it is an understanding of life shared among many persons, despite their political persuasions. The endurance of the failure myth may also be due, in part, to another Bataillean observation: the desire for a reflexive sovereignty, and in some instances for death itself. As Bataille explains, “In order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself cease to be.”132 To actually die is an impossibility; but, the drive toward death—toward imagining the ends of the self—is, perhaps paradoxically, what gives life a new meaning.

As I have been arguing all along, this death drive belongs to a white fantasy. For in order to desire death, one must already be alive. The compulsion to feel failed, to feel a sense of social death is most importantly an appropriative move. It emerges from contemporary circumstances of capital, but it necessarily trespasses on those who have long been killed off by modern social and political orders. All Lives Matter attempts to make the critique of Black death available as a ground for the resuscitation of white life

that has never fully been hampered. Perhaps the mass reluctance to see the importance of black lives matter is because it belies the central modernist fantasy that white life hangs in the balance.
Failure Redux: Trigger Warnings and the Re-Articulation of 
Academic Feminist Failure Under Austerity

To write about academic feminist failure is at once belated and timely. It is belated in the sense that, for at least the past two decades, critics have debated the “end of feminism” as it reached its limit in the loss of its proper object, woman. It is timely in that the ink spilled problematizing the new austerity regimes asks us to reconsider feminism’s role in a university complex to which it imagines itself markedly distinct for many reasons but, namely, because of the violences the university perpetrates on the real lives lived both within and beyond institutional borders. Realities, some might argue, to which academic feminism is especially obligated to represent. It is not the objective but rather the framing of this critical commitment that intrigues me. For time and again the academy becomes the backdrop for the articulation of a political failure that has long haunted feminist studies: the loss of the referential real, variously iterated as the abandoned commitment to materiality made manifest by feminism’s “transit from the street to the university.”

How do we begin to articulate the failures of the US public university when our institutional historiography over-determines the extent to which we are able to recognize (ourselves within) them? In this chapter, I argue that what Clare Hemmings calls the persistent desire for the “elusive material” continues to animate the critical itineraries, methodological priorities, object and analytic dispositions, rhetorical forms, and most importantly, field-forming narratives claimed by or attributed to feminist studies in ways that do not always critically attend to the problematic investments and attachments formed there. This underlining drive to name the constitutive conditions of feminist

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studies in line with its professed goals has the tendency to over-determine how we broach issues of institutional failure and the violences it creates.  

I follow Robyn Wiegman’s point that failure is the “unavoidable consequence of imagining political transformation, especially in the context of the differentials that collate around investments in institutions, social practices, and various kinds of critical agencies and projects.” As such, failure can productively occasion us to contemplate “what it means to be where we think we are.” Although many have taken up this task, I am nevertheless convinced by Hemmings that our responses are often couched within the context of feminism’s broader political aspirations—namely, a desire to do restorative justice to what it variously imagines itself to have betrayed. The contemporary “university of disaster” presents us many opportunities to think about failure and to develop grounded critiques of the disproportionate distribution of institutional value and vulnerability, visited upon the very bodies that comprise our units of study and departmental labor. Yet how we name those conditions, and moreover trace their impacts, often reveal certain affective attachments to figures and positionalities that reproduce rationalities of which we ought to be cautious.

There is perhaps no better an example of this than trigger warnings. Trigger warnings attempt to address the violence of the university classroom through preemptive/preemptive claims of harm. The amenability of trigger warnings to neoliberal rhetorics of debility is unmistakable. But more importantly, trigger warnings

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134 This is in reference to an argument that Hemmings makes in Why Stories Matter. Women’s Studies, as a discipline, has sustained itself on a promise to deliver conditions that will finally allow for the academy to honor the persons it excludes. Women’s Studies acts as a kind of gatekeeper, continuously narrating its own fraught relationship to the academy as one of necessity. Ironically, because it can only exist as gatekeeper, it must keep at bay the very thing it promises to return.

135 Wiegman, “Feminism, Institutions, and the Idiom of Failure,” 62.

136 Ibid.
have a unique relationship to the new academic civility politics that mandate not only what are acceptable responses to potentially troubling discourses but what are in fact appropriate discourses. Despite the ways that feminist thought has contributed to the critique of “civility,” there seems to be some reluctance in examining the relationship between trigger warnings and the biopolitical rationalities of late liberalism. Moreover, student demand for compliance with these measures places an especial expectation on feminist studies that misconstrues the pedagogical objectives and institutional positionality of academic feminism/the academic feminist by making us answerable to institutional failure in ways that predetermine what we are able to say and think about those conditions.

Thus, continuing in the spirit of the last chapter, this analysis will reflect on the meta-discursive context of institutional failure as it persists as a horizon for thinking, in this case, academic feminism. I begin by landscaping the idiom of failure, as it narrated the institutional position, or institutionality, of feminist studies in the 1990s and early 2000s. I argue that this first articulation of academic feminist failure coincided with the emergence of excellence and centered on the disjunction between field desire (to do justice) and field practices (the theorization of injustice). While that debate gripped the subsequent decade, the new conditions of austerity in the 2010s prompted a shift in thinking failure as a tool of institutional management. This has led to some very useful critiques of how failure, and its corresponding affects of injury and debilitation, are mongered or appropriated by the university apparatus in ways that coopt and/or detract from our ability to name the oppressive conditions of our labors.
But as I argue through an analysis of the trigger warning debate, some of the methods for combatting that cooptation, so as to more accurately identify the ways the university disproportionately fails already institutionally vulnerable populations, often reproduce the very logics they seek to critique. What clouds the ability to see these complicities, I argue, are the ways our own institutional historiography intersects with the present need for directed responses to the machinations of austerity. But perhaps what interests me most about the trigger warning debate is the way it has prompted many feminist academics to (re)visit their position on the “impossibility of feminist studies.” In turn, I take up three key feminist responses to the trigger warning debate and mine them for their contributions to a now decades-long conversation about the precarious institutionality of feminist studies under regimes of excellence and, now, austerity.

*Losing Feminist Studies to the Ruins*

Although in his groundbreaking critique of higher education he did not write about “failure” per se, Bill Readings noted many of the forces that would eventually give rise to the disaster-mediated present. In *The University in Ruins*, Readings critiques the educational standard of “excellence” as a non-referential principle of expansion and maximization that turned the academy into the corporate entity we continue to critique today. Under the aegis of excellence, the academy subsists not on the promise of delivering an education but on the desire for education itself—no matter what ruinous outcome that aspiration might produce (and we can name the main one: student debt). Worse, any attempt at radicalization is subsumed, writes Readings, as regimes of excellence seek to cannibalize and incorporate their own critique—as is evidenced by the troubling uses of “diversity” in university mission statements that grew out of criticisms of the ivory tower model. In the “university of excellence” there exists no content that
cannot be commodified and, as such, no knowledge that cannot be made amenable to the interests of capital.\(^{137}\)

This presented especially troubling conditions for liberal artists, particularly as it threatened to render any field of study with no apparent “tradable value” obsolete. Critical thinking skills do not “translate into substantial profits,” warns Henry Giroux. Those areas of study that focus on critical theory, literature, feminism, ethics, environmentalism, race, postcolonialism, philosophy, etc., are to be eliminated, subcontracted to other disciplines, or technicized because “their role in the market” is ultimately “ornamental.”\(^{138}\) The ability of excellence to render such areas of study anachronistic at best and reactionary at worst created the conditions under which conservative scholars, such as Dinesh D’Souza, could argue that it was actually race and gender studies that were introducing anti-intellectual discord into the fabric of US universities by way of a “victim’s revolution” against so-called democratic progress: the celebration of universality brought about by new liberalisms.\(^{139}\)

Yet in evacuating knowledge of its critical content, regimes of excellence effectively installed neoliberal multiculturalism as the principle of educational success. The coincidence of this ideological conceit to the objectives of racialized capitalism is unmistakable, writes Jodi Melamed. Contra D’Souza’s assumption, under excellence, higher education is engaged in a most pernicious form of citizenship making. Indeed, neoliberal multiculturalism abstracts the content of culture “from anything but an ideal relationship to concrete human groups and instead directly codes an economic order of


Such an arrangement aided in furthering distinctions between the racialized: global multicultural persons, or what Aihwa Ong would call “flexible citizens” “fit for neoliberal subjectivity” (the model minority), versus disposable populations designated as “monocultural, irrational, regressive, patriarchal, and criminal.” Thus excellence persisted in at once producing the context for the development of biopolitical rationalities required of the racial state while erasing its trace as a site for the construction of human value. Worse, it demanded complicity on behalf of the identitarian fields that took a staunch critique of such systems of power/knowledge as their raison d’etre.

Jeanette McVicker writes that, at this time, Women’s Studies directors were increasingly asked to redefine their programs’ “mission” in line with the corporate logics of “accountability” and “efficiency.” These logical economies, she writes, coalesce on the idea of a post-racial/post-cultural America, though they construct this ideology differently: “One invokes it overtly as a moral imperative and ground for the reproduction of a ‘shared democratic culture’; the other relies on it implicitly as a technological ground and imperative for ‘democratic and economic efficiency’ that can be exported and reproduced globally.” These aims, she warns, are “antagonized by the potentialities of transdisciplinary programs such as Women’s Studies, which are engaged in thinking the resistance to ‘scattered hegemonies.”

Moreover, the context and stakes of feminist labor in the academy were elided by such objectives, notes Dale Bauer. As they were made to take on “the second shift” of academic work in light of defunding initiatives, women’s studies practitioners suffered burnout. The “unpaid, unwaged labor

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140 Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 135.
141 Melamed, 87.
143 McVicker, 235.
of Women’s Studies work” produced ambivalence in many practitioners, jeopardizing the longevity of the field.\textsuperscript{144} For on what ground could one possibly justify unremunerated efforts, except through the exploitative logics of care long proponed and demanded of feminized subjects by heteropatriarchal capitalism?

The institutionalized marginalization of Women’s Studies under excellence was made all the more problematic by its always already suspect position in the academy. Patrice McDermott argues that, “when it comes to new curricular proposals, unlike traditional disciplines, [Women’s Studies] is continually forced to defend its intellectual merit.” Under significant budgetary constraints, feminist studies programs and departments alike found themselves innovating their own survival, ironically, through strategies of disaggregation: by cross-listing courses, relying on the labors of contingent faculty, and outsourcing core curriculum to the disciplines. While Rachel Lee notes that this practice can be useful, it also obscured how tiring “guerrilla tactics can be and how alienating (of our labor) this commitment to dissipating the field—diffusing it into an everyplace that feels, too often, like no place—can be for those working in the trenches.”\textsuperscript{145}

Excellence may have predicated feminism’s institutional failure. But the often incautious distinction between the greater powers that be and those they negatively impact elides some key points. There is nothing necessarily contradictory about the persistence of feminism in the university of excellence. Assuming that these institutional changes occurred entirely outside the scope of feminist studies’ critical practice


\textsuperscript{145} Rachel Lee, “Notes from the (Non)Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color,” in \textit{Women’s Studies on its Own}, (Durham: Duke UP), 2002: 86
disregards the ways in which feminist studies is produced by and within this context. In *The Reorder of Things*, Rod Ferguson contemplates the role that the academy has played in the consolidation of the contemporary US racial state and its official discourses of neoliberal multiculturalism. Much of the critical work on the academy views the neoliberalization of higher education *a fortiori*—as the reverberation of neoliberal ideology, where racial, gender, and sex disparities are thought to proceed from the application of broader austerity measures. Ferguson’s work instead suggests a longer institutional history where a more direct confrontation with difference was the impetus for institutional change.

Far from being a mere relay, the academy played a key role in developing policies for managing a heterogeneous university population in the interests of racialized capitalism—predating the seminal moment marked by most critics as the 1990s. The university of the 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in the number of minority students (students of color; immigrant or first generation students; international students). The somewhat de facto circumstances under which this came to be the case were anything but apolitical. The academy viewed this emerging population as a way to strategically navigate a growing demand for racial equity in higher education. Accounting for “difference” became a positivist calculus, where the academy could meet equity requirements—via enrollments—without structural impact. The “inclusion” of “diverse” populations served to change the perception of whiteness in the academy but not the whiteness of the academy.  

Feminist studies was part of the many emerging intellectual projects taking up the question of difference from which the academy at large sought to appropriate and

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146 This analysis is derived from Ferguson’s chapter, “The Racial Genealogy of Excellence.”
cannibalize. As Chandan Reddy observes in a different context, the post-1968 moment yielded the radical academic undercurrents of critical ethnic, queer, and feminist studies that, while originally conceived to address the limitations of hegemonic knowledge production, soon became spaces for the enforcement of diversity norms—especially as these sites have been and continue to be subject to immense pressures “to formalize their objects and areas of study [gender, race, class, etc.] through the lens of a positivist multiculturalism.”147 The lesson here is that the academy had not merely assimilated an already existing reality but actually helped to shape the neoliberal ideology of multiculturalism now deployed broadly across levels of culture, politics, and economy to account for populations. Although aided by an overall shift in what Ferguson calls “the strategic situation of power,” or the scope of power’s objective, it remains imperative to see not only institutions but the actors and academic units within them as creating a context for the deployment of power from which they cannot remain separate.148

Reading along the grain of Danielle Bouchard’s work in A Community of Disagreement: Feminism and the University, it is therefore striking how common it became among feminist studies practitioners to offer up a commitment to social justice

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147 Reddy, Freedom with Violence, 147.
148 To be fair, institutional histories are not always telling of the totality of politics and positionalities within those spaces. Key to Ferguson’s analysis is a critique of how scholars in fields such as gender and sexuality studies are positioned in respect to the diversity initiatives that have grown in response to their radical call for recognition of marginalized bodies and scholarship in academia. Surely few of us who find ourselves working in these spaces would advocate measures for “inclusion” that undermine the context and stakes of minoritized labor: i.e. representation based on empiricism and positivist understandings of identity, course credentialing protocols that devalue the intellectual content of our work, research funds and collaborations that promote the technocratic production of knowledges about populations marked by gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and nationality. At best, Ferguson writes, these circumstances produce ambivalence. Elsewhere Chandan Reddy symptomatizes this ambivalence as a problematic of recognition under liberal democracy, where the signs under which we necessarily operate and become legible rarely express our best intentions. This is foremost an ethical dilemma, especially as it means that the terms through which we become viable and valued as institutional subjects are relative to a range of excluded matter. Yet it is also a crucial reminder that there is a certain unevenness to how institutions and the people within them operate and, in turn, fail or become failed.
politics, interdisciplinarity, and transnationalism as answers to—and hence trends occurring outside of—the problematic of excellence. These terminologies began to show up in job postings, and importantly, course offerings as, at once, correctives to internal field limitations as well as resistance to trends of excellence. This kind of thinking pervades responses, such as McVicker’s, who advocates “transdisciplinarity” as the antithesis rather than the potential apotheosis of neoliberal non-referentiality; Susan Stanford Friedman’s defense of intersectionality as giving a context of fullness to feminist research; or even Chandra Mohanty’s reliance on transnationalism to organize knowledges of difference under an oppositional domain of justice. These commentaries, writes Bouchard, overlook how “politics, interdisciplinarity, and transnationalism […] are concepts which have arisen in conjunction with university responses to the social and intellectual movements of the 1960s, constituting a primary apparatus through which the understanding of racial and sexual difference as qualities that mark specific bodies is produced and promoted.”

That isn’t to argue against their potential usefulness as strategies of resistance. Like much else, these concepts are neither totally radical nor simply complicit. The point is that, within the disciplinary scope of feminist studies, they came to represent a desire for a pure space from which to theorize in ways that overlooked growing complicities. These analytics encompassed their own accounting logic that confiscated from feminisms of color both a vocabulary and positionality to be made amenable to an academic feminist apparatus that was increasingly showing its colonial tendencies. For it was the feminized body of color, increasingly being recruited and interpellated by such logics, which made academic feminism’s precarity an issue with measurable social and political stakes…

149 Danielle Bouchard, A Community of Disagreement, 86.
though in effect over-determined how those bodies of color were able to emerge within feminism.

Moreover, these critical vocabularies reflect what Bouchard critiques as a desire to be “in” but not “of” the academy. Of which she notes, “The problem of the general mode of describing feminism (and/or women’s studies) as not ‘of’ the university is not that it underestimates the limitations of institutional membership but that it precludes recognition of responsibility to the enabling processes of institutional difference and division and thus, unwittingly, reenvisions the institution as a sovereign, discrete, self-present entity.”¹⁵⁰ I would argue that this desire to be present-to yet unaccounted-for, institutionally located yet disciplinarily indistinct, is symptomatic of a constitutive anxiety regarding the failure of feminist studies: (what Bouchard identifies as) its “difference-to-itself.”

To explain, Bouchard argues that feminist studies has relied on a fraught notion of coherency to consolidate its field presence. Without a “there-there,” political and theoretical commonality is considered necessary to securing the field’s legibility. Yet appeals to a communicative commons misunderstand difference as a plot against feminism’s “progress” to triumph over its non-identicality. This struggle with difference, writes Bouchard, is an inherently racialized and sexualized one, as it is the unmarked heteronormative whiteness of the category “woman” and, subsequently, the insufficiency of “gender” to overcome those limitations, which produces anxiety in the first place. In attempting to manage the ways that difference disturbs the concept of unity that remains foundational to its organization, feminist studies has sought to control the meaning and context in which differences will come to matter in ways that are inclusive and

¹⁵⁰ Bouchard, 5.
encompassing of their critique—though not to account for the “radical unanticipation” of difference but to create a common sense in which the disruption of multiplicity merely marks a historical moment from which feminist thinking can progress.

Hemmings lends further weight to this argument, suggesting that the consensus around feminism’s disagreeable and at times chaotic “past” serves to order its disparate parts into the semblance of teleology: mainstream feminism, lesbian feminism, black feminism, postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, and so forth. In her analysis, it is post-structuralism, and more specifically, queer studies that come to figure the failure of feminism through their insistence on emphasizing the singularity of gendered experiences. The alleged “danger” of this line of thinking is not only its disaggregation of a common sense but its supposed dismissal of the “real” structural nature of gendered experiences.

Those “real” experiences are alleged to occur both within but mostly outside the academy. And, importantly, almost always rely on a haunting figure of racialized womanhood. In the academy, “woman of color” is a stance from which to narrate the challenge of multiplicity within party lines—as an oppositional discourse that reflects on the limitations of the dominant narrative while also holding out the promise of a victorious ending. This, writes Rachel Lee, is disturbingly necessary and productive to the advancement of the field:

Characterized as that which had been left out of Women’s Studies’ and ethnic studies’ historical and current practices (the subject of multiple exclusions and the testament to Women’s Studies’ ‘exclusionary’ practices), women of color symbolize the potentiality of feminist studies’ critical future—the superordinate capacity to switch between and among difference ‘gears’ (or different ideologies and explanatory systems), which is also the capacity to occupy the space outside itself (outside of its own explanatory systems). Thus in their aspect as ‘oppositional
consciousness’—as the residual subject never fully spoken for in any program of action or knowledge formation—women of color remain eminently useful to the progress narrative Women’s Studies wishes to create for itself, where the fullness of women of color’s arrival within Women’s Studies is always ‘about to be.’

It is precisely this suspensive mode in which difference is held—what Lee observes as “either a racial exclusion to be resolved or a non-territorial space of critical surplus”—that characterizes Hemmings’ concept of the elusive material. The elusive material, while always already racialized and linked to certain bodies is, nevertheless, paradoxically immaterial. It is the thing “to be advocated for, but never achieved, since its necessity remains predicated on its absence.” As such, the elusive material is what guarantees feminism’s institutional future, inasmuch as indexes a failure from which it must perennially work to recover. And when this ghostly material is not being recruited to comment on the internal ruptures of the field, it casts a range of figures who come to enflesh the often uninterrogated domains of the external, or extra-referential, real—the instances of trauma, violence, and captivity from which feminism’s “evidence,” “experience,” and “authenticity” derives.

To encapsulate thus far, excellence primed feminist studies for a critical reckoning. Its destructive impacts are not to be underestimated. Yet feminist studies practitioners’ resistance to their own disciplinarity revealed certain tensions attendant upon the privileged categories of thought (woman, gender) that construct feminism’s imaginary, in general, and feminist studies’ critical itineraries, more specifically. To be blunt, feminist studies was confronting the reality of its institutional normalization (its field location) in ways that sought to outwardly deny or narratively reconstruct that

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151 Lee, 88.
152 Ibid.
153 Hemmings, 114.
reality and what it triggered for field practitioners—that there may be more in common with the university industrial complex than with the expressed mission of social justice going on outside its borders. Thus one could say that feminist studies was experiencing its own institutionally-mediated crisis of non-referentiality from which it attempted recovery through the construction and incorporation of more, realer, referents.

This did not serve to work through the field’s points of tension and discomfort, but instead produced a far more troubling narration of them that effectively pitted critique against social reality; culture against materialism, and problematically, post-structuralism against woman of color theorizing. As Hemmings writes of this moment, it was the “linguistic turn” in feminist theory that was blamed for failing to address academic ills in pursuit of remaining politically and socially “unattached,”

Empirical engagement with the social world, underpinned by experience as the basis for knowledge production has thus been displaced by interdisciplinary humanities approaches that prioritize postmodern deconstruction and culture as method and object respectively. In the process, what is lost is a feminist theory and politics with a disciplinary, materialist ground, as well as the clarity and integrity of its subjects. The result of this set of unfortunate developments is the loss of feminist theory’s ability in the present to attend to the large questions of our day: social and economic justice, violence and conflict, and global transformations in power-relations affecting people’s daily lives.  

In this conceptualization, what caused feminist studies’ “ruin” was not a university model that was progressively defunding programs that had been historically short-changed, nor was it longstanding debates about the limitations of feminist theorizing; rather, the failure of feminist studies was its inability to produce embodied knowledges—to show up to the plate with a “there-there” that would exceed the “petty” and distracting nature of abstruse intellectual debate. I would argue, along with Robyn Wiegman, that this struggle is most

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154 Hemmings, 89.
evidently manifest in the discourse surrounding the field’s objective scope—specifically, what is lost unto “women” by/in “women’s studies.”

For at this time emerged the most provoking indictment of the field to date, Wendy Brown’s “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies.” For Brown, the crisis of women’s studies arises from its paradoxical interest in being legitimated by the very university apparatus from which it also desires to remain distinct, noting that its original purpose was to “challenge the ubiquitous misogyny, masculinism, and sexism in academic research, curricula, canons, and pedagogies.”[^155] Women’s studies, contends Brown, made its initial success through politicized efforts toward equitable representation and incorporation. But the viability of that gesture depended upon the availability of “woman” as a discrete category of experience. The advent of post-structuralism, coupled with the demands for nuance proffered by theories of intersectionality, effectively destabilized “woman” as a coherent, unifying description attributable to stable ready-made subjects and, in turn according to Brown, took away the field’s “there-there.” Without a proper object, and thus a political rallying point, what constituted the field, apart from its history? Moreover, what especial labor did women’s studies perform that other, interrelated fields could not lay claim?

Brown’s argument is a critique of feminism’s academic failure. Her question is, essentially, how does women’s studies come to be institutionally inhabited from the place of difference, and, subsequently, how does that inhabitation reveal recurrent problems from which the field cannot escape? What is “impossible” for Brown is the ability for “women’s studies” to be accountable to its exclusions without at once reproducing them.

She centers her analysis on the fraught institutional structure of her own women’s studies department—specifically its efforts toward curricular reform—in order to address that question. In her analysis, the core requirements of the major, “Introduction to Feminism,” “Feminist Theory, Methodological Perspectives in Feminism,” and “Women of Color in the United States” reflect a split between “generic inquiry” (the first three classes) and “political inquiry” (the last) that reveal the limits of feminist critique (the referential intransitivity of “woman”) in a “compensatory” emotional register of “guilt and blame.”\(^{156}\) The split in course offerings indicates the ways that gender is structurally superordinate to race in women’s studies and reflects a systemic problem of representation that “cannot be undone by any amount of courses, readings, and new hires focused on women of color.”\(^{157}\) In Brown’s estimation, women’s studies will only yield its exclusionary trace—its différence—in its attempts to organize a faulty coherence under the sign, woman.

I read Brown as responding, in part, to Judith Butler’s admonition about the “embarrassed etc,” where attempts to expand the category “woman”—to make it at once answerable to and broader than its unmarked whiteness, able-bodied/mindedness, class bias, and so forth—“invariably fail to be complete.”\(^{158}\) She states as much, arguing that the critique feminists of color bring to women’s studies can never quite be fully incorporated, “insofar as the superordination of white women within women’s studies is secured by the primacy and purity of the category gender.”\(^{159}\) However inspired by poststructuralist thought, I also read Brown’s frustrations as being informed by the advent

\(^{156}\) Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” 85.
\(^{157}\) Brown, 88.
\(^{158}\) See Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” in Gender Trouble.
\(^{159}\) Brown, 93.
of a university system that had already presumed the fate/failure of the so-called identitarian fields. For in Readings’ assessment, the university of excellence holds no place for cultural analysis. Rather than responding in kind by professing the merits of women’s studies, which has its own limitations, Brown suggests dispersing the labor of women’s studies to the disciplines, as she maintains feminism works best by critically shadowing the means and methods of dominant knowledge production. But perhaps most importantly, Brown reads as being keenly aware of the limitations that emerge from the activism of the field. How can one produce knowledges for justice, when those knowledges are conditioned by power?

Nevertheless, the limitations of this critique outweigh many of its otherwise cogent points. First, her solution presumes an innocence on behalf of the disciplines. In assuming the unproblematic state of disciplinary knowledge production relative to the fraught identity politics that mark feminist studies, Brown overlooks the limitations inherent to any field delineation. There is great risk, writes Judith Butler in “Against Proper Objects,” in differentiating fields of inquiry based on the “there-there” of a concrete analytical object—gender or otherwise. She instead suggests that scholarly work be guided by the “productive tensions” between and among the analytics of critique. Feminist theory does, in fact, toe a fine line between the biological and the cultural, the material and the discursive, not wanting to wholesale dismiss the relevance of embodied realities while at the same time not wanting to risk making determinist arguments.

While we have a vague notion that gender, sex, and sexuality constitute the critical terrain of feminist inquiry, we run into problems when, in the course of defending our institutionality, we make ill-informed distinctions, as when we carve out “gender” as
belonging to feminism and “sexuality” to gay and lesbian studies… or “race” to women of color feminism. But these debates pervade across the liberal arts, albeit to varying degrees of importance and relevance. So while we cannot necessarily dispute the claim that other sites perform a similar labor, we can challenge the assumption that any given academic unit has a requisite object. Put differently, we can challenge the notion that other intellectual domains and their objects of analysis are always already referentially in synch.

There is an “identity structure” to the disciplines as well, writes Wiegman. In privileging “disciplinary identity” over “corporeal identity,” Brown “reverses the political imperative” of the field “but not the organizing structures within which knowledge and bodies, identities and thought, in the university now move.” There is no more telling an example of this than Melamed’s work in *Represent and Destroy*, where she demonstrates how the organization of literary curriculum in English Departments contributes to the structures of feeling that normalize various iterations of race liberalism. Thus to say that there is no identity politics to these fields misses the ways in which the liberal arts, in sum, remains committed to developing the racial project of the state, despite however much excellence has displaced national culture and “the citizen” as a reference point. I follow Wiegman’s rebuttal that there is actually something quite useful, because potentially reflexive, about remaining in the tenuous space Brown describes:

> After all, it is precisely the existence of women’s studies today as an interdisciplinary institutional domain defined in relation to identity that makes productive the movement of courses and knowledge from women’s studies to other institutional arenas, for it is only under the auspices of women’s studies that feminism can emerge as a legitimate object of study

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embroiled in rethinking and remaking identity as a critical category of inquiry.\textsuperscript{161} Wiegman approaches women’s studies “difference-to-itself” not as the thing to be overcome—because impossible—but to be continuously thought and worked through.

For what other institutional location would permit the problematization of the very things this chapter discusses? As Wiegman points out, Brown is “too optimistic, as the contemporary university offers quite literally ‘no there-there’ for the study ‘of the powers involved in the construction of subjects.’ The present of thinking that Brown calls for needs to register this institutional failure, not as preamble to dismissing women’s studies as an academic endeavor, but in order to extend the critique of identitarian belonging to the disciplinary formations that currently structure ‘women’s studies’ own knowledge production.”

Most importantly, then, are some of the troubling ways that Brown’s logic reproduces the very thing it seeks to mark as problematic: women of color as “real” crisis object. As Lee deftly summarizes,

\begin{quote}
In declaring the ‘impossibility’ of Women’s Studies, Brown proclaims an end to what she portrays as a two-pronged hegemony within Women’s Studies programs: its focus on ‘one dimension of power… as primary and structuring, echoing the broad critique of mainstream feminist theory by ‘women of color’; and its cleaving to a pre-Foucauldian analysis of power as hierarchical ranking rather than as subjectifying modalities that produce even as they regulate subjects.
\end{quote}

Yet the complicity of critique emerges in its implicit assumptions, as Lee continues:

\begin{quote}
Though never explicitly argued, Brown’s citational practice indicates that this pre-Foucauldian construction of power has been a favored heuristic in ‘women of color’ scholarship and that this (to her mind) mistaken articulation of power along the lines of privilege and intersectional oppression has obscured for Women’s Studies the potential Foucauldian analyses not only to make more complex our understandings of agency, subjectivity, and discourse, but also to resolve the cycle of guilt and blame.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{161} Wiegman, “The Possibility of Women’s Studies,” 54.
enshrined in the ‘women of color’ classroom. Because this essay renders
the passionate volleys of that classroom the sign of Women’s Studies
breakdown, Brown obscures ‘guilt and blame’ as possible effects of a
particular cognitive leap made by students that Women’s Studies is itself a
site of regulation.\(^{162}\)

As Lee suggests, women of color represent for Brown a very material politics of
representation, the recognition of which threatens to undermine the post-structuralist
directionality of the field. In effect, women of color are rendered spatially and temporally
distinct from the theoretical project of feminism, as its trace effect. In suggesting the
dissolution, or rather the outsourcing of feminist critique, Brown effectively argues that
feminism haunt other field formations to escape the cycles of “guilt and blame” around
its own exclusionary practices. In that assessment, women of color become a doubly
negated spectral presence, whose embodied emergence is dually deferred.

Although perhaps the most poignant, Brown’s is not the only piece at this time to
suggest women of color as the thing to be considered problematic when assessing
feminism’s failure via the limits of “woman.” In “What Ails Feminist Criticism,” Susan
Gubar attributes feminism’s stalemate to the aesthetic style and tone of black and Third
World women’s scholarship that is the very killjoy of more rationally-minded (sic: white)
feminist critique. Gubar’s point problematically underscores not only the centrality of
white women to feminism proper but the fragility of the whole operation at the hands of a
“combative” racialized other, not comprehending the colonialist logic on which this
assumption is invariably based.\(^{163}\) When women of color’s presence is not precluding
feminist coherency in the academy, it is problematically recalled to draw attention to the
terrain outside institutional borders. For in Martha Nussbaum’s “The Professor of

\(^{162}\) Lee, 91.

Parody,” the central problem of feminist critique is the time it exhausts having precisely these kinds of debates. If Brown names the problem of women’s studies as its guilty attachment to the political, Nussbaum names the problem as its inattentiveness to the political. Citing blame with post-structuralist feminists, and namely Judith Butler, Nussbaum argues that academic feminism is a parody of what it once was, a social movement to end injustice:

Hungry women are not fed by [theoretical debate], battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it… The big hope, the hope for a world of real justice, where laws and institutions protect the equality and dignity of all citizens, has been banished…. Feminism demands more and women deserve more.164

Nussbaum’s conclusion suggests the political realness of struggle as the final judgement call of feminism and women’s studies. It will be the ability to realize that there is a substance beyond critique that will give feminism purpose and, in turn, institutional purchase.

The debate over feminism’s proper objective scope came to mark the decade preceding the millennium as one of great loss. The debate over “woman” is exemplary of something broader than itself. Whether signaling the triumphant vitalization of the field or its very unmooring, it is the inability to reconcile “the real” (proffered by the specter of racialized womanhood) within the scope of its professed mission of producing knowledges for social and institutional justice that remained feminism’s most nettlesome point of contention. Although the articles examined above propose different framings and solutions to the problematic of “woman,” they coalesce in their shared assumption that incoherency will be the downfall of feminism in the academy—the impossibility of the

shard category woman (Brown); the refusal of the shared category woman (Gubar); and the resistance to political synthesis via the academic feminist subject’s reluctance to acknowledge the sociality of woman (Nussbaum). In *Why Stories Matter*, Hemmings argues that the loss-qua-disaggregation so keenly perceived was not a mere reflection but rather a careful narration of reality.

Loss has many permutations but, in general, laments the abandonment of the prior mode. As Hemmings avers, “In loss narratives, we are not only subject to feminism’s demise, we are also responsible for it.” In this case, the “prior” is the fervor of progress, or the moment we thought we advanced beyond the limitations of mainstream feminist thought. Loss laments the uncertain future that is recalled whenever the plasticity of gender is debated:

> We used to think of ‘woman’ or feminism as unified, but progressive fragmentation of categories and infighting have resulted in the increased depoliticization of feminist commitments. Conservative institutionalization of feminist thought and the generational popularity of ‘post-feminism’ are empty parodies of a feminist social movement that has incontrovertibly passed. The demise of feminism can be understood as part of a more general political shift to the right that has also killed the viability of a left-wing alternative. Feminist academics and a new generation of women have both inherited and contributed to this loss, particularly through their lack of interest in recent feminist history and an acceptance of political individualism. Whatever the failings of previous feminist commitments, it was better to have a feminist movement than none at all.\(^{165}\)

Certainly we can read critiques, such as Gubar’s and Nussbaum’s into this analysis. Yet Brown’s work shares a similarly anxious temporality in valorizing the non-place of early feminist critique in the academy as being prior to the formalization of women’s studies. Brown may not be hostile or nostalgic, and she certainly does not disdain the “inappropriate playfulness” of cultural approaches that Nussbaum loathes. Nevertheless,

hers is a critique of a loss of something that never was: an academic feminism that does not operate on a presumptive norm.

But Hemmings’ point is even more precise than this. The story we tell is just as interesting as the erasures it performs. Feminist storytelling engages in what Amy Brandzel calls a “politics of presence,” a way of creating the conditions to which one will then respond. Through the use of certain “affective glosses,” Hemmings writes, feminism reconstitutes its history in line with its present preoccupations. The glosses she names—progress, loss, and return—are not simply interpellative frameworks but proclamations on where theorizing has been and its future directives. They instruct how we conduct ourselves in light of our subject matter. To be sure, we are appropriately smug about our progress beyond the racial limitations of 1970s feminism; melancholic about the intractability of “women”; and enlivened by the promises of a new materialism. As she argues, these broad strokes obscure the anatomical complexities of those various periodizations. And, central to my purposes here, ignore how such filters are mediated—in part, by excellence.

I would add to Hemmings’ theory that loss was made to reflect on the stilted project of justice, assumed of women’s studies labor. For Brown, women’s studies cannot do justice to its signifieds; when women of color are accounted for, it is only to make them available for political amelioration. For Gubar, the politically pressing point of collective justice is lost onto those who argue against the portability of the category woman. Similarly, for Nussbaum, the expense such alleged self-indulgent navel-gazing is the on-the-ground realities that exceed theoretical discussions of gender. But why is the concept of justice so compelling of the field’s directives? Robyn Wiegman takes up this
question in the recently published, *Object Lessons*. Rather than offering a precise answer, she elaborates the ways in which a commitment to social justice becomes almost messianic in its pursuit of discovering better, more reliable, reparative, and I would argue more connective, categories of analysis. These amendments do little to speak back to the limitations of prior modes, but instead animate the present occupations and arrestments of the field. As such, justice signals more than a desire to do right by an/Other. It indicates a will to “fix” the field presence in line with its stated goals. Thus much like the matter it seeks, justice is an elusive concept that, according to Lisa Duggan, typifies the problems that emerge when social movements move into institutional spaces while remaining tethered to their own shaping interests.

But let me be clear. It is not a “bad” idea for a field of study to be invested in a commitment to something larger than itself. As Gayatri Spivak explores in her most recent work, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, without a sense of the beautiful, sublime, or transcendent, education loses its luster for the transformative politics it might otherwise offer. But where a spirit of justice becomes problematically tethered to a desire for an elusive material is when we make demands of the field to compensate for its failings, to transgress the very context that gives it meaning. It is when we assume an analogous operation between knowledge production, or the social question of inequality, and action, or the political enactment of justice beyond institutional domains. Failure emerges in the moment when knowledge becomes a means to some other, often vaguely defined if not deferred, ends.

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166 See, especially, Wiegman’s discussion in the chapter, “Doing Justice with Objects: Or, the ‘Progress’ of Gender.”

“Doing justice,” particularly to/with (analytic) objects involves a revisionist effort to name the conditions of feminist failure.\textsuperscript{168} As I have demonstrated in this section, the confrontation with the university of excellence created the conditions under which feminist studies practitioners reconsidered the directives of the field. The efforts toward institutional survival—revising core curricula, reformulating labor structures—revealed the ways the field itself suffered from its own crisis of non-referentiality. Feminist studies had to confront the limits of the critical comportments it offered in resistance to excellence. As the progress narrative of feminism failed to exceed its trace, a loss was acutely felt… and re-narrated by way of the very thing also conceived as its salvation—the various figures of racialized womanhood that come to stand in for the referential real. What feminist studies “lost” to the ruins was its narrative cohesion, the ability to tell the story of itself in line with its professed interests. But Hemmings reminds us, as much as loss is a lament, it is also a staging for the future. The affect of loss that marked the discourse on academic feminism in this moment also contained traces of a desire for a return. In the next section, I explore the articulations of this affective shift in the context of the new institutional politics that exceed excellence in description and scope. In particular, I seek to understand how the organizing principle of justice that once spelled feminism’s failure in the academy under excellence has been reinvigorated as promising its return, even as many remain cautiously unconvinced.

\textit{Siting Feminism in The New Austerity Regimes}

If the academy was in ruins when Readings wrote, then this is surely the fall of Rome. The US public university of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century has fully assimilated the terms of excellence. In fact, I would argue that we are in a “post” moment where corporatization is

\textsuperscript{168} This is a play on Wiegman’s work in \textit{Object Lessons}, where she argues that feminist labor is about defining a justice labor that it then ascribes to certain objects.
no longer a future horizon but a ubiquitous reality, mediated by austerity measures that continually ask us to do more for less. The conditions described above have not improved but rather intensified. In fact, it is almost impossible not to be amenable to one’s own cooptation. Indeed, the administrative demand for compliance is not immediately ideological but rather organizational and targets the basic management of our departmental and individual labor. Chiefly concerned, are we, for maintaining high enrollments, bargaining for budgetary increases, securing superior evaluations, and digitizing our curricula to keep up with growing demands for innovative pedagogies.

One might say that the contemporary academy has mechanized the persistent specter of disaster that we have learned to fear from our experiences in the ruins in order to further manage the crises it creates. In fact, Paul Virilio names this particular institutional formation the “university of disaster.” Here, Virilio becomes interested in the ways that higher learning participates in a political culture he has elsewhere described as being consumed by the threat of its own undoing which is, ironically, of its own making. To explain, the very mechanisms designated for expanding life are also those that destroy it. For example, the highspeed train designed to defray the environmental and financial costs of travel also produced the catastrophic rail accident; in a more cultural register, the speed and spectacularism of information media that makes news more immediately accessible also desensitizes us from perceiving the frames that determine how events come to matter.\footnote{Paul Virilio, and Julie Rose, The University of Disaster (Cambridge: Polity), 2010.}

The debt cycle of higher education would be the clearest connection to this point: students take out loans to secure an education that does not guarantee gainful employment, causing further indebtedness. But I would argue that the discourse of the
university is not only consistent with our responses to disaster capitalism but also forms important material connections to other kinds of statist and imperialist power structures that produce and perpetuate crisis. The monetary relationships between private corporations and public research interests, the practice of managing university debt through the influx of international student dollars, the construction of university property on confiscated lands, and the use of prison labor in the construction and maintenance of university property would only be a few examples of these pernicious affiliations. But above all, this particular university model has been most effective in legislating our gut responses to these measures.

Many of us have lost the incentive for critique, as these ostensibly benign gestures have in actuality modulated the kind of response we are able to have to their passing. For example, I secured a temporary contract at a small, private and elite liberal arts institution to teach a course I had taught numerous times at my resident university. Mere weeks before I was required to report for duty, the department chair of the unit in question asked that I prepare an entirely different—and new to me—course. Fearful of losing the only supplemental employment I had lined up for the semester, and without which I would not be able to make rent, I acquiesced, still thankful that I was being asked to teach something that fell somewhat within the parameters of my research and coursework experience. In that moment I felt a liability to an administration that was actually profiting from my labor. I was hired on a contingency to replace the line of a faculty member on temporary leave, for which I was paid significantly less than she and without benefits. But it gets worse. This particular department was itself in a precarious position, bargaining with a hostile administration to even consider the possibility of using an
adjunct to relieve other, overworked professors of the burden of having to assume the labor of a downed faculty member—who herself had to fight arduously for a research sabbatical in the first place. The looming possibility of job loss amidst an unstable market has truly obscured the context and stakes of our labor. Instead of expressing founded concerns for the exploitative nature of these new austerity measures, we breathe momentary sighs of relief for the pittances we are offered, as we anticipate the next storm.

Stories, such as mine, are unfortunately numerous and are telling of the ways that we are socialized for scarcity—particularly within the marginalized fields. While work demands grow, the labor becomes increasingly unremunerated, and voluntarist efforts toward salvaging one’s academic future are conveniently cast as field commitments. It is not coincidental that the topic of this year’s 2015 NWSA was “Precarity,” billed as the central organizing theme animating many of our lives and work experiences. Yet there is something deeply ethical to consider here. Feminist studies practitioners have now over the course of two decades become accustomed to lamenting their loss in line with the languages of harm and devaluation that tend to trespass on the life narratives of the underserved. As Lisa Cacho makes clear in Social Death, it is the criminalized, unprotected, undocumented, and devalued whose lives have historically been—and continue to be—marked by attrition, abandonment, devaluation, alienation, and death at the hands of institutional structures designed to fail them long before excellence or austerity were even things. Now that precariousness has become late capitalism’s “business as usual,” more kinds of people are being exposed to those forces, though it is

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170 See the National Women’s Studies Association archive, [http://www.nwsa.org/Files/Program%20PDFs/%202015ProgramFINAL.pdf](http://www.nwsa.org/Files/Program%20PDFs/%202015ProgramFINAL.pdf).
nonetheless relative. To speak of burn-out and of exhaustion while still being a body that is institutionally legitimated becomes a complicated thing when the university is actively engaged in a project of comparative devaluation and citizenship-making that makes the campus structure not simply hostile but poisonous to certain kinds of bodies. Moreover, the effect of continually making corporatization the point of identification renders it a kind of primary horror that casts other forms of psychic, emotional, and physical damage that have not have attained the same kind of visibility outside the scope of our critique.

The “Whose Diversity?” student collective at my home institution points precisely to these instances. In their mission statement, the harm of the contemporary university is not in its austerity measures alone but in its failed commitment to redistributive justice.

They write:

For decades, this institution treated us as unimportant, unintelligent, and disposable. Being people of color, first generation (im)migrants, differently-abled folks, people of various spiritual beliefs, Indigenous people, GLBTQ people, means that the University of Minnesota reads us as people that can be exploited. Our exploitation at the hands of the university is multidimensional; our images are used by the university to validate claims that this is a ‘safe’ space, a ‘diverse’ space, a ‘welcoming’ space. Through brochures and PR materials, the University claims that our campus is inclusive of all peoples, that it has programs intended to ensure everyone’s academic success, when this has not in fact been our experience.171

The apprehension of diversity has, as explored above, been in the service of folding difference into the interests of capital. Ferguson makes clear the ways that capital has followed the university’s example for managing diversity. The academy, state, and the financial institutions “it refuses to regulate” collectively “sabotage projects of intellectual and demographic redistribution all the while promoting a love for diversity.” The university does not simply extract capital; it differentially assigns social value through a

variety of mechanisms that contribute broadly to the social deaths of the “underrepresented and marginalized.” Worse, it uses the simulacra of difference to promote an image of multiculturalism that ultimately obscures these injustices.

As such, Dylan Rodriguez describes the need to shift our focus to what he calls an “excess of the problematic” of neoliberalism and, in turn, of excellence. These instances of racial/colonial violence are not exceptional but are the “always already” constitutive condition of the university; it is through such “genocidal and protogenicidal” regimes of social organization that the intellectual, financial, proprietary, and cultural capital of the university is secured. He advises an “abolitionist praxis” where “radical intellectuals’ inhabitation of existing institutional sites can enable both ethical opposition to structures of domination and creative knowledge production that glimpse the historical possibilities that are always just on the other side of terror and degradation.”

I concur with Rodriguez that there is great possibility to be found in the activist-oriented interdisciplines. In particular, I am struck by his faith in our ability to “renarrate racial terror and misery-- the forms of suffering endemic to multicultural civil society.” I have made a similar argument about the space feminist studies affords to be reflexive, echoed in Rodriguez’s point that, within our work, “there is possibility for effective (though never permanent) denaturalizations— and politicizations—of the forms of human suffering, entrapment, and vulnerability that are otherwise routinely embedded in the current world’s institutional protocols, and death-inducing organization of resources.”

But I am nevertheless concerned that the optimism he portrays is cruel. For, at least in our

173 Rodriguez, 811.
174 Ibid.
unit, these intentions are never unproblematic. Feminist studies is not a pure space from which to theorize, and its ability to “renarrate” is marked by what Wiegman has elsewhere called “a field unconscious,” the residual, accumulated effects of the field’s desires as expressed through its institutional development. In this sense, I wonder how our ability to show up to these circumstances—of violence, of failure—may be over-determined by our prior institutional experiences and, more specifically, our historiography, or the story we tell about them.  

It is clear that more materially-grounded forms of critique are needed; justice in its truest sense demands it. Yet how we name and show up to those conditions is of grave concern, particularly as the lessons of the preceding decade indicate to us the persistence of a desire for presence that may over-determine our responses. How do we develop languages and practices for addressing the harm the university industrial complex metes out without succumbing to the lure of the justice imperative—so framed by the previous decades’ debates—or the illusion of return? Though this is not the only problematic in naming to consider. As the critiques of the university industrial complex become more boisterous—and increasingly voiced by students presumed to have ignorance of those organizing conditions—the university shifts its narrative. The university is not immune to its critique and has, in fact, enacted measures of accounting and accommodation to address its criticisms. The sanctioning of critique is telling of a remarkable shift in the occupation of power. In his late life lectures, Michele Foucault anticipated a chiasmic condition of power that worked against the “anarchy of difference” by assuming its place.  

The university has become quite skilled at adopting and, subsequently

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175 See, especially, Wiegman’s discussion in the “Introduction” to Object Lessons.
legislating, a vernacular of critique that reorganizes the content of that claim. For example, in a recently-published article, Rod Ferguson rethinks the meaning of anti-intellectualism, as it has been usurped by dominant interests. He writes:

It has only recently occurred to me that anti-intellectualism might be something more than ‘anti-intellectual,’ more than the description that so many of us use when we find ourselves in the throes of institutional distress, more than a grievance or an annoyance. I have only now begun to think about how anti-intellectualism might seriously be the ‘mature’ and defensive expression of academic institutions, an expression that retaliates against past and present campus uprisings and a formation worthy of serious theorization. Consider all the meetings with and speeches by administrators in which intellection is turned into the clumsiness of prima donnas, and bureaucratic thinking is taken to be the privileged capacity of reasoned individuals to properly run the university, individuals whose intelligence is measured by how much can they dilate over bottom line, people who—by some bureaucratic clairvoyance—can determine which undergraduate fields will yield jobs, profits, and a future, a clairvoyance that allows them to judge which forms of knowledge are worthy of life or death.

Ferguson’s disturbance is with a university that has appropriated the very languages by which we are able to name its violences. This is no less true of other vernaculars through which we name and organize our causes: academic freedom, integrity, rigor, and importantly, student demand. What once seemed our defenses against a disciplinary-bureaucratic norm of institutional governance, have been assumed by it. Thus, it seems that the university has been most aggressive in legislating our affect—our manners of speech and modes of expression—precisely in a moment when we need to be our most vigilant. Couple this with a history that makes the positionalities from which we enunciate fraught at best, and one has a rather epic problem of presence: how will we show up to circumstances that at once demand our attention but which have been

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structured by our own institutional histories and over-determined by the appropriation of minoritized rhetorics?

The debate around trigger warnings dramatizes much of this dilemma. The sentiment behind the request for a trigger warning is often a desire to have one’s institutionally-mediated pain acknowledged. Or, they are offered in acknowledgement that violence is an organizing condition of the university. But the method and mode of articulation are, in the broader scope of the racial state and the politics of injury, somewhat depoliticizing. Worrisomely, they place an especial expectation on the work of academic feminists and feminist studies that have elicited a variety of impassioned responses. The conversations that feminist-identified scholars have had around trigger warnings debate the ways that academic feminism is bounded to an obligation of care if not protection. This is intriguing to me because these responses are ultimately weighing the merits of a justice affect and its potential to shepherd us to that moment of materialist return that might afford feminist studies a final designation of being “of” but not “in” the academy. Not coincidentally, many of the concerns presented revolve around the figure vocalizing the request for trigger warnings and the racialized/gendered bodies who will disproportionately shoulder the burden of those requests. I thus wonder how the context of the trigger warnings debate allows us to at once glimpse the politics of failure in the new academy while also prompting us to productively re-engage some of the problematics of the previous decades that now emerge in the expectations students have of our field and what we hear students to be requesting. In short, it is in light of another moment of institutional failure—arguably more pernicious—that academic feminism is called to once again bear on its field presence.
To be clear, I am arguing that the university of excellence has given way to the university of austerity. Feminist studies practitioners are in a key position to respond thoughtfully to these various intensifications of power, but there are two issues at hand. First, many of our discourses have been integrated into the legitimating frameworks of the university itself, so as to over-determine their impact. Second, our entry point into these things is by way of our own institutional historiography that has often used the backdrop of institutional failure to re-narrate the field in line with particular goals and objectives that are often problematic. Through trigger warnings, feminists and feminist studies discourses are being recruited to produce critiques of violence that cast our labors as protective, and optimistically, distinct from the broader machinations of the academy. The responses to this are quite diverse but in general contemplate the goals of academic feminism and the presence of the academic feminist in light of these requests, with particular attention to the impact on our critical practice/purchase and with important nods to a longer institutional history of a failed presence around (the question of) (in)justice. To boil it down: things suck. We need to say they suck. But the critical vocabularies through which we describe the sucking are loaded with the weight of political and institutional histories that in this particular space have the tendency to over-determine our critiques.

*Trigger Warnings in Context*

My experiences with trigger warnings began in 2011, when I rather casually started to include them on my syllabi at the suggestion of a colleague. That summer session, I was assigned to teach feminist film studies and it seemed fitting, if not necessary, to make students aware of the potentially troubling visual politics one might encounter in a seminar devoted entirely to exploitation cinema. But as I started to think
more about the organization of counterviolence and the politics of injury for this dissertation project, my relationship to trigger warnings became more critical. I suppose I was belated, as by the time I had been asked to participate on a departmental panel weighing their merits, Slate Magazine had already hailed 2013 as the year of the trigger warning, they were the subject a dozen or more editorials featured in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and Jack Halberstam published his now infamous blog post on the matter.\textsuperscript{178}

My initial interest in the debate centered on policy and the conditions under which it becomes possible to argue for the institutionalization of trigger warnings as “content warning” issued for materials deemed “explicit” in nature. This concern is foregrounded in critiques that also oppose the adoption of university-wide policies mandating the use of trigger warnings, such as the one shopped by students at Oberlin College. Yet too often, those take a “slippery slope” approach where what’s at stake is (an under-theorized notion of) academic freedom. I do not make censorship my cause because it asks us to seek out legal verification while also ignoring the racial and sexual politics of freedom. Worse, such admonitions have become ground for conservative thinkers to devalue the political nature of our work as proscriptive, or following Ferguson, anti-intellectual.

I sincerely believe that we as educators have a responsibility to be frank with students about what our classes entail. Yet two things concern me when we mark our critical discourses about violence as themselves performing violence. The first is that trigger warnings curiously emerge in a moment when the state has reorganized itself as a counterviolence, positioning its core institutions as shelters for the aggrieved in ways that

\textsuperscript{178} See Jack Halberstam, “You are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma,” on Bully Bloggers, https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/
elide the violent erasures upon which that movement actually depends. Ferguson’s work evidences the ways that they academy, specifically, has trafficked in minoritized difference in order to represent itself as thoroughly “multicultural” and, in turn, to rebuke criticism—especially from students and faculty of color—that it continues to practice discrimination as unfounded or, worse, irrational.

This is, after all, the “post-racial” era where we have finally arrived at the moment in which political discussion of difference are moot if not simply bad form. Yet in determining how differences will come to matter, the academy conserves within itself the implicit authority to evaluate experience through its own flawed ethical discourse. Proponents laud trigger warnings as having the power to hold the institution accountable to the violences it would otherwise occlude. But I wonder how they might actually participate in this new culture of civility, where loss, endangerment, betrayal, and trauma are sanctioned ways of encountering power because of their amenability to normative narrative protocols—the very same protocols that situate rage and obscenity outside the boundaries of academic propriety (recall here Steven Salaita).

The second is that trigger warnings create a commentary on the state of academic feminism. The assumption that feminist studies (and other such marginalized fields) has (have) an especial obligation to creating certain conditions of non-violence in the classroom reveals how persons even positioned outside our field—i.e. students—articulate the context and stakes of our labor in line with the goals of doing restorative and reparative justice, in this case to those attempting to name the ways austerity measures and their concomitant violences wound. As the last section made clear, feminist studies has often positioned itself as the victim of, rather than the sometimes complicit
agent in, academic corporatization. Far from immobilizing, this cultivated “outsider within” status confers upon feminist studies the charge of cultural custodian—a labor that requires the construction of its practitioners, students, and subjects as vulnerable. In turn, the institutional objectives of feminist studies are not fleshed out through a transformative pedagogy but, as Hemmings might observe, through narratives that reiterate its marginality to certain university systems by way of its commitment to an elusive, because uninterrogated, sense of justice.

This has not yielded a meaningful critique of institutional norms; rather, it indicates to students that the feminist classroom provides an escape from violence… and apparently, an obligation to be critical of which kinds of injury have legibility/grounds on which to make that exit. Along those lines, I wonder how trigger warnings offer students a way to legislate the terms of their participation in the feminist studies classroom without having to historicize their trauma. This has its own politics of civility with some important links to “call out” culture. Trigger warnings not only diminish the importance of discomfort as a context for learning; they ground feminist studies as safe haven, not a rigorous field of inquiry. I thus grow concerned for how opposition to trigger warnings will be (and is often) framed as a betrayal of that trust, even as I remain disturbed by the more recent framings of the aggrieved student, to which I will return momentarily.

But let’s first be clear of the definitional vagueness of trigger warnings. In activist circles, trigger warnings are a way of performing social consciousness. Deploying the “trigger warning” buttresses one’s credibility as a social justice advocate. However, as many critics point out, the work of unpacking power stops there. The trigger warning is a place holder; a decontextualized hailing of what could potentially be harmful, indeed
offensive, to someone. Disability studies practitioners view them as a matter of accessibility. There are some very compelling arguments made for the need to acknowledge PTSD in the classroom as something more complex than what the accommodations clause on a syllabus would allow for. I especially value the work done to distinguish “feeling offended by” from having an unanticipated somatic response to course material. Moreover, I appreciate the critique that “trigger” as a root in clinical trauma; when we make this language available to a range of uncomfortable experiences, we risk configuring the differently able-bodied/minded person as cultural reference point/metaphor for our grievances. But I do not believe that this bars us from having to situate trauma in a broader cultural context. Nor do I think that distinguishing properly traumatized—often because documented as such—subjects from over-sensitive ones is a viable strategy for countering the rampant misuse of trigger warnings. For me, trigger warnings in the academy are an issue of managing affect under the rubrics of austerity.

I read trigger warnings as claims to injury—grievances that one may incur harm or be forced to relive a trauma in response to—in this case—certain mandated class materials. Many critics of trigger warnings cite their tendency to over-emphasize person harm as evidence of their place within neo-liberalism, which seeks to obfuscate the structural basis of violence and inequity by de-contextualizing “difference.” The argument follows that the descriptive statements about injury trigger warnings entail simply render deeply political source material a matter of individual perception. The gesture toward instituting a policy on trigger warnings attempts precisely what historian
Lisa Duggan cautions against: the swift move toward enforcement measure that disaggregate contend from its “on the ground, animating politics.”

This is one of the more cogent critiques Halberstam advances in his blog entry on the matter, “You are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetorics of Harm, Danger, and Trauma.” I follow Halberstam’s argument but am cautious of the broad strokes it makes; in a time when neo-liberalism is shorthand for naming anything that even vaguely aids in the expansion of capital or resembles a market rationality, such a critique doesn’t suffice to pinpoint, exactly, what makes trigger warnings such a troubling indication of the current state of discourse in leftist/progressive factions of the US academy. It is not simply that trigger warnings reproduce the dominant narrative of power. They engender a mode of public engagement that seeks to almost obsessively patrol the boundaries of meaning and sense-making through codes of civility installed by regimes of neo-liberal multiculturalism. Injury, betrayal, abandonment, and endangerment are ways of becoming recognized and accounted for under a system of governance that has also made its requirements of self-care increasingly difficult to assimilate. But these ways of being have also become ground for the uneven distribution of social value. They are, as Elizabeth Povinelli points out, economical.

Halberstam’s critique suggests this when he recalls our attention to Wendy Brown’s work in States of Injury. There, Brown is critical of the ways that the recognition of injury serves to expand the state’s power to validate experience. As she warns, the state or any other such normative apparatus or institution cannot successfully address or remedy adversity without reproducing its own normative formation in the

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179 See Lisa Duggan’s “On Trauma and Trigger Warnings.”
180 See Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment.
process. For example, something like the Clery Act has not made campuses safer or students better informed about sexual assault; rather, it has in application expanded the power of the carceral to codify certain bodies, behaviors, and spaces as “criminal.” One could also consider Reddy’s work on legitimate violence here that demonstrates, in another register, the ways that relief works to alibi the injustices of the racial state—or as Cacho has demonstrated—to make certain experiences of, and reactions to, violence something wholly unrecognizable, even uncanny, to contemporary formulations of justice.\textsuperscript{181}

It seems a bit far-fetched that a trigger warning would have such an impact, but there is at least something to consider about the ways in which trigger warnings may invalidate other manners of handing potentially fraught material. For what happens when we preemptively diagnose certain conversations or representations as injurious? Injurious how? Injurious to whom? In what context? What is at stake in marking the critical discourses around social violence, traumatic? Why do we route these discussions through mandates of self-care? Could this be one the central paradoxes of precariousness that Lauren Berlant identified, where the “structures of feeling” that narrate the various crises of life under late capitalism compete with its political and economic realities?\textsuperscript{182} I do not see this as an issue of censorship. I see it as necessary to a critique of contemporary practices of social accountability. In the US academy, it has become norm for administrations to advocate for the “respectful” treatment of racially and sexually marked text, which I’m sure many of us have come to understand in different ways as code for “devoid of a more rigorous contextualization which may cause discomfort.”

\textsuperscript{181} One could recall here the debates around conduct at the early Ferguson protests.
\textsuperscript{182} I am referring to arguments I cite earlier, from \textit{Cruel Optimism}. 
This doesn’t protect anyone from potential psychic pain or make a particular discussion around difference more accessible. Rather, it reconfigures and restricts the ways these politics come to matter in the classroom and, worse, masks the way that the academy as a whole continues to propone and rely on various social antagonisms and inequalities to function. It is under the auspices of such academic civic mindedness that the trigger warning emerges to settle the play of difference in favor of what it ostensibly seeks to challenge and resist. As such, they do not make us, as feminist studies scholars, or our course content, more accountable to just forms of learning and representation. Instead, they mark a disturbing complicity between power and its criticisms that has considerable impact on our intellectual and material labor.

Given the nature of our scholarship, it is truly feminist studies and critical race practitioners who will be disproportionately affected by the institutionalization of trigger warnings. Trigger warnings may justify increased administrative surveillance as well as self-policing when developing coursework according to certain contingencies that may never actually come to pass. With incidents, such as the one involving Shannon Gibney at MCTC, it will be faculty of color who remain at greatest risk. In a university culture that already identifies race radicalism as uncivil, the trigger warning will provide an additional infrastructure to officiate how and why already marked and over-determined issues of difference will be discussed. This is why, as I have argued, we need to contemplate trigger warnings as using a normative framework of civility to regulate our critical thinking and labor practices.  

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183 For a good primer on the Gibney incident, see http://gawker.com/teaching-while-black-and-blue-1473659925.
But it is these last points that have drawn some of the greatest controversy. I now turn to three responses to the trigger warning debate that variously weigh in on the question of academic feminism/the academic feminist in relationship to trigger warnings. I mine these discussions for the ways they recall the debates of a previous decade regarding the justice imperative and its commentary on material politics.

McKittrick, Kipnis, and Ahmed: Trigger Warnings and the Question of Institutional Failure

As the trigger warning debate raged on in the blogosphere, at academic conferences, and even in popular news media, a few key feminist figures stepped forward to address their impact on the field of feminist studies as well as on individual feminist bodies operating within the academy. By 2014, the debate had truly shifted its terms to contemplate the goals of the (social justice) classroom, in general, and the expectation around the labors performed by those either identified or allied with feminist intellectualism. These later conversations interest me greatly because emerging from that discussion of pedagogy and knowledge production are erstwhile anxieties that concern the pursuit of justice in a context where it has been very much over-determined by certain field interests.

I begin with Katherine McKittrick’s 2014 interview with the CLR James Journal. The conversation with Peter James Hudson, titled “Canada and the Question of Black Geographies” centered on her work in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* but included a lengthy section on the social geography of the critical race feminist classroom and the illusion of the “safe space.” McKittrick included this response as part of the Bully Bloggers series on trigger warnings, representing one of the first pieces by a scholar of color to move the conversation away from the prospect of
their formal implementation to a more fluid dialogue on their institutional ontology, best
capsulated by her sentiment, “I’ve never glimpsed safe teaching (and learning) space. It
is a white fantasy that harms.” What McKittrick seems to be pointing out is that the
sense of harm encapsulated by the request for a trigger warning is all too conveniently
broad and liberalizing of the precarity intellectuals of color have long faced, even, and
especially egregiously, in the feminist studies classroom. We often regard safety as our
first line of defense around violence but fail to acknowledge the ways that that can be
territorializing. Safety is a border construct that, as Christina Handhardt has argued, is
very much shaped by the policing of space for state interests—particularly as we deem
neighborhoods acceptable dwellings when they model the conditions of white
capitalism. And McKittrick’s response touches precisely on this act of policing
discourse through mechanisms that, ironically, make it easier to leave racialized
injustices intact and thus implicitly race the classroom as a white space:

This kind of ‘safe space’ thinking sometimes includes statements on
course outlines about respect for diversity and how the class (faculty? students?) will not tolerate inappropriate behavior: racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism. This kind of hate-prevention is a fantasy to me. It is a fantasy that replicated, rather than undoes, systems of injustice because it assumes, first, that teaching about anti-colonialism or sexism or homophobia can be safe (which is an injustice to those who have lived and live injustice!), second, that learning about anti-colonialism or sexism or homophobia is safe, easy, comfortable, and third, that silencing and/or removing ‘bad’ and ‘intolerant’ students dismantles systems of injustice.

But beyond that, safety is often a retreat or defense mechanism for protecting privilege.

And this is where McKittrick lands her primary criticism of trigger warnings: that anyone

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184 Katherine McKittrick, “On Trigger Warnings,” on Bully Bloggers,
185 See Christina Hanhardt, Safe Space:
186 McKittrick, “On Trigger Warnings.”
requesting such an accommodation has been in a position of having had their injuries legitimated—by a university structure that is premised upon racial/colonial practices of exclusion. She writes:

Privileged students leave these safe spaces with transparently knowable oppressed identities safely tucked in their back pockets and a lesson on how to be aggressively and benevolently silent. The only people harmed in this process are students of colour, faculty of colour, and those who are the victims of potential yet unspoken intolerance. I call this a white fantasy because, at least for me, only someone with racial privilege would assume that the classroom could be [safe.] This kind of privileged person sees the classroom as, a priori, safe, and a space that is tainted by dangerous subject matters (race) and unruly (intolerant) students. But the classroom is, as I see it, a colonial site that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion.187

McKittrick’s point here is significant and deeply linked to the kind of critique that Rodriguez puts forth, which is that racial/colonial violence is the constitutive condition of the university. How can one name such a foundational violence through an institutionally codified language without further enmeshing oneself within that structure? Moreover, how are our frames for recognizing violence delimited by their context: what does it mean for us to name violence in the university, through a language that has been sanctioned by it?

I am struck by McKittrick’s suggestion that classrooms are, always already, sites of pain, and especially for bodies who have not been historically validated by institutions. The classroom has never been a place that could hold those histories, and the issue with the trigger warning is that it suggests the contrary—that through additional policy, such issues can be addressed. In an especially striking passage, McKittrick connects the preemptive nature of trigger warnings to the “long history of silencing subalterns” and asks the pointed question, “why is silencing, now, something that protects or enables

187 Ibid.
safety?” In a sense, one could respond with the reasons I elaborated in the previous section but I think there is more to this, particularly as McKittrick points out that the presumptive norm of safety is one actually cultivated by feminism and other “identity” discourses. While the majority of McKittrick’s argument makes a case for safety as a place holder for silence, this particular line bespeaks a longer struggle with the justice imperative. To be sure, McKittrick writes that the trigger warning relates to “feminism and other ‘identity’ discourses [which] assumes that the classroom should be safe.” Placing “should” under erasure here suggests that the feminist classroom has been a site of contestation and that any expectation of or procedure for guaranteeing “safety” is a loaded response. In fact, it asks that communities of color hold white guilt.

McKittrick warns of the ways that critical race feminist discourses and, moreover, feminists of color in the classroom, will be held to a different standard of adherence, were a formal policy of trigger warnings to take effect. She responds not merely to a general trend in the devaluation of such things and people but their conditional existence within the scope of feminist studies. Here, we might contemplate the ways that the trigger warning is a reinstatement of the colonialist tendency of the field to manage the ways that the professor of color/woman of color feminism will come to represent the dynamics of violence in the academy and beyond. As McKittrick makes clear, the notion of the trigger warning forecloses the possibility of a discussion of racial/colonial violence that actually necessitates discomfort and feeling “unsafe.” In this sense, trigger warnings may be asking for a consensus, a ground on which we can all agree that the academy performs a violence—albeit an undifferentiated claim to/about violence that makes a discussion of violence well, violent. With this as our presumptive norm, persons seen on the side of
justice—as feminist—would be, in turn, those who act as filter rather than facilitator of difficult discussion, thus producing a standard of feminist labor in the academy that effectively brackets the feminist of color as representative of a violence that may be named but shall never be spoken. We might say that McKittrick’s critique allows us to establish a genealogy of the referential real from excellence to austerity. It makes the important contribution that the metric for understanding violence is often what is most policed, particularly when field interests are at stake. I believe that McKittrick’s argument makes a strong case for recognizing the liberal humanist impulse of the trigger warning request. It operates from an implicit subject position that engages with the enabling violences of the university while nevertheless maintaining the centrality of white experiences in naming and adjudicating that violence.

In quite another register yet around the same timeframe emerged Laura Kipnis’ rather, though predictably, irreverent response to the trigger warnings climate, “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe.” The piece was published as a review in the February 2015 Chronicle of Higher Education. The author of the self-proclaimed “polemic,” Against Love, which elaborates the historical emergence of an emotion believed to be unencumbered by the weight of moralistic control, here bemoans the administrative trend toward creating a presence around violence that produces precisely the kinds of affect that one might argue translates easily into a variety of biometrics aimed at controlling the feminized body—as vulnerable, as injurable. Her particular point is that the wave of deregulation characteristic of excellence has reversed but not undermined the dynamic of power that persists between students and institutions. It is students who are asking for the development of policy and, in turn, the increase of an administrative presence. And this is
all happening under the guise of “melodrama” where the looming specter of injury makes for vulnerable subjects who need administering—especially women because so much of the source of this potential harm is sexualized. As she puts it, these ostensibly agentic measures—to request a trigger warning, to ask for better rape reporting—create a paradigm of violence that actually disallows women and others to establish themselves as consenting subjects, able to critically reason with the conditions of violence, absent of a framing narrative.188

Kipnis, who describes herself in a June 2015 interview as a feminist intellectual, notes what she deems a disturbing trend of activity occurring “in the name of feminism” on campuses that “infantilizes women” by taking away their ability to think more critically about the broad and uneven conditions of violence. “If this is feminism,” she writes, “it’s a feminism hijacked by melodrama.” As she continues, “The melodramatic imagination’s obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what’s shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those who interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing.”189 Here Kipnis intimates a position not unlike Naomi Klein’s in Shock Doctrine. The discourse of fear around the loss of life and safety creates an effect that ironically asks for an increase in the disciplinary/bureaucratic order said to be the cause of that pain. When that authority is increased, it will control the terms on which we are able to recognize and manage ourselves as subjects. The temporality of the trigger

189 Ibid.
warning is of most concern to Kipnis, as she writes: “students are trauma cases waiting to happen.”

At least part of this claim intersects with a point that Jasbir Puar has made about a “prehensive” modernity that endorses its own outcome. But for me, much of Kipnis’ potentially useful argument about feminist complicities in the contemporary academy loses steam as it becomes amenable to conservative interests. In September 2015, The Atlantic published a rather reactionary piece, “The Coddling of the American Mind” by psychologists, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. Lukianoff and Haidt grounds itself in Kipnis’ article and the drama that ensued around its publication to insist that the real threat to intellectualism on college campuses is a movement toward so-called “political correctness” that refuses to see the pedagogical import in offensiveness. While I am agreed in part that it is a far better thing to name and confront the problematics of a perhaps offensive situation rather than to avoid or defer conversation for the discomfort it may cause during its discussion, I am gravely disturbed by the manner in which these authors make light of social justice terminologies like “microaggression” or students who cannot handle a little supposed “off-kilter” racial humor. In fact, they problematically lump any and all responses that question the presence of power a matter of student sensitivity, even going as far as to question the mental health of the aggrieved:

[V]indictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by

\[190\] Ibid.
cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.\textsuperscript{191}

The response is stunning in its ignorance of the fraught logics of its own argument. Although they ask for a more rigorous and nuanced dialogue, the authors map insanity onto students making qualified caveats. Such rhetoric is not only ableist, it is a sweeping dismissal of the very situational contexts out of which discomfort emerges. And like much of recent white liberal discourse, the authors buttress their claims to radicalism by and through an unqualified embrace of all that defies propriety, regardless of its political effect or intention. The problem is that the authors do not distinguish between aggressions, and, while they advise a dose of critical reasoning, they themselves make little attempt to consider the myriad conditions out of which people claim or process harm—namely longer histories with institutional violence.

I am curious, for example, how these authors would respond to a situation that occurred on my campus late last spring. A group of faculty convened to discuss the climate of academic freedom in the post-	extit{Charlie Hebdo} moment. Advertisements for the event featured a reproduction of the same caricature of Mohammed that led to the early January 2015 attacks. Four speakers were featured as part of a discussion roundtable, all of whom were male-identified, many of whom were white, and none of whom were Muslim. The speakers variously explored how the terrorist attacks indexed a broader assault against a broadly-construed “freedom of speech,” drawing false and, above-all appalling, parallels between the limitations imposed on intellectualism and para-military groups who, for better or worse, are responding to the cultural warfare enacted by the US and European state and military industrial complexes. In response, the Muslim Student

Union issued a public statement regarding the handling of the event. They vocalized two clear demands of the university: first, for campus-wide removal of the signage, citing that the reproduction of the image caused harm to those who believe that such iconography is heresy and, second, that they move forward with the democratic dialogue intended by extending an invitation to the students to join in discussion. As I saw it, the students were responding precisely to what Whose Diversity? critiques: the conditional inclusion of racialized/colonized bodies as well as the conditional recognition of the foundational violences through which the university industrial complex is enabled. The complaint pointed not to individual perceptions but to structural conditions—conditions that ask us to contemplate the colonial politics of a white body of experts debating subalternity.

Yet in response to their petition, faculty members of the panel claimed the requests violated their academic freedom, and one went so far as to link the request to trigger warnings, stating that this instance was one among many of a growing movement to “enjoin faculty from saying anything that might hurt somebody’s feelings, or that might offend someone.”\(^{192}\) In this climate, he warns, students have learned that they can too easily disengage simply by “invoking the fact that they were offended by something or insulted.”\(^{193}\) The frustration here, that the claim of offense denies one’s right to academic freedom, dramatizes the central paradox of a rights framework: your right to freedom of speech ends at my Title VII rights against discrimination. Would we then name irrational one’s entitlement to civil rights simply because there has been greater legal presence around (white) speech freedoms? Moreover, if the author of the aforementioned comments admits to being particularly “cynical,” on what ground do we


\(^{193}\) Ibid.
not acknowledge his claims as also having an emotional basis, simply because his position is dominant? Were we to follow Lukianoff and Haidt, and more primarily, Kipnis, we would critique the investment in “bad feelings,” though I am certain this critique would be launched at the emotional frameworks of students in protest and not those of the faculty in question.

But what of these “bad feelings”? In the university of disaster, one cannot not feel their relationship to the institution. As I explain in the previous chapter, institutions are key to the architecture of late liberalism, the success of which depends upon developing strong somatic/affective attachment to structures that wound. In fact, it is the discourse of injury itself that becomes fertile ground for domination. The academy implicitly acknowledges this potentiality, given its concerted attentions toward acknowledging and subsequently managing emotion under the rubrics of civility. I do find it interesting that the students in protest channeled their political energies into an affective claim: that the distribution of the image caused harm. It seems, in part, that this could be an instance of strategic essentialism, where an otherwise invisible claim to injury—Islamophobia—can become legible. “Harm” would then be a placeholder for a far more poignant critique. But the fact that this was even necessary is of interest. While I would argue that, in this case, the students in protest have a different investment in the discourse of harm, I am nevertheless intrigued that their complaints were met with other kinds of bad feelings—annoyance, frustration, cynicism—in a battle of emotional wits.

Kipnis makes a strong claim for the deconstruction of such emotional impulses. Though unavoidable, emotions should not detract from our critical purpose. As such, she advises against the presumed innocence of emotions, particularly for the ways that it
implies a pure basis from which one can name, and subsequently, act upon the politics in a given situation. I cannot help but be reminded of how at least some of this concern intersects with Brown’s earlier claims about the structuring of academic feminism as a guilt complex. The connection here is not found in the content of the claims but the framework from which we proceed. What I believe Kipnis correctly identifies is that the especial status of emotions in feminist discourse has often foreclosed our ability to see the full context of our thought. Worse, it creates geist, or an organizing sensibility—a point Brown at once critiqued and reproduced in her analysis. Despite the misgivings I have about Kipnis’ analysis, I believe her critique may be expanded to a more careful commentary on white hetero-femininity and melodrama. Although melodrama, particularly in film, has been reclaimed as an excessive emotional state that breaks the flow of linear narrative, it is nevertheless an emotion that has important linkages to the normative regulation of white femininity.¹⁹⁴ No matter what one might accomplish in its name, melodrama is a filter through which white heterofeminine complaint becomes not only acceptable, but codified. It is, therefore, an emotional state that has its roots in anti-Blackness. Perhaps Kipnis’ hailing of the trigger warning climate as “melodramatic” is in acknowledgement of the ways in which it does not support a rigorous critique of power but instead positions white feminism as the constitutive basis for imagining feminist academe—in, short, Brown’s fears realized.

Offering a rather stark counterpoint to this analysis is Sara Ahmed’s “Against Students.” Published in June 2015, the piece similarly expands the debate around trigger warnings beyond the question of policy. I was especially interested in the piece for its

central argument: that students are wrongfully maligned as the failures of higher education when they call out its structural violences. As she explains, those who hold students responsible for the problems of the contemporary academy are themselves invested in a normative project that argues against emotionalism by advocating “rationality, freedom, and democracy,” ideals that feminists have long critiqued as exclusionary. As she explains:

These values are identified as requiring the reproduction of norms of conduct that students are themselves failing to reproduce. Even if that failure is explained as a result of ideological shifts that students are not held responsible for—whether it be neoliberalism, managerialism, or a new sexual puritanism—it is in the bodies of students that the failure is located.  

I would concur that there is something distinctively hegemonic about this; by asking students to “buck up,” faculty and critics alike are effectively asking students to embody a neoliberal affect that ignores the ways these principles have grown out of the de-valuation of divergent ways of being and knowing. However, I would caution against Ahmed’s proposition: that we regard student complaint as the most authentic form of critique we have in this benighted age. In short, I take issue with the implicit proposition: that student dissent is always critical, consistently anti-neoliberal, and comes from a space of pure politics.

But let me begin by surveying some of the key aspects of Ahmed’s argument, namely her descriptions of the problematic student archetypes that animate the trigger warning debate. The “consuming” student is a pawn in a “thinly veiled” universalist critique of neoliberalism. In this movement, students who push back against curriculum in the name of their and their peers’ self-interests are ridiculed for deploying a

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consumerist logic that renders knowledge something one can barter—a good to be traded. Ahmed makes two important critiques here. The first is that it is often in the name of the consuming student that more conservative agendas are advanced: i.e. the “return” to the ivory tower. The second is that she makes a useful call to put the word, neoliberal, under overdue critical pressure. Too often, our critiques of neoliberalism and university management are totalizing, failing to glimpse the nuance of the complex negotiations we make within the constraints of such norms. If anything, this is just lazy theorizing that conveniently allows us to dismiss, for example, the perhaps challenging content of student complaint as a deployment of consumerist entitlement. Students become “neoliberal consumers,” she warns, when they:

are being critical of what we are doing, when they contest what is being taught […]. Students become the problematic when what they want is not in accordance with what academics want or what academics want them to want: students become willful when what they will is not what academics will or not what academics will them to will. […]. Rather ironically, students are more likely to be judged as acting like banks when they refuse to be banks.\(^{196}\)

I accept that we often confuse the language to which students defer with the impetus of their expression. This project is, in part, a study in the failure of rhetorical forms. The point is almost Derridean. We are compelled by languages of recognition that are only provisionally sufficient to describe the fullness of the realities in which we find ourselves. But this does not imply that our feelings are somehow prior to their description, however much they may exceed it. As Derrida reminds, we are “always already writing”; there is nothing that exists within a pure space, and no matter how directed the complaint, students work within the parameters of consumerist expectations.\(^{197}\)

\(^{196}\) Ibid.

\(^{197}\) See “Differance” in *Margins of Philosophy*. 
sentiments remain irreducible to their enunciation, they are, nevertheless, contextual. Granted, the dismissal of students on the sweeping charge of consumerism is problematic; but, the assumption that students are consistently critical in contesting what is being taught in their classes is just as reductive.

The “censoring” student is similarly positioned as having too much power, especially when asking for the creation of an institutional presence around themes deemed triggering. In Ahmed’s estimation, this so-called censoring student is not asking for the complete erasure of discomforting discourses but more dialogue around them, an “opting in,” rather than an opting out of their intellectual responsibilities. It is through this figure that she addresses trigger warnings. She rightfully couches trigger warning critique as being overly concerned with academic freedom and problematically assuming that trigger warnings are requested in the service of feeling “safe or warm or cuddled.” In a point that I echo in part, she describes trigger warnings as a “partial and necessarily inadequate measure to enable people to stay in the room so that ‘difficult issues’ can be discussed”—a nascent recognition of the ways that the violences of austerity are undeniable though incalculable. For Ahmed, the problem is not the trigger warning-requesting student but the critique that sees their offense as a form of moral weakness. And again, under the guise of student outrage, a conservative agenda calling for the de-politicization of academia via the dismissal of identity politics is advanced.

But where Ahmed loses me entirely is around this statement: “My own sense [is that] feminist political hopes rest with over-sensitive students.” For it is here that I read her as advocating the re-consolidation of academic feminist labors around an ethic of care. That is to say, Ahmed asks for a feminist politics of consensus that supplants bodies

198 Ahmed, “Against Students.”
(the transnational woman of color) with pedagogy and methodology grounded in care. A post-identitarian affect for the new academy, she effectively argues that no matter our research pursuits or the increasing breadth of our intellectual interests, we cultivate an academic feminist presence by collectively rallying around protecting the interests of the wounded student… in ways that do not critically examine how that student’s articulation of woundedness is deeply contextual and necessitates critical attention, not blind investment. When she claims that “over-sensitive can be translated as: sensitive to that which is not over,” she attributes a political significance to students that fails to account for the vast disparities among such claims. For example, one could argue that the Muslim students protesting the Charlie Hebdo event are “overtly” sensitive to the very politics I named; yet could not one, by this logic, similarly argue that the white male students in Gibney’s case were also acutely sensitive? I am not sure that student sensibility always or automatically translates into a justice consciousness… though in the sense that it merits some kind of attention, I concur.

As she continues, Ahmed turns her attention to the specter of silence surrounding sexualized violence on campus. In a “sweeping” gesture (to borrow her language), Ahmed links the silencing of persons who report harassment and assault to our silencing of students who ask for accommodations. I appreciate the rhetorical strategy. Ahmed reverses the imperative of the assessments she finds so problematic; whereas her opponents link student complaint to an assault on academic freedom, she links it to the politics of human de/valuation under austerity. But when she speaks of the “missing women” around whom we need to elicit our greatest sympathies, I cannot help but to be reminded of Hemmings’ concern that loss becomes a vehicle for the return of a material
context that will ensure our continued relevance. To put it differently, I wonder if Ahmed names the “elusive material” as the present absence of women in the academy. It is not so much this spectral figure around which feminist labor is to consolidate itself but the meaning of its absence, echoed in the concerns of the over-sensitive student: that the academy does not permit us the space to care about the de/valuation of racialized/gendered labor. Following this logic, if anything should reanimate the fractured project of academic feminism, it will be an insistence on caring at any cost.

These three texts represent for me a continuation of a theme. The “eventilization” of crisis in the academy has meant many things for feminist academics, but ultimately the struggle comes down to institutional survival: what narrative must one adopt in order to salvage their program against a hostile administration that sees knowledge in dollars and cents? The point is that we are in conflict with the conditions that also produce us. To echo Berlant, the means for our institutional life making are also the impediment to our flourishing. Brown will name this as the conundrum of academic feminism. While we seem to have spent the better part of the last decade focusing on the shifting language of our nomenclature—that represents many of the uneasy tensions between and among pejoratively gendered and sexualized subjects—there seems here a chance for revival. But move toward consolidation, represented by the reappropriation of care and its manifestation in the trigger warning, is reductive. We do our best when our work is not encapsulated by a singular directive, except, as Bouchard argues, continued disagreement. We may never know what the best or the most appropriate feminist response is, and that is what keeps us accountable.

As I use it early and as I intend to use it here, “eventilization” describes the process of a thing, once said to be remarkable, becoming ordinary. Although the concept is Foucaultian, it is Lauren Berlant’s usage I reference.
Conclusions

This chapter is an aberration in the face of what this project claims to do: to explore the narrative production of institutional failure in extra-institutional, or imagined sites, namely within vernacular contexts such as popular political non-fiction, news and television media. In short, this is a dissertation that explores the zeitgeist of the contemporary US racial state and global racial capitalism. I promised readers that my questions would proceed from the non-linearity of the narratives themselves… the very artful inter-articulations of sites of struggle that remain irreducible to one another. So how I came to a chapter so seemingly grounded in a singular institutional site seems methodologically sacrilegious. But as I have hoped to have made clear in the introduction to this project, my interest in institutional failure pertains to the many years I contemplated its impacts on the departments through which I matriculated—all three trans-disciplinary units, including an egregiously under-supported women’s studies program, a theory and cultural department waning in popularity and thinning on faculty of note, and a growing critical gender and sexuality studies department whose reputation for solid research and instruction does not insure against radical defunding and restructuring efforts that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable among its ranks.

My current Department’s refreshing stand on transparency has allowed me to observe the ways our faculty leadership has understood many of the contradictory measures of austerity—namely to overproduce at standards designed for much larger, better staffed, and sustainably-funded and/or endowed units. I listened to the stories faculty relayed to me about the struggle to maintain high enough course enrollments and to keep our Department functioning with limited senior faculty members—many of whom are of color and have service obligations in other units. It truly seems that we are
socialized for institutional scarcity. As a graduate instructor, I can similarly attest to the impacts of these policies in my own institutional life. To be clear, I’ve been generously funded beyond my years of guaranteed compensation, and I’ve been granted the flexibility to teach courses that reflect my research expertise. But it hasn’t been unproblematic. Graduate assistants at the University of Minnesota receive an impressive reimbursement and great health benefits (contingent upon our employment). Nevertheless, we work without protections and under the pressures of surmounting debt and a volatile job market.

Our compensation is hardly commensurate to the labor we provide; in fact, despite the rising increase in standard class size, our pay remains the same, though we are often responsible for teaching the bulk of undergraduate coursework in our departments in which we’re also tasked with the responsibility of recruiting new majors. This means preparing dazzling classes every week that make gender studies current, applicable, and a good time. Asking us to do more for less takes away from our own research and, in turn, prolongs our progression to degree completion while growing our debt and adding to our general sense of shame for failing to meet the five year deadline. This has serious institutional repercussions, especially for international instructors whose visa status is impacted.

This is not simply a matter of financial but emotional labor as well. We find ourselves developing curricula that accommodates mandated student learning outcomes, often repackaging rigorous political and intellectual themes into digestible content. While we do a disservice to the subjects we teach—some of which recall our own lived experiences—we also provide the university system new ways to frame and market
difference. In a mid-semester evaluation, a student of mine reported that “in another GWSS class, we watched movies. I wish there were movies in this class”… about post-colonial speculative fiction. I would laugh, but this student is honing in on something we in part created. But I am also conscious of the complicated ways that this may become narrated and the temptation of producing an alternate institutionality. The impetus for writing this chapter emerged from those conversations and experiences, but, in particular, the conflict I felt between what I knew to be true of our institutional precarity and the methods for narrating and managing that… as Hemmings would say, “the story we tell” about what feminist studies is.

In these final moments, I want to hold space for what Sara Ahmed describes as the fragile affect of diversity work, particularly among feminist activists and academics of color in the academy. Ahmed has long sought to capture the affective modalities through which feminist labor in the academy occurs. Most notably, the killjoy is the one who refuses to participate in and act as witness to the production of normative happiness. It is not necessarily the case that the killjoy is unhappy, she writes, but that the killjoy kills the fantasy that “feminists might not be happily affected by what is supposed to cause happiness” and that the failure of feminism is in its “sabotaging the happiness of others.”\footnote{Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects),” *Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert* 8, no.3 (Summer 2010).} A great deal of negativity is projected onto feminists in ways that index their threat to a social order to which many of them have belonged. There is much labor that goes into warding off the killjoy status that looms in the background of all our cultural assessments, however disposed toward a different kind of happiness they may be.
Because we are often presumed as suspect, eliciting some of the most reactionary or at the very least heightened or prickly emotions in others, “feminist spaces are emotional spaces.” Moreover, the threat is not from the outside alone, as Ahmed reminds that feminist killjoys can kill one another’s joy. But she suggests this as a great asset. If one is already going to be in the way, or is presumed to be in the way, then perhaps the objective should not be to shed the identity of unhappiness but to become more willful about it. She suggests, “Willfulness could be rethought as a style of politics: a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over. The ones who point out that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are actual are charged with willfulness; they refuse to allow these realities to be passed over.” The killjoy is thus not negative or even divisive but rather disloyal to the systems of thought and meaning-making which rely on comparative forms of devaluation to produce a life worth living.

Joining the ranks of other such “willful subjects,” the killjoy seems to hold the feminist future—not one based in a cruel optimism but in a kind of realism about the current state of discourse and material reality, behind which there is a careful intention toward creating more sustainable conditions. Thus for Ahmed, the killjoy is the central animating personality trait of the campus diversity worker. In On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life, Ahmed explores campus diversity work as divergent from, rather than complicit with the broader project of neoliberalism. I am grateful for the ways that Ahmed cautions us from making sweeping assessments of what neoliberalism looks like in the academy. Diversity workers labor under initiatives and vocabularies that do not always account for their personal negotiations with those terms. Diversity is not

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201 Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys.”
202 Ibid.
necessarily about managing difference in the interests of racial capitalism, and diversity workers constitute a complex human infrastructure without which we may not have any concessions made regarding the inherent inequality of higher education. Importantly, Ahmed reminds us that the terms under which one is hailed or regarded does not always equate how they see themselves. Moreover, the critique of diversity language cannot be an end point in the analysis of how we critique the institution, for it rarely captures the inhabitations and lines of flight taken by many of these workers.

It was in the spirit of honoring the difficult labor of diversity work, as social justice work, that Ahmed delivered her 2015 NWSA address, “Feminism and Fragility.” I was struck by the central argument, namely for the ways that it seems to complicate some of the points she makes in “Against Students.” Ahmed claims that diversity work makes for fragile subjects—subjects who are easily frustrated and have had their efforts undone by hostile administrations. To break, or to crack under the pressure, marks one as having certain vulnerabilities, though interestingly enough, vulnerabilities that importantly encode and archive the violences of the university. To assume that the resistance such persons face is ineluctable is to miss out on the phenomenological nature of the walls erected in front of them. The moment of encounter is just that—an encounter where the breaking of one’s strength is echoed in the fissures that form along the seams of the wall providing the opposing force. Institutions are built through human infrastructure, and that collective is capable of creating radical change, however slowly it may occur. The key to this change is to remain in the fragile, broken state she describes. For that state is, as Ahmed writes, the ground for the development of a politico-intellectual consciousness.
As she concludes, there are a great many collaborative possibilities in the institutionally fragile joining arms and forming intricate networks of support. 203

Here, it seems Ahmed is speaking mainly of faculty and professional staff working in marginalized disciplines and perhaps even special interest centers. I find a lot of resonance within her perspective. As I made clear in the former chapter, many subjects (all subjects) living under regimes of modern governance are made to feel inadequate, debilitated, and to engage in practices of comparative devaluation because that is how systems of dominance prevail. Self-love can be a decolonizing practice, but it is up against an ever-expanding and shifting field of pejorative power relationships that continues to reassert itself under different (and ostensibly benevolent) guises. For example, marriage equality implies growing acceptance of sexual difference, which in fact effectively brackets the ways that we can speak about ongoing forms of homo- and trans-phobia that impact more vulnerable (because often poor and/or of color) queer populations whom the state never served and, worse, whom “respectable” gays and lesbians openly reject as to secure their rightful spot at the citizenship table.

It is hard to be a subject in a moment where the violences around you are being alibied by progressivist ideologies that insist we’ve “gotten over” racism/classism/sexism/homophobia, etc. It is a struggle to find yourself positioned in some of those categories of marginality and, worse, to have the politico-intellectual consciousness to name those conditions of devaluation that few others are willing to see. I tend to rail against assessments that one can change their reality simply by shifting perspective or working toward a different truth… particularly for the ways that that

203 For the full transcript, see “Feminism and Fragility,” https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/01/26/feminism-and-fragility/.
entrepreneurial mentality is produced by the system creating the problem in the first place. I do not believe that this means we need to wallow in negativity, but I think the sense that happiness is a matter of personal choice to honor oneself misses the point about the structurally-mediated nature of unhappiness, anger, and frustration. People hurt not only from personal traumas but because of the sociopolitical conditions they endured and continue to be subjected to—realities produced by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to steal a line from bell hooks. I think we need a feminism that is able to shuttle between the real critique of politics (that requires a good deal of pessimism about “choice” and “future”) and the possibilities of the otherwise. I suppose this makes me a killjoy. The minute I break through a challenge, another wall presents. I create innovative mindsets to encounter the new and difficulty contexts that behold me, but my terms of resistance are conditional.

With this said, I do not believe that our work should be solutions-based. In short, if part of being the killjoy is critically resisting satisfaction, then offering up trigger warnings, and worse, formalizing policy around them, to curtail institutional violences may mean becoming content or worse, complicit. I wonder how the coming together of fragile subjects could offer some more serious possibilities for resistance when we do the difficult work of challenging the narratives we create to name and address the circumstances of our fragility—to have the metadiscursive conversation that asks, “Why trigger warnings now?” “What longer institutional histories is this connected to?” I suppose I am asking us to play analyst to our own institutional unconsciousness. We may not always be fully aware of what we are creating, and Wiegman is very clear that speaking of the field unconscious risks pathologizing a site which is already seen as
hysterical in many ways. Nevertheless, when we plumb the institutional historiography of feminist studies, we may not find a purely revolutionary project but a contested terrain of political desires and differently-constituted laboring bodies struggling with mediated, and moreover mandated, languages of institutional risk to narrate the precariousness of ourselves and our research subjects through terms that are always insufficient.

As I have made clear throughout this project, one cannot escape narrating the terms of her existence. As Hayden White makes abundantly clear, narrative is the basis for a social ontology. Because feminist studies is a discipline comprised of students, faculty, and subjects that are often scaffolding the ontological privileges of others, we often find ourselves narrating through failure. As I have hoped to have demonstrate, there is a legitimate and pressing need to remain keenly aware of those conditions. But I what I have hoped to have at least problematized is the temptation to produce the final pronouncement of how one might understand or administer to those violences. The trigger warning represents, for me, a point of emergence—a site through which other dramas about the institutionality of feminism might be read. Moreover, the trigger warning signals to me the ways that feminism has yet to avail itself of a political futurity and freedom that is based in foundational logics of care, equality, and inclusion. I do not know what this means in terms of how else we proceed. But I do know that a critical conversation must be had about the curious timeliness of the trigger warnings debate to the protectionist claims of the US state and racial capitalism. Whatever we as academic feminists do, I do not want to participate in a project that does not at least question these complicities.
PART II
Economies of [Institutional] Abandonment: Misery, Desire, and Belonging in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*

“Because this is how we survive... we tell ourselves that we are the walking dead.” – Rick Grimes

As I stated earlier in my first chapter, “Narrating Crisis,” institutional failure is “hardly the latest invention of the culture industry.” In the next two chapters, I nevertheless explore the preoccupation with dramatizing institutional failure. Inspired by Stuart Hall’s work, these analyses seek to understand how visual media is a site for the articulation of culture and politics. True to Hall’s definition of “articulation,” the texts I explore do not merely represent but rather engage and transform the discourse of institutional failure, though rarely to liberatory ends. This chapter examines how the zombie apocalypse of AMC’s *The Walking Dead* becomes parable for life under late liberalism.

To remind, late liberalism describes a political moment when the normative comes to occupy the tense of difference. When normative experiences fill out our understanding of institutional failure, we cannot fully comprehend the injustices done to the gendered/racialized Other that exists prior to this formation. In the first chapter, I suggested that even the leftist narration of institutional failure relies on a racialized referent to name the impacts of crisis more broadly. Histories of racialized failure are submerged when white experience grounds failure in the neoliberal moment. In the second chapter, I carried out this theme by elaborating how academic feminism uses the specter of loss to negotiate its relationship to an institutional space that has historically

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205 Robert Kirkman, writer. “The Walking Dead.” Produced by Frank Darabont, Gale Anne Hurd, and David Alpert. AMC.
failed the populations it imagines itself to represent. In both instances, the narration of institutional failure brackets a fuller naming of violence in institutional contexts. Moreover, it makes racialized responses to these contexts anathema to dominant imaginaries of pain and injury. I continue that exploration here, where I argue that *The Walking Dead* participates in the almost literal erasure of gendered/racialized experiences with a kind of institutional failure: abandonment.

Having just completed its sixth season, *The Walking Dead* was once the most watched show on television, even surpassing *Mad Men* in network ratings.\(^{206}\) Catalogued generically as a post-apocalyptic zombie-horror drama but hailed by famed director George Romero as a “soap opera with a zombie occasionally,” the show follows main character and former fictional King County, Georgia, Sherriff’s Deputy, Rick Grimes, and a cast of supporting characters—currently helmed by son, Carl, husband and wife Glenn and Maggie, loner Daryl, katana-wielding Michonne, peace-making Morgan, Abraham, Sasha, Rosita, Tara, and Eugene—as they navigate the hollowed out worlds of the mid-Atlantic American South. The show focuses most of its drama around the geographic epicenters of Atlanta and, later, Washington, D.C.\(^{207}\)

Throughout the seasons, the zombie, or “walker,” that first introduced itself as threat, has given way to a fear of other survivors as well as personal pathologies for which the zombie becomes supplement. From their fractured beginnings in a makeshift tent camp along the I-85 corridor outside Atlanta, we have watched as our core group moves northward, becomes more numerous, forms complex communities, antipathies,

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and even trading networks. Though with the return of the social come the challenges of organization and leadership. The survivors realize that the loss of the familiar they have long lamented and sought out is what may seal their demise. A cruel optimism no doubt: with each passing season, there is a growing realization that the defining conditions of our modern experience and historical existence are also ones that are given to destruction, even though they persist as the only imaginable horizon at which a future might be thought and willed.

The show creates a world where institutions exist only as vacuous structures, devoid of human infrastructure and, in turn, open for re-signification. As the group is cast out of the city proper—itself a kind of institutional failure that touches on the precariousness of the cosmopolitan fantasy of safety in numbers—they venture to the Center for Disease control, the family farm, the prison, the sub-division, and finally, the gated community. These sites are spaces of biopolitical control, occupation, and internment. Rather than honor the histories that haunt them, the show takes advantage of their lacking “human” content to instead analogize white injury. Yet a paradox emerges. Among the survivors are characters whose personal histories conflict with the meanings the show imbues in these sites. In awkward exchanges and, at times, through violent irruptions, these competing narratives collide. This chapter is interested in analyzing what viewers are able to re-member about some of the key institutions that represent many of our failed modernities. If not through characters, then the “extra-institutional” spaces of the woods and the road and the “present absence” of certain figures—namely the Black child—give additional testament to the fraught ways that the story the show seeks to tell is often disrupted by its contradictions.
Zombie narratives have an especial place in the American cultural imaginary. As Kyle Bishop explains in the introduction to *American Zombie Gothic*, the zombie is the only archetypical monster to emerge from “the new world” to animate fears surrounding “slave uprising and reverse colonization.” An uncanny figure, the zombie represents a return of what society has repressed or those that must be oppressed in order for dominant narratives to prevail. In this sense, the zombie belies the American progress narrative. However, the fear of zombification is not necessarily that some subjects live in a suspended state of (social) death or that hegemonic realities are mythical but rather that anyone can become—or already is—a zombie. As such, Bishop argues that zombie narratives are “gothic” narratives “that represent [mass] anxieties associated with turning points in cultural historical progress.” Zombie narratives “provide critics an important lens through which they may discern the prevailing attitudes, tendencies, concerns, and anxieties of the society or generation that produced those narratives.”

This is what makes the zombie a recurrent figure in U.S. popular culture. And following Bishop’s analysis, we do see it emerge during times of social and political unrest. As Cory Rushton and Christopher Moreman explain in their introduction to *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie*, we have seen biomedical zombies emerging from the fear surrounding nuclear technology in the cold war era, capitalist drone zombies at the dawn of the neoliberal epoch, and viral zombies in the post-9/11 era. I intend to comment

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209 Bishop, 32.
more extensively on the figure of the zombie in the section subsequent to this one, but I will agree now with Ronjon Datta and Laura MacDonald in “Time for Zombies: Sacrifice and the Structural Phenomenology of Capitalist Futures,” that the zombie genre most recently dramatizes the anxiety of the post-recession moment where people are living on “borrowed time”—in short, where people are already presumed dead.212

According to these authors, the zombie narrative now explores life at the brink of death, caused by economic and institutional collapse. Calling these zombies “economic zombies,” narratives, such as The Walking Dead, respond to a prevailing condition of precarity instituted by policy makers that are trying to conceive of “a new regulatory regime ‘less likely to breed zombies,’”213 or a certain class of “unprofitable economic agents” that “function on the basis of perpetual borrowing and ever inventive financing and re-financing arrangements,”214 through mechanisms that, ironically, exacerbate those conditions. If, as they argue, these narratives are “myths about an intractable problem of living life in an era dominated by finance capital,”215 then we can effectively argue that The Walking Dead owes its popularity to animating the cruel optimism Berlant argues many of us feel: the sense that the conditions of our life making are also our undoing. As we learn to naturalize disappointment, we become increasingly anesthetized to the violence around us. Disenfranchised and demoralized, we acquiesce, giving up control even over our emotional states.

213 Datta and MacDonald, 81.
214 Ibid, 80.
215 Ibid.
In the first anthology focusing on the show, “We’re All Infected”: Essays on AMC’s The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human, editor, Dawn Keetley, draws a connection between the structure of the show and what Berlant calls “slow death.” It is important to bear in mind that The Walking Dead is the first television zombie drama, she writes. Unlike zombie cinema that ends on a hopeful note or at least provides viewers the closure of the black screen,216 The Walking Dead continues along “the horizontal axis of a television serial,” forever deferring completion.217 The show can also be a bodily commitment. It is at once intense and exhausting to watch, and spills over into other avenues of engagement, whether through YouTube or the popular after-show, The Talking Dead. It assumes the pace of precisely what it animates: the gradual attrition of life under the demands of late capitalism. And as Keetley argues, the zombie it offers is not an “absolute Other” that merely configures a set of cultural anxieties but rather one that is bound with human destiny.

I will take issue with many of the ways that Keeltey and other contributors to that volume frame the zombie momentarily, but I do believe that she is correct in writing that the show marks a major departure from other zombie dramas in crafting a rather complex human-zombie assemblage that becomes—for her—the major pronouncement of the show: “we’re all infected,” as Rick tells us, “no matter who you are or how you die; you will turn.”218 Although I will ultimately critique this collapse, I do concur that this is a narrative that sees the zombie in the human—the propensity for us to become the reactionary monster we have only tacitly repressed through ideologies of post-racial

217 Keetley, 4.
tolerance—as well as the human in the zombie—that many of us see ourselves in a suspended death state. The core Cartesian dualism between mind and body is exploded here, as the point of horror is the always already compromised state of our sovereignty. To echo a point I made in the closing paragraphs of my first chapter, this zombie narrative satiates what Bataille would describe as the human desire for sacrifice—to see the humanity of man represented in its limit, death. The zombie in *The Walking Dead* is, therefore, something of a welcome threat.

Impressively, the show, about to enter its seventh season, continues to top Neilson ratings. Although spectatorship is not my entry point, it is worth mentioning that the show has an almost cult-like fan following, with producer and show creator, Robert Kirkman, speculating the reason being the ways it shatters viewer expectations by continuously killing off main characters, and often not in line with the comics on which the show is based.219 This social fact is second only to its claim of having the most diverse cast on television, featuring characters that are gay, differently abled, and/or of color, and offing them evenly in kind. This leads me to ask if indiscriminate killing is truly a measure of progressive politics. Though it certainly suggests something important about the ways we economize risk according to a neoliberal multiculturalist logic as well as how we tend to liberalize the precarious effects of crisis capitalism—of government malfeasance, economic fraud, poverty, and houselessness, and the problems of the carceral and military industrial complexes—that likely account for the show’s draw and certainly inform its plot lines.

For example, in the controversial season six cliffhanger, we are left guessing who antagonist, Negan, kills. Negan intends to punish Rick’s group for failing to adhere to his “new world order” (you give him “half your shit” and he does not kill you) by bludgeoning someone to death with his barbed wire-covered baseball bat, Lucille. In a testament to precisely what I’m pointing out here, Negan “simply can’t decide” who to kill and, in turn, walks up and down the line up, chanting “Eenie, Meenie, Minnie, Moe” as a process of elimination meant to feel like natural selection. Viewer response has been to acknowledge the ways this finale brought the serious “fear factor” back to the show, which is that in the zombie apocalypse no one is safe… though, of course, as I am sure many of us would be quick to comment, that assumption works against a sense of how bodies come to matter, as well as which lives are grievable.

Predictably, fans are already bemoaning the potential loss of favorite Daryl, slightly concerned about the possibility of an exit by Glenn, but are generally “okay” with the death of Aaron, a gay man, and, worse, would feel “let down” by the death of Rosita, the only Latin@ character on the show since the first season, because, as one YouTube commentator put it, “she’s not an important enough person.”

I have my own fears that it is Michonne who meets the bat. Shows exist not only within the scope of their own imaginary but within a cultural context as well. It remains to be seen—should this come to pass—how viewers might respond to the brutalization of a Black woman’s body, not only in light of recent events but histories of de/humanization that are fossilized

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221 This information was collected from comments left in the section of a YouTuber’s account, *The PT Channel*.
in the scene of torture itself—the backwoods of Virginia, amidst the foreboding shadows of trees that act as a haunting reminder of other such terrifying night scenes.

The critical entry points into this show are many. We can certainly recall a scandal of ex-privilege here, particularly in the ways that the narrative is organized around Rick’s injuries, which are propriety in nature and typically involve villainizing a figure that acts as a placeholder for what are often white and heteromasculinist anxieties: the loss of territory, family, and capital. In fact, he scampers about the first two seasons in a bloodied tattered police uniform—itself a kind of commentary on institutional erosion. We can comment extensively on the show’s pronouncements of race liberalism. While late in season two, we learn “we’re all infected, no matter how you die,” we are told very early in season one, by Rick, that in the new world “there is only white meat and dark meat.” The sentiment is clear: the world’s end is the end of difference.

Nothing in fact could be more modern or in line with current cultural ideology; in fact, the refusal to acknowledge racialized difference—what Jodi Melamed calls the discourse of “official antiracism”—merely separates race from the material conditions of neoliberal capitalism that continue to rely on the de/valued labor of racialized bodies cast outside its boundaries of belonging. We might say that, within the narrative economy of the show, such proclamations produce false equivalences between experiences of pain and misery that mask the universalizing logic at play in the establishment of shared reference points. White injury acts as index, making legible only that which intersects

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with and buttresses Rick’s claims to harm and does not dare disrupt the zombie
apocalypse as the primary point of human horror.\textsuperscript{223}

Here, I am reminded of a series of interesting conversations had between Glenn
and a few other characters during season two. Up to that point, we did not know much
about Glenn, other than that he delivered pizzas prior to the apocalyptic event. Much of
the drama in season two revolves around the breakdown of the nuclear family: Carol
losses her daughter, Rick and Lori’s marriage dissolves, Hershel losses his farm and,
eventually, all the reanimated members of his family that he keeps in a barn at the edge of
his property. It occurs to someone to ask Glenn as to where he is from and whom he
misses. His response is limited, just to say that he is from Michigan and that he had two
sisters.\textsuperscript{224}

Perhaps insignificant overall, I cannot help but ponder how the question posed is
over-determined by what counts as a familial loss (the death of a child, a divorce) or a
breakdown of a kinship structure (the inability to pass down the ancestral homestead).
Glenn’s status as a second generation Korean American suggests that his family narrative
is marked by patterns of militarized migration. It remains uncommented that the structure
and politics of intimacy which constitute Rick’s family are what could have
disaggregated Glenn’s, or at least left it unprotected. We are not granted the space, for
example, to contemplate how the “model minority” Korean American family was, at the
height of the LA Riots, called upon to produce the specter of Black criminality and to
disappear the obligation of the corporate entities responsible for creating the conditions

\textsuperscript{223} See Melamed’s work, referenced throughout this project, but especially in Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{224} The episodes generally referenced occur in Season Two.
under which underserved populations must fight for urban space or the practices of blockbusting and redlining condoned by the US racist state.

In short, there is no room to name the ways that the Korean American family has been produced within a liminal space of nationality and illegality, rescue and derision, freedom and capture, safety and harm, something that at once greatly disturbed but was also necessary to the establishment of American white locality whose violences are ongoing and often uneventful. His is perhaps a loss that cannot be named. Instead, Glenn is allowed to become a more robustly articulated figure, entitled to his emotions, when he marries Hershel’s daughter, Maggie, and he and Rick fight a nebulous enemy for a common cause: a future for their children—so when he is made white and heteromasculinized.

But perhaps the most obvious point of entry is the commentary on life and death. The show’s premise plays on themes of bio- and necropower: how does one live on in, or is made dead by the absence of structure? How do the forms of living on also gradually erode the life they constitute as livable? What does it mean that death is itself a pliant state, something that is always already a part of you and which you are doomed to live out indefinitely through a gradual process of post-mortem decay? At what point are you not “the living dead,” and how does this core truth conceal its differential social operations? Fundamentally, the show confronts the precarious nature of life that has become a preoccupation of mainstream US cultural discourse.

It is here that I want to elaborate a politics of difference. If we think in line with Jasbir Puar, debilitation is the condition for life. Life is made possible through a mechanism of deferring devastation. It is against the threat of unintelligibility that

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225 Puar, “Coda.”
modern subjects stake a claim but, in the words of Lisa Cacho, this almost always involves subjecting another Other to death. And this is why it is necessary to have a sense of how these things function economically. In light of this point, scholars like Berlant, Butler, and Puar have clarified a difference between precariousness, the pervasiveness of scarcity as the condition for life-making, and precarity, the unequal distribution of social vulnerability and exposure whose ontology exceeds—both historically and politically—these more current iterations of precariousness.

For what we might observe as radically changed in the present moment has long described the conditions of the poor, criminalized, stateless, and houseless. In fact, Berlant quips that “crisis” happens in the moment when the longtime political and economic realities of the socially neglected finally hit the white middle class. While the current conditions of crisis are inadequate to the flourishing of many, fewer have been subject to systematic forms of social attenuation, or what Berlant calls “slow death,” the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering. The ways precariousness is imagined does not point out these complex relationalities but instead works toward their consolidation into motile identity categories—the wounded, the oppressed, or the injured.

The refusal to see these differences, but worse, to appropriate them, characterizes the key pronouncement of the show. Late in season five, we find the group beleaguered and demoralized; after being displaced from the home they made in the prison, and surviving a series of cannibalistic attacks, with lacking ammunition, no food, or mode of transportation, they meander aimlessly. Lurching along the deserted highway, dirty and silent except for the sounds of their labored breathing, one cannot help but notice the

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226 Cacho, *Social Death*. 

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ways that they take up the posture of the “walker” (which is of course massively ableist for myriad reasons I will discuss in light of the zombie). Fully exposed to the elements, without a goal, or even a clear sense why they should keep walking, they await their tense, which comes in in the form of a rousing speech by Rick later that evening.

While holed up in an abandoned barn, Rick recalls the story of his grandfather’s survival. As a young soldier during the Second World War, the grandfather overcame his fear of certain death at the hands of the Third Reich by waking up each morning and repeating the mantra, “You’re dead. Now go to war.” In a moment that is just as instructive to viewers as it is for the group, Rick—having a Braveheart moment—poignantly states, “And that is how we survive. We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead.” And it is in light of this statement that I land on my primary criticism: The Walking Dead constructs a settler nationalist fantasy where the hollowing out of place and body conserves space for privileged narratives of injury to emerge. By “telling ourselves that we are the walking dead,” we are asked to be myopic in a way that also occults, making certain other experiences of violence wholly unrecognizable to formulations of injustice.

In her book of a similar title to this talk, Economies of Abandonment, Elizabeth Povinelli defines late liberalism as “the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements,” adding that “in a broader sense late liberalism is a belated response to the challenge of social difference and the alternative social worlds and projects potentially sheltered there.” Modern liberal states could not sustain the

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228 Povinelli, 25.
claim to democracy with facially racist practices on the books—like anti-miscegenation laws or Jim Crow segregation. That constitutive anxiety is resolved by adopting new “formal or informal policies of cultural recognition as a strategy for addressing the challenge of internal and external differences.”

As many of us study, this does not mean that things like Jim Crow racism go away; they emerge through other legitimating contexts of power, like the prison industrial complex, or the social conditions of labor, schooling, and zoning. Thus late liberalism maintains its pretense toward inclusion by “bracketing” the “tense of the other”… in turn suffocating the terms on which one is able to name their history by controlling memory and affect. What I believe happens in this narrative is not only the bracketing of the other’s tense but the actual occupation of the other’s tense. Thinking alongside Hamilton Carroll in Affirmative Reaction, the response to the challenge proffered by the Other is not only denial but appropriation: to “eat the other,” bell hooks might say in language more appropriate to this context.

White injury, contemporarily, makes itself available for redress by imagining itself in the place of difference, the positionality of the aggrieved. Thus the meaning of institutional abandonment is filled out by the complaints of those least historically impacted by it. By marking the point of emergence in the moment of the zombie apocalypse, other histories are downplayed, except when called as reference to symbolize the horrors endured by otherwise privileged figures. This is what defines the terms of belonging in this show, and it is through normative articulations of misery and desire that one earns place or at least a notable death. As I write this, I am also reminded of another

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229 Ibid.
dynamic of abandonment at play, theorized by Ruth Gilmore. The violent abandonments of the state—the forfeiture of its already limited social welfare capacities—is always accompanied by a “frightening willingness to engage in human sacrifice.”

It merits commenting that the show follows a similar arc, where in the absence of structure, war-making increases. Although I will ultimately argue that the show’s narrative progresses along an institutional trajectory, one could easily plot its development through the gradual normalization of violence, its eventilization into a commonsense.

But while I am effectively making a criticism of the conservative nature of the show, I do so with a caveat in mind. Povinelli’s objective in *Economies of Abandonment* is to demonstrate the complex ways that those bracketed by normative operations of power endure… precisely because one exceeds the point at which they are suspended—that there exists something beyond an ontological death. This is of course in direct citation of Afro-Pessimist feminist theories. As I mentioned in the first chapter, Saidiya Hartman argues that Black death—whether civil, discursive, or physical—is the ground on which (white) citizenship becomes knowable. As such, Black subjectivity cannot be reconciled to the terms of recognition and representation that make other, more dominant forms legible. White experience dominates the signifying space of this narrative, bracketing the Other in kind, but not totally erasing its trace.

In light of that critique, I focus on the point at which Black characters encounter this narrative through/as an antagonism where there exist conditions for inclusion but ultimately where a constitutive tension can never be resolved. The concluding analysis of this chapter will look at two such characters, Morgan and Michonne, whose respective

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experiences with child loss are only partially framed by the show’s visual text. The present absence of the dead Black child whose death can never be fully represented but on whose terms Morgan and Michonne gain belonging create a series of interesting ruptures in the story-telling mechanism… that ultimately resettle themselves.

*The Zombie and the Institution*

I want to provide a greater sense of the show’s occulting logic. We can trace this through the figure of the zombie and through the occupation of institutional sites. But even before that, I want to comment on the show’s commentary around causality. As mentioned above, zombie horror dramatizes cultural anxieties: around technology, disease, economy, or domestic politics. In classic zombie horror films, such as Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, we are typically given a reason: for example, nuclear science gone awry.

What makes this text markedly different is its failure to comment, other than that it is viral, and in turn, replicative. Gone is our context for understanding contagion and its disproportionate effects. Structural violence, Paul Farmer tells us, is key to knowing how a disease reaches epidemic proportions, and also, reveals the racialized/colonial dimensions of health scenarios. This omission feels intentional, particularly as it is the open-endedness of it that allows for some ahistorical conjecture. The zombie, as the primary effect of that virus, becomes an openly inscriptive space as well… a floating signifier that accumulates shifting meanings.

But those meanings are deeply contestable. The zombie, as it appears in this text, is itself an occulted figure. To rehearse a well-known point, the zombie originates from Haiti, in response to the conditions of enslavement under French colonial occupation.
According to cultural critic, Mike Mariani, “the original brains-eating fiend was a slave not to the flesh of others but to his own.”\(^{232}\) While death offered release and a return to Africa, suicide barred such a return, and those who took their own lives would be condemned to live trapped in a state of enslavement for eternity, what Mariani describes as the condition of having to live in a body to which you are not entitled.

When appropriated for white and western audiences, the zombie takes the temperature of another kind of abjection: the return of the repressed, the constitutive exclusion through which the confusing and unsettling contradictions of national belonging are projected. With a slip of the tongue, “Geek,” uttered only a few times during the first and second episodes of the first season starts to sound like “Gook,” drawing on particular US military histories in Asia and indicating that the post-apocalypse is a war for national sovereignty. With names like, “walker,” “roamer,” and “lurker,” we get a sense of improper entry that certainly plays on fears surrounding immigration—especially with all the wall building in this show— but also of indigeneity, as there are clear implications of statelessness and landlessness that are at once grounds for and effects of resettlement.

Keetley would concur that there are traces of that lineage throughout the show but warns against the criticism that this is yet another zombie narrative that serves to at once trouble but ultimately reestablish an absolute boundary between the human and its monstrous Others. Keetley takes issue in particular with Gerry Canavan’s reading of the comics as presenting the “thinnest sublimation” of violence against the racialized colonial object,” where the zombie becomes a receptacle for neoliberal antipathies that

are repressed through (what Melamed would call) the ideologies of race liberalism.\footnote{Keetley, 5.} For Canavan, reading the comics, or watching the show, becomes a practice in absolution. It provides readers and viewers a scapegoat for their bigotry. Yet, as I note above, Keetley argues for the marked departure \textit{The Walking Dead} takes from the racialized/colonial origins of zombie narratives. She remarks that the “viral zombie” was the last great iteration of that tradition.\footnote{Ibid.}

The viral zombie, typically infected with a “rage virus,” encompasses many of the post-9/11 fears surrounding epidemics, trauma, and terror. The drama around which these narratives hinge, is the outbreak of a virus that indiscriminately “infects” neighborhoods and completely alters otherwise mindful citizens’ social mentalities. But in movies, such as \textit{Land of the Dead}, the rage zombie also reflects the racialized/colonial figure that unjustly accrues our antipathies. \textit{The Walking Dead} does not dwell on such anxieties, even though they appear in certain storylines. I agree that there is an obvious break, but in arguing that the stronger relay between human and zombie (what Keetley calls its post-humanism) makes these things inconsequential to the narrative, Keetley assumes precisely what she ought to critique: new post-racial multiculturalist attitudes toward difference. To remind, if, under late liberalism, the normative does not seek to construct absolute and totalizing distinctions from the outset but rather to assume the place of difference, then the zombie would become indispensable to an otherwise implausible telling of universal human suffering.

In his contribution to Keetley’s anthology, “Burying the Living with the Dead: Security, Survival and the Sanction of Violence,” Steven Pokornowski calls the \textit{Dead}
zombie the epitome of “bare life.”\footnote{235} The concept, derived from Giorgio Agamben, holds that something must stand outside civility in order to make the citizen knowable. That “something” can be and was once a figure; but, as Agamben argues, under regimes of biopolitical control, is shared amongst a populous that is perceived as dysfunctional. To be clear, the argument is that bare life has been “dispersed” among an entire corpus, and for Pokornowski, the human/zombie proximities of *The Walking Dead* speaks to this. But I would counter that the grim fantasy the show creates where such a reality is possible is just that: a fantastical telling of life under regimes of late capitalism that mongers crisis for whiteness.

To be sure, I am introducing a critique to the dominant reading of *Dead* that echoes some key points of new critical race studies. In his work on “racialized assemblages” Alexander Weheliye argues that the reconceptualization of human-as-biopolitical-subject has woefully neglected race. Following the scholarship of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter in particular, Weheliye cautions against the ascription of biopolitical subjectivity to racialized bodies/subjectivities whose capture has been at the level of “flesh.” As Spillers explains in her work, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Black bodies have been characterized not as having meaning (not as sites for the accumulation of discourse) but as having things done to them in the production of meaning, so that they may be used expendably. As Weheliye explains, race becomes “pinioned to human physiology,” enabling a biological reality of which it is not necessarily part. To radically attribute the politics of “bare life” to a populous is to ignore how the human has always already been produced through multiple sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity.
into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. The reading of the zombie in this sense ignores “the political hierarchies” that exist in “human flesh,” or, in this case, decaying flesh.

Before I move on with this critique, I want to point out one more obvious trespass that goes largely unremarked about the Dead zombie, particularly with respect to late liberal narratives of failure. As I read it, the zombie is and has always been what Lacan would call a “perverse reflector,” a repository for the accumulation of social significances that are at once broadly cultural and deeply personal. As debilitation becomes a condition for the articulation of biopolitical subjectivity, more people make sense of their narratives through logics of dis/ability—whether they be immobilization, trauma, or sickness. The Dead zombie mirrors many of those feelings of debilitation.

“Biter” and “Lame Brain” are explicit references to a certain lacking able-bodied/mindedness, which I find interesting firstly because the zombie has a fairly advanced social. They travel in groups, and they do not eat one another. Their extra-linguistic sensibilities are heightened, and they moderate their response to emotional stimuli. When in captivity, they are relatively subdued, suggesting that the zombie is perhaps navigating the social encounter with humans in ways that are yes, life-threatening, but are perhaps misunderstood. In fact, we are given very little evidence that they completely lack rational capacity… if that is even the ground on which one is going to determine human status.

When the group reaches the CDC at the close of the first season, the sole remaining scientist uses brain imagining technology to “prove” that the reanimated state is not a human state. Showing a CAT scan recording of the reanimation process, we see
the hypothalamus light up, to which Dr. Jenner remarks, “you see? it’s not the part that makes you, ‘you,’” pointing to the darkness surrounding the areas of the brain that control personality and empathy. Not only does this frame ethics according to a neurotypical logic, it upholds neuro-technology as the arbiter of truth. What disturbs me here most is that the justificatory logic used to kill, or “put down,” the walker reflects those used to institutionally disappear differently abled bodied/minded populations. In the rare moment when we have a character acknowledge the possibility that these are “sick people” who are “just different,” she is executed… on account of her own mental fragility.236

Physical ability is referenced here as well. The zombie gait is most recognizable through its frenetic movements, which imply a lacking functional capacity. In what feels like a genuine mockery, I want to note that recent cast calls for “extras” advertise for “very thin” and “flexible” applicants who are able to walk disjointedly.237 The reference not named is nevertheless abundantly apparent. While I do not think we can definitively locate what the zombie is, in this drama, I think we can safely argue that it encompasses a range of intersecting neoliberal social pathologies. And this is where the ableism comes through clearest: disability as a condition of disease and contagion that can become anyone’s reality. And, indeed it does. Throughout the course of the show, otherwise able-bodied/minded characters become physically debilitated by the environment around them. Hershel loses a leg, Carl loses an eye, and if the show follows suit to the comics, Rick will lose his right hand.

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237 See “Season 4 Zombie School: Inside The Walking Dead,” AMC.
Moreover, many characters suffer through bouts of post-traumatic stress and psychotic breaks. Notably, the two characters on which I focus my next section, Morgan and Michonne, respond to the deaths of their respective children by dissociating with the world around them. In order to create space for the processing of their pain, they must refuse the social established by Rick. Rick himself develops coping mechanisms to manage his own misery as well, though in ways that are far more central to the narrative. After losing his wife in childbirth, he imagines that a defunct telephone enables communication between himself and the host of characters who died, including Lori. The consequences of this are grave as his lapse in leadership results in unpreparedness for outside aggressions. Despite other characters dying in the same zombie attack that resulted in Lori’s death, the focus of the group becomes about rescuing Rick from his misery.

While none of the characters ever fully overcome their trauma, they do provide it a framework so as to rejoin or reform social units. While Morgan describes his time alone as evidence of his “sickness,” he repackages the grief he feels about the loss of his son as something to be managed through non-violence and group activity. Michonne acknowledges her decision to keep her reanimated spouse as a pet “crazy” when she realizes that the revelation of her truth may repair the chasm in Rick and Carl’s relationship caused by Lori’s passing. Yet Rick’s traumas are the only ones that persist in a state of irresolution. Although in moments he is able to have moments of self-reflection, the narrative is driven by action that causes Rick’s anguish: the loss of his wife, the loss of his home, the loss of group, the loss of his power. As the supremely

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traumatized, Rick is not required to have these moments of reconciliation. As such, the gestures other characters—namely those who are Black and effeminized—make toward resolution emerge as space clearing for Rick’s narrative.

Although in perhaps one of the most poetic moments on the show, we see a refusal of the expectation for a character of color to “get better.” Reeling from the pain of losing her brother, Tyrese, Sasha emotionally distances herself from the group upon reaching Alexandria. She opts for a solitary position guarding and, if necessary, clearing the walls of walkers/walker corpses. In two, interrelated scenes, we see her create space for her trauma. In the first, she carts downed walkers to a designated mass grave site in the forest. Looking directly ahead with a marked lack of concern for whom may bear witness, Sasha removes her protective gloves and lies down in the grave with the walkers. Glancing from side to side at the zombies around her, she redirects her gaze to the sky, deeply exhales, and splays her arms in a Christ-like pose. The gesture is deeply symbolic. The great relief she takes in the proximity she establishes belies the normative meanings of the post-human zombie. She is among her “other Others” in this moment, forcing the zombie to become witness to racialized pain, which much like their protracted state of death is slow, enduring, and often unremarkable. If Rick is not going to create space for her to make sense of the loss of Black life amidst an almost homogenously white social, these silent witnesses will.\(^{239}\)

In another scene of traumatic embrace, Sasha descends from her post at the wall tower to follow the sounds of a nearby horde. Small in number and not directed toward the town, the horde poses no immediate threat. But Sasha rouses their awareness and

quickly begins to pick them off one by one. She is joined by Michonne and Rosita who give up attempting to coax her back to the safe zone and instead participate in the killing. Sasha implores them to allow her to manage the mass on her own, to which Rosita replies, “No. I need this too.” And so the three women of color on the show stand together in silence, taking pleasurable release in the act of killing. Unconcerned with how their actions might read to the other survivors concerned with conserving bullets and physical strength for greater feats, there is instead an acknowledgement of the productiveness of rage as an immersive affect. This moment of solidarity goes unremarked upon returning to Alexandria, a tacit awareness of the untranslatability of that moment within the dominant logics that resolution.

The zombie is not the only thing that stages white injury in this show. Institutions interest me perhaps even more than the figure of the zombie, namely because I am writing about them. As I read it, the show is first and foremost narrating failure as institutional abandonment. In the first season, survivors seek sanctuary at two key sites of national security, the CDC and Fort Benning, both of which predictably fail to deliver. The retreat to Hershel’s farm is by happenstance, but as the group settles and takes stock of the bucolic landscape and relative distance from the now urban wasteland of Atlanta, they quickly become attached to another failed site: the rural and all the classical fictions of the American family. Certainly not the aspects of settlement on native lands it also implies.

Realizing that it is reinforced walls they need, Rick advocates for the group to make a home in a prison, leading character T-Dog to comment, “This is probably the first

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time a Black man has ever attempted to break into prison.” The power of that abolitionist sentiment dissipates as the prison becomes a site for the articulation of white bodily captivity: it is there where Lori dies in childbirth, where Hershel almost loses his life to a walker bite, and where a strain of Spanish influenza takes out a good portion of the population. The prison loses its meaning as a place of racialized internment, and it becomes clear that captivity is an analogy for Rick’s loss of power, particularly at the hands of the show’s first human antagonist, the Governor, who holds court at another, related capitalist spatial fix: the town center, where a drama of walled sovereignty plays out. The governor keeps the residents of Woodbury safe on the illusion of indestructible walls and xenophobia. It is in this space where we hear direct references to post-9/11 nationalism, as he calls Rick’s group’s “terrorists” who want “what we have here.”

That fear-mongering irrupts into a full-scale attack on the prison, and our sympathies are with Rick while we are asked not to contemplate the bigger picture here: that these are all confiscated territories.

When the group is displaced from the prison, they reinvest hope in a destination called Terminus, where a group of survivors lure other humans on the promise of sanctuary only to cage and later eat them. Here we see a most egregious appropriation of “the death-bound subject” where the body is not merely reduced to flesh but to meat. Through a series of events, the group begins to see their desire for normalcy realized in the Alexandria Safe Zone, a gated community with homes starting in the low 800s. Those

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242 The concept of the death-bound subject comes from Abdul JanMohamed’s work in *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archeology of Death*. In that work, JanMohamed borrows from Hortense Spiller’s concept of the black body as “flesh” to instead argue that the ontological condition prior to being “flesh” (rendered in the service of white capital) is being “meat,” a material substrata that is not yet subhuman. It is to be utterly objectified and preemptively dead.
who claim membership to the 99% may feel that the 1% who presumably fled the community met their just desserts, making this particular plot progression one that resonates.

But instead of solace, Rick feels suppressed, something made all the more apparent when he is introduced to the space more aligned with his emotional state: the Hilltop, a repurposed historical museum that was once a plantation. We are first introduced to the settlement by a character whose name is, fittingly, Jesus. Hilltop is governed by one man who lives in a perfectly preserved master’s house, with trailers housing his people all around him. Making matters worse, Hilltop is also a “Savior Work Colony,” where residents are forced to produce not only for Greg, their leader, but a group of sociopaths, making explicit the metaphor of white enslavement as a struggle with “big government” and corrupt politicians. With each passing site, the occulting logic becomes increasingly egregious.

But I am also intrigued by the spaces that exist outside the immediate institutional enclave: namely the woods, the defunct suburb, and the road. In this drama, the suburbs carry the memory of a very crucial institutional scandal: the subprime mortgage crisis. And, in fact, when we encounter Morgan for the first time, he is “squatting” in the home of Rick’s former neighbor. After Morgan saves him from a possible walker attack, Rick’s response is to invalidate his presence in that space, asking, “Did you kill them, the people who lived here?” Making matters more interesting, Morgan’s zombified wife, Jenny, lurks outside the dwelling, nightly attempting to break in by fidgeting with the front door handle and peering into the peephole. The only zombie during the entire series to display such a level of intelligence and retention of a former life, Jenny seems damned to play
out her disbarment from that space. The scene of her nightly visitation seems to analogize a kind of white flight and Black habitation common to urban spaces where Black belonging is contingent and suspect.

When, in season five, the group returns with short-lived character, Noah, to reunite with his family in their Virginian subdivision, they find only the slaughtered corpses of its residents and, importantly, deceased members of his family as well as his reanimated brother. In this instance, a Black family—all dead or zombified—remain trapped inside the suburban home, a reminder that the suburb, due to predatory lending practices, has become a new site of racialized capture. However much the image of a Black family trapped in a persistent death state might critique such a condition, it also reifies Black exclusion. To be sure, Noah’s zombified sibling fatally attacks Tyrese, one of the few remaining Black males on the show who, mere episodes before the incident, had dreamed of settling into the pace of suburban life with Carol to avoid the horrors encountered at the prison.

The woods are often fetishized as a boundary between safety and danger, while also providing moments of escape. It is in the woods where we meet the Wolves, a band of murderous anarchists. The Wolves tell their story as indigenous folk figures. Their leader recounts, “During the settlement of the land, colonists put bounties on wolves’ heads, even getting the natives to hunt them. Didn’t take too long to kill them all. Now we’re back.”243 This is quite a story of deliverance. The wolf is not an unfortunate victim lost to the project of nation-building in which the indigenous population was conscripted into their own annihilation. Instead, there is a more primary loss which the wolf represents: that of autonomy and sovereignty… making the enlightenment ideology of

243 *The Walking Dead*, “Conquer.”
the colonial project somehow prior its articulation. I would be shocked, except that, on the production end of things, there is a complete ignorance of land politics.

The show itself is filmed in and around the Atlanta metropolitan area, often in real, abandoned spaces. That a context of disavowal—of flight and deindustrialization—could become ground for an eleven million dollar per episode show is a sobering testament to the disordered conditions of late capitalism. In a show that laments the loss of the national horizon, there is remarkably no context for how Atlanta emerged as a metropolis through the construction of the Georgia-Pacific railroad—a key technology in the colonization of the American West.

The road holds perhaps greatest significance in this triad of off space. In the US cultural imaginary, the road symbolizes absolute freedom and mobility; or, rather, becomes the simulacra of democratic freedom. In more recent US literary and cinematic history, the road is a key site for the dramatizing the limitations of American progress narratives. And in this storyline, the road proves no different. The group rarely reaches their points of destination and, while on the road, meet challenges that remind them of the futility—or perhaps cruel optimism—of their mission.

The emblems of freedom, such as the car, the motorcycle, and the rules of the road itself, falter. Modes of transportation break down and the group often detours, making off into the fields and woods tangential to their path. The road in Dead presents a challenge of access not unlike its representation in movies, such as Set it Off, where characters—notably female and of color—attempt relentlessly to access the road in order to escape the racialized violences of the welfare state. Their being thwarted is symbolic of their being barred from the American dream. The proposed similarity in experience—
as Rick’s group encounters hordes of zombies that block their path, abandon vehicles due to lack of resources—is telling of the ways that minoritized experiences become fodder for a new national narrative.

Thus these two referents—the zombie and the institution—foreclose a more critical discussion of the political and economic failures they represent. I want to be clear about the affective economy I see emerge through this telling. In “Affective Economies,” Sara Ahmed argues for the objectivity of emotions. Emotions “do things,” she writes; “they align individuals with communities” and “bodily space with social space.” Simply put, “affective economies” describe how emotions circulate between bodies and signs. More specifically, “affective economies” describe how emotions intensify around an event and then continue to accumulate meaning through the continued circulation of discourses related to that event. As emotions gain social currency, they “surface” individual and collective bodies in alignment with particular political rationalities, while distancing others in turn.

While our sympathies for Rick, in particular, and his various injuries, drive the narrative, other characters fade to the backdrop, only meriting commenting when they intersect with his storyline. The sympathies or antipathies we have for certain other characters are indexed through Rick and the often existential dramas he experiences with fatherhood and leadership. But there are interesting moments in the show that cannot be contained within this economy. The instances of characters who refuse to fully participate in Rick’s drama are subtle and come mostly through silences and absences of presence. I turn now to two key figures in the text that disrupt the seamlessness of the white heteropatriarchal signifying space the show constructs.

244 Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, see especially 82-85.
Death and the Present Absence of the Black Child

As Rick perennially reminds, his purpose for going on is to secure shelter and reestablish some sense of normalcy for his children, Carl and Judith. Judith, in particular, has been cast as a harbinger of hope. This pronouncement is made early on in season two, when Rick’s late wife, Lori, contemplates terminating her pregnancy with Judith but ultimately relents when it becomes evident that the child can serve as a rallying call. The group sees Judith similarly, as even Daryl, one of the most emotionally removed characters on the show, owes his allegiance to Judith. In season three he states, “we lost too many, and I ain’t losing her too” before going into battle with the residents of Woodbury that include his own biological brother.245

Her mere presence at times has the power to overcome the greatest challenges and antipathies. Upon meeting in the prison for the first time, Sasha warms to the group by exclaiming the “beautiful miracle” that is Judith.246 Later in the next season, after the prison is demolished by the Governor, Tyrese, pushes onward with Judith strapped to his stomach through the Georgia wilderness without shelter in the hopes of reuniting the then suspected dead Judith with Rick. When the group arrives at Alexandria, they are largely met with suspicion, until, at a party, Judith is gleefully received by residents who have not seen the likes of an infant in some time.

These feelings of hopefulness, grounded in the presence of youth, have an especial place in American politics. As Lauren Berlant explores in Queen of American Goes to Washington, D.C., the American child and even the fetus is a crucial “stand-in

for a complicated and contradictory set of anxieties and desires about national identity.”247 The innocent and illiterate—and indeed uninitiated—child becomes the ground on which citizenship may be idealized (desired) and critiqued (often by children themselves). It is their future that is at stake and in the name of which we must act. The child is interesting to Berlant in and of itself but also conceptually for the ways it symbolizes a kind of citizenship mirrored by adults—an “infantile citizenship”—that willfully complies with and embraces the policies of the state as a way of belonging. In a sense, one can read Judith as performing this labor. It is in her honor that the group continuously pushes northward to Washington, DC, even at the expense of their own safety. Members with fraught allegiance, such as the reluctantly violent Father Gabriel, are often able to secure footing in the group by offering to care for Judith. In short, as Berlant might argue, the encounter with the child is an opportunity to perform a restricted belonging.

The discourse of the child has an especial place in narratives of institutional failure. An institution is considered especially corrupt when it defers the future that is imagined on behalf of the child. We see this especially in political polemic, and currently, in the emotional politics of this 2016 election. Democrats frequently use what Berlant calls “conventions from the maternalist playbook of the 19th century (my mother! my daughter! Our children!)” to critique a conservative world order based on the kind of meritocracy Hayes abhors. Conservatives, in kind, bemoan a liberal future where there are not enough institutional barriers to keep “undesirables” away from “our children.” Elsewhere we can see where children are named the true victims of the imperial university (through the student loan crisis), the medical industrial complex (the debate on

247 Berlant, Queen of America, 6.
vaccination practices), and even the prison system (the ways incarceration disturbs nuclear family units). The child is often at the center of late capitalist dramas.

This is precisely why, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that the child “terrorizes” our ability to actually enjoy life citing,

> On every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an “otherness” of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve, uncompromised by any possible access to what is painted as alien desire, terroristically hold us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up.  

According to Edelman, the child takes away the jouissance that the queer, in particular represents. For the child “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity” that the queer disrupts. The child symbolizes a “reproductive futurism” into which those marked by whiteness, heterosexuality, religious conservativism, and so forth, can read themselves. The mere notion of Judith draws into relief many of the claims that Rick cannot otherwise substantiate based on the material realities around him—namely, that it is possible to “get back to how we were.” Speaking on behalf of the queer/ed figures whose sexual politics cannot produce such a guarantee, Edelman elaborates:

> Our queerness has nothing to offer a Symbolic that lives by denying that nothingness except an insistence on the haunting excess that this nothingness entails, an insistence on the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony’s always explosive force. And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here.  

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249 Edelman, 27.
As Edelman makes clear, the queer reminds of another way of being that must be anxiously foreclosed as it proffers the possibility of a world unstructured by progressivist desires.

Although I would not read these figures as “queer” but most certainly as “queered,” we do see Rick quickly dispose of the few surviving inmates at the prison, the cannibals of Terminus, and Randall, a sole surviving member of an all-male survival gang who has an unfortunate run-in with the group near Hershel’s farm. To varying degrees, the inmate, the cannibal, and the unattached drifter are cast in Symbolics that remain outside reproductive nationalism. The inmate becomes other to emancipated subjectivity, the cannibal indulges in one of the abject horrors explicitly written out of any democratic social contract, and the drifter is totally unencumbered by group responsibility. Regardless of the situation, Judith often stands in as rationale for why they must be destroyed.

Yet Edelman’s, as well as Berlant’s, critique omit an important consideration. It is not the child in general, but rather the white child, that configures this future horizon on which hope and anxieties are written and belonging is established. Markedly absent, though hauntingly present, in the show are deceased Black children—namely Duane, the son of Morgan, and Andre Alexander, the son of Michonne. The rituals of mourning for their losses in which they engage do not secure Morgan and/or Michonne a place among the survivors. And what I hope to suggest is that this is due, in part, to their attachment to the Black child, whose relationship to nationalism has a different valance.

As Saidiya Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection*, Black bodies are sites where white meaning is made; as such, they are sutured but never fully enfleshed within
the discourse of American nationalism. The Black child, and the Black family more generally, have been routinely pathologized in order to shore up and consolidate the symbolic integrity of the white family—most notably in “The Moynihan Report.” The “Report” took as its undertaking the diagnosis of a series of alleged Black pathologies, including the “underachievement” of Black men and the phallic motherhood of Black women. As Hortense Spillers explains, the “Report” produced a critical erasure of Blackness-as-substance, as it inscribed “ethnicity” within an opposition between white and Black family structures.\textsuperscript{250} Although whiteness is caught in the same constitutive dynamic, it is the Black body that is negated; or, as Spillers describes it, “captured” as a “physical and biological expression of ‘otherness.’”\textsuperscript{251} It makes sense, then, that the Black child is not available for mourning, much less is it even seen. Instead, the attachment Morgan and Michonne have to their sons is problematized, only to be resolved when it is broken or transferred.

We meet Morgan Jones in the first episode. He and son Duane take residence in an abandoned Atlanta suburb. While in the process of evacuating the city, Morgan’s wife, Jenny, fell ill with the virus. The original intent was for her to recuperate, but she succumbs to the fever. As I mention above, Jenny is the only walker in the entire series shown to have memory; she returns nightly to the jostle the handle of the front door and look hopefully into the peephole of a home over which she never fully had jurisdiction. Before parting ways, Rick offers Morgan a gun… not to protect himself but for the purposes of “putting down” Jenny, something Morgan later reveals he could not do.

\textsuperscript{251} Spillers, 67.
Crucially, Rick vows to reunite with Morgan and Duane in Atlanta, once he himself finds his wife and child… a promise he never fulfills.

Morgan’s character takes a reprieve from the show, namely so that actor Lennie James can pursue other gigs. When we meet him again in the third season, he has taken up residence in King County’s town hall. In a complete reversal of the institutional re-inhabitation narrative that drives the show, Morgan occupies the main street, erecting an elaborate system of deterrents and booby-traps to explicitly keep other people out.

His misanthropy is not directed toward Rick but rather the symbolic dimensions of Rick’s betrayal. When asked to join the group at the prison, Morgan refuses on the grounds that he does not desire membership to any community because that kind of hopeful thinking is what gets you killed. And death is precisely what he politicizes. Asking Rick, “Did you lose your wife? So you didn’t have to watch that? You didn’t have to watch her turn? That’s good. And your boy, he’s still alive?” The questions are purely rhetorical, and Rick provides no answer.252

Morgan states that Rick and Carl will eventually die, though, because “the good people always do.” “But the weak,” he scoffs, “we have inherited the earth.” The implications of this statement are vast. I cannot help but recall the reference to Frantz Fanon, as in his destitution, it appears Morgan is building a political consciousness outside the US national imaginary. He does not seek amelioration but instead responds to the death of his child as a catalyst for the articulation of rage. Morgan posits his “living on,” the impossibility of his death, as a different condition of bio/necropolitics, and one

in keeping with some of the original formulations of the zombie: the privilege of death and the respite it promises.\textsuperscript{253}

We do not see Duane die. We are told that he perishes one day when, after a food run, he and his father return to find that Jenny has found her way into the home and, as a result, attacks Duane. In this politically-loaded death scenario, the Black mother eats her child—drawing on histories of racialized discourses of Black maternal pathology mentioned above. But I am also wondering the ways in which this could be read differently, where taking the life of one’s child is an act of protection similar to Beloved’s Sethe, though certainly one that does not make sense in Rick’s world order. The deep sympathy and understanding Morgan has for his wife despite is an articulation of paternity that cannot be fully named here.

This interruption is momentary. Morgan eventually leaves King County, meets Eastman, a white middle aged man who practices Aikido and teaches him the art of non-violence. Morgan fully integrates into Rick’s group and interestingly enough advises against the unnecessary killing of antagonists, repeating the mantra, “All life is precious.”\textsuperscript{254} Thus, in essence, the main Black male character of the show tells us that “all lives matter.”

Morgan’s drama has an interesting foil in Tyrese. As mentioned above, Tyrese loses his life after succumbing to a walker bite. The culprit is none other than Noah’s reanimated younger brother, a Black youth of about ten years of age. The brother is one of the few zombified Black people on the show and most certainly the only zombified Black child of note. The attack occurs in the bedroom of a destroyed subdivision and on

\textsuperscript{253} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{254} The Walking Dead, “Here’s Not Here,” Directed by Stephen Williams, Written by Scott M. Gimple, AMC November 1, 2015.
the heels of Tyrese saving Judith from the chaos of the prison; at great risk to his own life, Tyrese leads Judith as well as two other young white girls to safety.

In this moment, we might read the attack as a critique of Tyrese’s racialized emasculation and acquiescence to the terms of Rick’s universe. But given the context of Black familial pathology, it is more likely that we are to read the attack as a possible response to abandonment the Black son feels toward the Black father. Indeed, we might read this as a possible scenario that could have played out between Duane and Morgan. Interestingly, this would be a tension that hinged on the killing off of the Black mother.

As Tyrese lies dying in the back of the group’s getaway car, a voiceover plays of Tyrese recounting the terms of his fraught relationship with his own father—a relationship he demarcates from the one he had with his mother. The message seems to be that Black fatherhood is unfathomable as it cannot produce the conditions of reproductive nationalism that is, in this case, depends upon Black maternal death.

Michonne’s story of child loss is grounds for her marked narrative silence. It takes an entire two seasons before she even reveals the reason why she expresses lacking attachment to the group. When we finally learn her backstory through a dream sequence, it is revealed that she had a young son, Andre Anthony, who died during an attack on her refugee camp because his father was high and failed to even notice that the camp was being overrun, let alone that his child had been attacked.

Drug use, the common reference point of Black male pathology, is suggested here but becomes secondary to the violation of Michonne’s trust in her partner. In fact, Michonne keeps a reanimated Michael, and his friend, Terry, as “pets,” whose presence deters walkers by masking her human smell. In a rather brilliant move, she attributes the
violence of her son’s death to Black women’s oppression and forces Michael to become accountable to her injury. By not naming who the pets are until the fifth season, viewers are unable to fully extrapolate a narrative of Black male criminality, though it is certainly suggested that there was some trespass. Michonne later describes her decision to “keep” her dead as “insane,” though it is unclear as to whether the insanity is about holding a grudge or the promises of death from which she kept her partner and his best friend.\textsuperscript{255}

Andre’s death similarly does not occur on screen. While viewers speculate the reason being his young age (he was only two at the time), we could also consider the ways Michonne refuses to make the Black family a public text or the Black mother a public body. When she fully emerges as a member of the community, and as Rick’s girlfriend, she utters the truth of her supposed anti-social behaviors and finds resolution in acting as a surrogate mother to Carl and Judith. Another interesting suturing happens here as well, this time with Michonne and Lori. In the narrative, Lori is posited as the sacrificial mother. She has failed in her duties as wife, given her infidelity and affair with Rick’s best friend, Shane, but recovers by opting to die in childbirth. Judith’s centrality to the narrative absolves Lori and reinsures the innocence of white femininity. As Michonne steps in to care for Judith, she becomes supplement to Lori, allowing the viewer to imagine what could have been. Through this process, Michonne’s membership is secured as Lori’s supplement.

But I want to be clear. If we read linearly, then these breaks do appear as part of a civilizing process. But if we think about the function of memory, and trauma, its ability to reemerge at any point, whether or not it’s named or visually represented, then we can

\textsuperscript{255} The Walking Dead, “Claimed.”
imagine how these characters must continually negotiate the terms of their belonging through a loss that cannot be fully named.

*Misery, Desire, and Belonging*

Beyond civil, juridical, or political status, our membership to the nation is affective. Berlant has made this clear across her oeuvre. The performance of citizenship is an emotional one; how we feel and posture has tremendous social consequence. The constellation of desire, affect, and citizenship is complicated. Our desire for belonging is often mediated through difficult, or negative, emotions. That is particularly true of the contemporary moment where precariousness is how we perform, and in turn secure, national belonging. This can make us feel quite miserable in our condition. Though, as I have made clear, that misery is often mythical and, importantly, strategic. Many people do legitimately feel injured, but must repress a lot of better judgement in making a claim for the novelty of that injury. The work that media does is therapeutic as well as pedagogic. We watch television shows like *The Walking Dead* to find our pain countenanced but also to have our emotions instructed to us. Watching the show is cathartic but also productive, which is certainly an interesting commentary on the importance of misery and pain as a praxis of citizenship.

Berlant observes that, historically, pain is often the sentimentality that is used when seeking redress or performing empathy on behalf of subalternized Others—ironically, she argues, in a way that entirely misses the point of what it means to be systemically failed. To commiserate is, therefore, to use another’s pain as one’s prerogative. It makes the perceived pain of the Other a place for public commenting. In these moments, the “subject of true feeling” is not the objectified Other whose lament is
sung but the one who is doing the emoting. Empathy is ultimately analogic. Under these contemporary circumstances, where the normative has occupied the stance of the subalternized Other, the Other’s story is even more immaterial to these musings.\footnote{256 Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling,” Left Legalism/Left Critique (2002), 105-33.}

In *The Walking Dead*, we see pain as a key analytic to belonging. By season four, Rick offers group membership to newcomers once they answer a series of questions, “How many walkers have you killed?” “How many people have you killed?” “Why?” As a verbal social contract, Rick is effectively gauging not simply the ethical persuasion of the party in question but how well their ethics countenance his own. As he and other characters continually reiterate, “We’ve all done things to survive,” it becomes clear that the “Why” question presumes its answer. The response he seems to anticipate, indeed over-determine, in asking is that said actions were taken on behalf of another and could, in fact, be done again in the name of Rick’s group. He is taking a moment to assess the evidentiary experience of pain and subsequently gauge how closely it follows his own narrative arc. And that is the key point: what he is able to read about himself in the life narrative of another, such that that other life narrative becomes his. Commiserating with Rick is a moment for characters to perform allegiance.

Importantly, commiseration is also the ground for the staging of desire. The fantasy of *The Walking Dead* is not merely to imagine an almost libertarian future, absent of “big government” and institutional infrastructure, but to indulge in the notion that this future is the horizon on which white injury will brought into great relief. Libertarian discourse is a highly affective one that posits extreme solutions to what are themselves gross misreads of political and economic situations. In particular, libertarianism argues
for a radical interpretation of sovereignty and market freedom; it has granted a lot of disgruntled white working and middle class men a place to see their injuries rectified. The show creates a space for the expression of that desire and, much like the discourse from which it stems, subjugates other claims to injustice within a general assessment that institutions have abandoned their promise to the white nuclear family.

What I hoped to have demonstrated here is not that there is an abundance of critical merit in a show whose primary viewing audience are white males between the ages of 18-34 but rather that *The Walking Dead* is one among many popular narratives that ruminates on the themes of loss, injury, betrayal, and abandonment that occupy the US cultural imaginary. If we can say anything good about it, it is that a show with such mainstream appeal struggles against its own convictions, suggesting that the normative narrative of injury is not the only nor the final pronouncement of the late modern era. Most importantly, I have sought to elaborate what Spillers might call a “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” an awareness of how the Black body-as-flesh testifies to a different set of violences, elisions, and realities that refute the inscriptions of white meaning. Although the Black characters on the show appear to ultimately eschew a commitment to racialized anguish, it is there nonetheless.

But as I write these concluding words, I am reminded of a doubly negated absence, the black female child. It is a crucial narrative decision to posit black male children as denied objects of mourning, particularly in a moment when we see the violences endured by Black women eclipsed. As Alicia Garza, founder of the hashtag, #blacklivesmatter, makes clear, Black male experiences with injustice frequently stand in for the totality of racialized violences. We can see some of this dynamic at play. When
the show creates space for alternate institutional encounters, it is anchored in a male presence. The occulting of the Black female child further ensures white hetero-femininity as an object of national mourning. Statistically, we can verify that Black women bear the brunt of institutionalized violence while also serving as its scapegoat—i.e. the pariah of the welfare queen—yet in a show that takes as its implicit objective the dramatization of institutional abandonment, they are markedly amiss. What this suggests to me is a point that I have been pressing all along; the narration of institutional failure is built in a particular structure of feeling that does not necessarily bear on material realities and, if anything, occults them. Perhaps this is why such figures never appear.
The Rightful Place of Failure:  
*Orange is the New Black* and the Spectacle of Black Death

“The criminal justice system has had a role to play in the racial hierarchy of this country since our founding [...]. When slavery was the law of this land, the criminal justice system was used to enforce those laws. After Emancipation, Jim Crow laws were rapidly put in place to maintain that racial hierarchy, and the criminal justice system was used to enforce those laws. After the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the 20th century, we had an expectation that things would change, but the criminal justice system has not caught up with our laws, and our expectations around racial equity.” Piper Kerman

“In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse. You’re not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina women, and old women and criminals. But if you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all those other stories [...]. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it’s relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It’s useful.” Jenji Kohan

What happens when the absence of blackness is supplanted by racialized abundance? Do representations of institutional failure suddenly become more attentive to the historical omissions named throughout this project? The television series I explore in the second half of this dissertation contemplate how racialized failure—marked by black death—is framed hegemonically. In explicit ways, *The Walking Dead* uses white fragility to scaffold issues of institutional abandonment and the failed promises of US nationalism. Less obviously, however, *Orange is the New Black* uses whiteness as a context for narrating racial/gender violence.

The show, inspired by author/activist Piper Kerman’s thirteen month stint in a low security prison following a drug trafficking charge, commits itself to portraying the “real” conditions of the prison industrial complex. Featuring a diverse cast of characters and

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257 Saralyn Lyons, “Activism is the New Black: Author Piper Kerman on Prison Reform,”  

258 See Kerman’s interview with Fresh Air on NPR, ”'Orange' Creator Jenji Kohan: 'Piper Was My Trojan Horse.” In *Fresh Air* NPR. August 13, 2013.
exploring everything from the ignorance of mental health issues and sexual violence to the inhumanity of prison privatization and labor to the faulty logic of sentencing laws and the unfair treatment of inmates who are queer and/or of color, the show makes clear the social eugenics of the US carceral system. Importantly, for this project, it also highlights the prison as, at once a failure unto itself and a solution, or, as Ruth Gilmore would argue, “fix” for other institutional and economic crises—namely deindustrialization and the fallout of neoliberal policies.

Creator, Jenji Kohan, notes the critical urgency of the show, stating, “our prison-industrial complex is out of control […]. This is my activism,” with supporting actress and trans* activist, Laverne Cox adding, “we revolutionized television.”259 Yet viewer/consumer demands for a show that is as entertaining as it is probing have led to the creation of a rather complex visual economy, where the—at best, stereotypical—portrayals of diverse characters commodify difference. Importantly, when questioned as to why a show so committed to exposing what Michelle Alexander calls “the new Jim Crow” features a white upper-class protagonist, Kohan answers to the effect of “it sells.” The implication is that the spectator to whom the show is marketed may be prepared to entertain a cultural criticism of carceral injustice but not unless they can empathize. This is made apparent by the quote cited above, as Kohan speaks to the mass appeal of white femininity and its fragility (“the fish out of water”), failing to realize how central that construction is to the creation of Black criminality of which she is otherwise critical.

Piper becomes a narrative point of identification for white viewers who would similarly find the experience of imprisonment to be radically out of sync with their lives.

At the same time her bungling anti-racism, so obvious as to be humorous in its misdirected intentions, enables audiences to overlook their own culpabilities by imagining more apt ways of navigating the “tribal” dynamics of Litchfield Penitentiary. The show’s “activism” turns out to be little more than an exercise in post-racial absolution.  

But perhaps more egregious than this is how the show makes an issue of black death by scandalizing white sensibilities. In these instances, the humor suspends itself to allow for more dramatic depictions. Throughout the seasons, we have observed as characters, such as Sophia Burset, is brutally beaten in a transgender hate crime, Daya Diaz is denied critical post-natal care, and Janae Watson is held in an indefinite detention in SHU. As this chapter will explore, specifically, the spectacular death of white class-passing black lesbian, Poussey Washington, yolks whiteness to racialized/sexualized violence in one of the most markedly racialized contexts of institutional failure—the prison. To tentatively answer the questions that begin this chapter, whiteness is made central to how we imagine the racialized dimensions of institutional failure even in the places where strong intersectionality matters most.

Orange is the New Black in the New National Culture Imaginary

Orange is the New Black follows white upper middle class protagonist, Piper Chapman, as she adapts to her new and unexpected life in prison. Piper, whom we first meet crying in a prison shower, notes “this wasn’t supposed to be my life,” at once referring to the failed expectations of her privileged upbringing as well as to the fact that she was prosecuted on a decade-old drug charge. We learn that Piper’s current life in

261 Ibid.
Manhattan with fiancé, Larry, conceals a not-too-distant past she shared with girlfriend, Alex Vause, a recruiter and funds transporter for an international drug lord.

Piper’s doe-eyed and innocuous veneer also conceals some fairly racist and classist antipathies that she denies through well-rehearsed critiques of the prison industrial complex and attempts at solidarity with inmates who are poor, neuro-divergent, and/or of color. Few characters on the show buy into her pretense until Piper fully emerges the changed and hardened woman we are supposed to see her as after an encounter with a rather incorrigible youth, Dina, from a scared straight program, whom she tells:

I was somebody before I came in here. I was somebody with a life that I chose for myself and now, now it's just about getting through the day without crying. And I'm scared. I'm still scared. I'm scared that I'm not myself in here and I'm scared that I am. Other people aren't the scariest part of prison Dina. It's coming face-to-face with who you really are. because once you're behind these walls there's no where to run, even if you could run. The truth catches up with you in here Dina and it's the truth that's going to make you her bitch.\textsuperscript{262}

And so from that point onward, we are to see Piper as at least partially awakened to the circumstances that surround her… incidentally, when she takes an opportunity to make the school-to-prison pipeline a theater for the staging of her own pain.

The show premiered for full season streaming on Netflix in the summer of 2013. As of 2016, it has rounded out a fourth season with no less than 6.7 million viewers. Never falling below 90% on the popular approval rating site, Rotten Tomatoes, and generously reviewed by Metacritic, the show has been renewed by Netflix through a seventh season. The show secured 13 Emmy nominations in 2014, receiving the award for “Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series” and was additionally recognized with a

\textsuperscript{262} \textit{Orange is the New Black}, “Bora, Bora, Bora,” Directed by Andrew McCarthy, Written by Nick Jones, Netflix June 11, 2013.
Peabody for excellence in quality and storytelling. The show is often acclaimed for “humanizing” prisoners and its commitment to diversity. With reporters calling it a “revolution for women” and a new direction for how we watch “and talk about television,” it is clear that a general viewing public sees the show as part of a welcome and progressivist movement to shift representations in the visual field.

More specifically, it seems to exist within the nominal liberalism of Netflix viewing culture. Shows, such as the Wachowskis’ Sense8, and Marta Kauffman’s Grace and Frankie, incorporate into their stories themes of queer desire, polyamory, and transracial relationships. Also disrupting the white heterocapitalist signifying space of mainstream television culture are a bevy of social justice documentaries, such as Documented, Poverty, Inc., Salam Neighbor, Girl Rising, and Living on One Dollar. These programs variously push back against the dominant grain of Islamophobic, Xenophobic, classist, ableist, and racist discourses. According to media and disability studies scholar, Kalima Young, these texts become powerful vehicles for codifying representations of trauma and oppression that remain absent from other avenues—particularly network television and even competitor site, Hulu.

Yet if we follow feminist theorist and cultural critic, bell hooks, these are commodified representations of difference that satisfy commercialized modes of encounter—expectations that we get the exoticness for which we paid and, in turn, preemptively imagined. Netflix may be attempting to appeal to a millennial viewing base that desires certain representationally sound but politically anemic modes of entertainment. The new American cultural imaginary espoused by these viewers is

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dominated by a post-racial liberalism that, despite diverse representations, continues to “construct and privilege white middle-class audiences as ideal viewers.”

This does not have to be a necessary deficit, write media scholars, Suzanne Enck and Megan Morrissey in their contribution to a special journal issue on the show, “If Orange is the New Black, I Must be Colorblind.” As they argue, “OITNB encourages white audience identification primarily through the show’s protagonist who, by providing a comic frame, also enables critiques of post-racial fantasies that so frequently reify existing U.S. social relations,” adding, “Postracialism animates contradictions and tensions that offer fertile ground for humor, and humor, in turns, directs attention back to often over-looked discrepancies and social failings.”

But I would seriously question the extent to which humor is always or necessarily critical. As I mention in the introduction, Piper’s clowning can also recenter whiteness by making viewers feel morally superior to her foibles. Creating a condition where viewers can reassure themselves that they do not see race or view it more accurately perilously teeters on “colorblindness.” It may not be the case that viewers deny the existence of race as a condition for injustice and the reproduction of group inequalities, white privilege, economic mobility, social access, and political power, but they are at least allowed to imagine themselves as existing outside those economies, with respect to the show itself.

The organization of the prison scandalizes us, as it does Piper upon arrival. When another inmate of color rejects her overtures of friendship, fellow white inmate, Lorna

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267 This is Henry Giroux’s understanding of well-intending racism.
Morello, tells her that she is safe among her kind, hands her a toothbrush and adds, “Don’t get all P.C. on me. It’s not racial; it’s tribal.”

Even as alliances form across racial and class divides, the show offers us highly stereotypical depictions of characters. Perhaps this is a nod to its roots in the hyperbolic women-in-prison genre, but it rarely allows us to imagine characters outside the racial/colonial, class, and gender scripts of US race liberalisms and the racial state.

Following Christina Blecher’s argument in “There is no Such Thing as a Post-racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on Orange is the New Black,” the show’s multiculturalist approach to diversity is actually “indicative” of its “inability and unwillingness to critique neoliberalism” that, while celebrating intersectional differences, does not dispel the mythologies of “neoliberal individualism and personal responsibility.”

She adds, “audiences are constantly reminded [that inmates] made poor choices leading to their incarceration.”

Piper makes this clear during the course of a conversation with her mother, who after insisting that Piper does not belong “among these women,” is informed by Piper that they “made similar mistakes” to her and that being incarcerated is “nobody’s fault but [their] own.”

Belcher’s observation is apt. Even when are given insight into the background of characters, the institutional context of failure is downplayed as personal or familial dramas are emphasized. To be sure, issues of the medically-managed gender reassignment protocol loom in the background of Sophia Burset’s fraud charge. Sophia, a

268 Orange is the New Black, “I Wasn’t Ready.”
269 Christina Belcher, “There is no Such Thing as a Post-racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on Orange is the New Black,” Television & New Media 17 (6), 2016: 494.
270 Belcher, 494.
Black trans* woman played by Cox, is in prison for defraying the costs of her hormone therapy by opening up lines of credit in the names of persons whose houses she administered to as a firefighter. Her presence on the show as an openly trans* woman does not serve to rescue her from the myriad ways that Black femininity is scapegoated by neoliberalist discourse; in fact, she is cast as a “welfare queen” of sorts. During the first season, funding for her hormone treatments is slashed when Litchfield faces state budget cuts. Her protest, that the denial of her hormones is a human rights violation, goes unheard and worse, is pathologized, particularly when the resident physician informs her that they cannot afford such “luxuries” anymore. In stating as much, he diminishes the significance of treatment that is critical as a personal choice that, extendedly, landed her a lengthy prison term in the first place.272

Worse, she is sent to SHU after defending herself from a brutal transphobic attack in which correctional officers failed to intervene. The attack was motivated by another inmate’s claim that she was “really a man” seeking more lax treatment than she would encounter in a men’s facility.273 The scene is a haunting reminder of the violences Black trans* women face both within and outside the prison and how, specifically, the carceral mediates Black trans-femininities. To be sure, nearly one in six trans* identifying people have been incarcerated, with 21% being trans* women. Among Black trans* people, nearly half have been incarcerated for alleged offenses that include self-defense. Black

272 For this background, see, especially, Orange is the New Black, “Lesbian Request Denied,” Directed by Jodie Foster, Written by Sian Heder, June 11, 2013.
trans* women have homicide rates that exceed national averages for any other racial group, even though they are rarely processed as hate crimes.274

The scene and subsequent storyline are an ostensible attempt on behalf of the show to address the ways that physical and juridical violence is integrated into Black trans* women’s lives. Indeed, after the incidence, Sophia is placed in solitary confinement “for her own safety.” This decision is not only part of the show’s drama but a reflection on the lacking standards for administering to trans* prisoners in both private and state-funded institutions. Speaking to this situation, Sarah Pemberton writes, “In the United States there is no comprehensive gender recognition statue, so policies regarding the sex/gender identity of transgender people differ between federal and state jurisdictions and between agencies within a given jurisdiction.” While policies based on gender self-identification are unusual they do exist, although “most prison authorities in the United States employ gender recognition policies based on birth sex” (13) or the requirement of genital reassignment surgery.

As Pemberton goes on, a genital-based placement policy is “likely to cause difficulties even among transgender people who have undertaken genital surgeries because it assumes binary categories of sex/gender that conflict with the experiences of many transgender people and ignores the possibility that people may have nonnormative genitals,” continuing, “Placement policies based on genitalia are also liable to invite harassment and invasive searches by prison staff seeking to categorized transgender people, which can facilitate sexual assault” (14). This assessment accurately encapsulates

Sophia’s experience and subsequent detention—reminding us that the celling of black bodies is, as Julia Sudbury notes, always already sexualized.275

Viewers are encouraged to see the decision to cordon off Sophia as the failure of the prison staff to provide adequate living conditions for her. Prison warden, Joe Caputo, offers her round-the-clock officer protection, but Sophia rejects the offer stating, “You’re going to surveil me?” before citing lack of proper officer training as the reason for her attack.276 Thanks, in part, to her wife, her assault receives national news coverage and demands for justice from prison abolitionists, but to no avail. In a subsequent scene, correctional officers descend on her bunk, announce the decision to remove her from the general population, and begrudgingly take her to SHU. In season four, she makes various attempts toward the reconsideration of her charge, including staging her own hunger strike as well as flooding her cell with toilet water. In a moment that reveals the dynamic of the show I ultimately critique, it is not until Sister Ingalls—a nun with a history of stolen glory—intervenes that she is allowed to return the group.

In another instance, Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett, an emblem of the poor white trash, is similarly held singularly accountable for her imprisonment while also bearing the scourges of a reactionary white nationalism. Doggett, whom author Piper Kerman describes as an “eminemette,” is scripted as a mentally unstable, recently evangelized, methamphetamine addict from rural Pennsylvania who, in a fit of rage, gunned down an abortion provider who had recently offered her care.277 While, by the third season, we are given insight into the life of Doggett, a young woman struggling for resources in a

276 *Orange is the New Black*, “Don’t Make me Come Back There.”
deindustrialized and economically depressed area of Appalachian Pennsylvania, we remember her most for her moral chauvinism, venomous racism, and physical outbursts toward Piper. Most notably, we recall her awful teeth—the frequent subject of online posts. Poor dental health is frequently associated with the white poor, and in this instance, naturalizes Doggett’s class status beyond economic abstraction: her lacking “fitness” is in her literal bone structure, such that so must be her proclivities toward the markedly “white trash” crimes of methamphetamine addiction, manufacturing, and possession.

Doggett’s is a whiteness that finds contrast in Piper’s WASPy-ness. But as Belcher observes, white nationalism and polite colorblindness are two sides a “neoliberal coin.” As viewers, we are primed to abhor Doggett’s ideological positions as representing a white national past from which well-intending and educated whites have evolved. Yet the educated whiteness Piper represents is a similarly problematic form that supplants racist avowals with post-racial disavowals that Belcher writes, “stress the importance of diverse representation and recognition while delegitimating anti-racisms that address material disparities attached to racialization in the twenty-first century.”

Even if we surmise Doggett’s inability to access a more enlightened raciality as the failure of rural education and financial structures that would help expose her to the difference she ultimately fears, we are nevertheless reminded that she is “really stupid” as unlikely confidant, and resident butch lesbian, Carrie “Big Boo” Black, frequently points out to her. In turn, Doggett’s crimes are posited as a matter of her inability to logically assess and productively respond to her socioeconomic situation.

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278 Belcher, “There is No Such Thing as a Post-racial Prison.”
279 Belcher, 2.
If structural factors are considered, blame is still configured as cultural/individual pathology. In particular, the show features rather damning portrayals of “unfit mothers” deemed incompetent, mean, and uncaring parents. Such figures are positioned as the “real reason” why Dayanara “Daya” Diaz and Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson are serving sentences. Daya’s mother, Aleida, also incarcerated at Litchfield, is dramatized as a monstrous mother who displaces parental responsibilities for her many children onto her daughter. Through a flashback, we are shown how Aleida, threatened by Daya’s positive experience at a “fresh air” camp, shames her daughter for “talking big” and cajoles her into abandoning her dreams to one day become a great illustrator. In this instance, we are shown that Daya’s success could very well have been possible, if only through continued participation in charity camps with her mother’s moral support.280

Although such programs can be rewarding, urban initiative projects for children are often articulated as making a critical intervention in the cycles of crime that plague poor urban communities of color and to which their parents are beholden. They exist within an American cultural tradition of removing at-risk children from their ancestral homes as a process of cultural imperialism—the most egregious historical example being the Indian School Initiative. Through arts, crafts, and social hygenics, it is assumed that Daya could overcome the hopelessness of her urban upbringing and break with the cycle of poverty and underachievement her mother perpetuates. Notably absent, of course, is a commentary on housing and zoning codes or other such systematic abuses that may cause Aleida to be suspicious of others and overly-protective of her daughter. Instead, we are shown that to merely have goals—however unrealistic—is desirable because it encodes motivation. The elusive promise of future gain is often how we reconcile the erosive

280 See, especially, “Don’t Make me Come Back There”
tendencies of life under late capitalism. Aleida’s recommendations for Daya thwart her from accepting the cruel optimism that is so central to national belonging. Thus we learn to dislike Aleida for her perhaps astute observation about the failure of US nationalism.

When Daya becomes pregnant by Correction Officer Bennett, her mother offers her unsound advice, even attempting to sell Daya’s unborn child to the mother of another correction officer, who was wrongfully assigned parentage. This ostensibly gutless action was done in the name of securing a future for Daya’s child that might finally break the aforementioned cycle. And for this, our partial sympathies return. When Children and Social Services ultimately take custody of the child, it is up to Aleida to fight for her return upon her release, at which point Aleida’s own maternal transgressions will be redeemed. But, overall, Aleida remains an unlikable character because of how she mothers. The vilification of Aleida’s misguided actions are extremely racialized as she is portrayed as not only acting out of self-interest but sexual interest—putting herself and her children in danger in order to sustain a relationship with her drug dealing boyfriend, Cesar.

Although character, Yvonne “Vee” Parker, is not a biological mother to Tastyee, she assumes a maternal role in her life, offering a then orphaned Tastyee sanctuary in exchange for working in her heroin ring. Vee is framed as a phallic mother, lacking the virtues of traditional maternalism and seeking to avenge her precarious claim to power by lording over a group of vulnerable youth. She is especially maligned when claiming that her surrogate son, RJ, was killed as a result of racial profiling—that the police officer who shot and killed him mistook him for an armed gunman. Late into the second season, we learn that Vee had arranged for his murder after RJ’s new selling operation
encroached on her territory. In this instance, some of the most frequent and indisputable evidence of state-sponsored racialized killing is attributable to the villainy of one, also structurally precarious, Black woman.\textsuperscript{281}

Vee makes similarly manipulative advances toward other Black inmates once she herself is incarcerated at Litchfield. She even dazzles them with her sharp and pointed critiques of prison racial hierarchy, noting the unfair entitlements white prisoners enjoy. But, she does so in the service of securing their allegiance and, importantly, participation in her prison drug trade. Again, the important, legitimate critiques of the prison industrial complex she ventriloquizes are rendered easily rehearsed, errant lines from a liberal playbook aimed to secure compliance. Eventually, Vee goes head-to-head in a maternal showdown with white matriarch, Galina “Red” Reznikov.\textsuperscript{282} Although being cast in similarly phallic ways, Red is understood to be acting in “her girls’ best interests.” She constantly berates her girls for poor behavior and has a zero tolerance drug policy, despite justifying overseeing the trafficking in of black market goods. An emblem of the “tough love” approach ascribed to the neoliberal state with respect to the management of minorities, Red emerges the only force strong enough to conquer Vee but fails. In an extremely unrealistic plot development, Vee escapes only to be run down by inmate Rosa in a stolen prison van. While visually pleasing, one cannot help but note the rather impersonal nature of Vee’s death, and the fact that she literally becomes road kill. If we

\textsuperscript{282} Orange is the New Black, “40 Oz. of Furlough,” Directed by S. J. Clarkson, Written by Lauren Morelli, Netflix June 6, 2014.
think about the significance of the road to the American cultural imaginary, then we have just witnessed Vee being effaced from the national discourse.\textsuperscript{283}

Thus worrisomely, these portrayals do not dismantle but rather perpetuate the mythology that prisons function to weed out the criminal among us, something Michelle Alexander describes as alibiing the white supremacist foundations of the prison industrial complex. When we relate to Vee or Aleida as “criminals,” we no longer feel compelled to perform a more nuanced critique:

In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.\textsuperscript{284}

As Alexander makes clear, it is this displacement of the social context that engenders our complicity with the dehumanization of prisoners:

Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America—we have merely redesigned it.\textsuperscript{285}

For the thoughtful viewer, Alexander’s words feel foreign. Yet, as Angela Davis writes, the media representations of prisons and prisoners as bad people works subconsciously.\textsuperscript{286} The show may allow for us to have sympathies for the gentle Flaca or the misguided Marisol, whose transgressions contain a lot less social critique, but we are

\textsuperscript{283} Orange is the New Black, “We Have Manners. We’re Polite,” Directed by Constantine Makris, Written by Jenji Kohan, Netflix June 6, 2014.
\textsuperscript{285} Alexander, 2.
\textsuperscript{286} See Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? (New York: Seven Stories Press), 2003.
not fully permitted to empathize with Aleida or Vee for reasons we cannot articulate outside neoliberalist frames of value.

While the show may make important observations about some of the institutional injustices that occur within the prison itself—which I will go on to elaborate—it nevertheless makes incarceration as well as recidivism a matter of poor personal choices and pathology. But where I would push the critique Belcher provides is on its understanding of neoliberalism.

Certainly, the emancipated citizen neoliberalism idealizes see personal action as the result of willful and agentic decisions. “Good” choices are those that are productive and profitable while “bad” choices are those to which gainful return cannot be applied. But ideals of productivity, profitability, and importantly, fitness—making “healthy” choices of body and mind—are also crafted to write persons of color outside civil society and national discourse. It is curious that this narrative should ground a show that alleged to have committed itself to making an intervention in how prison and prisoners are represented. Perhaps, as Kohan admits, it is because she is, at the end of the day, providing corporate-driven entertainment.

“Activism is the New Black”: The Show as Commentary on The Color of Institutional Failure

The number of cast members and consultants involved in social justice initiatives is impressive. Jenji Kohan has vowed to produce better representations of prisoners on television, while Piper Kerman is a board member of the Women’s Prison Alliance. The cast members frequently speak out against racial/sexual and gender injustices outside the entertainment world and, recently, collectively petitioned Donald Trump’s presidency.287

Crucially, Laverne Cox has used her celebrity to advocate for the acknowledgement and adjudication of trans* hate crimes. Cox was part of a legal and cultural initiative to support Cece McDonald through her trial and conviction. McDonald was famously arrested on charges of manslaughter after unintentionally stabbing the man who was physically assaulting her for being black and transgender. Elsewhere, she has pushed for the acknowledgement of how cisbeauty standards dictate the successes of trans* women, even calling for Caitlyn Jenner to cop to her class and cisfeminine privilege.  

These examples indicate a socially conscious cast that might also thoughtfully contribute to the show’s content, or at least in part—especially as it is a homage to the aforementioned “women-in-prison” filmic tradition. “Women-in-prison” is a genre that originated in exploitation cinema. Although many such films contain highly objectifying representations of women’s bodies, they are also noticed for their rare commitment to critiques of institutional injustice and taking a politically realistic approach to transracial/transnational relationships between women. In a similar vein, actresses who defined the genre, such as Pam Grier, were involved in Black empowerment efforts and continue to work for LGBTQ initiatives. Much like *OITNB*, women-in-prison cinema can be an equivocating viewing experience that caches social progressivism in unrealistic, and at times, excessively sexually exploitative plot lines. But it is nevertheless borrowing from a genre primed for precisely the kind of critique, or “activism,” Kohan intends.

The prison industrial complex is, as I mention above, an institutional failure unto itself as well as one that is linked to the management of related crises by various other

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288 See “‘Black Bodies are Under Attack’: Freed Activist CeCe McDonald, Actress Laverne Cox Speak Out,” *Democracy Now!* February 19, 2014. [https://www.democracynow.org/2014/2/19/black_trans_bodies_are_under_attack](https://www.democracynow.org/2014/2/19/black_trans_bodies_are_under_attack), (Accessed August 21, 2015).
statist and imperialist entities. As remarkably central as the prison is to the organization of modern life, there is little mainstream cultural knowledge about it, remarks Angela Davis. The United States incarcerates more people than any other statistically comparable nation. As a result of the “tough on crime” era on the 1980s and “the war on drugs,” the United States has seen a rapid increase in the number of incarcerated individuals, from around 41,000 in the 1981 to nearly half a million in 2014.\(^{289}\) As Davis makes clear, the vast majority of celled individuals were convicted on non-violent offenses. With harsher sentencing laws and mandatory minimums in place, people are going to prison for periods of time that are radically incongruent with the crimes they committed.\(^{290}\)

Moreover, because prisons are being radically defunded as well as deregulated and privatized, there is little oversight to ensure standards of living. There, is, however, a considerable amount of behavioral surveillance—likely given the profitability of extending sentences, a point to which I will return momentarily. Mass incarceration statistics are shocking as a whole and, when aggregated, reveal the implicit racial bias of the criminal justice system. According to the Sentencing Project, people of color constitute 37% of the US population but 67% of the prison population. African Americans are more likely than whites to be arrested, and once arrested, face a greater probability of being convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to face harsher sentences. Recidivism rates are high, as there is little by way of services for post-release but a bevy of state and federal laws prohibiting persons with priors from ever again achieving personhood status—from voting rights to housing eligibility. To put it concretely, “Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and


\(^{290}\) Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?
Hispanic men are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated as non-Hispanic white men.”

This is why Michelle Alexander calls the US prison system “the new Jim Crow,” and it is not these contemporary circumstances alone that disturb her. The function of the prison has been to cleave those deemed socially undesirable from the proper citizens of a nation-state. Michel Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* explains that normative society has always organized itself around a criminal element, particularly as that element could become a disciplinary tool of the state for managing populations. According to Foucault, the spectacle of punishment has taken many forms, beginning with the scaffold. But at the dawn of the modern era and with the rise of an enlightened humanism, public spectacles of punishment gave way to the formalization of the prison—a site where persons could be cordoned off and rehabilitated. However, the softer treatment of prisoners concealed a key fact: that the disciplinary regimes implemented for prisoners to gain compliance were also highly effective forms of docility that could be practiced outside the prison and in other institutional spaces.

The looming specter of the carceral pervaded Western cultures through everything from civility codes to personal hygiene rituals to the organization of the school day. But as Alexander importantly notes, the greatest feat of the carceral society was its ability to readily disappear Black bodies from the social text. Police forces emerged to enforce the rule of law under chattel slavery and continued to uphold the mandates of Jim Crow. More significantly, she argues, the rhetoric of “law and order” that is still commonly used

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today (most recently as a campaign promise of presidential candidate, Donald Trump), was first mobilized to foment white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement. By labeling tactics of civil disobedience as criminal, conservatives were able to malign an entire movement as “lawbreakers.” The nature of criminal justice has not significantly changed, as populations of color are still disproportionately targeted. But, as Alexander observes, the conditions of neoliberalism have altered the functionality of prisons.

Neoliberalism creates social problems that its grounding philosophy of economic liberalism cannot resolve. As Davis notes:

Globalization of capitalism has precipitated the decline of the welfare state in industrialized countries, such as the U.S. and Britain, and has brought about structural adjustment in the countries of the southern region. As social programs in the U.S. have been drastically curtailed, imprisonment has simultaneously become the most self-evident response to many of the social problems previously addressed by institutions such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children. In other words, in the era of the disestablishment of social programs that have historically served poor communities, and at a time when affirmative action programs are being dismantled and resources for education and health are declining, imprisonment functions as the default solution.

When tax dollars are cut from already unideal welfare programs and funnel them into corporate coffers while also slashing taxes from the highest earning entities, people will suffer. And although neoliberal ideologies of subjectivity personalize socioeconomic failure as a matter of failed entrepreneurialism, the vast number of populations negatively impacted by such policies is too numerous so as to justify that illogic. According to Davis, the prison became a place to hold bodies scripted out of neoliberalism, writing “prisons don’t disappear problems; they disappear people” who bear the symbolic markings of the problem. In the contemporary prison, incarcerated individuals are not


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permitted time to “reflect” as was protocol under rehabilitative models, but are conscripted into unfree labor.  

Prison labor has its roots in slavery and convict leasing programs, the iterations of which persisted well into the 1970s. Today, conscripted labor is one of the compelling logics behind mass incarceration, as scores of corporations have moved production from zones overseas to domestic prisons. These corporations view prisoners through the same racial/colonial and gendered ideologies in which they frame the migrant or trade zone worker—as having adapted a low standard of living and a pliable sense of self that can be filled out by ideologies of gendered/racialized labor. Notable companies, such as IBM, Boeing, Microsoft, AT&T, Macy’s and Target rely on prison labor. And even when prison labor does not prove to be lucrative, the practice of putting prisoners to work upholds the neoliberal ideology that that everyone must work. By making work part of punishment, it is also assumed that prisoners were not productive in that capacity prior to incarceration.

Because prisons are now seen as for-profit institutions, with a large and “recyclable” population, programming for education and funds for health care have diminished. As they become increasingly privatized, regulations ease, and the treatment of prisoners and even the concept of punishment can change radically state to state. Making matters worse, the unincarcerated communities surrounding prisons remain

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largely complicit, as prisons themselves are, in theory, key revenue-generating and job-providing resources amidst struggling rural economies.

These realities are very intersectional as well. The historical and contemporary antagonisms of LGBTQ populations and the police state is well documented, and statistically, women constitute the largest growing population of incarcerated individuals, with as many as 1.2 million persisting under the criminal justice system. African American women make up the largest incarcerated population. Yet, as Eric Stanley observes in “Fugitive Flesh,” the prison is still largely imagined as cis and male. More specifically, gender and sexuality are themselves “captures” or “arrestments,” he writes, that have their own policing logic born out of the kinds of critique Foucault made and that are mentioned above. Women and gender minorities are produced as different kinds of carceral subjects that also work and suffer the consequences of a failing system.296

OITNB dramatizes many of the prison industrial complex’s institutional failures, across personal and collective scales. When we first encounter Litchfield, it is a struggling federal prison whose budgets are being slashed and where conditions for inmates as well as officers are anything but ideal. Looming in the background is the imminent threat of closure; it is ultimately determined that losing out to a government contracted firm is preferable, and the prison becomes a private entity in the third season. The private takeover radically changes the dynamics of the show. Prices in commissary rise as labor is no longer limited to prison maintenance but the production of goods—namely panties for Victoria’s Secret stand-in “Whispers”—for outside corporations. Prison overcrowding occurs under surmounting pressures to maintain full occupancy.

Prior to the prison’s privatization, conditions at Litchfield fared little better. Under the original regime, inmates succumbed to drug overdoses and predatory officers, such as Healy, devised ill-conceived and compulsory programming with little oversight. Moreover, prisoners were laboring under the tutelage of untrained guards whose incompetency and self-serving ways put them in critical danger. This incompetency bled over into other avenues, namely lacking knowledge as to how to care for populations with special needs or diffuse tenuous situations. Somehow, conditions worsen when Litchfield is bought out.

Under a private system, taxpayer money goes to correction companies who profit from sanctioned mistreatment. If companies hire inmates, they can receive kickbacks on their taxes; moreover, if they pay them under a $1, they can secure precious contracts that often go overseas. Getting rid of something as essential as a free money transfer system is also impactful. For-profit money transfer systems that feature high fees stand to gain as much as 50% or more on prisoner transactions. Beyond these economic conditions, there is no regulation as to who can manage or serve as an officer, and costs are devoted to filling rooms rather than providing for existing inmates. This is reflected in the show.297

Basic needs are not met at Litchfield, including everything from nutritious food to feminine care. Most unfortunately, the already sub-standard of health significantly decreases, exposing many neglected inmates to even greater vulnerability. Indeed, it is during the latest season that prison transfer, Lolly Whitehill, is sent away to a psychiatric ward when her schizophrenic condition is allowed to escalate, punishing her for the failure of a system to devote critical funds to mental health therapies. In another example,

297 Benns, “American Slavery, Revisited.”
Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren meets a similar fate. Suzanee is cared for mostly by fellow Black inmates who fear that administrative awareness of her neuro-divergence and non-normative social behaviors could expose her to further abuses. When Suzanne attacks and near fatally wounds her former girlfriend—at the behest of officers who pay to see the fight—she is sent to a psychiatric ward, and we are led to believe that her already lengthy sentence will be extended. Historically, the US has used detention—whether prisons or poorly-run wards—for the management of disability. Although considered inhumane by many, the intersection of criminality and mental illness normalizes such approaches, with the “criminally insane” posited as some of the most incorrigible offenders on the books.

Other traumas are left similarly unaddressed by a prison structure that counts bodies but not lives. In the fourth season, Daya and Maria Ruiz both struggle with the loss of parental rights. As mentioned above, Daya’s daughter is placed in state care. Given her 35 month sentence, it is unlikely that she will ever see her daughter before grade school, let alone have an opportunity to raise her. At the same time, there is no space for her to process this grief, and she is expected to report back to kitchen duty upon returning from the hospital. Elsewhere, Maria’s husband grows restless with the length of her prison term and concerned about their daughter’s awareness of her mother’s conditions. Much to the shock and horror of Maria, he discontinues visits. This

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precipitates a lot of the strife between Piper and Maria, who is problematically portrayed as seeing an outlet for her rage in targeting Piper’s prison panty scheme.\footnote{Orange is the New Black, “It Sounded Nicer in my Head,” Directed by Mark A. Burley, Written by Nick Jones, Netflix June 17, 2016.}

And this is where the show again departs from its potentially radical critique. Angered by the demand that they sew panties for a company whose product they cannot afford to purchase, Piper masterminds a scheme to sell “prison panties,” lightly soiled drawers, to online costumers. The popularity of her business gives her a false sense of superiority, but after acting aggressively toward Latina inmates, she is met with resistance. Maria organizes the Afro/Latina contingent to overtake Piper’s industry. Her actions, spliced with flashbacks to memories of her father’s reign as a Dominican gang leader, instruct viewers that hers is a personal vendetta against the men in her life that is taking social justice contours. The interiority of her rage appears just as selfish and misguided as Piper’s attempts to become entrepreneurial. The structural conditions of institutional failure provide a backdrop to these dramas, but the tensions themselves have a more individuating causality that I believe is because the show is fundamentally structured by a white-normative ethico-politics.

The Spectacle of Black Death: The Murder of Poussey Washington

Amidst these escalating tensions, season four’s drama is somewhat slow and retrospective. Thus it came as something of a shock when at the close of the season finale, character favorite, Poussey Washington, is killed by a guard during a prison riot. While many viewers expressed grief, others noted the death as par for the course in a season broadly described as “trauma porn.” To be sure, the season gave viewers rare and indulgent insight into some of the more enigmatic characters of show, satisfying prurient curiosities about the reasons as to why inmates, such as Suzanne, Blanca, and Maria were
incarcerated. Further, the depiction of sexualized violence increased, as Maritza is forced to eat a fetal mouse to the pleasure of Office Humphrey, Doggett openly processes her sexual assault, and newly appointed Head Correctional Officer, Piscatella, wields a patriarchal authority over the inmates, which includes increased and invasive strip searches.

But in particular, critics note the ways that the season makes a flimsy and ultimately exploitative attempt to address Black Lives Matters through a white gaze. In a show that has, as I have argued throughout, made themes of racialized/gendered suffering accessible to white-normative expectations, this season is especially egregious. In particular, it reads as Piper’s attempt at making amends for her questionable actions around the panty business in the season prior. In an exchange with Alex during season three, Piper is asked to confront her complicity with the systems of white supremacy that structure the prison itself. Alex cautions Piper from acting harshly toward the women of color working for her, saying, “These girls have nothing.” It is a rather presumptuous critique made to elicit white guilt, but it does not even faze Piper.

When Maria threatens to organize against her, Piper makes the mistake of soliciting protection from a thuggish group of new transferred white supremacists. Maria ultimately ousts Piper and in retribution, burns a swastika into her arm. Piper is horrified but, mostly, embarrassed. Her fellow—non-Klan associated—white inmates help her burn the swastika into the shape of a square. Although Piper observes that it looks like nothing, I cannot help but see the multicultural joining of hands embossed on her skin. Thus in a testament to many of the post-racial multiculturalist foundations of the show,

Piper absolves her guilt through a symbolic gesture that depoliticizes difference. As Piper sheds (white) tears of gratitude and relief, she makes the confrontation with racialized sexism—evidenced by Maria’s rage—a struggle for the people who benefit most from it.

These narratives of white struggle are produced elsewhere as well. Although the glimpses into officers’ backgrounds are rarer, we are given insight into one of the most abominable figures of white cis/heterosexism the show has ever produced. Officer Healy first made his bigotry known during the first episode when he warned Piper, whom he presumed to be an ally, about the deplorable lesbians of Litchfield. At the time, we are able to assess his misogyny as being due, in part, to his failing marriage. His need for feminine legitimation finds temporary outlets in his paternalistic relationship with Doggett, pseudo-therapeutic services to Brook, and his friendship with Red. But his attempts to play savoir are often met with coercive expectations that reveal his nefarious intentions and alienate those who attempted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

This season, we are given an additional context to consider. In a rather Freudian turn of events, we learn that Healy suffers maternal abandonment. Through flashbacks, we watch as a devoted son’s affections are rebuked by his mentally ill mother. Although he makes it his life’s pursuit to find her after losing touch, his efforts are felled—namely by the lacking records mid-century asylums kept for psychiatric patients. Yet having a context for understanding this man’s abuses suggests that there is a reason for white

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Orange is the New Black, “Friends in Low Places,” Directed by Phil Abraham, Written by Alex Regnery & Hartley Voss, Netflix June 17, 2016.
supremacist heteropatriarchy; worse, in asking us to sympathize, it alibis power as something to which no one has accountability.\textsuperscript{303}

In fact, the entire season could be encapsulated as one of white revelation and minoritized pain, especially as additional white characters who have committed egregious offenses toward inmates of various racial, class, and sexual marginalities are similarly redeemed. To be sure, Officer Luschek, who has facilitated much of the prison drug trade and will frequently betray inmates to save his job, is on the receiving end of unsolicited sexual advances from an older inmate. Presumably, we are to see his “true” humanity reflected in his emotionally complex responses.\textsuperscript{304} Prison Warden, Caputo, who frequently turns his back on both inmates and staff, is shown to have serious reservations about his decision to privatize the prison. He himself struggles with a wounded masculinity, as his promising music career was foiled by a bad relationship that forced him to accept work as a guard decades prior. By the season’s close, he is siding more with inmates and even taking advice from Taystee, whom he hires as his private secretary. As a result, viewers are instructed to externalize power to a no-place beyond Litchfield.

This is a convenient move, as the season closes with the fall-out of an inmate-led riot against the new administration. Fed up with mistreatment, Blanca Flores stages what is, at the time, a one-woman hunger strike. Standing atop a cafeteria table—as she was instructed by Piscatella—Blanca refuses food and water for days on end.\textsuperscript{305} Inspired by


\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Orange is the New Black}, “People Persons.”

\textsuperscript{305} \textit{Orange is the New Black}, “Turn Table Turn,” Directed by Constantine Makris, Written by Sara Hess, Netflix June 17, 2016.
her actions, other inmates engage in forms of peaceful resistance to the anger of the correctional staff. Demonstrating not solidarity but perhaps something more akin to stolen glory, Piper joins Blanca on the table. Other prisoners follow suit, and the guards respond with excessive force.

During the skirmish, and seemingly out of nowhere, Poussey is accosted by the inexperienced Officer Bayley, whose unnecessary chokehold ends her life. In a disturbing turn of events, the cafeteria is evacuated and Poussey’s body is left on the floor (clearly a reference to Michael Brown) but not before cameras close in on the anguished cries of Taystee, kneeling over her friend’s corpse. The death is quick, brutal, and seemingly comes out of nowhere. In fact, this season had been so dominated by other—namely white—dramas that Poussey’s death could not serve as anything more than supplement to the broader narrative being constructed.  

And that is precisely my claim: Poussey’s death becomes an expression of white sympathies toward Black pain and suffering that are ultimately about absolving accountabilities for white supremacy and, worse, making white-witnessing necessary to critiques thereof. For the violence of the riot truly escalated when Piper took to the table in a moment of global sisterhood. No longer the enemy in that moment, Piper becomes the Norma Rae of Litchfield. This is visually sedimented through a camera angle that shifts its focus from Blanca to Piper, while maintaining a faded outline of Blanca in the background. Piper’s participation legitimates what was once perceived as the disorganized action as an emotionally volatile Latina woman. The fact that others follow her lead presumes that white feminism must be the thing to countenance the political

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306 *Orange is the New Black*, “Toast Can’t Never be Bread Again,” Directed by Adam Bernstein, Written by Tara Herrmann and Jenji Kohan, Netflix June 17, 2016.
actions of women of color. Piper’s actions precipitate Poussey’s death but also mark it as noble and as part of a broader feminist critique. The recruitment of women of color to white feminist cause is very historical, and the objective is almost always to prove the necessity of white women’s narratives.

In turn, Poussey is offered up as a martyred example of the white feminist burden: saving (brown and black) women from themselves. The selection of Poussey as victim is also interesting. Poussey’s blackness is often underplayed by her middle class educated status and history of dating white women. She often acts as a white surrogate to her friends, admonishing behaviors that she perceives as dangerous to their image and, in turn, chances at release. When her friends question her persistent desire for white women, Poussey places blame on them for more or less espousing a “reverse racist” logic. Although Poussey is imprisoned on a marijuana charge, the relationship between Blackness and criminality is complicated. As the child of a world-traveling military serviceman, her drug use and sales are recreational—part of a (mostly white) party scene. In a series of flashbacks that immediately precede her death scene, we are also shown that she is a free spirit excited about her new life in New York. Because she satisfies for us many white-normative expectations (going to college, moving to the big city), she becomes a more grievable victim—especially as mourning is, as Judith Butler argues, based in social value systems.307

Officer Bayley adds another layer of white innocencing that functions in the broader discourse of Black Lives Matter. In the episodes preceding his offense, Bayley is portrayed as a “good kid” making the most out of living in a deindustrialized town.308 His

307 Butler, Precarious Life.
308 Orange is the New Black, “The Animals.”
honesty and sexual innocence is especially pronounced, making him something of an exception of the other officers at Litchfield… and also those who escape trial for the murders of Black persons in America. It is even shown that he is unaware of the level of force he uses against Poussey but, before explaining this and expressing his apologies to her friends, he is intercepted by Piper who tells him to go home. As he gazes out the car window, clearly wracked with guilt and remorse, another officer tells him “it’s not your fault.”

His eyes well with tears, and a flashback plays to a moment in the past when he unknowingly brushed against Poussey, exchanging smiles, on a busy New York street.

From this we glean that Bayley’s actions were not motivated by his own privilege but rather alibied by others’ white supremacy. The “racing of his innocence” is clear; he did not act out of state-sanctioned aggression but because he was not properly trained as an officer—and moreover, that his role as a correctional officer is far due to the failed achievements of a “boy adrift.”

The fact that he actually had non-state-mediated positive physical contact with Poussey years prior in America’s “melting pot” also indicates his anti-racism while also positing both persons in a universalist framework where culpabilities are shared. In fact, we are led to see this and all other Black deaths as unfortunate misunderstandings that are retroactively coded as racist. Rather than engage in serious cultural dialogue about the structures of symbolic colonization that teach us to dehumanize minoritized subjects, and in particular women and gender minorities of color, we are instead led to believe that these matters are resolvable once we become acquainted with one another.

309 Orange is the New Black, “The Animals.”
The exchange between Piper and Bayley is especially telling of the ways Black death becomes a ground for the articulation of white narrative authority. As Piper stops Bayley in the hallway, she cautions him from apologizing to the other inmates, stating that “these women are grieving.” In nominating herself as the interpreter of Black emotions and, moreover, the arbiter of the situation itself, Piper scripts herself into a drama that does not concern her. Emerging the rational voice of reason, and the only entity stable enough to curtail more violence, she becomes the trusted authority on how viewers themselves should respond. As she sighs and watches Bayley leave, her emotions overtake her. It is unclear as to whether she too grieves for Poussey or mourns the ways the prison population cannot adhere to the universality she idealizes—sisters bonded together in struggle. The lesson learned here is that racial/sexual disparities are the tragic result of personal misgivings that white enlightenment can overcome.

*You’ve Got Time: What to do with OITNB?*

Sarah Artt and Anne Schwan claim in their introductory piece to the specially curated journal on the show, “Screening Women’s Imprisonment: Agency and Exploitation in *Orange is the New Black,*” that critique of the show falls into two categories: analyses that see the importance of its work despite its limitations verses those that remain at a loss to see its redeeming virtues. I do not believe that this moralizing assessment accurately captures the nature of my critique. I claim that the show is neither “good” nor “bad” but rather that it is a narrative that exists within a fraught discursive context that merits our critical attentions.

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312 Orange is the New Black, “Toast Can’t Never be Bread.”
313 See Sarah Artt and Anne Schwan, “Screening Women’s Imprisonment: Agency and Exploitation in *Orange is the New Black,*” *Television & New Media* 17, no. 6 (2016): 467-72.
As many bloggers question, however, does this mean that we continue to watch despite its problems or do we protest the representational problematics I elaborated throughout by refusing to give the show views and, in turn, decrease its ratings? This question may also be asked of The Walking Dead, where the sanctifying of whiteness is arguably more egregious. I would respond that remaining engaged is important but that viewing habits should ultimately be an exercise in self-care.

As many bloggers of color made clear, they felt completely let down by the latest season, particularly for the ways it appropriated and diminished in significance the political activity of Black Lives Matter. Moreover, for a show that proclaims its commitment to social justice politics and, especially in narrating the betrayals of institutionality, the viewing experiences it provides are hardly edifying. I would echo that the series has the unique opportunity to present relevant critiques of the ways that institutions dole out a disproportionate amount of violence on feminized bodies of color. But instead, institutional betrayal is about a white woman’s confrontation with the limits of the (neoliberal) multiculturalism she believed would make prison a shared experience among similarly struggling human beings.

This sense of betrayal extends to viewers as well, as we are meant to feel—deeply and affectively—the ways that prison staff and the culture outside Litchfield perpetuate issues of injustice within the prison. Moreover, we are to feel bamboozled by the realization that prisons do not rehabilitate but rather exploit. The entire experience of watching the series is garnering the sympathetic attentions of a receptive, though less than critically aware, audience—namely those who do not have prison experience. For
those who study the prison and/or have spent time behind bars, the show creates more cloudiness than nuance around the realities and function of the prison.

But as media scholars, Rachel Silverman and Emily Ryalls, suggest, there is something about the experience of watching a full-season in one sitting that can produce the critical consciousness that informed my own writing. They offer up “marathon viewing” as a critical mode of media engagement, writing:

Marathon viewing not only eliminates the stigma of consuming mass amounts of television but also offers a new and productive method of feminist critical analysis, one informed by and reliant on the convergence of today’s mediascape. Marathon viewing allows scholars to make deep connections between multiple texts, to connect patterns of importance, to consider media’s reproduction of power, and to intervene for the purpose of creating social and cultural change.  

Speaking to the blogging culture that exists around these shows, the authors continue, “The process of collaborative writing is encouraged and permitted by marathon viewing. While watching and writing, we [become] resources for each other; as a form of feminist critique, one aimed at interventionist strategies, we interject our voices through the process of analysis.” I am enlivened by the notion that my habits of consumption could be deeply political choices, but I must question the basis on which this assumption rests. In order to access this show, we must not only have the funds but also the time and energy. And given the content, it is unclear as to whether hours-long viewing sessions will awaken or dull our critical attentions.

Instead, I will conclude by stating that *OITNB* is one among many covert discourses of racialized/sexualized erasure in contexts of institutional failure and, most disappointingly, in the most explicitly racist institutional site: the prison. My decision to

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315 Silverman and Ryalls, 520.
write about it was not because it offered considerable critical purchase but rather because of its relationship to the things I was already critiquing. But true to my methodology of offering symptomatic readings across a range of texts, I believe it does give us a strong indication as to what white progressive audiences are consuming—for pleasure or for armchair activism. And given its emphasis, I must be critical of the ways that it perpetuates, rather than nuances, a totalizing narrative of liberal democracy gone awry.
Coda: Rethinking the Narrative Approaches of the Left

As I was in the process of finishing this dissertation, Republican Presidential Nominee, Donald Trump, won the 2016 Election by appealing to the disgruntled white precariat I did not engage. I stepped away from this project for an entire week as a result. Yes; I was busy offering care to my devastated students, but I was also deeply ashamed of the work I had nearly completed. What did it mean to critique left intellectualism in a moment when the state of discourse had reached a crushing low? How could I argue against the analytics of precarity, fragility, and injury through which so many social realities are narrated as problematic, when the country had just elected its first explicitly and unapologetically racist, xenophobic, hetero/cis/sexist, and ablelist president?

My distress deepened as I realized that the win for Trump galvanized a series of shocking attacks on people of color and other Others in the country. Reports filed in daily recounting incidents of Trump-inspired reactionism that revealed how stunning the wounded attachments are of “iconic citizens.” A white man screamed “Trump” in a coffee shop while berating baristas of color for taking too long to make his drink. Elsewhere, a white woman citing race discrimination verbally attacked two Black employees—whom she referred to as “animals”—at a craft store in Chicago. Most recently, a white man announced, while on board a Delta flight, “Donald Trump is the president of every damn last one of you. I know there are some Hilary bitches on here.” In one incredibly disturbing account, a white man hurled racial slurs at a Black man after a traffic dispute, adding that Donald Trump will make America Great Again by purging it of African Americans whom he alleges fail even in their servility to white men.316

316 Information variously collected from posts made to Facebook.
It seemed the election tore off the Band-Aid of post-racial multiculturalism and that US conservative types were taking any opportunity to cash in on their privilege. My own Facebook page was attacked as an acquaintance of mine criticized me for dispelling a “victims revolt” mindset to “our nation’s youth” in response to the following post that was intended to encourage thoughtful forms of response:

I am gutted. But I do have the (some?) words. Throughout the course of the day, I will pull it together and face 130 students who have spent the better part of the semester theorizing hegemony and looking toward this election to at least mitigate some of the violences that the Trump campaign represents. I will face 130 beautiful souls, many of whom are people of color, queer and trans folks of color, neuro-divergent, differently abled, unstatused, of refugee status, of low SES, and have been variously targeted by the hateful rhetoric and genocidal logic that secured this election for him. I don’t draw false equivalences among these positionalities but name them in an effort to point out that this post-election moment demands that America have a very self-reflexive pause: it is structured by a “white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy” (bell hooks). And many of us have become anesthetized to the instances of human devaluation that structure creates.

My whole of me wants to hide under my bed. But today, I will use my institutional legitimacy and relative privileges as a white, able-bodied/minded, cisgender, middle class woman to do something. Following Dylan Rodriguez, I believe that for all the ways that the imperial university wounds, it is also a context for intervention (see “In Excess of a Problematic”). Today, I will detour a bit and hold space for my students to process their concerns, their anger, their pain, and their plans for the revolution. They may not have a place in Trump’s America. But this is their classroom.

If I am able to give them any comfort, it will be to mention that this moment also reveals a “constitutive anxiety” at the heart of power… the tacit realization that the unearned privileges awarded to the beneficiaries of the US nation-state have been artificially imputed by a system that shores up and consolidates the normative authority of whiteness, cismasculinity, heterosexuality, ability, capital, etc., through the subjugation of people of color, of women and gender minorities, of LGBTQ populations, of differently able bodied-minded individuals, of the poor, and the disenfranchised. The claim to power is flimsy, and this election was decided by people who fear their own obsolescence. The vote for Trump was not a vote against Hillary; it was a vote against those who have been deselected from the nation and marked for social death. But those whose who believe that they won last night have not ultimately prevailed. For they have instead incited us to create social justice. “Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle from where we are standing.” – Audre Lorde
To add insult, this person questioned the decision of my university to award me a degree as well as my fitness as an educator before unfriending me, despite the post not having been directed nor imagined for him. The kind of backlash this person displayed is echoed even in presidential action, as in the weeks after the election, Trump campaign advisors denounced anti-Trump protests as “democratic operatives” and Trump himself began nominating alt-right ideologues to critical national offices so as to guarantee near total bankrupting of an already diminished public good. How could I argue for nuance in a moment that seemed so rigidly divisive?

Then, in the wake these incidents, something interesting happened that reminded me of how crucially the left needs to commit to strong intersectionality. As many remained shocked and traumatized by the results of the election, the domestic warfare against the Standing Rock Dakota Sioux increased. NoDAPL is an indigenous-led movement resisting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, a government-contracted natural gas initiative that not only threatens environmental sustainability but indigenous land sovereignty. Through the use of eminent domain, the state has granted easement for a private corporation, Energy Transfer Partners, L.P., to construct an underground pipeline that could effectively change the health/life outcomes of the Dakota community by contaminating their only drinking water supply. Indigenous activists are often clear in their efforts that this proposal is about the colonial logic from which the application of eminent domain distends and the presumption that indigenous lives do not matter as much as commodities.

Native activist, Winona LaDuke importantly frames NoDAPL as an institutional failure that takes advantage of indigenous precarity. As she explains in a recent interview,
the DAPL deal was signed in a radically different economic landscape when national oil production was growing and drilling companies were doing well. That is no longer the condition; production levels are plateauing, and the cost of oil is rapidly lowering. The economic motivation of Energy Transfer Partners to persist in the construction of another pipeline is thus somewhat illogical. Nevertheless, she notes, the push is about securing existing oil contracts. The Dakota Access Pipeline is, therefore, a fix to the Bakken oil bust that presumes the disposability of indigenous lives.317

The level of aggression from the US Army Corps of Engineers and police indicate the strong social antipathies behind the state-sponsored response, much of which goes unnoticed by the public due to faulty or totally lacking reporting. But the near media blackout of the protest was radically altered when water protector, Sophia Wilansky, was severely injured after sustaining a gunshot wound to the arm from a concussion grenade.

Her injuries, while grave and no doubt the result of an intentional, and moreover, illegal, assault intended to dismantle the protest through fear tactics, have received considerable attention in the press. Her injuries are met with allegations of human rights violation and calls for money and solidarity. I cannot help but ponder if this is yet another instance of white injury framing the state-sponsored brutalization of racialized bodies. And, moreover, if the Wilansky moment will be what makes the NoDAPL a matter worthy of mainstream commenting and value ascription. Finally, I am curious as to how the reaction to Wilansky’s injury, itself an overwriting, is also used to index post-Trump hostilities toward social justice liberalism as a whole.

Wilansky’s “GoFundMe” page boasts an undoubtedly impressive resume of social justice activism and allyship. As friend, Michael Basillas writes, “Sophia and I share passion addressing social justice, vigilance, and resistance, and understanding this world is unsuitable and required drastic change.” He additionally notes her involvement with other initiatives, including The Base, NYC Shut It Down, and HOODS4JUSTICE. Yet a certain white feminist fragility frames this narrative. Wilansky is described as being generously committed to causes without explicit personal investment. The self-sacrificial mode of white feminist activism often exalts the stakes and context of its labors. It is noted that during the incident that led to her arm being nearly severed, she was running bottled water to protestors. This is a point that more mainstream media outlets emphasize, implying that Wilansky was there to help not to be disruptive (compared to whom?) and willfully offered her body for the lives of others. The savior or martyr-for-a-cause is a very common trope of white femininity, intended to make white women’s lives necessary to racial progress. Our decision to see her as the archetypal victim of police violence is reflected not only in her high media visibility but also in the amount of money her account has raised to defray the cost of her medical bills, reaching $418,191 of her $500k goal.

Meanwhile, the physical aggressions against Native activists are rarely personified. An interesting counterpoint to Wilansky exists in Native activist, Red Fawn. Red Fawn was accused of firing a gun at a police officer after being tackled to the ground and beaten during similarly non-violent action. She is currently incarcerated and being denied her commissary money as well as her glasses, without which she is unable to see.

319 Ibid.
comfortably. While reporting of the case exists, it is anemic at best. On Generosity.com, her family asks only for $100,000 for legal bills and has, thus far, made about 24% of that goal.\textsuperscript{320} Although such a number is in keeping with the funds generated for these kinds of initiatives, it is markedly disproportionate to Wilansky’s financial support, given how key economics are to the measure and expression of human value.

There seems to be an implicit commentary here on how the momentary bodily violation of a class privileged white woman is of greater significance than the illegal incarceration of an indigenous woman. Is this because we have normalized the criminality of indigenous folks in this country? To be sure, the incarcerated Native population has increased by 27%, with Natives composing 60% of the federal caseload. The injustice and, moreover, inhumane treatment of an activist is clear in Red Fawn’s case. But perhaps because Wilansky serves as a better “referent-we,” or whom we mean when we say “human” and “human rights,” she is emerging the legitimate victim of Standing Rock.

In lieu of impassioned news reports, Red Fawn’s sister, Red Dawn, emphasizes the conduct of Red Fawn in the moment as non-violent, noting the family’s ties to peaceful environmental sustainability efforts. I cannot help but ponder how much she is working against the tide of discourse that pathologizes indigeneity—as a population that suffers from mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and lacking self-care.\textsuperscript{321} I am immediately reminded here of Lisa Cacho’s essay and final chapter of \textit{Social Death}, “Racialized Hauntings of the Devalued Dead.” There, Cacho remarks that the presumed-illegality and criminality of persons of color in America is so great that the violences

\textsuperscript{320} See \url{https://www.generosity.com/fundraising/free-red-fawn}.
\textsuperscript{321} See \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbt66m5PN6Q}. 
perpetrated against them—even resulting in fatality—are rarely acknowledged as crimes in and of themselves. To gain recognition of their dead, Cacho argues, communities of color must attempt to reconcile their departed to white-normative/neoliberal ideals of productivity, emancipation, and entrepreneurship... the very systems of valuation devised to script them out of civil society and national discourse. Before Red Fawn may be understood as a political criminal, she must first be positioned within the categories of humanism to which she ultimately serves as constitutive exclusion.322

The media representation of Wilansky does depart from many of the conventions of a white feminine victimology. Typically, the violated white female form is visually sacrosanct in cases such as these. But part of framing Wilansky as a movement icon was showing graphic images of her wounds and offering up such fleshy descriptions as “Most of the muscle tissue between Sophia’s left elbow and wrist as well as two major arteries were completely destroyed […] and doctors pulled shrapnel out of the wound.”323 These details are likely given to provide an accurately visceral description of the brutal force used against her. But, given the broader white savior narrative in which they circulate, they seem to reference another kind of fleshiness.

Black feminist theorist, Hortense Spillers, names “flesh” the capture at which Blackness is produced as Other. Spiller writes against the grain of feminist theories that have offered up the body as an optic through which to glean gendered violence, noting

322 As another interesting point of comparison, Cacho contrasts the local media coverage of her cousin’s death to that of an upwardly mobile white youth. While the circumstances of their passing are quite similar, the white youth is given a full biography, her cousin is barely named, except as a supposed member of a gang. As I detailed above, a similar narrative silence exists around Red Dawn which I hardly believe is because her plight is unknown; that ignorance is willful.
that black corporeality is precluded from human-qua-bodily status. The body to which privileged femininities are confined, she writes, accrues discursive meaning; it has a location in culture. By contrast, flesh has things done to it; it has not a location but a use-value and often times finds itself objectified by human genres of western imperialism. By this measure, Wilansky’s body cannot be “flesh” in this or any instance; yet, the fleshiness of her portrayal seems to create a symbolic link that yolks white injury to histories of racialized violence. Queer scholar and legal activist, Dean Spade, describes the simultaneous reference to and erasure of raced bodies through white analogy as part of fundamental “anti-blackness” that often pervades left politics.

I do not create this comparative framework to deal in false equivalences or to advocate that Red Fawn should be symbolically martyred for the cause instead of Wilansky. Instead, I am curious as to why Sophia Wilansky becomes the narrative point of identification through which white liberal fears and sympathies about an aggressive government are channeled. In the wake of her hospitalization, Wilansky’s father, Wayne, gave an interview to Democracy Now! He lionized his daughter’s cause, stating, “This is the wound of someone who's a warrior, who was sent to fight in a war […] . It's not supposed to be a war. She's peacefully trying to get people to not destroy the water supply. And they're trying to kill her.” The insistence that Sophia Wilansky was in “war” or national struggle against what her friend and GoFundMe curator, Basillas, calls “the black snake” takes on the valence of a “clash of civilizations” that pits two white Americas against one another. This reduction is also analogic and offers up an indigenous struggle against colonial force as grounds for the articulation of other national dramas,

324 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”
325 See “Father…”, Democracy Now!
specifically the recent election results. To be sure, journalist Kate Aronoff writes, “Standing Rock has for months been a frontline in the fights for indigenous sovereignty against reckless extraction […] It may also now be the frontline of Trump’s America.”

It is highly likely that Trump’s win enabled a surge of aggression toward myriad persons deemed antithetical to his campaign’s national vision. And it is probable that police response is linked to the ways that police violence is rarely adjudicated, particularly in these matters. But it is only possible to assign such social and political importance to Wilansky and, moreover, to uphold her injuries as archetypical, because she is seen as a universal subject and does not require us to think more complexly about the intersections of power, privilege, and difference. The fact that the media and certain activist cultures are reading her as the metaphor of the Standing Rock moment means that the call to demand better narratives from the left has never been more imperative.

The post-Trump moment has left many of us reeling, but during this time of stress, it is important to remain critical. Throughout this dissertation project, I have warned against the tendency to aggregate the various instances of human devaluation that result from institutional failures into broad rubrics that create sense and order out of life. This, I argue, is a process of colonizing difference. These logics do not serve our purposes, and worse, they occult the terms on which we are able to name and assess the ways in which the more contemporary circumstances of institutional failure have roots in the systematic oppression of communities of color. In particular, when white-normative prerogatives determine how we view and frame failure, we end up reproducing power.

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I look at leftist, or at least nominally liberal, sites in order to show the pervasiveness of narrative normativity. I do not feel as if this takes something away from how the current political situation in America demands collaborative response from the left. In turn, I follow Danielle Bouchard’s argument that political freedom rests in difference, or more specifically, disagreement. In her book cited throughout the second chapter of this project, *A Community of Disagreement: Feminism in the Academy*, Bouchard advocates for what she calls “a politics of disagreement.” By this she means the production of scholarship that does not seek to consolidate social realities under broad rubrics or political objectives but to appreciate them for their disparate and confounding nature.\(^{327}\) It is outside the scope and objectives of this project to offer up specific alternatives but it is within the range of this critique to suggest that, going forward, we proceed from the conviction that all lives do not matter, nor can they be easily reconciled to privileged human genres, that bar us from more precisely examining how injustices occur.

I conclude on a much different note than where I began this writing. In the week and a half following the election, comedian Dave Chappelle, hosted the popular late night comedy show, *Saturday Night Live*. In a skit pithily entitled, “Election Night,” a character played by Chappelle joins a group of white liberal friends who gradually unravel as election results roll in. Throughout, he remains collected and even while portending Trump’s victory, knowingly cites the “racism as usual” he has come to expect of America. Meanwhile, the white characters in the skit are stunned and rehearse every form of plausible deniability that subtends many of the left’s normative complicities. For

example, when Kentucky goes red, a character played by Beck Bennett, shouts, “yeah! Because that’s where all the racists are!” Dave Chappelle’s character laughs aloud in response.328

Chappelle is soon joined by fellow comedian, Chris Rock, who immediately takes note of the pall hanging over the room. As someone exclaims, “Donald Trump is going to win the election,” His character retorts, “Yeah. Are you surprised?” As the room moves from shock to sadness to anger, there is a hopefulness that various communities of color will “come through” to save the vote. Rock and Chappelle exchange glances before pointing out that the real betrayal of this election came from other white people—namely women.

As the night nears dawn, a character played by Cecily Strong, stumbles upon the realization that, “Oh my god, I think America might be racist.” Again, Rock and Chappelle feign surprise, with Chappelle noting, “I think my great-grandfather might have said something about that once.” When the election is called for Trump, various grievances are aired, including Strong’s announcement, “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be a woman in this country? You just can’t get ahead no matter what you do.” Mockingly, Chappelle and Rock attempt to fathom a response. But the statement truly encapsulating the spirit of the skit is when Bennett’s character proclaims, “This is the most shameful thing America has ever done!” Chappelle and Rock merely laugh with no additional comment.

I reference the skit here because I believe that in a rare yet brilliant five minutes of comedy produced by a show with a flimsy claim to social progressivism, encapsulated

so many of the themes of this dissertation—the urgency of the present moment, the recruitment of race to the objectives of white-normative critique, and the persistence of other temporalities of geographies of struggle that are not named. The position of take by Chappelle and Rock is not indifference; they express concerns as well. But their laughter is born out of social endurance—of witnessing other iterations of US nationalism that are similarly violent but have not merited white-normative response. In many ways, I too felt that the election of Donald Trump was a “shameful” embracement of the logics that I am committed to decolonizing. But rather than ascribe my own white liberal anxieties, I advocate a different kind of critique. This moment tempts us to make universal appeals to a common good. But if we remind ourselves of the real objectives of feminist critique—to end domination—then we must remain grounded in nuance and careful of our critical registers.
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