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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERAL DENIAL AND GENRE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AND WORLD ANGLOPHONE NOVELS 1

The Beginnings of an Ideology with "No National Purpose" 1

An Ideology in Denial 5

Genre under Neoliberalism 12

Overview of Chapters 14

1. POLITICAL NO MORE: EPISTOLARIES BY J.M. COETZEE AND PAUL AUSTER 18

1.1 Introduction 18

1.2 Private, Public, and Dialogics in the Epistolary 22

1.3 Unlearning Apartheid Ideology in *Age of Iron* 26

1.4 Learning Ethical Understanding 34

1.5 Commitment to Witnessing as Resistance in *In the Country of Last Things* 38

1.6 Mass Culture and Cynicism 44

1.7 Crafting Dialogue and Solicitude 47

1.8 Conclusion 53

2. ANTI-SOCIAL MATURITY: *BILDUNGSROMANS* BY JUNOT DÍAZ AND DONNA TARTT 57

2.1 Introduction 57

2.2 Anti-Social Maturity in the *Bildungsroman* 61

2.3 Individual Choice, Domination, and Isolation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 65

2.4 From Socialized to Anti-Social *Bildung* 70

2.5 *Bildung* as Striving in Isolation 77

2.6 Unsettling Individualism in *The Goldfinch* 83

2.7 *Bildung* as Managing Risk 89

2.8 Conclusion 95

3. OTHER THAN ASSIMILATION: IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE AND ATTICUS LISH 99

3.1 Introduction 99

3.2 Non-Assimilationist Immigrant Narratives 104

3.3 Self-Interested Immigration in *Americanah* 109

3.4 Assimilation in "Exclusive Democracy" 115

3.5 Non-Assimilation as Success 120
3.6 Alienation and Accountability in *Preparation for the Next Life* 126
3.7 Risk and Shared Responsibility 134
3.8 Conclusion 140

CODA: THE NARRATIVE OF MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM AS A GLOBAL WAY OF LIFE 144
A Genre That Responds to Social Instability 146
The Story of Market Fundamentalism 148
Solidarity as Resistance 153

BIBLIOGRAPHY 159

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, "The Denial of Neoliberalism: Genre in Contemporary American and World Anglophone Novels," I examine narratives, which demonstrate conflicts within the laissez-faire ideology. Neoliberalism presents itself as an ideology of entrepreneurial individuals who find human connection through the deregulated, global market, but genre changes show that this self-representation is tenuous. The distinction between public and private is central to the epistolary novel, but an erosion of that distinction reveals a transition from political to post-political society, as well as a contradiction between a devotion to social market relations and an assertion of radical individualism. The maturation of adolescents into national subjects is disrupted in the neoliberal *Bildungsroman*, revealing another conflict: neoliberalism dismisses sociality, but participates in a collective consciousness guided by self-interest. The immigration narrative is no longer driven by assimilation but entrepreneurial success, yet, even if neoliberalism expands transnational networks, it renders migration and integration issues of national law, outlawing those whose mobility is determined by global capital. Questions central to this dissertation include: How does neoliberalism represent itself and ignore what it actually enacts, and how do novels engage critically with neoliberalism while articulating alternatives? In its contribution to Literary and Cultural Studies, this project discusses works by J.M. Coetzee, Paul Auster, Junot Díaz, Donna Tartt, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Atticus Lish. These novels reveal what I term "neoliberal denial"—an ideology in denial of the anti-social conditions it produces. The narratives find resistance through acts of solicitude, commitment, and accountability—or practices of solidarity—which neoliberalism so readily denies.

INTRODUCTION: NEOLIBERAL DENIAL AND GENRE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AND WORLD ANGLOPHONE NOVELS

> In a much quoted passage in his inaugural address, President Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.' It is a striking sign of the temper of our times that the controversy about this passage centered on its origin and not on its content. Neither half of the statement expresses a relation between the citizen and his government that is worthy of the ideals of free men in a free society. The paternalistic 'what your country can do for you' implies that government is the patron, the citizen the ward, a view that is at odds with the free man's belief in his own responsibility for his own destiny. The organismic, 'what you can do for your country' implies that government is the master or the deity, the citizen, the servant or the votary. To the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above them. He is proud of a common heritage and loyal to common traditions. But he regards government as a means, an instrumentality, neither a grantor of favors and gifts, nor a master or god to be blindly worshipped and served. He recognizes no national goal except as it is the consensus of the goals that the citizens severally serve. He recognizes no national purpose except as it is the consensus of the purposes for which the citizens severally strive. (Friedman 1-2)

The Beginnings of an Ideology with "No National Purpose"

Milton Friedman begins *Capitalism and Freedom*, first published in 1962, with a statement of indignation against President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. The core passage of the address, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," is a succinct invocation of social solidarity in the nation. However, Friedman asserts that the statement is in disagreement with the ideal of "free men in a free society," which he implies is a more American formulation. He considers President Kennedy's request that citizens put their responsibility to society before their responsibility to themselves an encroachment on self-interest. In his eyes, self-interest is integral to fulfilling every citizen's individual liberty—"the free man's belief in his own

responsibility for his own destiny"—which must come before social commitment. Similarly, Friedman finds the call to endorse government offensive to the individual's entitlement to self-regulation that is, in his view, integral to American national identity. To Friedman, the government is "an instrumentality" in realizing individual agency, and the country a "collection of individuals," who are "proud" of their cultural heritage and traditions, but share no "national purpose," other than their investment in self-interest.

At the heart of the philosophy Friedman describes is a neoclassical-economic interpretation of Adam Smith's late-eighteenth-century magnum opus, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith's often-quoted metaphor of the invisible hand conveys the basic assumption that a self-interested action in the free market that leads to personal profit also produces a collective benefit, because the individual contributes to the strength of society through capital (Grampp 443). Smith assumes that the free market is a system in which unregulated competition and exchanges between private individuals and enterprises determine prices and create positive equilibrium. It is a mechanism whose purpose in society is that it *necessarily* leads to social good. That is, the traditional notion of the invisible hand harnesses self-interest for social utility but in Friedman's scenario, what individuals have in common is a fervent devotion to an absolute individualism, and a confidence in the capacity of the free market to coordinate human connection, even with "no national goal," or no social purpose.

Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises were among the economists, philosophers, and historians, who first outlined the political-economic philosophy Friedman describes. They met to address the decline of the "position of the individual" under "extensions of arbitrary power," which they deemed a danger to civilization, in

Mont Pelerin, Switzerland, in 1947, and became the founding members of the Mont Pelerin Society ("Statement"). The Society considered the "decline of belief in private property and the competitive market" equally threatening to society ("Statement"). They pledged no alliance with political parties or propaganda, and advocated for laissez-faire economics to reform postwar sociopolitical life, for they perceived movements and policies of social democracy and centralized planning as forms of collectivism and regimentation akin to Nazism and Stalinism. To be sure, in *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek argues that socialism "has persuaded liberal-minded people to submit once more to that regimentation of economic life which they had overthrown because, in the words of Adam Smith, it puts governments in a position where 'to support themselves they are obliged to be oppressive and tyrannical'" (84). Hayek's work and the Society's concerns articulate a conception of government as a threat to personal freedom, private property, and the unrestricted market.

When the Mont Pelerin Society was founded in 1947, it had under fifty members ("Statement"), and did not attract much attention for nearly two decades. The society's principles of safeguarding individual liberty and the deregulation of the market garnered some interest from the Chicago School economists, amongst them Friedman and Gary S. Becker, in the 1960s and early 1970s. Still, their ideas remained marginal until the economic crises of the mid-1970s, when the popularity of the principles of Keynesian, demand-side economics that promote government intervention and high taxation to support full employment and stable prices began to crumble. Friedman writes in the preface to the 1982 edition of *Capitalism and Freedom* that

> only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying

> around. That I believe is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (xiv)

Indeed, to many, the free-market idealism promoted by the Mont Pelerin Society, Friedman, and other Chicago School economists was the inevitable option at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, for it was nothing like Keynesianism.

The philosophy has since moved from the fringes of economic thinking to the center, a shift which coincides approximately with the Cold War's rise and dissolution. Famously, the philosophy was adopted by Augusto Pinochet, Margaret Thatcher, Deng Xiaoping, and Ronald Reagan, as they rose to power in the years 1978-1980, and liberated their respective economies. Their support of the philosophy may have derived from the appeal of what social scientists, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom, had characterized in 1953, as "rational social activity" centered on the logic of the "process of economizing" (22), to replace the socialist and capitalist extremes that had failed to institute stability in the aftermath of World War II. When the U.S. rivalry with the countervailing force of the Soviet Union ended in 1989, the "Washington Consensus" emerged ("Washington"). The consensus indicates a set of supply-side economic policies and practices, including deregulation, competitiveness, tax reform, liberalization of trade, and privatization or outsourcing of public services. The principles were applied by Washington-based financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to liberate crisis-ridden economies ("Washington"), and the Washington Consensus became emblematic of the strongly economics-based approaches to governance globally. Like the names Thatcher

and Reagan, the Washington Consensus is thought synonymous with the philosophy that has been commonly called neoliberalism since the early 1990s.[1]

An Ideology in Denial

By reading its ideology against contemporary American and World Anglophone novelistic accounts this dissertation will demonstrate contradictions at the heart of neoliberalism. For one, though it assumes the essential social phenomena of market relations at its core, neoliberalism is an assertion of radical individualism. Another discrepancy is that even if neoliberal ideology denies sociality in subject formation, it participates in a type of collective consciousness, or collective individualism, if you like. Lastly, though neoliberalism supports the expansion of transnational networks over nationalism, it leaves policies regarding transnational mobility and social integration to national law, creating undue obstacles for and criminalizing those whose migration is motivated by global capital. In the following chapters, by engaging critically with these contradictions in neoliberalism's representation of itself, my purpose is to demonstrate that neoliberalism is an ideology in denial of what it actually enacts.

I pair texts by American authors with those of World Anglophone writers based on their genre—specifically, the epistolary, *Bildungsroman*, and immigrant narrative—and work out readings of each book by virtue of the resonance between it and its partner. In terms of periodization, the works range from the late 1980s to the present, and represent distinct but related ways in which neoliberalism attacks sociopolitical life, disrupts subject formation, and renders social integration a dysfunctional goal. My

[1] Though the term "neoliberalism" was first used as early as 1898 to connote a "hedonistic world, that realm of pure political economy," its contemporary signification of specific laissez-faire processes and policies—"privatization, deregulation, competitiveness, social-spending cutbacks and deficit reduction"—has been common since 1992 ("Neo-liberalism, n").

purpose is also to trace how the selected narratives are attuned to the kind of social solidarity that Friedman denounces (suggesting that it is un-American) in the epigraph of this introduction. The value of comparativism to this project is that it helps to discern how World Anglophone writers relate their notions of subjectivity and social responsibility to the hegemonic position of American culture and economics worldwide. As a result of putting the novels in conversation with one another, it is possible to see how they assert the communitarian values of solicitude, commitment, and accountability through other than self-interested interactions. Under neoliberalism, one of the privileges is to not have to care about facts or decisions concerning others, but solicitude emphasizes the kind of care for others that can evoke trust between different social segments. Commitment in the neoliberal context might mean the devotion to protecting one's self-interest, but the novels in this study speak of dedicating oneself to a person, people, or to doing one thing well as a means of intellectual, emotional, or social grounding. The general definition of accountability is responsibility, and in economic terms, it means an entrepreneur's or organization's obligation to bookkeeping in a transparent manner. Neoliberalism regularly shuns responsibility when the free market fails, and blames individuals for poor choices and investments instead. The selected novels show that accountability must be shared to address collective problems.

My understanding of how neoliberalism attacks sociopolitical life (though it is seemingly founded in social market relations) is informed by David Harvey's examination in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey holds that neoliberalism equates human wellbeing with individual agency and entrepreneurial skills that can bring success in the free market. Because neoliberalism defines the competition of the

free market "an ethic in itself," it suggests that market exchanges can guide all human interactions (3). Thus, "social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" (3). Because neoliberal states have committed to competition over market power before committing to equalizing social justice, neoliberalism has introduced competition and consumer transactions as the preferred modes of human relationships.

Far from undoing the state, neoliberalism has also rendered the operations of the state more invasive. In countries where neoliberal policies have been actively applied, a ruling body between wealthy politicians together with selected multinational corporations has emerged. Together, they promote economic rights as civil rights, altering our sense of political and moral integrity.[2] The ideological tendency to reduce civil rights to economic rights makes itself manifest in policy choices that preserve the wealth of the few. In theory, neoliberals presume no asymmetries "with the capacity of individuals to make rational economic decisions in their own interests" (68). However, policies adjacent to the even playing field of the free market favor the already wealthy and their power in society, for instance, by reducing taxation on income from investments, while maintaining a tax on wages and salaries (16).[3] Thus, the supposedly

[2] In fact, Lizabeth Cohen posits that consumerism started to become a form of public and political participation immediately after World War II. In *A Consumer's Republic*, Cohen studies the period between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s, and proposes that a new national ideal of the "*purchaser as citizen*" emerged during this time (8). The reasoning was that the self-interest of the consumer would serve the national interest of Cold War containment, and that mass consumption and the ensuing rise in employment could afford every American an equal standard of decent living.

[3] Harvey notes that because most policy decisions are *choices* and not inevitabilities, alternatives are possible. For instance, he points out that the UN Charter includes "derivative rights," such as the freedoms of expression and education, the right to healthcare, food security, as well as organization of unions, which help to protect social security, and challenge the normalization of neoliberal ethics (182). Harvey suggests that prioritizing these rights, and making the currently primary rights of liberty and property derivative is a choice, which could lead to social and political-economic reform.

social and equalizing market relations are more of an assertion of individualism and division between social strata in practice.

Indeed, in its current configuration, neoliberalism could be defined as a divisive ideology, because together with the reduction of social spending, its appeal to individual desires and prejudices has also intensified the insecurity already present in communities marginalized based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, failing social integration. Or as David Theo Goldberg puts it, "the contemporary slogan of neoliberalism might as well be: The state looks after your interests by encouraging you to choose to lock yourself in (to gated communities) while it locks up the undesirable (in prisons) or locks out the externally threatening (by way of immigration restrictions)" (335). Goldberg's contrast of gated communities and state policing to bolster the gates is a figure of denial, especially when being on the good side of the gates enables one to forget about those who are deemed "undesirable" or "threatening," and pretend that the world stops inside the walls. Neoliberalism imagines sociality through our mutual participation in free-market competition, but it also imposes on us a theory of human subjectivity that atomizes us.

My sense of how neoliberalism conditions subjects of self-interest is informed by Michel Foucault's examination of the figure of *homo æconomicus* in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Referring to the intense individualism of neoliberalism, Foucault notes that *homo æconomicus* "is not at all a partner of exchange" (226). Rather, *homo æconomicus* is "an entrepreneur of himself" (226). He is "someone who pursues his own interest, and whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others. From the point of view of a theory of government, *homo æconomicus* is the person who

must be let alone" (270). In addition to the self-interest and autonomy of the *homo æconomicus*, Foucault proposes that because every neoliberal individual "must *laisser-faire*; he is the subject or object of *laissez-faire*" (270). This is to say that when submitting to neoliberal ideology, the individual expects *to be left alone*, but also *must leave other things be*. This principle of leaving all things or individuals to themselves expresses itself as indifference regarding issues beyond self-interest. It is because of this dynamic of the ideology that the *homo æconomicus* "appears precisely as someone manageable" or "someone who is eminently governable" (270). In other words, subjects of self-interest become manageable, because through their steadfast focus on individual agency they do exactly what the ideology states: they leave things be, including the political and economic state of affairs, and in doing so, are less likely to challenge the status quo. Foucault's argument is that the very devotion to individualism that is supposed to make subjects of self-interest free of the pressures of governance and collective life, as per the Chicago School formulation championed by Friedman, also makes them act like a collective.

The Chicago School economists' relation to the Chile regime of the 1970s offers a strong historical example of the way in which neoliberal ideology is used to form collective consciousness. Naomi Klein remarks that the "Chile Project . . . saw one hundred Chilean students pursue advanced degrees at the University of Chicago between 1957 and 1970, their tuition and expenses paid for by U.S. tax payers and U.S. foundations" (73). When those students, or "los Chicago Boys" (75), returned to Chile, they helped the military government implement laissez-faire operations to liberate the country's economy. The example of the Chile Project implies an alliance between the

ruling class and academic economists to anchor the national sensibility to self-interest. Even if neoliberal ideology generally disavows forms of subjectivity akin to collective consciousness, it participates in a form of collective individualism. This contradiction signals that though collective individualism may be the collective consciousness of our time, it is a positive recourse to social life for very few.

My understanding of how neoliberalism contradicts its objective to expand transnational networks by leaving the social integration of the transnationally mobile to national law is informed by Lisa Lowe's argument in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Though Lowe writes specifically of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in America, many of her observations of the combined impact of global capitalism and national law affect immigrants from other parts of the world as well. Lowe explains that since the 1970s, structural changes in the economy, such as countries moving their manufacturing abroad "to make use of low-wage labor markets," have generated a "demand for immigrants to fill minimum-wage, unskilled, and part-time jobs" (15). That is, global capitalism systematically produces low-wage jobs that primarily attract third-world workers to enter countries, such as the United States, as undocumented immigrants. However, regardless of the demand, many nation-states will not admit that the "economy systematically produces jobs that only third world workers find attractive," and will not wield their force to improve working conditions or ease the process to legalize status (21). This discrepancy between transnational demand and national immigration law perpetuates "a racially segmented" workforce (22), tiered according to level of skill and a person's origin, for global capital's needs while eliding the needs of the individual.

Lowe notes that the most profound "*contradictions*" of immigration to the United States involve the fact that immigrants are welcomed to participate and contribute to the nation's wealth and strength through labor and economic investment, but at the same time, they are labeled as outsiders—and even enemies—through racial and cultural markers (8; original emphasis). What Lowe describes demonstrates how neoliberal ideology engenders alienation through the discrepancy between its investment in global migration and utilizing national law. It is my contention that this and the other contradictions that the novels in this study evince show how the self-representation of neoliberalism as an ideology of devoted individualism that fosters human connection through the deregulated, global market is questionable. It is a cover story that ignores the disruptions on sociopolitical life, subject formation, and social integration that the ideology actually causes. Neoliberalism remains in denial of the fact that most people increasingly have no choice but to take their chances alone without access to institutions of social life.

In individual psychology, the notion of denial could be regarded as a defense mechanism through which a person rejects empirical facts or responsibilities, because acknowledging them is too uncomfortable. However, I employ the concept in a sociological context, because neoliberal denial exhibits more widespread denialism, which presents itself as a disavowal of a verifiable reality or the existence of a majority opinion. As a defense mechanism in the sociological context, denial has the purpose of suppressing majority dissent. The self-perpetuating aspect of neoliberalism—that it sustains itself through crises to which it presents itself as the only solution, as Friedman

had proposed—indicates that the ideology is in denial of the fact that it does not serve the majority.

Genre under Neoliberalism

In *Genre: The New Critical Idiom*, John Frow explores how genres "contribute to the social structuring of meaning" (1). As sets of conventions, genres are employed in sorting and classifying texts into groups, but genres also respond to and are informed by social institutions and their histories. In relating to the social, temporal, and cultural coordinates of texts, genres "generate and shape the knowledge of the world" (2). Because of the historical and social circumstances that affect generic knowledges, genres also reflect the use of social, cultural, political, and economic power in society. By mobilizing a particular genre in a text, an author appeals to the reader's grasp of a particular generic knowledge, and through that knowledge, seeks to shape the reader's understanding of the text's social setting. In this sense, I understand genre as a part of literary analysis in the tradition of Fredric Jameson, who treats narratives as "socially symbolic act[s]" (1827). In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson examines texts through their "political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time"; how they reflect the "sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes"; and history "conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production" (1827). That is, in addition to examining texts in relation to their immediate contexts, Jameson argues that the dynamic between different social strata, as well as political and economic histories inform a text's meaning allegorically.

In their introduction to the special issue of *Social Text* on neoliberalism, titled "Genres of Neoliberalism," Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins write that genre is an apt category for analyzing "nonhegemonic and transnational accounts" of neoliberalism, because it traces historical, textual, and social activities that neoliberalism tends to oversimplify and render in simply political-economic terms (3). Genre analysis can expose the ways in which neoliberalism is self-perpetuating, for it presents itself "as the only alternative to cataclysms that it itself creates" (7). Jameson's strategy of analysis is valuable here, because interpretation through the "concentric frameworks" he outlines will help to explore the "political unconscious" of a text (1827), or the sociopolitical conflicts of our time. This is to say that reading narratives as socially symbolic acts through genre analysis can help to show that the manner by which neoliberalism sustains itself through radical individualism is at odds with the values and practices of solicitude, commitment, and accountability the narratives in this study also enact. The selected authors address the problems adjacent to neoliberalism in their narratives to open access points for more egalitarian cultural identifications and nonhegemonic subject positions that are not solely defined by self-interest.

Analysis of the epistolary, *Bildungsroman*, and immigrant-narrative genres helps to identify shifts in social behavior and perspectives on ideology in the period from the 1980s to the present. The premise of the epistolary is founded in the letter-writer's intention of making private thoughts public—or at least known to the specific addressee (while we, the external readers, are observing)—through the letter. Thus, the conventions of the epistolary involve the classic distinction between the private and public spheres. The expectation of the genre is not fulfilled, because the neoliberal

epistolary does not reflect the divide between private and public; though it supposedly prizes individualism, neoliberalism does not sustain the sociopolitical conditions necessary for privacy. The *Bildungsroman* genre traditionally traces the maturation of adolescents into national subjects. That is, the attainment of a mature social role is the conventional culmination of narrative development in the *Bildungsroman*, but that expectation is not fulfilled in the neoliberal *Bildungsroman*, because the anti-social climate of neoliberalism disrupts development. In the immigration novel, assimilation is the convention that functions to resolve the characters' stories, but neoliberal subjects are not driven by assimilation as their objective. Instead, the defining experience the more recent immigrant narratives convey is that of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the demands of global capital. The ruptures in the conventions of each genre make manifest the contradictions of neoliberalism that affect characters in the narratives, bringing to the fore the sociopolitical conflicts of our time that undermine social sustainability. The ruptures convey that neoliberalism exists in denial of its unsustainability.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1. Political No More: Epistolaries by J.M. Coetzee and Paul Auster

I begin this chapter with an outline of Gary Becker's *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* and *Human Capital*, in which he claims that investing in the self, and maximizing the individual capacity to consume, determine an individual's sense of belonging and political life in society. I will read these claims against J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*. The repressive racist system in Coetzee's narrative differs from the system of governance ceded to economic

rule that Auster illustrates. When examined in conjunction, Coetzee's anti-apartheid novel and Auster's anti-neoliberalism narrative allow us to contemplate the transition from political to post-political society. This transition is also evident through the narratives' epistolary form, a connective thread between the works, which has gone unrecognized by many scholars. Coetzee conveys the process of unlearning the apartheid ideology through his protagonist's letter to her daughter, who resides in America. With references to Michael Warner's work, my purpose is to show that the distinction between a traditional epistolary and a neoliberal one is the tension between the private and public that Coetzee's protagonist negotiates in her letter, and which is mostly absent from the letter in Auster's novel. The letter of Auster's protagonist does not communicate her identity formation in relation to political divides, because in the post-political climate of neoliberalism, the distinction between public and private does not inform subjectivity to the same extent as self-regulation does. The expectation of liberation from under the rule of apartheid is implied in Coetzee through the references to the more democratic social life of the daughter in America, but Auster's portrayal of neoliberal America conveys cut-throat competition between entrepreneurial individuals. The letters in the novels attempt to resist endemic hostility, and convey solicitude through what Derek Attridge has described as the ethical understanding of the other.

Chapter 2. Anti-Social Maturity: *Bildungsromans* by Junot Díaz and Donna Tartt

To begin the second chapter, I detail how Milton Friedman argues that the neoliberal ideal is a free market of ideas. The market enables the circulation of diverse views and cultural concepts without limitations or pressure, liberating individuals from restrictive forms of collective life. Deregulation, Friedman insists, will create more

equitable conditions. Insofar as neoliberalism prompts young citizens to think of themselves not as sociocultural subjects, but as subjects of self-interest, then, *Bildung*, too, is subject to deregulated choice. I examine Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt in relation to Friedman's premise. Putting the novels in conversation with one another demonstrates that the more traditional statecraft in Díaz's depiction of the Dominican Republic defines maturity through social rules which guide personal development. In contrast, in his portrayal of neoliberal America, which is also the setting of Tartt's novel, the anti-social development of self-interest is regarded as maturity. I suggest that Díaz's narrative contemplates *Bildung* that does not result in a mature social role, but in isolation. Tartt's novel makes manifest the intricate ways in which neoliberal power dominates identity formation through the mechanism of choice based on private interests that are conceived necessarily without regard for others' interests. With references to the notions of neoliberal personhood by Michel Foucault, Richard Sennett, and Jane Elliott, I argue that the *Bildung* of Díaz's and Tartt's protagonists shows that when there is no purpose beyond self-interest to motivate the individual, neoliberalism offers loneliness and immaturity. The implication is that disinterested commitment to one's community, as Sennett suggests, would offer the grounding for more sustaining life narratives.

Chapter 3. Other than Assimilation: Immigrant Narratives by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Atticus Lish

I begin this chapter with a description of Gary Becker's 2010 proposal that by selling the right to immigrate, governments could abolish traditional immigration restrictions. Immigration would be available to all, but an entry fee would moderate

immigration, because the dedication to invest would separate committed and skilled individuals from those who might burden the host country. With Becker's argument in mind, I analyze Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Atticus Lish's novel *Preparation for the Next Life*. The novels convey that assimilation, which could be perceived as the long-standing objective and determiner of success in immigrant narratives, is no longer a key motivation. Now, entrepreneurial success drives the immigrant narrative. Adichie's protagonist launches a career in commenting on American society from the outsider's perspective, making her non-assimilation a success. Lish's immigrant protagonist fails to integrate, but shares that experience of isolation with a returned American soldier, who finds that the rights he fought for abroad are denied from those whom neoliberal culture characterizes as outsiders in his homeland. Lish's juxtaposition of the immigrant and returnee failures to assimilate into American custom shows that neoliberalism creates more outsiders than insiders. The non-assimilation of Lish's characters shifts the burden of integration and alienation away from the immigrant individual, and underscores the need for shared accountability for failures across society. Through the ways in which Adichie's and Lish's narratives break with the genre's conventions, my purpose is to demonstrate that neoliberalism renders recent immigrant narratives non-assimilationist.

1. POLITICAL NO MORE: EPISTOLARIES BY J.M. COETZEE AND PAUL AUSTER

> Since about 1970, a pretty mean vision has been propagated and encouraged and allowed to take over the direction of the planet, a vision of human beings as machines of self-interest and of economic activity as a contest of all against all for material spoils. . . . As a consequence a debased notion of what constitutes political life has come to prevail, and has in turn given rise to a pretty contemptuous view of what constitutes the practice of politics. . . . The word 'trust' has lost all purchase. (Coetzee, *Here and Now* 194)

> The time is dark, certainly . . . oscillating between those who believe in American exceptionalism . . . unfettered capitalism, the dog-eat-dog mentality of every man for himself, and the others, who believe in what you and I would call a just society, who honestly believe that human beings are responsible for one another. (Auster, *Here and Now* 196)

1.1 Introduction

In *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Gary Becker argues that the economic approach to human activity always entails maximizing value, and the free market will "coordinate the actions of different participants—individuals, firms, even nations—so that their behavior becomes mutually consistent" (5, 8). He furthers his argument in *Human Capital*, in which he offers a multifaceted examination of the value of investing in activities that increase human resources in society. In *Human Capital*, Becker divides actions into ones that maximize "money income," and others that maximize "psychic income" (11). More specifically, he defines "psychic income" as "consumption," and the activities that lead to the increase in money or psychic incomes as "investments in human capital" (11). Such investments include, but are not limited to, academic education, vocational training, healthcare, and migration, for enhancing one's knowledge, honing skills, improving health, and optimizing one's opportunities for success assist in maximizing one's money and psychic incomes. To put it

differently, if psychic income denotes consumption, then, investing in human capital adds to the capacity to consume. Because Becker does not define contributions to society through labor, but through investments on which individuals either do or do not receive returns, the theory of human capital reorients the classical relationship between private and public. In Becker's worldview, the acts of investing in the self, maximizing value, and maximizing the individual capacity to consume determine an individual's sense of political life in society, and because they are acts that shift responsibility to the individual, they make it harder to hold power accountable.

In the excerpts from their correspondence in *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011*, Coetzee and Auster, who are known for their interests in subject-formation, the position of the outsider, loss, and metafiction, contemplate the transition from political to post-political society. For them, the radical individualism of neoliberalism is a "mean vision" to arrange social life. Neoliberalism claims political clout by way of its logic that "reducing labour costs, reducing public expenditures and making work more flexible" are necessary policy measures for increased individual welfare (Bourdieu). Nevertheless, Pierre Bourdieu insists that the neoliberal ordering of the world is founded on a mathematical fiction that serves utopian ideas of deregulation as the guarantor of equity in society ("Utopia"). Coetzee's and Auster's denunciation of neoliberalism is aligned with the argument of Bourdieu and many other critics who conclude that by favoring "the economic choices of those who dominate economic relationships," neoliberalism can be realized as "*a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives*" ("Utopia"; original emphasis). The radical individualism of neoliberalism denies dialogic exchanges that engender solicitude across different social

strata. Instead, neoliberalism primarily expresses the interests of those who already hold most political and economic power in society. The repressive racist system in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*[4] differs from the system of governance ceded to economic rule that is illustrated in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*.[5] In other words, *Iron* is an anti-apartheid novel, and *Country* an anti-neoliberalism novel. *Iron* offers an outlook on apartheid as an extremely political form of power, which divides South African society into clear political tribalisms and segregates its people. *Country*, then, demonstrates how neoliberalism is not informed by similarly stark political divides; it is post-political, and underscores maximizing economic behavior and self-regulation in all aspects of society.

In this chapter, I will examine how Coetzee's and Auster's novels, when read in conjunction, show that the problem of denying dialogue between communities has widespread precarious effects on social life. *Iron*, which was published in 1990, four years prior to the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, is a letter by protagonist-narrator, Mrs. Curren, who is dying of cancer in Cape Town. She has been protected from, but quietly disapproving of, the brutalities of apartheid all her life, and begins to write about her process of unlearning the Afrikaner identity to her daughter who has moved to America in rejection of apartheid. *Iron* explicitly positions itself against the operations of the apartheid system, depicts the riots in resistance to it in the 1980s, and makes the impacts of South Africa's social disrepair palpable in the narrative's layers of violence, as well as the narrator's public denial and private shame. Auster's *Country* was published in 1987, and can be perceived as a reaction to the unjust mechanics of the

[4] Further references to the novel will be as *Iron*.
[5] Further references to the novel will be as *Country*.

1980s' neoliberalism that Bourdieu describes. Though places are unnamed in *Country*, the text invites readers to imagine the setting as America at the end of the twentieth century. The novel is protagonist, Anna Blume's, letter to an unnamed friend in another country that she has left to search for her journalist brother, William. As she relates the grim reality of a society on its knees, her commentary has a tone of forewarning. Anna's wish to witness, but diminishing ability to record, life in the strange country signals that dialogue, which would help nourish solicitude between the different social groups, is close to extinction in the country where everyone competes for subsistence.

The difference between the anti-apartheid and anti-neoliberalism novel is also evident through the narratives' epistolary form. Coetzee conveys the process of unlearning the apartheid ideology through Mrs. Curren's letter as a process that resembles what Michael Warner has called "mediation" between "the felt gap between public selves or roles and private ones" (25). I will argue that the distinction between a traditional epistolary and a neoliberal one is this tension between the private and public that Mrs. Curren negotiates in her letter, and which is almost absent from Anna's letter in *Country*. In his historical outline of the relationship between the private and public spheres, Warner writes that, because "public and private are rooted in what anthropologists call habitus. . . . They can seem quasi-natural . . . They are the very scene of selfhood" (24). That is, because public and private determine the way in which we experience our surroundings they also inform our subjectivity. Anna's letter is not attuned to communicating her identity formation in the country, for in the post-political climate of neoliberalism the distinction between public and private does not inform subjectivity to the same extent as self-regulation does.

Furthermore, reading *Iron* before *Country*, and in anticipation of Coetzee's and Auster's discussion of the mean vision in *Here and Now*, allows us to explore the pre-abolition expectations of political and social justice in South Africa. To some, such institutionalized racism as that of apartheid South Africa may seem anachronistic. Yet, as the scholarship of David Theo Goldberg and Paul Gilroy suggests, post-apartheid South Africa remains implicitly racist. In fact, Goldberg's and Gilroy's analyses demonstrate that while having explicit anti-racist laws, South African and American societies exhibit uneven distribution of social power and resources. The purpose here is not to suggest that Coetzee in *Iron* shows cognizance of how the end of apartheid would open South Africa to transnational neoliberalism which promises to provide equity through maximizing value. Rather, my purpose is to show that the expectation of liberation is implied in *Iron* through the references to the more democratic social life of Mrs. Curren's daughter in America, while Auster's portrayal in *Country* suggests that neoliberalism renders social life unreasonably risky. I will argue that the divergence between *Iron* and *Country* makes manifest how neoliberalism is divorced from traditional political forms of governance and social organization.

1.2 Private, Public, and Dialogics in the Epistolary

Conventionally, the epistolary is a novel that focuses on a collection of letters by the protagonist, or an exchange of letters between characters. Warner notes that because our notions of what is private and what is public govern "the conventions by which we experience, as though naturally" (24), our understanding of public and private experiences is reflected in shifts in identity formation. Writing about the classic eighteenth-century epistolary, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Christina Marsden Gillis

echoes Warner's characterization of the relationship between public and private, as she suggests that letter language is attuned to contemplating the differences between "the mental processes" of characters in relation to their social behavior (3). Gillis points out that though epistolaries regularly attempt to convey a level of realism, what is "real" is difficult to determine in the epistolary, for works in the genre imitate letters, which in turn, communicate subjective reality (3). Nevertheless, subjectivism is not the defining characteristic of epistolary fiction as a whole, because "turning experience into language" to communicate those events to the intended readers of the letters, depends on the premise that the writer and reader "share a symbolic system" (4). Any novel depends on some degree of reciprocity between the writer and reader, as Elizabeth Hewitt remarks, but in the case of letter-writing, reciprocity is the defining characteristic; it is the very premise of the epistolary (296). The epistolary underlines the writer's openness for making private ideas and emotions public, and the letters "achieve validity only when released to the external audience" (Gillis 11). It is the reader's action that substantiates the interiority depicted in a letter.

The epistolary does not simply signal reciprocity, but embodies the complexities of dialogue. Hewitt suggests that because correspondence in the epistolary conveys "the mediation between the self and other" it can also represent "the politics of symbolic exchange" (296-297). In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard resists perceiving human behavior solely through the economic approach.[6] Baudrillard's

[6] Written from the opposite stance to Becker's, Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was published in 1976, the same year as the publication of Becker's *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. It appears that the authors are reacting to the sociocultural changes taking place during the emergence of neoliberalism. Becker affirms the neoliberal view that economics underlies political and sociocultural decision-making, while Baudrillard contests bestowing broad cultural value on economics.

"symbolic exchange," which denotes poetic and cultural actions of receiving and giving without the objective of production or increasing value (26). The symbolic exchange enables Baudrillard to think outside of the otherwise-prevalent framework that garners economic concepts with cultural significance (Kellner). On a similar note regarding cultural significance, in his lecture "The Architecture of Cooperation," Richard Sennett refers to the literary analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, as he distinguishes between dialectic and dialogic exchanges. Sennett points out that dialectic exchanges seek resolution, which is essential to many forms of practical communication, but results in bounded narratives. Market transactions are dialectic, because they entail closure. Instead, dialogic exchanges form an "unclosed system . . . there will be no moment where the implicit, the hidden, can be surfaced and resolved with the other" ("Architecture").[7] Sennett notes that dialogic exchanges exhibit a more socially intuitive skill that "focuses on responsiveness to the covert rather than the overt," and argues that dialogic skills are important socially, for they demonstrate openness to "problem-finding" over forcing closure ("Architecture"). The dialogic exchange is akin in tenor to Baudrillard's symbolic exchange, insofar as they both eschew the kind of simplistic reconciliation of maximizing behavior that capitalist production and consumption entail. *Iron* and *Country* do not entail an exchange of letters, but each focuses on one letter that does not simply catalogue what the protagonist witnesses; journal-writing would satisfy that need. Instead, the letters are dialogic, because they bestow hope on the protagonists' communication of their othering experiences and changing sensibilities.

[7] The point of dialogism is unlike Becker's notion of the beneficence of the free market, which he argues, is evinced by its coordination of people's actions, making those actions mutually consistent.

Little work has been published on the letter forms of *Country* and *Iron*, though they are otherwise widely researched. *Iron* is often considered an example of "historiographic metafiction" in the tradition of Linda Hutcheon's categorization (Duvall 3), for it conveys a realistic, though highly subjective, picture of apartheid South Africa. The letter form is suited for communicating the way in which *Iron* finds representations of South African politics in the private lives of its characters, and the protagonist's narration. *Iron* is a more traditional epistolary in the sense that the private and public are clearly defined in Mrs. Curren's narration, and enforced by the description of how the apartheid state separates the spaces, public and private experiences of black and white South Africa. Caren Irr and others have defined Auster's *Country* as "apocalyptic fiction," a subgenre of the geopolitical narrative which does historiographic work in the sense that it takes part in "the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of the end-of-history debate" (169).[8] The end-of-history arguments claimed that at the dawn of the last decade of the twentieth century it was unnecessary to envisage alternatives to western capitalism for its successes confirmed its superiority as a model of social and political-economic organization, a premise that troubles Auster. The letter-writing in *Country* does not promote particular alternatives, but the problems it finds force the reader to visualize what could be if neoliberalism progressed unencumbered.

[8] In a famous article, followed by a book on the same topic, Francis Fukuyama proposes that the end of the Cold War in the fall of the Soviet Union proved the victory of western capitalist liberalism as the most superior form of social organization in the world, thus ending history. That is, Fukuyama assumes that America has reached the post-historical period by way of its superior form of capitalism that guides its democracy (18). His postulation is that capitalist liberalism would be the most apt ideology to maintain peaceful connections in the world. Ironically, the Cold War may have made the world more connected and supportive of ensuing neoliberalism, but contrary to what Fukuyama insists it did not make the world more peaceful.

As evinced in their collection of personal letters in *Here and Now*, Coetzee and Auster treasure letter-writing, for it promotes what Derek Attridge has called the "ethical understanding" of the other (100). Coetzee and Auster engage in correspondence and epistolarity, because letter-writing sparks critical and ethical thought, and thus, reflects the significance of dialogic exchange in society. Coetzee encapsulates dialogics, and the ethical understanding of the other in *Iron*, by showing how Mrs. Curren mediates between her public political identity and private disgrace, and makes her engagement with characters from outside of her South Africa the stuff of the letter. In other words, through the letter, Mrs. Curren attempts to express her shame in a public format to make herself accountable. Letter-writing helps Anna to encapsulate the other in text as well, as she writes to witness dialogic and symbolic exchanges that are not mere transactions or investments in individual success. Anna writes to make society accountable, but in the neoliberal setting of *Country*, public opinion is not of interest. Rather, neoliberal expression is interested in describing individual successes and failures. I will argue that through these connotations of letter-writing, the novels attempt to counter the denial of dialogue in their respective social settings.

1.3 Unlearning Apartheid Ideology in *Iron*

Coetzee is known as one of the most distinguished and prolific authors in opposition to apartheid, writing resoundingly sharp criticisms of the system of segregation. In addition to his attention to the limitations of the apartheid South African social organization, Coetzee's work also examines the ways in which the apartheid system inhibited social relationships between South Africans. Likewise, Coetzee

recurrently contemplates the intertwined role of ideology and writing in society, considering language a means of bondage ("J.M. Coetzee"). Michael Marais notes that Coetzee's oeuvre indicates the author's "sense of responsibility . . . that this writer, in attempting not to follow history by representing the apartheid state's atrocities, sought to interrupt that history" (*Secretary* xiv). Rachel Ann Walsh outlines how Marais and Attridge have both examined *Iron* as a narrative treatment of Levinasian ethics of the other. She provides specific comparisons between the ethics of the novel and Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*, concluding that, for Coetzee, abstract ethics alone is not sufficient, but we must put into words the social insecurity and inequality we witness (190).

Indeed, Marais's perception that Coetzee's objective of writing is to take "responsibility for what is not yet present in history . . . [to] *host* the other and so enable it to interrupt history" (*Secretary* xv; original emphasis), is acutely apparent in *Iron*. Though my examination of *Iron* is not informed as closely by Levinasian ethics as the analyses of Marais, Attridge, and Walsh, Coetzee's focus on accommodating alterity in his writing is central to my reading. Coetzee's persistence as a critic of apartheid is diligent, and writerly responsibility and hospitality towards alterity characterize his work. In fact, they are indicative of his perpetual efforts to make a home for societal transition in text.

Iron is set in Cape Town of 1986, and records its protagonist-narrator, Mrs. Curren's, reactions to her terminal cancer and changing sense of self. The pain of her illness coincides with her anguish of following the ongoing rioting in the largely black South African township of Guguletu that she travels to with her housekeeper, Florence,

because Florence's son, Bheki, and his friends are fighting for their rights against the state. Motivated by the twofold agony of her illness and her growing unease with the apartheid ideology, Mrs. Curren begins to write a long letter to her daughter, who resides in America and has vowed to not set foot in South Africa as long as the system of segregation remains in place. Mrs. Curren's cancer symbolizes her experience of the South African reality as increasingly insufferable. Her medication would deaden her pains, but she rejects it when possible, for it does not cure the cancer. Accordingly, Marais argues that the medication signifies the repressive effect of a system that refuses to address unpleasant realities ("Who" 8). Thus, Mrs. Curren's wish in the latter half of the novel to not be hospitalized and drugged with even stronger painkillers connotes her insistence on the unimpeded understanding of her indirect involvement in the state's social crimes (8). In much the same way as Mrs. Curren refuses hospital care, the shortcut of a phone call to her daughter about her imminent death will not do: writing the letter is essential to bearing and sharing her pain.

Because of the undeniable brutality of the apartheid system, Coetzee depicts it as a deformed social order. Or as Mrs. Curren narrates, South Africans live in a state of "madness" and "ugliness" (105, 136). The implication is that those conforming to the institutional racism and politics of oppression are as mad and ugly as the policies of Afrikaner nationalism, because of their inability to think for themselves, and for their unwillingness to challenge the ideology. Though Mrs. Curren employs letter-writing in order to revise her sense of self, her story is still, to an extent, complicit with the state's message, because, at its root, the letter reflects the power relations between the Afrikaner and non-Afrikaner realities of South Africa. With the help of Mrs. Curren's

contemplation, Coetzee negotiates an understanding of ethics that is specific to the generations of South Africa that have experienced apartheid violence as their primary social circumstance. In this sense, the reading of Mrs. Curren's cancer as parallel with the social pain of the system of segregation shows how Coetzee's ethics of rehabilitation involves taking the responsibility to address ugly truths.

Goldberg elucidates what Coetzee names the mindset of madness by describing the "political theology of race," which is at the heart of apartheid, and "seeks to account for origins, circumscribes rationality, motivates the social fabric and its constitutive forms of exclusion, orders politics and grounds power, liberating cruelty from constraint" (254). Having established ethno-racial heterogeneity in the colony that is now South Africa, Europeans strove to delimit the hybridity by way of sociocultural and religious control that was demeaning and malicious. Together religion and race cemented the "common whiteness" of the competing Boer and British as a God-given sign of supremacy in the region (283). For black South Africans, the political theology meant that hard, menial labor was expected of them to be granted "the promise of liberty, Zion," making the political theology of race "the historical ontology" of the nation, with "violence and its resistance" as its constant flipsides (286-287). Among the demarcations of race, labor, and culture, the designated areas for black townships in rural areas, or on the far peripheries of towns, were perceived to serve national security.

Coetzee's narrative offers a window into the township pushback against the apartheid regime through Florence's family in Guguletu. Mrs. Curren is exposed to the actuality of the other South Africa, when in the beginning of the novel Florence is forced to bring her children to work at Mrs. Curren's house, because of "troubles in the

schools" (38). In her assessment of education in apartheid South Africa, Rita M. Byrnes explains that the cause of the troubles, or the dissent, was the deep-seated disgruntlement with the disproportionate demands of the country's "capital-intensive development" in comparison to the minimal educational opportunities organized for black South Africans to develop skills and credentials (*South Africa*). Though hard work was widely perceived as the road to liberty in black South Africa, Byrnes points out that, in the eyes of the policymakers, "Black education was not supposed to drain government resources away from white education. . . . it prepared young Africans for low-wage labor and protected the privileged white minority from competition" (*South Africa*). That is, the schools both practiced and taught apartheid. All her life, Mrs. Curren has enjoyed white privilege, or the unearned assets that come exclusively from her racial identity. Coetzee implies further that, as a Classics professor, Mrs. Curren would have participated in the system that taught racial identity to the younger generations, both white and black South Africans, and thoroughly failed the country's youth in doing so.

Aware of the institutional defect, "young people during the 1980s were committed to destroying the school system" (Byrnes). In *Iron*, children and adolescents burn down their own township schools in resistance to their subjection to the state indoctrination that actively devalues them. Warner proposes that the way in which we might feel a dissonance between our private and public selves, gives rise to "longing for unity" (25). Especially in terms ethnic identity, an affirmative sense of identity is perceived to result from an engagement of the public and private selves (25). Warner argues further that "Identity politics in this sense seems to many people a way of

overcoming both the denial of public existence that is so often the form of domination and the incoherence of the experience that domination creates, an experience that often feels more like invisibility than like the kind of privacy you value" (25-26). Thus, the township "comradeship" to attack education symbolically undermines both the theory and practice of apartheid (Coetzee 149), but also asserts the identities of the young activists, for through that action they can correlate their private selves with their public existence.

Goldberg describes in blunt terms that the security forces of the state confronted black South Africans in the townships, often "softening them up by way of torturous interrogations, seasoning with sweated beatings over *braaivleis* (barbecuing) fires in farflung fields just out of social sight" (304). In many ways, the imagery of fire is pervasive in *Iron*. Whenever Guguletu appears in *Iron* it is either ablaze or recovering from fire, which is not a completely fictional portrayal, as the history of the school burnings and state interrogations indicates. Guguletu is where Florence's son, fifteen-year-old Bheki, takes part in the uprising against the state police. Bheki's whereabouts are of utmost concern to his family, because as Goldberg points out, the township rebels in the 1980s did not shy away from retaliation (304). They "responded in kind" to the interrogations "by publicly 'necklacing' police informers . . . by lighting a car tire around their necks and burning them to death" (304). Florence accepts and supports Bheki's contributions to resistance, but fears for his life. The cycle of retaliation between black and white South Africa is depicted in *Iron* as the country smolders, with unending smoke arising from Guguletu.

In search of Bheki in Guguletu, Mrs. Curren and Florence with her two young daughters encounter a hundred-strong crowd witnessing the state forces evicting a young woman with a baby by setting her home alight. Growing weary of the intensity of the eviction, Mrs. Curren urges Mr. Thabane, Florence's cousin, to guide her back to her car. Cross and exhausted, Mr. Thabane presses Mrs. Curren to see her undue haughtiness: "You have seen enough? . . . You want to go home . . . But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?" (97). Mrs. Curren is only able to offer the platitude that the situation is "terrible" (97), which resonates with Goldberg's description that "To live as a white person in apartheid South Africa was to live a life of more or less large-scale, if never perfect, denial" (303). Though it is apparent that Mrs. Curren feels alarmed by the terror present in Guguletu, her insistence to leave and inability to explain her stance to Mr. Thabane other than by lamenting the conditions in the township, is met with a man from the crowd pronouncing that "This woman talks shit" (99). Mrs. Curren's denial of dialogue and public refusal of guilt corresponds with Goldberg's description of white South African disavowal of the alternative realities of apartheid.

At the moment of the discovery of Bheki, dead in a pile with the bodies of four other teenage fighters (102), Mrs. Curren is again faced first-hand with the other South Africa. The momentousness of the discovery evokes a sense of disgrace in Mrs. Curren, and renders her unwillingness to communicate with the crowd in Guguletu even more distressingly irresponsible. Lawrence Thornton proposes that Coetzee makes the reader "suffer the shame" of injustice that Mrs. Curren struggles to acknowledge publicly ("Apartheid's"). Here, the significance of the suggestion of shared suffering is that

shame is a public feeling, but the apartheid state treats institutional racism as shameless, the tension of which is apparent in Mrs. Curren's exchange with Mr. Thabane. Bheki's death and her encounter with the people of Guguletu makes shame real for Mrs. Curren, but she can only bring herself to make her shame somewhat public by writing about it to her daughter in the privacy of her home:

> Now that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. . . . The age of iron waiting to return. (125-126)

Mrs. Curren's shame arises in part from her realization that her nation was built on the backs of black South Africans, as these lines regarding the land suggest so emphatically. She is also aware of the spirit of resilience that is palpable in the presence of the younger generation. Yet, Mrs. Curren's choice between private and public expression is a privilege the residents of Guguletu do not have.

Mrs. Curren's grappling with her shame, and the distinction between the ways in which she and the people of Guguletu experience public and private differently, are significant, because they signal possibilities for remorse that could start the process of social change. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy identifies the kind of personal development Mrs. Curren experiences—"the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame" (99)—as a kind of melancholia. The development of these emotions in *Iron* could be considered melancholic in Gilroy's terms, for Mrs. Curren must face her moral choice of having quietly enforced the apartheid system. More importantly, the impossibility of collective mourning may stunt "any capacity for

responsible reconstructive practice" (98). That is, postcolonial melancholia dissolves opportunities of communication in public on how to develop the feelings of remorse that can arise with shame to accountability, and solidarity.

1.4 Learning Ethical Understanding

The objective of facing her shame and developing it to public engagement takes focus on the homeless man, Vercueil, whom Mrs. Curren finds in her back garden, "Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. An unsavory smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing" (3-4). Vercueil is described as smelly, filthy, drunk, and reticent, but his race is not spelled out, which seems deliberate in a text that overtly addresses race and racism. Regardless of his race, Vercueil's homelessness makes him a figure of state and social failure. Or as Mrs. Curren notes: "Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I" (9). Attridge describes this attitude as the "other-directedness" of Mrs. Curren's letter (92). In Marais's words, Mrs. Curren has lived until the very last weeks of her life as "the host of the state's message" (*Secretary* 98). Mrs. Curren likens her act of offering shelter to Vercueil to the import of the letter-writing, for both are approaches to unlearning her Afrikaner identity that she no longer identifies as her own. Or as Attridge puts it, the task of the letter is to share "the learning experience itself—an experience in which unlearning is as important as learning" (92). Indeed, the way in which she explains her interest in Vercueil implies that she includes her interactions with him in the letter, in order to write her self out of the state's text.

Mrs. Curren's letter reveals that Vercueil is mostly unresponsive in conversation, indifferent towards her interest in his past and her involving him in her

plans. He never makes himself accountable by way of the social norms Mrs. Curren expects; and so, Mrs. Curren has no reason to rely on him, but she begins to do so anyway because of her attempt to better commit to ethical understanding. Through the setting of Mrs. Curren's house in a primarily Afrikaner neighborhood, where it hosts Vercueil, an outcast of the state, and Mrs. Curren with her newly dissenting views, Coetzee posits the characters' shared displacement as a possibility for compassion and critique. Though the township is a public position of displacement that embodies the failures of the apartheid state, Marais argues that *Iron* also "seeks to contrive a relationship with the reader that is mirrored from within the novel by the image of Mrs Curren's house. [It reflects] the damaged life of apartheid society from a position that is both within (i.e. implicated in) and outside (i.e. independent of) that life" (*Secretary* 119). The interactions that take place in the house reflect the letter's purpose of dialogic exchange. Vercueil and Mrs. Curren do not regularly achieve consensus on their views, but their dissonance affords Mrs. Curren new-found reason to resist, which, in turn, motivates her writing to her daughter.

Mrs. Curren also houses Bheki's fellow dissident, John, towards the end of the narrative. She must invite the boy in from harm's way when he is running from the police. When the state forces invade her house in search of John, Coetzee demonstrates that the private space Mrs. Curren has attempted to share with outsiders, who are rejected by and reject the state, is no longer privileged. Similarly, Mrs. Curren's whiteness affords her no resource for contending against the authorities that enter her home to investigate. Because the apartheid ideology violently re-enters Mrs. Curren's domain in this way, and John dies there, she considers the house "not [her] home

anymore" (157). She understands that her privilege that is founded on racial identity is frail. Mrs. Curren shelters under an overpass, and is attacked by scavenging youths to retrieve anything on her person worth selling. The street children cluster over Mrs. Curren, and force "a stick a few inches long" into her mouth to collect any gold teeth (159). Preserving Mrs. Curren's humanity and her old, tired, cancer-ridden body are of no concern to the street children, who are products of the apartheid system, born in the age of mistreatment. At the moment when she faces utter disregard for her well-being that Mrs. Curren's experience comes closest to Vercueil's who has been failed by the state. In this instance, Mrs. Curren neither fully embodies privilege, nor entirely experiences discrimination to the measure of her outsider counterparts, but her lessons in the ethical understanding of the other would not be effective if she did not learn of the life on the streets.

Regardless of Mrs. Curren's othering experience, Coetzee is aware that the challenge is for the learning process of solidarity to be shared. It is as though Mrs. Curren's symbolic degradation is requisite in fully appreciating or understanding the othering experience. After Vercueil saves Mrs. Curren from the mutilation of the scavengers, the narrative ultimately sees trust established between the two, and she makes him her domestic carer. Eventually, she shows absolute trust, as she asks him to become her messenger, the deliverer of the letter to her daughter after her death, but Vercueil does not explicitly commit to the task. Marais argues that Mrs. Curren cannot change Vercueil's behavior, though she initially attempts to, because fundamentally "she is inspired by his otherness. Her attempt to transform him is resisted by his alterity" (*Secretary* 116). My sense is that the learning process is more reciprocal than

what Marais proposes: it is not only Mrs. Curren who changes. The social rules of apartheid would have expected Vercueil to participate in—or at least allow—the youths' trespass against Mrs. Curren, but instead he interferes. In doing so and showing empathy, Vercueil demonstrates similar detachment from the state and social norms that Mrs. Curren explores. Her making him the executioner of the legacy of her learning experience is a heavy responsibility. Mrs. Curren and Vercueil's bond is not quite like the commitment of the township comrades to one another, but it is founded on a view of solidarity that is scarce in the apartheid state, and necessary for social change.

Iron ends with Mrs. Curren's hope that Vercueil will forward the letter to her daughter, though he does not promise to make the delivery. That is, Coetzee does not insist that Mrs. Curren and Vercueil, or Mrs. Curren and her daughter, are united in their opinions and ideals at the end of the novel. Nevertheless, the discord that remains, and Mrs. Curren's acceptance of the possibility that the letter will never be read, are implications of her learning dialogic skills. The hopefulness *Iron* attributes to the daughter's position in the United States is an attitude that is countered in Auster's *Country* with grave pessimism. Indeed, Coetzee's novel is a letter addressed to a daughter in a better place, America, while Auster's text invites us to imagine its setting as America in ruins after the resolution of neoliberalism. Grateful for her daughter's distance from the injustices of South Africa, Mrs. Curren notes, "I think of her body, still, solid, alive, at peace, escaped" (73). Together with the anticipation of the future, it appears that Mrs. Curren associates peace with the absence of segregation, and perceives America as post-segregationist. This optimism turns out to have been misplaced. Moreover, looking at post-1994 South Africa, Goldberg argues that in the

country, “Neoliberalism’s racial secularization turns out to fuel some of the very same people apartheid’s racial sacralisation was supposed to uplift. Only better so, neither history nor conscience withstanding” (316). The revealing relationship between Coetzee and Auster’s epistolaries is that the optimism attributed to neoliberal America in *Iron*, is paralleled by the dread attached to the scavengers’ wasteland in *Country*.

1.5 Commitment to Witnessing as Resistance in *Country*

Scholarship on Auster’s work generally finds his writing and themes to harken back to nineteenth-century American transcendentalism and French poststructuralism. For instance, thematic similarities with the works of Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Michel de Certeau, and Jacques Derrida are evident in *The New York Trilogy* and *Leviathan*, while Baudrillard’s influence is implied in *Country*. Owing to Auster’s poststructuralist influences, many scholars, such as Bernd Herzogenrath, have analyzed the acute scarcity depicted in *Country* as the loss of language and referentiality, as well as the diminished capacity of understanding between individuals. Many scholars also point to the post-apocalyptic nature of the novel, yet Padgett Powell notes in his review of *Country* that Auster’s story world is not necessarily futuristic, but actually “reminiscent of the Great Depression” and “will try to surprise with the obvious” (“End”). That is, the extreme consumerism, free-market fundamentalism, and wasteland of scavenging on display in *Country* echo the socioeconomic injustices that Auster perceives already at play in society. My analysis furthers the strand of scholarship that pays attention to implications of economic rule in the novel. I treat the country of last things as Auster’s invitation for us to imagine the ruined landscape of a neoliberal state. Auster employs the trope of scavenging-for-trade as a consequence of

the intense consumerism and ultimate resolution of neoliberal free-market fundamentalism. He is alarmed by the effects of blind market reliance and laissez-faire economic ideology that reduce the possibilities for justice and solidarity.

Warner argues that under capitalism privacy was made the realm of self-interest, so "the public came to be defined as disinterested" (40). This dynamic by which public opinion lost significance in society, is reflected in *Country* as widespread indifference. Auster's narrative begins *in media res*. We discover only later that, Anna, had first been compelled to write after a dear friend's passing, and pursued the letter as a lifeline after a near-death experience. Anna has moved to the country to search for her brother, William, a reporter who has gone missing while trying to record the precarious sociopolitical situation in the country. Eventually, Anna's letter could be seen as an effort to complete some of the work we are told William began. In other words, the purpose of Anna's letter is to transcribe what she witnesses, which could be likened to what Warner describes as engagement with public opinion, a vital practice in order to "hold power accountable" (50). Though many critics mention the epistolary form of *Country*, they tend to do so as a side-notion. My discussion points to the advantages of letter-writing—the reaching out to the other without the certainty of a successful reception of one's writing—in reflecting on power that denies responsibility. The very beginning of *Country*—"These are the last things, she wrote" (1)—communicates that, against all odds, Anna's letter was received by the unnamed friend from her home country. Though neoliberalism is hardly driven by accountability, but by the stories of winners and loser, the fact that the voice of the letter's recipient frames the novel's

beginning demonstrates that Anna's persistence in dialogic expression pays off eventually.

Anna's letter does not report events in a linear order, but rather depicts significant events that signal the deterioration of community in the country, where goods and commodities are the future to invest in, and people are only valued through their agency within the consumer economy. Auster communicates that the chances for community-building are crumbling through several episodes of Anna's journey. She must compete for an income as a scavenger (because nothing is created, every existing thing is up for sale), but manages to form a friendship, only to lose the friend to an illness. She has a short-lived opportunity for companionship and family with a writer, Sam Farr, but she is kidnapped, nearly killed, loses her and Sam's unborn child, and contact to Sam. She recuperates in a halfway house, only to discover after a while that the house has been sold and the community dissolved. Each of the opportunities for Anna to establish human bonds ends abruptly. Echoing Becker, self-interest, maximizing consumption, and competition define almost all activities in the country, and turn dialogic exchanges into transactions.

The tone of concern in Anna's letter signals to the reader that her experiences in the unnamed country are a precursor to those the letter's recipient could encounter. She refers to the remnants of a metropolitan city, its streets, parks, old subway stations, and "municipal markets"—"probably the safest, most reliable places to shop . . . guarded by the police" (4)—that appear not too unlike those in cities of our day and age that are going through varying stages of gentrification, positioning extreme wealth and scarcity side by side, thereby creating tension. Here, conspicuous wealth becomes an orienting

factor, because it makes inequality more present to those who have less. Auster's description of the extreme lifestyles of the various groups of "object-hunters" and "Scavengers [who] roam the streets at all times" (16), is a bleak but ironic image of consumerism, for they not only compete for subsistence but also for the sake of possessing more goods than the next person. As part of their kit, each self-respecting object-hunter must purchase an empty shopping cart which they attach to themselves with a strap known as "the umbilical cord" (46), making the cart a clumsy but necessary, pseudo-natural, extension of the body to survive competitive, entrepreneurial scavenging. Not only does this paradigm gesture toward an organic connection to consumerism, but it seems to reference some anxiety for the future. Children take up numerous resources and most mothers bear children with the hope of an improved social circumstance for the future generations, but the implication here is that children in the country of last things are born to merely to survive. Auster thus intimates that even in such a site of dystopian decay and loss, the greed and competition that the ideology of the deregulated market instils have by no means become extinct, but determine social relations: the country of last things is governed by the radical individualism of neoliberalism.

Though remnants of the familiar remain in the country, Anna is painfully aware of the fact that "Life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what has taken its place" (20). When Anna begins a career in object-hunting, she explains the difficulty of earning a living by identifying materials worth selling to "one of the Resurrection Agents around the city—private entrepreneurs who convert these odds and ends into new goods that are eventually sold to the open market" (33). With "other

modes of production in the city now nearly extinct, they are among the richest and most powerful people around, rivalled only by the garbage brokers themselves" (33). Here, through the dynamic between the Resurrection Agents and the object-hunters, Auster makes apparent how the free-market fundamentalists exploit workers while discrediting their work. Because of the lack of facilities for government and production, "nothing is really itself anymore. There are pieces of this and pieces of that, but none of it fits together" (35). Together the notions of scarcity and resurrection in Auster's description imply a post-apocalyptic world, but upon closer examination, the narrative hits close to home, when it illustrates the disorienting nature of the city that derives from the fact that social life that appears familiar to Anna has been altered by radical deregulation.

In *Equaliberty*, Etienne Balibar argues that one of the key requirements of neoliberalism is flexibility, which in *Country* is seen as the sense of the city's constant shifting. The city could be described not as a place under development, but as a site of overlapping processes of erosion. Balibar writes of the social impact of flexibility that most frequently individuals consider themselves "disaffiliated or disincorporated," because of the freedom of behaving as entrepreneurs of themselves (26). To be sure, the scavengers pushing shopping carts to salvage items for further sales seem to be the epitome of entrepreneurial subjects of the neoliberal vision: competition enforces their displacement from communities, and harnesses them for the unfettered capital. They invest in themselves to work in isolation. Upon careful analysis, neoliberalism functions not as pure economics of utilitarian choices for the greater good of society, but as ideology and practices which push the majority to risky social situations. Seemingly, the

individualism neoliberalism grants is appealing, but it is achieved by way of undermining equality.

Consumption appears to drive life in *Country*, though resources are depleting, especially with the reference to the future of the children of the consumerist country through the "umbilical cord" metaphor. The conflation emphasizes the disposability of people and the investment in commodities as the most plausible future. It reduces individuals to both entrepreneurial scavenges and targets of scavenging, the process of which everyone in the country knows: "First to go are the shoes, for these are in great demand and very hard to find [then] the clothes . . . Last come the men with the chisels and pliers, who wrench the gold and silver teeth from the mouth" (16). Here, Auster's description contains an uncanny parallel to the attack on Mrs. Curren in Coetzee's novel. The scavenging that shows no care for others communicates the widespread sense of resentment between different social segments in the two novels. Moreover, in Auster, the commonness of entrepreneurial scavenging indicates that free-market relations are the primary form of social interaction, and that one-upmanship breaks more individuals than scarcity.

Lack, of course, adds to the sense of instability, but Goldberg points out that under neoliberalism, "Scarcity is manufactured to sustain value through the artifice of desirability" (364). Goldberg explains that the "point is to play the marginal utilities, to determine the moment just prior to diminishing returns," to figure out that things and people are more desirable and more highly priced when they are not readily available (364). Indeed, Anna's narration demonstrates that despite the paltry offerings "the people are insatiable: [they] will sell anything just to turn a profit: eggs and oranges

filled with sawdust, bottles of piss pretending to be beer. No, there is nothing people will not do, and the sooner you learn that, the better off you will be" (5). In *Country*, it seems that scarcity is manufactured to propel the scavenging-for-trade, and ultimately, to feed the heightened consumerism.

The ploys Anna outlines not only reflect the driving force of desire for things, but the emptiness of capitalism itself as well. If thought of in terms of spiritualism—in the vein of the references to resurrection—the sawdust-filled eggs and oranges present the market and commodities as empty idols. The eggs and fruit should present the idea of productivity and life that might develop into something more, but clearly, they are emphasized as some sort of loss in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism. Signaling utter futility, they could be seen as metaphors of neoliberal capitalism's own proclivities toward self-destruction. Given the conflation of people and commodities, the notion of the "country of last things" seems to suggest an eradication of humanity to a point from which we cannot be "resurrected." Part of the author's anxiety appears to be that there may be nothing to resurrect at the end.

1.6 Mass Culture and Cynicism

Most social relations in Auster's portrayal are defined by resentment and rivalry, conditions that many sociologists, such as Sennett and Bourdieu, identify as corollaries of the cutthroat competition and uncertainty that neoliberalism induces. In *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett explains that competition is actively instigated within corporations, because "to deliver quick, flexible results, work groups have to be given a certain measure of autonomy. . . . The system produces high levels of stress and anxiety among workers . . . since the line between competitor and colleague becomes unclear"

(53). Furthermore, when the uncertainty and dread spread through an organization, "one near-certainty is that inequality within the firm will intensify" (54). Bourdieu furthers Sennett's portrayal of the situation, by noting that a "sort of moral Darwinism" ensues, instituting "*cynicism* as the norm of all action and behaviour" ("Utopia"; original emphasis). It is for this rationale of neoliberalism that the majority of society does not benefit from its business logic and individualism, but experiences intense insecurity and isolation. In other words, Anna's narration is Auster's means of sensitizing the reader to the actuality of neoliberal ideas and practices that condition social anxiety.

Such unease propels the mass culture that manifests itself as competition for consumption. Referring to Jürgen Habermas's work on mass culture and the public sphere, Warner contemplates the reasons for the erosion of the distinction between public and private. Warner aligns the causes for the erosion with "the liberal tradition" of the mid- to late-twentieth century, for "In liberal thought, private persons . . . had become the proper site of humanity. They possessed publicly relevant rights by virtue of being private persons" (39). Namely, rights were no longer granted and protected by "public legal statuses," but by virtue of individual claims, made on the basis of self-interest (39). According to Habermas's theorization, Warner notes, that "the asymmetrical nature of mass culture" means that those with capital or social power are freer to make public their views than those in the margins who might wish to voice concerns (50).

Warner points out that the joint dynamic of mass culture and the culture of self-interest produces "a public that is appealed to not for criticism but for benign acclamation. Public opinion comes less to generate ideas and hold power accountable

and more simply to register approval or disapproval in the form of opinion polls and occasional elections" (50). Indeed, in *Country,* Anna finds that the race for things breeds passivity towards social progress. Echoing the concerns about cynicism and widespread resentment, Anna explains that passivity towards social problems is rife: "there are no politics" in the country of last things, for the people are "too hungry, too distracted, too much at odds with each other for that" (17). Even if the insatiable demand, uncertainty, and social antagonism wear out the denizens of Auster's country, Brendan Martin notes that its "sinister logic" leaves the citizens to "blindly accept that they are ultimately powerless [and] relinquish responsibility" of challenging the system in place (157).

The lack of government structures in Auster's country indicates the overpowering influence of the economy. Or as Anna writes, the state is not in charge, and not working for the public, because "Governments come and go quite rapidly here" (86). The free reign of the economy is guaranteed by the undermining of the state; and so, the state is not eradicated, but the government in the country has no other role than garbage collection and the "Sea Wall Project," which is the only new "public works enterprise" that has been initiated (86). Anna notices that serving the public is not a priority of the latest government of the country. She concedes that the purpose of the wall is to "protect our homeland" (86), but in many other ways the wall appears a huge disservice. Its construction has taken years, so the people are unable to reap the promised benefits of increased security, and though the construction employs many, the workers receive abysmal compensation. The extreme attitudes towards the wall's construction further divide the people within the country, and between it and other

countries. In addition, the construction of the wall seems to contradict the transnational economic disposition of neoliberalism in the novel.[9] Auster's metaphor of the wall building (which is sustained by the exploitation of the workforce) as the chief function of the state is telling, because the metaphor illustrates how the public, political force is harnessed for ensuring commercial success, but ultimately reduced to enforcing isolationism.

1.7 Crafting Dialogue and Solicitude

Debra Shostak characterizes Auster's fiction as narratives of trauma that "dramatize lack" (66). As is the case of *Country*, "these narratives recount a personal loss" that is extended to a metaphor of loss on a national scale (66). Shostak points out that in extending loss from the private to the public, Auster "explores the possibility that loss is a historical, and hence potentially narratable, condition" (66). Shostak suggests that Auster's objective is that the texts "work through" the causes of the loss as a process of mourning (66). In *Country*, Auster depicts Anna's account of her displacement from home, and her loss of community as a result of constant mobility in order to survive the struggle for subsistence and physical attacks from other scavengers. The letter becomes a record of her working through mourning the loss of home, becoming active in and eventually numb to the antagonistic quotidian of the country. Anna's letter-writing is an action that seeks to witness and garner a response to enact

[9] Though published in 1987, *Country* foreshadows the sociopolitical climate of 2017 in uncanny ways, not least by way of Auster's description of the Sea Wall Project that echoes the Donald J. Trump administration's executive order to build a wall on the Mexican-American border. In much the same way as the government in *Country*, the Trump administration defends the polarizing initiative by referring to the need to bolster America's national security. However, mostly, the initiative might serve the business interests of American manufacturers. What is absent in both instances, is the attention to social security which would serve the interests of the public.

change. It manifests hope in dialogic exchanges similar to those which develop between the main characters in Coetzee's *Iron*.

Moments of respite from the experience of displacement and disaffiliation for Anna emerge from the rare acts of creative exchange that are not plain economic transactions; that is, exchanges that resemble Baudrillard's symbolic exchange. Baudrillard's concept implies the import of the kind of dedication to the social and cultural that makes communities functional, instead of relying on short-sighted transfers, which neoliberals insist are sufficient, for in their view, the positive equilibrium of the market will always naturally correct itself and uplift deserving factions of society. In the early days of Anna's stay in the country, her survival amid the atmosphere of hostility is sustained by companionship with the more experienced object-hunter, Isabel. Secure accommodation is in short supply in the city, but Isabel invites Anna to move in with her and her morose husband, Ferdinand. While Ferdinand sulks at home and builds model ships all day long, the two women end up sharing the burden of object-hunting.

Ferdinand's case is intriguing in the sense that he refuses exchange—economic and symbolic—almost completely. He is determined to procure whatever he desires, which he does not by way of purchasing, or giving and receiving favors, but by violently taking from others. Ferdinand is similarly opposed to amassing wealth through production. His rejection of economic exchange is exemplified by the fact that he turns scavenged rubbish into bottle ships that are "remarkable little pieces of engineering, stunningly crafted, ingeniously put together," but he is adamant that they are not for profit even if they could in Anna's eyes "fetch a lot of money" (53). His outrage when

Anna proposes that the intricate ships could bring a more substantial income to the household indicates that the models serve another purpose to Ferdinand. Though Ferdinand clearly shows craftsmanship, he does not harness his skills for developing the community or supporting it emotionally in terms of symbolic or dialogic exchange, for he does not share the products, or the knowledge, of his craft.

A disregard for social responsibility is also apparent in the way Ferdinand has no qualms about exploiting the scarce fruits of the labor of Anna and Isabel, and his attitude towards the women is that of misogynistic loathing when he disrupts their everyday routine at regular intervals. Owing to an illness, Isabel must stop accompanying Anna on object-hunting trips across the city, and the household's income decreases significantly, altering Anna and Ferdinand's relationship. When Anna becomes the main breadwinner, she also becomes the object of Ferdinand's contempt and verbal attacks. Ferdinand's hostility turns out to be imperative in Anna's realization of her changing character. Ferdinand attempts to rape Anna, resulting in Anna's nearly choking him to death. Ferdinand is emasculated due to his lack of goods and control, and finds a sexual violation the most effective form of retaliation. What begins as self-defense, results in Anna's squeezing Ferdinand's throat and feeling "an immense happiness, a surging uncontrollable sense of rapture" (65), thus making the encounter an exchange of assaults. Anna quickly becomes aware of the grossness of her pleasure in violence: "I was no better than Ferdinand, I was no better than anyone else" (66). The struggle in the dark, and Anna's horror at her own brutality, are evidence of the move away from amicable human interaction to the individualism and lack of concern that Anna has previously observed in others, but now recognizes in her self as well. Though

hardly an example of symbolic exchange, the incident with Ferdinand forces Anna to realize the deterioration of her sense of self that, in turn, reflects the sociocultural sensibility of the country of last things.

The revelation about her evolving character has the potential to allow Anna to resist the pull of radical individualism. Anna's relationship with Isabel gives her cause to actively craft her commitment to the possibilities of solicitude. Anna is mentored and cared for by Isabel, who has an extraordinary knack for finding the best items on the streets. In much the same way as Coetzee shows the importance of the shared learning experience between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil, in *Country*, Isabel imparts her object-hunting strategies to Anna. The experience of learning Anna and Isabel share occurs through a type of transfer of skills that is not only procedural: "Whatever I finally learned . . . I absorbed it by a kind of osmosis, in the same way you learn a new language" (56). This characterization of the learning experience as "osmosis" suggests a similar idea to the symbolic exchange, for Auster conveys a type of unbroken passing of cultural knowledge between the two women, from which both benefit by learning to look after another person—Anna also learns exceptional object-hunting skills, and Isabel learns to resist Ferdinand's domestic tyranny—and forge a friendship.

Auster further illustrates the value of such a transfer by making Isabel's involvement in Anna's writing project explicit to the reader. Not long after they first start working together, Isabel becomes terminally ill, gradually loses the ability to speak, and "Bit by bit, the whole world had slipped away from her" (78). In order for Isabel to be able to keep her world intact by way of writing messages, Anna goes to a Resurrection Agent and invests a large sum of money in six pencils and a blue

notebook—"All the pages were blank, and this made it expensive" (79). But Isabel never manages to fill many pages, and to do justice to her friend's influence on her personal development, Anna feels

> an overwhelming urge to pick up one of the pencils and begin this letter. By now it is the one thing that matters to me . . . I tremble when I think how closely everything is connected. If Isabel had not lost her voice, none of these words would exist. Because she had no more words, these other words have come out of me. I want you to remember that. If not for Isabel, there would be nothing now. (79)

Thanks to commitment and dialogic exchanges between the two women, Anna gains confidence in communication outside of their relationship.

Anna's urge to write also emerges from her resistance to the country's treatment of death in individualistic terms, which echo Becker's framework. According to Becker's economic approach, most human behavior can be analyzed as investment successes or failures in human capital. Thus, for Becker, "*most* (if not all!) deaths are to some extent 'suicides' in the sense that they could have been postponed if more resources had been invested in prolonging life" (*Economic* 10; original emphasis). To put it differently, Becker considers death an investment failure. Anna wants to record Isabel's history to honor her life as more than a set of investments.

Anna meets Sam, a fellow writer, shortly after losing Isabel. Together, in resistance to what has become of society, they write and maintain a dilapidated library. Their purpose is to preserve information of the country and what they know of its history, before resources run out. Anna's partnership with Sam is equally short-lived as that with Isabel, as Anna is kidnapped by scavengers who attempt to slaughter her, and her and Sam's unborn child (125). She cannot find her way back to Sam, but is found by the people of Woburn House, a halfway house run in an old mansion. At Woburn

House, where the socially displaced reside, the most unthinkable atrocities are met with the simplest values of responsibility and empathy. Eventually, after she has been cared back to health, Anna becomes one of the workers of Woburn House, whose chief form of care is listening: "They all wanted to tell me their stories . . . It was a different story every time, and yet each story was finally the same. The strings of bad luck, the miscalculations, the growing weight of circumstances" (143). The emphasis on listening and the unclosed system of stories makes the shared coping mechanism at Woburn House dialogic. Anna's letter relies on this same method of recovery: she has crafted a starting point for dialogue. Though Woburn House offers Anna much needed social succor, and enables her to give it to others, the community cannot withstand the pressure to sell the property and terminate services.

Despite her intermittent skepticism, Anna values her few social relations highly, which she makes clear to the reader in the very beginning of the letter: "It would be good, I suppose, to make yourself so hard that nothing could affect you anymore. But then you would be alone, so totally cut off from everyone else that life would become impossible" (19). Of course, the cutthroat competition and cynicism have further diminished the possibilities of social anchoring for Anna in the city, and she is prompted to take her search for William elsewhere in the country. Her letter becomes her final effort for connection to another person. Much like Coetzee's novel, Auster's letter-writing is not only set to describe social problems and Anna's inner life, but at the end of the novel it is clear that the letter is a way for Anna to cope socially, or as Aliki Varvogli notes, it "become[s] the means of holding together a world that is falling apart" (10). Even with Woburn House gone, Anna makes the letter a home for the

varying pieces that make the story of the country: “I’ve been trying to fit everything in, trying to get to the end before it is too late, but . . . [t]he closer you come to an end, the more there is to say” (183). Anna’s project of writing the letter, as I have sought to demonstrate in this discussion, embodies a revival of the social through her commitment to dialogue.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, my analysis has focused on showing that, though for different reasons and ends, apartheid and neoliberalism affect radical changes in the societal structure to diminish what ought to be shared social provisions. Though the racial divisions of the apartheid system and the self-regulating market equilibrium of neoliberalism are social constructions, they promote their tenets as natural facts. At the same time, they deny dialogue, and in so doing undermine equality, justice, and security. Goldberg bases his examination on regional analysis, for the “specific global conjunctions” offer him a lens on exploring the evolution of the notions of race and neoliberalism without forgetting “historical interaction” (68). I have sought to show similar historical interaction between regions and social structures to better chart the emergence and operations of neoliberalism. I treat the country of last things in Auster’s novel as the wasteland of a neoliberal state, the form of governance we now know post-apartheid South African leaders deemed liberatory. Together Auster’s dystopian depiction of neoliberalism and our retrospective position afford the advantage of examining Coetzee’s novel with regard to what we know of post-1994 South Africa. In addition, Goldberg writes that

> [t]he land of apartheid supposedly has become that of deracialized choice. . . . Less the choice of freedom than the freedom of choice, this

> latter liberty is all about affordability. . . . This pretense of choice perfectly characterizes the neoliberal condition. It is choice within the limits of one's means and networks, one's inheritance and education, one's class and gender, all of which are racially marked if much less deeply and directly determined than under apartheid. (312)

Regardless of the abolition of official apartheid, Goldberg suggests that post-1994 South Africa is still a state divided by race, gender, wealth, and class.

Another purpose of this discussion has been to show that Coetzee and Auster's epistolary fiction is a shared formal consideration between the works, which has not been sufficiently addressed. The letter form conveys the purpose of reaching out to the other without the certainty of a successful reception of one's writing, and thus reflects a more dialogic form of communication. In *Iron*, this attempt at dialogism is evident in Mrs. Curren's purpose to make her letter a host to otherness. The process of making the text a host to otherness involves facing her complicity with the so-called cultural text of the apartheid system, and recording the learning experience from shame to understanding of genuine trust and care, so the intended recipient of the letter, her daughter, may also show responsible responsiveness towards otherness. Marais points out that Vercueil's otherness must remain, because Coetzee is not writing about otherness that will be reconciled by rendering it the same with the self (*Secretary* 119-120). The references in *Iron* to the daughter's childhood dependency on her mother's nurturing make the present geographical distance, and emotional as well as intellectual detachment between Mrs. Curren and her daughter overt. Yet, the distance and discord seem to further motivate Mrs. Curren's recording of her learning experience in the letter, modelling how to extend trust as an imperative social condition for the new generation of South Africa. Envisaging in this way what must follow the age of

violence communicates Coetzee's hope; the letter makes room for the possibility of the South Africans' altering sensibility. Similarly, the last words of Anna's letter in *Country* offer an inkling of such a possibility of trust: "I will try to write to you again, I promise" (188). The promise Anna makes to write more conveys hopefulness, though writing had been a near impossibility for her in the beginning. This shows the writers' openness to the fact that letters can host revision of social values and motivations. Because letters embody the idea of dialogic exchange, they must remain open to the implications of their messages in the future.

The letter form aptly communicates transforming private ideas into public expression. Therefore, in this chapter, I have argued that the break between traditional epistolaries and neoliberal epistolary fiction in part arises from the narratives' treatment of the distinction between the private and public spheres, as evinced by Coetzee's and Auster's novels. The divide between the two spheres is evident in *Iron,* as Mrs. Curren must negotiate her public Afrikaner identity and private shame to make herself accountable to her new sense of self, and to her daughter. Conversely, because of its motivations in self-interest and self-regulation, public opinion does not matter in the same manner in the neoliberal setting, and the distinction between private and public is not as pronounced in *Country*. Anna's efforts to hold power accountable for the injustices she witnesses almost always end in unresponsiveness, because people around her are pre-occupied with competition.

Coetzee's and Auster's novels offer us letters without full correspondence. At the end of *Iron* it is clear that Mrs. Curren will soon die, and though the possibility exists that Vercueil will pass on her words of unlearning apartheid to her daughter, we

have no assurance the letter will be delivered. Whether the letter reaches Mrs. Curren's daughter or not, no response will be received by Mrs. Curren. At the very least, Vercueil lives with the knowledge of Mrs. Curren's legacy. In *Country*, Anna's letter is received and narrated partly by the unnamed recipient, but there is no direct response to Anna, and her fate is unknown at the end of the novel. Though the letters written by Mrs. Curren and Anna embody the hope for reciprocity, the absence of successful dialogue shows that social connection is a value rendered largely impractical by the isolation that the settings of *Iron* and *Country* impose on the main characters. Perhaps more importantly, the letters in *Iron* and *Country* show the protagonist authors negotiating between private self-possession, which is based on different rationales in the novels, and the social context of public culture that encroaches on that privacy, breaching the racial state and sheer human capital, respectively.

Ultimately, the novels are guided by the last things in life. The "last things" the novels portray first appear to be about the dwindling material and social goods, but the letters actually address the *last things that matter*. In *Country*, Anna ponders, "God knows why I persist. I don't believe there is any way this letter can reach you. It's like calling out into blankness" (183). She does not explicitly state what she thinks is the reason for her persistence, but an answer can be found at the end of Mrs. Curren's letter: "When it comes to last things," what matters in life is "solicitude" (197). Indeed, both authors determine that solicitude is what propels persistence for social change.

2. ANTI-SOCIAL MATURITY: *BILDUNGSROMANS* BY JUNOT DÍAZ AND DONNA TARTT

> The German word *Bildung* names a process of personal formation which fits a young person for the lifelong conduct of life [but] the institutions which enabled this life-narrative thinking have now 'melted into air.' . . . When I began interviewing software programmers in Silicon Valley in the early 1990s, they seemed to be drunk on the possibilities of technology as well as on the prospect of sudden wealth. . . . none of the old rules, I was told frequently, now applied. . . . They despised steadiness of purpose . . . When the dot-com bubble burst in 2000 and Silicon Valley began to be ruled by prudence these young people discovered the reality of living on a fresh page. The most common reaction I heard was that the young programmers felt suddenly alone. . . . Alone, they suddenly discovered time—the shapeless time which had before exhilarated them, the absence of rules for how to proceed, how to move ahead. Their fresh page was blank. . . . In this limbo, isolated, without a life narrative, they discovered failure. (Sennett, *Culture* 24-27)

2.1 Introduction

In the beginning of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman notes that the function of traditional liberalism is to reduce the role of the state in market operations in favor of the amplified role of the individual (5). Classic liberalism in the tradition of Smith expanded individualism to develop benefits gained through self-interest into social utility, while neoliberalism augments individualism at the expense of government and social programs. Unlike classic liberalism, neoliberalism puts more emphasis on purely individual traits rather than societal structures to explain inequality. Philosophically, Friedman's neoliberal ideal is "a free market in ideas," in which different views and cultural concepts are circulated without limitations or pressure, liberating individuals from restrictive forms of governance (115). However, egalitarianism is not a governing principle of neoliberalism, or as Friedman puts it, "equality comes sharply into conflict with freedom; one must choose" (195).

Deregulation, Friedman insists, will create equitable conditions for collective life. Insofar as neoliberal values prompt younger generations to think of themselves not as sociocultural subjects, but as subjects of self-interest, then, *Bildung*, too, is subject to deregulated choice.

Richard Sennett's example of the Silicon Valley software programmers shows that the equitable social institutions which used to "cut deep into subjective life" no longer inform twenty-first-century *Bildung* (*Culture* 24). Jane Elliott argues that literary-cultural works influenced by neoliberalism map the constitution of subjects of self-interest, and suggest something new about *Bildung* in the contemporary period. Such works posit "interiority as the possession of interests; interests as the motivation for choice; choice as the engine of action; chosen action as measure of agency, and agency as a sign of personhood" (88). That is, individual choice has become a primary form of social existence. Elliott's description of neoliberal subject formation differs from the individualism of classic liberalism, because even if neoliberalism welcomes diverse interests, that promise of inclusivity cannot be realized. Instead, the neoliberal premise is that on the road to personal property and liberty inequality may be necessary.

Following Friedman's logic, the liberatory promise of the neoliberal model of learning is that the identity formation of subjects of self-interest is supposed to relieve people of nationalistic absolutism and grant them the freedom of choice in determining their *Bildung*. The historical outlook of the *Bildungsroman* demonstrates that global capital may have alleviated some of the most apparent facets of oppression, but it does not shield individuals from isolation. Moreover, the historical outlook reveals a discrepancy within neoliberal ideology: though neoliberal ideology denies sociality in a

person's development, it participates in a form of social consciousness, collective individualism. As discussed through the example of the Chile Project in the introduction of this dissertation, collective individualism is most evident in the alliances between political leaders and academic economists, as well as the wealthy adjacent to those alliances. Neoliberalism is in denial of the fact that many have insufficient social resources.

Critical scholarship on neoliberalism also finds that a consistent rhetoric based on the tension between individual agency and isolation is emerging. In Sennett's words, the "prospect of drifting in isolation" following the eradication of social commitment that would offer maturity and "steadiness of purpose" is a landmark difference between the new and old capitalism (*Culture* 26-27). Correspondingly, George Monbiot calls the contemporary period "the Age of Loneliness," for him, too, the emphasized experience of solitude marks our time (9). Monbiot identifies that many structural choices, such as competitive and insular workplace conditions, union eliminations, the promotion of car travel over the use of public transportation, as well as walled residential areas, and customizable streaming services over public spaces for consuming entertainment, reflect the social isolation (10). Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[10] and *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt are *Bildungsromans* that depict the negative repercussions of growing up under the radical individualism of neoliberalism. Díaz's *Oscar Wao* chronicles events in the life of a precocious and lovesick Dominican-American teenager, Oscar de Leòn, in Paterson, New Jersey. *Oscar Wao* is divided into three major sections, which map Oscar's *Bildung* as an American teenager as well as his

[10] Further references to the novel will be as *Oscar Wao*.

family's history under the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic. The final chapters depict Oscar's maturation in Santo Domingo, where he is eventually killed by a corrupted police officer who is an example of hustling which does not spring from an authoritarian but entrepreneurial form of power. *The Goldfinch* traces the life of an adolescent protagonist and narrator, Theo Decker, as his life spirals out of control as a result of an explosion that takes the life of his mother at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Like *Oscar Wao, The Goldfinch* is divided into three sections which depict the major periods of personal development for Theo and the culmination of his fraudulent activities in a deadly confrontation in Amsterdam.

I will begin this chapter by examining the *Bildungsroman* genre, which conventionally follows young protagonists from childhood to maturity and into asserting a set of values as a demonstration of maturity. The *Bildungsroman* convention of asserting one's values at the end of the narrative to demonstrate a mature social role is problematic in the narratives by Díaz and Tartt, for both authors provide unstable grounding for their protagonists to construct their value systems. I examine Díaz's narrative first, because it offers a juxtaposition of traditional *Bildung* and sociality implicit in state power (even if distorted in the form of tyranny), and the extreme anti-social nature of development under American neoliberalism, which is also the context of the *Bildung* of Tartt's characters. My discussion examines the background of Díaz's characters under despotic rule first, and moves on to explore how the promise of liberation under neoliberalism is complicated in the case of Oscar's development into maturity. I suggest that *Oscar Wao* contemplates *Bildung* that does not result in a

mature social role, but affiliates maturity with the capacity to manage risk in a system of investments and returns that possesses less common property from which everyone can draw value. I explore Tartt's novel following Díaz's, because it makes manifest the intricate ways in which neoliberal power dominates identity formation through the mechanism of choice based on private interests that are conceived *necessarily* without regard for others' interests. *The Goldfinch* implies that the reliance on individual choice and capacity to manage risk—which neoliberalism assumes to be the sources of personal empowerment—turns out to be debilitating for most people. I posit that a comparative examination of these *Bildungsromans* helps to examine how neoliberalism disrupts development. Sennett's example of the software programmers of the new millennium resonates with Díaz's and Tartt's novels, because their protagonists' *Bildung* as neoliberal subjects demonstrates that when there is no purpose beyond self-interest to motivate the individual, neoliberalism offers loneliness and perpetual immaturity.

2.2 Anti-Social Maturity in the *Bildungsroman*

Conventionally, the *Bildungsroman* charts the intellectual and spiritual journey of a young protagonist to adulthood. In *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman*, Tobias Boes explains that the *Bildungsroman* lends itself to an examination of complex sociocultural circumstances, because it scaffolds links between recurring social problems and the historical, political, and cultural circumstances in which they occur (9). Due to the historical outlook of the *Bildungsroman*, the subject formation of the protagonist is often perceived to symbolize the formation of the values of a generation. The traditional *Bildungsroman* expects that

the adolescent protagonist matures as a result of committing to a worldly, social community, and asserts values as an accountable member of society. The process of *Bildung* traditionally entails the development of an individual psychology, abilities, and judgment, but also that of the social value of empathy. Scholars of modernism, among them Jed Esty, have noted that through tropes of movement and displacement modernist writers disrupt the progress of "smooth biographical time" and the protagonist's development into a mature social role (2). In so doing, the modernist *Bildungsroman* resists the normative expectation of personal development culminating in asserting bourgeois values.

Traditionally, the notion of the nation has tied otherwise antagonistic social groups in a joint objective of development, but reciprocal ideas of development are harder to sustain in narratives that reflect social roles in globalized neoliberalism. Migration and mobility have been longstanding themes of the *Bildungsroman*, not only interrupting the linear progress in the narrative, but also privileging the protagonist's cosmopolitanism instead of traditional values of domesticity. Though regularly playing a central role in development, mobility has often been treated as an impediment to social maturation in the *Bildungsroman*. Boes does not dismiss the ways in which the genre is closely bound to the establishment of the modern nation-state, especially in the German tradition, but insists on analysis through a transnational lens, because such a perspective allows writers and readers to explore the tensions that arise from identity formation that is not simply explained by interpretations of what we conventionally perceive as sociocultural development.

In the neoliberal *Bildungsroman*, mobility can be integral to the protagonist's experience of moments of fulfillment through varied, albeit temporary, social connections that movement enables. The mobility of the characters creates opportunities for social bonds that are otherwise diminished in the neoliberal setting. Those connections afford the characters respite from the relentless sense of insularity under neoliberalism, and signal to the reader opportunities through which life narratives can be constructed in a way that supports communal longevity. Because neoliberal lessons in self-interest elide the expectation of the individual's accountability in her or his social community, the *Bildungsromans* under study here question what happens when people are denied the social process of accumulating life narratives that would assist individuals to find social relief in the face of failure.

In her essay on neoliberal personhood, Elliott writes about the expansion of the role of self-interested choice in society that is widely considered the cornerstone of the appeal of neoliberalism, but, in her argument, can have precarious ramifications on maturity. The set of choices determined by the neoliberal economic and political circumstance may be very unfairly assembled: "Not only is the import of human actions intensified in such situations, but the subject's interest in preserving his or her life leads to limit-case decisions and deeds that would be otherwise unthinkable; the actions that result are both the result of legitimate individual choice and utterly undesired" (89). In other words, when the best available option is appalling, and would render life unbearable, a choice made based upon self-interest can feel imposing on the individual. Drawing from the tension between self-interest and choices founded on unreasonable options, Elliott proposes that we currently witness a mode of political behavior that she

terms "*suffering agency*" (84; original emphasis). Suffering agency indicates different types of suffering that result in social conditions where, in the face of political practices that further inequality, the majority of the public can be held accountable for their misinformed choices. The suffering agency of the neoliberal subject means that in the face of social problems the neoliberal system can eschew accountability, demand action from the individual alone, and blame the individual for poor decisions.

This disavowal of responsibility is a theme in both *Oscar Wao* and *The Goldfinch*. Both Díaz's and Tartt's narratives of formation are divided into sections of the beginning, middle, and end to reflect the stages of personal development, though neither are purely chronologically linear. The more traditional statecraft of the Dominican Republic in *Oscar Wao* defines maturity through social rules which guide the young individual's development into a social being. Neoliberalism, as depicted in Díaz's description of Oscar's American *Bildung* and *The Goldfinch*, sees maturity through investments in the self, which Becker's theory of human capital, discussed in the previous chapter, suggests. As a developmental concept, maturity has no place in the neoliberal ideology, insofar as maturity involves social interaction and responsibility over an extended period of time. In this chapter, my purpose is to show that the neoliberal *Bildungsroman* breaks with the genre, because it expects that the young adult develops maturity through individual choices made without the guidance of a worldly, social community. That is, the neoliberal *Bildungsroman* disavows socialized maturity. Instead, it considers the anti-social development of self-interest and the capacity to manage risk maturity.

Elliott's exploration of suffering agency addresses dystopian undertones of culture under neoliberalism, because the ideology is not invested in promoting lasting social commitments that could support maturity and ease the impacts unthinkable choices have on the individual. Elliott proposes that genres of self-preservation, such as adventure narratives or apocalyptic stories, best convey the inexorable logic of having to exercise individual interest and agency to decide between unreasonable choices (89). Many critics have not attended to the fact that, in the *Bildungsroman*, the effects of individual choices are prolonged and formative. My reading of the neoliberal narratives demonstrates how the consequences of poor choices can be devastating in the *Bildungsroman*, for they inform the young protagonist's developing epistemology and social ontology. Because, as Foucault argues, subjects of self-interest "must *laisser-faire*" (270)—namely, they must *be left alone*, but also must *leave other things be*—neoliberal *Bildung* entails that they may not learn to question the poor options at the foundation of their realities. Though the *Bildungsroman* does not overtly address self-preservation, but concentrates on self-development, Díaz's and Tartt's portrayals make manifest how self-preservation and isolated perseverance can become the primary modes of growing up and forming an identity under neoliberalism.

2.3 Individual Choice, Domination, and Isolation in *Oscar Wao*

Díaz is known for exploring themes of the legacy of struggle and the collision of cultures in both the Caribbean and American contexts. His writing style of code switching between English, Spanish, slang, and literary vocabulary parallels his description of the diasporic experience. In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz's interweaving of stories that span from colonial power to Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's despotic rule of the

Dominican Republic that lasted for thirty years until 1961, and the Dominican diaspora make manifest ways in which self-interest and insecurity have become institutionalized across borders. *Oscar Wao* tells the formation story of a Dominican-American adolescent, Oscar de Leòn, in Paterson, New Jersey. The novel begins with a foreword about a curse Díaz's narrator, Yunior,[11] names "*Fukú americanus*," which was "unleashed" with the screams of the enslaved that accompanied the Europeans to the New World (1). The arrival of the curse with the screams of the slaves makes for a very clear message of the way in which the wrongfulness of the enterprise of slavery and removal of indigenous peoples—as Díaz writes, the fukú "was the death bade of the Tainos" (1)—undermines the progressiveness attributed to the prospect of bootstrapping and prosperity in the New World.

The influence of the fukú in the novel also coincides with anecdotes of Trujillo's dictatorship, which propelled the Dominican diaspora to the United States. Díaz's first footnote about Trujillo illustrates the scale of his despotism:

> Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror . . . Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself . . . for running the country like it was a Marine boot camp; for stripping friends and allies of their positions and properties for no reason at all. (3; original emphasis)

[11] Most of the story is told by Yunior, who is a former college roommate of Oscar and boyfriend of his sister, Lola. In the early chapters, it is not immediately evident who the third-person narrator is, until Yunior identifies himself. In addition, one chapter is told from the point of view of Lola, who explores her relationship with her and Oscar's mother, thus relating her narration to the theme of mother-daughter relationships that signal a way of negotiating the colonial past and the protagonist's separate sense of self in such Caribbean novels as Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*.

The authoritative actions led to an ever-present fear of Trujillo in the country. Díaz titles Trujillo the "high priest" of the fukú, because "If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fuá*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, *fuá*, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you, *fuá*, the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow" (3). Trujillo is tightly connected to the fukú, the curse of oppression, in the minds of the Dominican characters of *Oscar Wao*, because his dictatorial personalism, betrayal of subordinates' support, and institutional cruelty, were experienced as if they were a curse.

Here, the purpose is not to argue for a connection between the oppression enforced by a state power, such as Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic, and the neoliberal denial of the legitimate necessity of state power in the face of the invisible hand that governs self-interested individualism. They are different forms of power. Despotism, even when lodged in an individual, is not self-evidently part of neoliberal individualism. Moreover, the kind of supernaturalism that the fukú suggests is in opposition to the rational self-interest of neoliberalism. The purpose is simply to show how Díaz depicts the expansiveness of Trujillo's rule was experienced by Dominicans, and in the terms of their magical-realist[12] and sociocultural heritage, which Yunior, the narrator, refers to as the everyday language of his and Oscar's ancestors (2). Historians Ernesto Sagás and Sintia E. Molina note that the impact of Trujillo's rule propelled

[12] In *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin trace the origin of the concept of magical realism to the "specific need to wed Caribbean social revolution to local cultural tradition" in the 1950s (132). They write that mythic and magical traditions, "far from being alienated from the people, or mere mystifications, were the distinctive feature of their local and national cultures, and were the collective forms by which they gave expression to their identity and articulated their difference from the dominant colonial and racial oppressors" (132-133). In other words, the mythic and magical traditions—like the fukú in Díaz—were "the modes of expression of that culture's reality," especially Caribbean culture's "social vision" (133).

Dominicans to migrate to the United States and Spain in vast numbers, and destabilized the country for long after the regime's collapse (11-12). Because Oscar is a child of this diaspora, and takes it upon himself to transcribe previously unheard stories of his family's Dominican past, it is essential for Díaz to frame Oscar's story of formation with the anecdotes of oppression in the Dominican history.

The foreword and beginning of *Oscar Wao* thus offer a specific political and sociocultural premise for the novel, before progressing to the three non-chronological sections about Oscar and his family's history of social injustice. The stories recounted by Yunior in the narration function like a "zafa," or a counterspell, to offset the fukú's oppression (7). Jennifer Harford Vargas proposes that the zafa is a performative speech act, based on "the Spanish verb *zafar* ('to release or escape from')" (10); to say the word means an evocation of protection and liberation. Yunior narrates that the zafa may be a simple utterance to counter an everyday misfortune, or a great act of love, such as the collection of stories of Oscar's family that Oscar, and later Yunior, compile. In other words, the zafa is both a revisionist form of responding to the colonial history, but also a subversive one that transcends the limitations of imperial historicizing.

Vanessa Pérez Rosario points out that *Oscar Wao* provides an "alternative side to official history" through its content, which explores generational transformation of power from the perspective of the oppressed, and its genre considerations as a story of formation with encyclopedic footnotes (209-210). The Dominican Republic under Trujillo could be seen to have had alternate histories: for instance, the one told from the perspective of the regime and the elites related to it, as well as the histories told from the perspectives of average Dominicans, the oppressed, and those who left the

country.[13] As Rosario points out, the narrative illustrates the story of the people, "the oppression of the social injustices in Dominican history, especially those suffered by people of African descent on the island and their descendants, the diaspora, in the United States" (209-210). Many scholars have examined *Oscar Wao* as an encyclopedic novel, due to Díaz's employment of footnotes to supplement the main narrative. For instance, Vargas argues that the footnotes are a significant tool for Díaz to address domination through the way in which the text's structure on the page emulates subverting hierarchical relations. Namely, Vargas proposes that by placing anecdotes about Trujillo underneath the people's story in the primary text, Díaz "creat[es] a counter-dictatorial narrative," in which the people's story is privileged over that of the dictator (23).

In addition, Vargas suggests that symbolically the footnotes "mimic the ways in which subaltern agents navigate repressive power by communicating information indirectly, secretly, and below the radar of the repressive regime's gaze" (20). I agree with the reading that Díaz privileges the stories of the socially discriminated and culturally subalternized characters over Trujillo to point the reader to the omissions made by the official Dominican history under the dictatorship. Thus, the task of Díaz's text is to remind us to not erase, and not forget, especially in the later phases of Oscar's life in America, because the consistent neoliberal story functions to erase and forget other stories. The *Bildungsroman* reading of *Oscar Wao* shows us the cultural operation

[13] In contrast, neoliberalism has only one "official history" of the repeated story of the nature of rational market transactions leading to social good.

of forgetting, especially with respect to Oscar's Dominican (colonial) heritage and American (neoliberal) upbringing.

2.4 From Socialized to Anti-Social *Bildung*

The beginning and end of the narrative concentrate on Oscar's *Bildung*. At the start, Oscar is an overweight and unpopular high-school student, who is a writer and collector of superhero and fantasy works in his spare time. Though a social introvert, Oscar's creativity and fluency in Elvish and all things Tolkien, the Marvel Universe and DC Comics, science fiction, and role-playing games are propensities his grandmother considers Oscar's inherited family genius. Because of his sophisticated vocabulary and fascination with literature, Oscar acquires the nickname, Oscar Wao, a Spanish pronunciation of Oscar Wilde that Oscar's peers use to mock him, but which he embarrassingly accepts as his moniker.[14] At the start of the novel, Oscar's self-interest is aligned with his concern about others' views of him, and associates self-advancement with the ownership of collector items as well as relationships with popular classmates. In Yunior's eyes, Oscar's misfortune is that he has "none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks" (19-20). Regardless, Oscar is obsessed with falling in love, and is in a constant state of heartbreak as the girls he longs for do not reciprocate his

[14] Oscar Wilde explored themes of self-centeredness, self-indulgence, risking one's future for passionate love, and favoring public image over moral development in texts, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As such, Wilde's work contemplates individualism. Intertextual references, such as this connection with Wilde, enforce Díaz's examination of self-interest.

feelings. Oscar transfers his frustration of being unable to make friends or find love to writing.

Monbiot refers to a study titled "Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values," [15] on recent developments in psychology, when he writes about the individualism at the heart of our contemporary cultural values:

> Our social identity is shaped by values which psychologists classify as either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic values concern status and self-advancement. People with a strong set of extrinsic values fixate on how others see them. They cherish financial success, image, and fame. Intrinsic values concern relationships with friends, family and community, and self-acceptance. Those who have a strong set of intrinsic values are not dependent on praise or rewards from other people. They have beliefs which transcend their self-interest. (286)

Currently, our mainstream culture favors extrinsic aspirations. The objective of the study is to explore ways in which to promote intrinsic values in our communications and policymaking. Monbiot explains further that few people exhibit only extrinsic or intrinsic values, but the research results from over sixty countries show that values cluster consistently. Those who are guided by the goal of maximizing capital tend to show "less empathy, stronger manipulative tendencies, a stronger attraction to hierarchy and inequality, stronger prejudices towards strangers and less concern about human rights and the environment" (287). Conversely, those whose objective is self-acceptance exhibit "more empathy and a greater concern about human rights, social justice and the environment" (287). What is more, "the stronger someone's extrinsic aspirations, the weaker his or her intrinsic goals" (287). That is, the research conveys that the sets of values tend to counter each other.

[15] The report was written by Tom Crompton of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), and published in 2010. It reports on research into contemporary cultural values that can lead to more ethical and empathetic culture and policymaking.

Correspondingly, Oscar's identity formation is not motivated by self-acceptance that could develop into maturity in the early chapters. Díaz conveys the communal and consumerist cultures of Oscar's Dominican-American experience through the crossover between the realities of "Macondo" and "McOndo" (7), which is a nod to Gabriel García Márquez's notion of magical realism in the Americas and the Caribbean. According to Márquez's distinction, Macondo is the traditional, spiritually active community of people who would take such notions as the fukú and zafa as genuine aspects of their daily lives. McOndo, then, signals the ubiquity of American corporate and consumer capitalism, for instance, the global presence of McDonald's restaurants, as the name implies. McOndo reflects the younger generations' adoption of the consumer values of American capitalism, and their diluted attitudes towards the spiritual and the collective. The intrinsic and extrinsic values that Monbiot writes about resonate with the distinction between Macondo and McOndo. Macondo signals the intrinsic goals of self-acceptance, relationships with family and community, and empathy, while McOndo is associated with extrinsic aspirations, or an obsession with accumulating capital, fame, beautiful people, and less concern about social justice. Insofar as developing extrinsic values and maximizing human capital are seen as essential to becoming a mature member of society in the neoliberal setting, Oscar's McOndo tendencies indicate rational self-interest. Nevertheless, they do not make his loneliness less severe.

Friedman writes that the "discrimination against groups of particular color or religion is least in those areas where there is the greatest freedom of competition" (109). That is, Friedman believes that neoliberalism serves diversity without prejudice,

because the self-regulating free market enables unfettered competition. Friedman argues that the free transactions and competition make the market non-discriminatory, because if a person objects to working or doing business on the basis of race, religion, political view, or gender, that person "thereby limits his range of choice" (110). The implication is that the free market serves the interests of those who have experienced ostracism in particular. A child of the Dominican diaspora in New Jersey, there are no apparent threats to Oscar's wellbeing other than bullying. His partiality to McOndo culture is most evident in his sexualized hunger for love and almost obsessive collectorship of geek-chic genre items. Oscar's McOndo tendencies culminate when during his studies at Rutgers, he tries to take his life after drinking two bottles of orange Cisco, a fortified wine. He is morose after having been rejected by another love interest, and jumps on to the train tracks just as Route 18 arrives at the New Brunswick train station. Oscar fails at his attempt: "In his drunken confusion he must have miscalculated . . . the dude missed 18 proper and landed on the divider!" (191). In this instance, Díaz's novel talks back at the presumption that McOndo is meant to have saved Dominicans from the restrictions of Macondo nationalism and communality. Instead, Oscar's McOndo life pushes him to solitude and unreasonable choices, though he simply seeks reciprocation of affection and companionship. As Oscar and Yunior discuss the suicide—"It was the curse that made me do it, you know. I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit. It's ours too, he said" (194)—Díaz conveys that diaspora may have done away with the most apparent facets of oppression for most Dominicans, but normalized insecurity persists.

The middle chapters of *Oscar Wao* go back in time to portray the resilience of Oscar's grandfather, Abelard Cabral, and his mother, Hypatia Belicia, or Beli. Because, in fear of dissent, Trujillo had barred many Dominicans from leaving the country, Díaz describes that "His Eye was everywhere; he had a Secret Police that out-Stasi'd the Stasi" (226). The story of Abelard[16] and his daughters is indicative of the lock-down mentality. Though Abelard had gained his medical training in one of the best schools in Mexico City, Jacqueline, the daughter who has ambitions of following her father's footsteps, has no opportunity to leave the country for Trujillo wishes to court her. Because Abelard refuses to acquiesce and offer Jacqueline to the dictator, he is tortured and imprisoned for life. All evidence of Abelard's esteemed medical career and the Cabral family pride is destroyed. Even Beli's eventual move to the United States, which is an attempt to take charge of her own life, is prompted by her family's oppression. Beli's struggle in the middle of the narrative helps the reader see how the fukú shapes her and her children's futures in New Jersey. Furthermore, the lessons of the hardship that Oscar's grandfather and mother experienced in the Dominican Republic inform Oscar's *Bildung* in America and later Dominican struggle.

The only survivor of Abelard's children, young Beli suffers horrendous burns in the hands of her foster parents, before being taken in by Abelard's sister, La Inca. Beli grows to be a headstrong young woman, who endures further devastating violence for

[16] Similarly to the connection to Oscar Wilde, Díaz makes another reference by way of a character's name here. Peter Abelard was a medieval French philosopher and theologian. Peter King describes that Abelard was the "teacher of his generation" and the preeminent scholar of the twelfth century ("Peter Abelard"). This reputation of outstanding scholarship is mirrored in Díaz's Abelard, who is characterized as the preeminent Dominican doctor of his time. Due to Abelard's ill-fated affair with Héloïse that led to his being castrated and defamed (King), he, like Wilde, carries a history of dangerous passionate love. However, this connotation of risking one's wellbeing for romantic love applies to Díaz's Oscar more than his Abelard. In *Oscar Wao,* Abelard does sacrifice his life, but he does so to retain his daughters' dignity.

engaging in an adulterous relationship with Trujillo's brother-in-law. The relationship is passionate, but after Beli requests her lover to commit to his promises of leaving his wife and acting like a father to the child Beli is expecting, she is taken to the canefield on the orders of her lover's wife, Trujillo's sister. It is an act that echoes the demeaning violence of the plantation system, or as Yunior narrates, "They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog," and counts that Beli endures two rapes and incurs "167 points of damage in total" (146-147). If the fukú functions as an allegory for the evolution of domination in the novel, a figure, called the Mongoose, accompanies Beli, and later Oscar, at times of unthinkable hardship, and is suggestive of the resilience of Díaz's characters.[17]

The first sighting of the Mongoose occurs after Beli's beating in the canefield. Though the gangsters leave her to die in the middle of broken stalks of sugar cane, miraculously Beli survives:

> there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her. *You have to rise*. My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso. *Hypatia, your baby is dead*. No, no, no, no, no. It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter*. What son? What daughter? *The ones who*

[17] Yunior depicts the Mongoose not as the opposite of the fukú—the zafa has that purpose—but as the embodiment of persistence and inner resilience. Yunior explains that similarly to the fukú, the Mongoose came to the New World on a slave ship. According to the history of the species that Yunior provides, the mongoose is not a native species of the Caribbean or the Americas (151). Rather, it accompanied the enslaved from India to West Africa, and from there to the New World, an anecdote which affirms the symbolism of Díaz's Mongoose as an ally of people, especially those who have faced different forms of social injustice. In addition, as a species, the mongoose is known for being immune to snake venom and fighting snakes; the natural resistance of the species could be seen thematically as the Mongoose of the novel helping the characters to fight against the venom of normalized violence. The first appearances of the Mongoose relate to the violence of colonial and dictatorial powers, while in relation to the Mongoose's interactions with Oscar the larger thesis is that neoliberal ideology creates a particular kind of social injustice that, more fully than most, erases its nature as injustice. Therefore, Díaz depicts the Mongoose urging Oscar, for Oscar's writing about the injustice is imperative.

> *await*. It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke. *You have to follow*. (149; original emphases)

The Mongoose, who speaks with Beli and bolsters her spirit, pushes her back to life. Even though her unborn child dies in the beating, the Mongoose compels Beli to envision the future of her family. Her life is nearly erased the way almost all evidence of the lives of her late parents and sisters were erased for standing against Trujillo. Though facing violence is the most visible thread in the Cabrals' story, the Mongoose points to family integrity that survives as well. Abelard did not give in to intimidation, and intuitively, Beli follows in her father's footsteps by way of her intrinsic fortitude. Beli drags herself out of the canefield to the roadside, and eventually to the diaspora. She is led by her interest in self-preservation as well as the social motivation to save the future of her family, of "those who await."

As a result of the encounter with the Mongoose, the hope that diaspora encapsulates starts to inform Beli's identity. The motivation for diaspora can spring from fears of injustice, inequality, and insecurity hand in hand with hopes of self-improvement. Beli swears to become independent, or in Díaz's words, Beli becomes "the Empress of Diaspora" (107). The McOndo life that Beli would embrace in America is persuasive, because it claims to protect from discrimination through freedom of choice. Beli is determined to uproot her life to liberate herself and her future children from the oppression and poverty she has experienced in the Dominican Republic. Colonial rule and postcolonial dictatorship can destroy the oppressed people's sense of safety fundamentally, because, as Ashcroft and others note, "the question of the subject and subjectivity" affects their "perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the conditions of their domination, their 'subjection'" (219). That is, structures of

trust are hampered under colonial rule and postcolonial dictatorship due to the use of power in a way that blurs the distinction between identification with resistant subjectivity and being a subject. The neoliberal model does not serve Beli well, because it privileges the freedom of the market, and defines subjectivity through the individual's ability to harness her or his self-interest for success, over the person's sense of safety.

The normalized violence of state oppression may have motivated the migration of many, but in neoliberal ideology, as Becker has suggested, migration is treated as another investment in human capital (*Human* 11). However, neoliberal ideology rarely accounts for the severe cost of migration the individual must bear, which I will explore further in the next chapter. Indeed, decades after Beli's move, Oscar's sister, Lola, describes her mother's actuality in America as rather different from the dream: "if she wasn't at work she was sleeping, and when she was around it seemed all she did was scream and hit" (54). Beli's social status as an immigrant of Dominican descent means that her liberty comes with a heavy weight of working multiple jobs to the extent of losing touch with her children, whose better futures were also included in her idea of America. Beli experiences the fear of falling back to everyday hardship so severely that her standards for her children in the host country are so high that she regularly beats them to shape, exhibiting the kind of normalized violence she escaped and hoped her children would escape. Her manner of enforcing the mature development of her children becomes anti-social.

2.5 *Bildung* as Striving in Isolation

In the last third of the novel, Oscar is convinced that he must act alone to salvage himself and his family's history. The end of the novel sees Oscar as a Rutgers

alumnus in his twenties. He works as an English teacher and is still as unpopular as ever in the high-school setting. Following the failed suicide attempt, Oscar begins to direct his cultural interests to his ancestral Dominican Republic. The suicide attempt, survival, and subsequent decision to travel to Santo Domingo[18] prove central to his self-learning. The concluding chapters see Oscar attempting to connect more with his Macondo heritage. As Oscar negotiates the path from McOndo to Macondo, Oscar transcribes the family's history, its relationship to the fukú, and possibilities for a zafa in the form of his writing project that conveys his family's story, including the previously unspoken brilliance and resilience of Abelard.

Oscar's project begins primarily through his interest in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and superhero comics, because, as Tim Lanzendörfer points out, those genres offer a way of thinking of another framework for truth and the power structures at play in society (138). In addition, his understanding of Caribbean history and engagement with the supernatural that is characteristic of the Caribbean tradition enrich his Western genre interests. To further previous interpretations of Díaz's narrative as text-as-zafa, I suggest that *Oscar Wao* gives reason to address the role of genre-as-zafa. Combining genres could be seen as another practice of zafa-ing by Oscar, for his genre-mixing makes visible how the two cultural influences of pop culture and Caribbean heritage support one another. To put it differently, Oscar's genre-mixing makes visible the connections and discrepancies between the official and people's stories of the

[18] Díaz highlights the influence of neoliberal competition on the present-day Dominican Republic in his description of Santo Domingo as a place where Oscar sees such "hunger on some of the kids' faces [that he] can't forget" it, at the same time as he takes in the rows of "U.S. fast-food restaurants (Dunkin' Donuts and Burger King)" (273). This juxtaposition in Díaz's description of the country after Trujillo's regime further suggests that domination was not eradicated with the arrival of neoliberalism.

Dominican experience, and the distinction between Macondo and McOndo. Moreover, the *Bildungsroman* genre enables Díaz to map Oscar's genre-mixing as a type of learning, which elucidates the interplay between self-acceptance and self-interest in negotiating diaspora.

In an example of suffering agency, Elliott argues that the residents of the hard-hit areas of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina were not denied possibilities of action to ease their hardship, but rather, they were left alone with their choice to act (85). The appalling choice between drowning in one's home or swimming to safety though simple is an important notion, because it is a mode of domination specific to neoliberalism, which assumes that the subject must take significant action alone (85). That is, Elliott treats the unreasonable choice as a form of domination, because the assumption of personal responsibility becomes a modality of social control under neoliberalism. Elliott's example of the Katrina survivors and private individuals who became rescuers in their neighborhoods relates to the narrative theme of self-preservation and self-interest in *Oscar Wao*. Both Beli and Oscar are figures of striving in isolation. In Elliott's analogy, the rescuer may be saving others, but is forced to work alone. Moreover, the individual rescuer becomes heroic for achieving the sort of salvage that ought to be a fundamental responsibility of a caring collective organization. Echoing Elliott, Monbiot notes in his essay on neoliberal loneliness that, in the absence of social support networks, we have begun to expect that acts of "heroic individualism" are essential in personal development (10). The case of suffering agency made by Díaz's *Bildungsroman* is effective, for it makes manifest how self-preservation can become a primary mode of growing up under neoliberalism.

Oscar is faced with a serious threat to his capacity to persevere when he is beaten up by gangsters in Santo Domingo. Oscar has been seeing his grandmother's neighbor, a middle-aged prostitute, Ybón, who finally reciprocates his affection. Perhaps in a reflection of the fukú's workings, Ybón's corrupted policeman boyfriend, known as "the capitán" (303), grows extremely jealous of Oscar. The capitán is an example of hustling which is an entrepreneurial form of power. Namely, the capitán, and the type of law and order he practices, embodies neoliberal kinds of self-interest and force. The capitán orders Oscar to be beaten up, and eventually killed, for his crush on Ybón. The capitán's disproportionately severe violence towards Oscar over his crush demonstrates how the setting of institutionalized insecurity informs the characters' actions and reactions to each other.

In much the same way as the Mongoose appears to his mother, Oscar is visited by the animal after his first beating by the capitán's aids in the canefield. When Oscar comes to after having been unconscious for three days as a result of the beating, he recalls a meaningful dream,

> where a mongoose was chatting with him. Except the mongoose was the Mongoose. What will it be, muchacho? It demanded. More or less? And for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain—Less! Less! Less!—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. Lola and his mother and Nena Inca. . . . More he croaked. (301)

Here, the Mongoose behaves in much the same way as with Beli, but instead of obliging him to persevere, as it did with Beli, the Mongoose makes Oscar choose between life and death. The changed tone of the Mongoose could be seen to reflect Oscar's own assumption that heroic individualism is expected of him to survive, for neoliberal ideology teaches responsibility as an individualist, and not a collective, concept.

Aside from remembering "the image of an Aslan-like figure with golden eyes,"[19] another dream remains with Oscar: "An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he saw that the book was blank" (302). Anna Garland Mahler points out that a similar metaphor of a faceless man figures prominently in the writings of Edouard Glissant that explore the processes of colonization and decolonization in relation to Caribbean cultural discourse and theory. In Mahler's analysis, Glissant's analogy of the "Third World as the hidden face of the Earth" indicates that forms of domination are most visible from the figurative concealed side of the world (124). In other words, the hidden face of the Earth signals the resilience of the oppressed that is frequently omitted from the official history of global power relations, from colonialism to neoliberalism.

The blank face and book signal the dialogic processes of storytelling and becoming in Díaz's *Bildungsroman*. Oscar's dream presses him to write in order to engage with the Macondo-side of his heritage, and grant the Cabral stories visibility. Nonetheless, the blank-page metaphor is not entirely positive here, because it implies that until the moment of his dreams, Oscar has failed to take responsibility to learn of his family's past. Furthermore, in terms of the neoliberal *Bildungsroman,* the empty book signifies a similar lack of a social narrative that the "fresh page" of Sennett's Silicon Valley analogy communicates: when faced with a failure, the subject of self-interest has no reliable support. The dreams communicate a heightened need for Oscar

[19] Here, Díaz refers to the lion, Aslan, who rules Narnia and is often the voice of justice in C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Through the analogy, Díaz perhaps likens the role of the Mongoose to Aslan's acts of redemption. Though both the Mongoose and Aslan are somewhat unpredictable characters, they serve to reinforce the other characters' inner resilience.

to strive in isolation to fill in the blank pages to salvage his story, the history of his family, and by association that of his Dominican-American experience.

In fact, Oscar expects to strive in isolation to the end. When he recovers from the first altercation in the canefield, Oscar believes that he brought the beating upon himself by way of his choices. Yet, Oscar is not willing to forget Ybón, for "He realized, rather unhelpfully, that had he and Ybón not been serious the capitán would probably never have fucked with him. Proof positive that he and Ybón had a relationship" (303). Regardless of Ybón's efforts to avoid Oscar in order to keep him out of harm's way, he decides to confess his love for her publicly: "I love you, he shouted into the street. I love you!" (304). Aware that his days are numbered, because of the capitán's threats, Oscar acts in denial of the safe options available for him: to leave for the U.S. or stay in the Dominican Republic without Ybón.

Neither of the options is a reasonable choice for Oscar, and he accepts that his choice of loving Ybón inevitably puts him in danger. After each threat from the capitán, Oscar "recorded the time and then phoned the embassy and told them that Officer ----- had threatened to kill him, could you please help?" (317). He does not give up hope, "because if [Ybón] really wanted him gone she could have lured him out in the open and let the capitán destroy him" (318). While waiting for the capitán's retaliation, for twenty-seven days, Oscar researches and writes close to three hundred pages of the Cabral history. He writes not only how insecurity and violence pass from Abelard to Beli and himself, but also how love and resilience do the same.

Eventually, Oscar gives up his life for the sake of a single sexual encounter with Ybón. His affection for Ybón may be sincere, and his efforts to continue writing the

family zafa and be with Ybón may be heroic considering the likely fierceness of the capitán's retaliation. Certainly, his affection and writing project are inspired by the stories of justice and grand gestures in his beloved Tolkien and superhero comics. But even if Díaz's *Bildungsroman* frames sexual desire as the focus of Oscar's motivation for seeking human connection and becoming a man, expecting love with a partner should not entail the risk of death. In other words, Oscar's life need not be at stake for such basic human connection that society more attuned to solidarity could offer a young individual as a foundation for a life narrative. The shift from state power to neoliberalism disrupts the expectation of the *Bildungsroman* to reflect development into socialized maturity. Neoliberalism does not offer a social grounding in which Oscar's purpose of being a responsible son of the Dominican diaspora could be fully realized.

2.6 Unsettling Individualism in *The Goldfinch*

Tartt's lengthy and contemplative prose seems akin to nineteenth-century literature, and concentrates on themes of social stratification, guilt, beauty, and what it means to be good. *The Goldfinch* portrays the journey of Theo Decker, whose mother—his sole caregiver, because his father has left—dies, when he is thirteen. *The Goldfinch* is divided into sections which depict the stages of Theo's *Bildung*, starting with the novel's current moment in Amsterdam, where distraught, adult Theo looks back on the times he spent with his mother, Audrey Decker. The first part of the narrative, then, depicts the loving relationship between Theo and Audrey, and begins to describe how Theo ended up in a desperate situation in Holland. On the morning of the bomb explosion that takes Audrey's life, Theo and Audrey are on their way to a school meeting to discuss his recent misbehavior. To escape pouring rain, they stop by the

Metropolitan Museum to see an exhibition on the works of the Dutch Masters, her favorites. Theo is separated from Audrey when she goes to catch the last glimpse of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Class* before leaving. It is shortly after their separation that the explosion takes place. In the chaos of fire, rubble, and piles of bodies, Theo is clustered together with an old man and young girl, whom he had seen upon their entry to the museum. With his last breaths of life, the old man gives Theo an antique ring and the painting of the luminescent goldfinch by Carel Fabritius to protect. He instructs Theo to find an antiques shop, called Hobart and Blackwell, to return the artefacts.

After the man's passing, overcome with confusion and fear for his mother's well-being, Theo slips out of the museum that is barricaded by emergency services to walk home in the hope that his mother will do the same. Quite unbelievably, he manages to walk away without being questioned for witnessing the event, and more importantly, for taking a bag (containing the masterpiece) from the crime scene. With his mother still missing the next day, Theo's post-explosion headache turns into heartache. In disbelief, Theo rejects calls from social services, but eventually, he accepts that his mother died at the museum. Theo will return the ring but not the painting.

The bomb at the museum establishes the narrative problem that initiates the *Bildungsroman* plot. Reviews of *The Goldfinch* by renowned critics characterize the novel as Dickensian. Writing for *The New York Times*, Stephen King calls Theo a "21st-century Oliver Twist," and regards Boris Pavlikovsky, Theo's mischievous friend, as Tartt's rendition of the Artful Dodger ("Flights"). James Wood of *The New Yorker* titles his review of Tartt's narrative "The New Curiosity Shop," while the National Public

Radio's Maureen Corrigan finds similarities between Theo and David Copperfield. Many reviews also romanticize the role of the mother in Theo's *Bildung*, which is a customary reading of the convention of the absent mother figure within the genre. It is true that the first section of the novel depicts the mother-son relationship as one of happiness and adoration: "I loved the sandalwood perfume she wore . . . I loved the rustle of her starched shirt when she swooped down to kiss me on the forehead" (8). Or as Theo muses further, "her laugh was enough to make you want to kick over what you were doing and follow her down the street" (8). Both King and Corrigan concentrate on the way in which Tartt conveys the boy's grief: "Like the goldfinch in the painting he can't bring himself to relinquish, Theo is chained, forever yearning for the mother he lost on that terrible day at the museum" ("Dickensian"). Though this interpretation justifies Theo's unyielding love of the painting, the romanticized attention to the mother and Theo's holding onto the stolen painting out of grief makes him primarily a victim of a horrible terrorist attack and the ensuing trauma. Certainly, the explosion and Audrey's death divert the attention from the fact that, in neoliberal terms, Theo privatizes public property when he takes the painting from the museum.[20]

Indeed, the focus on the mother is a reading that does not allow for a nuanced engagement with Theo's own choices or other characters' influence on him. In addition to romanticized mother figures, flawed father figures characterize Dickensian narratives. For instance, in her article that likens Tartt's Theo to Dickens's David

[20] The way in which the explosion in the beginning of Tartt's novel diverts attention away from the unpleasant aspects of Theo's subject formation is reminiscent of what Klein terms "disaster capitalism" (7). Klein identifies that Friedman's tactics of shock—"using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering" (9)—have provided a clean slate for neoliberalism to posture as the inevitable political ideology of our time. The bomb in Tartt's novel serves this purpose of providing a clean start for Theo, making him the perfectly free neoliberal—*tabula rasa*—subject.

Copperfield, Helen K. Heineman notes that, frequently in the Dickensian *Bildungsroman*, the father is a "hostile" character, who might force the protagonist to "make his way independently" (23-24). Perhaps it is because of the trauma of losing his mother, and the genre expectation that the father figure is antagonistic or not present, that many critics of *The Goldfinch* have focused on the novel as Dickensian, and have not examined the father's role in Theo's formation in detail. In doing so, they have overlooked the fact that Theo is deceitful from the outset of the novel, echoing the way in which Theo describes his father as "*Unreliable*" (55; original emphasis).

The middle section of *The Goldfinch* depicts the drug-fueled years of Theo's living, in practice, with his friend Boris, though officially with his mostly-absent, gambler father in Las Vegas. With his ventures in betting, fraud, and drug abuse, Theo's dad is a father figure reminiscent of Jacques Lacan's philosophy. Indeed, the father à la Lacan is the other to the more primitive mother-child relationship and disrupts the child's socialization (Johnston). To be sure, Mr. Decker is a socially irresponsible subject of self-interest, whose influence on Theo's self-learning and denial is substantial. Analyzing the father-son relationship in reference to the Dickensian and Lacanian traditions helps to also understand the formation of Theo's neoliberal *Bildung*.

Sennett notes that the "apostles of the new capitalism" argue that their laissez-faire version of social organization makes for "a fluid freedom" in society (*Culture* 13). Living with his dad and new stepmother, Xandra, Tartt describes how Theo's everyday life takes on this air of fluid freedom:

> [It] was like living with roommates I didn't particularly get along with. When they were at home, I stayed in my room with the door shut. And when they were gone—which was most of the time—I prowled through the farther reaches of the house, trying to get used to its openness. . . . No

> one cared that I never changed my clothes and wasn't in therapy. I was free to goof off, lie in bed all morning, watch five Robert Mitchum movies in a row if I felt like it. (232)

The free-for-all city of Las Vegas signals utmost personal liberties to Theo, his dad, and Xandra, and in that framework, their parent-child relationship becomes a laissez-faire affair. In this setting, Theo's freedom to do anything also means solitude: "My new room felt so bare and lonely . . . I left the sliding door of the closet open so I could see my clothes hanging inside" (225). The absence of spaces for social activity, which Monbiot describes in his account of the neoliberal period as the Age of Loneliness, are echoed in Tartt's description of the residential area of Desert End Road, where Theo finds himself "stuck in the middle of nowhere—no movie theaters or libraries" or public transportation to get away from the rows of enormous, unoccupied houses (233). Because the grownups in his life show no real interest in his schooling or social life, Theo could be considered on the road to becoming the perfectly free neoliberal subject, but it is a lonely path.

Though of Ukrainian descent, Theo's classmate, Boris, has lived all over the world with his miner father. The boys become close out of enjoyment and necessity, because neither lives under adult supervision: "if either of us had lived in an even halfway normal household, with curfews and chores and adult supervision, we wouldn't have become quite so inseparable, so fast" (245). They wake each other up for school, sign report cards, and shoplift food and drinks. Together Theo and Boris start to drink heavily every night, and Theo's growing addiction to alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drugs, is a turning point in Tartt's novel of formation. The boys' freedom goes awry when they begin to frequently fight while drunk: "A line of blood drips

wound across the paving stones to the pool. Shoes, jeans, bloodsoaked shirt, were riotously flung and tossed. . . . Worse: a greasy scum of vomit floated in the shallow water by the steps" (277). The initial buzz of the care-free, drunken nights turns into unease. Elliott's notion of suffering agency is evident in Tartt's passages that depict Theo and Boris scrambling a life together, because their *Bildung* in those years spent in Las Vegas is based on an unreasonable choice. That is, whichever option they choose, they must take significant action without guidance and support: either they live in solitude without the comforts of a home, or they take care of everyday life together as best they can, dabbling with petty crime and substance abuse while at it. Though the latter option means that the boys continue to be schooled, fed, and have each other for company, it confines them in the same patterns of unreliability and addiction that keep their parents away from them. The unreasonable choice determines Theo's and Boris's development as social beings to the extent that their *Bildung* becomes a process of self-preservation and perseverance.

Theo blocks out the signals of his life in pieces, and stops to care about cleaning up signs of his hangovers; the reek of vodka, sunburn from passing out by the pool, malnourishment, bruises from both vitamin deficiency and fights with Boris (291). The boys' *Bildung* suggests that they have constructed their daily life on their dubious sense of liberty, learned from their fathers. In other words, they have internalized the system that produced them. Sennett insists that the problem is not whether the fluid freedom of the new capitalism is real, because "institutions, skills, and consumption patterns have indeed changed," but the "argument is that these changes have not set people free"

(*Culture* 13). Indeed, Theo's and Boris's freedom is fraught and unsettling, because it emerges from the fact that no one cares about them.

2.7 *Bildung* as Managing Risk

The last third of the novel leaps forward to Theo in his twenties. Theo has become a successful, self-made man, and is living back in New York City. The last third also sees the culmination of Theo's secrets and lies in a fatal fight with traders of stolen masterpieces in Amsterdam, which leads Theo to kill a gangster in self-defense. Theo longs for social security, but perpetually undoes opportunities for companionship, for his *Bildung* has been marked by deceit. In much the same way as Sennett's Silicon Valley programmers, Theo lacks steadiness of purpose: he shrugs accountability for his actions continuously, and simply moves on when responsibility or resolution is demanded of him. Theo's secrets and lies start to unravel, as he stretches his few friends' commitment to him too thin. To be sure, when Theo faces difficulty, he again finds himself alone; his life narrative is devoid of communal guidance.

Protecting his addiction to pills and the painting that he cannot bring himself to return, Theo becomes highly skilled at keeping up appearances. He elucidates his obsessive behavior by noting that at the start of his twenty-sixth year, for three years, he had had no more than three sober days in a row. Indeed, Theo elucidates his obsessive behavior: "I'd been keeping myself (for the most part) to a one-day-on, one-day-off schedule (although what constituted an 'off' day was a dose just small enough to keep from getting sick)" (455). Evidently, he has adopted his father's approach of disavowal as a motto instead of owning up to his actions: "*Deny, deny, deny*, as my dad . . . had advised" (485; original emphasis). Even Theo's capacity to stick to a self-imposed

routine and remain honest with himself seems suspect. Yet, Theo is in so much denial about the extent of his addiction and habit of lying that his evasions of responsibility do not affect his conscience much.

Regardless of his denial, Theo longs for true companionship. Theo shows openness to commitment with James Hobart, the proprietor of Hobart and Blackwell. Tartt depicts Hobart, or Hobie, as "absent-minded and kind . . . self-deprecating and gentle" (395), and he is the only adult character in the *Bildungsroman* with whom Theo feels secure after his mother's death. The two cultivate their relationship through craft, when Theo helps Hobie in the restoration of old furniture. Theo's apprenticeship with Hobie gives him the much-needed guidance of a grownup, and lessons in a craft, as per conventions of the novel of formation. Sennett notes that the shifting demands of the neoliberal reality mitigate the ideal of craftsmanship, of committing to "learning to do just one thing really well" (*Culture* 4). Sennett relates the fact that neoliberalism undermines the value of craftsmanship to the lack of "mental and emotional anchor" in contemporary communities, which, in turn, would be essential in managing the neoliberal demands of flexibility (183).[21] He includes in the notion of craftsmanship the importance of "mental craftsmanship," as in communicating effectively and ethically, and practicing self-discipline in doing so, as well as "social craftsmanship," which indicates the cultivation of reputation and that of sustainable relationships (104). Sennett suggests that "Getting something right, even though it may get you nothing, is

[21] Integral to Thorstein Veblen's sociological approach to economics is a similar notion of craftsmanship. As Veblen puts it, "the immaterial equipment, or, by a license of speech, the intangible assets of the community" are necessary for individuals to "make a living . . . make an advance" (518-519). Likewise, the commitment to hone one's craft, one's "immaterial equipment," is a means to commit to the prosperity and development of one's community.

the spirit of true craftsmanship" (196). It is the kind of spirit that initially keeps Theo engaged with work in Hobie's company.

The neoliberal argument is that the invisible hand of the market creates all the social commitment necessary, because the maximizing behavior of self-interested individuals will benefit society as a whole through the accumulation of value. This scenario defines commitment through the notion of individual investment in human resources, rather than through the spirit of craftsmanship. Sennett does not address the logic of the invisible hand directly, but argues that only "*disinterested* commitment . . . can lift people up emotionally; otherwise, they succumb in the struggle to survive" (196; added emphasis). Sennett's sociocultural notion of craftsmanship is valuable here, because it demonstrates how to practice disinterested commitment, which is largely absent from the neoliberal setting of Tartt's *Bildungsroman*. Theo's apprenticeship with Hobie offers him an emotional uplift and sense of respite, but he "cannot *help* but be interested," as Elliott would put it (91; original emphasis).

Eventually, Theo betrays Hobie's commitment to him and his apprenticeship in antique restoration. Though Hobie has taught Theo to identify reproduced, fake antiques for sincerity in the service of art, Theo uses his lessons to do the exact opposite. He uses his trained eye for details of reproduction to create a scheme of selling altered and even fully reconstructed pieces as originals out of Hobie's workshop. Theo's business model is based on misdirection, for "People loved to think they were getting a deal. Four times out of five they would look right past what they didn't want to see" (453). Theo's capitalizing on counterfeit furniture exemplifies neoliberal thinking. He inflates values and generates a market, taking on risk of discovery in order to accumulate personal

wealth.[22] To be exact, Theo's business model relies on re-routing risk; that is, Theo bears the insecurity of being found out as a fraud, but if his buyers can be fooled, they should be the ones to manage the risk of swindling more effectively. Theo's idea of the market is not based on the traditional notion of the invisible hand; that is, the argument against neoliberalism that Theo exhibits is that its market ideology always serves individual interests rather than transforming those interests to social utility.

Theo assumes that his rapid accumulation of profit justifies his fraud. What is more, it is not only important to Theo that he makes a fortune out of the reconstructed pieces, but also that his deceit actually makes him seem magnanimous:

> [If] the collector got the piece home and noticed something amiss . . . then I—grieved at the mix-up, while stalwart in my conviction that the piece was genuine—gallantly offered to buy it back at ten percent more than the collector had paid . . . This made me look like a good guy, confident in the integrity of my product and willing to go to absurd lengths to ensure my client's happiness, and more often than not the client was mollified and decided to keep the piece. (450)

Trading on misinformation, Theo abuses his customers' lack of expertise in reconstruction. He is only found out when he is investigated by another expert, Hobie. Theo has capitalized on Hobie's trust, knowledge of the craft, and reputation of sincerity, or as Hobie points out, Theo's betrayal undermines the entirety of his life's work: "*Everything* is called into question—every stick of furniture that's ever gone out of this shop. I don't know if you've thought about that" (495; original emphasis). Theo has broken the honor system of the craft of restoration, something that is still founded on commitment. Namely, Tartt's narrative suggests that Theo's market ideology has betrayed his maturation into a social being, because he cannot empathize.

[22] Little does Theo know that the beloved painting he has been hiding is actually circulating with a similar inflated value, for Boris has stolen it and trades on it on the black market.

Perhaps the longest commitment Theo forges is to the painting of the goldfinch that he smuggled out of the Met. The painting is also a liability for Theo and of no actual utility, for he cannot safely share his having possession of it. Nonetheless, its beauty sustains him: "The painting had made me feel less mortal, less ordinary" (559). Even if the initial purpose to sneak the painting out of the museum was to serve the history and integrity of the painting by protecting it from the terrorists and damage by the explosion, Theo's keeping it means years of lies. Theo's secret, as Boris reminds him, has formed "a closed circle"; because the painting has been missing for too long, it "is too famous. No one wants to buy it'" (586). The painting is both priceless and useless. Figuratively, then, Theo's lies chain him to the painting, like the goldfinch in the painting is chained to the wall. Once Hobie finds out about Theo's betrayal, and when Theo discovers that Boris out-hustled him by stealing the painting and secretly using it to trade, Theo's confidence in his choices shakes.

He is aggrieved at the loss of the painting, and shows remorse, willing to face his true self, which demonstrates some maturity. But in the next instance, Theo is again led by his self-interest, when he travels to Amsterdam in the hope of recapturing the goldfinch from dealers of stolen masterpieces known to Boris. In a confrontation over the painting, Theo kills a man in self-defense, but is unable to secure the painting. After the altercation, Theo locks himself in his hotel room for days, hoping to evade police investigations into his whereabouts on the night of the killing. He considers killing himself, and enters a drug-fueled period of fever, during which he hallucinates about his mother; how all would be well, had she not died. To be sure, Theo acts immaturely, in denial of his choices and their repercussions: he shuts himself away, considers escaping

the blame by means of suicide, takes drugs to forget, and shifts blame solely to the attackers who killed his mother. Guilt is a feeling that shows consideration of how one's behavior affects others, but Theo is mostly remorseful about his actions *only if* he is found at fault. Theo's dire situation in Holland—which, quite remarkably, is resolved by his leaving the country without questions asked about his involvement in a homicide—demonstrates the precariousness of arranging a life around a secret about actions that were guided primarily by extrinsic values. As Theo's guilt turns into self-pity, Tartt makes evident his questionable values and *Bildung* under the radical individualism of neoliberalism.

Many analyses of *The Goldfinch* are critical of its conclusion for the fact that when the action ends, the novel, as the critics argue, turns from descriptive to prescriptive narrative, which attempts to tell the reader how to conceptualize its ethics. That is, *The Goldfinch* attempts to interpret its own message for the reader. Admittedly, the passages at the end of the novel are rather beautiful ruminations of Theo's realization of his self in relation to what he considers to be the teaching of his story. The laissez-faire upbringing depicted by Tartt has led to a story of a young adult who, only after burning bridges with few remaining friends, comes to realize that what is precious in life is coming to terms not with "outward appearances but inward significance. . . . That first glimpse of pure otherness, in whose presence you bloom out and out and out" (761). Lines such as these show the possibility of Theo's finally developing self-acceptance, but they do not set forth the relation between individual psychology and social *value*, which is key in realizing maturity in the *Bildungsroman*. Tartt's narrative does not show how Theo's *personal* self-acceptance could lead to *social* empathy, as a

demonstration of his maturity. It could be said that, in its conclusion, *The Goldfinch* shows awareness of its own purpose as a *Bildungsroman*, and tries to teach the reader one last lesson of how to afford Theo's story a more forgiving reading. However, because of Theo's *Bildung* in an environment largely shaped by deceit and inability to empathize, Theo's immaturity makes his final assertion of values suspect. *Bildungsromans* regularly develop a sense of the growing person's place in the world, but neoliberalism gives no worldly, social place under the primary category of self-interest.

2.8 Conclusion

In the most literal sense, as I have been arguing, the intense individualism of neoliberalism assumes the formation of young adults into subjects of self-interest. Though Oscar's engaging with his Caribbean family heritage through popular culture is based on good intentions, it is a lonely project for him. Because of neoliberalism's attack on solidarity, the individual hurricane rescuers, in much the same way as the narrative's portrayal of Oscar, are celebrated for simple acts of dignity and care that ought to be basic social provisions. Oscar's intrinsic concern for his family and the Cabral story is implied by the way Yunior is impacted by his work and adopts his cause. Indeed, after Oscar's death, Yunior starts to have recurring dreams of a masked Oscar with a blank book:

> Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (325)

Evidently, Yunior's dreams are reminiscent of Oscar's vision of the faceless man, and they ignite a sense of responsibility in Yunior to write into a narrative the contents of "the four refrigerators where [he] store[s] [Oscar's] books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers" (330). Likewise, Yunior makes it his mission to teach to his and Lola's daughter the cultural heritage contained in the fridges. By association, the family story between Macondo and McOndo, which Oscar began, continues.

Oscar's *Bildung* may be seen to reach a degree of maturity through writing about his ancestry, but it still falls short of disinterested social commitment or an assertion of values. Certainly, despite his implied efforts in enforcing family ties, Oscar continues to be persuaded by his McOndo interests, or what Monbiot calls "a compulsive, atomizing, joyless hedonism" of the neoliberal subject (13), which keeps him from actual social connectedness. By following the trajectories of the Dominican diaspora and Oscar's personal development, *Oscar Wao* shows how the collective individualism of neoliberalism aggrandizes tough choices and imposing gestures, but does not provide mechanisms for dealing with emotional responses to suffering. Neoliberalism simply characterizes personal demonstrations of weakness and anguish as failures that the individuals brought on themselves.

Reflecting the *Bildungsroman*'s focus on self-learning, Tartt, too, addresses the issue of how neoliberalism's fundamental individualism pushes reliance on self-interest while eliding social support and empathy. Theo ponders on his extensively laissez-faire upbringing as the root of his inability to trust and be trustworthy:

> Every shrink, every career counselor, every Disney princess knows the answer: 'Be yourself.' 'Follow your heart.' . . . What if one happens to be possessed of a heart that can't be trusted –? What if the heart, for its own unfathomable reasons, leads one willfully and in a cloud of

> unspeakable radiance away from health, domesticity, civic responsibility and strong social connections and all the blandly-held common virtues and instead straight towards a beautiful flare of ruin, self-immolation, disaster? (761)

Indeed, neoliberal maturity might mean the assertion of "being yourself"; the conviction of individual interest and agency. But as Theo's questions indicate, what happens when the self-interest and individual choices are misguided? At every turn that Theo has a possibility of coming clean and acting accountably, he reverts back to numbing his anxiety with a concoction of denial and prescription drugs. Apart from his relationship with Hobie, whose trust and kindness he betrays, Theo lacks the guidance of mature grownups who could have taught him the social value of disinterested—that is, not self-interested—commitment. Without that social engagement, the end of the narrative sees Theo lose confidence in his own decisions.

By way of Theo's denial, Tartt's narrative does what Elliott calls a failure "to imagine an escape route, . . . to think past the terms of neoliberal personhood" (97), which, Elliott points out, is common among literary texts depicting neoliberal subjectivity such as Yann Martell's *Life of Pi* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* that she analyses. Theo's inexplicably easy return to New York City from Amsterdam after killing a gangster indicates that self-interest is the essential solution to Theo's situation at the end of the novel, in which he finds himself alone, having lost most of his friends. Leaving their protagonists alone, the assumption is that Díaz's and Tartt's *Bildungsromans* cannot help but participate in the logic of neoliberalism.

My reading of the texts also shows how the neoliberal *Bildungsroman* revises the conventional expectation of *Bildungsromans* to build towards the maturity of the protagonist in a linear manner. Rather, the contemporary neoliberal project could be

seen to supply the *Bildungsroman* with a laissez-faire attitude that suggests a process of self-learning marked by insecurity, misinformed penchant for grand gestures, and deceit, implying an education of perpetual immaturity. Sennett's Silicon Valley example demonstrates that fluid freedom arises from the neoliberal demand for a self "oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience" (*Culture* 5). Such orientation, and the inclination of leaving things be, enables neoliberalism to disregard past irresponsibility, which Díaz addresses through his historical outline. But Sennett points out that "Most people are not like this; they need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they've lived through" (5). The new cultural ideal of fluid freedom thus damages many people who attain it, an argument which Tartt's and Díaz's unhappy and lonesome protagonists affirm.

3. OTHER THAN ASSIMILATION: IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE AND ATTICUS LISH

> So, how can we improve the [immigration] system? First, I accept the fact that most immigrants add a lot to countries, that they are conscientious, that they are hard-working, that they do unpopular jobs and add skills. Immigration may also bring some negative features. Crime rates are often higher among immigrants and there are some other problems that you are all familiar with. So the question that I have tried to think about is how can one maximize and preserve the advantages of having many immigrants and reduce the disadvantages? I have a very simple proposal. You might say it is naively simple. The proposal is that governments should sell the right to immigrate. The government should set a price each year and anyone would be accepted, aside from obvious cases such as potential terrorists, criminals and people who are very sick and who would be immediately a big burden to the health system. But aside from these cases, you would allow anybody to immigrate who could make the payments. (Becker, "Challenge" 27)

3.1 Introduction

Immigrants exhibit entrepreneurial spirit in the neoliberal sense, because they regularly assume a great risk of failure when investing in their futures. Delivering the 2010 Hayek Memorial Lecture, titled "The Challenge of Immigration – A Radical Solution," at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London, Gary Becker notes that immigration will continue to intensify. He mentions immigration for humanitarian reasons as "a subset" (48), and considers the substantial income difference between rich and poor countries one of the primary reasons for immigration (20-21). Becker points out that animosity towards immigrants is rarely a result of how freely people are allowed to flow into a country, but rather, how freely they may be permitted to access welfare benefits in that country (25). To replace immigration restrictions, and to maximize the value of immigration to nations, Becker proposes that "governments should sell the right to immigrate" (27). The system would allow anybody to immigrate,

if they could pay a set price, which would be determined by each nation.[23] For immigrants too poor to pay the entrance fee, Becker suggests a loan system similar to a student-loan program (31). Becker believes that the entrance fee would "moderate" the amount crime associated with immigrants and illegal immigration, because the dedication to invest would distinguish committed and skilled individuals from those who immigrate to gain "a free ride" or for low-skill and low-wage jobs (29-30).

Though Becker concedes that his proposed system of immigration has not yet been adopted by any country, it conveys the neoliberal notion of immigration as an investment in human capital. In a 1979 lecture included in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault critiques several claims of Becker's theory of human capital, which was first published in 1964 and commented more generally on immigration as an entrepreneurial act. Foucault points out that migration takes its toll on the individual, perhaps more severely than Becker acknowledges: "migration obviously represents a material cost, since the individual will not be earning while he is moving, but there will also be a psychological cost for the individual establishing himself in his new milieu" (230). What Foucault calls "the period of adaptation" in the new environment (230), will also result in a (temporary) loss of earning, which may, in turn, cause further psychological distress. Mobility and the "ability to make choices of mobility as investment choices for improving income" enable migration to be brought "into economic analysis," but the very approach of examining migration as individual

[23] Becker suggests that the United States set the entrance fee at $50,000, perhaps higher, because the employment and education opportunities for income increase and self-improvement in the country would compensate for the fee generously and rapidly (28). Of course, this scenario assumes that most immigrants are wealthy or will enter higher education and well-paying jobs upon arrival. Becker suggests that a lower price would be the fair exception for those immigrating on the basis of humanitarian reasons, because "even those coming for humanitarian reasons will work and earn money" (49).

enterprise ties migrants to "an immense machine which they do not control" (230).[24] Even if the decision to immigrate is made voluntarily, it can involve unreasonable choices in the new environment to compensate for the varied costs of immigration. In contrast to Becker, Foucault points to costs that burden immigrant communities more than state or market power whose demands motivate mobility.

Elsewhere in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault points out that neoliberalism is not interested in "equitable justice," but in individual success and failure (16-17). Considering immigration an entrepreneurial act renders the objective of immigration an investment success. Within the logic of human capital, a successful immigrant would be one who gains a higher education, substantial income, and stable physical wellness to contribute to the economic growth of the adoptive country. An immigrant, who enters the country with a simpler skillset, substantial educational needs, as well as health problems, would likely burden the economy of the host country and be treated as a failure. The judgment over successful or failing immigrants is evident in Becker's suggestion of the entrance fee, which indicates he believes that the fee would help to separate committed and skilled individuals from those who immigrate for low-skill and

[24] In the excerpt from *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault refers to "migration," with which he implies mobility that might unsettle the "migrant" financially as well as psychologically (230).
Though the terms regarding itinerant individuals are sometimes used interchangeably, the distinctions between "migrant," "refugee," and "immigrant" convey how differences in material resources and motivation often inform our perceptions of displaced people. First, the term "migrant" denotes a "wandering, nomadic" person who "moves temporarily or seasonally from place to place" ("Migrant, adj. and n."). To be a "refugee" means to be a displaced person "who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, esp. in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster" ("Refugee, n."). Finally, the term "immigrant," suggests a person "who migrates into a country as a settler" ("Immigrant, adj. and n."). Because of the often-acute reasons for their departure from the homeland, refugees are likely to have fewer resources at their disposal than migrants and immigrants. Furthermore, migrants and refugees may be motivated by need more clearly than immigrants. Migrants may move more frequently, for instance, due to seasonal job opportunities, while refugees and immigrants are likely to stay in their adoptive countries for longer. The itinerant characters in the novels selected for this chapter are portrayed as legal and illegal immigrants, who have left their countries of origin voluntarily, and arrive in their destinations with the intention to settle.

low-wage jobs or seek welfare benefits ("Challenge" 29-30). Furthermore, the focus on successes and failures tends to ignore any other facets of the immigration experience that exist in between the extremes.

In his contribution to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, Tim Prchal notes that "immigrant adjustment novels" in the history of U.S. literature relate in different ways to the immigrant's assimilation to American national culture and identity (431). In contrast, Stacey K. Sowards and Richard D. Pineda, whose research focuses on popular and mainstream media accounts of individual immigrants, argue that the premise of the neoliberal immigrant narrative increasingly focuses on "how success is achieved" (84). This orientation towards economic success rather than social integration signals a break from the genre conventions of the immigrant narrative. In this scenario, assimilation, which could be perceived as the long-standing determiner of success in immigrant-adjustment narratives, is no longer a key motivation. That is, assimilation to national custom has become a dysfunctional goal, because the incentive to orientate oneself towards the demands of the global market affords more opportunities for prosperity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*[25] are narratives that offer perspectives on immigration to the United States in the neoliberal period. Adichie's *Americanah* is a love story of two Nigerian immigrants, Ifemelu and Obinze, who are driven by a shared dream to build a life in America. *Americanah* is divided into seven parts which move back and forth between the narration of Ifemelu's and Obinze's present-day lives—in which they are

[25] Further references to the novel will be as *Preparation*.

about to be reunited in Nigeria—as well as memories of their past in Nigeria, and as immigrants in different countries in the years in between. I will argue that their eventual entrepreneurialism could be seen as an expression of immigration that is not reconciled through assimilation. In particular, Ifemelu creates a successful career as a writer commenting on American society from the outsider's perspective, and it is her non-assimilation that brings her prosperity. Indeed, my purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate that neoliberalism renders recent immigrant narratives non-assimilationist.

Lish's *Preparation* is set in New York and details the love story of Zou Lei, who is an illegal immigrant of Uighur and Han Chinese origin, and American Brad Skinner, a troubled Iraq War veteran. In the span of the novel's four parts, Zou Lei and Skinner struggle for different reasons, but develop a sense of comradeship and bond over their experiences of isolation in America. Though *Preparation* opens the opportunity of reconciliation through the tropes of hard work and marriage, the protagonists' stories cannot be resolved through assimilation. The anti-immigrant ideas and hostility of a third central character, Jimmy, an ex-convict, provoke unease to highlight alienation not as a problem of immigration. Lish's juxtaposition of the failures of an immigrant, returned soldier, and ex-convict to integrate into the American national custom conveys that alienation is shared across society. [26] I will argue the non-assimilationist narratives

[26] In Karl Marx's terms, specifically in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the notion of alienation refers to a consequence of exploited labor in a factory. Marx's argument was that, as machine-like mechanisms of society, factory workers felt alienated from their humanity, or sense of self. The individual characters in Lish's *Preparation* are not alienated like factory workers: Zou Lei has to work illegally in "gigs," because employers are ready to hire low-wage, undocumented immigrant workforce without providing assistance in securing legal statuses for the workers; Skinner has completed three tours in Iraq, but is unable to work because of his PTSD; and Jimmy is an ex-convict who works on criminal gigs. Lish's characters are drawn to the gig economy, but their efforts to invest in their human capital do not fit the parameters of the cultural identity of entrepreneurial success. Adichie's *Americanah*, in contrast, portrays flourishing entrepreneurs, who have come to prosperity through the gig economy, but also by marketing their transnational identities.

show how neoliberal ideology generates alienation, which is particular in the sense that it erases its nature as alienation; that is, neoliberalism denies its accountability, and expects that individuals who are outsiders to the scope of maximizing human capital be held accountable for failures to integrate.

3.2 Non-Assimilationist Immigrant Narratives

In "New Americans and the Immigrant Novel," Prchal notes that a useful way to explore immigrant novels from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is to concentrate on "what they hope to reform or . . . what they argue *against*" (428; original emphasis). More specifically, social cohesion is frequently the objective of the immigrant narratives that express hope for change, while the protest novels are not only aimed at representing the realities of immigrant life, but the writers position themselves against "conditions deemed harmful to society" (428). Prchal divides the genre further into narratives of "immigrant tragedy," "immigrant invasion," and "immigrant adjustment" (428-429). The immigrant tragedy depicts the individual's inability to assimilate in the new environment; the immigrant-invasion narrative portrays immigrants as a threat to national identity and custom; and the immigrant-adjustment novel details the sacrifices and opportunities of integrating into the U.S. social life and culture. The immigrant-narrative genre conventionally portrays the frustrations, fears, and opportunities attached to the process of assimilation from the perspectives of the immigrant individuals, or through interactions between immigrant and American characters.

In "Under-Writing: Forming an American Minority Literature," Gina Masucci MacKenzie explains that immigrant works regularly express individual motivations for

leaving the homeland and expectations of improvement (1). Lisa Lowe has suggested that the motivation to leave the home country, or the past that is communicated in immigrant narratives, does not convey "a naturalized factual past," because the connection to that history is always broken by displacement (29). Instead, immigrant culture "re-members" the fragmented past as well as it imagines new trajectories "that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning" national identity and culture (29). In narratives that map immigration to the United States, the future expectations regularly engage the American dream (MacKenzie 6). According to Prchal's characterization, immigrant narratives from the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries are centered on the dream as a "promise of financial opportunity, greater freedom, and self-improvement" (429). Drawing from the tension between the motivations to leave and the expectations for the future, some immigrant narratives, such as Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, largely romanticize the dream of self-improvement.

On the contrary, immigrant tragedies convey the immigrant reality, when the dream cannot be realized. Such novels as Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* by European immigrants convey how the hopes of personal advancement in the United States, were often met with disillusionment after arriving. The tragedies depict "succumb[ing] to harsh working conditions," the inability to "achieve economic stability," as well as the poverty and hunger that mark the lives lived in the slums, or on the streets (Prchal 428-429). Moreover, the tragedy narratives depict how the failure to meet the expectations of improved income, a greater sense of individual liberty, and personal development meant for many a disengagement from previously held beliefs as

well as a disenchantment with social life in the new land. Prchal notes that in these tragedy narratives the authors focus their protest against the "flawed social environment that engulfs them" rather than on the immigrant community itself (429).

The immigrant-invasion narrative deals with sentiments of disenchantment as well, but from the anti-immigrant standpoint. Prchal remarks that the hostility towards immigrants in the invasion narratives makes manifest the sociocultural circumstance that faced the newly-arrived immigrants in many parts of the country (429). Works that portray immigrants as threatening masses emerged particularly in reaction to Chinese immigration in the late-nineteenth century. The fear of the extensiveness of the immigrant population from China, especially their involvement in the workforce, propelled narratives that have often been called "Yellow Peril" works, which may have accentuated the xenophobia leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (430). In the immigrant-invasion narratives, the imagery of a dangerous mob is combined with sociocultural commentary, which concentrates on the risks of admitting primitive immigrants as opposed to the ideal of cultured, European ones. To be sure, the anti-immigration rhetoric of the immigrant-invasion narratives underscores the Anglo-centric ideals of American culture.

The adjustment novel departs from the bleak treatment of immigration in the tragedy and invasion narratives. It focuses on immigrant characters who might go through struggles and sacrifices, but primarily perceive the new environment as an opportunity, and assimilate into American society. Prchal outlines three sub-categories of the adjustment novel that convey different degrees of assimilation. The "Americanization" narrative "casts the USA as a country steeped in its British roots,"

and expects that immigrants abandon other cultural traits in favor of the ones that conform to the Anglo-centric cultural template (431-432). Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* is often cited as an Americanization narrative, in which assimilation is achieved through marriage. MacKenzie notes that many conventional immigrant narratives attain assimilation through the marriage plot, which appears in the works as an effort to escape the immigrant community, an opportunity for upward mobility, and to disavow old national identity, customs, and values (6). In contrast, the "Melting Pot" narrative portrays immigrants "contributing their distinctive traits" to the mix of national culture rather than relinquishing them (Prchal 432). Though the melting-pot narrative advocates for more even assimilation than the novels of Americanization, it still exposes problems inherent in the expectation of fusing the cultural traits of different groups under the dominant, Anglo-centric American cultural paradigms.

Prchal's third sub-category, the narrative that promotes cultural pluralism, conventionally contends "that cultural heterogeneity better befits a democratic society that values self-realization" (432). To put it differently, here success is defined through the degree of the immigrant characters' assimilation in much the same way as in the other modes of the immigrant-adjustment novel, but the pluralist narrative stands in resistance to those forms of assimilation that enforce a prescribed cultural identity. The trope of labor can stand to offer positive instances of collective activity in the pluralist scenario. Labor and the workplace offer opportunities for collective expression outside of one's immediate community. Likewise, they provide a platform for creating something new, and contributing to the host society in doing so. Lowe notes that the most profound "*contradictions*" of immigration to the United States involve the fact that

immigrants are welcomed to participate and contribute to the nation's wealth and strength through labor and economic investment, but at the same time, they are labeled as outsiders—and even enemies—through racial and cultural markers (8; original emphasis). Lowe argues that the "immigrant *acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival" can help immigrants make manifest the contradictions they experience, and which alienate them, to develop "politicized cultural work" (9; original emphasis). When denied legal and political representation, cultural work is the best manner to question the forms of state and market power that cause immigrants to feel anxiety.

Regardless, even in cultural pluralism "the pressures to conform to [the dominant U.S.] cultural strain are formidable" (Prchal 434). Prchal proposes that the immigrant-adjustment novels are more popular than the immigrant tragedies and invasion narratives, because they are interested in "how to define an American—and how to become one" (435). Perhaps it is this question of interest which differentiates more recent immigration narratives from the adjustment novels Prchal characterizes; to be sure, Adichie's and Lish's protagonists do not want to become Americans. Indeed, in *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*, Cowart observes that though immigrant writers in the period since 1970 continue to address "diversity, political disenfranchisement, and cultural alienation," they are not equally focused on marginalization from or assimilation into the national-cultural paradigms as their canonized predecessors (3). Instead, many recent immigrant writers explore their defining immigrant experiences of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the demands of global capitalism. In this sense, I will argue, Adichie's *Americanah* and Lish's *Preparation* are non-assimilationist immigrant narratives. My purpose is to show that it

is the non-assimilation of Adichie's characters that affords them success. In *Preparation*, the non-assimilation of Lish's protagonists shifts the burden of integration and alienation away from the immigrant individual. Assimilation, which is a process that requires a prolonged period of time and commitment, no longer affords success within the context of global capitalism which is oriented towards instantaneity and individualism.

3.3 Self-Interested Immigration in *Americanah*

For the past fourteen years, Adichie has been the darling of critics across the world. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was longlisted for the Booker prize in 2004, her second, *Half a Yellow Sun*, won the Orange Price in 2007, and her short-story collection of 2009, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, earned her the MacArthur "Genius" grant in 2010 (Day). Born in Nigeria and after a period of studying in the United States, Adichie now divides her time between the two countries. *Americanah* is often described semi-autobiographical. In much the same way as Adichie, the protagonist, Ifemelu, is a young Nigerian who enters America on a student visa, receives a prestigious fellowship from an Ivy League university, becomes a citizen, and eventually, moves back to Nigeria with the knowledge that her American passport will afford her the choice between two homelands. Adichie's previous works explored Nigerian history and the Nigerian cultural identity, but Mike Peed suggests that *Americanah* negotiates the "difference between an African-American and an American-African" reality ("Realities"). Some critics argue that *Americanah* challenges stereotypes of race and subverts white privilege, while others contend that the novel perpetuates those

problems, in particular in its portrayal of Nigerian life to American audiences.[27] Corrigan notes that the genre that best characterizes the novel divides critics as well, because *Americanah* presents qualities of the *Bildungsroman*, novel of manners, romance, and the immigration narrative ("Coming").

Peed suggests that Ifemelu and Obinze, who are high-school sweethearts, represent a "new kind of immigrant" ("Realities"), because they do not leave Nigeria for starvation, violence, or explicit threats to their lives, but to escape the tediousness and disappointment they envisage in their futures if they were to stay at home. Ifemelu and Obinze become separated in their efforts to gain visas to the United States and make their dreams a reality. Ifemelu in Philadelphia, and Obinze in London, quickly acquire racialized immigrant identities, and enter into years of no communication with each other while they negotiate life abroad. Fifteen years after their initial plans for a life together, Ifemelu and Obinze are re-united in Nigeria. Obinze has since been deported from Britain, married, and established a successful real-estate business in Lagos. Both realize that money, race, and divisive attitudes towards foreignness inform the everyday lives of Nigerians as well, especially amongst the "sanctified, the returnees" whose moral righteousness Ifemelu identifies as familiarly middle-class American, and recognizes in herself as well (Adichie 502). The last chapters privilege the resolution of Ifemelu's and Obinze's love story over offering an in-depth depiction

[27] In "'To Be from the Country of People Who Gave': National Allegory and the United States of Adichie's *Americanah*," Katherine Hallmeier follows two strands of early reviews of Adichie's novel. In Hallmeier's examination, such critics as Ruth Franklin, who writes for *Book Forum*, have claimed that *Americanah* foregrounds Adichie's understanding of her own privilege, while also "subverting white privilege through its sympathetic portrayal of its Nigerian protagonists" (231). In contrast, reviews such as Yemisi Ogbe's piece in the *Chronic Review* argue that the representations of Nigerians in *Americanah* are simplistic and stereotypical (231). Hallmeier compares and contrasts these strands of criticism to contend that Adichie's novel offers a "utopic vision of global power," in which the future of Nigerian capitalism is privileged over that of the United States (232).

of returnee identity. Their eventual prosperity and enduring love make Ifemelu and Obinze's immigration stories narratives of success. However, having undone many social ties to achieve that success, they appear rather alone in their love, residing in Ifemelu's apartment outside of the city and away from their families, at the novel's closing.

The early chapters of *Americanah* depict Ifemelu as a woman who has made a financial and public success out of her immigration to the United States. The blog she begins to write during her studies in America uses her Nigerian identity to brand herself an authority for the entertainment and instruction of other female immigrants from African countries, who identify with her, and of black Americans who do not have her cosmopolitan racial identity. The main sections of the novel group together chapters that share themes of the characters' immigrant, Nigerian, American, and returnee Nigerian—or "Americanah" (78)—perspectives.

The novel begins in the present, in which Ifemelu has completed a fellowship at Princeton, and prepares for her move back to Nigeria by taking the train to nearby Trenton to have her hair braided at an African salon. She has lived in America for fifteen years, investing in her future as a student, a well-paying but unfulfilling job as a nanny, and as a writer, but her immigration has also included psychological costs through periods of unemployment, and sexual mistreatment. Ifemelu contemplates her present social status by means of association, noting that while the hair salon in Trenton has a distinctive smell of the hair products combined with the fragrance of the different dishes the hair dressers from various African countries have brought for lunch, "Princeton had no smell" (3). On the one hand, Ifemelu's notion of the smell, or the

lack thereof, indicates that affluence which is concomitant to the Ivy League institution cancels out the character of the place, making it plain. On the other hand, the implication is that the prosperity and privilege of the place imparts a sense of self-importance to the inhabitants, including Ifemelu, because "in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (3). Even if certainty may signal monotony, for Adichie's immigrant characters it is a status symbol, which signals the steadiness the availability of choices affords.

The beginning of the novel also provides a glimpse into Obinze's present situation, which is equally adorned with certainty as Ifemelu's by virtue of his newly acquired wealth in the context of thriving Nigerian capitalism. Having built his real-estate empire soon after his deportation from Britain, part of Obinze's reputation and success is associated with his experience of a foreign culture, and his transnational identity. Obinze does not flaunt his wealth, or the right to be inconsiderate towards his subordinates that his income affords him in the eyes of his business associates. Instead, Obinze feels "bloated from all he had acquired—the family, the houses, the cars, the bank account—and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free" (26). Because many of his peers take full advantage of their top positions in society, Obinze's business benefits from his perceived humility as a magnanimous capitalist. That is, the novel distinguishes arrogant capitalists from Obinze's kindness. By beginning with Ifemelu's and Obinze's present-day comforts, and the opportunities that the Nigerian economy presents,

Adichie charts how the characters' conceptions of choice and certainty transition during their immigration.

Through her portrayal of adolescent Ifemelu and Obinze, Adichie characterizes immigrants who immigrate because of "dissatisfaction" (341). The entrepreneurial spirit may have colored many decades of immigrant narratives, but Adichie's immigrant characters could be perceived as particularly driven by self-interest, because they do not immigrate for fear of violence or famine, but due to lack of contentment. Ifemelu's memories of her teenage years include idealization of the west. Though Ifemelu is not from a rich family, her parents think that "There is no need to show the world that things are hard for us. Ours is not the worst case" (60). Her parents are serious and proud Nigerians, and reading British and American classics together with Obinze and his mother offers Ifemelu moments of respite. In particular, Obinze is fond of all things American; he is a keen fan of *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, with the phrase "'You look like a black American'" as his favorite compliment (81). Obinze's mother thinks American literature and culture "are lightweights," and that he is "too besotted with America," but Obinze argues that "America is the future" (85). Adichie's narrative makes manifest how global capitalism is not solely apparent in America, but also in Nigeria.

To be exact, for Obinze and Ifemelu, the motivation to immigrate is their disappointment with the prospects for their generation in Nigeria. Though dates are not mentioned in *Americanah*, the references to American popular culture help to date the events in Ifemelu's and Obinze's adolescence to the late 1980s and early 1990s. During that time period, in fact from 1983 to 1999, Nigeria was ruled by several military

regimes (Ajayi et al.). In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's conversations with Obinze, their friends, and their families refer to frequent strikes in response to the defunding of education. When Ifemelu and Obinze enter university in Nsukka, Obinze's hometown, their first semester is disrupted by a long strike by lecturers, including Obinze's mother. Ifemelu and Obinze join the student strike against the teachers, but as Obinze's mother explains, "we are not the enemy. The military is the enemy. They have not paid our salary in months" (111). The students must return to their homes, because they cannot stay on campus without anyone to give lessons, and after weeks of strikes Obinze and Ifemelu grow restless, "he bored and spiritless in Nsukka, she bored and spiritless in Lagos, and everything curdled in lethargy. Life had become turgid and suspended" (111). As soon as the strike becomes nationwide, "Everyone was talking about leaving" to go to school abroad (120). Though they are well-to-do, and in no immediate danger if they stay, Ifemelu and Obinze envisage their futures in Nigeria in terms of idleness. They anticipate no satisfaction from the careers available to them under the political disgruntlement in the country.

The character of Aunty Uju, Ifemelu's relative who accommodates her when she first arrives in America, exemplifies that choicelessness and uncertainty are very much present in the United States as well. Though Aunty Uju is highly educated, her experience in America is one of endless work to safeguard a life of contentment for her son. She is constantly tired, for she studies to become a doctor, works as a research assistant, retail assistant, and at Burger King. Aunty Uju is described as a working poor, whom "America had subdued" (134). In Aunty Uju's storyline, the tropes of hard work and marriage follow the genre conventions and are presented as opportunities for

assimilation. Indeed, Aunty Uju grows weary of her working schedule, and decides to marry an American citizen of Nigerian descent to uplift her and her son, Dike's, social statuses. However, it turns out that though Aunty Uju's husband offers a steady life in an affluent neighborhood, he treats their roles as husband and wife traditionally, confining her to hard work in and out of the home.

By way of foregrounding her description of middle-class Nigeria, and comparing and contrasting it to the expectations of middle-class America, Adichie attempts to avoid essentializing her immigrant narrative. Regardless of its name, *Americanah* is not a narrative of Americanization, melting-pot, or even cultural-pluralist assimilation. Aunty Uju's immigrant experience conveys the aspiration for assimilation and the American dream as exhausting.

3.4 Assimilation in "Exclusive Democracy"

The meritocratic logic of neoliberalism privileges Ifemelu as a good, well-meaning immigrant, but it leads to the rejection of Obinze's entry to the United States and the United Kingdom. *Americanah* implies that Ifemelu's immigrant endeavors are seen as auspicious for she enters the U.S. on a student visa, which puts her on the path to maximizing human capital. Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze's visa applications are refused one after another, perhaps, because he does not apply for entry to study or professional development in the United States. As an unmarried, unemployed man from an African nation, his background is of the kind that is easily regarded as a disadvantage of immigration as Becker describes in the epigraph of this chapter. Because he does not show evidence of maximizing behavior, as Becker would put it, Obinze's attempts at investing in his human capital appear suspect. Furthermore, Obinze's decision to enter

the United Kingdom as an undocumented immigrant, marks him as an economic and even moral failure, because the illegality of his status stigmatizes him regardless of his ambitions and good intentions to obtain documentation and secure job opportunities.

Even though Obinze enters the U.K. illegally, and Ifemelu studies in the U.S. on a legitimate visa, their everyday experiences are similarly informed by experiences of exclusion. In *Equaliberty*, Balibar proposes that, under neoliberalism, exclusion can be caused by the combined effects of the "logic of racialization" which leans on essentialist representations of historical communities, and the "logic of commodification" that evaluates individuals as things, as per their skillsets and their investment potential (202). The logics of exclusion do not only concern immigrants, but low-income and ethno-racial communities within a nation-state may also be rendered outsiders. More specifically, the logic of commodification "proceeds through the transformation of human beings into things, that is, imported and exported goods that can also become redundant or disposable, having lost their use-value" (203). The logic of racialization "proceeds via the transformation of outsiders (not only *foreigners*, defined by their nationality, but *strangers*, defined by their culture or behavior) from merely relative Others into absolute Others and thus enemies" (203; original emphases). Together the logics of exclusion institute "exclusive democracy" (201), because having been defined as strangers and enemies, the excluded cannot be fully accepted, but neither can they be eliminated, because as others of the national identity, they are essential to defining the parameters of the national culture of a nation-state. Though Ifemelu's immigrant position is one that is perceived favorably, she becomes aware of the multiple ways in which American perception of race and economic status affect

social relations. Furthermore, her story makes manifest ways in which neoliberalism tries to bypass the problem of commodifying laborers by referring to every subject as an investment opportunity.

When Ifemelu first arrives in the U.S. in advance to the beginning of her studies, she has to find an income to support herself, but none of her interviews is fruitful. Her qualifications and experience—those abilities that secured her the position at an American university and the visa—do not help her attain a job, because she is racialized for appearing and sounding different. In addition, commodification is a formative experience for Ifemelu's immigration to the United States. In desperate search for an income, Ifemelu responds to a newspaper ad by a sports coach, Trevor, who is looking for a personal assistant. It turns out the ad was misleading on purpose, as the job is actually that of masseuse, to help him relax, or more frankly, to provide him with sexual favors, or as Trevor says, "'I'll touch you a little bit, nothing you'll be uncomfortable with. I just need some human contact to relax'" (189). Ifemelu consents, for she is desperate for money. In the most horrible way, according to Becker's neoliberal logic, Ifemelu could be seen to take part in her own commodification and regarding herself as a resource for investment. Even so, the job makes her feel sexually exploited, because it is based on deceit. Treating her body purely as a commodity is a significant experience for Ifemelu, which shuts her down from human contact: "she felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up" (192). After the encounter, she stops writing to Obinze, for it changes her motivation for social connection. The exchange with Trevor also sullies the possibilities of assimilation through work or an intimate relationship in Ifemelu's case.

Obinze, who ends up in London as an undocumented immigrant, experiences the ramifications of racialization and commodification as well. His illegal status translates into the kind of insecurity within the city crowds that pushes him to accept any work, so as to gain a National Insurance (NI) number—a document that would legalize his existence as a worker. He must gather enough money to pay two Angolan men for an arranged marriage to a British citizen, Cleotilde, in order to consolidate his status in Britain. Obinze works as a toilet cleaner for a pittance, before he is able to use another immigrant's NI number for a fee, and becomes Vincent Obi to secure a job as a driver at a delivery company. That is, Obinze lands part-time, unofficial freelance work that deprives him of sufficient resources for self-improvement. In Nigeria, Obinze had been of a class above Vincent in social status, but in Britain Vincent has the power to alter Obinze's life, for he threatens to report Obinze to the immigration authorities, if he does not pay a portion of every paycheck. In much the same way, Obinze is treated as a second-class citizen at work, where his colleagues make openly racist jokes that his "knee is bad because he's a knee-grow!" when he limps after tripping and landing badly on his knee (312). Even an old school friend, Emenike, who has married a wealthy, older, British woman, looks down his nose at Obinze. When the Angolans increase the price for the marriage ceremony, and Vincent continues to charge a steep fee for the use of the NI number, Obinze turns to Emenike, who eventually gives Obinze twice the amount he asked. Though Emenike stresses that "It's not a loan" (329), he knows fully well that Obinze cannot afford to refuse the money and will be deep in debt.

Obinze's situation is not helped by his attempts at marrying Cleotilde, or his hard, menial work, for the business of immigration drains him of his income, energy,

and integrity. Try as he might, his investments in human capital do not bear fruit, because the source of his problem is not economic but legal. On his weekly trips to a bookshop to treat himself to coffee and contemporary American fiction to find resonance to what had been his American dream, Obinze finds himself disappointed at the books' "ironic nothingness" (317). The discrepancy between the life Obinze had pictured for himself, the life depicted in the American novels, and his reality of continuous disappointment, leaves him disaffected. Obinze's status in Britain could be analyzed as an immigrant tragedy, through which Adichie protests against the social ills of the workings of the nation-state system. It is a flawed system of social organization that engulfs immigrants, and can rob them of control over their futures. However, in much the same way as Ifemelu, Obinze is an individual striver who does not consider integration alone a substantial-enough goal, but aspires for success on a transnational scale. In this scenario, states are less significant than transnational networks and post-national economic infrastructures.

When Obinze is detained for illegal immigration just before his wedding to Cleotilde, he finds himself almost relieved, and admits: "I'm willing to go back to Nigeria" (345). Obinze's dissatisfaction that had prompted his immigration away from Nigeria, remains with him in Britain, and drives his decision to not fight the deportation. The business of immigration and exclusion may have made Obinze feel exhausted and alienated, but as a subject of self-interest, Obinze eventually determines immigration an undesirable choice. An example of a post-national economic infrastructure in *Americanah* is the unregulated market system, which has emerged in Britain to aid undocumented immigrants' efforts to remain in the country while

gainfully employed. In this market system in which Obinze operates, labor is exchanged for counterfeit documentation or other methods, such as arranged marriage, to attain legitimate status. The system utilizes a transnational network of immigrants, and inside the system of exchanges the prices fluctuate unpredictably, because there is no protection from a state. In fact, state governance is only pertinent to those market transactions at the limit of the system, when somebody such as Obinze is found out. There is no function for assimilation in this system.

3.5 Non-Assimilation as Success

In "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism," Jodi Melamed characterizes multiculturalism as "the spirit of neoliberalism" which masks the uneven progress of global capitalism (1). The usage of *multiculturalism* in the 1970s denoted "grassroots movements . . . for community-based racial reconstruction" (15). Likewise, multiculturalism was the objective of reform in many pluralist immigration narratives, and in that context, it meant resistance to the dominance of Anglo- and Euro-centric norms in American culture. The objective of multiculturalism in public culture made cultural diversity a political and economic goal as well. Melamed notes that since the 1990s, multiculturalism, has become "a policy rubric" which informs the structuring and restructuring of government, business, and civil society (15). Though the concentration on cultural diversity and inclusivity is a positive one, Melamed is wary of the ways in which multicultural reference diverts attention away from the central role of race and racism in neoliberalism. She argues that, "Race continues to permeate capitalism's economic and social processes, organizing the hyperextraction of surplus value from racialized bodies and naturalizing

a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South" (1). Namely, the difference between the value assigned to the wages of the workers from the global South, and the value of the goods and services they produce, is vast. The racialized workers generate enormous surplus value through their labor in the global North.

The rhetoric of multiculturalism normalizes circumstances, such as the hyperextraction of surplus value from the global South, as scenarios of economic opportunity and cultural diversity, obfuscating the inequalities and racial antagonisms inherent to global capitalism. In addition, the rhetoric of multiculturalism obscures accurate racial reference. Melamed finds a means for resistance to this aspect of multicultural rhetoric in the race radical tradition of the United States, such as the late work of W. E. B. Du Bois, which offers a critical perspective on the use of race and racism as parts of the "genealogy of global capitalism" (9-10). That is, Du Bois "deploys race to mark the continued unevenness of capitalist development," and "defines black culture as a vehicle for a historically transmitted consciousness" (13). To be effective, racial reference must be explicit about how race, labor conditions, and immigration permeate the uneven economic and social processes of exclusive democracy.

In *Americanah*, some of the most important racial references are made by way of Ifemelu's exchanges with the wealthy, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, Kimberly, whose children she nannies. The babysitting job is one that Ifemelu attains soon after her encounter with Trevor, and though it could be regarded as a low-wage, low-skill job, it saves Ifemelu from having to ration meals to pay for her rent. Adichie portrays

Kimberly as smiling "the kindly smile of people who thought 'culture' the unfamiliar colorful reserve of colorful people, a word that always had to be qualified with 'rich'" (180). In the same vein, Ifemelu realizes that Kimberly uses the word "beautiful" in a particular way in reference to women of African descent, or as Adichie writes, "Kimberly said, 'Oh, look at this beautiful woman,' and pointed at a plain model in a magazine whose only distinguishing feature was her very dark skin" (181). Ifemelu is frank with Kimberly, and points out, "You know, you can just say 'black.' Not every black person is beautiful'" (181). Her comment is subversive, because economically her and Kimberly's relationship is that of an employee and employer, and in terms of the adjustment story their relationship is that of a racialized immigrant and the culturally more dominant American citizen. Ifemelu later thinks of her and Kimberly's conversation about beauty as the moment they became genuine friends. Though this is not to say that it is a moment after which Ifemelu feels more assimilated to the American national culture, it is a moment without multicultural colorblindness between the two women.

Conceptions of beauty, especially the shades of complexion and the connotations of different hairstyles for afro-textured hair, are what draws Ifemelu to the blog, titled *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, which is an example of an active online community that is not founded on multicultural rhetoric, but offers a critical perspective on race that does not obscure racial referencing. Encouraged by *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, and her conversations with Kimberly, Ifemelu sets out to launch her own blog, titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* (4). Ifemelu's blog

posts are intended as alternatives to the mainstream multicultural thinking of the United States of *Americanah*. The plain font and plain-spoken voice of the blog posts convey Adichie's endeavor to observe and record nuances of racial perception in a sociocultural and political climate that promotes colorblindness. Or as Ifemelu puts it: "In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. . . . the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not" (390). On *Raceteenth*, Ifemelu argues that in plain sight, there is nothing complex about racism:

> Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black . . . Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. . . . Blacks actually don't WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist shit happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it's maybe because it actually is? . . . Hear what is being said. . . . They are just telling you what is. (406)

Ifemelu's blog posts address multiculturalism's disavowal of race's relevance. In addition, Ifemelu makes changes in her personal life that correspond with the premise of the blog. She ends her relationship with Curt, Kimberly's cousin, whose lavish lifestyle had given Ifemelu the "gift of contentment, of ease" (246). Likewise, she stops relaxing her hair to make it straight, and switches back to her Nigerian English from the American English and accent she had acquired. Through these actions of non-assimilation Ifemelu allows herself to appear more foreign and, by extension, more black.

In neoliberal economic terms, Ifemelu's *Raceteenth* is an example of a freelance blog, whose eventual popularity makes her a successful entrepreneur. Ifemelu's situation as a freelance blogger is an exemplary case of gig-economy employment that expects short-term commitment and flexibility from those who operate in it. Though

Raceteenth begins as sociocultural and political commentary, it also serves as instruction and entertainment for other non-American blacks, and black Americans. As the readership of *Raceteenth* grows, Ifemelu exploits her own identity and experiences as the content she provides to her readers, who are her customers. In this sense, Ifemelu does not assimilate by way of sharing experiences with her readers on the blog, but becomes an example subject of capital, for she makes a living through the appeal of describing her identity and the perspective it affords her in the context of her adoptive country.

After ending her relationship with Curt, Ifemelu begins one with Blaine, a politically active professor of African-American Studies at Yale. Her affection for Blaine grows to be more intellectual than passionate, but they are equally enthusiastic campaigners for Barack Obama during his first presidential election. Their sociocultural and political interests are realized in President Obama's victory, but without the uniting cause of campaigning, Ifemelu and Blaine's relationship starts to crumble. When an African-American security guard at the Yale library is suspended on false allegations of drug dealing, Blaine organizes a protest. Blaine assumes that Ifemelu would attend, but she does not go; instead, Ifemelu attends a friend's going-away lunch, because she "merely preferred" it (426). Once Blaine discovers Ifemelu's real reason for not participating in the protest, he points out that Ifemelu cherry-picks her sociocultural and political causes in much the same way that you choose "an interesting elective evening class to complete your credits" (428). Even if Ifemelu had attempted to engage in open racial referencing in her blog, the blog does not offer her a real-life community. Rather, the blog begins to isolate Ifemelu, for she is able to engage with those who agree with

her opinions, but can shut herself away from real-life relationships that might entail disputes. Though Ifemelu applies for citizenship and receives an American passport, her decision to leave Blaine and end the blog regardless of its success implies that she is not persuaded by the assimilated American identity. Rather, the American passport is an insurance policy to safeguard her transnational mobility.

Even if Ifemelu disavows Americanization, privilege affects perception, and as the characters in *Americanah* become wealthier, they become less discerning of their own complicity in economic inequality. Ifemelu attains a position of convenience through her American passport, and her status as a successful writer upon her return to Nigeria, which "shield[s] her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay" (481). Likewise, Obinze has established significant wealth as a real-estate magnate, who can buy a visa to the United States, if necessary. The narrative's shift in focus to Nigeria could be perceived as a challenge to neoliberal multiculturalism in its offering an alternative perspective to America's cultural hegemony. However, here *Americanah* stops short of fully denouncing the manifestations of global capital, because it suggests that if the American dream did not save the characters from dissatisfaction, the Nigerian dream might. The group of Americanahs, the returnees to Nigeria from America, are expected to join a networking group of young professionals who were trained abroad, which is nicknamed the "Nigerpolitan Club" (499). It is at the club meetings, where people drink champagne from paper cups and complain about the absence of decent smoothies, that Ifemelu catches "the righteousness in her voice, in all their voices," and realizes that though she "was comfortable here . . . she wished she were not" (502-503). Ifemelu's return allows Adichie to make such observations as the

growing economic power of Chinese corporations in Nigeria. However, these observations are only mentioned in passing, and the narrative does not question in detail the ways in which Ifemelu's and Obinze's more well-heeled lifestyles and their entrepreneurial activities impact their relationships with their families and communities.

Instead, Adichie gives prominence to the love story of Ifemelu and Obinze over the immigrant story at the end of the novel. Everything is resolved between the two as soon as Ifemelu reconnects with Obinze, and reveals the real reason of her silence over the years having been the experience of sexual mistreatment. Though Obinze has married and had a daughter since his return to Nigeria, he explains that he primarily married Kosi for "it was the right thing to do to gain certainty" (555). Instead, the narration describes the love between Ifemelu and Obinze not in terms of the right thing to do, but as longing, "a kind of grief. This was what the novelists meant by suffering" (583). Ifemelu has no obligations other than the new blog she starts after a short stint as a writer at a local magazine, whereas Obinze describes both his family and work in terms of simple duty. Because Ifemelu and Obinze are self-employed and not concerned by family relationships, they can afford to preoccupy themselves with re-engaging without a care. In so doing, *Americanah* valorizes entrepreneurial activity, and Ifemelu's return to Nigeria as the successful person who made it in America is a logical resolution of the neoliberal alternative to the immigrant-adjustment narrative.

3.6 Alienation and Accountability in *Preparation*

Preparation is Lish's debut novel, though Lish's name is not unknown in the publishing world, for he is the son of Gordon Lish, a well-known editor.[28] Owing to

[28] Having not shown his manuscript to his father before its publication, Lish is quoted explaining in interviews that he decidedly separates his writing career from his father's achievements (Flood).

periods of working in the ranks of the Marines, and as an English teacher and translator in China, before returning to the United States, Lish is an outsider to the literary field, but also possesses outsider insight as a returned soldier and immigrant. Many critics have characterized the novel's portrayal of American life in the shadows as akin to the narrative style of American modernists, even Dickens (Flanery), or the protagonists' "unlikely romance" (Flood) as "the new American love story" (Garner). I treat *Preparation* as a non-assimilationist immigrant narrative, for Lish offers perspectives on the underbelly of global capital in American life through the varying angles of immigrant and returnee alienation.

In *Preparation*, Skinner, an American war veteran, and Zou Lei, an illegal immigrant of Chinese origin, bump into each other in an alley behind the building complex in Queens, where she works long hours at a Chinese restaurant and has discovered temporary refuge, for "everybody was illegal just like her" (49). Likewise, Skinner finds solace in the busy city streets after three tours in Iraq. He wants to blend in the crowds of New York City and have a good time to forget his trauma, but he cannot dismiss the recurring nightmares, the discomfort of shrapnel scars on his body, and irrepressible fits of rage. The two agree to meet again, and start a relationship of spending nights chatting at a 24-hour McDonald's, drinking beer and eating pizza at Skinner's basement apartment, and working out together at a gym or going on runs through the boroughs of the city. *Preparation* is aware of the ways in which policies have direct consequences in lived experience. The romance between Skinner and Zou Lei never allows them to fully forget about the anxieties associated with their respective situations, nor does the narrative romanticize their gritty love. The combined motifs of

Zou Lei's anxiety of being deported, and Skinner's liberal use of military-prescribed "anti-anxiety medication, antipsychotic medication, and something to help him sleep" (208), together with his habit of carrying a Berretta 9mm gun on his person to most places, do not pre-empt a happy ending. Lish's immigrant narrative departs from neoliberal expectations in the sense that it does not assume responsibility for social failures from the failing individuals alone. Rather, *Preparation* communicates that shared accountability is necessary to treat a collective problem.

Zou Lei travels from Xinjiang[29] province in western China, via Shenzhen and Southeast Asia to Mexico, and from there, along the East Coast, to New York City. Her fragmented memories of her journey "by way of Archer, Bridgeport, Nanuet . . . carrying a plastic bag and shower shoes, a phone number" (3), illustrate the experience of being smuggled across the border, and through small towns, to the final destination. Sowards and Pineda note that the contemporary immigrant narrative rarely actually describes the process of the crossing, the full story of which is absent from *Preparation* as well. Instead, the immigrant narratives tend to create a "spectacle of illegality" out of the crossing (Sowards and Pineda 81), and attach criminality solely to the immigrant, and not those who run the business of immigration, to initiate the premise of individual failure and success.

[29] Xinjiang is the largest administrative region in China, which has been assigned similar autonomy as Tibet, and borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India ("Why"). The region is primarily inhabited by the indigenous, nomadic population, Uighurs, who are mostly Muslim, and "regard themselves as culturally and ethnically close to Central Asian nations" ("Why"). In Lish's narrative, Zou Lei's mother is Uighur, and her father a Han Chinese soldier. Zou Lei's memories of her childhood reveal that her father was stationed in Xinjiang irregularly, and so, Zou Lei grew up identifying with the Uighur and Islamic heritages from her mother's side more than with the Han Chinese heritage, which is regarded as the predominant cultural identity in the country.

The organized business of illegal immigration and people smuggling is evident in Lish's description of Zou Lei's arrival in the United States. From a pickup point, Zou Lei is taken to a room in a Motel 8, where six other Chinese women wait. The women do not share a dialect, but communicate in broken English, and watch American TV to keep practicing the language. What they all know well is how to work hard; they work fourteen hours a day in eleven day stints with one day off in between. Though the women are grouped together and given the primary identity of faceless, cheap workforce, the women share stories of their diverse Chinese backgrounds. The other women doubt Zou Lei's cultural belonging, because her hair is brown and wavy, her eyes "Siberian," and her nose "slightly hooked" (3). Her home in Xinjiang, as she describes it, is "a territory of tribal nomadic herdsmen who did not recognize the borders between nations" (16). Zou Lei identifies as Uighur, Muslim, and Chinese, but most of all as a nomad, because even between the different cultural identifiers, "the songs were the same" (17). She tries to befriend the other women in the motel room, but her cultural difference makes them suspicious.[30] Zou Lei's adaptability to endure the wait for the next stage in her journey springs from her nomadic, Uighur heritage.

[30] Zou Lei's status as an illegal immigrant in America is complicated by the fact that she was treated as a stranger in her home country, and continues to be regarded as such by other Chinese immigrants whom she encounters in America. In *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, Haiyan Lee explains that the metaphor of the extended family is a pervasive one in Chinese society, and defines how relationships with strangers are experienced. Lee calls this "the tyranny of the familial metaphor," because issues of dishonesty and mistrust towards strangers may not be addressed for fear of seeming in support of essentialist nationalism (7). Generally, Lee notes, the stranger is "defined vis-à-vis a collectivity: the country, the city, the faith, the race, the family" (11). In *Preparation*, Zou Lei is regularly described by other characters as a Muslim, because that is the quality that others her the most in encounters with Chinese immigrants or Americans. However, Lee points out that the stranger is also a concept that allows us to see "soft boundaries that do not always align with national boundaries," such as gender, sexuality, class, native place, and language that can help "cementing solidarity" (12). That is, the stranger as a concept allows us to address crossovers of cultural identity, rather than divides informed by the notions of the nation-state and national identity. Lish's description of Zou Lei's memories of Xinjiang implies that to her the value of her nomadic identity is one that is constructed from such crossovers.

The demands of global capital that propel precarious mobility impact Zou Lei even before her immigration to the United States. Lish's narrative describes that, as the Han Chinese gain corporate privileges in Zou Lei' home province over protecting the Uighur herdsmen's traditional livelihoods and trading, Zou Lei and her ill mother become peasants (16-17).[31] Zou Lei describes that the Uighurs are given subsidies to work in factories far away from their ancestral land, and Zou Lei and her mother move from Xinjiang to Shenzhen in southeastern China to work at a factory that produces polyethylene derivatives. The managers lock up the workers inside the factory "for their own protection" (28), but of course, it is to enforce long working hours and productivity. Because of their displacement from their province, Zou Lei and her mother are treated as immigrants without rights in their own country, and do not receive enough of a compensation for their work for Zou Lei to send her mother to go to an infirmary. With Zou Lei's mother wasting away and Zou Lei collecting bottles for recycling to add to their income, the locals quip that if "you wanted heaven . . . maybe you shouldn't have come. There's always America, if you think your feet will carry you" (28). The immigrant narrative conventionally traces the motivations for immigration, and Lish's narrative shows how investing in one's human capital may not always be the primary incentive for immigration. Restrictions to the rights of citizens in

[31] The economy of Xinjiang is traditionally focused on agriculture and trade, but major development projects have brought wealth as well as new residents from the east of the country ("Why"). The BBC reports that "In the 2000 census, Han Chinese made up 40% of the population, as well as large numbers of troops stationed in the region" ("Why"). The major grievance of the Uighurs is that, in their view, the Han Chinese receive the best jobs and benefit the most from the development in the region. The Uighurs' criticisms are largely supported by activists, who have stated that "Uighur commercial and cultural activities have been gradually curtailed by the Chinese state. There are complaints of severe restrictions on Islam, with fewer mosques and strict control over religious schools" ("Why"). According to the BBC, "Establishing facts about these incidents is difficult, because foreign journalists' access to the region is tightly controlled," but the Uighur resentment is evident in protests that have occurred at regular intervals since the 1990s ("Why").

the face of corporate expansion also motivate global mobility. The Chinese government's policies that limit Uighur trading and subsidize factory work propel Zou Lei's departure from Xinjiang, are paralleled with the policies that govern her life in the United States.

Regardless of her resilience, optimism, and determined work ethic, Zou Lei's everyday life is colored by the fact that she is an undocumented immigrant in post-9/11 America. According to Melamed, the Patriot Act is a form of neoliberal, "ideological policing," which has "recourse to the language of multiculturalism," and justifies mistreatment of certain categories of immigrants (19). It innovates "a new racism that rewards or punishes people for being or not being 'multicultural Americans,' an ideological figure that arises out of neoliberal frameworks" (19). The Patriot Act stigmatizes Zou Lei, because her nomadic multiculturalism is not evidently assimilationist within the American context. When the police arrest Zou Lei in Connecticut, before her final destination in New York, they ask her why she did not run away from them, a question that already assumes her culpability, which she does not fully comprehend. Her entire detention in prison is marked by similar miscomprehension and uncertainty. Though Zou Lei does her best to tell a bail bondsman who she is over the phone, she realizes that she does not know where she is being held; her charge has not been explained to her either. Zou Lei learns that she is named "Al Qaida" by fellow prisoners and guards (11), because, in their eyes, her Islamic religion likens her to a suspect of terrorism. The uncertainty of the time and place, and the exact reasons of her detention, are part of the Patriot Act. It denies her the knowledge of her situation as well as her civil and human rights, because her

multicultural background is, as Melamed would put it, non-American and non-patriotic (18). The uncertainty of Zou Lei's detention continues after she is released, for the prosecutor does not object to her release, but she is not told why. The Patriot Act robs Zou Lei of her right to know of her precise status, and subjects her to further policing and anxiety.

Zou Lei's experience of the Patriot Act and its adjacent ideological policing is contrasted with Skinner's trauma of the Iraq War, which was prompted by U.S. policing abroad. The beginning of the war may have been based on ideology, but Skinner's attitude towards the war demonstrates that the reality of the war is far from the ideals of an ethically sound quest of democratization. Indeed, Skinner reveals to Zou Lei later in their relationship that he signed up with the military, partly because of 9/11, but primarily because he wanted "just to do something" (124). It is not necessarily a noble motivation, and Lish's narrative conveys how the war affects Skinner severely physically and mentally. *Preparation* complicates the immigration narrative by connecting it to another recognizable genre: the story of the soldier struggling after returning home from war.

Skinner's coping mechanism of managing the psychological cost of his duty is ordering himself to countdown to calm down. In many instances, the narrative also outlines the ways in which Skinner tries to consciously process the attack in which he was injured and nearly lost his friend, Sconyer. He narrates the event to himself over and over again:

> When his friend exploded, something had struck Skinner in the back. . . . he scrambled to his friend, he felt him in the sand, and tried to pull him up. Skinner couldn't lift him. Instead his weight had pulled him down with all their armor. The sand was filling up with Sconyers' blood. . . .

> The sand became a sucking, sloshing pit that soaked them both and overflowed with blood. . . . The blood wet his hands and arms, it got on his weapon, and got in his face and mouth and eyes, and he tasted it, his friend's blood. And the blood itself had weight, and they combined as a blood mud that dragged them down. (66)

Sconyer lives with serious injuries, but dies soon after his return to the United States, while Skinner feels weighed down by the memory of the bloody sand almost daily. Skinner's concerns of his ability to cope are misunderstood by military doctors when no PTSD is diagnosed, and he is merely prescribed reading glasses and a vast catalogue of medication for headache and anxiety. The military policy forces Skinner to be deployed again soon after the incident, leaving him stunned and traumatized, on duty in a foreign country.

Similar fortitude is required of immigrants and soldiers when they embark on their journeys, and the legitimacy of their existence in and between the home and host land is determined by way of policies and legal documentation. Eventually, Skinner and Zou Lei bond over these experiences. Skinner is anxious as a result of having been stop-lossed[32] by what he considers misuse of military policy, and Zou Lei's worry is her detention and the possibility of deportation under the Patriot Act. Skinner's experience of having been stop-lossed resonates with the uncertainty ensuing the bureaucratic obstacles Zou Lei faces in trying to adjust her immigration status and gain the right to work legally. In this way, Zou Lei and Skinner experience what Foucault had called the

[32] Being stop-lossed in the U.S. military indicates the involuntary extension of a soldier's active-duty service beyond the projected end of service, which can expose soldiers to dangers of prolonged combat deployment. The stop-loss policy was used in particular if soldiers were to be deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan (Shanker). In 2009, calls were made to end the "unpopular practice"—which prevented tens of thousands of soldiers from leaving the military at their planned end of service—by 2011 (Shanker).

period of adaptation—an agonizing wait—for an extended amount of time, which takes a great toll on their abilities to invest in their futures.

Moreover, the story of the struggling returned soldier, such as Skinner's, shares some elements with the immigrant-tragedy narrative. Like an immigrant who is unable to assimilate, Skinner finds it difficult to adjust to the American homeland he had left. Many soldiers may leave the homeland to fight for the very reasons immigrants, according to the immigrant-narrative genre, come to the U.S.—the promise of opportunity, greater freedom, and self-improvement—but may also contribute to depriving people of those rights and values in the countries in which they battle. Lish also describes how, upon his return, Skinner observes that Zou Lei is deprived of the rights and values he fought for in Iraq. By juxtaposing the immigrant and returned-soldier narratives, *Preparation* speaks of personal failures, as well as the ways in which the post-9/11 wars and policies let down immigrants to America and Americans alike.

3.7 Risk and Shared Responsibility

In *A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story*, Tom Gjelten explores the history of immigration law in the United States, and how changes in the legislation shaped the population of America as well as attitudes towards different groups within American society. Gjelten's description echoes the way in which Foucault responds to Becker's notion of immigration as an investment in human capital. Gjelten points out that though "Immigrating can be seen as an entrepreneurial act," the potential of future reward entails taking "up-front risk" (220). Similarly, Sowards and Pineda write that "neoliberal politics in immigration discourse have come to demand that individuals provide for themselves and their families to protect against economic

risk" (84). Though the entrepreneurial view of immigration could be seen as empowering for the individual, it also normalizes the neoliberal goal of re-routing the risk of failure. While many immigrant narratives give agency to the immigrant characters through work, that approach also individualizes the problems related to immigration status and risk as immigrant problems. In media accounts of immigration, the work trope "highlight[s] how these immigrants address their own problems through their own solutions, namely, by working harder than they already are" (Sowards and Pineda 84). Sowards and Pineda point out that when immigration stories in the mainstream media are centered on the individual's self-interest, they often communicate that the responsibility to succeed and deal with prejudice, is the individual's alone. In doing so, the stories become less effective as social commentary, because characters are determined primarily by their individual tenacity (86). Sowards and Pineda argue that as long as immigrants are portrayed adopting social problems as their own, and solving those problems independently, contemporary accounts of immigration will fail to evoke "collective responsibility" (84).

Zou Lei works long hours to provide for herself and Skinner, who cannot find employment for his PTSD and drug abuse that incapacitate him. Because Zou Lei and Skinner spend most of their nights together after she finishes work, she regularly wakes up to his weeping in his sleep and worries about his ability to cope. She looks up to Skinner for his service to his country, "his roughed-up boots and the American flag on his sleeve," and begins redeeming bottles and cans, and bootlegging DVDs "to increase her productivity" (120). Riding the subway, "holding the bootleg movies fanned out like playing cars in their plastic envelopes, murmuring: Deeweedee, deeweedee. Hello,

deeweedee," puts her in greater danger of being reported by fellow passengers or found out by the police (120). Zou Lei is also expected to acquire the risk her employer undertakes in employing her. Though he is completely familiar with hiring illegal workforce, the employer insists that "If I hire you, I have risk. . . . If I have risk, who is responsible? You have to be responsible. . . . So the salary will be adjusted" (130). Because of her undocumented status, Zou Lei's endeavor to provide for her and Skinner is inhibited by the fact that her rights are diminished, and she is not in a position to bargain or protest. She must pay to be allowed to work for a minimal salary, and still stands the chance of being reported to immigration officials.

Immigrant workers, such as Zou Lei, may be actively investing in their human capital, but Lowe's work on Asian immigration to the United States demonstrates that the odds that the value the low-wage workers can accumulate to compensate for the costs of immigration are often stacked against them. Lowe writes of the ways in which global capitalism systematically produces low-wage jobs that primarily attract third-world workers to enter countries such as the U.S. as undocumented immigrants (21). Regardless of the demand for low-skill, low-wage workforce, many states will not legislate improvements on immigration policy or labor conditions (21). Immigrants, not state or market power, are made accountable for the choice to immigrate and work without legal status. In other words, immigrants are, in fact, already paying for their immigration with an investment that usually lacks return beyond subsistence, and involves the risk of being policed. When immigrant stories do not make apparent the dynamic between the demand for low-wage, undocumented workers and the refusal to offer them legal and political representation, the narratives perpetuate stereotypes and

lose their accountability. In *Preparation*, Lish conveys that, in Zou Lei's case, the entrepreneurial promise is disproportionate in comparison to the risk and responsibility she must bear. In this sense, Lish makes apparent the uneven progress of global capital in a critical manner that Melamed suggests is absent from the discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Zou Lei and Skinner identify with a similar military-like comradeship and discipline, which helps them retain a sense of control of their daily lives that are otherwise regulated externally. Zou Lei's admiration for military discipline comes from her admiration for her father's work as a soldier. Later, Zou Lei fantasizes that she and Skinner find an income in trading goods and lead nomadic lives; that they would "form an army of their own, a two-person unit, to fight these difficult battles involving his mental recovery and her immigrant status" (238). Skinner does indeed offer the option for Zou Lei to gain permanent residence through marrying him. However, marriage is not a feasible option for Skinner and Zou Lei, for she has no documentation to show to start the process without her illegal status and previous detention being discovered.

Even if Skinner and Zou Lei hold ambivalent positions in relation to American national culture and identity, they relate to each other through alternate cultural paradigms and practices. Skinner finds resonance to his experiences of the desert in Iraq when Zou Lei tells stories of her childhood in the mountainous desert of her ancestral land near the border of Afghanistan. They enjoy sharing the skewered lamb Zou Lei buys with her small paycheck to recall the flavor of the desert home. It is with the ability of recounting their stories that Skinner and Zou Lei gain a sense of control over their respective circumstances. Likewise, they bond over working out—when lifting

weights together, he "felt the metal, dirt, and sweat on her hand, which created a glue between them" (221). Because they are constrained in many ways, fitness and discipline afford them freedom to pursue strength and health, and allow them to exercise control over their everyday lives, a possibility that work and marriage cannot offer them.

Gjelten points out that since Bill Clinton's administration, the focus in the United States has been on restricting illegal immigration, and a popular view that immigrants seeking low-skill jobs are a threat to working-class Americans has grown, recently with overtly racist tones. For many the problem appears to be that, in their eyes, immigrants have turned America "into a nation alien unto itself" (Gjelten 257). In the second half of his novel, Lish introduces the character, Jimmy, who is the son of Skinner's landlady, Mrs. Murphy, and of Irish immigrant descent but now devoutly anti-immigration. Jimmy re-enters the neighborhood having spent years incarcerated. Jimmy had been "a union man in rubber coveralls, boots, and a World War I helmet, going down into the ground for the City" before his prison sentence (160). Having been a member of the Aryans gang in prison, upon his return home, Jimmy joins "a couple of guys from New York who had in common that they were not black" (168). Emboldened by his new group, Jimmy goes out looking reasons to agitate and fight (169). Lish describes Jimmy as an ex-union man and ex-convict, who associates his loss of job security and disaffiliation with a contempt for immigrants.

Jimmy's xenophobic attitudes culminate, when he assaults a Chinese prostitute in a horrific attack. He "sodomized her . . . What he was doing sounded like a boxer hitting a heavy bag with wet gloves. . . . She gagged and threw up in the towel he wrapped her head in. . . . You got the virus now, he told her as he was pulling up his

jeans. She was standing there half-bowing, her face unrecognizable as human" (309-310). Jimmy not only mutilates the woman, but steals her money, ensures that she knows he has HIV, and takes her fake ID only to put it in the garbage later. Thus, he leaves her in terror, for he has put her in danger of contracting the virus and being detained for illegal immigration when the police arrive to respond to the calls to help her. Jimmy knows that the woman lacks the legal standing to seek assistance she requires as a result of his attack.

Lish describes Jimmy's anti-immigration sentiments further, when Jimmy recounts to an acquaintance the story of how he assaulted another Asian woman. The story reveals that Jimmy observes the street stalls of the Falun Gong human-rights advocates, because he thinks the members of the movement manage a massage parlor, and "run their whole game outta there. Smack, guns, girls, whatever you can name" (313). In Jimmy's view, his violent acts are warranted, because of the criminal immigrant activity he believes he witnesses. Besides his racist mission, based on a warped sense of justice and nationalism, Jimmy's overbearing presence in Mrs. Murphy's house shadows Zou Lei's and Skinner's situation. Jimmy actively taunts Skinner and Zou Lei, by staring at them through the basement window, and entering Skinner's apartment when he is not present to steal his belongings. Lish outlines in a prolonged manner Jimmy's brewing anger and agitation of others, which creates an added sense of dread that amplifies Zou Lei and Skinner's worries.

Through Jimmy's monstrosities, *Preparation* invites us to think of the immigration-invasion narrative. Describing Jimmy in similarly threatening terms that had been used to describe the immigrant masses, Lish writes in reaction to the

immigrant-invasion narrative. He evokes unease and draws attention to the dangers of allowing for anti-immigration sentiment to gain ground unchecked. *Preparation* depicts the prevailing sentiment of widespread alienation in America that does not only concern immigrants, but also other groups of disaffiliated people who identify as outsiders in their homeland.

3.8 Conclusion

Eventually, Jimmy's actions unravel the story of Zou Lei and Skinner. While Skinner's is at the gym and Zou Lei alone in his apartment, Jimmy confronts her. Scared Zou Lei leaves without taking her belongings, leaving even her sneakers behind. As Skinner returns, he discovers that Jimmy has once again entered his apartment, and with Zou Lei nowhere in sight, Skinner is suspicious that Jimmy has finally taken what is most precious to him. Skinner goes upstairs to Mrs. Murphy's and beats up Jimmy. Jimmy dies from his injuries, and both Zou Lei and Skinner think that they have been abandoned by each other. She walks miles out of the city to stop feeling the pain, while he, carrying his gun, looks for her in the neighborhood. Assuming that the worst has happened to Zou Lei, Skinner sits under an overpass, and gives in to the inclination to end his traumatizing memories of war by shooting himself. Zou Lei walks back to Queens to find Skinner nowhere, but locates her things in a trash can outside his apartment, including the credit card and PIN number Skinner had given her as a precaution hidden in her shoe. Zou Lei responds to the homely call of the desert and leaves New York for Arizona, where she finds work at a farm. The routine of exercise and health she and Skinner established, as well as contributing as a member of the immigrant workers' community, are sources of happiness and pride for Zou Lei. The

novel's finale with Zou Lei in co-operative labor near the border and away from urban investigation is a somewhat happy ending. She gets to safety in part by way of Skinner's resources, especially his credit card, which indicates that regardless of the fact that assimilation to national custom is not a tenable option, their partnership was responsible. Their non-assimilation, but shared accountability, put Zou Lei in charge of the next stage of her journey.

The end of *Americanah* sees Ifemelu and Obinze united, but their re-engaged relationship becomes as isolating as their entrepreneurial successes: they work from the confines of their homes or chauffeured cars, and keep their encounters private as well. Their relationship at the narrative's conclusion is illicit, and an offense against the family that has given Obinze traditional roots and a foundation for prosperity in the homeland. In dedicating the end of the narrative to the reconciliation of the love story, *Americanah* may indeed denounce "the high personal and public costs of a particularly American manifestation of capitalism in which material prosperity offers no freedom" as Hallmeier suggests (237). In other words, Adichie's is an immigrant success story, the propitiousness of which she invites us to question, for the success entails intense individualism and isolation. At the conclusion of *Americanah,* the relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze is the only one that remains.

Assimilation functions to resolve plots in the traditional immigrant-narrative genre. In other words, the conventions of the genre feature assimilation as the objective, or a form of success, of immigration. The resolution of Adichie's and Lish's immigrant narratives leave the protagonists in a curious relationship to the kind of national identification that the standard immigrant-adjustment novel expects. The multinational,

ambivalent subject positions occupied by the protagonists at the novels' ends are not consistent with genre conventions. Moreover, the novels demonstrate ways in which the U.S. state and public cultures have been given over to policies and values of market fundamentalism, and impede the prospects of immigrants—and others deemed outsiders, because of their failures in maximizing human capital—from becoming part of the national project. I have argued that in *Americanah*, Ifemelu makes a success of her immigration through creative marketing of her identity as a non-American. Because she makes her living through her non-assimilation, proper assimilation would put that success at risk. My purpose has been to show as well that Adichie offers a success story that diverts our attention away from the pressures of isolation to its immigrant characters.

Some audiences may be interested in immigrant narratives to "support their anti-immigrant positions because of the representations of criminalization, taking advantage of public services, or split families and relationships" (Sowards and Pineda 87). Of course, such reductionist scapegoating hampers progress on immigration matters as well. Though it depicts the criminalization of its immigrant character, Lish's narrative portrays the dissolution of relationships and the many levels of disaffected individuals to insist that the systemic poverty, prejudice, and racist violence of an exclusive democracy cannot be the responsibilities of immigrants alone. *Preparation* provokes unease to demand more in-depth engagement to address immigration and alienation not as issues of individual responsibility, but as concerns of shared accountability. Lish's juxtaposition of the immigrant-adjustment, returned-soldier, and immigrant-invasion

genre conventions shows that alienation does not consist of only one kind of narrative, but is shared across many stories and many factions of society.

CODA: THE NARRATIVE OF MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM AS A GLOBAL WAY OF LIFE

> [T]he Chicago School strain of capitalism does indeed have something in common with other dangerous ideologies: the signature desire for unattainable purity, for a clean slate on which to build a reengineered model society. This desire for godlike powers of total creation is precisely why free-market ideologues are so drawn to crises and disasters. . . . It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world. (Klein 25)

> Without a story, we are, as many of us were after September 11, 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. (Klein 580)

In this study, through genre analysis, I have identified shifts in social behavior and perspectives on neoliberalism, primarily in the period from the 1980s to the present. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated that the distinction between a traditional epistolary novel and a neoliberal one is the tension between the private and public spheres that Mrs. Curren negotiates in her letter in Coetzee's *Iron*, and which is mostly absent from Anna's letter in Auster's *Country*, because neoliberalism diminishes the difference between the spheres. In turn, this difference between the texts connotes a transition from political to post-political society. In Chapter 2, I proposed that examining Díaz's and Tartt's *Bildungsromans* in conjunction demonstrates that the more traditional statecraft in Díaz's depiction of the Dominican Republic determines subject formation against social norms. In contrast, in his and Tartt's portrayals of neoliberal America, the formation of self-interest is the goal of personal development, and is treated as a sign of maturity. The comparative analysis of Tartt's and Díaz's narratives points towards a

shift from socialized to anti-social *Bildung*. Lastly, Chapter 3, focused on Adichie's *Americanah* and Lish's *Preparation* as renditions of the immigrant novel that differ from the conventions of the genre in the sense that their protagonists' motivation is not assimilation to American culture and national identity, but entrepreneurial success. I suggested that the non-assimilationist immigration narrative underscores the need to address alienation, not as a problem of a particular group, but as a fact of life under neoliberalism.

The trajectory of my analysis characterizes neoliberalism as a post-political ideology that creates anti-social conditions for subject formation and collective life. Moreover, this examination exhibits a contradictory relationship between neoliberalism's transnational agenda and utilization of policies more pertinent to the nation-state model, which regulate the kind of harmonious existence the free market is supposed to establish. I explore the ideology similarly to Klein's book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, in the sense that Klein's work also points towards neoliberalism's inherent conflicts. Indeed, Klein explores how the Chicago School economists theorized laissez-faire economics as a rigorous science, but, in practice, administered it forcefully, more like a fundamentalist philosophy. She also traces the transformation of neoliberalism from an anti-state approach to statecraft into one that renders the state a for-profit enterprise at the expense of the vast majority of the tax-paying public, who are increasingly "psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted" from their communities (25). *The Shock Doctrine* conveys that, in the absence of competing narratives, neoliberalism has rendered itself the politically inevitable ideology, as Friedman projected.

A Genre That Responds to Social Instability

The Shock Doctrine could be seen as an example of the nonfiction genre of literary journalism which combines literary techniques with journalistic research. Tomas B. Connery writes that literary journalism developed in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century in response to "a cultural need to know and understand the rapidly changing world" (4). Literary journalism differs from standard news journalism in the sense that it does not merely record and report, but interprets as well (6). In other words, the literary-journalistic account includes accurate, studied details together with personal impressions. Philip Gerard points out that the early-twentieth-century wars and postwar political instability increased people's interest in nonfiction, for they "needed something concrete that they could use to measure what was going on in the world" (3). In the 1960s and 1970s, works by authors, such as James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe furthered the genre with their critical sociocultural commentary that paralleled their political activism. Their nonfiction works, especially Wolfe's texts, inspired New Journalism, a movement which was initially met with criticism, because to some the subjective style undermined the believability of the pieces as true accounts (Sims xiii). For others, the appeal of the style was that by presenting facts from a personal standpoint, and with a literary turn of phrase and imagery, authors captured the anxiety attendant to the period that saw the Civil Rights movement as well as anti-war and anti-establishment protests.

Throughout its history, literary journalism has flourished at times of crisis thanks to its speculative way of addressing serious social, political, economic, and cultural questions. When readers moved to the Internet, many critics and pollsters

expected modes of literary nonfiction and longform journalism to become largely defunct. However, in her article regarding a 2013 conference on the future of longform journalism held at Columbia University, Naomi Sharp notes that the genre is "thriving" ("Future").[33] Columbia Journalism School professor, Michael Shapiro, and David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, suggest that instead of diverting readers' attention away from lengthy, deeply-researched pieces, online publication has enabled more creativity with the multimedia presentation and serializing of literary-journalistic accounts (Sharp). The popularity of literary-journalistic podcasts, such as *Serial*, and *Making a Murderer*, an exploratory series on the streaming service Netflix, could be seen as evidence of peaking interest in the style on online platforms. Focusing on individuals who, the writers claim, have been convicted of crimes or ostracized on false accusations, *Serial* and *Making a Murderer* are in-depth examinations of social injustice. With its historical, critical commentary and standpoint that allows for speculation on the possibilities for change, literary journalism offers a way to process social instability.

The Shock Doctrine is more creative than pieces of reportorial journalism but not as imaginative as fiction. Klein incorporates references to declassified government-agency documents, newspaper articles, academic publications, and field research from disaster zones into a storytelling form that illustrates a setting, historical characters, the inciting events, and culminates in a climactic incident as well as reflection. Klein traces how advocates of neoliberalism utilize collective shock caused by natural disasters,

[33] More recently, *Publishers Weekly* reported a "7% print unit gain" in 2016 over 2015 for adult nonfiction (including other categories of the genre as well as literary journalism), which was "the biggest unit gain among the major print categories" in 2016 (Milliot).

coups, and terrorist attacks to create blank canvases for political and economic restructuring. More specifically, the disorientation that follows the original shock diminishes resistance to the societal changes that people might find controversial in ordinary conditions. The results are powerlessness and alienation, sentiments which are echoed in all six novels discussed in this project. Through a literary-journalistic account that explores the history of Friedman's and the Chicago School economists' rise to fame, as well as their influence on political leaders across the world, *The Shock Doctrine* challenges the narrative of neoliberalism as a democratic ideology.

The Story of Market Fundamentalism

In her introduction, Klein begins with depictions of New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina. The disaster, which caused the closure of public housing, hospitals, and schools, enabling the restructuring and erasure of public services in the affected districts of the city, works as an allegory of disaster capitalism, or "the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (6). In the early chapters of the book, Klein moves back to the 1950s and the CIA's experimentation with shock-and-awe tactics in interrogation, as well as the Chicago School's subsequent interest in using such strategies in policy-making. The speculative, subjective stance of *The Shock Doctrine* is the connection Klein makes between the missions of the father of shock therapy, Dr. Ewen Cameron, and Friedman. Or as she puts it: "Where Cameron dreamed of returning the human mind to [a] pristine state, Friedman dreamed of depatterning societies, of returning them to a state of pure capitalism, cleansed of all interruptions—government regulations, trade barriers and entrenched interests" (60). It is through these ideas that Klein begins to connect the dots between shock treatment and

neoliberalism. Critics of *The Shock Doctrine*, such as Joseph E. Stiglitz, find the association Klein makes between Cameron and Friedman "overdramatic" ("Bleakonomics"). He argues that Klein "oversimplifies" the history of the ideology ("Bleakonomics"). Stiglitz's criticism reflects how the use of the interpretative literary-journalistic approach can evoke more questions than a text can answer. Nevertheless, the purpose of literary journalism is to provoke readers to question the status quo and imagine solutions to social problems.

Stiglitz concedes that Friedman and other neoliberals were "also guilty of oversimplification, basing their belief in the perfection of market economies on models that assumed perfect information, perfect competition, perfect risk markets" ("Bleakonomics"). To be sure, Friedman's ideal was to treat economics as a rigorous science. Central to the Chicago School teachings is that if the market were perfectly free, economic forces, such as supply and demand, would behave like "the forces of nature," and they would exist "in perfect equilibrium, supply communicating with demand the way the moon pulls the tides" (Klein 61). Friedman's problem was that unlike hard scientists who could provide evidence to prove their theories, he could not point to a perfectly functioning example of laissez-faire economy as proof of his (61). In fact, in cases of high inflation or unemployment, the default Chicago School response is to insist that the market is not free enough, and the solution is "a stricter and more complete application of the fundamentals" (62). Klein points out that responding to problems by enforcing severer versions of the same principles as those that were applied in the first place demonstrates that Chicago School economics is "Like all fundamentalist faiths . . . a closed loop" (62). Whatever the problem, neoliberals

recommend that political leaders remove state regulations, sell state assets, liberalize trade and corporate expansion, and privatize or outsource social programs and public services (68-69). Klein's literary journalism shows the futility of neoliberalism as a rigorous science, and charts its development as market fundamentalism that reacts to catastrophes worldwide with a universal solution.

In order to elaborate on the story of Chicago School economics as market fundamentalism, Klein narrates that in the late 1950s, the chairman of the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago, Theodore W. Schultz, and Albion Patterson, director of the U.S. International Cooperation Administration (which later became USAID), agreed that the U.S. government had not provided a strong enough ideological response to Marxism (72). Or in Patterson's words: "we want [the poor countries] to work out their economic salvation by relating themselves to us and by using our way of achieving their economic development" (qtd. in Klein 72). In fact, Patterson and Schultz initiated the Chicago School's Chile Project. Students from Chile, a nation with a history of support for Marxist groups and state-centered economics, would be paid by the U.S. government to study Economics at the University of Chicago, "a school where the professors agitated for the near-complete dismantling of government with single-minded focus" (73). The message to Chilean leaders was that "the U.S. government had decided what ideas their elite students should and should not learn" (73). The ideological foundation of the Chile Project, as Klein narrates it, shows how the principles of market fundamentalism were disseminated as distinctly American tenets of economic development and statecraft.

The 1970s' sociopolitical upheaval in Chile and other Latin American countries allowed the Chicago School economists to experiment with the fundamentals of their theories. Despite the fact that the Chicago Boys had the ear of Augusto Pinochet, and government involvement had been minimized, Chile's inflation reached 375 per cent in 1974—the highest rate recorded in the country, and in the world, at the time (97). Because Friedman believed the high inflation signaled that the application of the fundamentals was not rigorous enough, he called for re-introducing the principles in a manner that would shock the economy into health. Under Friedman's stewardship, Pinochet radically cut government and public spending—"by 25 per cent within six months"—diminished protections on local companies and workforce, and removed trade barriers (99). The intended effect of the sudden policy shift was an eventual change in the expectations of workers and consumers: neither prices nor wages would rise. The breadlines, epidemics, and closed factories evinced that Pinochet also created mass poverty by sending his country into recession to reshape the economy (100-101). Friedman's project of building a prosperous and free society to show the beneficence of his theories inevitably entailed instituting jarring inequality. What is more, Klein's account implies that the neoliberal fundamentals have rarely been elected by the majority, but more often, the principles have been shocked into practice.

In the years from 1981 to 1986, the shock treatment that had been inaugurated in Latin America was developed into "debt shock" in several developing countries (199). For instance, many African nations had taken heavy loans through the IMF or the World Bank in the 1970s, and the increased interest rates in the United States in the early 1980s translated into higher payments on foreign loans (199). Together with

"price shock[s]," or sudden decreases in the prices of commodities, debt shocks quickly worsened the situation of those developing countries that were reliant on a single major export (199). Strictly speaking, the operations of the IMF and the World Bank do not fit Friedman's philosophy, because they are examples of institutions that interfere with the pure workings of the free market. However, the Washington-based financial institutions were essential to the period in which Friedman's tactics became "self-reinforcing" (200). As Klein notes, the "more the global economy followed his prescriptions, with floating interest rates, deregulated prices and export-oriented economies, the more crisis-prone the system became" (200). The implementation of the Washington Consensus as a form of aid prolonged that cycle of crises.

Overall, *The Shock Doctrine* conveys how crises were utilized and manufactured for structural changes in China, Southeast Asia, South Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Before the beginning of the War on Terror, the Chicago School economists had curtailed government involvement, but an undermined government could not sufficiently bolster unity and safety, which the American public demanded in the wake of September 11. The U.S. government claimed a central economic role when, in response to the call for enhanced protection, President George W. Bush's administration sought latest intelligence and security solutions from private contractors, creating what Klein terms a booming "disaster industry" (381). This particular conflation of the government's geopolitical and profit-seeking objectives is troubling, because a variety of adversities—"wars, epidemics, natural disasters and resource shortages" (393)—benefit the companies involved in providing homeland security. The amalgamation of the government's role in national security and economic expansion

has characterized post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy. In addition, it has redefined what it means to be American at home and abroad, dividing people into well-meaning or problem segments of society based on income, race, religion, and nationality. This divisiveness contradicts the neoliberal tenet that, as free agents, individuals should be judged and rewarded for their self-interest and merit, not for their association with a particular social group. Klein's literary-journalistic account identifies market fundamentalism as a manner of statecraft and ideology, for which the United States bears a disproportionate responsibility.

Solidarity as Resistance

Returning to her discussion of New Orleans in the concluding chapters, Klein describes how the Bush administration appointed contractors to restructure the areas that were hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina.[34] Local people, "who might have seen the reconstruction of New Orleans not only as a job but as part of healing and reempowering their communities," were not employed in the restructuring (521). Through the example of rebuilding New Orleans, Klein contemplates possibilities for resistance. Her argument is that community collaboration is essential in rebuilding, but it is not sufficient alone. More specifically, Klein argues that without sharing social histories, communities of increasingly insular individuals are "intensely vulnerable" to the narrative of market fundamentalism (580). Because neoliberalism progresses through undermining sociality, social histories must be employed in what Klein calls

[34] Specifically, President Bush approved of suspending the "law that required federal contractors to pay a living wage; 'make the entire affected area a flat-tax free-enterprise zone'; and 'make the entire region an economic competitiveness zone . . . Another demand called for giving parents vouchers to use at charter schools" (518). Klein claims that all these declared actions were straight out of the Chicago School playbook.

"people's reconstruction" (560). Unlike neoliberal restructuring, which wipes away sites of public assembly and social support to start anew with districts devoted to corporate competition and private enterprise, people's reconstruction entails the local people's involvement in rebuilding, starting with the remnants of their communities. Based on her interviews in disaster zones where community rebuilding has been successful, such as towns in Thailand that were hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, Klein argues that people's reconstruction is an empowering experience, because it does not entail the erasure of communal memories, but weaves past stories together with those of resilience in the face of hardship. Keeping alive social histories, people's reconstruction entails crafting stories for more equal futures.

By reading the narratives in this study as socially symbolic acts through genre analysis, I have also sought to show that the manner by which neoliberalism sustains itself through atomization is at odds with the values and practices of solicitude, commitment, and accountability the novels express. At the end of *Iron* it is clear that Mrs. Curren will die soon, but the letter contains, and Vercueil lives with, the legacy of Mrs. Curren's unlearning of apartheid. Mrs. Curren observes and records instances of brutality adjacent to the politics of segregation in her letter. Though the apartheid system and disaster capitalism that Klein discusses are different expressions of power, Klein's argument about the importance of witnessing as part of resistance is useful here. She writes that in terms of violations of human rights related to disaster capitalism, it is not only necessary "to determine why abuses [are] taking place but to document them as meticulously and credibly as possible" (147). Coetzee's choice of the epistolary novel communicates a similar logic to Klein's. The purpose of the letter for Mrs. Curren is not

simply to catalogue the violence she witnesses, but the way in which the letter publicizes her private shame shows that Mrs. Curren intends to make herself accountable for her past complicity with apartheid. In *Country*, Anna's efforts to show the responsibility of neoliberal reasoning for the injustices she witnesses almost always end in unresponsiveness, for the people of the country of last things are preoccupied by cut-throat competition for survival. Both *Iron* and *Country* gesture towards the possibility that the letters the women write might not be received or read by the intended readers. Even so, the fact that in the epistolary the letters are directed at another reader, the genre is suited for underscoring social responsibility. Anna's fate is unknown at the end of *Country*, but her letter is received and narrated partly by the unnamed recipient, which suggests that, through the letter, her purpose of witnessing and holding power accountable can be realized.

Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* traces the formation of the protagonist into a mature social role, but neoliberalism does not offer such social mooring in which that role could be developed. Klein speaks of the precariousness of the anti-social conditions neoliberalism produces, for crises are moments "when there is a gap between fast-moving events and the information that exists to explain them" (579). Díaz's and Tartt's novels make apparent the insecurity that results from the gap in between the young protagonists' precarious social reality and making sense of it in the absence of social guidance. In *The Goldfinch*, Theo has an opportunity to re-write his life story, which has been marked by acts of deception, through his apprenticeship with Hobie, but fails to do so. Theo's neoliberal *Bildung* informs his decision to capitalize on Hobie's teachings, rather than learning from them. In *Oscar Wao*, after Oscar's death, Yunior

ensures that the Cabral history is a part of the everyday life of his and Lola's daughter, Isis, who is given three family-heirloom azabaches, or jet jewelry, to wear around her neck for protection, and will grow up hearing her late uncle's story. Yunior commits himself to the narrative of the Cabral history, to make Isis more resistant to the atomization neoliberal *Bildung* offers. The historical outlook of the *Bildungsroman* regarding subject formation under neoliberalism, highlights commitment as fruitful grounding for more sustaining life narratives.

In terms of the global effects of market fundamentalism, Klein argues that because "shock therapists are intent on the erasure of memory" to institute their own policies and practices, active remembering, "both individual and collective, turns out to be the greatest shock absorber of all" (585-586). But in terms of mobile and uprooted populations, memories may be tenuous building blocks of resistance. The conventional immigrant narrative regularly depicts homeland memories being repressed in favor of adjustment to the culture of the adoptive country. However, the protagonists of recent immigrant narratives in this study move more effortlessly between the past and present, and build on memories of the homeland as they develop identities that are marked by transcultural experiences more emphatically than any one national culture. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's fluid immigrant identity, which is informed by the memories of Nigeria as well as her experiences in the United States, affords her success in both countries. In *Preparation*, Zou Lei's initial sense of helplessness derives from her inability to make a decent living and contribute to her community, principles which her parents had impressed upon her. After Skinner's death, Zou Lei puts the teachings of her past to use at a farm in Arizona. Though she is not engaged in rebuilding, the farm

is a setting reminiscent of people's reconstruction, because Zou Lei is empowered by the fact that she has the agency to act on her memories of home to make a future in a community where the immigrant members are equals. In so doing, Zou Lei lives by the notion that conscientious social life is "Preparation for the Next Life" (Lish 324), a maxim which is also inscribed in a sign over the doorway of the mosque she visits.

By reflecting on how its political, cultural, and economic forces are received, the World Anglophone writers in this project critically examine the representation of America as a central cultural component in their respective settings. Coetzee's *Iron* depicts America as a democratic political setting, which is the adopted home of Mrs. Curren's daughter who identifies as strongly anti-apartheid. Mrs. Curren attributes a sentiment of hope to America, for the sense of anti-segregationist liberation it has offered her daughter. In Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, America is the neoliberal setting whose culture instils in Oscar a set of primarily extrinsic values. It is a culture that does not offer a social setting in which Oscar's purpose of committing to his family history could be fully realized. *Americanah* communicates that the opportunities America's economic power and rich culture present attract Adichie's immigrant characters. However, Adichie's characters find their transnational identities more marketable and worth investment.

By linking texts by World Anglophone authors with those of American writers, I have addressed neoliberalism as an American way of global life. The World Anglophone narratives in this study portray perspectives on America in a manner that could also be used to describe attitudes towards neoliberalism: the novels communicate America's appeal as a site of democratic values, cultural diversity, and upward

mobility, but they also illustrate the uneven distribution of economic and social resources, insecurity, as well as alienation in the country. Further comparative analysis of novel genres of neoliberalism could expand on more recent crises related to climate change (and climate denial) through depictions of drought, resource shortages, or water conservation in environmental literature. Another genre to elaborate on would be literature by refugees whose displacement is often directly enforced by armed conflicts—such as those that are currently being fought in parts of the Middle East and Africa—but indirectly initiated by the effects of climate change, fundamentalist beliefs, and the demands of global capital. Climate change and mass displacement are topics of global significance that likely will be shaped by the policy decisions that American political and economic leaders make this decade. Examining neoliberalism, not as the science of economic forces it postures as, but through genre, as one prevalent narrative of our time, highlights the potential in countervailing stories that undermine the ideology's position as the ineluctable political option. The narratives in this study offer alternatives that find resistance in the social knowledge of solidarity that neoliberalism so readily denies.

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