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Sick Men of Late Capitalism

Immunity and Precarity in Recent American
Fiction and Performance Art

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You've had a lot of people's hands in you

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Introduction

In a letter, purportedly written by Donald Trump's now disgraced personal physician Dr. Harold Bornstein in 2015, but now confirmed as having been dictated by Trump himself, the presidential candidate's health was said to be "Astonishing excellent." The letter concluded: "If elected, Mr. Trump, I can state unequivocally, will be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency."¹ Another day, another bizarre episode from inside the walls of the White House we might think but, if we delve a little below the surface, Trump's boasts, made by a man whose administration is intent on dismantling affordable healthcare in the United States, hint at a bigger story; one about the ideals of impermeable masculinity and the weaponization of health in the neoliberal era which this PhD thesis will examine. "Sick Men of Late Capitalism" explores the recurring trope of the debilitated male body in contemporary American fiction and late-twentieth century performance art to prize open the complex biopolitical conditions of living under neoliberalism. It places novels by Joshua Ferris, Ben Marcus, and Hanya Yanagihara into dialogue with the endurance art of Ron Athey, Chris Burden, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, James Luna, and Tehching Hsieh to think about the ways in which the disintegration of the body has been used as a metonym to consider the pressures put upon liberal ideas of sovereignty, citizenship, and labor in a globalized, corporatized world.

I read these cultural texts through the framework of immunity, a medical term appropriated from political discourse that conceptualizes the health and security of the physical body. This immunitary fiction articulates a homology between the disintegration of the physical body, on the one hand, and the collapse of broader systems of safety and security, on the other. The texts under scrutiny are particularly concerned with the ways in which the white male body is affected. This subject position has been afforded the fantasy of inviolability due to its shielding by systems of immunization, such as the legal and political protections developed during modernity, or by more recent incarnations of

¹ Tom McCarthy, "Trump Dictated Note Saying He Was 'Astonishingly' Healthy, Doctor Says," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/01/trump-dictated-doctors-note-harold-bornstein>.

the welfare state. It is now, however, facing new situations of exposure. This has been seen not only in the case of punctual traumatic events such as 9/11, but also in the more insidious long-term economic effects of the financial crash of 2008 and changes to labor in the postindustrial economy. I argue that these fictional representations of disintegrating bodies that cling to the fantasy of being “immune” are essential for thinking about life under neoliberalism’s regime of precarity which has been enthusiastically taken up in the United States. These texts negotiate the loss of the fantasy of the impenetrability of the male subject to articulate the shift from a biopolitical governance based on the protection of its subjects to one based on their insecurity. Immunitary narratives react to a political moment that has responded to this change in biopolitical governance with blinkered, chauvinistic populisms that call for the hardening of the boundaries between nations and between subjects. By discussing Roberto Esposito’s philosophy together with materialist approaches to immunity found in critical disability, postcolonial, feminist, queer, and contemporary Marxist theory, however, I engage in conversations that model new, less violent forms of immunity that recognize our fundamental interdependence without eradicating our right to corporeal autonomy. I analyze my literary corpus alongside endurance art, that is, bodily performances that embrace self-discipline and physical hardship. I argue for the significance of endurance as a concept for imagining life under a neoliberal regime of enforced uncertainty. While speaking to the lived experience of neoliberalism, these artists’ extreme experimentations with embodiment probe modes of community and relationality that nurture an acceptance of rather than eradicate the evidence of our mutual vulnerabilities.

In this introduction, I will begin by mapping out the contours of neoliberalism and the welfare state as competing models of biopolitical governmentality, before moving on to the specific literary and cultural contexts of the works under examination. In doing so, I draw attention to the way in which neoliberalism’s governance of precarity has been matched by an increasing interest in the concept of immunity within political philosophy. I then turn to current debates in American literary culture and performance studies to map out the relationship between immunity, contemporary cultural practices, and neoliberalism, before offering an overview of my chapters.

Biopolitics and the Governance of Life under Neoliberalism

The financial crash of 2008 and the increasingly obvious economic implications of globalization and deindustrialization have produced a significant amount of academic interest in the philosophical and moral assumptions of what is customarily seen as our

current political and economic paradigm: neoliberalism.² I understand neoliberalism, following Wendy Brown and Michel Foucault, as a normative order of reason and governing rationality that attempts to align and remake every aspect of human existence in the economic terms of the free market.³ This rationality manifested itself in the 1970s and early 1980s as a set of political-economic policies seeking to remove barriers that prevented the flow of global capital, deregulating trade and labor markets, privatizing previously communal institutions and resources, and dissolving social security nets and welfare provision.⁴ The effects of this neoliberal reasoning have differed greatly from region to region and from era to era. In Central and South America during the 1970s and 1980s, neoliberal economic policy was actively used as a way to try and halt communist influence. This was most evident in the training of Chilean economists by Milton Friedman, one of the central figures in neoliberal economics. “The Chicago Boys”, as they became known, were deployed to spread neoliberal doctrine during the regime of Augusto Pinochet, who took over Chile in 1973 in a U.S.-supported coup after the election of socialist president Salvador Allende.⁵ In this region and elsewhere in the Global South, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank sought to bring national economies under free-market principles by imposing structural adjustment measures. Following U.S. president Richard Nixon’s termination of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971, the leadership of the Anglo-American world in the 1980s saw the increasing deregulation of capital. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and U.S. president Ronald Reagan implemented liberalizing economic reforms, lowering taxes, privatizing public industries, and weakening the power of trade unions.⁶

Aware of this variation, I narrow my focus to sketch out the influence of this neoliberal logic most relevant to this thesis—the shift from a comparatively strong welfare state underpinned by a manufacturing economy to a post-Fordist regime that has seen the withdrawal of state intervention in the United States. After the Second World War, the

² In particular see, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. George Elliott (New York: Verso, 2014); Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Daniel Steadman-Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³ For an overview of neoliberalism’s intellectual origins see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 17.

⁴ Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5; Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, “Introduction: Reading and Writing the Economic Present,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 2 (March 2015): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.993516>.

⁵ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 21.

⁶ Harvey, *Brief History*, 10.

United States organized around a liberal democratic state form that placed regulatory constraints on capital in order to promote the smooth functioning of the global economy by balancing the interests of capital and labor, a free-market economy “embedded” in a social safety net. Embedded liberalism thus reconciled classical liberalism’s economic principles, economic freedom and liberty, with the belief in justice and equality of social liberalism.⁷ Neoliberalism came into being as a specific economic and political reaction against embedded liberalism.⁸ As Foucault notes, those opposed to the controlling of economic disparity could easily position the Keynesian state against the founding ideals of America, “as something extraneous and threatening inasmuch as it involved both introducing objectives which could be described as socializing and also as laying the basis of an imperialist and military state.”⁹ Neoliberalism’s advocacy of individual self-interest and the free rein of the market possesses significant conceptual overlap with classical and laissez-faire liberalism’s strategies of minimal state interference.¹⁰ However, Brown sees the absolute fusion of political institutions and market rationality under neoliberalism as something distinct, arguing that a neoliberal rationality impedes the state’s ability to protect the rights of the individual, threatening liberal democracy’s ideals of freedom and self-determination. The primary function of the state has become to actively facilitate the functioning of the market, and for the individual to manage its life within the whims of the market.¹¹ As I go on to suggest, this has been felt acutely and undesirably by the white, male subject in the United States who, from the enshrining of the American Constitution onwards, has habitually been afforded liberalism’s political privileges of self-rule and physical sovereignty in return for their voluntary subjection to the laws of the state.¹²

Here, I move on to outline the biopolitical effects of this transition from an embedded liberalism, where market activities were controlled primarily to protect those deemed capable of self-governance and their dependents, to neoliberalism, which sees market forces liberated and all subject positions newly, though not equally, exposed.¹³ As Brown suggests, in the Euro-Atlantic world, the neoliberal project was enacted not simply through political measures, but also through more granular forms of “soft power” such

⁷ Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, “Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction,” to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literature*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 4.

⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 21.

⁹ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 218.

¹⁰ Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37.

¹¹ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 21.

¹² Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 110.

¹³ Harvey, *Brief History*, 2.

as remaking institutions and creating consensus.¹⁴ Foucault's concept of governmentality, which sees the manifestation of power through the production of norms, knowledge, and practices, is thus a particularly useful tool to think about neoliberalism's insidious restructuring of all aspects of human existence.¹⁵ I offer an overview of Foucauldian biopolitics to show the entwined relationship between the different formations of liberalism, capitalism, and biopolitics.

Liberalism and Biopolitics

In "Society Must Be Defended", Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics to expose how in modernity life and biological processes became subject to techniques of political knowledge and power.¹⁶ Liberalism and biopolitics evolved simultaneously.¹⁷ Beginning in the eighteenth century, Foucault identifies the development of biopower as a political formation that was more nuanced than the withdrawal or granting of life that we see with the power of the sovereign, or the disciplinary control of the body that was featured in Foucault's earlier work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.¹⁸ Biopower is the power to "make live and let die", and the social body is no longer understood as a metaphor, but as an organic reality.¹⁹ This entrance of life into the political sphere saw the growth of institutions and the development of scientific techniques and knowledge that aimed to harness and enhance the biological life of human organisms. Paul Rabinow articulates the "bipolar" nature of biopower as it acts upon both individual and population.²⁰ On the one hand, biopower focuses on the "anatomy-politics" of the human body, disciplining the individual human body to ensure its efficiency. On the other hand, the production of statistics around biological processes such as birth, death, and fertility, which begins in the second half of the eighteenth century is, for Foucault, emblematic of this new regulatory power that imagines society as a population.²¹ The strength of a nation was thus increasingly seen to depend on the health of its population. For Foucault, medicine

¹⁴ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 35.

¹⁵ Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015), 24.

¹⁶ Thomas Lemke, introduction to *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederik Trump (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁷ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 24.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 239.

²⁰ Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Biopower Today," *BioSocieties* 1, no. 2 (June 2006): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1745855206040014>.

²¹ Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 243.

is significant as it offers scientific knowledge of the organic processes of the population and acts individually on the body.²² He continues to expand his discussion of biopolitics in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, investigating how these biopolitical technologies were strengthened in the nineteenth century. Foucault focuses particularly on the emergence of the idea of sexuality by charting the convergence of medical, social, and scientific practices which aimed to create a “norm of sexual development”.²³ Rather than operating as an exclusionary practice which determines subjects as either normal or not, the endless proliferation of sexual classifications actually serves to tie subjects to discursive and state apparatuses.²⁴

Wither Welfare State

Foucault’s recently published lectures from the Collège de France entitled *Security, Territory, Population* from 1977-1978 and *The Birth of Biopolitics* from 1978-1979 show how Foucault developed his thesis to address the relationship between the demise of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism as competing methods of biopolitical governmentality which treat biological life differently within a capitalist framework.²⁵ With reference to these newly published lectures, Jeffrey Nealon convincingly reads Foucault’s commitment to the notion of governmentality and governance in his writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a means to understand how biopolitical power has mutated and intensified under neoliberalism.²⁶ Summarizing the trajectory of Foucault’s thought, Nealon writes: “from the “banishment of the leper (sovereign power), to the quarantine of the diseased (social power), to panoptic surveillance (discipline), to the designation of the normal (biopower), Foucault’s genealogy of power’s increasing intensity charts a movement to ever-more-supple forms of control.”²⁷

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault claims that the welfare state’s holistic approach to care for national citizens from cradle to grave required the implementation of social policy which would act as a “counterweight to unrestrained economic processes.” He emphasizes that the welfare state was not concerned with actively creating a more equal

²² Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” 244–5.

²³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 36.

²⁴ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications Since 1984* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 51.

²⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*.

²⁶ Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

society. Rather, it needed to control excess inequality. Describing the function of social security payments, he claims: “it enables us not to raise wages, and consequently its effect is to reduce the costs of the economy by pacifying social conflicts by enabling wage claims to be less steep and pressing.”²⁸ The systems of the welfare state re-directed the surplus value produced by the laboring body into the management of inequality at a state level.²⁹

In *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, Melinda Cooper expands on Foucault’s thesis. She writes that the welfare state is

the first political form not only to understand obligation in immediately social, collectivist terms, but also to inscribe its relations of debt at the level of the biological. It undertakes to protect life by redistributing the fruits of national wealth to all its citizens, even those who cannot work, but in exchange it imposes a reciprocal obligation: its contractors must in turn give their life to the nation.³⁰

The welfare state was constructed on the promise of biopolitical protection for individual subjects in return for their waged or, as will be developed shortly in reference to the gendered formulation of the welfare state, their unwaged labor.

Rise Precarity

Whereas the welfare state was concerned with managing inequality, neoliberalism has unleashed it. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the expansion of wage labor, and saw the growing strength of political bodies such as trade unions and civil rights organizations that fought for worker’s and citizen’s rights.³¹ The end of the 1960s saw a breakdown in embedded liberalism due to a crisis of capital accumulation during which unemployment and inflation rose rapidly.³² This crisis provided an opportunity, in David Harvey’s terms, for the elites who had lost economic and political power during the brief period of embedded liberalism to reclaim it. Neoliberalization has seen the advent of accumulation by dispossession—the concentration of wealth and power into the hands of an elite through processes of privatization, financialization, and state redistributions.³³ Against the backdrop of these developments in North America, Cooper suggests that:

²⁸ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 199.

²⁹ Jemima Repo, “Gender Equality as Bioeconomic Governmentality in a Neoliberal EU,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics*, ed. Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea (New York: Routledge, 2017), 160.

³⁰ Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008), 8.

³¹ Harvey, *Brief History*, 178.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 162–3, 178.

Neoliberalism announces the end of the mediations that were so central to the growth strategies of the welfare state and developmental biopolitics: the second world, the middle class, the family wage, the very notion of the standard of living all give way to extreme differences in the distribution of life chances. Contrary to the philosophy of the social state, it teaches that the collective risks gathered under the banner of the nation can no longer be (profitably) collectivized, normalized, or insured against.³⁴

The shift from collective forms of protection to an increasing reliance on individual resourcefulness in neoliberal reasoning is encapsulated by Foucault's utilization of the concept of "human capital." Under older formulations of liberal capitalism, the subject was able to maintain a precarious divide between a subjectivity that is inalienable and a labor power that can be rented out.³⁵ Under the regime of neoliberal capital, however, this split between the spiritual and existential aspirations such as the pursuit of relationships, of culture, of religion on the one hand, and the pursuit of material interests on the other, disintegrates.³⁶ Individuals are thus increasingly encouraged to perceive themselves as competitive "entrepreneurs of the self", where all aspects of human life can be quantified and regulated by the market.³⁷ This ideal of competition and enterprise produces a political culture that sees individuals as responsible for themselves and a state composed not of subjects seeking security, but of winners and losers in a capitalist system.³⁸ As I will delve into later, the brutal exposure to the whims of the marketplace has been strategically marketed as an expansion of the creatively stimulating yet insecure lifestyle of the artist to all.³⁹

The welfare state's collective management of inequality should thus be seen as an exception to the long history of precarity—the governance through social and economic

³⁴ Cooper, *Life as Surplus*, 62.

³⁵ Michael Feher, "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital," trans. Ivan Ascher, *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2008-019>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–4.

³⁷ Christopher Breu, *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 15.

³⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 38.

³⁹ As Jeffrey Nealon suggests, the concept of governmentality permits scholars to challenge the traditional, teleological narrative of Foucault scholarship which sees his last works, the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, as recuperating the promise of liberation through aesthetic and ethical self-creation after his more pessimistic works on biopolitics and power. *The Birth of Biopolitics* allows us not to see Foucault as a blind convert to the neoliberalism's valorization of individuality and freedom, but rather as producing an astute analysis of how creative self-expression has become economized under a neoliberal schema. See *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, 9; Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality* vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Foucault, *The Care of the Self, The History of Sexuality* vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

insecurity—in industrial capitalism.⁴⁰ This has manifested most prominently in the changing forms of labor under neoliberalism. The expectation of having secure, life-long employment and a sustaining wage has largely been abandoned in recent decades. Across private and public sectors in the United States, workers are often expected to work on a temporary and contingent basis with little employment rights, and to invest in their own human capital.⁴¹ These new risky forms of labor have produced a significant body of scholarly work and political activism which responds to the end of the Keynesian compromise and its promise of safety and stability. Precarity has thus become both a political organizing tool and an object of academic discourse within the early years of the twenty-first century, particularly mobilized by the European left.⁴² As a concept it is rooted in the arguments made by autonomist Marxists in the 1970s regarding the need for solidarity between different kinds of workers being produced in the post-industrial economy. The freeing of capital from the regulatory constrictions of the standardized mass production of Fordism has produced both conditions and kinds of work that have been extensively documented elsewhere.⁴³ Most notable within the Global North are the expansion of automation and the shifting of manufacturing overseas that has seen the exponential growth of the knowledge, service, and financial sectors, as well as the rise of precarious or “flexible” forms of labor. Labor under neoliberalism should thus be seen as an intensification of the biopolitical forces on the corporeal body. Some critics have seen this positively, as an affirmative biopolitics. In *Empire, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* and *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have embraced this global reorganization of the economy. The redirection of workers and their surplus labor power from the factory into forms of “immaterial” or cognitive and intellectual labor produces a new and potentially revolutionary arrangement between labor and life.⁴⁴ The obsolescence of older forms of security provides opportunities for new forms of collaborative, self-directed working practices and hitherto unexplored alliances between

⁴⁰ Jasbir K. Puar, ed., “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović, edited by Jasbir Puar,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 165, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23362779>.

⁴¹ Lisa Adkins, “Contingent Labour and the Rewriting of the Sexual Contract,” in *The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract: Working and Living in Contingency*, ed. Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

⁴² Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, “Precarity as a Political Concept, or Fordism as Exception,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7–8 (December 2008): 54–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097796>.

⁴³ In particular, see the collection *Temporary Work, Agencies and Unfree Labour: Insecurity in the New World of Work*, ed. Judy Fudge and Kendra Strauss (London: Routledge, 2013); Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, “Politicizing Contingent Work: Countering Neoliberal Labor Market Regulation...from the Bottom Up?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 741–61, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1724165>.

⁴⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* and *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

subjects, creating the new collective biopolitical body of the “multitude”.⁴⁵ The convergence of capitalist production and sociality within contemporary working practices, however, also makes all aspects of our lives more precarious, as I will discuss later in the introduction of the performative qualities of neoliberal labor.⁴⁶

Precarity was an organizing principle for the Euro May Day protests and has been revived most recently by the Occupy movements in the United States and Great Britain, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter movement.⁴⁷ Given the proliferation of different meanings, here I look to Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Isabel Lorey as theorists who utilize the term precarity as a way to conceptualize the loss of the collective benefits of the welfare state. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler examines the missed opportunity to use the exposure of America’s fragility experienced during 9/11 constructively. She calls for the temporary dislocation from First World privilege as an opportunity to acknowledge a mutual corporeal vulnerability as a basis for a new interdependent global political community.⁴⁸ Butler draws a distinction between “precariousness,” a general condition shared by all forms of life due to our physical liability, and “precarity,” a politically induced condition which refers to specific populations exposed to state violence or neglect in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*.⁴⁹ Most recently, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler extends her understanding of precarity to address the specific contours of neoliberal governmentality, pointing to how a logic of scarcity heightens states of inequality. In Butler’s terms, “we are faced in a new way with the idea that some populations are considered disposable.”⁵⁰

In *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, Isabell Lorey offers a genealogical account of political and economic relations to suggest that governance through insecurity has become the dominant form of neoliberal regulation.⁵¹ She builds on Butler’s distinction between precarity and precariousness to bring in the term “precarization” to analyze the ways in which populations previously protected by welfare state mechanisms are now governed by a logic of uncertainty. As she states, precarization is no longer “a marginal phenomenon”: “it can no longer be outsourced to the socio-

⁴⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 30; see also Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

⁴⁶ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 75.

⁴⁷ Liam Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 65; Neilson and Rossiter, “Precarity,” 53.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), xiii.

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 25–26.

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, foreword to *State of Insecurity*, vii.

geographical spaces of the periphery where it only affects others.”⁵² Drawing on the French sociologist Robert Castel’s analysis of precarity, Lorey sees the European and North American welfare state as a temporary taming of the “virus of social vulnerability” that had seen the coupling of wage labor with disadvantage.⁵³ Viewing the welfare state as an exception to a longer lineage of capitalist-induced precarity, she acknowledges that these benefits were still dependent on a series of biopolitical stratifications, including the exclusion of women, whose domestic work was not recognized or remunerated within the system, and through the exclusion of migrants and those deemed ‘others’ in the structure of the nation state.⁵⁴ Under neoliberalism, however, the site of precarity expands to include the white male bourgeois subject, which explains my focus on these bodies. Lorey argues:

precarization is currently undergoing a process of normalization in which, though the patterns of a liberal ordering of precarity continue to exist in a modified form, existential precariousness can no longer be entirely shifted through the construction of dangerous others and warded off as precarity; instead it is actualized in the individualized governmental precarization of those who are normalized under neoliberal conditions.⁵⁵

Similarly, in *Cruel Optimism* Lauren Berlant dissects the temporal lag between our aspirations for a “good life,” its promise of financial, occupational, and political security encompassed by the postwar social contract, and the slow retraction of the material conditions which would enable us to achieve this way of living. This situation has caused, in Berlant’s words, a kind of cruel optimism due to the continued attachment to a presently unattainable object which in turn prevents human capacity and agency.⁵⁶ The attrition of what Berlant describes as the “postwar good life fantasy” has been met with a variety of movements and demands, and here she collects together the Tea Party and Occupy, which can be said “to participate in a structure of feeling, a desperation about losing traction that is now becoming explicit and distorted politically.”⁵⁷ Berlant can thus be seen to engage with the affective production of precarity, though she remains ambivalent about its possibilities as a tool for political organizing.⁵⁸ As she suggests, precarity as a political slogan seems to be a “continuation of the predictable pattern in which ordinary contingencies of material and fantasmic life associated with proletarian

⁵² Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14–5.

⁵⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

⁵⁷ Puar, ed., “Precarity Talk,” 166.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

labor-related subjectivity became crises when they hit the bourgeoisies, which is when crises tend to become general in mass political terms.”⁵⁹

Health care policy and practice within the United States offers a particularly striking example of this new regime of precarity, here understood as the governance and self-governing through social insecurity. As an international and interdisciplinary conversation has been observing, flexible employment produces new health concerns for workers. Not only is American healthcare predominantly delivered through an employer-provided model, but job insecurity has also been found to be a “chronic stressor” akin to the negative psychological and physical effects of unemployment.⁶⁰ Americans spend substantially more on healthcare than citizens in other economically developed countries but collectively receive the smallest amount of coverage.⁶¹ The brutal logic of this system is brought home forcefully when we consider that medical care expenses are the number one reason that Americans file for bankruptcy.⁶² With reference to the Trump administration’s attempts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, Jasbir Puar argues that it is “only really remarkable because they definitively expose the actual scale of disregard for human life, having blown so far open so quickly.”⁶³

As Nikolas Rose argues in his incisive overview of neoliberalism’s effects on medical treatment, the charge of human health has increasingly been handed over to quasi-autonomous regulatory bodies, often private providers who are regulated “at a distance”. Individuals seeking medical services are now consumers, increasingly responsible for their own treatment.⁶⁴ Rose points to the increasing “somaticization” of individuality, the ways in which we are encouraged to think about ourselves in bodily terms, emphasizing

⁵⁹ Puar, ed., “Precarity Talk,” 166.

⁶⁰ For details of unemployment and underemployment as a chronic stressor, see Joan Benach and Carles Muntaner, “Precarious Employment and Health: Developing a Research Agenda,” *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 61, no. 4 (April 2007): 276, <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2005.045237>; Marlea Clarke et al., “‘This Just Isn’t Sustainable’: Precarious Employment, Stress and Workers’ Health,” *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 30, no. 4–5 (July–October 2007): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlp.2007.06.005>; Aaron E. Carroll, “The Real Reason the U.S. Has Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/upshot/the-real-reason-the-us-has-employer-sponsored-health-insurance.html>.

⁶¹ Luca Lorenzoni, Annalisa Belloni, and Franco Sassi, “Health-Care Expenditure and Health Policy in the USA versus Other High-Spending OECD Countries,” *The Lancet* 384, no. 9937 (July 2014): 83, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)60571-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60571-7).

⁶² David U. Himmelstein et al., “Medical Bankruptcy in the United States, 2007: Results of a National Study,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 122, no. 8 (August 2009): 741, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2009.04.012>.

⁶³ Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (London: Duke University Press, xvi); U.S Department for Healthcare, *Affordable Care Act (ACA)*, accessed January 2, 2018, <https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/affordable-care-act/>.

⁶⁴ Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2–3.

in particular the rise of genetic testing, reproductive technologies, and physical modification.⁶⁵ This corporate model promotes an increasingly personal, moralistic, and competitive perspective which fails to account for the political or collective view of health incorporated in the welfare state, articulated by various critics as “healthism” or “biomedicalization.”⁶⁶ American cultural theorist Eric Cadzyn, whose thinking will frame my first chapter, draws on his own experience of trying to receive treatment for leukemia while working in Canada to formulate the idea of the “global abyss”, the space produced between the political formations of the nation-state which provide healthcare to individuals, and the financially driven transnational pharmaceutical corporations offering drugs.⁶⁷ Cadzyn, along with other commentators, points to the increasing inequality of healthcare and the restriction of affordable and accessible treatment as indicative of the thriving state of neoliberal capitalism.⁶⁸

Melinda Cooper claims that the biotech industry’s exploitation of living matter was perceived as a way to negotiate the shift from a productive to a financialized economy, whose consequences will be examined in the third chapter. Whereas the welfare state, centered on communal growth, has an interest in the collective health of the nation in the present moment, neoliberalism thrives on catastrophism, the unequal distribution of life chances, and speculative investment in the future.⁶⁹ She expands this by detailing how the biotech revolution, the manipulation of biological processes for commercial processes, was used as a means to overcome the ecological and economic limits of the manufacturing economy, “a result of a whole series of legislative and regulatory measures designed to relocate economic production at the genetic, microbial, and cellular level, so that life becomes, literally, annexed” within the process of capitalist accumulation.⁷⁰ Thus, under neoliberalism we witness the intent to efface the boundaries between the spheres of “production and reproduction, labor and life, the market and living tissues—the very boundaries that were constitutive of welfare state biopolitics and human rights

⁶⁵ Rose, *Politics of Life*, 129.

⁶⁶ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 30; Adele E. Clarke et al., “Biomedicalization: Technoscientific Transformations of Health, Illness, and U.S. Biomedicine,” *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 2 (April 2003): 161.

⁶⁷ Eric Cadzyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture and Illness* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20; see also: Tom R. Reid, *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Elisabeth Rosenthal, *An American Sickness: How Healthcare Became Big Business and How You Can Take It Back* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Steven Brill, *America's Bitter Pill: Money, Politics, Backroom Deals, and the Fight to Fix Our Broken Healthcare System* (New York: Random House, 2015).

⁶⁹ Cooper, *Life as Surplus*, 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

discourse.”⁷¹ Neoliberalism’s removal of the conditions for a secure and stable life means that liberalism’s ideal of the independent, self-sustaining individual has deteriorated.

Mapping Immunitary Discourse: The Political Hues of Immunology

Fascinatingly, as a neoliberal governance of precarity took hold, a concern with immunity intensified. From the late twentieth century to the present, thinkers as varied as Emily Martin, Roberto Esposito, Peter Sloterdijk, Ed Cohen, Mel Chen, Niklaas Luhmann, Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida, Byung-Chul Han, David Napier, Catherine Waldby, Alfred I. Tauber, Eula Biss, and Warwick Anderson began turning toward immunology as a way to understand the contemporary political and social landscape.⁷² This turn toward

⁷¹ Cooper, *Life as Surplus*, 9.

⁷² Andrew Goffey, “Homo Immunologicus: On the Limits of Critique,” *Medical Humanities* 41, no. 1 (June 2015): 8. See: Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994); Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Esposito and Timothy Campbell, “The Immunization Paradigm,” *Diacritics* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 23–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204124>; Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Microspherology, Spheres* vol. 1, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011); Sloterdijk, *Globes: Macrospherology, Spheres* vol. 2, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014); Sloterdijk, *Foams: Plural Spherology, Spheres* vol. 3, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016); Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (London: Duke University Press, 2009); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (London: Duke University Press, 2012); Niklaas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984); Donna J. Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Consituations of Self in Immune System Discourse,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 203–30; Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, ed. *Religion*, trans. David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); David A. Napier, *The Age of Immunology: Conceiving a Future in an Alienating World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Catherine Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Alfred I. Tauber, *Immunity: The Evolution of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Tauber, *The Immune Self: Theory Or Metaphor?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eula

immunological discourse has been read as part of a broader philosophical shift toward theories of embodiment in the 1980s, and of the ongoing disruption of scientific discourses from within feminist science studies.⁷³ Yet I argue that it should also be seen as a response to the prolonged failure of the welfare state's standardization of life and economy, as well as to the rupturing events of 9/11 and the 2008-2012 financial crisis. In the overview of immunity presented here, I will focus on three developments which inform the rest of the project. Firstly, I observe how the autoimmunitary turn in contemporary philosophy has been used as a frame to process the boundary-troubling effects of neoliberal precarity. Secondly, I demonstrate how the biomedical construction of immunity is embedded in liberal categories of personhood, privileging a defensive, atomized, proprietary, and bounded body. The protections of the welfare state, described by Lorey as a structure of "biopolitical immunization," are thus situated in an extended lineage of security mechanisms provided by the state.⁷⁴ Thirdly, I outline how this understanding of immunity privileges a fantasmic version of the male subject. In this interrogation of immunity's entanglements, I will offer a genealogy of the "immune subject" to outline how the conceptual entwinement of physical and political inviolability developed. Prior to addressing these specific interventions, I want to offer some insight into why immunology as a scientific discipline has proven to be such a rich resource for political philosophy.

In his recently published synthesis on the development of immunity as an idea, philosopher of science, Alfred I. Tauber, asks, what is immunity? "The commonsensical answer," he suggests, "holds that a host animal possesses mechanisms by which to defend itself against pathogens, and the completion of that process results in *immunity*, a protected state."⁷⁵ While, as Tauber's definition suggests, the term is now primarily associated with biomedicine, immunity was initially a legal term. I will probe into the precise consequences of this shift from the juridico-political to the biomedical domain in my discussion of the creation of the immune subject below, but it is worth noting now that this gives immunology a consciousness of its own lack of objectivity. Immunity, Ed Cohen argues, "is not a natural choice of images for our ability to live as organisms among other organisms of various sizes and scales" and is instead derived "from the ways that Western legal and political thinking accounts for the complex, difficult, and at times

Biss, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (New York: Graywolf Press, 2014); Warwick Anderson and Ian R.

Mackay, *Intolerant Bodies: A Short History of Autoimmunity* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁷³ Warwick Anderson, "Getting Ahead of One's Self?: The Common Culture of Immunology and Philosophy," *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society* 105, no. 3 (September 2014): 610, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678176>.

⁷⁴ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 43.

⁷⁵ Tauber, *Immunity*, 1.

violent manner that humans live among other humans.”⁷⁶ As Warwick Anderson suggests, immunity offers an opportunity to think about the “traffic of metaphor and model between social theory and the biological sciences—traffic so dense and intricate that it sometimes obscures any divisions between these domains.”⁷⁷ Significantly for my project, immunity thus helps us to expose the relationship between biological life and the political.

Critical examinations of the history of immunology—the branch of medicine and biology concerned with immunity—have demonstrated its entanglement with political, philosophical, and societal shifts. While a full overview of this field is beyond the scope of this thesis, and has already been expertly undertaken elsewhere, a synopsis of immunology’s key developments is revealing.⁷⁸ These shifts can be identified as a transition from a military model, to one engaged with the self, to the most recent ecological model. From its inception, immunology has been concerned with the establishment and maintenance of biological identity.⁷⁹ As will be fully explicated with reference to the ideas of Élie Metchnikoff and the construction of the immune self, from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century immunity was rooted in the notion of the defense of the insular, self-contained organism.⁸⁰ As Emily Martin notes in her expansive investigation into perceptions of immunity, the 1940s and 1950s were characterized by the perception of the body as a fortress.⁸¹ This emphasis on the maintenance of external boundaries can be linked to the confidence of the nation state as a primary political formation, as well as to the mid-century “welfarist ideal of normalized, nation-centered growth” which relied on limiting cross-border movements.⁸²

This military model of identity received a different emphasis due to the consolidation of transplantation biology and a broader understanding of autoimmunity, where the organism attempts to eliminate its own healthy cells and tissues, following World War II.⁸³ Writing in 1965, immunologist Frank Macfarlane Burnet reflected on immunology’s fascination with organismal identity to comment that immunology is “more a problem in

⁷⁶ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 3.

⁷⁷ Anderson, “Getting Ahead,” 607.

⁷⁸ See Inge Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy: Immunisation and Its Discontents* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Tauber, *Immunity*; Arthur M. Silverstein, *A History of Immunology* (New York: Elsevier, 1989).

⁷⁹ Tauber, *Immunity*, x.

⁸⁰ Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse*, 43.

⁸¹ Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 71.

⁸² Cooper, *Life as Surplus*, 61–2.

⁸³ Silverstein, *History*, 232.

philosophy than in practical science.”⁸⁴ Burnet introduced the term “self” into the vocabulary of immunity, suggesting that the body’s memory of itself provides it with the ability to distinguish between self and nonself elements.⁸⁵ According to his theory, an immune response is caused against all nonself entities, whereas none is triggered against the organism’s self.⁸⁶

As Tauber notes, Burnet’s original notion of a self as “transcendentally cohesive and fixed” has been largely displaced within immunology.⁸⁷ In 1967, Niel Jerne coined the term “immune system” in order to understand immunity as an organization of interdependent parts.⁸⁸ This brought together “those who believed that immunity depended largely on antibodies and those who believed it depended more on specialized cells.”⁸⁹ As will be fully developed in chapter 1, Martin convincingly argues that Jerne’s concept of the responsive immune system was linked to the changing formations of labor within a globalized, neoliberal society that demands responsive subjects.⁹⁰ By the turn of the millennium, however, immunology shifted toward an ecological perspective. This embraces a model of tolerance that “balances the original paradigm of host defense with an ecological perspective that must account for all relationships and encounters the organism faces in its life cycle.” Part of this ecological model is the recognition that the immune self is in fact a holobiont, composed of many diverse organisms living in cooperative relationships within the framework of what we perceive as the human body.⁹¹ Evidently, immunology is not a static discipline, and as Tauber claims, immunologists increasingly recognize that immunity is something far more complicated than a “defensive army against destructive invaders.”⁹² However, these views of immunity, particularly of the antagonism between self and other, profoundly influence the “immuno-philosophy” of the late twentieth century.⁹³

⁸⁴ Frank Macfarlane Burnet, “A Darwinian Approach to Immunity,” in *Molecular and Cellular Basis of Antibody Formation: Proceedings of a Symposium, Prague, June 1-5, 1965*, ed. J. Sterzl (New York: Academic Press, 1965), 17.

⁸⁵ Tauber, *Immune Self*, 135.

⁸⁶ For more on this see, Frank Macfarlane Burnet, *The Integrity of the Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Burnet, *Cellular Immunology: Self and Notsself* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁸⁷ Tauber, *Immunity*, 3.

⁸⁸ Niels K. Jerne, “The Natural-Selection Theory of Antibody Formation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 41, no. 11 (November 1955): 850, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.41.11.849>.

⁸⁹ Biss, *On Immunity*, 62.

⁹⁰ Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 109; Biss, *On Immunity*, 62.

⁹¹ Tauber, *Immunity*, 5.

⁹² Alfred I. Tauber, “Expanding Immunology: Defensive Versus Ecological Perspectives,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 272.

⁹³ Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 95.

Precarity and the Autoimmunitary Turn

In her overview of “the use and usefulness of immunological models in contemporary political philosophy for assessing and analyzing contemporary political culture,” Inge Mutsaers claims that the 1990s marked a high point in which biomedical immunity came to grip political and cultural philosophers as a paradigm for comprehending the world.⁹⁴ For Mutsaers, this increased interest in immunity was rooted in the dissolution of borders and boundaries in a globalized world after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and, although not emphasized in her account, we could add the dissolving power of the nation-state in relation to the forces of boundless capital.⁹⁵ For a number of prominent thinkers, the current global situation’s expansion of precarity has been understood as an autoimmunitary crisis.

These perspectives are significant to my project as they demonstrate the ways in which immunity has been used to convey some of the anxiety surrounding the current political climate. In *Rogues and Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Derrida uses the concept of autoimmunity to describe the actions of various states which employ anti-democratic elements in order to protect democracy itself. Employing the conceptual framework which reads autoimmunity as “protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system,” as communicated in his earlier explorations into autoimmunity in *Religion*, Derrida sees the logic of autoimmunity penetrating the response to the terror attacks of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London.⁹⁶ He dwells on the fact that the terrorists who undertook 9/11 were trained and armed by the United States. These individuals committed a double suicide, “their own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal, autoimmunitary aggression—and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed and trained them.”⁹⁷ Additionally, the foreign policy response to these attacks, to suspend democracy and initiate wars in the Middle East, undermined the freedoms that Western nations vowed to protect.⁹⁸ In spite of the alarming nature of the events that Derrida describes, he insists on the necessity of the autoimmune dynamic:

It must touch an exposed vulnerability, one without absolute immunity, without indemnity; it must touch this vulnerability in its finitude and in a nonhorizontal fashion, there where it is not yet or is already no longer possible to face or face up to the unforeseeability of the other. In this regard, autoimmunity is not an absolute

⁹⁴ Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse*, 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁶ Derrida and Vattimo, *Religion*, 73.

⁹⁷ Borradori, *Philosophy*, 95.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20, 140.

ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to what and to who comes—which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event.⁹⁹

For Derrida, autoimmunity opens up the space for recognition of our coexistence.

Central to this project is Esposito's theory of immunity. Alongside Hardt and Negri and Giorgio Agamben, Esposito is part of a new wave of Italian philosophy that tackles biopolitics after Foucault.¹⁰⁰ Esposito's claims can address some of the questions left unanswered by Foucauldian biopolitics with regard to the historical events of the mid-twentieth century—principally, how did a biopolitical rationality, conceived as a way of enhancing life, culminate in the Nazi death camps?¹⁰¹ Esposito contends that this oscillation between sovereignty and governmentality, between the purely negative and potentially emancipatory functions of biopolitics, can be “unified by the bivalent character of the immune dispositive, which is both positive and negative, protective and destructive.”¹⁰² Esposito also sees the current era as being defined by an autoimmunitary logic. For Esposito, and in line with Derrida's emphasis on the events of 9/11 as being indicative of an autoimmunitary turn, the tendency to collapse the political into the purely biological is indicated through looking

at the panorama that inaugurates the beginning of the twenty-first century [...] from the explosion of biological terrorism to the preventative war that attempts to respond to its own terrain, from ethnic—that is biological—massacres to the mass migrations that sweep away the barriers that are intended to contain them, from technologies that invest not only individual bodies but also the traits of the species to psychopharmacology that modifies our vital behaviors, from environmental politics to the explosion of new epidemics, from the reopening of concentration camps in different areas of the world to the blurring of juridical distinction between norm and exception—all of this while everywhere a new and potentially devastating immunitary syndrome breaks out once again, uncontrollably.¹⁰³

Liane Tanguay has productively used the autoimmunitary paradigm to examine recent pressing, and horrifying, historical events. Tanguay draws a useful comparison between the propulsions driving the campaign for the United Kingdom to leave the European

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Rogues*, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Timothy C. Campbell, “Bios, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito,” *Diacritics* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2008.0009>.

¹⁰¹ Jaakko Ailio, “Biopolitics of the Global Governance of HIV/AIDS,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics*, 236.

¹⁰² Roberto Esposito, “COMMUNITY, IMMUNITY, BIOPOLITICS,” trans. Zakiya Hanafi, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18, no. 3 (September 2013): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2013.834666>.

¹⁰³ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 87.

Union, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Whether it was Trump's emphatic calls to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, or the image which adorned the former leader of the UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage's, poster, the idea of refugees and asylum seekers seeking entrance into Europe, the UK, and the United States has driven populist movements demanding the reinstitution of national borders. In calling for the reinforcing of physical boundaries, these factions fabricated the incompatibility of these subjects with British and American "ways of life," presenting those seeking sanctuary as a drain on limited national resources.¹⁰⁴ At the heart of these political movements is the promise to revitalize a now-threatened community presented in the guise of the white, heterosexual male, disenfranchised not by ongoing neoliberal economic policies, but instead by the perceived nonself of migrants and refugees.¹⁰⁵ However, as commentators have suggested, this idea of the uniquely threatened white man fails to account for the way in which class and race intersect so that material inequalities disproportionately affect people of color.¹⁰⁶ These campaigns also promote xenophobic versions of society that simultaneously eradicate the transnational exploitation and transit of goods and people in Britain's and America's imperial past and present, and perpetuate the perspective that immigration, as opposed to a steady decline in localized industry brought on by the expansion of neoliberalism, has caused the deterioration of living standards in some parts of Anglo-American society.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, the excess of immunity that drives these political shifts threatens the collective fabric of global society itself.¹⁰⁸ The illusion of the 'common man', which Tanguay highlights, offers an opportunity to probe deeper into who has historically been afforded the position of immunity, and ponder why the loss of this immunity has become an animating force within political discourse and the cultural texts which I investigate over the course of the thesis.

¹⁰⁴ Lianne Tanguay, "The Indebted Man's Cognitive Mapping: Boundaries and Biohorror in the Neoliberal Debt Economy," in *The Debt Age*, ed. Jeffrey R Di Leo, Peter Hitchcock, and Sophia A McClennen (New York: Routledge, 2018), 58.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Akwugo Emejulu, "On the Hideous Whiteness of Brexit: Let Us Be Honest About Our Past and Our Present If We Truly Seek To Dismantle White Supremacy," *Verso Books Blog*, June 28, 2016, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2733-on-the-hideous-whiteness-of-brexit-let-us-be-honest-about-our-past-and-our-present-if-we-truly-seek-to-dismantle-white-supremacy>; Tony McKenna, "Here Be Monsters: Trump's 'White Working Class,'" *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/monsters-trump-white-working-class-180117104213439.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Emejulu, "On the Hideous Whiteness."

¹⁰⁸ Tanguay, "The Indebted Man's Cognitive Mapping," 60.

A Genealogy of the Immune Subject

To chart how the concept of immunity was instrumental in the creation of the modern, liberal subject and its production of fictitious impenetrability, I here focus on the work of Esposito and Cohen. Although operating from different disciplinary backgrounds, both trace the material consequences of immunity's semantic shifts, from its juridical origins in ancient Rome, over its biopolitical manifestation in early modernity, to its adoption within the biomedical sciences. This excavation of how an immunitary paradigm shapes modern identity requires us to linger over three central moments in its conceptual lineage: the adoption of bodily defense as judicial political concept, early immunology's concern with protecting the integrity of the physical body through active host defense, and the creation of an atomized subject.

To open their discussions, Esposito and Cohen both emphasize the significance of the etymology of immunity, pointing to the root *munus* around which the term revolves. In its original Roman usage, *munus* signified a variety of shared responsibilities and services.¹⁰⁹ In Roman law, municipal status offered the protections and privileges of Roman citizenship to male, non-slave inhabitants of an (often defeated) city, which was both geographically and culturally distinct from the city-state of Rome.¹¹⁰ The bestowing of immunity on certain citizen-subjects granted them permission to negate specific responsibilities without severing their ties to the state.¹¹¹ Esposito claims:

The concept of *immunitas* can be contrasted directly with that of *communitas*. Both exist in relation to the term *munus*, from which they originate etymologically, though one has an affirmative meaning and the other negative. If the free circulation of the *munus* characterizes *communitas*, *immunitas* is what deactivates *communitas*. *Immunitas* abolishes it, setting up new protective borders against what is outside the group as well as among its very own members.¹¹²

The concepts of community and immunity thus revolve around the “contractual obligations” that we have with one another.¹¹³ For Esposito, modernity can be seen as erecting “an enormous apparatus of immunization.”¹¹⁴ Offering a corrective to what he suggests is Foucault's inability to articulate the specific temporal relationship between modernity and biopolitics, Esposito contends that the shifts in the political philosophy of

¹⁰⁹ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 40–1.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹² Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 127.

¹¹³ Esposito, *Communitas*, xiv.

¹¹⁴ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 127.

the seventeenth century are unified through their creation of categories which place “individual self-preservation” at their center.¹¹⁵ The linguistic and institutional foundations of sovereignty, property, and liberty upon which modern political personhood rests are defined for Esposito by their immunitary logic, establishing the boundaries of the individual in opposition to the collective.¹¹⁶ Esposito traces modernity’s first immunization strategy which mollifies the relation between community and individual to the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Born from the religious and political conflicts which afflicted Western Europe and the expansion of colonial rule abroad, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* constructs a body politic held together through a fearful recognition of the violent, acquisitive nature and ultimately undifferentiated vulnerability of human existence.¹¹⁷ To prevent the dissolution of society into its natural state of “perpetual war, of every man against his neighbour,” Hobbes advocates the submission of individuals to a sovereign power.¹¹⁸ Through the sovereign, the community immunizes itself from its “own implicit excesses.”¹¹⁹ In Hobbes, the idea of immunity as a biopolitical power is brought out as we see the intertwining of the political meaning as exemption with the modern meaning of immunity as physical protection.¹²⁰

From Hobbes’s concept of *conservatio vitae*, Esposito traces the development of the categories of modernity, sovereignty, property, and liberty. Esposito claims that we can see an intensification of the protective apparatus of immunization in the transition from a collective sovereign immunization to that of the proprietary body.¹²¹ Looking to John Locke, Esposito suggests that Hobbes’s paradigm of self-defense is dependent on ownership of the body.¹²² Echoing Hobbes’s claim that “of those things held in propriety, those that are dearest to a man are his own life, & limbs,” Locke founds his political philosophy on the notion that we have sovereignty over our bodies, that they belong solely to us as individuals.¹²³ In maintaining that “every man has a ‘property’ in his own person” and that the “work of his hands [...] are properly his,” Locke conceptualizes legal and economic rights as a form of investment.¹²⁴ Through the notion of the proprietary

¹¹⁵ Esposito, *Bios*, 8–9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 75.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J.C.A Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998), 119.

¹¹⁹ Campbell, “Bios, Immunity, Life,” 5.

¹²⁰ Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse*, 27.

¹²¹ Esposito, *Bios*, 63.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹²³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 192.

¹²⁴ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government*, ed. Richard H. Cox (New York: Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 18; Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 87.

individual, there is a diffusion and installation of sovereignty over every biological organism.¹²⁵ The right of property therefore becomes “the factual precondition for the permanence of life,” a position which necessitates a fierce maintenance of the body’s boundaries.¹²⁶ Modern liberty too, for Esposito, is undergirded by an immunitary logic. Esposito points to the dominant understanding of liberty as a *freedom from*.¹²⁷ The institution of the modern state revolves around linguistic categories that divide the community into individuated units, “proprietor of himself or herself: ‘proper’ and no longer ‘common’.”¹²⁸

Cohen's analysis follows the migration of immunity from the domains of politics and law to bioscience and biomedicine, showing how the political and philosophical investments intrinsic to its initial formulation endure—and are literally given *substance*—in its later figuration as a biological concept. Cohen convincingly shows that this liberal model of political sovereignty continued to influence and inform responses to disease into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the medico-political responses to European cholera pandemics that combined the protection of bodily and national boundaries, to theories of vaccination which overthrew the expansive approach of public health programs to embrace an individualist approach to the eradication of infection, Cohen’s genealogy shows the continued influence of political immunity on our understanding and treatment of disease. He argues, however, that it is only with zoologist and ‘father of immunology’ Élie Metchnikoff’s 1883 discovery of the phenomenon of phagocytosis that the political theory of immunity was made material on a biological level. Using a microscope, Metchnikoff observed the behavior of specific amoeboid cells, phagocytes, which consume and subsequently degenerate other microorganisms. In his ideas, drawn from a long liberal lineage of conceiving the body in protective terms, Metchnikoff represents the activities of these phagocytes as actively defending the single, bounded organism against invading hostile forces.¹²⁹ In combination with his own evolutionary thinking, Metchnikoff redefines the relationship of the body to the outside world as a “cellular struggle for survival,” fully incorporating Hobbes’s idea of self-defense on a microbiological level.¹³⁰ Metchnikoff’s ideas helped to promote immunology as “establishing and maintaining the immune *identity* of the organism.”¹³¹

¹²⁵ Esposito, *Bios*, 63.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²⁸ Vanessa Lemm, “Introduction: Biopolitics and Community in Roberto Esposito,” to *Terms of the Political*, 5.

¹²⁹ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 257–8.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹³¹ Tauber, *Immunity*, 3.

For Cohen, the incorporation of legal and political forms of immunity into biomedicine produces a fundamental revisioning of the body. Drawing on his own genealogy of immunity alongside Tauber's *Immune Self*, Cohen argues that modern "bioscience's investment in the self-interiorizing and defensive organism betrays its unacknowledged debt to modern philosophies of personhood."¹³² The conceptual overlap between biomedical and political versions of immunity therefore advocates the envisioning of the body as radically separate from its lifeworld, denying our ecological existence, and our dependence on others. Biological immunity thus provides the scientific rationale for the modern body, which, in Cohen's terms, is the "proper body, a proprietary body, a body whose well-bounded property grounds the legal and political rights of what C. B. Macpherson famously named 'possessive individualism'."¹³³ He continues that it was only with biological immunity that "a monadic modern body fully achieved its scientific and defensive apotheosis."¹³⁴

Exposing the Logic of the Immune Body

Using a detailed, genealogical approach, Cohen and Esposito convincingly demonstrate how the political and discursive construction of immunity influenced biomedicine's figuration of the body as bounded, possessive, and defensive. The transition in biopolitical governance from welfare state liberalism to neoliberalism has damaged the illusion of the immune subject. However, it is worth reflecting on the exclusionary logic of which individuals were able to aspire to inhabit this body and its political consequences. In his most recent work tracing the organizing principle of the "person" in political discourse from Christianity and Roman law to its centrality in human rights discourse birthed in the aftermath of World War II, Esposito acknowledges the way in which this abstract, juridical category fails to provide protection for all human beings, due to its dependence on a liberal ideal of rationality.¹³⁵ Esposito here recognizes that this construction of the rational subject creates a series of gradations between those who can suppress their animality and are capable of self-rule, ranging from

¹³² Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 8.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8; C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

¹³⁵ See Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

the healthy adult, to whom can be awarded the title of being truly and properly a person; next there is the infant, who is considered to be a potential person; and then the elderly invalid, who has been reduced to a semi-person; to the terminally ill to whom the status of non-person is given; to finally the madman who has received the role of anti-person.¹³⁶

Thus, the power is given to proper persons to either maintain the lives of the “less-than-proper person” or, depending on the political and economic climate, to let them die.¹³⁷ In opposition to this segregated system, Esposito advocates a philosophy of the impersonal “something within the person that inhibits the distinction and separation from all those who are not yet, no longer, or have never been, declared persons.”¹³⁸ The idea of the impersonal is useful as it uncovers the complicity of the concept of personhood in creating and maintaining divisions between different kinds of bodies.

Esposito’s thinking is further illuminated by critical race scholars who have exposed the exclusionary logic of the possessive grounding of liberalism. Alexander Weheliye looks to the history of habeas corpus, cemented in Article 1 of the U.S Constitution, to observe the way in which liberal theories of personhood have reduced the privileged status of the human to the concept of ownership.¹³⁹ As suggested by Cohen, habeas corpus “grounds the legal rights of subjects, and the rights of subjects to due legal process, in their living matter as such.”¹⁴⁰ Habeas corpus is a racializing juridical assemblage which fluctuates to allow different subjects to be within or exceptions to “the world of Man.”¹⁴¹ What we witness is a division between citizen-subjectivity and the objects of property.¹⁴² This held particular importance historically in America, as articulated in Cheryl Harris’s understanding of whiteness as property, which disavowed the proprietary subjecthood of black subjects during slavery by imagining them as the legal property of their white masters, and through the accumulative dispossession of Native lands.¹⁴³ As Eula Biss, following James Baldwin, notes whiteness is “not a kinship or a culture,” it is a system of

¹³⁶ Roberto Esposito, “The *Dispositif* of the Person,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (January 2012): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872111403104>.

¹³⁷ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 117.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³⁹ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 77–9.

¹⁴⁰ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 80.

¹⁴¹ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 79.

¹⁴² Chen, *Animacies*, 50.

¹⁴³ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1726.

social advantages that allows some bodies to pass through the world both unhindered by, and entitled to it.¹⁴⁴

The case of Henrietta Lacks offers a forceful explication of the ways in which a racialized and gendered liberal logic of immune personhood underpins bioscientific practice. Lacks was an African-American woman who died from cervical cancer in 1951. Unbeknownst to her and until very recently the family that survived her, her cells were the first to be taken and kept alive outside her body. Lacks's cells, dubbed HeLa by the scientific establishment, have been instrumental in scientific research, helping to develop drugs for a multitude of diseases.¹⁴⁵ However, her family have received no financial compensation for their use.¹⁴⁶ Lacks's unbounded cell-line is now thousands of times larger than her physical body would have ever been.

The utilization and expansion of Lacks's corporeality by the medical establishment operates as a stark reminder of the conceptual overlap between the political and biomedical envisioning of the immune body. The female body is commonly coded as a body that leaks and morphs, and consequently cannot be mastered like the rational and solid male subject.¹⁴⁷ HeLa thus represents the opposite of the immune body and its techniques of self-discipline. In her dissection of the underexamined assumptions which determined the biomedical approach to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Catherine Waldby underscores how the idealized phallic body, or "the immunologically perfect body without orifices," continues to permeate scientific and cultural discourse.¹⁴⁸ She goes on:

proper subjectivity is signified by the body's containment within culturally specified boundaries. Anything excessive to this boundary aligns the body with natural processes, with decay, contagion and death, draining away its claims to sovereign self-control to proprietorial individualism, and the political status these claims shore up. Bodies which do not conform to these protocols of subjectivity thus appear to be in need of social intervention and regulation.¹⁴⁹

Lorey goes on to unpick how this idea of the proprietary, immune subject continued to inform the political systems of the twentieth century. She uses the notion of "biopolitical immunization" in order to dissect the exclusionary and dominating dynamics of who was

¹⁴⁴ James Baldwin, "On Being White... And Other Lies," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* by James Baldwin, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 135–8; Eula Biss, "White Debt," *New York Times*, December 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html>.

¹⁴⁵ See Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁴⁸ Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic*, 13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

and was not protected by the welfare state.¹⁵⁰ Her analysis allows us to start to perceive the way in which the American welfare state was dependent on the fantastical construction of the white male bourgeois subject, who is able to manage “one’s own’ precariousness through the security of property”, which she claims began to spread as a “materializing ideology” from the twentieth century onward, with the introduction of Henry Ford’s family wage.¹⁵¹ As suggested previously, Lorey indicates that the protection of the welfare state was “dependent on standard male Fordist employment conditions, which ensured a man’s—socio-politically supported and protected—independence on the basis of the domestication of wife and children, in turn giving these a dependent security.”¹⁵² These critical perspectives offer a glimpse into the way in which the idea of the proprietary immune subject holds influence within the biomedical and broader political realm.

Feminist Reimaginings of the Immunitary Paradigm

Through this overview of immunological discourse and the immune subject, I have shown the exchange between immunity and liberal personhood. This discourse should be seen more broadly as part of the ongoing biopolitical theorizations that seek to dissect the hierarchical positions and boundaries between different embodiments, particularly in the work of Colleen Glenney Boggs, Nicole Shukin, Mel Chen, and Alexis Shotwell.¹⁵³ However, some new theoretical work has used developments within immunology as a foundation for imagining more holistic relations between the subject and the world. A less aggressive version of immunity which has been widely influential is scientist Polly Matzinger’s concept of the danger model. Matzinger’s danger model attempts to account for some of the inconsistencies in the self/nonself model outlined by Burnet, and which continues to dominate scientific and popular immunological discourse. She asks:

How do organisms go through puberty, metamorphosis, pregnancy, and aging without attacking newly changed tissues? Why do mammalian mothers not reject their fetuses or attack their newly lactating breasts, which produce milk proteins that were not part of earlier “self”? Why do we fail to make immune responses to

¹⁵⁰ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 43.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 30; see also Melinda Cooper’s *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

¹⁵² Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 67.

¹⁵³ Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Animalia Americana: Animal Representations and Biopolitical Subjectivity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Nicola Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Chen, *Animacies*; Shotwell, *Against Purity*.

vaccines composed of inert foreign proteins unless we add noxious substances, collectively known as “adjuvants”? Why do we fail to reject tumors, even when many clearly express new or mutated proteins? Why do most of us harbor autoreactive lymphocytes without any sign of autoimmune disease, while a few individuals succumb?¹⁵⁴

Matzinger’s danger model suggests that rather than being concerned with the recognition of foreign elements, the immune system only acts defensively if it is injured. This model has been an inspiration for Donna Haraway and Eula Biss. Building on the anthropological work of David A. Napier—who reads immunology’s obsession with ‘self’ and ‘other’ as replicating Western society’s intolerance toward non-Western societies—Haraway argues in “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse,” that “the immune system is an elaborate icon for principal systems of symbolic and material difference[...]a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and pathological.”¹⁵⁵

Haraway dissects representations of the immune system in the security-obsessed political context of the 1980s. She points to the recurrent trope of the intrepid explorer which portrays science, and particularly the gaining of knowledge about the body, within the genre of the adventure of colonization, drawing a parallel between the ‘empty’ landscapes found in precolonized lands, outer space, and the interior of the human body. “Expansionist Western medical discourse,” she suggests, “has been obsessed with the notion of contagion and hostile penetration of the healthy body, as well as of terrorism and mutiny from within,” a profound reversal in which the colonized are perceived as the invaders, a threat to “overwhelm white manhood.”¹⁵⁶ Within the immunological images that Haraway cites, we find a discourse of hostility which echoes the enduring image of immunity as warfare, but also a commentary on who has been afforded the position of the immune subject; the white male. Haraway warns against the atomized, self-defensive subject which immunology constructs, claiming:

Life is a window of vulnerability. It seems a mistake to close it. The perfection of the fully defended, ‘victorious’ self is a chilling fantasy, linking phagocytotic amoeba and moon-voyaging man cannibalizing the earth in an evolutionary teleology of post-apocalypse extra-terrestrialism. It is a chilling fantasy, whether located in the

¹⁵⁴ Polly Matzinger, “The Danger Model: A Renewed Sense of Self,” *Science* 296, no. 5566 (April 2002): 301, <https://doi.org/301.10.1126/science.1071059>.

¹⁵⁵ Haraway, “Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies,” 204.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

abstract space of national discourse, or in the equally abstract spaces of our interior bodies.¹⁵⁷

Haraway advocates for the conception of immunity as a kind of semi-permeability, an acknowledgment of our shared specificities that we could perceive as undergirding the politics of precarity.¹⁵⁸

Writer Eula Biss's *On Immunity: An Inoculation* is the most insightful recent work on the subject. Biss's interest in the topic of immunity was awakened after she gave birth and found herself faced with the decision of whether to vaccinate her first child. Surrounded by other mothers who had acquired highly technical vocabulary to debate the pros and cons of vaccination, she remembers:

It was not a good season for trust. The United States was engaged in two ongoing wars that seemed to be benefiting no one other than military contractors. People were losing their houses and their jobs while the government was bailing out the financial institutions it deemed too big to fail and using taxpayer money to shore up the banks. It did not seem unlikely that our government favored the interests of corporations over the well-being of its citizens.¹⁵⁹

Dismayed at the state's failure to protect its citizens from the deregulated financial industry in light of the 2008 crash, Biss remembers her panicking about the oil industry and chemical industry: "If our government,' I cried to my husband, 'can't keep phthalates out of my baby's bedroom and parabens out of his lotion, and 210 million gallons of crude oil and 1.84 million gallons of dispersant out of the Gulf of Mexico, for the love of God, then what is it good for?'"¹⁶⁰

Biss positions the ongoing swirling anti-vaccination debate against a neoliberal state which has abandoned its collective responsibilities to its citizens and whose only interest is in the facilitation of capital. In a compelling twist, she demonstrates how the pursuit of physical autonomy and atomized purity embedded in the liberal ideas of immunity has been revived by proponents of anti-vaccination, mostly white, wealthy, college-educated mothers. These privileged *unvaccinated* children are often spatially isolated. When these *unvaccinated* children come into contact with *undervaccinated* children, who are statistically more likely to be people of color, to live in poverty, and to have lived in different states, they raise the probability that they will contract a disease that will then, once in circulation, be passed back to *undervaccinated* children.¹⁶¹ As Biss suggests, the

¹⁵⁷ Haraway, "Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," 224.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁵⁹ Biss, *On Immunity*, 15.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

refusal of the privileged to vaccinate thus exposes those who, by force of circumstance, have been unable to fully vaccinate their children, breaking the principle of herd immunity. Biss outlines the peculiar instance of vaccination in which “both the burdens and the benefits are shared across the entire population [...] Vaccination allows us to use the products of capitalism for purposes that are counter to the pressures of capital.”¹⁶² Vaccination, undertaken by all, thus offers a new version of immunity, one of “immunity as a “public space,” one shared and maintained.¹⁶³ Biss and Haraway are at the center of creating, in Eugene Thacker’s terms, a new biophilosophy which counters the foundation of the body politic defined by an aggressively guarded epidermal boundary, and instead advocate an inclusive idea of immunity.¹⁶⁴

Neoliberalism, Sickness, and the Novel

Through this summary of immunitary discourse, I have argued that immunity has operated as a powerful metaphor for the ways in which humans live amongst each other and has been an expedient tool for imagining the contemporary disregard of life within a neoliberal framework. Although immunitary discourse, and particularly the philosophy of Esposito, has been used as a frame for selected pieces of literary criticism, this is the first extended project to use it as an overarching theoretical structure.¹⁶⁵ It is situated in relation to a new wave of literary criticism which dissects literature’s place in the neoliberal project, including the work of Mitchum Huehls, Rachel Greenwald Smith, Jeffrey Nealon, Andrew Hoberek, Sarah Brouillette, Alison Shonkwiler, and Leigh Claire La Berge, and also that which observes the relationship between biopolitics and contemporary literature, particularly the work of Arne De Boever, Pieter Vermeulen, and

¹⁶² Biss, *On Immunity*, 102.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶⁴ Eugene Thacker, “Biophilosophy for the 21st Century,” in *Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies*, ed. S.E Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (New York: Routledge, 2015), 135–46.

¹⁶⁵ For shorter pieces which use Esposito’s philosophy as a framework for literary criticism see, amongst others, Pieter Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future,” *Political Theory* 45, no. 5 (October 2017): 659–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591716668382>; Christopher Breu’s chapter “Almanac of the Living: Thanatopolitics and an Alternative Biopolitics in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*,” in *Insistence of the Material*, 151–82; Laura Shackleford, “In Toxicating Languages of Bioinformatic Circulation: Poetics and Other ‘Smallwork’ in *The Flame Alphabet*,” in *Narrating Life—Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Science and Art*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Elisabeth Friis (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 147–71.

Christopher Breu.¹⁶⁶ The thinking of these theorists informs the rest of the thesis, but intersects with a number of ongoing literary-critical conversations that I want to outline here by way of introduction. These conversations center on how the idea of the inviolability of the masculine subject, so central to the biopolitical formation of immunity, manifested itself in the production of neoliberal literary culture in the moments preceding and following the events of 9/11, and on the prevalence of tropes of illness or sickness in contemporary American fiction.

In the introduction to their edited collection *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Huehls and Greenwald Smith convincingly show the reciprocal influence between neoliberalism and the literary form from the propagation of Ayn Rand's ideas through her novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) onward.¹⁶⁷ Huehls and Greenwald Smith offer a topography of this relationship, dividing the period from the 1970s up to the present into four distinct phases: the economic, the political, the sociocultural, and the ontological.¹⁶⁸ The economic phase, which took place during the 1970s and saw the erosion of barriers to financial capital, was followed by the political phase of the 1980s, which witnessed the fusion of economically liberal and socially conservative views under the leadership of Thatcher and Reagan.¹⁶⁹ This political phase saw a growing recognition of both the influence of market ideologies within literature, exhibited in Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985) and Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), and the institutional and commercial success of texts from previously resistant social and political movements born out the 1960s and 1970s, such as Toni Morrison's

¹⁶⁶ See Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*; Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, ed., *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014); La Berge, *Scandals and Abstractions: Financial Fictions of the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Arne De Boever, *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); De Boever, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); De Boever, *States of Exception in the Contemporary Novel: Martel, Eugenides, Coetzee, Sebald* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); Pieter Vermeulen, "Reading Alongside the Market: Affect and Mobility in Contemporary American Migrant Fiction," *Textual Practice* 29, no. 2 (March 2015): 273–93; Breu, *Insistence of the Material*.

¹⁶⁷ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943); Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).

¹⁶⁸ Huehls and Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases," 5.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Beloved (1987) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977).¹⁷⁰ This focus on cultural diversity, as Walter Benn Michaels has provocatively suggested, has detracted from a structural analysis of neoliberalism's economic inequalities.¹⁷¹

The extension of a market rationality into previously unaffected domains during the 1990s, described by Huehls and Greenwald Smith as neoliberalism's third, socio-cultural phase, produced a sense of anxiety among the traditional heirs of literary culture. They highlight the complaints of white male authors such as Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace, who witnessed the direction of the market toward women and people of color "as a moment of scarcity."¹⁷² In an essay entitled "I'll Be Doing More of the Same," Franzen rails against the influence of academia on literary production, claiming that the academy's infatuation with the "'subversive' side of pop culture" would eventually serve to demonstrate literature's complete irrelevance.¹⁷³ Instead, Franzen advocates that true subversion comes through the refashioning of old literary models, as we can see in the Dickensian realism of his 2001 bestseller *The Corrections*.¹⁷⁴

The agitation displayed by Franzen should be seen as part of a wider conversation surrounding the violability, or the failure of previous structures of immunity, surrounding the white male subject.¹⁷⁵ The events of 9/11, whose casualties were predominantly white, middle-class men drawn from the suburbs of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, was a powerful indicator of the loss of sovereignty and autonomy in the globalized world.¹⁷⁶ But it also prompted a new wave of literary production designed to speak to this apparent state of vulnerability, which has been interpreted in different ways by literary critics. Elizabeth S. Anker criticizes the nostalgic impulses in

¹⁷⁰ Huehls and Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases," 7; Brett Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985); Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (London: Penguin, 1977); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf., 1987).

¹⁷¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

¹⁷² Huehls and Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases," 8. See Jonathan Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of the Same," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 34–8; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151–94.

¹⁷³ Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of the Same," 36.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 38; Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Strass and Giroux, 2001).

¹⁷⁵ In particular, see Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (New York: Random House, 2011); Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (New York: Picador, 2007); Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University, 2000); David Savran, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013); Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁷⁶ Kathy Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xv.

what we can perceive as classic post-9/11 novels such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), which deal directly with the day itself as opposed to its ongoing reverberations within contemporary American society. She contends that in their registering of the events of 9/11 through the exposure of white, upper-middle-class manhood, these novels hark back to "a bygone era of American omnipotence wherein white, heteronormative, patrician masculinity was still sacrosanct."¹⁷⁷ In *Affirmative Reactions: New Formations of White Masculinity*, Hamilton Carroll analyzes 9/11 as one point in an ongoing discourse of crisis which penetrates representations of white masculinity. The failure of the productive and industrial economy and the rise of globalization has led to the demise of the traditional forms of masculine authority, though, as noted by Carroll, not masculine economic supremacy, as white men continue to earn substantially more than any other group.¹⁷⁸ Carroll points to how a lack of structural economic analysis perpetuates the myth that it is white men whose prospects have been most severely damaged in the decades following the expansion of civil rights, and the subsequent onset of neoliberal rationality. "The discourse of masculine crisis," he argues, "attempts to account for and to reorient these transformations; white male injury, phantasmagoric though it may be, is a phenomenon that attempts to recoup political, economic, and cultural authority in the face of a destabilized national consensus."¹⁷⁹ Kathy Knapp's *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11* explores a cluster of post-9/11 novels focusing on suburban existence by authors such as Philip Roth and Franzen to offer a slightly different take on this figuration of white injury. While emphasizing the prevalence of white, middle-class angst in fiction produced after 9/11, Knapp claims that these texts "make a modest but bold adjustment by conceiving of their white middle-class everymen no longer in opposition to society but in relation to it."¹⁸⁰ These critical works thus identify an ongoing cultural moment which has seen the myth of, in Haraway's terms, the "fictive rational self of the universal" disintegrate, reflected both in the anxieties of authors and within literary production itself.¹⁸¹

Intersecting with the cultural output of this post-9/11 moment is the trope of the ailing male body, as found in, among other novels, Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2006), David Foster Wallace's

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth S. Anker, "Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 468; Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (New York: Picador, 2007); Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 2005).

¹⁷⁸ Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction*, 5.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ Knapp, *American Unexceptionalism*, xxix.

¹⁸¹ Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," 210.

Infinite Jest (1996), Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), John Wray *Lowboy* (2009), Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2012), and *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy (2005).¹⁸² Marco Roth uses the term "neuro-novel" to describe the heightened presence of scientifically-defined conditions within literary texts, including well-known works such as Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003).¹⁸³ This is reflective of a cultural shift away from environmental causes of human behavior and has been accompanied by a turn inward not in a traditionally psychological sense, but to focus on the material qualities of the brain itself as a source of "who we are."¹⁸⁴ Roth sees the neuro-novel as emblematic of the exhaustion of the linguistic turn in the humanities, a desperate attempt by literature to align itself with science in an austerity-stricken world where the arts are continually shoved aside in the face of allegedly bigger concerns.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, in their analysis of "syndrome literature," T.J. Luistig and James Peacock identify the influence on literature of the explorations of neurological and genetic factors which affect human existence, altered embodiments which are then creatively rendered through formal experimentation.¹⁸⁶ As Patricia Waugh suggests, these diagnostically-informed critical stances tend to molecularize the self, untethering these biomedically-informed narratives from their imbrication in large-scale global systems.¹⁸⁷

I argue that the immunitary narratives under scrutiny here challenge the depoliticized, atomized quality of fictive renditions of illness which is prevalent both in contemporary fiction and in the focus on personal testimony within critical texts

¹⁸² Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (New York: Random House, 2005); DeLillo, *Falling Man*; Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996); Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); John Wray, *Lowboy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009); Rivka Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014); Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012); Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Richmond, UK: Alma, 2005).

¹⁸³ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005); Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003).

¹⁸⁴ Marco Roth, "The Rise of the Neuronovel," *n+1* (Fall 2009), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-8/essays/the-rise-of-the-neuronovel/>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ T.J. Luistig and James Peacock, introduction to *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome Syndrome*, ed. James Peacock and T.J. Luistig (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.

¹⁸⁷ Patricia Waugh, "The Naturalistic Turn, the Syndrome and the Rise of the Neo-Phenomenological Novel," in *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction*, 18.

observing illness.¹⁸⁸ This recognition of the sick body's entanglement with global systems chimes with the approach taken in Heather Houser's *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction: Environment and Affect* that brings our attention to examples of contemporary literature which outlines somatic and ecological vitality and vulnerability "as shared concerns that cannot be isolated from each other." Instead of adopting a biomedical perspective which turns inward to examine the dysfunction of the human body on a material level, Houser's use of sickness as a mode of inquiry is concerned with how macrosocial forces "penetrate individual human bodies, and how embodied experience might transform these forces in turn."¹⁸⁹

Houser's emphasis on both representation and embodied experience reminds us that in writing about the physical body there is a potential violence in writing the corporeal, especially, as Susan Sontag's now classic works *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* emphasize, in symbolic terms.¹⁹⁰ As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue through their concept of "narrative prosthesis," disability has been "used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potency, and analytical insight."¹⁹¹ They point to how disability within these texts is often seen as exceptional and isolating, claiming:

the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural consistency. The ascription of absolute singularity to disability performs a contradictory operation: a character "stands out" as a result of an attributed blemish, but this exceptionality divorces him or her from a shared social identity.¹⁹²

The prevalence of chronic, unnamed conditions within my corpus which subtly register the forces of neoliberalism has led me to describe these characters as experiencing a loss of immunity through an encounter with debility. In Puar's formulation, debility is used as a term to disrupt the ability/disability binary.¹⁹³ Outside of a rights-based framework

¹⁸⁸ For examples of critical works that focus on these personalized stories of illness, see Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁸⁹ Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 12.

¹⁹⁰ See Susan Sontag, "Illness as Metaphor," (New York: Farrar, Strass and Giroux, 1978), and "AIDS and Its Metaphors," (New York: Farrar, Strass and Giroux, 1989). Citations refer to collected edition *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Penguin, 2002).

¹⁹¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 49.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹³ Puar, *Right to Maim*, xv.

which allows only some disabled bodies to be recognized, empowered, and exceptional, the wider condition of debility “addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic.”¹⁹⁴ While biomedical treatment is hypothetically available to the protagonists of these novels, I argue that its tantalizing failure responds to the expansion of debility as a category under neoliberalism. Crucially, debility is not an identity, but rather a massification, a collecting of bodies together.¹⁹⁵ These experiences are not registered on a political level, none of the texts deal explicitly with the failure of the welfare state and its associated protections, biomedical ones amongst them. This apparent absence of political consciousness resonates with what Huehls and Greenwald Smith describe as the fourth and current ontological phase of neoliberalism, wherein resistance is founded not in alternative means of representation, but rather in alternative “bodily, networked way[s] of being in the world” which, as we shall explore in the conclusion, is necessary for creating a sustainable politics of precarity.¹⁹⁶

The Art[s] of Endurance: Literature and Performance in Unbearable Times

Having engaged with the ongoing literary debates immunitary fiction has grown out of, I will here concentrate on the specific qualities that distinguish my literary corpus. I argue that the immunitary texts that I have selected exhibit qualities of unbearability that viscerally embody the experience of life under neoliberalism, and which, I go on to argue later, inventively connect them to the performance practices of endurance art. A succinct survey of the state of contemporary fiction perhaps helps to draw out the distinctiveness of my corpus. As the data released by the organizers of “The Contemporary” conference held in 2016 at Princeton University tacitly confirmed, the study of contemporary fiction has calcified around specific names: Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, and Tom McCarthy.¹⁹⁷ I do not wish to unnecessarily homogenize the literary output of these writers, yet their narratives are marked by a sense of moral and emotional detachment, whimsical neurosis, and intellectual protagonists. These protagonists bear carefully cultivated resemblances to their authors who self-reflexively negotiate their existence using the tools of creative self-expression valorized in a neoliberal rationality. The highly curated, self-conscious postmodern sheen that veils the works of Lerner, Cole, and McCarthy are

¹⁹⁴ Puar, *Right to Maim*, xvii.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁹⁶ Huehls and Greenwald Smith, “Four Phases,” 11.

¹⁹⁷ Out of the 135 proposals that the conference received, 10% mentioned the name Ben Lerner. Sarah Chihaya, Joshua Kotin, and Kinohi Nishikawa, “‘The Contemporary’ by the Numbers,” *Post45*, February 29, 2016, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/02/the-contemporary-by-the-numbers/>.

absent in my corpus. Instead the immunitary narratives of *A Little Life*, *The Flame Alphabet*, and *The Unnamed* represent a more pertinent engagement with the governance through insecurity that defines neoliberal precarity.

While more detailed explorations of the critical receptions will be examined during the course of the chapters, a brief overview of Yanagihara's, Marcus's, and Ferris's creative contributions helps to situate them in a wider literary conversation. Following her debut novel *The People in the Trees* (2013), which similarly thwarted the conventions of taste by including graphic descriptions of child abuse, Yanagihara's wildly commercially successful *A Little Life* (2015) has been both praised and derided for its temporally and spatially claustrophobic narrative. As Yanagihara herself has emphasized, the novel's endless scenes of torment are imbued by a fairy-tale like quality, creating a brutal and abusive intimacy with the reader that is markedly distinct from the blurring of lines between autobiography and fiction that we find in the work of someone like Lerner.¹⁹⁸ Like Yanagihara, Joshua Ferris has also received substantial popular attention but little academic interest.¹⁹⁹ From his first novel *Then We Came to an End* (2007), which vigilantly documents Chicago office life in the run-up to a temporally undefined economic downturn, to his most recent collection of short stories, *The Dinner Party and Other Stories* (2017), Ferris's writing centers on the trials and tribulations of unsympathetic male characters. "How Much Juice Can Joshua Ferris Squeeze Out of Male Ugliness?" asks Christian Lorentzen, referring cuttingly to the "menagerie of assholes" who populate the pages of Ferris's works.²⁰⁰ Ben Marcus, in contrast, has been more warmly received by the academic community.²⁰¹ Besides his multiple short story collections, Marcus is perhaps most well-known for his tussle with Jonathan Franzen over formal innovation. In "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction," an essay written for Harper's magazine, Marcus dismisses

¹⁹⁸ Hanya Yanagihara, interview by author, *Hotel* no. 3 (Summer 2017), <https://partisanhotel.co.uk/Hotel-3>; Yanagihara, *The People in Trees* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).

¹⁹⁹ Ruth Maxey, "National Stories and Narrative Voice in the Fiction of Joshua Ferris," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 2 (February 2016): 208.

²⁰⁰ Christian Lorentzen, "How Much Juice Can Joshua Ferris Squeeze Out of Male Ugliness?," review of *The Dinner Party and Other Stories*, by Joshua Ferris, *Vulture*, May 14, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/05/joshua-ferris-the-dinner-party-review.html>; Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007); Ferris, *The Dinner Party and Other Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017).

²⁰¹ Lee Konstantinou, "Anti-Comprehension Pills," review of *The Flame Alphabet*, by Ben Marcus, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 28, 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/anti-comprehension-pills/>.

Franzen's realist bent, lamenting the current status of language in contemporary fiction which is meant to flow "pre-digested, like liquid down a feeding tube."²⁰²

Despite their markedly different approaches to the literary form, Yanagihara's, Marcus's and Ferris's work can be placed alongside literature by Elena Ferrante, Garth Greenwell, Darryl Pinckney, Adam Haslett and Eimear McBride as authors examining the "unbearable" in contemporary fiction, portraying images of daily life that are blemished by intense suffering.²⁰³ While evidently representative of a broader literary moment that, in many cases, attempts to draw out the influence of neoliberal rationality on everyday life, these immunitary narratives represent debilitating conditions to examine the disintegration of political and economic forms of protection. Although *A Little Life*, *The Flame Alphabet*, and *The Unnamed* have been read in relation to a neoliberal political context, the way in which they access the political *through* the biological has been largely side-lined.²⁰⁴ These texts exhibit a number of shared tropes: the physical disintegration of the fantastical proprietary white male body, biomedical diagnostic failure, a preoccupation with the figure of the contract and the law, forms of unproductive labor, and the rupturing of the suburban home. The immunitary narratives that I have chosen to examine not only gesture to the unbearability of contemporary existence, but also prompt a more rigorous unpicking of the conditions that have *caused* life to become unbearable.

On a formal level when reading these novels, I was also struck by how the experience is uncannily reflective of the gloomy outlook of their protagonists. Samuel Beckett, the literary giant who arguably best exemplifies a sense of exhaustion with western modernity and the possibility of narrative, haunts the pages of this thesis.²⁰⁵ Dragging myself through the litany of traumas of *A Little Life*, the repetitive drudgery of *The Flame Alphabet*, and the nod to Beckett's novel in the title of *The Unnamed* drove me to think about other artforms that responded with a similar sense of desolation.²⁰⁶ Mindful of

²⁰² Ben Marcus, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction," *Harper's Magazine* (October 2005), 39.

²⁰³ My thanks go to the organizers and participants of the "Feeling Unbearable in Contemporary Fiction" at the American Comparative Literature Association in 2017 for drawing out the connections between these authors. See in particular, Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2011); Garth Greenwell, *What Belongs to You* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Darryl Pinckney *Black Deutschland: A Novel*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Adam Haslett, *Imagine Me Gone* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016); Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (Norwich, UK: Galley Beggar, 2013).

²⁰⁴ A notable exception to this statement is Shackleford's engagement with *The Flame Alphabet* in her piece "In Toxicating Languages."

²⁰⁵ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23–4.

²⁰⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

Beckett's dual identity as novelist and playwright, I became fascinated with endurance artists as contemporary heirs of Beckett's avant-gardism, his sense of historical completion. Endurance art is one specific strand of what has been variously described as live, body, or performance art, in which artists use their own body not "simply as the 'content' of the work, but also as canvas, brush, frame and platform." These actions often take place temporally in front of live audiences, and are subsequently accessed through various modes of documentation such as video or photographs.²⁰⁷ Performance art produces the dissolution of the accepted distinctions between artist, artwork, and audience, as, although the subject-object distinction between viewer and viewed is maintained, the artist's presence ensures they remain "the active agent of art making."²⁰⁸

Amelia Jones's notion of "body art" helps us to witness the imbrication of these forms of art with the same forms of biopolitical neoliberal governmentality that frame this project. Although Jones traces the development of this art form across the twentieth century in avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, she argues that the artist's body came to the fore in the Euro-American scene during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰⁹ Jones connects the transference of the body as medium from the margins to the center of artistic practice to the disintegration of the suppression of the social context found in Modernism. She writes that the Modernist philosophical tradition "privileged a certain 'disinterested' and thus resolutely disembodied subject—usually the white, Western male: the allegedly universal subject or transcendent, disembodied *cogito* of Descartes' philosophy of being," linked to the immune subject previously discussed.²¹⁰ Jones's useful trajectory of body art encapsulates the variety of different responses to the disintegration of the immune subject, from the pursuit of the authentic existential artistic self embedded in Jackson Pollock's and Yves Klein's work at the turn of the mid-century, to the parodic embrace of the everyday in the Fluxus events and Happenings in the 1960s, the increasingly violent and excessive performance practices of the 1970s (which are

²⁰⁷ The term "performance art" is more commonly used in a North American context, the term "live art" in the UK, see Amelia Jones, "The Now and the Has Been," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2012), 12, 22. For specialist overviews of the trajectories of these performance practices, see *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011). As will be developed in more detail below, body art projects the "body of the artist as a particularized subject [...] open[ing] out subjectivity as performative, contingent, and always particularized rather than universal," and is linked by Jones to the specific political and economic transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, see *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14.

²⁰⁸ Karen Gonzalez Rice, *Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 1.

²⁰⁹ Amelia Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 18.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

analyzed here particularly in chapter 1), and the negotiation of the technological, simulacral self of the 1980s and 1990s.²¹¹ In spite of their variety, Jones is keen to emphasize that the emergence of the artist's body should be linked to the issues of subjectivity and sociality of late capitalism, in which "subjects become objects of the commodity system with its never-ending processes of exchange."²¹² Thus, body art's registration of the dissolution of the immune subject was prompted by the systematic erosion of systems of support.

Jones's thinking is part of a larger critical movement which adopts a culturally materialist approach to investigate how these new artistic practices have been informed by historical and economic transformations of neoliberalism, following a broad interest in the notion of the performative developed within the work of J. L. Austin, Derrida, and Butler.²¹³ As Gabriele Klein and Bojana Kunst suggest in their introduction to labor and performance, since the 1960s the field of performance art has been a site for testing out new working practices within a post-Fordist economy that lacks the immunitary superstructure of the welfare state.²¹⁴ Marked by their flexible, collaborative, precarious, and all-encompassing nature and often taking place, as will be further developed in chapter 3, in post-industrial spaces, the labor of the performance artist can be "directly related to the production of artistic subjectivity, which, in turn, is in correspondence with changing modes of labor in contemporary society."²¹⁵ These artistic experimentations are thus linked to the broader shifts from an industrial to a service-based economy, in which the person themselves becomes the site of production.²¹⁶ As Lorey suggests:

When labour appears ever more frequently as knowledge and service work, and is based to an ever-greater degree on communication, then the intellect, thinking and speaking in general increasingly coincide with the realm of labour. What these performative cognitive activities have in common is that in them the entire person, with their knowledge and their affects, becomes part of the capitalist production process, as do their relationships to those who direct or commission these activities and to those for whom they are carried out.²¹⁷

²¹¹ Jones, "Survey," 21–2.

²¹² Ibid., 21.

²¹³ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, 307–30 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

²¹⁴ Gabriele Klein and Bojana Kunst, "Introduction: Labour and Performance," *Performance Research* 17, no. 6 (December 2012): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.775749>.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 1–2.

²¹⁶ Puar, ed., "Precarity Talk," 175.

²¹⁷ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 83–4.

Lorey argues that the inseparability of production and sociality means that both our labor and social life are increasingly precarious.²¹⁸ Sven Lütticken suggests that the rise of performativity has eradicated the once resistant aspects of performance art. Whereas performance art was positioned as a radical gesture against all forms of reproduction, representation, and commodification, the importance of the immaterial qualities of performance within the labor market has complicated this.²¹⁹ Some critics have argued that performance art practices can be seen as a form of soft power in adapting populations to conditions of increasing precarity. From a UK perspective, Jen Harvie's insightful book observes the growth and sustenance of relational art practices which encourage audience participation under the New Labour and Conservative governments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, political moments marked by the dismantling of the welfare state.²²⁰ Using Foucault's concept of governmentality, she suggests that the proliferation of relational, immersive theater, produced by companies such as Punchdrunk and Shunt, entices the audience with the "spectre of the benefits of artists' creativity and autonomy while delivering the constraints of artists' insecurity and alienation that are already endemic in cultural labour."²²¹ Similarly, in a roundtable talk focusing on precarity, Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanovic emphasize the material toll taken on the bodies of these forms of immaterial labor. They imagine:

the types of work that artists developed in the last 25 years or so—a variety of flexible and temporary workshops, festivals, and residencies—as an outsourced training ground for flexible neoliberal politics and its "crisis management," which constantly seeks new, "creative" solutions resulting from improvisations in unknown surroundings. The political potential of the ephemerality of performance as a public event—which exhausts itself through the fragility of a performing body that embodies human physical coexistence at its most vulnerable—takes place exactly within this system of production.²²²

Cvejić and Vujanovic's contributions echo Sarah Brouillette's commentary on the function of literature in shaping acceptance towards post-Fordist working practices, particularly during the New Labour administration. Brouillette argues that the romanticized figure of the writer, traditionally defined by their self-sufficiency, introspection, and rejection of material goals, became a "norm-setting model" for a creative economy that placed capital gain over the need for public provision.²²³

²¹⁸ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 75.

²¹⁹ Sven Lütticken, "Progressive Striptease," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, 187.

²²⁰ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 28.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 6, 50.

²²² Puar, ed., "Precarity Talk," 176.

²²³ Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, 8.

Mindful of these reflections, I contend that endurance art provides a site of resistance against neoliberal capital's endless demands for flexibility and productivity, and thus has the potential to model a more inclusive version of immunity. As suggested by Karen Gonzalez Rice in her illuminating study on the subject, endurance artists "practice self-discipline by testing their bodies' physical and psychic capacities, performing long-term actions, or submitting to pain or hardship."²²⁴ Rice's analysis of Ron Athey, Linda Montano, and John Duncan emphasizes the moral complexity of their practice, placing them in dialogue with the American prophetic tradition which seeks to use the presentation of suffering as a springboard for testimony.²²⁵ The physical extremity of the actions undertaken by Athey, discussed in chapter 1, and the other artists in Rice's book raise questions about the definition of endurance art. Adrian Heathfield identifies the rise of durational aesthetics in live art from the late 1960s and 1970s.²²⁶ For Heathfield, durational pieces were developed as a resistance to "the allied kinetic logics of capitalized temporality," a response to the increasing forms of regulation and acceleration found within a neoliberal capitalist system.²²⁷ He continues:

Durational aesthetics often establish a temporal measure against which the work can be interpreted, and deploy an alteration of its (culturally) ascribed terms. This may take many forms: counterpoint with cultural measure or tradition through the counter-scheduling or intervention of the work within temporally institutionalized contexts; proliferation, contraction or extension of the "proper" time of the work; variations or discordances in its conventional rhythm, punctuality and speed.²²⁸

Heathfield warns of collapsing together endurance art with examples of early performance and body art, claiming that its emphasis on pain and on the heroism of the artist occludes a wider commentary on capitalist temporal regulation.²²⁹ However, I contend that the artists under my scrutiny explicate "the sustained lived processes of

²²⁴ Rice, *Long Suffering*, 1.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²²⁶ In particular, Heathfield highlights Marina Abramović and Ulay's performances *Relation in Time* (1977) where the couple were connected for 17 hours by having their hair tightly braided together; *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-6) where the artists sat opposite each other at various points and durations; and *The Lovers—the Great Wall Walk* (1988) where the couple walked separately for 90 days from opposite ends of The Great Wall of China, meeting each other in the middle to symbolize the end of their relationship. See, "Impress of Time," in *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*, ed. Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 18.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

lived subjection” which occur under neoliberalism, and disrupt the absolute distinction between endurance in art and endurance in life.²³⁰

Immunitary Narratives: The Chapters

Before outlining my chapters, first a word on my approach to comparing these two artforms. I am reliant on both the visual and written documentation of the performances that I look at. Their endurance, as such, goes against the impermanence of performance as a medium, which, as Peggy Phelan puts it, “cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document—a photograph, a stage design, a video tape—and ceases to be performance art).”²³¹ Attentive to the profound formal differences which mark these two different art forms, this thesis practices a project of culturally materialist close reading of the novels and performance documents it deals with.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*, a novel that engages the question: what happens after the welfare state and its contractual promises of security and stability has failed? The narrative tells the story of a cohort of dazzlingly successful Manhattan friends, with the mysterious Jude St. Francis, a corporate lawyer, at its heart. The novel quickly takes a dark turn. The reader discovers the hidden secrets of Jude’s past, and we see him struggle to cope with a series of debilitating, chronic medical conditions. Jude’s own experience of living with chronic illness is positioned against the wider chronic temporality of the novel’s world, which I explore in relation to critical thinking that emphasizes that neoliberal precarity produces a “new temporal architecture,” that struggles to remember the recent past and the potential alternative economic and political visions embedded within, or to project into the future due the ongoing grind of day-to-day survival.²³² To develop *A Little Life*’s portrayal of the breaking apart of the social contract and the truncated future this entails, I turn to two practitioners of masochistic performance art, Chris Burden and Ron Athey. I read Burden’s performances as elucidating the flexible, immune subject of Foucault’s human capital whose able-bodiedness allows him to perform the aspirational fantasy of the self-contained, bounded body. I explore how classical liberalism’s idea of the self-governing masculine individual has been revived by a neoliberal culture of individualization, a subject position that Jude longs to inhabit. However, Athey’s performances provide a

²³⁰ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 16.

²³¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 31.

²³² Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 471.

profoundly different response to neoliberalism's intensified grip of biopower, embracing a radical politics of physical vulnerability. Reading these endurance artists in dialogue with *A Little Life* opens up two very different trajectories about how to respond to neoliberalism's governance through insecurity.

In the second chapter, I consider the boundary-troubling conditions described in Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, in which the upstate New York-residing Jewish-American couple, Sam and Claire, are tormented by the toxic speech of teenagers, most prominently their daughter Esther. I consider how the viral epidemic of Marcus's novel is used to convey the manner in which contagious disease further reveals the fictionality of the concept of the atomized body. That Jewish children are posited as the origin of the disease has led critics to consider *The Flame Alphabet* solely through the prism of Holocaust memory. However, my reading of the novel aims to disrupt this interpretation in multiple ways. I argue that the virus's disturbance of human hierarchies is also positioned against a broader interrogation of the colonial violence of the anthropological structures we use to understand the world, a situation interrogated through the slipperiness of Marcus's prose. In light of this, I pay close consideration to the novel's portrayals of ethnographic exhibits and medical experimentation. This prizes open an expansive history of instrumentalization of bodies through capitalist appropriation, showing the connections between the commodified laboring body of neoliberalism and longer colonial histories. The events of the novel happen against a backdrop of active forgetting and erasure, mnemonic practices which I illuminate through an engagement with contemporary Indigenous theory, and which are also entangled with the stunted neoliberal architecture articulated in my reading of *A Little Life*. Reflecting on the ongoing ramifications of colonial logic within capitalist systems, I connect the novel's "labors of purity" to similar mnemonic practices undertaken in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a novel whose societal disintegration in the wake of an unexpected toxic event, also recalls previously submerged colonial histories. I draw on the subversive use of exhibitionary and anthropological practices in Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-1994) and James Luna's *Artifact Piece* (1987) as artistic practices which actively bring these histories to the surface.

In my final chapter, I read Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* as responding to the different crises of late capitalism. Tim Farnsworth, the novel's protagonist, is driven by an undiagnosable, chronic compulsion to walk. I argue that Ferris's presentation of Tim's perambulatory condition enacts some of the key anxieties about the globalized, financialized consumer credit economy in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis triggered by the collapse of the subprime mortgage market in the United States. I contend that Tim's corporeality dramatizes the flows of capital in the twenty-first century, as his uncontrollable body cannot be contained within any of the novel's shifting domestic properties or effectively disciplined through labor. I also bring Ferris's novel into dialogue with the "lifeworks" of Tehching Hsieh. Hsieh's extreme durational

performances, which include punching a worker's time clock every hour every day for a year, and spending one year living without any shelter, opens up a consideration of how contemporary conditions of capitalism expose previously privileged bodies like Farnsworth's in unprecedented ways. I use Hsieh's shelter-themed piece as a means to think through a previously underexamined aspect of the novel—its engagement with real estate, the impact of the mortgage crisis on middle-class identity, and liberal understandings of the proprietary body and home ownership.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I ask if the flourishing theoretical and fictional work around the maternal body can be used to think about alternative, positive versions of biopolitics. Pregnancy occupies a privileged space within immunitary discourse, which sees the productive and beneficial conjoining of two bodies through a shared notion of precariousness. As we shall see, however, the gestures of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Elisa Albert's *After Birth* and Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming A Mother* toward plurality are undermined by the lack of collective forms of childcare within a neoliberal system. Finally, I highlight the work of artist Johanna Hevda and artist collective and support group The Canaries, subjects who use the experience of chronic illness to recuperate communal and individual healing outside the neoliberal biomedical system, and consider future trajectories for the study of immunitary fiction.

Chapter 1

Melodramas of Neoliberalism: Chronic Conditions in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* and the Masochistic Performance Art of Chris Burden and Ron Athey

The opening chapters of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* start harmlessly enough. The novel begins by detailing the intricacies of the charmed New York existence of protagonist Jude St. Francis's group of college friends as they negotiate the romantic and professional terrain of the city. Paying homage to the style of the New York ensemble novel, the opening chapters are given over to the perspective of each one of Jude's intimate friends, and depict their rise to prominence in their chosen careers—Jude himself as a corporate litigator, Malcolm as an architect, Willem as an actor, and JB as a painter.¹ However, as the narrative progresses, the story becomes increasingly consumed with Jude's voice, and we are dribbled flashbacks to his past. We discover that Jude was abandoned at birth and raised in a Catholic monastery, his indeterminate origins ensuring that his ethnicity is somewhat enigmatic. With the intent of escaping the brutal punishments inflicted upon him by the monks, Jude ran away with Brother Luke, who turns out to be a pedophile. As they travelled, living in motels, Brother Luke both sexually abused Jude and rented him out as a child prostitute. Following the authorities' discovery of the situation and Brother Luke's subsequent suicide, Jude was then tossed into a children's home where he was once again abused and from which he subsequently escaped. Abandoned and alone, he was forced once more to work as a prostitute. In the final, pitiless episode of his childhood, he is kidnapped and used as a sex slave by a

¹ Jon Michaud, "The Subversive Brilliance of *A Little Life*," review of *A Little Life*, by Hanya Yanagihara, *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-subversive-brilliance-of-a-little-life>.

physician called Dr. Traylor, who, when Jude finally escapes his clutches, runs him over, causing the injuries which produced lifelong problems with his spine and legs. Whilst living in New York as an adult, Jude becomes involved in an abusive, romantic relationship with fashion executive Caleb. In the final phase of the novel, when his confidante and partner Willem is killed in a tragic car accident, Jude continues to work as a corporate litigator but starves and cuts himself, barely existing for a couple more hundred pages, until Yanagihara finally permits his suicide. A relief, perhaps, not only for Jude but also for the reader.

It is difficult to not be overwhelmed by the traumas of *A Little Life*. But scratching beneath the novel's sensationalist surface, this chapter argues that we can find a pertinent commentary about living under a neoliberal regime of precarity. The novel's opening scene, which features Jude and Willem miserably trying to rent an apartment in New York, exhibits two of the running themes that dominate the novel's representation of life no longer shielded by the welfare state: a collapse in the relationship between individuals and institutions embodied in the form of the contract, and a sense of temporal and spatial insulation. As they are both orphans, Willem and Jude are told to lower their expectations, that no-one is going to rent to candidates with their doleful financial profiles.² In an effort to alleviate their woes the prospective housemates go out to meet JB and Malcolm at their preferred Vietnamese restaurant. The conversation is dominated by the minutiae of their daily existences; the comedic reworking of the failed rental venture—"the apartment floor became tattooed with mouse droppings, the man across the way had almost exposed himself"—and the consequences of Jude moving out of Malcolm's parents' basement.³ It appears that it is the very mundanity of this initial spectacle which prevents us from gaining an understanding of the novel's historical grounding. Over dinner, no political figures, movements, or wars are discussed, the calendar year isn't even alluded to. Reading further, however, as the quartet achieve their astronomical success, we realize that the chronological indistinctness of the inaugural scene is in fact symptomatic of the rest of the novel. *A Little Life* offers us a version of New York which is unswayed by cultural and political shifts, seemingly impervious to historical rupture.

Cadzyn's "new chronic" is thus a useful framework through which to view *A Little Life*'s despairing narrative. Appropriated from the medical realm, Cadzyn sees the chronic mode at work in politics and culture in numerous ways. A logic of scarcity has intensified under neoliberal consolidations of capitalist systems. While the biopolitical has always been entangled with the economic, this process has intensified through the influence of pharmaceutical corporations who possess a powerful, financial investment in the long-

² Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

term management of conditions rather than in curing individuals. Instead of the past, present and future, Cadzyn argues that the present's temporal construction is rooted in the idea of the "meantime". The ongoing crises of capitalism produce the meantime as a permanent state, acting as a justification for the lack of provision of cutting-edge healthcare for all.⁴ While not rejecting the incredible ability of the biomedical matrix to stabilize the effects of previously terminal illnesses, he nevertheless questions what happens when we abolish the concept of cure, whose radical and utopian effect he associates with revolution.⁵ As previously examined, immunity as a political framework has been used to understand the contractual obligations between individuals and the wider society they inhabit. In the first section of this chapter, I unpack how the novel's obsession with the contract form can be productively read as a nostalgic longing for the immunitary protections associated with the welfare state fragmented by a neoliberal logic of scarcity. The failure of liberalism's social contract is accentuated by the novel's twisted implementation of melodrama, a cultural form entwined with the development of liberalism. As implied in the introduction, the untethered forms of economic freedom and ideals of self-sufficiency promoted by a neoliberal rationality have been linked to a resurgence of the philosophies of eighteenth-century classical and nineteenth-century laissez faire liberalism.⁶ Going forward, I investigate the complex implications that this revitalization has for individuals living under neoliberal rationality. I turn to two pieces of masochistic performance art, Chris Burden's *Bed Piece* (1972) and *Doomed* (1975) to probe the effects of the intensification of the biopolitical grip on the body that we see in the doctrine of human capital.

As will be fully developed, Jude's narrative is dominated by a nostalgia for the security and sense of temporal continuity promised under contractual forms of liberalism, including the welfare state. However, as emphasized by Angela Mitropolous, the contract form is a future-oriented technology that binds us to a specifically capitalist future.⁷ In the second half of the chapter, I engage with the theoretical movements that developed out of the HIV/AIDS crisis that embrace temporal impermanence and extended kinship to imagine forms of existence that neither capitulate to the logic of human capital, nor uncritically long for liberalism's limited immunitary protections. In particular, I focus on critical thinking that advocates the subversive, political potential of the narratives and experiences of those living with chronic illness as a way to break through the endless,

⁴ Cadzyn, *Already Dead*, 132.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), xiv.

⁷ Angela Mitropolous, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2012), 23.

ongoing grind of neoliberal temporality. This position is elucidated in Cadzyn's concept of "the already dead". The paradigmatic condition of the already dead is that of a medical patient who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, who then proceeds to live through medical developments that allow the illness to be managed as a chronic condition.⁸ As Cadzyn notes:

The already dead are exposed to a logic of crisis, which is homologous to how crisis functions within capitalism. This also requires a form of awareness that lends itself to an astute economic analysis: one cannot forget that one has cancer, HIV, or a formerly terminal disease, however much life is normalized, just as one cannot forget that capitalism is always in crisis, however much day-to-day political-economic life is normalized.⁹

I look at how the legacy of the HIV/AIDS crisis within the text helps reveal the revolutionary consciousness of the already dead in opposition to the temporal construction of the new chronic. As a means of imagining a different mode of existence that does not promote the individualizing rhetoric of neoliberalism, I turn to the work of performance practitioner Ron Athey, who uses bloodletting and masochistic techniques to manifest the paradoxical position of the "living corpse."¹⁰ Athey's artistic trajectory spans the shifting meanings of an HIV prognosis. While his initial work played with fears about lethality and contagion during the HIV/AIDS crisis, his performances are now read in the context of living with a chronic, medically-manageable condition albeit dependent on medical treatment not automatically provided for by the neoliberal state. His work has shifted from the temporality of the epidemic to the endemic, and thus he, I conjecture, embodies the already dead of Cadzyn's analysis.¹¹ There is a temptation to align Athey's toying with physical ordeal and duration with Burden's work, as an iconic precursor of stretching the body to its limits.¹² However, as I will demonstrate, they offer fundamentally different responses to the demands placed on the body by the intensified biopolitical situation of neoliberalism.

⁸ Cadzyn, *Already Dead*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁰ Dominic Johnson, "Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology," to *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013), 10.

¹¹ Tim Dean, "Bareback Time," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 79.

¹² Johnson, "Introduction," 16.

Contractual Nostalgia

Nestled at the very heart of the novel, Jude experiences a brief window of reprieve in his endless suffering. Before Caleb's intervention, in a period where the ebb and flow of his adult life does not appear to be so radically at odds with the people that surround him, Jude finds a family. After years of being cared for by Harold, his law professor and mentor from college, and Harold's wife Julia, a doctor, the couple take the initiative to legally adopt Jude. As Jude is approaching thirty, the choice to undertake such a procedure is evidently an unusual one, a position which Harold readily acknowledges when he suggests it to Jude: "I mean it's not common, but you can. As long as both parties consent".¹³ Jude agrees, completely overwhelmed by the gesture: "he wanted it with a steady fervor that defied logic."¹⁴ After the initial shock of the proposal, Jude dutifully fills out the paperwork which Harold sends him, even changing his birth certificate. The day of the adoption itself is a truly blissful moment in the novel, where Jude is unencumbered by his past. The ceremony closely resembles a wedding, Jude standing in for the blushing bride amongst the lavish gifts and well wishes from their combined circle of friends. At the court house, Jude and Harold and Julia "make their promises to each other [...]" and then there is a flurry of picture-taking, with everyone taking photos of everyone else in various arrangements and configurations. [Jude] is the only who doesn't take any at all, as he's in every one."¹⁵ Returning to Harold and Julia's house for the reception, Jude basks in their guests' adoration: "His face hurts from smiling. Decades of approbation, of affection are stuffed into this one afternoon, and he gorges on it, reeling from the strangeness of it all."¹⁶

This legal binding together of Jude with Harold and Julia is one manifestation of *A Little Life*'s deep fascination with the contract form. Earlier, it is revealed that Harold has made his name writing legal interpretations of the founding documents of America. In his published work *The American Handshake: The Promises and Failures of the Declaration of Independence*, Harold examines "Which of [the Declaration's] promises had been kept and which had not, and were it written today, would it be able to withstand trends in contemporary jurisprudence?"¹⁷ We are given a pithy retort to this question within the novel's pages—Yanagihara includes an invented response by a *New York Times* review which reads "Short Answer: No". Jude remembers Harold expanding on this issue while lecturing him on contract law in college. Harold expounds: "When we choose to live in a

¹³ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 184.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

society, we choose to live under a contract, and to abide by the rules that a contract dictates for us—the Constitution itself is a contract, albeit a malleable contract, and the question of just how malleable it is, exactly, is where law intersects with politics.”¹⁸ In the case of the Constitution, Harold insists “we are both the creators of and bound by this contract: as citizens of this country, we have assumed, from birth, an obligation to respect and follow its terms, and we do so daily.”¹⁹

Jude’s belief in the adoption contract as a way to counter the horrific events of his past is thus positioned against a broader exploration of contractual liberal political subjectivity. As explored in the introduction, the modern state is predicated on the idea of the physical preservation of its subjects in exchange for submission to its laws, an idea that has become unsustainable under neoliberalism’s submission to the pursuit of unfettered economic gain.²⁰ As Andrew Hoberek argues, the Marxian reading of the contract as a disciplinary tool for worker exploitation has largely been displaced in contemporary thinking. The contract has become “a site of nostalgia” for a time in which limitations could be placed on capitalist power, acting as a “metonym for the expanded version of the social contract associated with the welfare state” and its immunitary protections.²¹ Hoberek draws attention to the media’s focus on the extramarital affairs of politicians and celebrities such as Tiger Woods and New York governor Eliot Spitzer as the realities of the financial crash of 2008 loomed into view. He reads the media’s captivation and heightened reactions to these stories of cheating public figures, hardly unusual occurrences, as a displaced reaction to the violation of the contract form, “putatively central to capitalism but in fact increasingly outmoded in its current incarnation.”²² In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant extends our understanding of how a neoliberal rationality has corroded these expectations, and consequently the cultural forms, of previous phases of capitalism. Berlant contends that the older realist genres that characterized twentieth-century popular culture have lost their appeal, as genres provide an implicit script and a series of expectations. She argues that melodrama, amongst other codified genres, lacks resonance with current audiences as they promote now “archaic expectations about having and building a life”. The optimism that was attached to the expansion of economic, legal and social opportunity nurtured in Europe and the United States following the Second World War has ebbed away.²³ I argue that Hoberek’s intervention can be used to show how the novel’s preoccupation with contractual forms comments on the failure of the social contract and the breakdown of the immunitary

¹⁸ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 117.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 34.

²¹ Andrew Hoberek, “Adultery, Crisis, Contract,” in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, 55.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3, 6.

protections of the welfare state. Using Berlant's understanding of melodrama, I will now explicate how concerns over the failure of the liberal ideals of autonomy and self-governance are woven into the very fabric of the novel's construction.

Powerful Fictions: Melodrama, Autonomy, and the Immunitary Failures of Neoliberalism

A dissection of melodrama's embroilment with the liberal political tradition permits a more nuanced reading of the novel's extreme emotion than was offered in some of the initial critical responses. Ironically of course, given its title, *A Little Life* is a novel of excess. Describing her 736-page volume in an interview with *The Guardian*, Yanagihara claimed, "I wanted there to be something too much about the violence in the book, but I also wanted there to be an exaggeration of everything, an exaggeration of love, of empathy, of pity, of horror. I wanted everything turned up a little too high."²⁴ The book's immoderation drove Daniel Mendelsohn, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, to tear into the novel claiming "the abuse that Yanagihara heaps on her protagonist is neither just from a human point of view nor necessary from an artistic one."²⁵ Although Mendelsohn emphatically denies that *A Little Life* is a melodrama, claiming "there isn't even drama here," his critique goes on to identify what Linda Williams asserts are the two chief attacks against melodrama as a mode—its emotional manipulateness, and its association with a culture of femininity.²⁶ The preservation of Jude's innocence in the face of a procession of seemingly unmotivated villains ensures that the narrative thus coincides with many of the conventions of melodrama: pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarization and a non-classical narrative structure.²⁷

The distinctive narrative structure of the novel is also supported by specific temporal mechanisms associated with melodrama. In their comprehensive summary of recent critical work on the mode, Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann outline how our emotional identification with the victim, the "so-called *work* of melodrama," is achieved not just through the use of heightened aesthetics, but also in combination with a specific

²⁴ Hanya Yanagihara, "I Wanted Everything Turned Up a Little Too High," interview by Tim Adams, *The Guardian*, July 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/26/hanya-yanagihara-i-wanted-everything-turned-up-a-little-too-high-interview-a-little-life>.

²⁵ Daniel Mendelsohn, "A Striptease Among Pals," review of *A Little Life*, by Hanya Yanagihara, *The New York Review of Books*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/12/03/striptease-among-pals/>.

²⁶ Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 43.

²⁷ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 44.

melodramatic temporality.²⁸ Loren and Metelmann emphasize this point by gesturing towards the importance of revelation, peripety, an attempted return to the space of innocence, and the dialectic of pathos and action in melodrama, occurrences which rely on a specific use of pace and time.²⁹ Within *A Little Life* we can perceive how the unexpected nature of Jude's rise to fortune, the contrast between his current life and his gruelling upbringing is one which is consistently investigated on the surface of the text. Jude at one point reflects, "he has been lucky beyond measure; he has an adulthood that people dream about," his comments reverberating with the reversals of fortune that characterize the mode.³⁰

There are also countless moments within the text where it seems that Jude, with just a little more prompting, will be able to divulge what happened to him as a child to the other characters, to begin a process of unburdening his past. Following the development of their friendship into a romantic partnership, Willem asks Jude about Brother Luke, whose name Jude has been screaming in his sleep in their shared bed. Although Jude does eventually divulge to Willem the horrific abuse he has suffered, Jude reflects on how his present could have been altered if he had spoken about his traumatic upbringing earlier. Ana, his devoted social worker and one source of support prior to his college days, dies of lung cancer before he can tell her what has happened to him. As he refuses Willem's request this time, Jude thinks: "Ask me one more time, Ana, . . . and I'll tell you. Teach me how to do it. This time I'll listen. This time I'll talk."³¹ The ongoing failure of the people around Jude to extract his story thus dramatizes the pull between the stasis and the salvation of melodrama. As such this moment exemplifies Williams's temporal formulation of the dialectic of pathos and action: it is always a little "too late" to save Jude.³²

From these two examples – his perception of his own luckiness and his inability to take the initiative to divulge his story – we can see that Jude perceives that he has very little control over his adult life. Jude's perception of his lack of autonomy permits a meaningful reflection on the liberal tenants of the melodramatic form. As previously suggested by Berlant, there is an inconsistency between melodrama's representation of a "good life" achievable under welfare state liberalism and the tactics of survival necessitated by neoliberalism. But, as Peter Brooks outlines in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, the intertwined relationship between liberalism and the form goes back further. Noting that the first recorded use of the contemporary

²⁸ Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, "On Victimhood," in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, ed. Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 461.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³² Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 69.

sense of melodrama, a play accompanied by music, is assigned to none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Brooks shows that the development of the form was intertwined with the naissance of classical liberalism following the French Revolution.³³ In Brooks's words, melodrama was developed in "the epistemological moment that symbolically marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society."³⁴ Melodrama's representation of unambiguous ethical choices, its legibility, provided grounding for a society in flux. In *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, Elizabeth R. Anker also emphasizes how the development of the form was connected to the French Revolution's disturbance of political and social conventions. Melodrama portrayed the lives of normal citizens but drew its dramatic tension from the control that these suffering people had over their own lives.³⁵ Thus melodrama and liberalism "nourished the belief that one could become one's own master, and as both argued that individuals are free to determine the shape of their own lives, they exemplified modes of being in which individuals triumphed over claims of transcendent authority."³⁶

Evidently, the autonomous liberal subject proffered by social contract theory, who in Foucault's words can utter to the sovereign, "I have rights, I have entrusted some of them to you, the others you must not touch," has always existed as a fiction.³⁷ However, as developed in the introduction, this ideal of the immune subject has also had a powerful grip on multiple manifestations of liberalism across Europe and America, and on creative forms such as melodrama which grew out of this political trajectory.³⁸ This violation of the social contract, a concept so bound to immunitary thinking, lies at the heart of *A Little Life*. Jude's early life is marked by the failure of the welfare state institutions of the child protection services that fail to prevent him falling into the clutches of a succession of pedophilic villains. In order to escape the monastery, in which he is physically beaten, Jude "gave up everything to follow Brother Luke," whose initially gentle nature and separation from the wider community of monks fits the stock image of the pedophile.³⁹

³³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 283.

³⁸ Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 9.

³⁹ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 153; Gillian Harkins, "Virtual Predators: Neoliberal Loss and Human Futures in the Cinema of Pedophilia," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2081157>.

Brother Luke's abuses are then replicated by the employees at the children's home, and again at the house of Dr. Traylor where Jude, while still a minor, is imprisoned and raped. This unfortunate sequence may be represented as a series of calamities elevated outside of a particular historical time period. However, in her analysis of the filmic adaption of *Mystic River* Gillian Harkins builds on the work of Judith Levine, Roger Lancaster, and James Kincaid to demonstrate the intimate correlation between neoliberal economic restructuring and pedophilia.⁴⁰ In her analysis of the Dennis Lehane novel on which the film is based, Harkins sketches how *Mystic River* connects the effects of neoliberalism's economic policy of privatization, downsizing, and outsourcing on a working-class Irish-American community in Boston to the "mystic" figure of the pedophile.⁴¹ In the novel, the economic effects of neoliberalism and the pedophile's attacks demonstrate the "seemingly inevitable disposability" of the younger inhabitants of East Buckingham.⁴² A logic of social and economic devaluation pervades both the pedophile's actions and the restrictions placed on the state's role in economic redistribution through social entitlements, the shifting of governmental functions to private actors.⁴³

While in Harkins's reading of *Mystic River*, the survival of human agency is restored through the policing of the community using new technological interventions, the narrative of *A Little Life* makes no such promise.⁴⁴ While Jude is undoubtedly dedicated to his profession, competent and hardworking, his success is nevertheless almost wholly dependent on the generosity and professional competence of those that surround him.⁴⁵ Indeed, each of his friends contribute their specific skill to his well-being. Andy, an orthopedic surgeon whom Jude first meets in college, is willing to attend to Jude's complex medical needs at no cost. Richard, a painter who shares studio-space with JB, subsequently gives Jude an enormous apartment in a building which he has inherited, after the lift stops working in Jude's own building. Having bought the apartment at a reduced price, Jude is then able to use Malcolm's specialized capability as an architect and interior designer to create a living space which is both sleek and modern, but also able to accommodate his limited mobility. Initially reluctant to have the area adapted, Jude will later be grateful for Malcolm's preparations: "he will notice that in his apartment, the

⁴⁰ See James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child-Molesting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Roger N. Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Harkins, "Virtual Predators," 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ Sean McCann, "'I'm So Sorry': *A Little Life* and the Socialism of the Rich," *Post45*, June 3, 2016, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/06/im-so-sorry-a-little-life-and-the-socialism-of-the-rich/>.

passages are wider, that the bathroom and kitchen are oversize, so a wheelchair can make a full, clean revolution in them.”⁴⁶ The dependence of Jude’s existence, as Sean McCann describes it, on “the gift economy of the wealthy” accurately mirrors the increasing economic polarization of the United States.⁴⁷

The experience of *A Little Life*’s protagonist can thus be aligned with Elizabeth Anker’s idea of “neoliberal melodrama.” Anker describes how a sense of vulnerability experienced by individuals after 9/11 “orgiastically displaced” a political powerlessness cultivated by a general condition of unfreedom under neoliberalism.⁴⁸ In stark contrast to the quick, spectacular revelation of the villains of the terrorist attacks, unfreedom defines a “set of conditions in which distant problems are selectively exposed but rarely imagined to have real solutions; in which power is often nonagentic and deinstitutionalized.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, the narrative offers a series of figures—Brother Luke, Dr. Traylor, Caleb—who in turn offer morally legible representations of evil, identifiable individuals whose abuse of Jude contributes to his desolation and despair, but there is a failure of the recognition of the structural causes of his exposure. While Jude’s narrative is not placed in relation to a broader historical backdrop, which could account for his experiences in relation to the retraction of the state under neoliberalism, the protagonist himself possesses a deep consciousness of the potentially personal effects of this withdrawal. Working in public defence after graduating from college, Jude is scouted by a private firm, a position which he decides to take. Harold is dismayed by Jude’s decision and asks “Is this all about money? Tell me what you need, Jude, and I’m happy to help out.”⁵⁰ While both “frustrated and fascinated by Harold’s lack of imagination,” Jude muses: “How could he tell Harold that he dreamed not of marriage, or children, but that he would someday have enough money to pay someone to take care of him if he needed it, someone who would be kind to him and allow privacy and dignity?”⁵¹ Although Jude’s professional prowess seems to distinguish him from the contingent forms of precarious work prevalent examined in the introduction, his lack of security and financial dependence mirrors them. No wonder he clings onto Harold and Julia’s offer of adoption so firmly.

⁴⁶ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 255–6.

⁴⁷ McCann, “*A Little Life* and the Socialism of the Rich.”

⁴⁸ Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁰ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 240.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

Inverting the Social Contract: Chris Burden and Fantasies of Continuous Consent

During the course of the novel, as Jude grows older, he starts to feel increasing pressure from the community to find other sources of stability, specifically a romantic relationship. At this particular juncture a fashion executive, Caleb, appears at a party thrown by one of Jude's colleagues. Although outwardly charming and handsome, Caleb turns out to be yet another abuser, regularly beating Jude. After Caleb's brutality has been revealed, Harold recalls that the relationship "had taken something large from [Jude], how it had changed him: into someone else, or maybe into someone he had once been [...] I knew that he had decided that Caleb was right, that he was disgusting, that he had, somehow, deserved what had happened to him."⁵² As we have seen, Jude is truly invested in how the contractual protections embedded in liberal systems of thought can offer him security, however, the introduction of Caleb into the narrative represents the demise of this immunitary fantasy. Instead, Caleb comes to symbolize the logic of human capital. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown places particular emphasis on the incompatibility of this logic with the social contract, arguing that human capital's focus on economic prowess, as opposed to equal protection of subjects, ensures that the "social contract is turning inside out."⁵³ Here, I observe how the novel considers the production of new, neoliberal contractual forms in the wake of the fragmenting of the social contract.

Caleb's adherence to the doctrine of human capital and its fundamental revisioning of the idea of the contract is first delved into when the narrative probes into the fashion executive's peculiar management style. New to the city, Caleb talks enthusiastically with Jude about how he copes with working with creatives unused to adhering to deadlines. Caleb claims that his position demands that he "construct a system of governance within the company, and then make sure it's enforceable and punishable." He suggests that his artistic employees are unconcerned with the procedures. Thus, "you have to instead present it as the bylaws of their own small universe, and convince them that if they don't follow these rules, their universe will collapse. As long as you can persuade them of this, you can get them to do what you need."⁵⁴ Caleb's systems of control, which as we will see extend in an insidious way into Jude's life, signify the shifting nature of contracts in the neoliberal era. Walter Benn Michaels's "Fifty Shades of Neoliberal Love" sheds light on this. Michaels reads the failure of Christian Grey and his lover Ana to sign the sadomasochistic contract in the wildly popular book trilogy by E.L. James as noteworthy

⁵² Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 368.

⁵³ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 38.

⁵⁴ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 311.

in thinking how the contract form has become divorced from ideas of security and stability. Michaels unpicks the significance of the Uber contract as an example of “neoliberal masochism.” The employees of the ride sharing app Uber are framed as independent contractors, their own bosses, which means that the company itself does not have to provide the traditional safety nets such as pensions and sick pay. In Michaels’s terms, neoliberalism does not let go of contracts altogether, on the contrary, companies like Uber use them to superficially erase the differences between employee and employer by “thinking of us all investing in our human capital” and thus saving the company itself significant amounts of capital.⁵⁵ Neoliberal masochism “perfects what we might now call liberal masochism by replacing liberal freedom of contract—binding in a way that necessarily limits the will—with a fantasy of continuous consent, of a social bond, as one might put it (and as David Graeber *has* put it) based ‘solely on the free consent of [its] participants.’”⁵⁶

The endurance art of Chris Burden offers an enriching illustration of neoliberal masochism in action, and allows a deeper discussion of which kinds of bodies these flexible working practices are available to. Burden is one of the artists whom Kathy O’Dell pays attention to in the development of masochistic performance art. In her work, O’Dell utilizes a Deleuzian reading of masochism which breaks apart the work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch from that of the Marquis de Sade, the sado from the masochist as it were, by not focusing on the sexual perversions elucidated in the oeuvres of these writers but rather by looking at their political investments in differing forms of societal governance.⁵⁷ Suggesting that Sade was interested in institutions that determine a long-term state of affairs that are involuntary and inalienable, Deleuze develops the notion of the masochistic contract to clarify the importance of both the implicit and explicit agreements which undergird the masochistic ritual, in which a person *willingly* submits to being physically punished by another.⁵⁸ O’Dell creatively uses Deleuze’s concept of the masochistic contract to explicate the rise of a specific kind of masochistic performance art in the early 1970s. A generalized preoccupation with the physical violation of the artist’s body—shown when Burden agreed to be shot, when Ulay sows up his mouth as Marina Abramović spoke for him, and Vito Acconci gnaws on his leg—prompts O’Dell to ponder the breakdown in dialogue between these individuals and the society that these

⁵⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, “Fifty Shades of Neoliberal Love,” in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literature*, 31.

⁵⁶ David Graeber quoted in Benn Michaels, “Fifty Shades of Neoliberal Love,” 30.

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs* by Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von-Sacher-Masoch (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

acts appear to denote.⁵⁹ O'Dell contemplates how the presence of spectators offered a form of implicit permission for the artists to harm themselves. By calling attention to the structure of this implicit contract, the artists emphasized that the real power of the agreement lies there.⁶⁰ In neither preventing the actions that were taking place nor leaving the premises as they were undertaken, the audience members were asked to consider the delicate distinction between being witnesses to and perpetrators of violence.⁶¹ O'Dell's reading of these masochistic performances links their spectacle of violence specifically to the context of the Vietnam War. American citizens watching the escalating carnage of the Vietnam War on their TVs were grappling on a wider scale with questions of complicity, registering the growing discrepancy between the official narrative of events and the massacres they witnessed.⁶² O'Dell proposes that these artists' manipulations of the masochistic contract gestured towards the corrosion of the consensual relationship between citizen and state in this period. Through materializing the vulnerability of the body, these artists showed the dematerialization of accountability on the part of society-at-large.⁶³

O'Dell's analysis of the development of masochistic performance art in the 1970s draws on the effects of an American response to the Vietnam War, and on the legal changes that were occurring in contract theory, which saw a shift towards a model of a meeting of minds as opposed to engagement with the objective content of the contract itself.⁶⁴ However, sublimated in O'Dell's account are the changes to economic reasoning and logic that also began during this period as outlined by Walter Benn Michaels. Michaels's concept of neoliberal masochism thus offers a compelling lens through which to observe Burden's work. As a conceptual artist Burden has had a wide and varied career, but he is still best known for his early work in which he agreed to place his passive body into serious danger. Relating the piece's position in cultural folklore, O'Dell opens her book with a description of *Shoot* (1971), the infamous performance where Burden asked a consenting friend to shoot him in the arm.⁶⁵ Burden's initiation of the act, his passive acceptance of the prospect of pain, and the stunned yet submissive audience who watched on means that *Shoot* exemplifies O'Dell's reading of a masochistic performance's

⁵⁹ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 3. These references are to Chris Burden's performance *Shoot* (1971), Marina Abramović and Ulay's *Talking About Similarity* (1976), and Vito Acconci's *Trademarks* (1970).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Kathy O'Dell "Towards a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1992), 292–3.

⁶⁴ O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

ability to question the everyday agreements that we make with others.⁶⁶ 1971 was a significant year in the suffusion of neoliberal ideology into a political and economic mainstream—Richard Nixon freed the U.S dollar from the gold standard, allowing the easy flow of capital across borders thus enabling the rise of speculative financial capitalism.⁶⁷ However, it is Burden’s less overtly intensive works, *Bed Piece* (1972) and *Doomed* (1975), that anticipate the erosion of the social contract and the effects of an intensified market rationality upon individual subjectivity. For *Bed Piece* [fig. 1], curator Josh Young asked Burden to do a piece within the Market Street gallery in California for a period of three weeks. Burden requested just a single bed in the gallery, where, in his words, “I took off my clothes and got into bed. I had given no other instructions and did not speak to anyone during the piece. On his own initiative, Josh Young had to provide food, water, and toilet facilities. I remained in bed for 22 days.”⁶⁸ In the case of *Bed Piece*, we can perceive how the gallery staff had to take on the additional role of caring for Burden’s physical needs, a duty which they sometimes forgot due to Burden’s inertia. “In their minds I had become an object,” Burden claimed in an interview. Occasionally the food and drink which were meant to be left for him on Young’s instructions, and which he consumed when the gallery was closed, did not appear.⁶⁹

In a similar alteration of the internal workings of the museum space, *Doomed* [fig. 2] featured Burden lying behind a sheet of glass for 45 hours and 10 minutes, though the conditions of the piece were again obvious only to the artist himself.⁷⁰ Burden would only move when someone “altered in any way the arrangement of his body and/or the pane of glass,” which occurred when someone placed a glass of water next to him.⁷¹ In a quote from staff members at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art where *Doomed* took place, we see their dismay that Burden did not reveal the conditions of his implicit agreement: “we could have ended [the performance] anytime we wanted to, and here we thought we had a contract with him that we couldn’t break unless he died.”⁷² While contending that Burden’s work demonstrates that the body is made perilous by institutional constructs and the implicit contractual agreements that support them, O’Dell, like the gallery staff involved in *Doomed*, is critical of the opaqueness of the conditions of these acts.⁷³ Burden’s refusal to let the other participants know the terms of

⁶⁶ O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 1–2.

⁶⁷ Huehls and Greenwald Smith, “Four Phases,” 5.

⁶⁸ Chris Burden, “Bed Piece 1972,” in *Chris Burden*, ed. Fred Hoffman, Jon Bewley and Jonty Tarbuck (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 215.

⁶⁹ Robert Horvitz, “Chris Burden,” *ArtForum* 14, no. 9 (May 1976), 25.

⁷⁰ O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 67.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Burden quoted in O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 67.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

the agreement ensured that they were established as absolutes, which did not allow a negotiation between audience and artist to take place, a negotiation which in O'Dell's terms would have permitted a more profound acknowledgement of the structural concepts of the masochistic contract at work.⁷⁴



Figure 1: Chris Burden, *Bed Piece*, 1972.

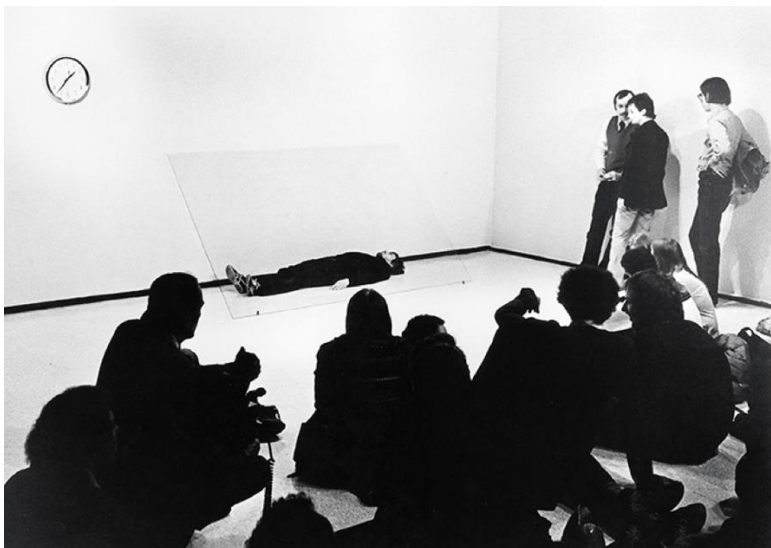


Figure 2: Chris Burden, *Doomed*, 1975.

I want to read Burden's performances in relation to its wider socioeconomic context on two different levels. Firstly, Burden's position within the museum space, his unspoken presumption that the people there will care for him, can be read as a metaphor for the social contract. Burden's inertia forces the museum and the individuals associated with it to enact the role of the state, to mimic the social contract which encourages an individual

⁷⁴ O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 69.

sacrifice of freedom—in the case of *Bed Piece*, the gallery staff providing Burden with basic needs and leaving him alone—in order to uphold a broader, collective cohesion. Burden’s radical dependence on the (virtual) strangers around him acts as a resistance to the imperative of “responsibilization” under neoliberalism, which, as Brown notes, tasks individuals with both understanding and enacting the “correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving.”⁷⁵ The combination of the devolution of state security nets with the responsibilization of neoliberal subjects has led to the creation of “morally burdened agents,” individuals who are both pressurized to provide for themselves while the conditions for them to do so are retracted, a situation which, as previously elucidated in Jude’s dependence on his privileged social network, *A Little Life*’s protagonist himself is subject to.⁷⁶

Tellingly, however, Burden’s subtle manipulation of the contract form allows us an insight into the privilege which is inherent within the working and living situations of neoliberal masochism’s fantasies of continuous consent. According to art critic Donald Kuspit, Burden’s early oeuvre can be defined through its exploration of “the emotional survival of the individual in a world indifferent to him.”⁷⁷ But how indifferent is the world to Burden? Amelia Jones offers a different perspective, claiming that Burden’s body woundings, as opposed to demonstrating his vulnerability, in fact fortify the impermeability of his masculine subjectivity.⁷⁸ Jones continues that it seems no accident that “such performative displays of simulated bodily suffering are executed almost entirely by melodramatic, castration-anxious heterosexual male body artists.”⁷⁹ In invoking melodrama, Jones suggests that these performances were distinct from and in excess of the actual experiences of these artists. Even if Burden has claimed that his motivation for *Shoot* was drawn from him knowing men of his age being drafted into the Vietnam War, the context in which he was wounded was evidently very different: Burden chose these actions.⁸⁰

To employ Emily Martin’s useful term, the issue of the privileged corporeal existence of Burden as an artist undertaking the kind of work in *Doomed* and *Bed Piece* should be seen in terms of flexible immunity. In her incisive overview of conceptualizations of immunity in twentieth-century American culture, Martin explains that there was a shift in body imagery from the 1970s onwards, a shift that was enmeshed with changing forces of

⁷⁵ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 132.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷⁷ Donald Kuspit, “Man For and Against Machine,” in *Chris Burden: Beyond the Limits*, ed. Peter Noever (Vienna: Museum of Applied Arts, 1996), 61.

⁷⁸ Jones, “Survey,” 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁰ O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 12.

production.⁸¹ The decade saw a move towards what Martin dubs *flexible specialization* where labor markets, in contrast to the rigid structure of the state, were adaptable and able to adjust continuously to change, characterized by custom marketing pointed towards a variety of newly carved-out niches.⁸² This focus on flexibility within the labor market envisages a new image of the body in popular culture and immunology, one in which the body is “possessed of agile responses, and flexible specificity, our adroit innovative bodies are poised to anticipate any conceivable challenge.”⁸³ As Martin notes, the new models of the ideal flexible body seem appealing in their apparent distinctiveness from the conformity of Foucault’s disciplined bodies, which are constrained by the rigid rules of institutions.⁸⁴ Martin outlines how the shift towards flexibility in the workplace rests on a central idea of trainability and educability, therefore achievement in the workplace is open to all. This notion of trainability is also present within immune-system thinking: we are able through specific measures including diet and exercise to improve our general health, to fortify our immune system. The onus to become flexible therefore rests entirely on us; the old basis for inequality has been removed and replaced by “good sense, progress, or the fruits of knowledge.”⁸⁵

Doomed and *Bed Piece* see Burden choosing to become immobile and to alter the institutional structures of the museum in order for them to provide for him. But at the end of *Doomed*, when the glass of water is placed in front of him, Burden leaps up, thereby demonstrating that the duration of his dependency is both temporary and chronologically under his control.⁸⁶ Thus, we can perceive how Burden and *A Little Life*’s Caleb both manipulate the environments in which they work to their own advantage, concealing the relation between them and the workers around them which resonates with Michaels’s characterization of neoliberal masochism. Going forward, we witness how Burden’s flexibility allows him to fulfil the ideal logic of human capital, a position that societal structures render unavailable to Jude.

⁸¹ Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 40.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 40, 147.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁸⁶ O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 67.

Axioms of Inequality: Jude's Masochistic Practices, and the Ableist Logic of Human Capital

As the novel progresses, the logic of human capital that Caleb forcefully introduces to the narrative becomes intensified and embroiled with Jude's methodical abuse of his own body. Jude's self-laceration is hurled into the reader's view early in the novel. In their first shared apartment in Lispenard Street, Jude's practice is revealed when he cuts his flesh too deeply and requires Willem to take him to his physician, Andy. Following a tense couple of hours in which Andy treats Jude's wounds, and then chastises Willem for not paying more attention to Jude, the two young men return home. With Jude slumped barely conscious on the sofa, Willem lifts Jude's sleeve and sees "three columns of neat white scars, each about an inch wide and slightly raised laddering up his arm."⁸⁷ From this point on, Jude's self-mutilation becomes an almost permanent fixture. Readers are subjected to graphic, extended descriptions such as, "there was half a second in which he could pull apart the two sides of flesh and see only a clean white gouge, like a side of fatted bacon, before the blood began rushing in to pool within the cut".⁸⁸ Coherent with Yanagihara's desire to create a claustrophobic narrative in which most of the action takes place indoors, "where time, by its nature, seems to vanish," the last section of the novel following Willem's death seems to take place almost entirely in Jude's bloodied bathroom, the space picked for its privacy and wipe-down walls.⁸⁹ O'Dell's political reading of masochistic practices as denoting a wider fragmentation of societal accountability is useful for viewing Jude's actions as he does not appear to derive pleasure from them in the traditional sense of masochism.⁹⁰ The figure of the pedophile, as noted earlier, has become a cultural trope for contemplating the effects of neoliberal economics on society, and thus it is notable that Jude develops his cutting as a coping mechanism while his body is being rented out and abused by the pedophilic monk Brother Luke.

It is also arresting that Jude's cutting becomes exacerbated when he is unable to maintain a strict division between his work and home life, and thus to maintain the boundaries between production and reproduction, past and present. As Harold comments: "his very existence was twinned: there was who he was at work and who he was outside of it; there was who he was then and who he had been."⁹¹ It is Jude's ability to compartmentalize, to maintain the split of the liberal subject, that permits his survival. This system, so fragile under the neoliberal rationality in which the novel is submerged,

⁸⁷ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 71.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸⁹ Yanagihara, interview by author.

⁹⁰ O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 3.

⁹¹ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 353.

crumbles when Caleb enters the narrative. Caleb's reasoning for abusing Jude is noticeable in light of the text's captivation with a contractual liberal subjectivity. Caleb's main qualm with Jude is the way in which Jude's own impairments recall the frailty of Caleb's own parents, in particular their "surrender to illness: first canes, then walkers, then wheelchairs, then scooters, and vials of pills and tissues and the perpetual scent of pain creams and gels and who knows what else."⁹² After brutally informing Jude that he was unaware of his physical condition at the beginning of their relationship—"we were sitting down, so I didn't know you had a limp"—Caleb becomes exasperated by Jude's use of a wheelchair, claiming, "I can't be around these accessories to weakness, to disease."⁹³ What is significant here is that Caleb explicitly defines Jude in terms of his human capital, a principle that sees the inclusion of many different factors in the valuation of each individual—some innate and not under the purview of our control, some acquired. As Foucault suggests, the doctrine of human capital, its insistent economization of all aspects of human existence, ensures that the perceived 'health' of the physical body, its genetics, its wellbeing are also valued according to a market logic.⁹⁴ Thus Jude's worth is determined by Caleb's perception of his physical limitations, a rationality which Jude readily accepts: "Caleb didn't like the fact that he was in a wheelchair. Neither did he. He couldn't resent Caleb for not being able to accept what he himself couldn't accept."⁹⁵

The convolutions of Caleb's reasoning express what scholars in disability studies have forcefully reasoned are the ableist dispositions of human capital discourse. In his influential text, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer explains that the definition of being able-bodied, and therefore of being dis-abled, has from the nineteenth century onwards been tied to the ability to work.⁹⁶ Under a liberal Fordist period of production, people with disabilities were targeted by practices of immobilization and active prevention of participation in public space such as institutionalization, sterilization, and confinement within one's own home.⁹⁷ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out how under neoliberalism we can perceive a shift towards a more concerted biopolitical treatment of disability, one which shifts away from confinement and legal prohibition towards a "productive massaging of ways to live one's life appropriately within the community without disrupting the naturalized, normative

⁹² Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 320.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 229.

⁹⁵ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 320.

⁹⁶ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8.

⁹⁷ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism: Ablenationalism and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 6.

activities of citizenship.”⁹⁸ The absence of intervention and state support—the driving economic logic which directs state energies to the creation of new corporate marketplaces—thus has some specific effects when dealing with disability. Initially, it pronounces that all bodies are in some way failing, fragmenting the body into separate areas all in need of treatment in order to improve their human capital and increase their productivity.⁹⁹ This opens the neoliberal subject to more extreme forms of economic intervention, increasing the grip of biopower. This wider pathologization of the body at large and the vigilance needed to maintain it thus positions disability as “a failure of personal upkeep to adequately maintain one’s embodiment within an acceptable range of social norms of ableist comportment.”¹⁰⁰ In Mitchell and Snyder’s outlining of neoliberal ideology, the subject’s body is stretched and contorted, pulled in different directions. Our corporeal existence is divided into different parts each open to improvement using economic means, while at the same time evaluated as a whole in terms of its productivity in relation to normative scripts of human capital.

Jude’s attachment to the concept of the contract inherent in liberal ideals can be read as an opposition to this neoliberal seizure of the body’s capacities. Jude’s use of a wheelchair has no effect on his possession in classic liberal and capitalist terms of a “productive” body, and indeed his professional prowess is confirmed throughout the novel. Black Henry Young, one of Jude’s friends from college, describes seeing Jude give evidence in court, stating that, “he becomes someone else at work [...] he was borderline frightening, just incredibly relentless.”¹⁰¹ Jude’s attachment to maintaining the strict division between citizen and economic subject presents the contractual rationality of classical liberalism as a means of protecting himself from the purely economic self-interest of human capital that Caleb replicates when he crows, “My god, you really are deformed. You really are.”¹⁰² This discussion does not want to present the undoubtedly precarious division between citizen and economic subject under classical liberalism and Fordist models of production as some kind of golden age for those ascribed non-normative bodies by society. Rather what it does want to draw attention to is the way in which Caleb’s denigration of Jude’s physical being coincides with neoliberal ideology’s scheme of valuation: the production of a new entrepreneurial subject in light of an economic logic. As we have seen, Caleb’s position is reflective of the desirability of compulsory able-bodiedness promoted by a culture of neoliberal specialization. The

⁹⁸ Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability*, 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰¹ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 332.

¹⁰² Jason Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,” *Foucault Studies* 6 (February 2009): 35, <http://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i0.2465>.

importance placed on flexibility in the post-Fordist workplace which, as Martin suggests, is also reflected in popular culture and immunology, very easily slips into an insidious form of social Darwinism whereby individuals are scrutinized for their agility and ability to adapt to late capitalism's unpredictable circumstances.¹⁰³ The flexible subject's desired imperviousness to their environment can thus also be seen as a perverse revival of the ideal of the immune body discussed in the introduction.¹⁰⁴

Unlike Burden, whose flexible body can adapt to the demands of neoliberal masochism, Jude absorbs the doctrine of human capital advanced by Caleb to confirm his own insufficiency. The section of the novel that portrays Jude's relationship with Caleb opens with Jude describing his favorite axiom to a group of Harold's dinner guests interested in his choice to study both law and pure mathematics in college. Jude picks the axiom of equality, the idea that x "must always be equivalent to itself, that it has a uniqueness about it."¹⁰⁵ The final part of this segment of the narrative returns to the axiom of equality in what can be seen as a classic melodramatic sensation scene. Caleb breaks into Jude's apartment and then proceeds not only to beat him senseless but also to rape him. The incident is portrayed with a kind of twisted inevitability, upon entering the apartment Caleb punches Jude in the face, and Jude reflects, "It is Caleb, of course."¹⁰⁶ During the assault, the narrative flashes back to the mathematics-oriented dinner party. Jude reflects upon the relevance of this axiom to his own life as he is "flying into the black of the staircase," having been kicked by Caleb. Jude considers:

in that microsecond that he finds himself suspended in the air, between the ecstasy of being aloft and the anticipation of his landing, which he knows will be terrible, he knows that x will always equal x , no matter what he does, or how many years he moves away from the monastery, from Brother Luke, no matter how much he earns or how hard he tries to forget. It is the last thing he thinks as his shoulder cracks down upon the concrete, and the world, for an instant, jerks blessedly away from beneath him: $x = x$, he thinks. $x = x$, $x = x$.¹⁰⁷

The combination of contemplation and physical suspension shows how this sensation scene "shifts to a different register of signification," one which bypasses language and is felt emotionally.¹⁰⁸ In contrast with traditional forms of melodrama in which the sensation scene is meant to reveal the true villain, Jude blames himself, there is no escape from the cycle of abuse he is caught within. Jude can be seen to internalize the ableist

¹⁰³ Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 240.

¹⁰⁴ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 337.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 339–40.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 52.

logic of human capital in order to participate in another masochistic fantasy of continuous consent, that it is right for his body to be denigrated and abused.

Queer Times and Normative Scripts of Living: Jude's Developmental Alienation

As I have shown, the disparagement of Jude's corporeality under a neoliberal rationality leads the protagonist of *A Little Life* to sentimentally embrace the sense of security and temporal continuity embedded in liberalism's contract. However, the novel's representation of the lived experience of Jude's non-normative body ensures that the narrative also offers, very brief glimpses of the revolutionary humanity of embracing our collective transience that will be explored in my discussion of Ron Athey. In this section, I tackle how Jude's chronological queerness is aligned with the theories of temporality and connection produced in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Jude's untimeliness is a topic that is repeatedly returned to in the novel. When Jude arrives at college, for example, he realizes that he has had no contact with the fixtures that ground contemporary adolescent experience: sitcoms, movies, vacations, and summer camps. This developmental alienation, he conjectures, is far more profound than spatial distance in a globalized world: "How was it that apparently all of his peers, whether they were born in Lagos or Los Angeles, had had more or less the same experience, with the same cultural landmarks?" This opacity is cultivated not only by Jude's absolute refusal to reveal any details about his past at this early point in the narrative, but also by the fact that he is an abandoned orphan, occluding his genealogy and his heritage. As JB explicates in one of the frequent flashbacks to the four companions at college, Jude's lack of origin ensures that the normal footings of identity do not apply: Jude is "post-sexual, post-racial, post-identity, post-past."¹⁰⁹ Jude's "unstable embodiment," to use Jack Halberstam's term, resonates with the disruption to linear conceptions of time and space that defines queer temporality. The work of Halberstam, Lee Edelman, José Muñoz, Elizabeth Freeman, Sara Ahmed, and Heather Love has contributed to the field of queer temporality in which, while they are at times wildly divergent in their analysis of the nature of this relationship, is nevertheless unified by imagining queerness not as being purely attached to sexual practice, but rather "as a set of possibilities produced out of temporal and historical difference."¹¹⁰ Queer sexual,

¹⁰⁹ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (May 2007): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-029>. See Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the*

social, and kinship practices are characterized by E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tukhanen through their inappropriate relation to socially shared temporal phases, both on an individual and on a collective historical level.¹¹¹

At first glance, the peculiar conditions of Jude's adoption continue to establish the importance of friendship over heterosexual marriage and child-bearing.¹¹² The novel's central characters embrace forms of queer community that rest outside of these models. One of the main refrains in the novel comes from Malcolm's father, who asks the predominantly single members of the group, "You boys are really turning into a bunch of Peter Pans [...] Don't you think you guys should stop clinging to one another and get serious about adulthood?"¹¹³ However, in amongst the fanfare of the adoption ceremony, Harold presents Jude with a watch which his own father had given to him when he turned thirty. "Engraved on the back of the face: SS/HS/JSF," the initials of each successive generation.¹¹⁴ For Freeman, watches are among the tools used to implement chronormativity, a phenomenon by which our bodies are "bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation," ensuring that our use of time is organized in order to achieve maximum productivity.¹¹⁵ The watch's inscription also reinforces the concept of generational time—that is, the time in which social morals and goods are transferred from one generation to the next—provides a stable central thread which connects the family to the historical past of the nation.¹¹⁶ The watch's inscription seems to reinforce the way in which this ceremony tries to incorporate Jude's body into a teleological, regulated temporality that resonates with both state and socially sponsored ways of being.

Jude recognizes the privileged nature of the temporal experience of chrononormative, generational temporality. Andy writes to Jude about the significance of the adoption, saying in a scribbled note: "I HOPE YOU'LL TAKE THIS AS A SIGN THAT YOU NEED TO TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOURSELF SO SOMEDAY YOU'LL HAVE THE STRENGTH TO CHANGE HAROLD'S ADULT DIAPERS WHEN HE'S A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND

Death Drive (London: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (London: Duke University Press, 2006); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹¹¹ E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, introduction to *Queer Times*, 6.

¹¹² Freeman, "Introduction," 159.

¹¹³ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 224.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹⁵ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Space*, 5.

INCONTINENT”.¹¹⁷ The tepid humor of this comment aside, Andy sees Jude’s inscription into normative kinship and temporal models through the adoption as providing an impetus for him to change his patterns of destructive behavior. Jude himself extends this further when, directly after the adoption, he stops cutting himself for a brief period of time: “maybe he is cured, he dares to think. Maybe this is what he needed all along, and now that it’s happened, he is better. He feels wonderful, like a different person: whole and healthy and calm.”¹¹⁸ Within the text, there is thus a link made between the inscription of Jude’s temporally queer personage into socially-sanctioned kinship models and a process of physical healing.

The explicit association which the novel’s portrayal of Jude’s adoption makes between able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and homogeneous systems of temporality allows us to explore the intertwined nature of systems of temporal and embodied homogeneity.¹¹⁹ The figure of the “crip,” like the “queer,” has been used to play an oppositional role against enforced systems of normativity. As opposed to simply trying to increase the visibility or ensure societal accommodation of the needs of people with disabilities, a crip perspective examines how those designated “defective” or “deviant” or “sick” “have been used to justify discrimination against people whose bodies, minds, desires, and practices differ from the unmarked norm.”¹²⁰ In her important book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer draws on the foundational texts of queer theory to demonstrate how queer time has always already been crip time. Kafer asserts that queer/crip temporalities intersect through their operation outside of the imagined linear development from a dependent childhood to an independent adulthood established by marriage and reproduction.¹²¹ Through the possession of non-normative embodiments and attachments, Kafer reads queerness and cripness as being unified by notions of excess, the “acts of failing to adhere to some societal norms while or by exceeding others”.¹²² Kafer shows how Halberstam’s concept of queerness as a misalignment with these markers of life experience emerged from the AIDS crisis. Halberstam contends that the constantly diminishing future experienced by people with AIDS at the beginning of the epidemic “create[d] a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now.”¹²³ Kafer claims that queer temporality is as much rooted in discourses of illness as it is in sex: “The trajectory of queer theory that

¹¹⁷ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 186.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹¹⁹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 17.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹²³ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

locates its origins in critical response to the AIDS pandemic also necessarily understands queer survival as far from a given.”¹²⁴

A significant moment, which exists in contrast to the text’s predominantly conservative imagining of the possibilities of queer/crip life, is when Jude reflects on the implications of the HIV/AIDS crisis. In a phase of contentment for Jude, prior to Willem’s death and following Jude’s first suicide attempt, Willem plays the ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev as he is diagnosed with AIDS. The producers have changed the title of the film from *The Dancer on the Stage* to *The Happy Years*, a move which Willem perceives as cynical. Speaking to Jude, Willem claims “there’s something so curdled and ironic about it.”¹²⁵ Listing Nureyev’s privileges during the time—his professional prowess, money, his relationship with fellow dancer Erik Bruhn—Jude comments, “That sounds like a happy life to me,” to which Willem darkly responds, “But he was sick [...] But he was dying.”¹²⁶ Jude dismisses this, claiming, “We’re all dying. He just knew his death would come sooner than he had planned. But that doesn’t mean they weren’t happy years, that it wasn’t a happy life.”¹²⁷ We could thus perceive Jude’s perspective, so distinct from Willem’s, as being rooted in a queer/crip time which does not diminish the pleasure or validity of experiences because of their impermanence.

Enduring Bodies: Performing “Slow Death”

In spite of other people’s repeated attempts to incorporate him into normative systems of temporality, Jude shows a more nuanced appreciation of the temporariness of his existence that appears to come from inhabiting a body with a chronic illness. Before moving on to a discussion of Ron Athey, whose practices of endurance art represent one form of the profound openness and acknowledgement of systems of support that I argue is essential for thinking beyond the liberal immune subject and the neoliberal paradigm, I want to unpick some of the ethical complexities of connecting the endurance experienced through chronic illness, to a larger condition of endurance in life implemented by political and economic policy. As we have seen, this lies at the foundation of Cadzyn’s concept of the already dead, but it is also acknowledged in the novel. In the scene in which Jude and Willem discuss *The Happy Years*, Willem makes a striking observation. Willem observes Jude’s embrace of temporal ephemerality, and thinks of

¹²⁴ Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, “Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (June 2015): 192–3, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843215>.

¹²⁵ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 620.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 621.

him as part of “a larger sadness, one that seemed to encompass all the poor striving people, the billions he didn’t know, all living their lives, a sadness that mingled with a wonder and awe at how hard humans everywhere tried to live, even when their days were so very difficult, even when their circumstances were so wretched.”¹²⁸ Here, Yanagihara paints a complex image, connecting the AIDS epidemic to a broader condition of economic and social precarity.

What are the implications of this stance? Martin O’Brien helps negotiate some of the complexities of connecting endurance art to wider conditions of neoliberal survival. His discussion here revolves around the question of choice.¹²⁹ Endurance art is undertaken voluntarily, with a limited and controlled time-span in mind, and is markedly distinct from the conditions on perseverance embodied by Berlant’s “slow death”. Berlant primarily explores slow death within the context of the American obesity epidemic, which she reads as a capitalist distortion of practices of eating that sees the collapse in the distinction between practices of the nourishing of life with its attrition.¹³⁰ Slow death, then, represents the condition of being exhausted with reproductive labor. In this state “agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; and embodying, alongside embodiment.”¹³¹ As suggested by Fred Moten in an unpublished keynote which O’Brien draws upon:

The endlessness of death in life, of life under a death sentence, of slow death passed on, is not easily to be valorized ... one wonders if the people in the population to whom Berlant refers are conscious of their endurance as art, as meditative practice, as a monastic sociality of study, as what [Tehching] Hsieh calls “slow suicide in a constructive fashion”.¹³²

However, O’Brien claims that a life lived with a chronic illness disrupts the absolute distinction between endurance-based art and endurance in life. As O’Brien notes, the chronically ill body is one that must be biomedically regulated to ensure survival.¹³³ O’Brien draws on the work of Bob Flanagan, an artist with cystic fibrosis who, with his wife and performance partner Sheree Rose, employed an endurance-based and masochistic practice. Flanagan, is shown here [fig. 3] dangling from his ankles in the

¹²⁸ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 621.

¹²⁹ Martin O’Brien, “Performing Chronic: Chronic Illness and Endurance Art,” *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts* 19, no. 4 (August 2014): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2014.947138>.

¹³⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 96.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹³² Fred Moten quoted in O’Brien, “Performing Chronic,” 57.

¹³³ O’Brien, “Performing Chronic,” 58.

installation *Visiting Hours* which transformed the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992, and the New Museum in New York in 1994 respectively into a simulated medical clinic “replete with waiting-room furniture, potted plants and copies of Highlights for Children magazines. An anatomical doll dripped simulated mucus and sperm; a chest X-ray portrayed cloudy lungs and pierced nipples; pictures of Houdini and cartoon pigs appeared on the wall.”¹³⁴ O’Brien claims “Flanagan chooses to work with his body in particular ways but this emerges out of an embodied life of endurance.” Artists with chronic illness such as Flanagan and Athey use endurance art to re-embody and perform slow death, thus using their practice in a profoundly different way to Burden’s performance of flexibility.¹³⁵

As we have seen with Jude’s encounter with Caleb in *A Little Life*, he internalizes the doctrine of human capital, and he punishes himself for not being able to fulfill the role of the adaptable subject that undergirds neoliberal masochism. Yet, the grueling punishments that Jude subjects his body to can be interpreted differently in light of O’Brien’s claims, and through a detailed comparison of Jude’s acts with the performances of Ron Athey. Going forward, I draw homologies between Jude’s and Athey’s conscious cutting of their own bodies as acts of resistance against the biomedical regimen that living with chronic illness demands.

¹³⁴ Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, and Ralph Rugoff, “Visiting Hours,” *Grand Street*, no. 53 (Summer 1995): 65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25007885>.

¹³⁵ O’Brien, “Performing Chronic,” 57.



Figure 3: Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose, *Visiting Hours: An Installation* by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose, 1992.

Brief Windows of Resistance against the Biomedical Establishment: Jude's and Ron Athey's Cutting

Athey's performances of self-mutilation involve live piercing, bloodletting, and the penetration of physical orifices, and explore his personal narrative, characterized in his own words by a "Grapes of Wrath darkness that was fatherless, an institutionalized schizophrenic mother, a fundamentalist Pentecostal upbringing by relatives, a decade of drug addiction followed by 15 years of HIV infection."¹³⁶ While Athey's performances on stage are highly curated, these acts of non-suicidal self-injury cannot be separated from the strategies that he practiced as a child in order to cope with domestic violence and a restrictive religious environment.¹³⁷ The choice to interpret Jude's practices of mutilation against these performative and aestheticized forms of cultural production follows Armando Favazza's complication of the strict distinction that is made between culturally

¹³⁶ Ron Athey, "Some Thoughts on the Politics of the Body and the Problematics of Documentation," in *Manuel Vason: Exposures*, ed. Lois Keidan and Manuel Vason (London: Black Dog, 2002), 6.

¹³⁷ Rice, *Long Suffering*, 70.

sanctioned and pathological mutilation.¹³⁸ Favazza rejects a strictly medical interpretation of this kind of injury, claiming that both culturally permissible self-mutilation and pathological self-mutilation are fused as expressions of societal dynamics. These acts, in spite of their context, fulfil the same purpose: “to correct or prevent a pathologically destabilizing condition that threatens the community, the individual, or both.”¹³⁹

As a practitioner, Athey is still most notorious for the inclusion of his work alongside that of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz in the National Endowment for the Arts controversies of the 1990s, a key part of the Culture Wars, whereby conservative politicians sought to eradicate funding for the visual arts which promoted “deviant” lifestyles.¹⁴⁰ The piece which attracted the controversy, *The Human Printing Press* was taken from Athey’s larger production *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1993–96), and saw Athey make a series of incisions into another member of his performance troupe, Divinity Fudge’s (aka Darryl Carlton) back. He then made prints with Fudge’s blood, and then sent these on pulleys above the audience’s head. As Dominic Johnson suggests, although Fudge himself is HIV-negative so there is absolutely no possible risk of infection, the “sex and blood and queers and HIV coexisting in one place at one time, unapologetically, open and illustriously” was too much for the conservative establishment to take.¹⁴¹ *The Human Printing Press* thus illustrates a continuing preoccupation of Athey’s work with the permeability of bodily boundaries, and the breakdown in Catherine Waldby’s healthy, masculine-identified, heterosexual “immunocompetent body.”¹⁴² However, through the externalization of the porousness of the physical body through his performative practice, Athey is able to question the biomedically informed exclusionary practices which mark some bodies as ‘normal’, healthy, and sovereign, and others not.¹⁴³

The most palpable way in which Athey’s and Jude’s practices of self-mutilation are connected is through their desire to “take control of their own experience” in the face of chronic illness and abusive relationships.¹⁴⁴ The pressure associated with the physical

¹³⁸ Armando R. Favazza and Barbara Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation in Culture and Psychiatry*, 3rd ed. (Maryland, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 276.

¹³⁹ Maria Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 126.

¹⁴⁰ Dominic Johnson, “Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?: Ron Athey and the Culture Wars,” in *Pleading in the Blood*, 75.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴² Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic*, 12.

¹⁴³ David Harradine, “Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaking Body,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 10, no. 3 (2000): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800008568597>.

¹⁴⁴ Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain*, 125.

maintenance of biomedical illness preoccupies Athey's work in the same manner as it does for Jude in *A Little Life*. After going to see Andy for his multiple check-ups, the endless bandaging of his wounds, the treatments of his damaged legs, Jude often finds the card for a psychologist slipped into his clothes. Jude resists, saying that he would decide how his body would be used: "He had such little control of his body anyway—how could they begrudge him this?"¹⁴⁵ Athey examines this particular situation in the first tableau of 1992 piece *Martyrs and Saints, A Nurses Penance* [fig. 4]. As told by Mary Richards:

This piece is specifically about A.I.D.S. [...] It begins in a hospital setting suffused with uncomfortably bright light. There are a number of 'sick' performers on stage. Some are on gurneys, some in wheelchairs, all are in states of physical abjection having been cut from black body bags. Here, Athey and his co-performers enact the pain and humiliation of the exposed and abject body by using grotesquely caricatured and brutal nurses to carry out publicly, physically degrading and intrusive examinations.¹⁴⁶



Figure 4: Ron Athey, *Nurse's Penance*, 1992.

In Richards' reading, the nurses attend to the patients in this "abrupt manner" to try and prevent themselves from becoming attached to their patients and their suffering.

¹⁴⁵ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 382–3.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Richards, "Ron Athey, AIDS and the Politics of Pain," *Body, Space and Technology* 3, no. 2 (January 2003), <https://www.bstjournal.com/articles/224/>.

Alternatively, we can read Athey's performance as an exaggerated resistance to biomedical authority, a position which Jude also undertakes. Throwing the psychologist's card in the bin, Jude reflects on his own ritual of placing the bag containing "hundreds of alcohol wipes and bandages, stacks and stacks of gauze, and dozens of packets of razors" under his sink, resisting Harold and Andy's offers of help.¹⁴⁷

Beyond the Immune Subject: Ron Athey's Dissociative Sparkle

At the end of the novel after Willem has died, Jude's loved ones perform an intervention in which he is brought forcibly to hospital. Resistant, Jude fights "yowling and spitting in Harold's and Andy's faces, ripping the IV from his hand, thrashing his body against the bed," until he is sedated.¹⁴⁸ As Garth Greenwell has noted "Jude's childhood is an extreme iteration of the abandonment, exploitation, and abuse that remain endemic in the experience of queer young people."¹⁴⁹ *A Little Life* does not shy away from the potential difficulties of inhabiting a queer, debilitated body under neoliberalism that is glossed over in mainstream representations of LGBTQ life, a sentiment that is reflected in the challenging content of Athey's work. However, the novel ultimately fails to imagine any kind of meaningful existence for Jude outside of the binary logic of failed and capacitated bodies that neoliberalism imposes. One of Jude's fantasies at the end of the novel is that Harold and Julia are his real parents, and that he is wearing "a soccer uniform, his arms and legs bare; maybe he is accompanied by a friend, by a girlfriend [...] his own feet running across a field of grass."¹⁵⁰ In this, we witness what Kafer describes as the hypernormative trope of the lost past, rooted in the assumption that all disabled people long for "a lost whole, pre-illness, pre-disability body," and also the imagined restitution of Jude's heterosexuality, his masculinity.¹⁵¹ The narrative therefore attaches Jude's happiness and wholeness to his inhabitation of the temporally and physically normative liberal immune body. As I have argued in this chapter, neoliberalism's withdrawal of institutional support and implementation of the doctrine of human capital has seen the troubling revitalization of this exclusionary ideal, the colonial origins of which will be explored in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁷ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 382–3.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 692.

¹⁴⁹ Garth Greenwell, "A Little Life: The Great Gay Novel Might Be Here," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/a-little-life-definitive-gay-novel/394436/>.

¹⁵⁰ Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 699–700.

¹⁵¹ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 43.

To conclude my discussion of *A Little Life*, I would like to draw on Athey's piece *Incorruptible Flesh (Dissociative Sparkle)* [fig. 5] as modelling a corporeal endurance that neither culminates in suicide, nor advocates a refusal of the reality of existing in a debilitated body. For Athey, the term "diassociative sparkle" symbolizes a gesture of temporarily overcoming the limitations of a "trying, tough, or grim social reality."¹⁵² An account of the performance offered by Jennifer Doyle gives an insightful description of the events which took place. Doyle, a close friend of Athey's as well as a critical commentator on his work, played a supervisory role during the event, intermittently dropping liquid into Athey's pinned-open eyes.¹⁵³ Doyle reports:

In his work, Athey lies on his back on a metal table made from scaffolding. (It looks like an elevated lawn chair.) His body rests against the fat metal rods of his platform for six hours. Built into the table is a pivoting rod, onto which Athey attached a baseball bat, upon which he has impaled himself. He is naked and covered in bronzing lotion and Vaseline. Hooks pierce multiple points in his face and are attached to leather strings to pull his skin back, turning his face into a painful (and also comic) mask. His scrotum is filled with fluid—turning his genitals into a watery, pink, feminine mass. On entering the space, spectators are told by a gallery attendant that they are welcome to put on gloves and touch Athey, using Vaseline as a lubricant. In the center of the white gallery is the artist on his table, lit from underneath by lights covered with red gels. Clusters of disco balls hang from the ceiling above him, sending sparkles of light across the brightly lit gallery. This is the only thing he has to look at. In fact the hooks pull his skin back so that his eyes are forced open—he can *only* stare up at the ceiling, without blinking.¹⁵⁴

Here, Athey embraces the permeability of his body and its boundaries. His body is neither immune or inviolable, but, rather, radically open to the world. Athey's presentation of social vulnerability illuminates a "precondition of being, that is our singular interdependence, our differentiated co-being."¹⁵⁵ The invitation that Athey gives to audience members to perform acts of care and touch his prostrated, static body thus simulates the inclusive version of collective immunity outlined through my discussion of Eula Biss and Donna Haraway in the introduction.

¹⁵² Johnson, "Introduction," 34.

¹⁵³ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 50.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁵⁵ Adrian Heathfield, "Illicit Transit," in *Pleading in the Blood*, 209.



Figure 5: Ron Athey, *Incorruptible Flesh (Dissociated Sparkle)*, 2006.

Chapter 2

Contagious Histories and Viral Entanglements in Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, and James Luna's *Artifact Piece*

How is one to read *The Flame Alphabet* and its deeply associative yet stubbornly unresolved mysteries? A brief outline of the looping plot is necessary. Marcus crafts a world in which all language has become toxic, only children are immune. Parents Claire and Sam, evacuate their home leaving their daughter Esther to fend for herself among the other quarantined toxic teenagers. The subsequent chapters diligently flashback to the unfolding of the impact of the disease on a month-by-month basis, reflecting the surreal expansion of time which accompanies the progression of a rampant and elusive sickness. The novel's scenes of familial and societal disintegration are positioned against an all-pervasive atmosphere of anti-Semitism which only intensifies as the story continues. Sam and Claire are members of the Reconstructionist Jewish faith, and practice an “*entirely covert method of devotion*”, travelling to a synagogue concealed in a hut, and receiving their religious instruction through radio broadcasts transmitted via underground cabling, and received through a listener, a semi-corporeal device.¹ These huts are repeatedly “surveilled, seized, burned for fear that the Jew was drinking something too important out of these holes, drinking directly from God’s stomach.”²

All adults are subject to the epidemic’s effects, all children exempt. Yet the accusation that Jewish children *alone* are the source of the epidemic circulates within the

¹ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 41.

² Ibid., 47.

novel's anti-Semitic environment. The outbreak's Jewish origin is originally expounded by the novel's arch villain, LeBov, the toxicology and sociolinguistic researcher whom we first encounter in the guise of Murphy, another lay individual ostensibly undertaking similar localized attempts to assuage the language toxicity to Sam. Swathes of the novel are devoted to the semi-philosophical dissection of the potential causes of the epidemic conducted between the two men, aided by "Child's Play," a dubiously sourced linguistic shielding. In spite of these dialogues, LeBov is a threatening figure so convinced of the power of the Jewish sermons that he breaks into the synagogue huts and rips out the listeners. Following a peculiar twist of events, for the second half of the novel Sam finds work at Forsythe, the institutional setting run by LeBov that is devoted to finding a harmless script. At Forsythe, Sam is briefly united with his abandoned wife, Claire, only for her to die. The hallucinogenic end to this section sees Sam enter LeBov's "Jew-hole" a cavernous space filled with the stolen listeners where other Jewish individuals are either working as scientists or being used as test subjects. Sam escapes Forsythe and the novel closes with the narrator back at his own hut, with a kidnapped girl suspiciously presented as a weakened Esther.

Even at the novel's close, and in line with the conceptual incoherence which flavors Marcus's corpus, the source of the epidemic is never revealed, LeBov's identity is never confirmed, and there is little character development. As the initial critical responses bemoaned, *The Flame Alphabet* often feels like a hybrid and half-formed thing, like the virus itself, neither dead nor alive. The *Flame Alphabet*'s winding narrative is balanced precariously between a conventional thriller and his far more obviously innovative earlier works *The Age of Wire and String* (1995) and *Notable American Women* (2002), creating, as J. Robert Lennon notes, "an expectation of structural coherence that the book then declines to deliver," or, as Lee Konstantinou puts it, the failed promise of "narrative cohesion and coherent plotting," without fully pursuing avant-garde innovation.³ On a thematic level, meanwhile, the novel's gestures towards a genetic Jewish cause have been linked to the thanatological logic of the Holocaust. Laura Shackelford uses the specter of the epidemic's Jewish origin to articulate philosopher Roberto Esposito's claim that the rationality of the Holocaust resides in the immunological lexicon of contemporary political systems, systems which continue to identify viral (subhuman) bodies to be exterminated and excluded for the health of the nation.⁴ Inbar Kaminsky points to how

³ Konstantinou, "Anti-Comprehension Pills,"; J. Robert Lennon, "When Children's Speech Turns Lethal," review of *The Flame Alphabet*, by Ben Marcus, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, January 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/books/review/the-flame-alphabet-by-ben-marcus-book-review.html>; Marcus, *Notable American Women* (New York: Vintage, 2002).

⁴ Shackelford, "In Toxicating Languages," 161.

Sam's Jewish-American community is afflicted by both a physical plague and the "plague" of anti-Semitism.⁵

This reading of the novel will respond to these critical interpretations to see how its deliberate incoherence offers a broader critique of scientific and anthropological legitimacy, positioning the Holocaust in a historical continuum of biopolitical and thanatopolitical exploitation. At its core, Marcus's immunitary narrative is a mediation on the experience of communities facing experiences of physical exposure. As I develop, the radical intimacy between bodies that the virus represents led to the creation of classificatory divisions in the colonial era, spaces that are represented spatially through the segregation of Sam's Jewish community. This chapter therefore delves deeper into the historical construction of the proprietary immune subject, which, as established in the introduction, is dependent on a series of discriminatory measures of who and who did not count as human. I trace the idea of exposure further by examining critical responses by Laura Shackelford and Ted Martin who show how Sam's body is subject to intensified forms of biopower in the post-Fordist landscape of the Global North that have their roots in colonial and neocolonial thinking. I then bring the novel into dialogue with Don DeLillo's 1984 book *White Noise*, a piece of fiction symbiotically entwined with Marcus's work, to illuminate the continuing reliance on classificatory measures between different moments of capitalism, which, I contend, demonstrates the ongoing ramifications of colonial logic within capitalist systems. The "labors of purity" which the protagonists of both novels undertake are supported by the materially and, crucially, the memorially purified landscape of the novels themselves. I attend to the process of institutionalized forgetting, associated with the recurring figure of "white noise" within both novels, by employing current strands of Indigenous theory that see forgetting as a key component of the current functioning of capitalism. In my concluding thoughts, I draw on the subversive use of exhibitionary and anthropological practices in Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-1994), James Luna's *Artifact Piece* (1987) and Esther's linguistic obstinacy as exercises that cut through the white noise of colonial forgetting.

Contaminated Comprehension in Marcus's Viral Oeuvre

Early in the novel, Sam claims "the days of understanding were over."⁶ The symptoms of the illness are easy to identify. A shrinking and hardening of the face, a pulling back of

⁵ Inbar Kaminsky, "Epidemic Judaism: Plagues and their Evocation in Philip Roth's *Nemesis* and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*," *Philip Roth Studies* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 110.

⁶ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 196.

the lips, a callusing of the tongue—the reader is informed that no additional instruments were needed, “you could perform the diagnostic just by looking.”⁷ And yet, in spite of its flagrant effects, the disease produces a frightening dismantling of medical expertise. The medical profession’s repeated advice for him and his wife, now a hollow-eyed “paper-skinned creature,” to merely get more fresh air leads Sam to reason that “there were doctors, and there were armchair doctors, and then there were people like us, crawling in the mud, deploying childish diagnostics, hoping that through sheer tone of voice, through the posturing of authority, we would exact some definitive change of reality.”⁸ “Perhaps we thought the world we lived in could be hacked into pleasing shapes simply by what we said,” Sam muses, troubled that “our common sense had so little medical traction.”⁹

Sam’s perspective explicates how the frustrations of reading and comprehending *The Flame Alphabet* can be aligned with the way in which the experience of epidemic disease effectively demolishes the conceptual structures that we use to understand the world. While this is a source of intense anxiety for Sam some contemporary critical mediations that draw out the potential usefulness of the connective experience which contagious disease provides, particularly as tools in disassembling the fiction of the immune subject and its specific biopolitical investments. “The viral has itself *gone viral*,” note Jasbir Puar and Patricia Clough in a recent special issue on the topic.¹⁰ This is at least, as Eula Biss has emphasized, due to the productively slippery nature of viruses themselves. “They are not exactly inanimate, but viruses are not, strictly speaking, alive,” she argues, “they do not eat, do not grow, and generally do not live in the manner that other living things live.” Biss describes viruses in supernatural terms, “zombies, or body snatchers, or vampires,” microscopic entities which invade and take other bodies over by force.¹¹ Viruses are at once both a source of essential sustenance and potentially of annihilating destruction for human beings, and thus a fount of confusion and disorientation.¹² Ed Cohen, drawing on his wide-reaching examination of the liberal tenets of the discourse of the autonomous immune body, suggests that the parasitic microbe violates liberalism’s most sacred ideal—that we own and are in control of our bodies.¹³ The microbe is a social leveler, offering “evidence of a common humanity conceived as a common susceptibility,

⁷ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ Patricia Clough and Jasbir Puar, “Introduction,” *Women Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2012): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2012.0015>.

¹¹ Biss, *On Immunity*, 35-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ Ed Cohen, “The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment; or, How Scale Undoes Us One and All,” *Social Text* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 21-2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-1210247>.

[creating] the communion of bodies as it searched for its prey.”¹⁴ Although Mel Chen’s work privileges toxicity as a site of boundary trouble as viruses are more easily contained, they still take up this sense of common susceptibility by insisting that “myths of immunity can be challenged, and sometimes dismantled, by transnationally figured diseases” that indiscriminately travel between different populations and species.¹⁵ Contagion, as these theorists emphasize, literally means “together touching.”¹⁶ And indeed, Marcus’s novel’s specific manifestation of a “speech fever” intensifies our understanding of the viral as a boundary-breaking condition. Sam notes the measures undertaken to prevent communication, the “gesture-perfect evasions” which characterize the body language in his neighborhood following the outbreak, “the well-crafted public solitude.”¹⁷ As Brandon LaBelle proposes in his dissection of the association between sound, space and the construction of subjectivity, “sound is always already mine and not mine,” underscoring the “auditory experience as locational and poignantly embedded within the processes of social exchange.”¹⁸

Beyond *The Flame Alphabet*, Marcus’s wider oeuvre exhibits a suspicion of the process of comprehension. Breaking with the familiar bindings of plot and character, Marcus’s debut novel *The Age of Wire and String* is positioned as a “cataloguing of a culture,” the documenting of an invented time and location dubbed the Age of Wire and String.¹⁹ The text is organized under subheadings which include “God,” “Weather,” “Sleep,” and “The House.”. These categories, each with glossaries of key terms, ostensibly offer an anthropological overview of the society that Marcus is depicting. In spite of the book’s appeals to empiricism, the predominant effect of Marcus’s text is one of disorientation. Take, for example, the entry entitled “Dog, Mode of Heat Transfer in Barking,” which comes under the section “Animal.” After defining dog as “a mode of heat transfer in fluids (hair and gases),” the entry gives details of the canine current; “with warmer less dense fluid continually rising from the application of heat and cooler, denser portions of the dog flowing outward and downward to replace the warmer dog.”²⁰ We are informed that this is how “barking may be transferred to the entire dog.”²¹ Marcus’s viscous canines are exemplars of the objects which fill the pages of his cultural catalogue, wavering in and

¹⁴ Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 120.

¹⁵ Chen, *Animacies*, 7.

¹⁶ Cohen, “The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment,” 40.

¹⁷ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 5.

¹⁸ Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xix.

¹⁹ Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf., 1995; Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), 3. Citations refer to the Dalkey Archive Press edition.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*

out of comprehensibility through their peculiar mixing of the animate and inanimate; literary creations, which trouble the subject-object binary. Although flirting with classificatory and empirical structures, *The Age of Wire and String* traces social and ecological relationships which cannot be revealed by these tools, “while at the same time intensifying a sense of embeddedness within those relationships.”²² Marcus’s writing simulates modes of boundary-troubling viral associations.

Classification and Colonial Histories of Viral Control: *The Flame Alphabet*’s Spatial Segregation

Marcus’s literary disruption of anthropological practices takes on a new meaning in *The Flame Alphabet* and allows us to consider how a legacy of viral comprehension and control has its roots in colonialism. The radical potential of the virus for disassembling human hierarchies led to the extensive development of technologies of viral control in the colonial era. Colonization saw groups of people and microbes that were previously unconnected come into contact with one another, often with devastating consequences. In the American context, disease, more than any conventional weapon, was the most useful tool for weakening and annihilating Indigenous North Americans by their European colonizers. The lack of acquired immunological resistance and the relative genetic homogeneity of Indigenous subjects meant that they were particularly vulnerable to the previously unencountered infectious diseases which Europeans brought with them, but settlers too found themselves vulnerable.²³ As Warwick Anderson suggests, disease ecology is an inheritance of “settler colonial anxieties” which necessitated the careful tracking of the effects on bodies and landscapes of these new confrontations.²⁴ Colonial schemes of racial classification were developed in tandem with new technologies used to observe and control microbes. This, in Alexis Shotwell’s terms, “coproduced the age of colonialism.”²⁵ For Shotwell, classificatory practices are distinctly biopolitical. Organizing people, and therefore controlling their relation to the land and others, is an essential tool of colonial rule.²⁶

Before elaborating on the specific entangled measures of viral and acoustic control which the novel implements, it is worth reflecting on the racialized constitution of the

²² Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 89.

²³ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 15.

²⁴ Warwick Anderson, “Natural Histories of Infectious Disease: Ecological Vision in Twentieth-Century Biomedical Science,” *Orisis* 19, no. 1 (2004): 58–59, <https://doi.org/10.1086/649393>.

²⁵ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

prevention of contagious disease, a point to be noted in a novel which posits a genetic source of the epidemic.²⁷ Jih-Fei Cheng's work on the tobacco mosaic virus furthers our understanding of how these colonial classificatory practices were imbricated in new ways of understanding the sub-microscopic world. This virus is particularly significant in the history of virus discovery, the first to be identified by Western modern medicine in 1898 and the first to be scientifically imaged thereby empirically verifying the existence of all viruses in 1939.²⁸ It is the language used to describe the tobacco mosaic virus that interests Cheng most. The earliest recorded description of the virus appears in the work of Jules Crevaux, colonial scientist and travel writer, who describes a tobacco plant stricken by the virus as "*mulato* [sic]" in 1881.²⁹ Writing for a Victorian audience well-versed in the colonial racial order, Crevaux uses the term in order to make a presumed comparison between the dry texture of the tobacco and the racialized subject's hair. This shared designation marks both these entities as being undesirable within the colonial order, "compromised consumable products" in a free market economy rooted in a hierarchical scale of visual difference.³⁰ Cheng then traces the ongoing influence of the *mulato* reference in both historical and scientific texts written between its first instantiation and the present day. The labelling of the tobacco as *mulato*, as a transient figure who is not readily assimilated into systems of racial and sexual administration, helped to influence the ongoing scientific conceptualization of the virus as threatening to the nation state and global security.³¹ Cheng's documentation shows how the assumed objectivity of visual technologies used to understand the viral activity, microscope photographs held by the scientific community, "as speaking for themselves," were undermined by the influence of this racialized description.³² Cheng's work prompts us to adopt a more circumspect stance when observing the intellectual systems used to comprehend and understand viruses, one which, as discussed, is stylistically replicated in Marcus's fiction.

The attachment of Sam's narrative to a few specific places (the home, the family's Jewish hut, the picnic field, later the Forsythe institute) fails to offer us a comprehensive perspective on the effect of the epidemic on the whole of society. The reader is therefore reliant on Sam's already highly unstable reporting of the intermittent, and generally unilluminating, news reports of the situation outside his direct apprehension. We know

²⁷ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 30.

²⁸ Jih-Fei Cheng, "'El Tabaco Se Ha Mulato': Globalizing Race, Viruses, and Scientific Observation in the Late Nineteenth Century" *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 1, no. 1 (2015): 2–3, <https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/cheng/21421>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

that the sickness is rampant, that it affects everyone over a specific undefined age, but Marcus's choice to focus on the effects of the infection in a space specifically demarcated as Jewish alongside its proffered, if not proven, origin in the Jewish child invites reflection on the entwined project of public health and practices of spatial segregation rooted in racialized discourse. In *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health*, Alison Bashford sees public health as a project of spatialized biopolitical governance. She brings to the fore the racialized dimensions of the dividing practices which Foucault emphasizes in his understanding of the control of epidemics as an early disciplinary tool.³³ The diligent division of different populations, cemented in colonial classificatory practices, was therefore extended through the carving up of space and the division between 'healthy' and 'sick' bodies.³⁴ It is while they are sitting in the picnic field that Sam and Claire receive news over their portable radio that "studies had returned, pinpointing children as the culprit." While the word carrier was used, the word "Jew was not." The report says that the virus is genetic in nature, and requests that if you feel you fit into that category, you should comply and bring your child in for testing. "When they started listing counties," Sam claims, "I turned off the radio."³⁵ And so, *The Flame Alphabet* invokes, in the light of the dangerous effects of the commingling of public health concerns and racialized discourse, an intensification of "the stigmatizing of already despised populations and the spaces where they lived."³⁶ Marcus's novel thus gestures to historical accounts of the treatment of the Jewish community, returning us to the logic of quarantine at the core of ghettoization, as opposed to the positive sense of social contagion: what Priscilla Wald calls a "communicable Americanism," a generative and steady biological and cultural exchange which followed a clearly articulated path towards a homogenized Jewish-American identity unblemished by the specificities of heritage or previous national ties.³⁷ Marcus's characters are therefore subject to culturally and socially embedded means of viral control, procedures with racially enmeshed disciplinary histories.

³³ Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 30.

³⁶ Wald, *Contagious*, 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 146, 115.

Smallwork as Precarious Labor

Against the broader societal impulse which seeks to quarantine and demarcate viral bodies comes Sam's smallwork, the individual experiments which he undertakes to try and alleviate the toxicity of language. Before deliberating how smallwork has been read variously by critics as a commentary on the intensification of biopower in the neoliberal present, I outline the peculiar manifestations of Sam's smallwork here. Sam's initial medical endeavors possess an uncanny resemblance to those measures undertaken in the first years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which like the sickness pervading Marcus's novel return us to a "premodern experience of illness," one in which sickness was experienced intuitively.³⁸ In his memoir of the HIV/AIDS crisis, *Close to the Knives*, David Wojnarowicz insists that people with HIV "are turning themselves into human test tubes," compiling so much information that they are able to pass themselves off as research scientists and turning "their tenement kitchens into laboratories, mixing up chemicals and passing them out freely to friends and strangers to help prolong lives."³⁹ Individuals dosing their skin with photochemicals to remove lesions, receiving shots from vaccines developed from human feces, driving your ex-lover to see a so-called doctor with faked medical certificates on the wall: Wojnarowicz's work is crammed with moments which show perilous experimentation with your own body and the bodies of your loved ones. However, unlike the withholding of money, drugs, and information by the government which could be observed during the AIDS epidemic, potential preventatives for Marcus's verbal virus "sped through testing, and the basic anti-speech agents were released for free to the public, dumped into empty newspaper bins on corners."⁴⁰ But with these measures failing, Sam experiments, in his kitchen lab, with chemical and substance-based preventative measures "prompted from instructions" received at the synagogue hut.⁴¹ In characteristically confusing prose, Sam rambles "I reduced solutions of saline, blended anti-inflammatory tablets, atomized powder from non-drowsy time-release allergy vials, and milled an arsenal of water-charged vitamins, particularly from the B group [...]"⁴² Sam carefully observes Claire's responses to his tests, Sam "wrote things like *no change*. I wrote *muteness*. I wrote *talkative*, *erratic*, *nervous*. I wrote *giddy*. I wrote, and this I wrote most, no data."⁴³

³⁸ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 120.

³⁹ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 107.

⁴⁰ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 70; Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 107.

⁴¹ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89.

Later, at Forsythe, the institution designated to finding a cure for the effects of the epidemic, Sam's smallwork continues. With Claire having been left behind during the evacuation, Sam lives amongst the other volunteers at Forsythe, a place that is not a government structure but instead a "research lab embedded within the old educational structure that still had the mascot carved in his face."⁴⁴ Sam is part of a team of volunteers who undertake ingenious textual experiments on the "language martyrs," collections of withered individuals who, at first it seems, willingly expose themselves to the toxicity which these trials inevitably produce.⁴⁵ Sam's office at Forsythe contains a drafting desk, and in its drawers he finds

rubber stamps, ink pads in different colors, and a set of baby sawtooth knives [...] and most interestingly, a scroll of self-disguising paper—paper with small windows factored in that could be enlarged with a dial—that allowed you to see only the script character you were presently reading, and nothing else, not even the word it belonged to. It broke the act of reading into its littlest parts, keeping understanding at bay.⁴⁶

The intimacy of Sam's actions has thus been aligned with the breakdown in the distinctions between our intimate and working lives which is characterized by immaterial or affective forms of labor, such as the financial, service, and care industries which characterize post-Fordist models of work. Shackleford stresses the function of smallwork as an act of resistance to current neoliberal structures. Sam often feels despondent about the ineffectiveness of his experiments, noting "*Work* was a wishful word for my failures in the lab."⁴⁷ However it is in the unofficial nature of smallwork, its very amateurishness, that Shackleford finds its power. In contrast to the various normalizing roles of language in systems of twenty-first century biopower, smallwork "serves to designate a range of, at once, theoretical and practical efforts at maintaining one's individual and collective life within and against official languages and biopolitical imperatives, efforts designed to contravene biopower's ever-expanding uninterrupted circulation to others' benefit."⁴⁸ With the instructions for its practice circulating outside any authorized channels, Shackleford reads smallwork as repelling the immunological operations of the nation.⁴⁹ Alternatively, Theodore Martin suggests that smallwork can be read as an analogy for the changing nature of work under neoliberalism, arguing for an "occupational aesthetic"

⁴⁴ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 150.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁸ Shackleford, "In Toxicating Languages," 166.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

that afflicts the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel. Sam's incessant need to work, marked by routinization and alienation, supports "capitalist realism"- the idea that capital has so successfully suffused every crevice of our existence that we are unable to conceptualize an alternative, in fact it is far easier to imagine the end of the world.⁵⁰ Martin claims that this imagining of contemporary society, attributed to Frederic Jameson and fully interrogated by Mark Fisher, is present in *The Flame Alphabet* through its presentation of a collapsed capitalist society which leaves us with nothing to do but work.⁵¹ Martin links the useless tedium of smallwork to late capitalism's current systems of alienated labor, discernible by its relentlessness, precariousness, its fundamental meaninglessness, and associates unfamiliarity of many of Marcus's terms with the jargon of expertise.⁵² The data produced for data's sake in the novel's pages echoes neoliberal knowledge work, the shifting around of pointless morsels of information, which is so prevalent after the failure of the productive economy, whose consequences will be more fully excavated in the following chapter.

Coherent with Martin's emphasis on the precarity of contemporary working conditions, Sam is very much at the mercy of the institutions he labors for. This point is emphasized when LeBov breaks into Sam and Claire's synagogue just before the couple evacuate and Sam arrives at Forsythe. Having watched the news report of LeBov's death and seeing a picture of the man he had previously identified as Murphy, Sam bursts into the hut and interrogates LeBov over his slippery persona. LeBov replies, "There are certain boundaries that I'd prefer not to observe when it comes to my own identity [...] There's a lot of behavior that I want to accomplish, but I don't need all of it, or really any of it, attributed to me. Attribution is a burden."⁵³ Virulent and unpinnable, LeBov's construction of self mimics the virus which so vexes the novel's characters, and the very form of the text itself. He goes on to pronounce, "I'm less like a person, a person as you might think of one, and more like an organization."⁵⁴ After aligning himself with systems of authority, LeBov then goes on to rip the validity of Sam's religious practice to shreds. LeBov reveals that Burke's sermons are a decoy, "for people like me who hack into the transmission, to appease us, to make us stop looking."⁵⁵ LeBov continues, "even this thing with Thompson, I mean you really believed that, that he was a *rabbi*? You didn't recognize

⁵⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

⁵¹ Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 171.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵³ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 127.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 128-9.

my voice?”⁵⁶ Thus, in many ways LeBov also replicates the functions of a stripped-back neoliberal state.⁵⁷ Not only does he describe himself as an organization and run what is apparently the main facility for trying to solve the language emergency, he also undertakes practices of surveillance on Sam and his community, as Shackleford emphasizes. LeBov’s actions often collapse the distinctions between the public and private spheres, as when he invades Sam’s synagogue, mocking Sam’s protestations that it is private property by asking him to present a deed.⁵⁸ Through its saturation into every corner of existence, the eradication between the boundaries of public and private, smallwork mimics the conditions of the expansion of precarious forms of labor and living under neoliberalism.⁵⁹

Bodies on Display: Tracing the Antecedents of Precarious Labor

Although Sam’s body is itself subject to deepened forms of biopower, the qualities of his own institutionally embedded smallwork also show his participation in systems of capitalist exploitation whose histories extend beyond the relatively recent onset of neoliberal economic and political and rationality. In his reading of Leslie Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, Christopher Breu uses Esposito’s idea of the immunitary apparatus of the welfare state to suggest that neoliberalism’s elimination of protections brings the experience of the once immunized middle class into dialogue with those who have historically been excluded from the protections of the state.⁶⁰ In particular, Breu is keen to identify a similar commodification and instrumentalization of the body central to colonial and neocolonial thinking. In neoliberal biopolitics, “the commodified body is no longer a tool of labor (traditionally conceived) but one commodified and appropriated as an end product of the production process itself.”⁶¹ While the new service proletariat in the Global North is exploited by wage labor, their subsistence under a capitalist framework is also dependent on unwaged, and often thanatopolitical, labor in the Global South.⁶²

The complex and ongoing legacies of biopolitical manipulation are explored in *The Flame Alphabet* through the recurring trope of unwilling physical exposure and display, of which the intrusion of LeBov into Sam’s hut is one example. However, the testing of Sam’s

⁵⁶ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 129.

⁵⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

⁵⁸ Shackleford, “In Toxicating Languages,” 158-9; Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 125.

⁵⁹ Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, 85; Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 14-5.

⁶⁰ Breu, *Insistence of the Material*, 155.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 20.

smallwork on human subjects at Forsythe places him in a more compromised ethical role. From his office, Sam sends down his linguistic specimens which were tried “against people already shattered and near death, over the very thing I made more of every day.”⁶³ Sam resists witnessing the fruits of his labor, insisting “I didn’t need to see them at all. I could stay at my desk and picture the sad readers being led into the testing area, strapped to the medical monitors.”⁶⁴ Sections from one particularly striking scene at Forsythe are worth quoting at length:

Sometimes an assembly was called, heralded by a long dissonant bell.
Here the researchers, scientists, administrators, and the animal handlers who
worked their tests in the walled-off southern wing could settle into the surgical
theater and view the latest work on display, the experiments with comprehension,
the medical tests.⁶⁵

After a demonstration of a failed alternative to spoken language which involves the test subjects whistling, an elderly man is brought out, and speaks. Sam is awed, “he spoke with no apparent agony, without the clenched pain and contortions every single one of us expected to see.”⁶⁶ But then the basis of the man’s ability to speak is revealed:

Indeed it was a bag of *fluid*, but it dangled from the little neck of the child, puckering
into the tube.
From this it flowed directly into the man.
Allowing him to speak, one presumed.
*A fluid drawn directly from the child.*⁶⁷

The man shuffles off stage, the collapsed child covered with a sheet, the remaining liquid left dripping from the child not to be wasted. Later in the novel, Sam is shown a wing of Forsythe where rows of children were drawing and reading. Innocent enough until, he sees a masked technician bend over one of his subjects, “who smiled up at [Sam] as the needle was raised.”⁶⁸

The medical experiments conducted on subjects with compromised consent and limited knowledge uncovers the appropriative logic which runs from colonial biopolitical interventions, through the Holocaust, to the experience of contemporary “experimental subjects” forced by economic depravity to offer their bodies up for the testing of

⁶³ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 169.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

pharmaceutical and biotech treatments in parts of the Global South.⁶⁹ Akin to the dual theatrical and educational qualities of Marcus's assembly, the spectacle of human bodies being forced on display has frequently straddled entertainment, anthropological and medical research. From the ethnological spectacle, to world fairs, to ethnographic exhibits in museums, the public demonstration of racialized and 'abnormal' subjects took place within institutions allegedly devoted to public education well into the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Demonstrations of medical knowledge were entrenched in complex and colonially-informed biopolitical hierarchies, as developed by Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell in their notion of the "Eugenic Atlantic." Indebted to Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking approach to race as a transnational, intercultural phenomenon, Snyder and Mitchell use the term the "Eugenic Atlantic" to permit the analysis of "disability and race as mutual projects of human exclusion, based upon scientific management systems, successively developed within modernity."⁷¹ "From quests for racial purity to eugenics campaigns to rid human 'defects' from the biological continuum to the systematic extermination efforts of the Holocaust", the histories of abuse against racialized and disabled subjects have been intertwined since the European Enlightenment.⁷² As Jay Katz reflects in his account of the medical experiments undertaken in Nazi Germany, the trials undertaken by Nazi doctors on Jewish subjects should be seen as part of a historical and continuum, which did not end with the Nuremberg trials and the ethical code which came out of it.⁷³ While we are just beginning to be exposed to the full atrocity of these histories, we know that African-Americans have been used as unknowing test subjects for a wide-range of medical issues, including most prominently the Tuskegee Syphilis study where for forty years the medical establishment withheld drugs for syphilis in order to see the disease's 'natural' progression.⁷⁴ Also pertinent are the trials of contraceptive pill on

⁶⁹ See in particular Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (London: Duke University Press, 2006). In this work, Rajan delves into how colonial logics continue to structure which bodies are available for testing in the global pharmaceutical and biotech industries. Rajan uses the term "experimental subjects" to demonstrate how the lack of availability of agricultural and manual labor has prompted individuals in India to turn their bodily material over to pharmaceutical companies.

⁷⁰ Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, "Indigenous Peoples and Western Science," in *Biomapping Indigenous Peoples: Towards an Understanding of the Issues*, ed. Susanne Berthier-Foglar, Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, and Sandrine Tolazzi (New York: Rodopi, 2012), 34.

⁷¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "The Eugenic Atlantic: Race, Disability, and the Making of an International Eugenic Science, 1800-1945," *Disability and Society* 18, no. 7 (June 2010): 843, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759032000127281>.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 859.

⁷³ Jay Katz, "Human Sacrifice and Human Experimentation: Reflections at Nuremberg," *Yale Journal of International Law* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 401-18.

⁷⁴ See Harriet A. Washington *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

Puerto-Rican women and vaccinations on Aboriginal Australian children held in institutional care, and the psychological experiments undertaken on Indigenous people in Canada's residential schools.⁷⁵ Undergirding these diverse actions is a logic of autoimmunity, in which projects with a narrow definition of 'life worth living' end up destroying life.⁷⁶

The Classificatory Gaze in *White Noise*

Embedded at the heart of the diverse anthropological, ethnographic and medical procedures, similar to those described in Marcus's novel, is the separation between the object on display to be interpreted and classified on the one hand, and the viewing subject on the other. This dichotomy lies at the heart of dispassionate intellectual and classificatory discourse from the nineteenth-century onwards, present in the medical practitioner's gaze articulated in Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, sees the subsuming of the identity of the subject under their diagnosis, and of the anthropologists, ethnographers, and other experts whose voices were used to comprehend the body for an observing audience.⁷⁷ We can witness these spectacles as one way in which capitalism in Elizabeth Povinelli's terms, "vigorously polices the separations between different forms of existence so that certain kinds of existents can be subjected to different kinds of extractions."⁷⁸ In the course of *The Flame Alphabet*'s pages, Sam, as a persecuted, spatially-segregated Jewish subject, and as a smallwork practitioner at Forsythe is thus at once subjected to and subject of this classificatory gaze.

Strikingly for this analysis, the protagonist of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* also employs the tools of classification to try and negotiate a residential landscape similarly afflicted by a natural disaster which collapses societal distinctions, this time an "airborne toxic event." Akin to *The Flame Alphabet*'s focus on the dysfunctional family unit, at its core *White Noise* is a portrayal of suburban life. Alongside his wife, Babette, Professor of Hitler studies Jack Gladney lives in an invented Midwestern town, Blacksmith, with an unruly assortment of children from multiple marriages. Before a train carriage comes off the

⁷⁵ Collingwood-Whittick, "Indigenous Peoples," 42.

⁷⁶ Esposito, *Terms*, 61. In recent fiction, the entangled nature of scientific and capitalist logic has been most eloquently expressed in Colson Whitehead's alternate history of slavery *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994); Priscilla Netto, "Reclaiming the Body of the 'Hottentot': The Vision and Visuality of the Body Speaking with Vengeance in *Venus Hottentot 2000*," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12, no. 2 (May 2005): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805051235>.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 20.

tracks and releases a “heavy, black mass” which hangs over Blacksmith, Gladney’s day-to-day existence is consumed by the mundane, gathering with his family for a Friday night ritual of eating Chinese take-out and watching TV, attempting to finally master German for an upcoming international conference on his specialist subject.⁷⁹ *The Flame Alphabet* can easily be seen as the heir to DeLillo’s twisted suburbia.⁸⁰

DeLillo’s descriptions of the attempts to clean up the toxic cloud demonstrate the formal similarities between his and Marcus’s viral prose. “The men in Mylex suits moved with a lunar caution [...] They moved as if across a swale of moon dust, bulky and wobbling, trapped in the idea of the nature of time,” DeLillo’s sentences sound beautiful and informative, but their meanings swiftly unravel under the scrutiny of their individual parts.⁸¹ Albeit not quite as pronounced as in *The Flame Alphabet*, substantial portions of the novel’s explication of the plot occur between two men, this time Jack and his best friend, Murray Siskind, a Jewish professor whose research interest revolves around another infamous figure, Elvis. In one of the wide-ranging dialogues between the two academics in *White Noise*, we witness the text’s concern about how domestic intimacy breeds lies. Jack, looking back on this conversation, thinks about Murray’s “heartless theory” that ignorance and confusion are the bedrock of family solidarity, that “the family is strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted.”⁸² In DeLillo’s partial and Marcus’s more complete renderings of the apocalypse, two men philosophize about society’s fragmentation.

White Noise, in stark contrast to *The Flame Alphabet*, reflects the technological and political landscape of its time of production. Representative of Jameson’s characterization of the depthless postmodern condition, the novel brims with technological systems which cursorily connect far-flung spaces and cultures. The “white noise” of the novel is connected to the continuous interjections which these commercialized systems make into the lives of the characters, urging their participation in consumerism, a calling which they clearly relish. Penetrating through the din of the novel’s commercial white noise, however, lies Jack’s attempt to categorize and classify the othered bodies which he sees around him. Take Jack’s confusion over the ethnic identity of his son’s friend Orest. “What kind of name is Orest,” he asks, “He might have been Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, a dark-skinned Eastern European, a light-skinned black. Did he have an accent? I wasn’t sure. Was he Samoan, a native North American, a Sephardic Jew?” Jack is particularly worried about the way in which a multicultural society might curtail his

⁷⁹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984; London: Picador, 2011), 128. Citations refer to the Picador edition.

⁸⁰ Shackleford, “In Toxicating Languages,” 157.

⁸¹ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 134.

⁸² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 97.

absolute freedom of expression. He whines that it “was getting hard to know what you couldn’t say to people.”⁸³ For Tim Engles, the white noise of the novel is thus not only the low buzz of technology, but also Jack’s complex categorizations, the “noise that white people make.”⁸⁴

The rampant consumerism and ongoing flow of global networks which we see in DeLillo’s text are absent within the enclosed world of *The Flame Alphabet*. Utilizing Martin’s eloquent connection between Sam’s smallwork and the precarious labor of late stage capitalism, we can perceive the novels as speaking to the anxieties of different moments of financialization. Whereas an ongoing refrain in DeLillo’s setting is that the characters in the novel are unable to process the masses of new data being thrown at them, all Sam’s smallwork does in *The Flame Alphabet* is produce data. What remains hauntingly consistent between the two texts are the methods of division and segmentation in their responses to the boundary-troubling occasions of the toxic and viral events.

White Noise and the Politics of Forgetting

Carrying forward Ted Martin’s idea that Sam’s smallwork is an actual form of work, and one which resounds with contemporary formations of labor, I conceive of Sam’s smallwork and Jack Gladney’s diligent carving up of the world around them as “labors of purity.” Purity, according to Shotwell’s incisive investigation of this topic, operates as “a particular idea-as-technology of parsing, cleansing, and delineating” which arranges key modes of life today.⁸⁵ As we have seen in both *White Noise* and *The Flame Alphabet*, the narrators undertake attempted discursive and textual performances of epistemic mastery which refract the institutional and commercial forces that surround them. But as I shall develop, these labors are undertaken to support a purified memorial landscape. Shotwell expands on the idea that the impulse towards purity in contemporary consumer culture and political ideology tends to a fundamental denial of relationality, both with the other individuals, groups, and species with whom we share the planet, and this is perhaps where her argument flourishes, with the histories that these formations bear. As she notes, there is no “preracial state we could access, erasing histories of slavery, forced labor on railroads, colonialism, genocide, and their concomitant responsibilities and requirements. There is no food we can eat, clothing we can buy, or energy we can use

⁸³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 239.

⁸⁴ Tim Engles, “‘Who are You, Literally?’: Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 755.

⁸⁵ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 14.

without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering.”⁸⁶ Shotwell’s investigation into purity pays particular attention to how this category functions in relation to the complexities of being a settler living on unsundered Indigenous territory (in her case the Algonquin territory).⁸⁷ Here, I unpack how the tools of classification, or labors of purity, undertaken to try and control the physical entanglement of epidemic disease in *The Flame Alphabet* and *White Noise* support a purified memorial practice that eradicates the presence of violent historical processes, in particular, the founding of America, which was achieved, in part, through viral means. The figure of white noise in both *White Noise* and *The Flame Alphabet* becomes a way for us to understand that the way in which to live in America is to inhabit a “produced incomprehensibility.”⁸⁸

In Sam’s final moments at Forsythe, and after much resistance, he finally enters LeBov’s Jew-hole. In this cavernous space he sees a “large-scale listening task force I was meant to join, siphoning deep rabbi sounds”.⁸⁹ Sam finds the collection of the listeners which LeBov has stolen, including his own “shriveled and pale, like an oversize raisin cast in cement.”⁹⁰ While it is difficult to establish exactly what is going on from the narration, the reader is informed that the Jewish radio feed is being fed hooked up to mannequins adorned with yarmulkes and tefillins. Rather than creating a new language in the hole, they are “listening fiercely for one that might have always been there, however deeply encoded in copper.” Alongside these mannequins adorned as Jewish figures, Sam finally encounters the presence of other living Jewish individuals.

The living were conscripted as listeners, too, martyrs seating in docile postures. Citizens of Rochester, Buffalo, Albany. Shirtless men who looked surprised. One of them slowly combed his hair. Antenna wire grew like creepers up their faces. Test subjects with cages for mouths, human antennas. From their faces came nothing but white noise.⁹¹

Sam claims that these scientists knew that the equipment being used was broken and that the testers “knew but were not saying. Such a phrase might serve as a new motto for our times.”⁹² This deliberate obfuscation is a feature of Sam’s life even before the illness strikes, most obviously in his private religious practice. The “dispersed, silent community” of which Sam is a part never meet in person, and are connected only through

⁸⁶ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 4-5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁸ Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Peges, and Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (November 2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633283>.

⁸⁹ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 250.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁹² *Ibid.*

the underground radio system.⁹³ The concealed nature of Sam and Claire's religious practice extends not only to each other and the outside world, but also to their offspring. Children are forbidden: "They must be approached separately [...] Curiosity about how others worshipped, even others in your family, *even Esther*, was not a genuine curiosity; it was jealousy, weakness."⁹⁴ Moreover, even grasping the religious doctrine is discouraged. Sam reflects that "spreading messages dilutes them. Even *understanding* them is a compromise."⁹⁵ At the very height of the epidemic, Sam craves the interaction of traditional worship, but throughout, in both his personal and religious practice, his actions support the notion that the enforced silence "was a relief. Because all talk was banished we could not disagree, we could not mutually distort what we heard during services. There was nothing to debate, nothing to say, and the experience remained something we could share that would never be spoiled with speech."⁹⁶

As Sam prepares to leave his home in the novel's apocalyptic opening and to abandon Esther to her own devices, he ponders what are the "operative motifs from mythology when parents take leave of a child?"⁹⁷ Failing to come up with any meaningful imagery, he initially wishes that the emergency services had provided music, but then changes his mind to desire "no music, no sound whatsoever."⁹⁸ Ultimately, Sam craves the presence of an "emergency vehicle broadcasting a heavy coating of white noise so that even the leaves rustled silently. A plague of deafness [...] so we could hear nothing."⁹⁹ The descriptions of the material qualities of the landscapes also contribute to an idea of a sanitized land. Salt figures heavily in both novels, and Sam's descriptions of the epidemic always return to it. The bodies of victims are "saltless," but the scenery itself is covered with it.¹⁰⁰ Salt blasts streak Sam's neighborhood, and while they're difficult to see, you feel it "crunching under your feet, some living thing recently crushed into grain."¹⁰¹ The narrator of *The Flame Alphabet* floats his own, again ultimately unsubstantiated, theories about the meaning of this salt. "Salt as a detoxifier," he suggests, stating that at the hut, he had heard of the idea of salt as a residue of an ancient language, which was dissolved in water and "dispensed to mutes, to the deaf, to infants on the threshold of speech." The powder left over from sounds was "acoustical decomposition," but "what this proved

⁹³ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 41.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

went unsaid.”¹⁰² In *White Noise* too, the radio murmurs variously that “A California think-tank says the next world war may be fought over salt,” or merely “Excesses of salt, phosphorus, magnesium.”¹⁰³ The onset of the viral epidemic in Marcus and the toxic event in DeLillo thus appear to create an excess of purification, an amplification of the original ideal of a suburban life within which both novels are set. As LaBelle notes, the expansion of suburbia in the postwar era was characterized by its embrace of controlled isolation, eliminating the social difference of urban society, and thus the silence offered by suburban space was a “slippery ideal” whose image of harmonious living was rooted in strengthening existing social barriers.¹⁰⁴

The striking combination of deliberate practices of ignorance combined with this emptied landscape brings forward the purified memory politics that all non-Indigenous peoples in America undertake in order to inhabit the land. This notion resonates with key thinking in contemporary Indigenous theory, which underscores the dangerous quality of suppressing colonial connections, and their relation to colonial land. Jodi Byrd’s insight into the category of the arrivant is useful here. Byrd uses the term from poet Kamua Braithwaite to describe those people who, fleeing violence, have been coerced onto American soil. Byrd is concerned with how the arrivant has functioned within and has resisted the historical project of the colonization of Indigenous land.¹⁰⁵ Within this model, Byrd asks that we recognize how the U.S. propagates its own form of empire through this continued settlement and colonizing, thus implicating “all arrivants and settlers regardless of their own experience of race, class, gender, colonial, and imperial oppressions.”¹⁰⁶ Byrd advances the concept of cacophony to refer to the competing depictions of diasporic arrivals and native lived experiences, “which vie for hegemony within the discursive, cultural, and political processes of representation and identity” within the biopolitical order.¹⁰⁷ In Byrd’s terms, this clamoring of moral claims distracts from the potential dismantling of ongoing conditions of colonialism.¹⁰⁸ Byrd’s reading of the arrivant, a category that we can connect with the status of Marcus’s portrayal of a persecuted Jewish community, is therefore potentially still a participant in the ongoing violence of conditions of colonialism.

¹⁰² Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 83.

¹⁰³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 259, 271.

¹⁰⁴ LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 55, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Capitalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xix.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

Lisa Lowe's work scrutinizes the implications of why specific historical moments and connections are subject to "forgetting," a condition that "reveals the politics of memory itself, and is a reminder that the constitution of knowledge often obscures the conditions of its own making."¹⁰⁹ Lowe describes "forgetting" as a dynamic force that serves the purposes of the ongoing grind of current forms of capitalism, entangled with historical and contemporary forms of colonialism, without any significant interruption complements Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Peges, and Ayosha Goldstein's concept of "colonial unknowing."¹¹⁰ Influenced by, but ultimately drawing back from what they note are, from a disability studies standpoint, the ethical complications of Byrd's coinage of the term "colonial agnosia" to denote the pervasive but incomprehensible nature of ongoing colonial occupation, these theorists use the term unknowing to signify this lack of acknowledgement of historical or contemporary relations of colonialism, at once everywhere and nowhere.¹¹¹ Colonial unknowing addresses the way in which the omission of the experience of Indigenous populations and the colonial entanglements of differential racialization are complicit with a state of ignorance which is "aggressively made and reproduced, affectively invested and effectively distributed in ways that conform the social relations and economies of the here and now."¹¹² In these readings, forgetting is therefore not a passive process, but one which allows the continuation and extrapolation of things as they are, referencing the sheer fortitude of colonial and capitalist infrastructures.

In the acoustically muffled and subtly bleached visual landscapes of the novels, we witness the same labors of purity, labors embodied by the prayers which both men undertake at the height of each novel's tension. Jack's take place in a graveyard, he comes there not in search of deceased relative but instead of peace. The details on the graves are "barely legible," and snow covers the ground, he walked among the stones, trying to read the names and dates, "adjusting the flags to make them swing free."¹¹³ Then he utters: "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan."¹¹⁴ Jack's inability to read the signs and signals of the past is connected to the isolation of the "white self from an historical narrative that could account for its formation."¹¹⁵ This understanding of whiteness coalesces beautifully with Shotwell's, who

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 39.

¹¹⁰ Vimalassery et. al, "Introduction."

¹¹¹ Ibid., see also Ann Laura Stoler "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France," *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2011).

¹¹² Vimalassery et. al, "Introduction."

¹¹³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 116.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Engles, "Fantasies of the White Self," 768-9.

claims that “we live whiteness in part as active ignorance and forgetting.”¹¹⁶ She draws on Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s concept of unforgetting as a theft of memory integral to the colonial process to claim:

We white people might, on some level, *like* living with annihilated social and historical memories—we might like to think that the present can be innocent of the past that produced it. We might like to think, though we’re ashamed to admit it, that we don’t need to tell or hear the painful stories of the actions that created the world we live in.¹¹⁷

Against the snowy background, Jack calls for aimless days, drifting seasons, occurrences which would allow him to continue to comfortably live in the whitened landscape which he inhabits, a town which is “not smack in the path of history and its contaminations.”¹¹⁸ This conscious purposelessness is of course supported by Jack’s own research agenda. While his area of interest is Hitler studies, he places “special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms,” papering over the atrocities of the Holocaust.¹¹⁹

In spite of the persecution that he suffers, Sam offers his own prayer to ignorance. At Forsythe, Sam finds a wire which hosts the “Jewish transmission” and becomes a human conductor for the words that flow out:

*Blessed are they who keep his testimonies quiet, who share them? not even with themselves.
They make no crime in the air; they walk in the ways.
How does a person cleanse his way?
By saying nothing of your word.
Let me never announce the thought. Let me not corrupt it with
sound.
Your word I have buried in my heart.
My heart I have buried in the woods.
These woods you have hidden from me in darkness.
You have commanded us not to know you and we have obeyed.
When we have known you we have looked away, put blacklings in our eyes.
If my ways are directed to keep your promise, then I will not be ashamed. If my ways are
directed to keep your promise and I am rendered alone, then I will not be ashamed.*¹²⁰

The distinction has been made already between differing ways in which colonial histories manifest themselves in *White Noise* and *The Flame Alphabet*. What is striking about the two

¹¹⁶ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 37.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 101.

¹¹⁹ Engles, “Fantasies of the White Self,” 768.

¹²⁰ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 159.

protagonists' prayers is how in these whitened cold landscapes, they both offer prayers which advocate purity inherent in the immunitary paradigm and refuse relationality.

Dismantling the Purifying Matrix: Exhibitionary Aesthetics in the Performances of James Luna, Coco Fusco, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña

The active erasure of comprehension that marks both Sam's smallwork, his life before the apocalypse, and the communal production of white noise which we see by the individuals trapped in LeBov's Jew-hole, ensures that the broader condition of colonial unknowing suffuses the memorial landscapes of *The Flame Alphabet*. I now want to turn to some of the selected performances of performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and James Luna who openly present their bodies for classification in order to expose the brutal pasts which Sam's labors of purity aim to conceal.

Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* [fig. 6] was developed in response to the official quincentenary celebrations of Columbus's 'discovery' of the New World.¹²¹ Fusco and Gómez-Peña toured globally, carefully selecting locations from London to Madrid to Washington D.C to Sydney whose national histories were soiled by the attempted annihilation and ongoing mistreatment of aboriginal peoples.¹²² Fusco describes the project:

Our plan was to live in a golden cage for three days, presenting ourselves as undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries. We called our homeland Guatinau, and ourselves Guatinauis. We performed our "traditional tasks," which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that for a small fee, I would dance (to rap music), Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language) and we would pose for polaroids with visitors. Two "zoo guards" would be on hand to speak to visitors (since we could not understand them), take us to the bathroom on leashes, and feed us sandwiches and fruit. At the Whitney Museum in New York, we added sex to our spectacle, offering a peek at authentic Guatinaui male genitals for \$5. A chronology with highlights from the history of exhibiting non-Western peoples was on one didactic panel, and a

¹²¹ Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR: The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 144.

¹²² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (London: Duke University, 2003), 65.

simulated Encyclopedia Britannica entry with a fake map of the Gulf of Mexico showing our island was on another.¹²³

Fusco continues that the original intent of the project was to “create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other,” yet the artists were unprepared for the audience’s widespread belief that their fictional identities were real, and for the outrage exhibited by some cultural establishments that Fusco and Gómez-Peña had misled the public.¹²⁴ Questions about the ethics of negotiating the history of human displays through performance have been recently raised by the controversy surrounding Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit B* (2010-2016). Bailey, a white South African director, had constructed a series of performance installations which toured key sites in Europe from 2010. The director used black actors as *tableau vivants* representing atrocities from selected periods of European colonialism. These historical references were then interspersed with actors representing contemporary refugees from Africa, some of whom were asylum seekers to Europe. Activists in Berlin, London and Paris were deeply disturbed by the way that the show replicated the practice of the human zoo, leading the Barbican Centre in London to cancel the showing of the work.¹²⁵ In contrast to the widely publicized *Exhibit B*, there was no effort made by Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s to announce the event, which meant that “audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing,” helped only by the zoo guards and written signs. “In such encounters with the unexpected,” Fusco claims, “people’s defense mechanisms are less likely to operate with their normal efficiency; caught off guard, their beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface.”¹²⁶ The lack of questioning which greeted *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* reveals the continuity in the way that we encounter racialized bodies. Fusco elaborates:

Performance Art in the West did not begin with Dadaist “events.” Since the early days of the Conquest, “aboriginal samples” of people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas were brought to Europe for aesthetic contemplation, scientific analysis, and entertainment. Those people from other parts of the world were forced first to take the place that Europeans had already created for the savages of their own Medieval mythology; later with the emergence of scientific rationalism, the “aborigines” on display served as proof of the natural superiority of European civilization, of its ability to exert control over and extract knowledge from the

¹²³ Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” 145.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹²⁵ Guardian stage, “Exhibit B: is the 'Human Zoo' Racist? The Performers Respond,” *The Guardian*, Sep 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/sep/05/exhibit-b-is-the-human-zoo-racist-the-performers-respond>.

¹²⁶ Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” 148.

“primitive” world, and ultimately of the genetic inferiority of non-European races.¹²⁷

As referenced in the introduction, the emergence of the artist’s body in art was tied to failure of the immunitary super-structure of the welfare state and the shifting labor conditions of post-Fordism. However, while this experience of being both subject and object within a commodity system is only now perhaps more forcefully being experienced by the newly precarious, Fusco’s comments show how this imposed performativity is a long-standing feature of capitalism for subjugated subjects.



Figure 6: Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992.

Conceptually related to this is the work of James Luna. Luna interrogated his own cultural identity as a Native American through performance and installation art. Most pertinent for this discussion is Luna’s *Artifact Piece* (1987) [fig. 7], where he used endurance art tactics to question his own relationship to institutionally based classificatory practices and the erasure of contemporary indigenous experience through a critical parody of the

¹²⁷ Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” 146.

ethnographic museum.¹²⁸ The artist displayed his own body at the permanent exhibition devoted to the Kumeyaay Indians at the San Diego Museum of Man. He lay “slightly sedated, on a sand-covered table, wearing only a loincloth, several hours a day during the run of the exhibit. He was so still and quiet that some visitors did not realize he was alive until they were standing beside him.”¹²⁹ Surrounding Luna were his own belongings, and museum labels he had written himself, depicting Luna’s at once playful and defiant commentary of his experience as a member of the Luiseño tribe. The signs explained the scars on Luna’s body:

Drunk beyond the point of being able to defend himself, he was jumped by people from another reservation. After being knocked down, he was kicked in the face and upper body. Saved by an old man, he awoke with a swollen face covered with dried blood. Thereafter, he made it a point not to be as trusting among relatives and other Indians.

The burns on the fore and upper arm were sustained during days of excessive drinking. Having passed out on a campground table, trying to walk, he fell into a campfire. Not until several days later, when the drinking ceased, was the seriousness and pain of the burn realized.¹³⁰

Two Undiscovered Amerindians and *Artifact Piece* demonstrate how these labors of purity continue to contribute to a national landscape which erases its histories of violence. But crucially these artists invert the unidirectional gaze that structures these labors. Fusco and Gómez-Peña made a film about their show entitled *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinate Odyssey* (1994). Here, it was the audience and their views that were scrutinized.¹³¹ As Fusco states, the audience’s reactions to these human exhibitions “dramatize the colonial unconscious of American society,” supported by legal, cultural, and scientific systems which shore up hierarchical relations.¹³² In Luna’s installation, the artist took advantage of the “opportunity to perform as both the *speaking* and the *spoken* subject, the one who creates the display and who serves as its object.”¹³³ These performances highlight the barbarism of the exhibitionary and anthropological impulse, ripping through the myth of the civility of Western cultural and historical institutions in which they took place.

¹²⁸ Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 15.

¹²⁹ Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 38.

¹³⁰ Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, 16.

¹³¹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 78.

¹³² Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” 152.

¹³³ González, *Subject to Display*, 41.



Figure 7: James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, 1990.

Uncultivated Refusals: Esther's Resistance

This chapter has argued that *The Flame Alphabet*'s disrupted viral prose provides unique insight into a longer genealogy of the contemporary working practices of post-Fordism, and of the purified memorial practices that permeate capitalism's multiple phases. In my concluding thoughts, I think through how the interventions of Luna, Fusco and Gómez-Peña are linked to what I will argue are Esther's acts of resistance to the novel's sanitized memorial landscape and the linguistic structures that support it. The final section of *The Flame Alphabet* flashes forward to three years after Sam escapes from Forsythe by plunging down into LeBov's Jewish hole. Sam is back at the Jewish hut, the feed within it now extinguished.¹³⁴ He has kidnapped a girl presented to the reader as Esther. Though she is on the cusp of adulthood, the illness has apparently rendered her "anonymous, and I found it better not to look too closely."¹³⁵ Although Sam calls himself Esther's guardian, he roughly sketches the ways in which this term has become sinisterly scrambled in the precarious conditions after the epidemic. In the world outside, Sam adapts the preventative procedures which he has learned at the medical demonstrations of the extraction of Child's Play, which see a temporary language immunity gained from fluids drawn directly from children.¹³⁶ Released from Forsythe's confines, Sam and the others like him, the "Escorts, predators, parents", capture those who have been let outside of the children-only cordon to extricate the precious fluids "using a mixed weaponry of kindness and cruelty."¹³⁷ The violence of these procedures is touched upon: Sam aims to

¹³⁴ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 255.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

initiate an “unproductive kind of stillness.”¹³⁸ And although Sam aims to distance these actions from his other undertakings within the novel, suggesting he “had not really named that form of smallwork,” his acts of “hunting” can clearly be seen as part of the novel’s wider labors of purity.¹³⁹ It is in Marcus’s account of the smallwork of extracting Child’s Play that one can see the ongoing and enforced exploitation of bodies which exemplifies the structuring event of settler colonialism. Advocating a “remote perspective,” Sam maintains the practices of wilful ignorance which hang over smallwork by reciting, “*Name not that which you intend to cultivate*, was the saying. But *cultivate* is such a strong word.”¹⁴⁰ It is the duty of the smallworker to obtain medicine from wherever it comes, “living or not.”¹⁴¹

Sam claims that words fail him in describing the process of extraction from these children. I want to remain with this term “cultivate,” as it provides a productive lens through which to analyse the different generational memorial and linguistic practices of Esther and her father, and consequently their divergent ways of being in the world. Esther’s refusal to follow commonplace everyday linguistic rituals marks her as a wild figure in the carefully maintained acoustic ecosphere of Sam’s house. Esther is loud, she “muttered in her sleep and awake. She spoke to us and to others, into the phone, out the window, into a bag. It didn’t matter. Nice things, mean things, dumb things, just a teenager’s chatter, like a tour guide to nothing, stalking us from room to room.”¹⁴² Sam attributes Esther’s deviance to her juvenility. But what if we read Esther’s refusals to conform to society’s rules not, as her father’s unrelenting perspective demands, as defiant expressions of teenage angst, but rather as acts of political refusal?

Prior to dwelling on what I will call Esther’s uncultivated refusals, I will observe how Marcus represents the consequences of Sam’s civility. “Harmony came easily for us,” says Sam, thinking back on the “parallel play” which he and Claire perform as they jointly prepare Esther’s welcome home dinner, “it was perhaps our most salient statistic, the least problematic of our virtues.”¹⁴³ This desire for coherence not only causes the suppression of problematic histories and discourses on a macro-level, but also prevents Sam from acting out against the wrongdoing which he sees before him. When Sam first encounters LeBov, LeBov is crouched over the bodies of a Jewish family in a picnic field. Sam hears the family calling out in pain, “a kind of high-pitched whine in the air,” but brushes it aside, he reasons “it could have been anything, really” and goes back to his

¹³⁸ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 281.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

car.¹⁴⁴ Sam's refusal to intervene therefore makes him complicit in LeBov's actions. I contend that the collusive acts of courtesy which Sam undertakes are also replicated at a formal level for the reader. The fractious composition of the text and its ultimately garbled logic means that while reading Sam's narration, fractured through his dialogue with LeBov, it often feels as if the reader is performing an act of civility, an experience akin to listening and gently nodding along to someone on the brink of sanity or deleterious old age.

Esther's insolence, her "insistence on the literal," comes as a welcome interruption to the bloated linguistic fluidity which characterizes the conversations between LeBov and Sam.¹⁴⁵ Esther's discourse is depicted in explosive terms, Sam's records of her speech are "volatile artifacts", she "fumed" if you gave out information she took to be a given; "Anything factual went without saying." Esther's birthday brings these tensions to a head. As the virus prevents the family's usual celebrations, Sam remembers that Esther demanded that "we'd not talk about the birthday, not mention her age, absolutely not remark on how she'd grown up or changed or stayed the same." Esther thus refuses to engage with the daily or yearly rituals of family life, accusing her parents of being "professional distorters, incapable of simply seeing a situation for what it is." Images of her childhood "were an attack. They caused physical pain, why did we insist on hurting her?"¹⁴⁶ Sara Ahmed's most recent work, *Living a Feminist Life*, assists us in contextualizing Esther's acts of refusal within a feminist framework. Part of a broader body of work which examines the figure of the feminist killjoy, the individual who is seen to interrupt the happiness of others by pointing to ongoing injustices, *Living a Feminist Life* focuses on the particular qualities of speech which are associated with the intrusions of the killjoy. Ahmed reminds us that the term "complaining" derives from experiences of the plague, meaning simply "sick speech". Even before the onset of the epidemic, Esther's complaints are perceived, in line with Ahmed's definition of the term, "as coming from ill will [...] as making the whole body ill."¹⁴⁷ Ahmed likens the experience of being a feminist to "being out of tune with others. The note heard as out of tune is not only the note that is heard most sharply but the note that ruins the whole tune."¹⁴⁸ This notion of sharpness is then nuanced later in the text through the concept of the feminist snap. The snap is a sharp sound, a "sudden quick movement" which interrupts the natural flow of institutional and family life.¹⁴⁹ The snap is often registered as the *origin* of violence, a willful action that

¹⁴⁴ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 32.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), 203.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

dismantles and disrupts. But snaps in Ahmed's appraisal are reactive, a response to the build-up of pressure in environments which are not sustaining for those that inhabit them.¹⁵⁰ In the novel's opening sections, Esther's existence is radically disassociated. She has few friends and is brought up in a household whose intimate relations mirror the institutional practices of colonial erasure and unknowing. It is little wonder, perhaps, that she wants to commemorate her birthday against the backdrop of the bloated, coiling narrative of her father's acts of complicity. "It was true," Sam thinks, "Our family suffered from issues of calibration."¹⁵¹ It is fruitful to imagine Esther's failed familial alignment in the musical terms which Ahmed offers us, as punctual moments of discord jarring against the hushed tones of white noise produced by the institutionally embedded male characters within the novel.

'Esther', whether Sam's real daughter or not, escapes from his clutches by the novel's close. This breaking of familial bonds can be aligned with Ahmed's elucidation of the communal aspects of the feminist snap. Ahmed extends the concept of the snap to knowing the difference between bonds that are and are not sustaining. The breaking of damaging familial bonds in Ahmed's work opens up the possibility of an alternative queer or feminist genealogy.¹⁵² To conclude, I read Esther's toxicity and her separation from her father in relation to current thinking within queer studies, which embraces toxicity as a means of thinking through different relational formations that promote a condition of shared intercorporeal vulnerability, another example of the boundary trouble with which this chapter opened. Before moving on to this discussion, I will briefly observe the ways in which Esther and the gang of rogue youths with whom she roams the neighborhood are presented. Prior to the descent of the sickness, Claire and Sam encourage Esther to relate to the other children, who unlike the adults in the novel "coagulate in some violent, anonymous way."¹⁵³ This allusion to the mixing and merging of young people into a powerful indistinctness is repeated. Sam watches and notes: "In our neighborhood, anyway, these children were not just Jewish. This was a mixed, feral pack, drawing from vast bloodlines."¹⁵⁴ The "gender-neutral underlings" under Sam's gaze represent an entangled mass, resistant, akin to the figure of the mulato in Cheng's discussion, to the classificatory practices of purity which dominate the novel.¹⁵⁵ Marcus's contaminated children therefore resemble the queer utopian imaginings which Mel Chen associates with toxicity. For Chen, toxicity as a condition deemphasizes the binaries of the immune

¹⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 189.

¹⁵¹ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 102.

¹⁵² Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 193.

¹⁵³ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 26.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

system, and its attachments to the concepts of life and death, allowing us to think about synthesis and symbiosis, promoting “interabsorption over corporeal exceptionalism”¹⁵⁶ Following Chen’s call for an ulterior ethical stance which comes from the toxic muddling of the subject-object relation, Shotwell calls for queer practices of relationality which resist “an expected line of descent, denaturalizing ‘fitness’ and modelling something more interesting about what it might be to survive and thrive in disrupted landscapes.”¹⁵⁷ Here, Shotwell references Anna Tsing’s important work on blasted landscapes, landscapes which eerily recall those in Marcus’s novel. Tsing examines the case of the matsutake mushrooms which flourish in the wake of nuclear radiation. She opens by warning us that we are all living in disturbance regimes, landscapes which bear the brunt of the ongoing environmental and militaristic exploitation of the planet. But, cautiously, she asks us to look for the “patchy difference” between landscapes in order to find hope.¹⁵⁸ Tsing focuses on the uncultivated habits of wild mushrooms, claiming that our ability to think with them pushes us “beyond the idioms of controlled and beneficial reproduction ingrained in farming regimes.”¹⁵⁹ Perhaps we could read the potential survival of the novel’s youth through this lens of a queer patchy flourishing, through Esther’s resistance to her father’s cultivation, both in terms of his polite speech and in his last ghastly phase of harvesting smallwork. “And together, when they spoke in unison on their nighttime tours, their weapon was worse,” a co-constituted acoustically deafening collective ripping through the white noise of the landscape, blasted from colonial history.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Chen, *Animacies*, 197.

¹⁵⁷ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 86.

¹⁵⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Blasted Landscapes, (and the Gentle Arts of Mushroom Picking),” in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey (London: Duke University Press, 2014), 108.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶⁰ Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*, 54.

Chapter 3

Improprietary Subjects: Failures of Productivity and Property in the Post-Fordist Landscapes of Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* and Selected Performances of Tehching Hsieh

Tim Farnsworth walks. The protagonist of Joshua Ferris's 2010 novel *The Unnamed* is driven by an undiagnosable compulsion to walk, to leave the New York law firm where he is a successful trial attorney, to abandon his beautiful wife Jane and their teenage daughter Becka in their home, and walk until sheer exhaustion overwhelms him and he falls asleep in whichever sprawling city outskirts he finds himself. Tim's condition annihilates the life that he once knew—driving his wife to alcoholism, straining his relationship with his daughter, ending his career. Tim's condition is chronic, the text is framed around his relapses. The first setback that the novel documents takes place at Jane and Tim's suburban home and the second at the newly purchased Brownstone where they have moved to look for a new life. With this dream thwarted, the novel's close sees Tim permanently homeless and roaming around different parts of the United States. He eventually returns to New York to see his wife recover from cancer. Shortly after, the novel's ambiguous ending suggests, he dies.

Alongside Ferris's novel, I will also be looking at the performances of Tehching Hsieh, in particular his works *Time Clock Piece* (1980-1981) and *Outdoor Piece* (1981-1982). Hsieh is, depending on one's perspective, either one of the most dedicated or one of the most unhinged artists of his generation. From September 1978 to July 1986, Hsieh undertook a series of demanding performances, each lasting a year. In *Cage Piece* (1978-1979), Hsieh imprisoned himself. He signed a document, witnessed by attorney Robert Projansky, avowing that he would not "read, write, listen to the radio, or watch TV," or indeed feed, clothe himself, or dispose of his own waste. For these tasks he employed his friend Cheng Wei Kuong, echoing the dependence of Chris Burden's and Ron Athey's performances. In

Time Clock Piece (1980-1981), perhaps Hsieh's most well-known work due to its extensive documentation, the artist attempted to punch a time-clock on the hour, every hour, twenty-four hours a day for an entire year. Astonishingly he missed only 133 out of 8,760 punches. In *Outdoor Piece* (1981-1982), Hsieh declared his intention to not enter into any shelter, be it building, subway, train, airplane, ship, cave, or tent, for an entire year, a plan which was only interrupted by his brief arrest for fighting. *Outdoor Piece* was followed by *Rope Piece* (1983-1984), in which Hsieh spent a year tied to Linda Montano, another artist. His final one-year performance (1985-1986) saw him refuse to produce, consume, or talk about art.¹ As we shall see, specific aspects of Hsieh's performances strongly resemble the actions undertaken by Tim: the sheer discipline displayed in *Time Clock Piece* echoes Tim's work ethic, and Tim's homelessness at the end of the novel can be connected to Hsieh's adoption of the same condition in *Outdoor Piece*. More broadly, though, the bodies of both men symbolize shifting globalized economic formations. Hsieh arrived as an illegal migrant to the United States in 1974, receiving amnesty only in 1988. Accordingly, his artistic practice has been linked to the increased movement and changing status of labor in a post-Fordist economy.²

In the course of this chapter, I will analyze how both Tim's and Hsieh's bodies dramatize the structural failure of the productive economy in the wake of financialization and globalization. I use Roberto Esposito's ruminations about the fragmentation of the "proper" in the globalized world to establish how financialization has changed our conceptions of property and labor. In the opening historical section, I focus particularly on unpacking how the processes of gentrification and the subprime mortgage crisis, the effects of which are subtly tackled within the novel's pages, are connected to the failure of the manufacturing economy in the United States. I then go on to examine how the novel's repeated examinations of the fluidity of Tim's bodily form are related to the changing conception of financial liquidity before and after the financial crisis. With the help of the obsessive discipline displayed in Hsieh's *Clock Piece*, I read Tim's walking as representing the failure of productive capital under globalization. The next two sections examine the ways in which the novel tackles the positive and negative aspects of the financialization of the American housing market. Noting how Hsieh's work is temporally and spatially connected to the consolidation of a post-Fordist economy which relies on the transformation of urban space through gentrification, I go on to show how the novel engages with the return of the "real" of this process: the subprime mortgage crash. The intrusion of racialized bodies into Tim's consciousness, I suggest, provides an allegory about the inclusion of "subprime" populations into mortgage lending practices. I will

¹ Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh ed., *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*; Frazer Ward, "Alien Duration: Tehching Hsieh, 1978-99," *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 6-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2006.10791212>.

² Ward, "Alien Duration," 8.

explore the way in which the novel's globalized financial culture and condition of indebtedness produces burdened collectives, representing the immunitary failure of the white middle-class subject Tim represents.

Loss of the Proper: Global Financial Culture and the Failure of the Immunization Paradigm

"He was going to lose the house and everything in it," contemplates Tim at the novel's opening, which sees the return of his inexplicable condition. Tim's instinct, having made his way home alone from his most recent bout of perambulation, is not to rush to his wife, but to "run his hand along the dimly lit countertop" in his kitchen, a room which he loves for its "antique cupboard doors, the Moroccan tile backsplash."³ This preoccupation with property pervades the novel. Jane's sense of self and purpose is tied to her professional life as a realtor and Tim and Jane celebrate the remission in Tim's condition in the second half of the novel by moving away from their sprawling suburban home to a Brownstone. While the nuances of these examples will be developed in due course, I want first to establish how the concept of the proper and property is positioned within Esposito's immunitary thinking, particularly within his understanding of globalization.

While reluctant to offer a definition of the actual character of globalization, Esposito insists that there are parallels to be drawn between our globalized world and the pre-modern world, and that both represent the prospect of "undifferentiated community."⁴ Esposito returns to the idea of the *munus*, "a donation, expropriation, and alteration," and the etymological root of both community and immunity.⁵ The possession of immunity prevents members of a society from having to participate in the reciprocity of community, the law of which "constitutes an originary condition of human existence, given that we have always existed in common; that is, we come into the world always already under this law and under this debt, or guilt."⁶ As has been shown in the introduction to this thesis, Esposito sees modernity as erecting "an enormous apparatus of immunization."⁷ The concepts of sovereignty, political rights, and—particularly relevant for this discussion—property, which are integral to modern political philosophy, permit the notions of the individual and the sovereign state to flourish, allowing us to see societies as compositions of discrete, autonomous, and defensible elements, and thereby

³ Joshua Ferris, *The Unnamed* (London: Viking, 2010), 4.

⁴ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶ Lemm, "Introduction," 4.

⁷ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 127.

marking the transition from the regime of the “common” to that of the “proper” (one’s own).⁸ Greg Bird and Jonathan Short place the dissolution of the concept of the proper at the very heart of their edited special issue examining Esposito’s philosophy. For these theorists, the globalized world is defined by the fact that nothing “can be effectively isolated, insulated, instituted, even immunized, as something that might be considered *proper* to itself.”⁹ Globalization is a “nonspace,” which, in accordance with the originary community, “knows no borders, no limits, and no terms.” Crucially for the purposes of this discussion, he describes it as a “totality that is fluid and spineless, so to speak destined to push the world towards perennial mobilization,” a phrase which could be used to describe the features of Tim’s condition. The world is no longer defined between West and East; rather, it “sees these spaces as penetrating each other under the shock of continued migrations that break down every border.”¹⁰ Accompanying these physical migrations are “flows of finance and information technology” happening in real time.¹¹ In Esposito’s framework, globalization and financialization are entwined, symbolizing the breakdown of the “proper” in contemporary society.

Using Esposito’s conception of globalization as a breakdown of the “proper” as a starting point, I here turn to the work of David Harvey, Annie McClanahan, Neil Smith, and Nicky Marsh to articulate the specific effects of this immunitary failure on the concept of property. These theorists show how gentrification and the subprime crisis are linked to the structural failure of productive capitalism and the rise of financialization. As Harvey recalls in his account of the subprime crisis, “something ominous began to happen in the United States in 2006,” when the foreclosure of homes increased drastically in poorer areas of Detroit and Cleveland. This initial wave of misery predominantly affected African-American, Hispanic, and/or single-female-headed households, and thus, in line with the political establishment’s treatment of the HIV/AIDS crisis a decade or two earlier, was largely ignored. The following year, however, the crisis began to affect middle-class areas in growing, affluent urban and suburban areas such as Florida, California, Arizona, and Nevada, and the press and those with political influence began to sit up and take notice.¹² From then on, the dominoes fell relatively quickly: by the end of 2007 approximately 2 million people had lost their homes, an additional 4 million were at

⁸ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 128.

⁹ Greg Bird and Jonathan Short, “COMMUNITY, IMMUNITY, AND THE PROPER: An Introduction to the Political Theory of Roberto Esposito,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18, no. 3 (September 2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2013.834661>.

¹⁰ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 131. Of course, this characterization of globalization possesses compelling links to my discussion of the viral discussed in the previous chapter.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

risk of foreclosure, and by autumn 2008, the mortgage crisis had caused damage to all substantial Wall Street investment banks. In September 2008, Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, resulting in the freezing of global credit markets worldwide. At the very heart of this problem was “the mountain of ‘toxic’ mortgage-backed securities held by banks or marketed to unsuspecting investors all around the world. Everyone had acted as if property prices could rise forever.”¹³

To unpack the significance of these “toxic” mortgage-backed securities, it is necessary to observe the ways in which the financialization of the American economy had affected the home mortgage and rental market. Harvey outlines how from the 1970s onwards, geographical and regulatory constraints on banking had been removed in order to “facilitate the easy international flow of liquid money capital to wherever it could be used most profitably.”¹⁴ This transition from a productive to a financialized economy outlined by Harvey can be usefully explained through Marx’s ‘M-C-M’ formula. Industrial or productive capital makes profit using the ‘M-C-M’ cycle. Money (M) is transferred into commodities (C), and then commodities are changed back into money (M) at an altered value. The production of commodities created financial risks for investors, due to their need to be manufactured, distributed, and exchanged by a workforce. In a financialized economy, money enters into a relation with itself, becoming a tradable good from which more money is created.¹⁵ The removal of the constraints on capital which were evident from the 1970s onwards created a cyclical effect. The ability to produce goods or to draw labor from anywhere caused greater global competition and led to the production of goods and service not being a profitable endeavor in the developed world. Surplus capital was thus more lucratively directed into speculation than production.¹⁶ Prior to the financial crash, the effect of this process on property was felt most keenly in the rental markets of inner cities, where investors pumped capital into spaces which had faced long-term neglect by the state. As Neil Smith has suggested in his extensive analysis of gentrification, in the face of the failure of twentieth-century liberal urban policy and the demise of manufacturing, real-estate becomes the centerpiece of the “city’s *productive* economy, an end in itself.”¹⁷

This new financial architecture also had particular consequences for the home mortgage market, the spark which caused the financial crash. Mortgages went from being a relatively stable investment, where one customer’s debt was funded by another’s

¹³ Harvey, *Enigma of Capital*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 247–57.

¹⁶ Harvey, *Enigma of Capital*, 29.

¹⁷ Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” *Antipode: A Journal of Radical Geography* 34, no. 3 (December 2002): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00249>.

deposit, to being folded into highly risky financial instruments—mortgage-backed securities (MBS) or collateralized mortgage obligations (CMO)—in which a mortgage payment was grouped together with other mortgages and then traded on secondary markets.¹⁸ These forms of debt securitization, in which consumer credit becomes a tradable instrument, were supposed “to create a virtuous cycle: banks could grant loans to previously unqualified buyers while diluting the risk by reselling those loans as securities to speculative investors around the world.”¹⁹ However, as the financial crash all too clearly demonstrated, these forms of securitization actually promoted risk-seeking forms of speculation.²⁰ Facilitated by these new financial instruments, the increasing liquidity of money meant that different financial institutions were more entangled than ever before, something which had grave consequences once defaults on payments occurred.²¹ As McClanahan suggests, the emphasis on market liquidity transformed US real estate into a form of global capital by turning concrete, rooted assets like homes into financial commodities.²²

Crucially for the purposes of the framing of this chapter, these theorists link the developments of financialization to the changing status of labor and the failure of productive capital. One of the central protections in the 1960s to the excessive capital accumulation which we see today was the shortage and unionization of labor.²³ The moving of production offshore, the incorporation of surplus labor from the Global South into Western economies, as well as the effective dismantling of labor laws at home temporarily solved the labor issue—in Harvey’s terms, provided a spatial fix—but left the United States with a problem: wage stagnation, which prevented the workforce from being effective consumers.²⁴ This is where the concept of consumer credit stepped in, filling the breach between what labor was earning and could afford and what the economy needed it to buy. From the 1980s onwards, household debt rose exponentially and banks over-leveraged themselves, both supporting and promoting “the debts of working people whose earnings were not increasing.”²⁵ Financialization provided a “temporal fix,” claims McClanahan, allowing “capitalists to supplement the declining profitability of investment in present production with money borrowed from the profits

¹⁸ Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²² *Ibid.*, 148.

²³ Harvey, *Enigma of Capital*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

of a hoped-for future production.”²⁶ For all theorists, the subprime mortgage crisis can be read as a crisis of credit’s temporal fix. As Nicky Marsh puts it:

The profits of the future have been realized as the losses of the present and are returned, through the bailouts of the State, to the over-indebted labouring body of productive capital, already suffering from the “disintegration” of the “mode of production”. It is in this sense that the present crisis can be claimed as a return to the real: the dialectical interdependencies between the “concrete” realities of productive capital and the “abstract” concepts of finance capital are made apparent once more [...] Credit’s apparent ascendancy over the productive world of work has been revealed as a dangerous fantasy: its temporal-fix has failed and its over-leveraged costs are being paid for by the already over-indebted body of the worker.²⁷

As we shall see during the course of this chapter, the corporealities of the characters of Ferris’s novel and Hsieh both exhibit the changing conceptions of financial liquidity before and after the financial crisis.

Creditable Bodies: Gendered Formations of Financial Liquidity

In the final section of the novel, “First Chill, Then Stupor,” the incongruities between Tim’s previous life as a wealthy professional and his current status as a vagrant are brought into sharp relief in a scene at a bank. Lurking in the shadows following another night of sleeping rough until the bank opens, Tim crawls from under the pine tree where he has been sheltering, and goes in.²⁸ Once inside, he tells the bank worker who greets him that he wants to “reallocate some funds and maybe establish a trust,” fiddling uncomfortably with his belt, and helping himself to free coffee. This occasion is interrupted by the moans of “the other.” Coherent with McClanahan’s identification of the prevalence of the imagery and language of horror in cultural texts which deal with violent material traces left by the financialized economy, this phantom voice regularly intrudes upon Tim’s consciousness to sadistically berate him, and to highlight the untended needs of physical body.²⁹ Here, “the other” drives Tim to take notice of his leg, and rolling up his ripped chinos, he sees a cut, “deep and clean,” which runs straight through from shinbone to calf. Seeing the banker closely watching him, Tim reiterates his request, and peels “the blood-stiffened sock from his skin.” The banker advises Tim

²⁶ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 13.

²⁷ Nicky Marsh, “‘Paradise Falls: A Land Lost in Time’: Representing Credit, Debt and Work After the Crisis,” *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (November 2014): 1190, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.965466>.

²⁸ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 207–8.

²⁹ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 226.

that he should consider getting stitches, but dutifully takes him into a cubicle. There, the banker accesses Tim's portfolio and sees "an inordinate amount of money diversified across a wide spectrum of investment vehicles." The narrative's focalization shifts as we observe Tim through the eyes of the banker, who is prompted to "turn away from his computer screen and stare at the man across from him. [Tim's] foot was perched on the edge of the desk and he was picking dried blood from his leg and collecting the flakes in the palm of his hand." The banker offers Tim a garbage pail, but Tim does not respond; instead he "pocketed the flakes of dried blood as if they were so many nickels and dimes and settled back into the chair and looked past the banker." When Tim finishes banking, he goes to the nearest drugstore, purchases a sweatshirt with the legend "Happy Thanksgiving" across it as well as other essentials for living outdoors ("a rope, a steak knife, and a box of cookies"), and makes himself a new belt out of the rope.³⁰ This scene exemplifies some of the book's key concerns. Tim's decent treatment by the banker appears to be tied to his impressive portfolio, and to his class and gender status. Although the banker observes Tim's unusual behavior dubiously, he is neither disparaged nor ejected. Going forward, I argue that Tim's ability to enter and exit the bank as he pleases, traversing financial space with his portfolio attached, taps into a long-standing understanding of a controlled financial liquidity undergirding a healthy economy, and Tim's affinity with the figure of the "rational financial man."³¹ However, the dried blood that Tim picks off himself, and which is described in monetary terms, hints at a congealing of this beneficial flow. This scene acts as a springboard to discuss the novel's negotiation of the changes to ideals of liquidity which occur within a financialized economy, and the conceptual attachments which notions of financial health and competency have to different bodies—particularly with regard to gender.

Before moving on to a more detailed consideration of the ways in which figurations of liquidity and stasis are expanded in *The Unnamed*, it is useful to address how these concepts are framed within a broader economic lineage. The association between liquidity and the health of the economy is longstanding in economic thought. Well before its most famous articulation in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Brad Pasanek and Simone Polillo show the influence of William Harvey's discovery of pulmonary circulation on early modern descriptions of the economy, noting that writers observing the functions of commerce saw "coinage circulating within a country as a sign of economic health."³² Marieke De Goede reiterates this perspective, claiming that today's "official definition of

³⁰ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 208–9.

³¹ Marieke De Goede, *Virtue, Fortune, and Faith: A Genealogy of Finance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 38.

³² Brad Pasanek and Simone Polillo, "Guest Editors' Introduction: After the Crash, Beyond Liquidity," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, no. 3 (August 2011): 232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2011.586845>.

national money supplies in terms of different liquidities, referring to the ease with which one monetary form or instrument can be interchanged with another, is based on the historical imagination of money and credit as the *blood* of the national economy.”³³ De Goede points to *Leviathan*, in which Thomas Hobbes conceives of money as the blood flowing through the Body Politic, nourishing the sovereign state. Hobbes, a significant figure in the history of the construction of the immunitary paradigm, was one of the first to imagine a national financial system.³⁴ This notion of positive and productive liquidity was extended into the nineteenth century with the consolidation of credit economies. As Alexa Preda suggests, the stock exchange becomes the “heart which pumps the lifeblood of public credit through the veins of society. Good speculation, then, ensures that this heart beats regularly and a strong stock market is viewed as evidence of a healthy nation.”³⁵ In her analysis of the recurring metaphor of the diseased body to describe economic crises, Nicky Marsh draws on historical scholarship which characterizes good financial speculation and the extension of credit as “natural phenomena” and a “vital force” which eradicates dysfunction in the living being of society.³⁶

The law firm where Tim was employed is permeated by this figuration of a disciplined, useful economic fluidity. Tim reminisces on his career trajectory. Having risen quickly through the ranks to become a partner in his seventh year after graduating from law school, he was “sat in the best restaurants and ordered the best wines.” But these luxuries were not the main point, he emphasizes:

The point was Houston, Seattle, Pittsburgh, Orlando, Charleston, Manhattan—wherever the trial was. The trial, that was the point. The clients. The casework. The war room. He took on a few pro bono causes. And he worked in midtown amid the electricity and the movement. And his view of Central Park was breathtaking. And he liked the people. And the money was great. And the success was addictive. And the pursuit was all-consuming. And the rightness of his place was never in doubt.³⁷

The case that Tim is working on when his condition first returns is the defense of, intriguingly given the centrality of Hobbes’s corporeal metaphors to conceptualizing financial health, R.H Hobbs. R.H Hobbs is accused of murdering his wife and dumping the body on Staten Island. The evidence against R.H Hobbs, “despite a loveless marriage,” was entirely circumstantial, and the case is especially important to Tim’s law firm, as R.H’s

³³ De Goede, *Virtue*, 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22–3. See my discussion of Hobbes in the introduction.

³⁵ Alex Preda, *Framing Finance: The Boundaries of Markets and Modern Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 184–5.

³⁶ Nicky Marsh, “Desire and Disease in the Speculative Economy,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, no. 3 (August 2011): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2011.586851>.

³⁷ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 37.

private equity firm “generated an enormous amount of business for Troyer, Barr, and no one wanted a guilty verdict to interfere with that relationship.”³⁸ Tim’s determination to go into work, to hide his condition, is therefore associated with the solvency of his company. Later on, one of the anecdotes relayed to the reader to indicate the working culture of the law firm is that of the managing partner Mike Kronish, “famous inside the firm for once having billed a twenty-seven-hour day.” This unusual occurrence was “possible only if you plied the time zones”: Kronish worked for an entire day on the East Coast, and then continued working on West Coast time, and so “he rightfully attributed more hours to that day than technically possible.” This makes Tim “want to leap across the desk and eat his lucky, healthy heart.”³⁹

In the space of the law firm, therefore, the novel subtly establishes links between financial and medical health, and to the kind of healthy, liquid circulation which conforms to tropes in classical economics. Tim is able to traverse national borders with a measured and controlled ease, Hobb[e]s is defended to ensure the affluence of the company. Kronish’s impressive feat, gestured to in coronary metaphors, can be seen as a positive form of liquidity, the supple and controlled manipulation of time and place cognizant with profit-making in the global economy. Heeding the ways in which the health of the economy has been described in corporeal metaphors, the measured movements of Tim’s and Kronish’s bodies model the ideal movement of capital, unhindered by national borders, yet disciplined and protected in their approach.

However, Tim’s condition brings to the fore a different understanding of liquidity. Tim feels unable to tell his work colleagues about his condition, fearing their judgement. Ruminating on Kronish’s twenty-seven-hour day, Tim thinks: “I’ll just come clean. I’ll show Mike *The New England Journal of Medicine* article [...] I’ll be honest, and Mike will respond in kind with a show of sympathy he’s never demonstrated because we are both human beings slated to fall ill and die.”⁴⁰ But instead, scared to expose himself and try and explain the difficulties of having a condition which cannot be given a biomedical or psychiatric explanation, he claims, at that time falsely, that Jane has cancer but wants to preserve their routine as much as possible. Tim reflects on the “enviable, unlucky power, of a fatal and familiar disease.”⁴¹ Tim’s fears are confirmed when he returns to the law firm after he is dismissed. As he is unable to remain in the office or the courtroom, his condition leads him to lose control over the R.H Hobbs trial, which is subsequently lost, and he is demoted to junior partner. When he returns to work, his condition uncovered, Tim’s younger colleagues mock him mercilessly. Peter, the newest and youngest partner

³⁸ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 38.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

to be appointed and thus Tim's replacement, implores Tim not to be angry while he recounts Tim's condition: "Uncontrollable bouts of walking. Masserly, you gotta read the thing to believe it. And then you still won't believe it."⁴²

Tim's "uncontrollable" walking and his corporeal fluidity is thus positioned differently to the kinds of constructive, financial liquidity exemplified at Troyer, Barr, Atkins, LLP. Resonating with Bird and Short's account of globalization as a loss of "the proper," Tim's condition is framed as an absence of regulation. "I know myself," he tells his wife, 'I'm not in control, Jane.' His mind was intact, his mind was unimpeachable. If he could not gain dominion over his body, that was not 'his' doing."⁴³ As indicated by the scene discussed above, and noted by critic Peter Ferry, Tim's condition places him at odds with the hierarchical masculine framework which the law firm represents.⁴⁴ But perhaps overlooked have been the ways in which Tim's loss of control is framed against highly gendered ideas of financial dominion and competency. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, capital's unboundedness within globalization is thought of in terms of seepage and liquidity, tropes associated with the leaking feminine body, and in opposition to the masculine immune subject. Grosz places this figuration in contrast to the liquidity of seminal fluids associated with the flow of economic capital before financialization had freed money from the productive economy.⁴⁵ A clear parallel can be drawn between this notion of globalization and the long-standing idea of a feminized credit economy. De Goede points to Daniel Defoe's highly influential personification of Lady Credit. Defoe's recurring satirical figure was particularly significant, as the writer used "sexual metaphors to articulate a new conception of morality in which the nascent credit structures would be able to flourish."⁴⁶ De Goede notes the similarities between the representations of public credit formulated in the eighteenth century and Fortuna, the goddess of chance and luck who is a long-standing figure in political discourse. Both women are tyrannical sovereigns who control men's affairs, "unreliable, malleable, and fickle, both are seductive and tyrannizing, both are represented as stately ladies who need to be treated with respect on the one hand and as unreliable loose women who cause destruction on the other."⁴⁷ Lady Credit is not to be abandoned by her male subjects, however, but rather to "be actively mastered and controlled. She is neither essentially a

⁴² Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 124-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴ Peter Ferry, "Reading Manhattan, Reading American Masculinity: Reintroducing the Flâneur with E.B. White's *Here Is New York* and Joshua Ferris' *The Unnamed*," *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 55, <https://doi.org/10.3149/CSM.0301.49>.

⁴⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 199.

⁴⁶ De Goede, *Virtue*, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

virgin nor a whore, but it becomes the responsibility of financial man to make an honest woman out of her.”⁴⁸

Strikingly, Tim’s loss of control over his body is framed against his wife’s and his daughter’s, and is thus feminized. Jane, in her own words, goes from someone who enjoyed a glass of wine to now doing “the bills totally blasted” at four a.m. She escapes from the confines of their suburban house to the anonymous comfort of chain restaurants in strip malls, leaving Tim chained to the bed at home, with Becka taking care of him. Prescribed anti-depressants by a doctor, she reflects that she did not need a prescription but a life.⁴⁹ Perhaps, she thinks, she was predisposed, has the gene, lacks the vigilance, acknowledges that “she was making choices, even if she didn’t know it.”⁵⁰ Jane recovers, gains back control over her life. But what is deemed to be Becka’s excessive weight is never conquered. A source of constant sorrow for her parents, Becka never loses her baby fat, and never conforms to an ideal feminized image. That is, apart from in her father’s fantasies. When visited by Jane and a detective who has found him on the road, he imagines his daughter wearing a simple red sundress which falls “over her new figure,” her hair gently layered.⁵¹ When Tim returns to New York and sees Becka again, the physical transformation is revealed to be a mirage. At the very peak of her teenage angst, Becka snipes at her mother that her father can control his walking, to have her mother retort: “Like you can control your weight?”⁵²

Tim is ultimately unwilling to consider the similarities between his condition and his daughter’s weight—both experienced as a loss of physical control. Instead, he punches down, taking out his frustration on her. In one of his more unforgiving moments, after the condition has returned for the first time in the novel’s trajectory, Tim comes to Becka and claims that while he loves her, he does not understand her, and asserts: “I hid behind my duty. I used work as my excuse to avoid you.”⁵³ In this scene, told from Becka’s perspective, we see Tim insist that that this statement is simply an attempt for him “to come clean.”⁵⁴ He leaves the room, and Becka follows him. She says that he is only apologizing because he is sick again, and that for the difference that he made to her life he could have been “stoned on crack since I started high school, nothing would be different. You think too much of yourself, Dad.”⁵⁵

⁴⁸ De Goede, *Virtue*, 31.

⁴⁹ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 161.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

As Becka correctly identifies, Tim's compromised physicality leads him to try and gain mastery where he can, in this case over her. Here, we see the undertones of gendered financial comportment that conforms to Defoe's writings on Lady Credit. Drawing particularly on the example of Defoe's articulation of the masculine pursuit of double-entry bookkeeping, which was developed in the eighteenth century as "mastering credit, mastering the self," De Goede shows the contrast which was set up between "capricious, unpredictable, irrational, and inconsistent Fortuna or Credit" that is articulated in opposition to "the virtuous, honest, reliable, and rational financial man."⁵⁶ Even at some of his very lowest points, Tim retains an understanding of economic competency and financial control. After leaving the bank in which he accesses his portfolio, Tim sits on a street corner and is approached by a man from the *Food Bank of America*. After being given the meal, Tim hands him money, confused about the status of the donation. The man is "more than surprised by the amount in the Client's [Tim's] possession" and finally agrees to accept Tim's offer.⁵⁷ In spite of his sense of economic discipline, Tim is unable to keep up with the enmeshed financial and corporeal demands of his high-powered masculine workplace. Ferris's portrayal of his physicality is thus not aligned with the healthy liquidity propagated in classical economic theory, but rather with a feminized loss of control manifested from Defoe's writings on credit to the present-day conceptualization of the unbounded, seeping globalized economy.

Unproductive Acts of Discipline: Tim's Walking and Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece*

In one of the novel's opening scenes, Tim wakes up bleary-eyed in a small wooded clearing not far from his home, having walked all night. In spite of himself, Tim enjoys these walks as they provide a wholesome sleep, free of the preoccupations of work which usually dominate his dreams.⁵⁸ This sleep, "these black-dot swoons—coming after such punishing miles, after the metabolic change," is not only replenishing, but offers him "perfect clarity."⁵⁹ After his wife Jane picks him up, Tim states that he has to "go in." At first Jane is confused, the two having just spoken about the return of Tim's condition and the possibility of Tim going for further medical treatment. But then she realizes, he means go into work. Jane appeals briefly to Tim's rationality, claiming that the reappearance of his unrelenting walking has wide-reaching consequences for those around him. But she is

⁵⁶ De Goede, *Virtue*, 38.

⁵⁷ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 211.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

overruled. Instead Tim starts “pounding the glove box with his gloved fist,” and in his frustration breaking it.⁶⁰

This scenario is typical of Tim’s relationship to his profession. Tim works past ten most nights, describing happiness as remaining until the energy-saving sensors cannot detect his presence, and he is forced to “wave his arms around, jump up and down, walk over and fan the door, sometimes all three, before the lights would return.”⁶¹ Indeed, in the period when Tim’s walking has returned, Jane comforts herself by thinking that although currently she did not know where he was,

she could still picture him in a climate-controlled conference room with his associates arrayed around him in their decorous business attire, drinking civilized lattes and assessing the other side’s evidence. It was what he wanted, this corporate pastoral. What the glove box had given its life for: the perpetuation, inherently a kind of celebration, of uneventful everyday life. Long live the mundane.⁶²

Following his return to the office after his demotion, Tim embraces “his steadiness behind the desk, his palpable sense of day following uninterrupted day.”⁶³

However Tim cannot maintain this state of rootedness; his sickness forces his body into an unstoppable state of acceleration: “It was like watching footage of legs walking from the point of view of the walker. That was the helplessness, this was the terror: the brakes are gone, the steering wheel has locked,” Tim thinks, “I am at the mercy of this wayward machine.”⁶⁴ Drawing on Paul Virilio’s foundational work on accelerationism, and reading the novel through a critical disability studies lens, Stuart Murray claims that Tim’s corporate success is destroyed by his walking, countering the “speed of the efficient and immediate workplace” by producing a different, embodied, pace.⁶⁵ Tim’s disability causes him to be a failed economic subject, caught on the wrong side of the class boundary, thrown into a very different America to the affluent life of the suburbs, one of “unemployment, homelessness and despair.”⁶⁶ Murray reads Tim’s unstoppable and rapid accelerations as a commentary on the demand for speed and flexibility in the postindustrial economy a situation which, as demonstrated in my discussion of *A Little*

⁶⁰ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁵ Stuart Murray, “Reading Disability in a Time of Posthuman Work: Speed and Embodiment in Joshua Ferris’ *The Unnamed* and Michael Faber’s *Under the Skin*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2017), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/6104/4823>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Life, produces new kinds of discriminations against bodies with disabilities.⁶⁷ However, with the help of Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece*, I want to show how the failure of Tim to discipline his body is presented not just as a problem with the protagonist's own productivity, but rather as the structural failure of the productive economy in the wake of financialization.

In *Time Clock Piece* [fig. 8] Hsieh punched a time clock on the hour every hour for the duration of a year, and recorded each punch of the clock with a single frame of 16mm film.⁶⁸ Ray Langenbach, critic and viewer of one of Hsieh's performances, describes it thus:

floodlights were switched on, illuminating the space every hour at 59 minutes and approximately 30 seconds. The artist entered from a door under the 16mm film camera and lights, walked across the space to take a position in front of a time-punch clock, waiting. When the clock's minute hand struck the hour, he picked up a time card from a rack and inserted it into the clock. The sound of the card being stamped resonated in the silent space. Hsieh replaced the card on the rack, turned to face the camera and squeezed an airbulb, exposing a single frame of himself standing next to the clock. He then immediately left the room as he had entered and the floodlights were extinguished.⁶⁹

Aside from the minimal number of people who viewed the piece live, these imprinted punch-cards and the film produced are the only remaining evidence that Hsieh undertook this physically and mentally challenging work—it bears repeating that Hsieh cannot have slept over 50 consecutive minutes in an entire year. The film, as Langenbach notes, is thus ostensibly “the only existing stop-action film of a year in a human life shot at hourly intervals.”⁷⁰ Langenbach reads Hsieh's work as a commentary on his status as an illegal immigrant at the time of the piece's production, embodying “the abject (foreign) proletarian, enmeshed in the American and global industrial complex,” who uses punching in and punching out, the “paradigmatic labor ritual of the Taylorist American workplace,” in order to draw attention to his own impermanent position.⁷¹ Frazer Ward too sees the excessive, pointless mass of information produced by Hsieh during this work as a commentary on the impossible bureaucratic and political situation of undocumented workers, who are themselves produced by the needs of new globalized economic formations.⁷² Taken together these analyses read Hsieh's disciplined efforts as responding to shifting sources of labor.

⁶⁷ Murray, “Reading Disability.”

⁶⁸ Ward, “Alien Duration,” 11.

⁶⁹ Ray Langenbach, “Moving Pictures: The Persistence of Locomotion,” *Performance Research* 12, no. 2 (June 2007): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160701554857>.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 122.

⁷¹ Ibid., 121–2

⁷² Ward, “Alien Duration,” 11–3.



Figure 8: Tehching Hsieh, *Time Clock Piece*, 1980-1981.

Perhaps unacknowledged in these accounts, however, and pertinent for the connections between *Time Clock Piece* and Ferris's novel, are the ways in which the excessively disciplined acts of Tim and Hsieh utilize a fragmented aesthetic of liquidity to point to a broader absence of productivity under financialization. Later in the novel, when he is continuously exposed and slipping in and out of contact with Becka and Jane, Tim considers the relationship between his mind and his machine-like body. Although his body had multiple, tiny malfunctions, "infections and inflammations, to aches, cricks, tweaks, cramps [...] it persisted to function more or less with an all-hands-on-deck discipline. He was certain that it had a mind of its own, an unassailable cellular will." With just enough sustenance, a little sleep, a little food, it would not need him, "would walk without him, after his mind had dimmed and died."⁷³ Earlier in the novel, in that brief window when he returns to the office as a junior partner, Tim reflects on his walking. "Twenty-seven months and six days of profitless labor had passed," he thinks, "He had

⁷³ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 269.

endured as a half-wit, the scale of life diminished to a light fixture.”⁷⁴ Coherent with Tim’s conception of his walking, Adrian Heathfield reads Hsieh’s performance as an act of labor which does not produce anything. Heathfield describes his performance as “an evacuated passage of time: it contains a job that is strenuous but ultimately empty and wasteful. Most of the time he is waiting, doing ‘nothing,’ his actions lack function and utility, they make little of visible or material value,” all he offers is his corporeal presence, recorded on film.⁷⁵

Both the film and the novel’s descriptions of Tim’s walking can be described in terms of a stuttering liquidity. Langenbach notes how “the body in the film is spasmodic and never at rest, incessantly repositioning, readjusting, seemingly driven by a nervous system in a state of dystonia. What is recorded is not intention per se but the by-products of the mind’s intentions—that is, Hsieh’s willful desire (and failure) to stand still.”⁷⁶ Heathfield describes the film as uncanny: “His eyes are startlingly engaged with our eyes, but in the meantime his body is coursing with a vital energy; he is rapidly trembling and mutating in the grip of a relentless, machinic condensation of time.”⁷⁷ Thus Hsieh’s film, composed of a series of still photographs, is described as “shards of instants of a ‘flow.’”⁷⁸ Hsieh’s body, representative of the flow of capital brought by globalized patterns of immigration, and Tim’s, analogous to the fluid form of financialized capital, both stutter and stammer. Hsieh and Ferris thus both distort the fluidity and liquidity of their protagonists’ bodies to bring a consciousness of how their disciplined labor does not produce anything of value, therefore representing the failure of productive capital in our financialized and globalized economy.

Unhousings: Gentrification and the Property Bubble

The deep concern which both Hsieh’s *Time Clock Piece* and Ferris’s novel display around concepts of fluidity and stasis, productivity and its absence, is also manifested within the spatial dynamics of the two works, particularly in their treatment of New York’s spatial co-ordinates. I will now move on to discuss how Ferris submits his characters to both the positive and the negative aspects of the financialization of the American housing market. The acquisition of property acts as a salve for Jane and Tim’s relationship. At Jane’s lowest point when she is absorbed by alcoholism, and Tim is sick, her suburban house becomes

⁷⁴ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 149.

⁷⁵ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 32.

⁷⁶ Langenbach, “Moving Pictures,” 123.

⁷⁷ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

oppressive. When not hauled up at a strip mall bar, she moves through her house, “from room to room feeling the massive crushing weight of it.” She tries to recall why “they had decided that they needed so much space” and counts a total of eight beds, including Tim’s hospital bed, the pullout sofa, and the twin mattress in the basement. Asking, “How did they ever come to own so many beds? Who were they for?” Claire speaks to the absence of their wider familial community: her and Tim’s parents gone, no siblings between them, “nobody had anything and everyone was dead.”⁷⁹

And so Tim’s decision, after Jane recovers from her alcoholism and before he relapses, to move them out of the suburbs and back to the city is one met with joy, and chimes with the novel’s broad message that property is a saving grace, prefigured in Jane’s acquisition of her real-estate license. Tim finds the Brownstone for sale by accident, stumbling upon it in one of his planned walks around New York, noting “the exposed brick, the cement stairs, the small ironwork gates, the tin garbage cans, the protective grilles overlaying the windows of the garden apartments,” and falls in love.⁸⁰ As the broker walks around the kitchen, “her shoes clapping against the hardwood floor,” he admires the street where “lit windows made a lambent patchwork in the Brownstones across the street. The buildings were built of white brick and red brick and the brick of fall colors.” Within this hallowed space, Tim comes to the realization that he was never going to be fully accepted into the law firm again, but releases that desire—“what did it matter anyway.”⁸¹ On the day that Jane comes out of the alcoholism treatment facility, worried about the temptations of the outside world and of returning to the suburbs after being in “only one room with one bed,” Tim takes her to the Brownstone.⁸² “We don’t own it just yet,” he says, and then leads her through the apartment, a fraction of the size of their house in the suburbs, with “charm and character and windows full of sunlight, hardwood floors and a remodeled kitchen, and a restorer’s touch around the woodwork. It had an antique chandelier and clawfoot tub,” and best of all, utters Tim, “Only one bedroom [...] Only one bed.”⁸³

In the section set in the Brownstone, Ferris offers us a brief glimpse into a four-year window of domestic bliss before the return of Tim’s condition. At breakfast, Tim and Claire read out different sections of the New York Times to each other, only interrupted by one of them “briefly touch[ing] the other, as in good morning.” They are each preparing for a day of fulfilling work, Tim having found a position as an adjunct professor

⁷⁹ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 166.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 179–80.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 183–4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 184.

at Columbia, Claire busy with her real-estate practice.⁸⁴ The image which Ferris creates in the Brownstone, itself an icon of urban rebirth, matches the process of gentrification where characters move from the suburbs back to the city. As Neil Smith notes, following the 1974-1975 recession and the fiscal crisis in 1977, and the “virtual cessation of federal funds for new housing under the Reagan administration, the city government essentially adopted gentrification as New York’s housing policy.”⁸⁵ As Matthew Godbey puts it in his analysis of the representation of middle-class identity in Jonathan Lethem’s 2003 novel *The Fortress of Solitude*, gentrification, defined as the “rehabilitation of inner-city neighborhoods through an infusion of mostly private capital and middle-class homeownership,” has seen the abandonment of the suburbs by large sections of the white middle class, striving for a more authentic existence.⁸⁶ Undoubtedly, Claire and Tim conform to this, flourishing in their new habitat, enjoying “the fruits of gentrification without guilt.”⁸⁷

Hsieh’s performances are also implicated in the earlier moments of these spatial shifts. A description of Hsieh’s *Outdoor Piece* [fig. 9] pops up in the novel *The Flamethrowers* (2013), Rachel Kushner’s motorcycle-populated flashback to New York’s 1970s art world. In one scene, the book’s protagonist, known only by her nickname Reno, converses with a friend who knows Hsieh. Reno recounts having seen Hsieh in a little park near her house while he was conducting *Outdoor Piece*, and claims that while her initial response was to say that he was homeless, she thought that there “was something too careful and precise about him.” She prods her friend, asking what he makes, to which she received the answer, “Nothing. He makes nothing. He’s living outside this year. He doesn’t enter any structures.”⁸⁸ This fictional representation of *Outdoor Piece* gestures towards the underlying absence of productivity. Hsieh, via his usual signed contract, claimed that he would not enter shelter for a year. “I shall not go in to a building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent,” and his project was only briefly interrupted by his arrest for fighting on May 3rd 1982, after which he was released by a sympathetic judge.⁸⁹ Without a specific purpose, Hsieh is “suspended, loitering, drifting; uncertain of his destination,

⁸⁴ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 188-9.

⁸⁵ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. 3rd. ed. (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 2008), 230.

⁸⁶ Matt Godbey, “Gentrification, Authenticity, and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 64, no .1 (Spring 2008): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2008.0006>.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Gumport, “Gentrified Fiction: Brooklyn’s Recent Crop of Nostalgic Novelists,” *n+1*, November 2, 2009, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/gentrified-fiction/>.

⁸⁸ Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers*, (New York: Scribner, 2013), 59.

⁸⁹ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 37, 160.

his course is determined by organic choices, by physical necessities or by aimless whim.”⁹⁰ This experiment took place as New York was still feeling the effects of the 1975 fiscal crisis which saw the city become almost bankrupt, and its financial capability passed on to Municipal Assistance Corporation. This saw a turning away from the interests of those populations and activities deemed unproductive, i.e. the marginalized, working populations and manufacturing industries, towards the needs of those white-collar workers employed in the business and FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) industries.⁹¹ Significantly, the fiscal crisis has been taken up by both David Harvey and Neil Smith as an encapsulation of broader patterns of the failure of the welfare state and the creation of privatized neoliberal housing policy.⁹² In order to try and capture Hsieh’s experience, Heathfield borrows copies of Hsieh’s intricate maps so that he can retrace Hsieh’s movements around the city. While not mentioning the fiscal crisis directly, Heathfield points to its effects, noting that Hsieh’s walk must have taken “place in a time of rapid capitalization and privatization of public space.”⁹³

While the relationship between shifting forms of labor and performance art has been analyzed in the introduction to this thesis, I want to focus here on the specifics of the way that Hsieh’s performances can be linked to the consolidation of the post-Fordist financialized economy, and the volatile housing market it produces. As noted by Andrew Strombeck in his analysis of *The Flamethrowers*, the retreat of manufacturing in the 1970s was matched by the shift of artistic practice away from the production of objects into the realms of conceptual art and performance. The abandonment of the city’s manufacturing spaces also opened up places where this kind of art could take place. Although, as Strombeck notes, New York’s manufacturing spaces were not devoted to the manufacturing of heavy goods traditionally associated with Fordism, the jobs they offered alongside the securities provided by the welfare state gave strength to working-class life, described by him as the “essence of the Fordist compact.”⁹⁴ The arrival of these artistic communities operated as a gateway for the “reterritorialization” of the city by the wealthy.⁹⁵ While evidently the fictionalized renditions of Hsieh’s work and the Brownstone purchase are positioned decades apart, they are symptomatic of the ingrained effects of post-Fordism and the waning of the manufacturing economy. As

⁹⁰ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 39.

⁹¹ Andrew Strombeck, “Zone One’s Reanimation of 1970s New York,” *Studies in American Fiction* 44, no. 2 (2017): 262.

⁹² Smith, *Uneven Development*, 230; Harvey, *Brief History*, 44.

⁹³ Heathfield, “Impress of Time,” 39.

⁹⁴ Andrew Strombeck, “The Post-Fordist Motorcycle: Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* and the 1970s Crisis in Fordist Capitalism,” *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 459.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 456.

impoverished communities are moved out, the middle and upper classes find new vitality in conquering a hitherto “abandoned” urban environment.⁹⁶



Figure 9: Tehching Hsieh, *Outdoor Piece*, 1981-1982.

This sense of personal fulfilment for the middle classes which arises from the liquefaction of the housing market is reinforced in Jane’s narrative. Jane becomes involved in real estate after the first period of Tim’s illness. Following his first recovery, Tim “was fine again, as if nothing had ever happened, but she was changed. She was suddenly bereft of purpose.”⁹⁷ Her savior from this bleak time was the acquisition of her real-estate license. It is worth pausing here and referring to McClanahan’s analysis of how the ideologies of property ownership shifted during the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Prior to the mortgage crisis, McClanahan identifies a controlled voyeurism in the way that domestic spaces were visually represented. From the Depression-era photography of James Agee and Walker Evans, to the show which epitomizes housing-boom culture, *Real Housewives of Orange County*, the inviolability and security of domestic space was maintained through deliberate, conscious violations inside the walls of the home.⁹⁸ McClanahan reasons that real estate during the housing

⁹⁶ Strombeck, “The Post-Fordist Motorcycle,” 457.

⁹⁷ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 21.

⁹⁸ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 115.

bubble was infused with a sense of erotic desirability.⁹⁹ This tendency is enacted clearly in the chapter in which Tim and Claire are living in the Brownstone. Leaving after having lunch with Tim, Jane shows David, a handsome art dealer, around a “seven-room duplex with a wall-to-wall view of the Hudson, a wine pantry, a professional culinary kitchen.”¹⁰⁰ Jane muses on her recovery from alcoholism: “If a man like David had pressed himself on her five or six years ago, she might have avoided drinking altogether.” And then, “just to indulge a fantasy, she pretended that they were looking at the place together, that she knew everything there was to know about contemporary art,” envisaging an alternative reality for herself.¹⁰¹ We see here that Jane’s fantasy entwines property and her sexual desires, but when David, a self-identified impulsive character, offers her a glass of champagne, Jane is initially lured, but refuses.¹⁰² This scene can be read as emblematic of the dominant affects associated with the housing bubble. Jane imaginatively traverses the position of consumer and seller, seduced by the house and the potential other life it contains but ultimately, she retains a sense of control. She refuses David’s advances, and he accepts, and thus her stimulating speculations are balanced with her safety.

That is, until her husband rings. Standing in the lobby of the building, she takes a call from Tim, who informs her of the return of his condition. Describing the contrast between the visual representations of domestic interiors made before and after the mortgage crash, McClanahan focuses on the genre of foreclosure photography, images of homes abandoned due to the inability of their occupants to pay their mortgages. In this case, she suggests that “the blurred line between private and public produces anxiety rather than security [...] this home is the site of forced entry,” marked by the possibility of a “violent unhousing.”¹⁰³ Tim’s physical condition means that the buildings around him cannot contain him; he is continuously evicted. Tim’s phone-call to Jane symbolizes the final disruption of the tenets of Tim’s everyday life and his descent into a permanent state of homelessness. While Jane briefly shelters in the beautiful apartment complex, playing with the notion of the alternative realities offered by the property, Tim is unprotected from the storm which is ripping through the city: “the raindrops white as blisters, the windows whipping in their warped sills [...] he had no awning under which to take cover, no deli, no lobby, no office, no Starbucks, no bedroom.”¹⁰⁴ As Tim rips the clothes from his back in frustration, letting his gabardine blazer fall to the ground, a “man came out of a

⁹⁹ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 99.

¹⁰⁰ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 190-1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 192-3.

¹⁰³ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 115-6.

¹⁰⁴ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 195.

doorway, one of a loose association of the ill and unkempt, and picked it up and put it on and returned to the doorway where he sheltered.”¹⁰⁵

And thus, Tim’s physical liquidity, aligned with the changes associated with finance capitalism, as I have suggested, ruptures this fantasy in a way that mirrors the transition from the controlled exposure of life inside the home which marked the pre-2008 period, to the forced violation which came to symbolize the mortgage crisis. McClanahan suggests that the stress on market liquidity which the securitization of mortgages enabled, contravened the dominant ideologies of property ownership which emphasize physical and fiscal security.¹⁰⁶ Real estate is by definition rooted and stationary. However, in the wake of mortgage securitization these illiquid assets become fluid, “transferable with a single keystroke.”¹⁰⁷ As we shall see, the novel demonstrates how the beneficial liquidity of property as a financial asset, embodied by the couple’s move to a gentrified New York, is presently ruptured by the specter of the financial crash.

Burdened Collectives: Subprime Subjects and Connecting to the Indebted

The contrast between Jane’s and Tim’s experiences in “First Chill, Then Stupor” demonstrates the shift in the way that housing in its liquid forms was conceived prior to and following the financial crash. In this section, I will explore the way in which the novel’s globalized financial culture, and its specter of debt, produces burdened collectives. From the cab window when he first goes to view the Brownstone, while his wife is still in rehab, Tim watches a garbage man, and wonders how much of the city he notices on his travels. He thinks that the man’s memories must be comprised “of stench, stickiness, weighty bins. That was no way to live.” Climbing out of the cab Tim marvels at the “unyielding permanent motion of the city.” He looks over to see a “stout Hispanic woman in sandwich boards stood on the street corner mutely passing out flyers for discount men’s clothing. Metal burned bitterly from a pretzel vendor’s cart.” Throughout the novel, Tim’s worldview is briefly punctuated by the fleeting forms of racialized and impoverished bodies, people he tries to maintain a distance from. But then he thinks back to the garbage man, and reasons, “If you want to do it right [...] you have to get down on your hands and knees and crawl inch by inch across the earth, stopping occasionally to touch your cheek to the ground.”¹⁰⁸ I suggest that Tim’s flight of imagination here is indicative of some of the core tensions explored in Ferris’s novel and Hsieh’s work. Ferris’s protagonist and Hsieh himself both occupy a position of homelessness while

¹⁰⁵ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 195-6.

¹⁰⁶ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰⁸ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 178.

being materially separated from the homeless population around them. I will investigate how these cultural texts negotiate these negative, exposed forms of community, and how they link them to a state of financial fluidity.

In the run-up to Tim's final violent unhousing, his perambulation brings him into contact with people and corners of the city which his privileged position would not normally bring him to. I read Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* as a precursor to these encounters. In contrast to the incessant documentation of *Time Clock Piece*, Frazer Ward notes that Hsieh's records of *Outdoor Piece* were relatively sparse. All that remains of Hsieh's year-long experiment are the photocopied maps which detail mundane everyday activities (where he slept and woke up, where he purchased food) and the fifty-minute film produced by Robert Attanasio. In Ward's reading, the insufficiency of documentary evidence produced by Hsieh is a mimetic depiction of the absence of representation of real homelessness "that became such an open sore in New York during the Reagan period," a condition which Ward connects to Giorgio Agamben's "bare life", which describes bodies stripped of their political significance.¹⁰⁹ Ward's nod towards the state of homelessness in the Reagan era resonates with a broader claim that he makes about the responsiveness of Hsieh's work to the time of its political production. In his study of performance art and the question of the audience, Ward reads the work of Vita Acconci, Chris Burden, and Marina Abramovic during the 1960s and 1970s to suggest that these artists demonstrate a "profound ambivalence about the possibility of a meaningfully public realm or of community."¹¹⁰ Ward sees Hsieh's work as a culmination of these artists' communitarian uncertainty, citing the invisibility of Hsieh's artistic practice to a wider audience. In particular, we can see this in Hsieh's final year-long piece, which saw the artist withdraw from art production and consumption completely. Taking place in 1985-1986, and thus at the height of the Thatcher/Reagan matrix, Hsieh's abandonment of the art community can be read in tandem with neoliberalism's disregard for the concept of society and community, a feature which can be seen in *Outdoor Piece*. As Heathfield suggests, Hsieh's drifting did not produce an empathetic or connective response with other marginalized subjects; it instead "can be read as a kind of movement at the outside of the outside, a refusal to be bound to the social body other than in an errant orbit of extremity."¹¹¹

As we shall see, however, Tim's chronic perambulation does not allow for such distance to be maintained from the impoverished subjects which occupy the pages of Ferris's

¹⁰⁹ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), 143; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁰ Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*, 133.

¹¹¹ Heathfield, "Impress of Time," 47.

novel. The text's figuration of the disruptive aspects of financial liquidity and of the structural condition of homelessness thus shows its connection to the subprime crisis. During the time of the housing boom, specific populations marked by discriminatory policies which had historically prevented home ownership were permitted to buy property due to their financially profitable status as high-risk borrowers.¹¹² These "impoverished subprime communities," in McClanahan's terms, were targeted and saddled with huge amounts of debt and increased risk of foreclosure.¹¹³ However, the financialized nature of the mortgage market meant that the fortunes of the middle classes, previously immunized by their assets and structural privilege, were now enmeshed with the socio-economically deprived. Tim's interaction with these "subprime subjects" metonymically represents some of the concerns raised in indebted, financialized society, a characterization which can be usefully illuminated through the thought of Esposito and the theoretical work that has adapted his thinking on immunity to deal with the specifics of neoliberal capitalism.

In spite of the wide-sweeping nature of his philosophical practice, Esposito himself has not connected his arguments about the dissolution of "the proper" to the processes of financialization, a project which has been taken up by other scholars. In "The Indebted Man's Cognitive Mapping: Boundaries and Biohorror in the Neoliberal Debt Economy," Lianne Tanguay critiques Esposito's vague definition of "globalization" and instead calls for a more rigorous examination of finance and debt as the specific forms of capital that fuel globalization, as well as asserting the importance of examining the social relations they precipitate. In order to ground Esposito's work in a financial imaginary, Tanguay brings Esposito's existential debt, the *munus* of community, into dialogue with Maurizio Lazzarato's investigation into the power of economic debt in financialized economies to think about how these neoliberal economic and social formations threaten the foundations of modernity and modern subjectivity.¹¹⁴ Lazzarato's influential treatise *The Making of Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* claims that an effective analysis of the neoliberal project requires a deeper investigation of the issue of public and private debt. "The debtor-creditor relationship," argues Lazzarato, "intensifies mechanisms of exploitation and domination at every level of society, for within it no distinction exists between workers and the unemployed, consumers and producers, working and non-working populations, retirees and welfare recipients. Everyone is a 'debtor,' accountable to and guilty before capital."¹¹⁵ Debt itself is represented in Lazzarato's work as

¹¹² McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 148.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Tanguay, "The Indebted Man's Cognitive Mapping," 62.

¹¹⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012), 7.

a transversal power relation, unimpeded by State boundaries, the dualisms of production (active/non-active, employed/unemployed, productive/non-productive), and the distinctions between the economy, the political, and the social. It immediately acts at a global level, affecting entire populations, and contributing to the ethical construction of the indebted man.¹¹⁶

The indebted man is the subjective figure produced at the heart of Lazzarato's debt economy, allegedly "free," but whose behavior and actions are confined by his debt and the knowledge that he must one day repay, and who is thus afflicted by guilt, blame, and conscience.¹¹⁷ Lazzarato's emphasis on the soft, biopolitical effects of the debt economy have been taken to task by some critics. McClanahan, for example, emphasizes that the increased coercive power of the state means that the consequences of unpaid debt extend much further than the social shame emphasized in Lazzarato's reading.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, Lazzarato's analysis enables us to see the ways in which the consequences of debt extend beyond a purely financial realm.

While, as Tanguay notes, Esposito's particular formulation of existential debt and Lazzarato's monetary debt should not be read as identical, both provoke a crisis of "the proper" which is particularly useful when observing the ways in which the novel engages with the burdened collectives created by the subprime crisis.¹¹⁹ Lazzarato characterizes this not only as a financial crisis but also as a "failure of neoliberal governmentality of society. The mode of government founded on business and proprietary individualism has failed."¹²⁰ The subprime crisis is significant because it reveals how the debt economy functions, showing the complicity between the state, the financial economy, and the "real" economy.¹²¹ As the "real" economy strips away stability through increasing precarization, wage stagnation, and the widespread depletion of social security, speculative finance claims to "enrich" these indebted subjects through credit.¹²² The crisis revealed despotic forms of control.¹²³ Lazzarato claims that the "subprimes" are a paradigmatic example of this political logic, the attempts of capitalist ideology to make everyone an "owner" without an appreciation for the consequences of human lives.¹²⁴ The subprime crisis thus marks "the failure of the political program of proprietary and patrimonial individualism. The crisis is highly symbolic in that it strikes at the emblem

¹¹⁶ Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, 89.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41, 31.

¹¹⁸ McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 80.

¹¹⁹ Tanguay, "The Indebted Man's Cognitive Mapping," 63.

¹²⁰ Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, 109.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 109, 114.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

par excellence of ‘individual property’: home ownership.”¹²⁵ Tanguay argues that the dissolution of commodity power under a neoliberal financialized economy leaves workers vulnerable. The turn to consumer credit which has filled the wage gap produced by the failure of the productive economy, has disrupted the “immunizing” and proper functions of the classical political economy—labor, wages, and rights.¹²⁶ The subject, Tanguay claims, is now left to “navigate the creditor-debtor relation bereft of the immunity that is now the exclusive privilege of the creditors.”¹²⁷

This dissolution of proprietary boundaries in economic crisis is examined in the last section of the novel. As Tim walks in the storm, he cries “You and me [...] you son of a bitch!”¹²⁸ What Tim refers to as “the other” becomes a consistent feature of the last section of the novel, the voice for Tim’s physical needs, whining at Tim—“Hands and feet are cold. Leg is hurting. Stomach is empty and would like some food.”¹²⁹ Prior to this fundamental split of self, we see Tim’s walking bring him into contact with communities targeted by subprime lending practices. On one of the very first trips detailed for the reader, Tim ends up in the lower Bronx, inside an African hair-weaving salon. The excursion is focalized through Jane, who goes to pick Tim up. After parking, she surveys “the neglected neighborhood,” noticing the way the trash and the “eroded brick surfaces” which, in heavily racialized language, she feels “ghettoed the neighborhood.”¹³⁰ She pauses outside, “checked the name and address against what she’d written down,” and notes that the “yellowed clippings from hairstyle magazines” obscure “what awaited her inside: two black stylists, one albino with pink pigmentation spots, both in heavy blue aprons and tending to matrons in chairs.”¹³¹ “The hands of the two women “paused in their labor” as Jane enters. After noticing what she perceives as the unkempt state of the shop—“there were cords everywhere, cords and spray bottles and dusty fake plants reflected in the mirror-paneled walls”—she faces the women for a second time and “forced a smile, feeling the interloper again, the tension of her unexpected presence in another random subculture.”¹³² On the drive home, Tim remarks that while he expected the world “to greet you with hostility [...] instead they give you a chair and call your wife.”¹³³

¹²⁵ Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, 114.

¹²⁶ Tanguay, “The Indebted Man’s Cognitive Mapping,” 64.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹²⁸ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 197.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

An encounter at work the following day leads Tim to reflect on this meeting. Walking down the stairs, he finds a black homeless man on the staircase, wearing a winter coat, a “collection of wrinkled shopping bags arrayed around him.”¹³⁴ “You shouldn’t be here,” Tim cries, and he reports his presence to the security guard, Frank, but then recalls the way that he had been treated in the African hair-weaving salon: “White man walks in and asks for shelter, black women point to the folding chairs. Same white man walks past a homeless man seeking the very same shelter, has black man thrown out into the cold.”¹³⁵ He pauses, thinking about the question of karmic imbalance which had been thrown up by practitioners of Eastern philosophy in his search for a cause of his condition, and asks that the man be allowed to stay, as a “personal favor,” reversing his request by claiming that he knew him from high school and that the man has fallen on hard times. “Will you do me the favor of seeing he stays put as long as he wants? And also sure make no one else harasses him?” Tim asks, before requesting the woolen cap off of Frank’s head, and marching off into the distance, another episode having taken its toll.¹³⁶

The analogous nature of Tim’s body with that of capital, the novel’s fascination with property, and the consistent intrusion of racialized bodies into Tim’s consciousness provide an allegory of the anxiety produced in the white middle class by the inclusion of subprime populations into mortgage lending practices. As Angela Mitropolous and Melinda Cooper argue, the extension of credit to those previously denied it on the basis of class, race, and gender followed in the steps of the queer liberation, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, whose campaigns for greater equality focused on (and, they note, often found their impasse in) “questions of rights, representation, and recognition.”¹³⁷ This expansion was thus portrayed—and here they draw on the work of economist Robert J. Shiller—in terms of equality: “the financial sector invited the non-white, the migrant, the unemployed, the unmarried woman and—even, it is claimed—the non-citizen into the ostensibly expansive embrace of financial democracy.”¹³⁸ However, Cooper and Mitropolous articulate some of the underlying problems with this so-called democratization. In retrospective enquiries into the subprime debacle, they note how the creditworthiness of borrowers, their quantification into prime, semiprime, and subprime, was often calculated on the “intangibles of race, gender, and marital status.” Women, particularly African-American and Latina women, “were relegated to subprime loans even when earning as much as their white male

¹³⁴ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 43.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46–7.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48–9.

¹³⁷ Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropolous, “The household frontier,” *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 9, no. 4 (2009): 364, <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/household-frontier>.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 364.

counterparts.”¹³⁹ While it may be true that we are “all subprime now,” in the sense that the “Keynesian ideal” of guaranteed employment is out of reach for the large majority of us, the authors contend that this risk must be differentiated from the extension of unstable credit to the “riskiest of at-risk populations,” who suffered hardest when the markets failed.¹⁴⁰

As demonstrated by the two examples above, Tim’s loss of ownership over his own body and property is framed through his connection with black bodies, and thus resonates with Fred Moten’s dissection of the association of the subprime debtor and the black body. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the history of slavery saw the exclusion of the black American subject from proprietary personhood. Anchored in the U.S constitution, the legal definition of habeas corpus thus produced subjects as either citizen-subjects, or as objects of property.¹⁴¹ Moten honors this past to see blackness as “the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty.”¹⁴² For Moten, because of the unique situation of blackness as a condition of disorder and disownership, “whoever says ‘subprime debtor’ says black as well.”¹⁴³ While Moten acknowledges the subprime debtor is the target of different forms of residential and financial segregation, her position in the neighborhood of home ownership “wherein normative conception, embodiment, and enactment of wealth, personhood, and citizenship reside” leads Moten to also portray her as a guerrilla, “carrying revaluation and disruptively familial extensions into supposedly sanitized zones.”¹⁴⁴ The subprime debtor is thus defined in terms of her financial, and physical excessiveness. Here, we can think about the figure of Henrietta Lacks as the antithesis of the immune subject. Critical work around the resurgence of calls against the sin of usury following the financial crash illuminates the ways in which this immunitary crisis was caused by a globally entangled speculative financial system. To return to the thinking of Cooper and Mitropolous, they understand the subprime crisis in terms of “a mass desire to live above one’s means,” a situation which was facilitated by usury. They connect the invocation of usury in popular journalism following the crash with a desire to reinstitute boundaries which was seen in the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s, and therefore to trace a genealogy which desires the reinstitution of boundaries between

¹³⁹ Cooper and Mitropolous, “The household frontier,” 365.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 366.

¹⁴¹ Chen, *Animacies*, 50.

¹⁴² Fred Moten, “The Subprime and the beautiful.” *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (July 2013): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2013.797289>.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 243.

subjects, between nation-states, but also crucially between what is deemed excessive and what is proper.¹⁴⁵

However, in spite of Tim's financial competency and his affiliation with the figure of the immune subject, his discipline and warped form of labor does not save him from homelessness, entangled as his condition is with these othered bodies. Walking out into the city on his lunchbreak while he is still employed, Tim watches potential actors lining up for a casting call, and reflects upon his own fortunate career trajectory: "Never sat for a headshot or waited tables for crap pay or suffered the heartbreak of losing a part on the final audition. So this was the subculture [...] With the rest of the artists, together with the immigrants, they carried the city on their backs."¹⁴⁶ At the end of this carefully curated walk, eating a kebab, something he had craved when unstoppably striding, Tim overhears two homeless men talking. Their dejected state is emphasized: Tim notes that they each have "a bottle in a bag within arm's reach" and one of them is in possession of a wheelbarrow, presumably to transport their belongings from place to place, a stand in for the home.¹⁴⁷ Tim reports that while they were speaking English, the meaning of their words was lost on him, though he registers a tenor of complaint: "They corset cheese to blanket trinket for the whole nine. Bungle commons lack the motherfucker to razz Mahoney. Talk, knickers!" they muse.¹⁴⁸ Although the rambling of these characters may be added for comic value, the next stage of Ferris's story sees the complete dissolution of the distinction between these men's condition and Tim's, both in terms of linguistic coherence and of control of subjectivity. This transition resonates with Esposito's definition of *communitas*, a loss which is not a painless process.¹⁴⁹ The community is not a subject's expansion or multiplication, but as a violent loss of borders, an exposure which leaves us open to the "most extreme of all possibilities but also the riskiest of threats".¹⁵⁰

In this chapter, we have seen how Hsieh's work and *The Unnamed* offer compelling mediations on the changing status of labor and property in the financialized economy. In the forthcoming conclusion, I observe models of thinking which promote neither the inviolability of the immune subject which Tim clings to, nor represent the complete loss of protective borders which we witness in a financialized economy. Antithetical to Tim's personal lack of compassion and the ruthless rationality of housing provision, at their very best the artistic political practices that I assess recognize our inherent relationality

¹⁴⁵ Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos, "In Praise of Usura," *Mute Magazine* 2, no. 13 (November 2009), http://www.metamute.org/content/in_praise_of_usura.

¹⁴⁶ Ferris, *The Unnamed*, 149.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁴⁹ Pieter Vermeulen, "The Biopolitics of Trauma," in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2014), 151.

¹⁵⁰ Esposito, *Communitas*, 8.

and embrace our differences, imagining immunity within community rather than in opposition to it.

Conclusion

Nurturing Sparks of Life Beyond the Immune Subject

In the sweltering summer of 2018 as I was finishing this thesis, I was casually Googling surgeon, public health researcher, and MacArthur genius recipient Dr. Atul Gawande when I discovered something surprising.

I had just finished Gawande's book *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, a meditation on end-of-life care. The book was thought-provoking and, amongst other things, questions the status quo within the American medical system which promotes treatment after treatment, for those that can afford it. Gawande interrogates this logic: "The simple view is that medicine exists to fight death and disease, and that is, of course, its most basic task. Death is the enemy. But the enemy has superior forces. Eventually, it wins. And in a war that you cannot win, you don't want a general who fights to the point of total annihilation."¹

Although Gawande might use the aggressive military language which characterizes the immunitary paradigm, the conclusions that he draws about a more expansive view of health outside the biomedical paradigm, a belief in the autonomy of subjects to determine their own treatment, and the inevitability, and potential beauty, of dependency fit neatly with the alternative approaches to embodiment and wellbeing that have been considered throughout this thesis. As I have argued, immunitary fiction uses the metonym of the chronic, debilitated body to explicate neoliberalism's eradication of the protections of embedded liberalism and the welfare state. From Jude's clinging to a fantasy of flexible able-bodiedness in *A Little Life*, to the rendition of Sam's exploited and exploiting subject in *The Flame Alphabet*, to Joshua Ferris's unraveling of the ownership of body and mind in *The Unnamed*, the anxious desperation which pervades these texts calls for new perceptions of the physical self not beholden to the mourning of the illusion of the

¹ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine, and What Matters in the End* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2014), 187.

immune subject. Some of the endurance art practitioners discussed above adopt what we can see as a more critical stance to the disintegration of this fantasy. Ron Athey opens himself, literally, to the world. Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and James Luna instrumentalize their own bodies to remind us of emphatically more brutal historical precedents of neoliberalism's spiritually and materially overbearing labors, and Tehching Hsieh's excessive discipline parodies the needs of the postindustrial economy. Rather than merely accepting the conditions of our current economic and political paradigm, these artists put their bodies to extreme lengths to viscerally probe them from the inside-out, creating space for new ways of living. Which seems akin to what Gawande promotes in his book. Gawande argues that the protective sterility of the nursing home represents a failed social experiment. We "seek a life of worth and purpose, and yet are routinely denied the conditions that might make it possible," he claims, "there is no other way to see what modern society has done."²

And so, perhaps naively, I was a little stunned to learn that Gawande had been appointed chief executive of a non-profit venture funded by Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway, and JPMorgan Chase, created to address the health of their collective workforce, over a million workers in total, with the plan to expand to include "all Americans".³ As an opinion piece in the *New York Times* put it, the announcement "moved stock markets and prompted optimistic predictions of major reform in a notoriously complex industry." However, the commentary was skeptical about whether the employees from JPMorgan Chase, a financial services company in New York with "highly compensated employees", the consortium of companies which comprises Berkshire Hathaway, and Amazon's technological business which has both extremely highly paid employees in Seattle and lower-wage workers in warehouses around the States, would be able to be accommodated in the same kind of health plan. As the article continues:

Health insurance is not taxed in the same way as other forms of compensation, so an investment banker may prefer a health plan that covers everything instead of one with a big deductible that she has to pay out of her post-tax salary. A lower-wage worker in an Amazon warehouse, by contrast, may want a skimpier health plan and more wages.⁴

² Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 128.

³ Berkshire Hathaway, "Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway and JPMorgan Chase & Co. to Partner on U.S. Employee Healthcare," accessed August 1, 2018, <http://www.berkshirehathaway.com/news/jan3018.pdf>

⁴ Margot Sanger-Katz and Reed Abelson, "Can Amazon and Friends Handle Health Care? There's Reason for Doubt," *New York Times*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/upshot/can-amazon-and-friends-handle-health-care-theres-reason-for-doubt.html>.

Beneath the article's cool and detached exterior brews a familiar narrative. Amazon, now the world's most valuable retailer, run by the richest man in history, is perhaps *the* symbol of the successes of neoliberal rationality in 2018. Amazon locates its Fulfilment Centers, the ironically named warehouse systems from which it operates, in rural areas which provide a captive labor force with little or no alternative employment. Many of its employees are dependent on food stamps as the average worker is paid \$13.68 an hour, and workers report urinating in bottles so as to keep up with their inhumane productivity targets.⁵ It is also one of the most dangerous places to work in the United States. A recent investigation by *The Guardian* revealed that many Amazon workers were suffering from untreated workplace accidents or injuries, often leaving workers without income, homeless, and unable to work.⁶ They are perhaps the definition of precarious laborers.

Gawande being a medical professional and public intellectual, we can only hope that his heading up of the healthcare plan will actively try and alleviate these problems. After all, on paper it would not make sense to strategize a healthcare plan for a company whose labor conditions actively damage the bodies of its workers to not tackle those working practices first. While I have my doubts about whether this preventative approach could or would ever be taken within Amazon's framework, it is the apparent disconnect between the ideals promoted in Gawande's books and his heading up of a venture associated with a company whose workers are subjected to what has been described as "purposeful Darwinism" that interests me.⁷ While Gawande's writing certainly deals with the precariousness of life, our essential dependence on one another, his new affiliation with Amazon arguably obfuscates the company's induced precarization of its workers. In a statement, Gawande claimed that his appointment would be an extension of his work to build scalable solutions within public health, but now with "the backing of these remarkable organizations to pursue this mission with even greater impact for more than a million people."⁸

⁵ Michael Sanaito, "Exploited Amazon Workers Need a Union. When Will They Get One?" *The Guardian*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/08/amazon-jeff-bezos-unionize-working-conditions.html>.

⁶ Michael Sanaito, "Accidents at Amazon: Workers Left to Suffer After Warehouse Injuries," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/30/accidents-at-amazon-workers-left-to-suffer-after-warehouse-injuries.html>.

⁷ Jodi Kantor and David Strietfield, "Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace," *New York Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html>.

⁸ Atul Gawande, quoted in Ingrid Lunden, "Atul Gawande, the Doctor and Writer, Named CEO of Amazon's Employee Healthcare JV," *TechCrunch*, June 20, 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/20/atul-gawande-the-doctor-and-writer-named-ceo-of-amazons-employee-healthcare-jv/>.

It is this disassociation between a writerly engagement with the existential problem of precariousness, and the ways in which biopolitical and economic relational structures produce bodies as more or less precarious than others that I want to explore here by turning to a new wave of writing about pregnancy and early motherhood.⁹ As established in the introduction, precarity represents a mechanism through which to analyze the effects of neoliberalism's governance through insecurity, and a political tool for populations affected by these political and economic policies. Precarity's focus on embodied experience offers a potential route for thinking forms of existence outside of the immunitary paradigm. From Hannah Arendt's employment of "natality" to express the potential freedom of the human condition, to Judith Butler's argument that birth shows our inherent dependence, the beginning of life represents an important touchstone for theorizing new forms of relationality within philosophical discourse.¹⁰ As we shall see, it holds a particularly crucial place in ecological movements within immunology and subsequent feminist reimaginations based on this shift which aim to find non-aggressive ways of envisioning the self-other relation. However, while the field of maternal writing confronts life's primary vulnerability on an intellectual level, the texts also confront the uncomfortable reality that their production is dependent on the domestic labor of other marginalized women. In my final remarks, I highlight the important work of activist projects created by individuals with chronic illness which create and sustain collective forms of care, and offer thoughts on future avenues of research for immunitary fiction.

Pregnancy and Immunity

In "Chimerism and *Immunitas*: The Emergence of a Posthumanist Biophilosophy," Margrit Shildrick expertly outlines the scientific discourse which has challenged the empirical evidence for the bounded body. Expanding on her research on the ways in which organ transplantation is a source of psychic disturbance due to the disruption of the singular embodied self, even when it is successful and extends life significantly, Shildrick directs her attention to the fetal-maternal relation.¹¹ She builds on Emily Martin's assertion that

⁹ Puar, ed., "Precarity Talk," 168.

¹⁰ See Hannah Arendt's discussion of natality in *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9, 178; Butler, *Precarious Life*.

¹¹ Margrit Shildrick, "Chimerism and Immunitas: The Emergence of a Posthumanist Biophilosophy," in *Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies*, 95. See also Shildrick et al., "Messy Entanglements: Research Assemblages in Heart Transplantation Discourses and Practices," *Medical Humanities* 44, no. 1 (September 2017): 46-54, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2017-011212>; Shildrick, "Staying

the militaristic metaphors of defence are incompatible with this association. As Martin suggests, the imagery of aggressive immuno-warfare works when the focus is on the body defending itself from a disease-causing microbe, but the model runs into difficulty “when the nonself is a fetus growing inside a woman’s body.”¹² Shildrick argues that the action of microchimerism, the presence of nonself cells in the body, is noteworthy for immunology, commenting:

The mechanisms of the maternal-fetal relation remain something of a mystery but the view persists that the two bodies operate as separate entities, immunologically opposed to one another rather than mutually supportive. While the placenta was recognized as a limited site of exchange between mother and fetus—oxygen, nutrients and hormones passing in one direction, products of excretion in the other—it was, until the later 20th century, mainly seen as a protective barrier separating the distinct maternal and fetal bodies. And, as many women have found to their detriment, that supposed mutual distinction leaks over into the biopolitical sphere in the context of abortion politics, for example. At the same time, however, a great deal of research [...] has uncovered strong evidence, now widely accepted, that both maternal and fetal cells cross the placental barrier as a matter of course, effecting a kind of microchimerism within each body.¹³

Consistent with the aims of this thesis, Shildrick is eager to see how the revisioning of scientific discourse allows us to offer a critique of the bounded body within political and philosophical discourse. As she notes, Esposito identifies pregnancy “as a model for an immunity that does not end up destroying the life it seeks to preserve, that is not simply tolerant but hospitable to, and nourishing of, difference,” that is coherent with the scientific notion of microchimerism activated by pregnancy “which is bidirectional and at very least partially protective to both mother and fetus.”¹⁴

The beginning of life is a recurrent trope in Esposito’s philosophy for thinking about the potential of community.¹⁵ In *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* Esposito develops his idea of how the constant modifications and alterations which the body makes during pregnancy challenge the militaristic vision of the immune system. As Esposito suggests, pregnancy is not marked by an absence or failure of immunity which allows the tolerance of the fetal body. Rather, there is a complex immunitary dynamic at play which sees the immunity mechanism recognize a foreign presence, but acknowledges it as a life-giving force. He states:

Alive: Affect, Identity and Anxiety in Organ Transplantation,” *Body & Society* 21, no. 3 (June 2015): 20-41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15585886>.

¹² Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, 59.

¹³ Shildrick, “Chimerism and *Immunitas*,” 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁵ See Esposito, *Bios*, xxxi–xxxii.

This is the ultimate—and prime—issue around which the entire immune paradigm wraps itself until reaching the point where it becomes indistinguishable from its opposite, “community”: the force of the immune attack is precisely what keeps alive that which it should normally destroy. The mother is pitted against the child and the child against the mother, and yet what results from this conflict is the spark of life. Contrary to the metaphor of a fight to the death, what takes place in the mother’s womb is a fight “to life,” proving that difference and conflict are not necessarily destructive.¹⁶

Outlining how the conflict between antibody and self-regulatory cells during pregnancy does not cause destruction, as with an autoimmune disease, but rather promote growth, he continues:

Like a tug of war, the equilibrium of the whole is determined not by subtraction, but by the sum of the forces that oppose each other. In the same way, self-regulation is determined by the force of the immune response. A perspective is thus opened up with the immunitary logic that overturns its prevailing interpretation. From this perspective, nothing remains of the incompatibility between self and other. The other is the form the self takes where inside intersects with outside, the proper with the common, immunity with community.¹⁷

The presence of paternal chromosomes in the fetus permits its incorporation into the mother’s body. Penelope Deutscher reasons that in opposition to the images of war and defence, Esposito presents an “image of the mother as able to tolerate the fetus, only *insofar* as it is other and heterogeneous.”¹⁸ There is hope in Esposito’s image of an affirmative biopolitics here, a community built on difference. However, coherent with the erasure of considerations of gender and/or sexual difference throughout Esposito’s philosophy, women are simply hollow, physical containers of this new community, rather than its active creators.

Giving Voice to Pregnancy and Motherhood: Maggie Nelson’s Queer Family Making

Eula Biss’s *On Immunity* is illustrative of how a growing corpus of writing about pregnancy and early motherhood considers these experiences as exemplary of disrupting bodily

¹⁶ Esposito, *Immunitas*, 171.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Penelope Deutscher, “THE MEMBRANE AND THE DIAPHRAGM,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18, no. 3 (September 2013): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725x.2013.834664>.

atomization, bearing arresting similarities to Esposito's philosophical approach. Biss writes:

You've had a lot of people's hands in you was a phrase I would hear in my mind for a long time after that surgery, along with *Remember, it's not your blood*. My pregnancy, like every pregnancy, had primed me for the understanding that my body was not mine alone and that its boundaries were more porous than I had ever been led to believe. It was not an idea that came easily, and I was dismayed by how many of the metaphors that occurred to me when I was pregnant were metaphors of political violence—invasion, occupation, and colonization. But during the birth, when the violence to my body was greatest, I was most aware not of the ugliness of a body's dependence on other bodies, but of the beauty of it.¹⁹

Lily Gurton-Wachter, writing an overview of the maternal body in literature in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, opens by reflecting that in pregnancy “the distinction you once knew between self and other comes undone. So does the gap between how you protect yourself and how you care for others.”²⁰ But unlike the experience of war, which Gurton-Wachter draws upon as a similar profoundly disrupting physical and mental event (one which divides the lives that experience it into a before and an after, and separates those affected from those not), there is a limited literary and philosophical record on pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting. The erasure of motherhood is linked to the broader lack of female voices in the philosophical and literary canon, a situation which began to change with the advent of second-wave feminism, particularly Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* in 1976. Rich's work set the tone for the cerebral engagement with motherhood which can be seen in *On Immunity* as well as Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015), Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001), Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015), Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors* (2016), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2016), and, most recently, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) and Kimberley Harrington's *Amateur Hour: Motherhood in Essays and Swear Words* (2018).²¹

¹⁹ Biss, *On Immunity*, 86–7.

²⁰ Lily Gurton-Wachter, “The Stranger Guest: The Literature of Pregnancy and New Motherhood,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 29, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/stranger-guest-literature-pregnancy-new-motherhood/>.

²¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1976); Elisa Albert *After Birth* (Boston, MA: Houghton Miffler Harcourt, 2015); Rachel Cusk *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001); Sarah Manguso, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (New York: Graywolf Press, 2015); Rivka Galchen *Little Labors* (New York: New Directions, 2016); Maggie Nelson *The Argonauts* (New York: Graywolf Press, 2016); Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2018); Kimberley Harrington, *Amateur Hour: Motherhood in Essays and Swear Words* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018).

This emerging canon is unified by its decision not to see motherhood as a disturbance of intellectual work but as its motivation.²²

I see these works, in their detailed interrogation of the effects of pregnancy and motherhood, as an enfleshing of the hollow container of Esposito's maternal body. While almost all of the texts employ a confessional aesthetic, it is Nelson's *The Argonauts* that best formally and thematically articulates the corporeal changes of pregnancy. The text has been described as a work of "autotheory", bending the divisions between genres to combine autobiography and critical theory to offer an entrancing account of Nelson's queer family making. As Hilton Als claims, *The Argonauts* "questions what it means to be a lover, a parent, someone's child—'heteronormative' roles—when you don't feel heteronormative, let alone comfortable with such traditional labels as 'gay,' 'straight,' 'female,' and 'male.'"²³ The narrative follows Nelson's pregnancy alongside the physical and emotional journey made by her spouse, the artist Harry Dodge, who is fluidly gendered and undergoes surgery during the same period. Nelson writes:

2011, the summer of our changing bodies. Me, four months pregnant, you six months on T. We pitched out, in our inscrutable hormonal soup, for Fort Lauderdale, to stay for a week at the beachside Sheraton in monsoon season, so that you could have top surgery by a good surgeon and recover. Less than twenty-four hours after we arrived, they were snapping a sterile green hat on your head—a "party hat," the nice nurse said—and wheeling you away. While you were under the knife, I drank gritty hot chocolate in the waiting room and watched Diana Nyad try to swim from Florida to Cuba. She didn't make it that time, even in her shark cage. But you did. You emerged four hours later, hilariously zonked from the drugs, trying in vain to play the host while slipping in and out of consciousness, your whole torso more tightly bound than you've ever managed yourself, a drain hanging off each side, two pouches that filled up over and over again with blood stuff the color of cherry Kool-Aid.²⁴

The formal mutability of *The Argonauts*' is mirrored by Nelson's and Dodge's queer refusal of the categories assigned to their identities. As the text documents, Dodge refuses the idea of a gender transition, "*I'm not on my way anywhere*," prompting Nelson to ask: "Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body?"²⁵ With this in mind, Nelson outlines the political potential of the term *queer*

²² Gurton-Wachter, "The Stranger Guest."

²³ Hilton Als, "Immediate Family: Maggie Nelson's Life in Words," *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/18/maggie-nelsons-many-selves>.

²⁴ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 79–80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13, 53.

with reference to the thinking of Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick “wanted the term to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder—a nominative, like *Argo* willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip,” and Nelson goes on to describe the specific experience of pregnancy in this queer vein.²⁶ As an older mother, she distances herself from the idea that motherhood comes with an eradication of a sense of self, claiming that she had almost “four decades to become myself before experimenting with my obliteration.”²⁷ But in her descriptions of the experience of labor, she writes of her fear of “*falling forever, going to pieces*”, an issue not addressed in any of the pregnancy magazines.²⁸ Crucially, Nelson describes the feeling of her body making another as one of “radical intimacy, radical difference,” akin to Esposito’s articulation of pregnancy as both foreign and life-giving.²⁹

Nelson’s account of pregnancy is positioned against a broader consideration of care-taking, an ethics built on difference. Queer family making for Nelson is expansive, composed of “peers or mentors or lovers or ex-lovers or children or non-human animals”; child bearing is just one aspect.³⁰ This expansive idea of care-taking is lingered upon in the book’s conclusion, which juxtaposes Nelson’s giving birth with the cessation of labor signified by Dodge’s mother’s death from cancer.³¹ Nelson describes her own acceptance of her dependence on others, an abandoning of an autonomous hypercompetence which marked her youth, with a quote from Butler’s *Precarious Life* in which Butler is attempting to think through the primary vulnerability associated with the infant. Butler discusses how the infant’s need for survival leads it to attach “to persons and institutional conditions that may well be violent, impoverishing and inadequate,” what is then referred to as “the bind of radically inadequate care.”³² Nelson uses Butler’s idea to articulate her own progression from a fantasy of independence. As Butler suggests, “It is not that we are born and then later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself (birth is, by definition, precarious), which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands.”³³ Through Nelson’s description of the

²⁶ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

³¹ Kaye Mitchell, “FERAL WITH VULNERABILITY,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 23, no.1 (February 2018): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435398>.

³² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 45.

³³ Judith Butler, “Precariousness and Grievability—When Is Life Grievable?,” *Verso Books*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2339-judith-butler-preciousness-and-grievability-when-is-life-grievable>.

childbirth, surrounded by hospital staff, and the death of Dodge's mother, we see the "social network of hands" which Butler describes. Here, Nelson gives the text over to Dodge to describe their mother's death: "*and then her eyes relaxed and her shoulders relaxed of a piece, and I knew she had found her way.*" Following this, Nelson's voice reappears to describe the last stages of labor. She is surrounded by Dodge, and their birth assistant Jessica, the hospital staff, a chorus of counsel: "Push, they say. They teach me."³⁴ *The Argonauts* thus powerfully represents the communities of care which encircle two paradigmatic moments of intense precariousness, birth and death, broadening Esposito's concept of community to include not only the relationship between mother and fetus, but also their relationship to the people surrounding them.

Unsung Toils of the Global Care Chain: The Conflict of Creative and Domestic Labor in *After Birth* and *A Life's Work*

In Nelson's account, motherhood is positioned as one form of care-taking among many. But her concept of labor within the text is purely tied to the physiological and the literary: the birth of Nelson's son prompts her to "get back to work" as a writer, specifically, as So Mayer notes, writing *The Argonauts*.³⁵ I now wish to broaden my focus to observe how the concept of labor plays out in two early motherhood and pregnancy narratives: Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* and Elisa Albert's *After Birth*. The protagonists of Cusk's personal account and Albert's fictional narrative of early motherhood both demonstrate the dependence of their creative labor, the writing of their narratives, on the domestic labor of racialized and migrant women to care for their children. As I go on to argue, the class-based and racialized divisions in these narratives demonstrate the dangers of basing communities on an ethereal precariousness which does not consider the politics of precarity and long-term disenfranchisement. Before delving into how these encounters are represented within the two texts at hand, here, following Mayer, I want to draw on the distinction between motherhood and mothering made recently by Alexis Gumbs in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*. Motherhood is defined as a status given to white middle-class women whose rights to their children are not challenged by the state, even if they do not perform the labor of childcare. The work of mothering is thus:

a possible action, the name for that nurturing work, that survival dance *worked* by enslaved women who were forced to breastfeed the children *of* the status mothers

³⁴ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 132.

³⁵ Ibid., 153; So Mayer, "MEDEA'S PERINEUM," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 23, no.1 (February 2018): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435397>.

while having no control over whether their birth or chosen children were sold away. Mothering is a form of labor *worked* by immigrant nannies like my grandmother who mothered wealthy white kids in order to send to Jamaica for my mother and her brothers who could not afford the privilege of her presence. Mothering is *worked* by chosen and accidental mentors who agree to support some growing unpredictable thing called future. Mothering is *worked* by house mothers in ball culture who provide spaces of self-love and expression for/as queer youth of color in the street.³⁶

The labor of mothering, which, as Gumbs points out, is predominantly performed by women of color, flickers at the edges of a number of these pregnancy narratives. In her semi-autobiographical account of early motherhood *A Life's Work*, Rachel Cusk devotes an entire chapter, titled "Help", to the potential candidates that might take care of her daughter while she writes. There is Rosa, from Spain, who is "angry. She cursed the British weather. She cursed our house, which had been so difficult to find," and whose hostile demeanor leads Cusk to dismiss her on the spot.³⁷ Celia, a Brazilian woman, "desired fervently to better her circumstances," and was trying to get a teaching qualification but is prevented from doing so by her "stubbornly and profoundly accented English, an English that no amount of classes and courses could erase."³⁸ After failing her English course, Celia becomes "silent and morose, walking as if every step hurt her, her eyes shining with unhappiness."³⁹ Celia is replaced by Stefan, a Slovenian, who is writing his PhD, wildly efficient at housework, but terrible with children.⁴⁰ He, too, is dismissed. The issue unresolved, the chapter ends with a phone call from Rosa, "ringing to let us know how badly we had treated her. You people, she said, you pay slave wages. You are rich and you pay slave wages for slave labour."⁴¹ Rosa had seen a check for a large amount of money, and asks Cusk what she "had done to deserve that money? It was she who slaved all day. Her tirade became obscene, hysterical."⁴²

Elisa Albert's novel *After Birth*, a raw rendition of the tribulations of early motherhood, also positions her creative labor in opposition to the domestic. The narrator Ari is trapped with her new baby in a dismal upstate New York town where her husband is employed as a professor. Ari's own new experience of motherhood is interwoven with her narration

³⁶ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering," in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 22–3.

³⁷ Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 149.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴² *Ibid.*

of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, and her mother, who died early as a result of her own mother taking Diethylstilbestrol, a fertility drug which prevents miscarriage but fated “the unborn to all manner of cancerous disaster.”⁴³ The arrival of Mina, a visiting poet and musician, profoundly alters Ari’s situation. The two women become microbiotically, spiritually, and emotionally entwined as Ari helps to breastfeed Mina’s infant. Entranced by this new communion, furious at having been made to have a C-section, and conscious of the way in which a synthetic drug killed her own mother, Ari rails against the medicalization of childbirth. “Basic biological functions,” she thinks, “ceded a generation or two or three ago and by now vanished as if the knowledge never existed in the first place. Like if breathing became specialised, or, no—like shitting became specialised. Like if some corporation struck gold convincing us all that shitting is not necessary.”⁴⁴ Against this backdrop, Ari is trying (and failing), to finish her PhD dissertation, a continuation of a master’s project which dissects “*how feminist organizations very frequently tend to implode [...] Because women are insecure competitive ragey cuntrags with each other. In a nutshell.*”⁴⁵ And so, four days a week so that she might work, she hands the baby over to Nasreen at day care, who has “seven children, the oldest four of whom still live in Pakistan with her sister.”⁴⁶ Ari is confident that Nasreen “takes good care of him. Nasreen knows how. It’s good for him there. Better, even probably.”⁴⁷ Domestic work again features in Ari’s mother’s narrative. Ari reflects that her mother “abused our housekeepers, made them cry. She preferred Hispanic housekeepers as the black ones didn’t take shit [...] I remember a succession of kowtowing brown women: *yes Miss Janice, okay Miss Janice, I so sorry Miss Janice, oh Miss Janice yes I so sorry.*”⁴⁸

In spite of their differing national contexts—Cusk’s book is set in the UK, Albert’s in the U.S—these women are connected by what Arlie Hochschild has influentially named the “global care chain,” a series of personal links that exists between people across the world founded on the paid or unpaid work of caring.⁴⁹ The international composition of this care chain has been exacerbated under post-Fordism. As indicated by Lisa Adkins, the features of the Fordist sexual contract, with the heteronormative ideal of the male breadwinner earning a family wage supported domestically by the housewife, has fallen away alongside the Keynesian social contract from which it sprang. It has been replaced by an adult worker model, whereby all subjects are either employed, or looking vigorously for work.

⁴³ Albert, *After Birth*, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value,” in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens (London: Vintage, 2001), 130.

⁵⁰ Against the backdrop of wage stagnation, increasingly precarious modes of work, and prevalent financial indebtedness, a woman's wage is now central to the survival of many households.⁵¹ Crucially, neoliberal orthodoxy, intent on the destruction of public space, has placed state-run collective models of child rearing such as nurseries, after school centers, and community based projects to the back of government agendas.⁵² Families are thus increasingly responsible for their own private care arrangements, as we see in *A Life's Work* and *After Birth*. Silvia Federici situates the commercialization and globalization of forms of intimate care with regard to the permanent crisis in social reproduction under capitalism. While Federici asserts that it is only in the present context of the twenty-first century that the effects of the global economic restructuring—particularly the abrogation of social contracts and noncontractual forms of labor examined in the first chapter of this thesis—have been felt in the global North by previously politically immunized subjects, the devastating impact of capital accumulation and labor power was continuous in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands, and the former socialist world. The migration of women from these regions, and on a national scale within racialized and poor communities within the United States, to work within the domestic spaces of the wealthy creates a reproduction crisis as women are forced to leave their homes and dependents behind.⁵³ As Federici suggests, “while governments celebrate the ‘globalization of care,’ which enables them to reduce investment in reproduction, it is clear that this ‘solution’ has a tremendous social cost, not only for the individual immigrant women but for the communities from which they originate.”⁵⁴

Together, *After Birth* and *A Life's Work* articulate the divisions which the absence of collective forms of care produce between women, bringing the global interdependencies into the heart of the family home. The marginalization of the narratives of Nasreen in Albert's book and of Rosa, Stefan, and Celia in Cusk's work demonstrates the fractures between the protagonists, undertaking intellectual and creative work about motherhood, and the other characters who, in Gumbs's terms, are undertaking at least some of the mothering. Ari is positioned in opposition to Nasreen, who is conceived as being a more natural maternal figure, even if, as the novel notes, her presence in the U.S prevents her from caring for four of her own children. Ari's ambivalence toward Nasreen is positioned

⁵⁰ Adkins, “Contingent Labour,” 2–3.

⁵¹ Lisa Adkins and Maryanne Dever, “The Financialisation of Social Reproduction,” in *The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract*, 130–1.

⁵² Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

⁵³ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 118.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

against her mother's open aggression, a violence replicated in the narrator's description of these women as "kowtowing." Rosa's violent screaming at Cusk's narrator, her invocation of "slave wages", is positioned against a general sense of Rosa's irrationality that Cusk must escape. In these narratives, we see how within the space of the middle-class household, "the legacies of a colonial order, reactivated through racial and gendered segregation in the labor market and dehumanizing migration policies, are felt on an individual level and mobilized in our everyday encounters."⁵⁵ In their erasure of their identity, these two narratives echo the desensitizing portrayals of domestic workers in the contemporary societal imaginary. As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez claims in his wide-ranging study of the experiences of migrant domestic workers and their employers, domestic workers are often portrayed by their employers in one-dimensional ways as "pre-modern subjects lacking any kind of social complexity and individual agency. They are perceived merely as 'automatons.'"⁵⁶ These affects are connected to a colonial imaginary, which positions the irrational "Other" in opposition to the rational and sovereign Western self.⁵⁷

This is an uncomfortable relationship when we consider the different kinds of work undertaken in *After Birth* and *A Life's Work*. While not wishing to smooth out the nuances of these pregnancy and early motherhood narratives, I argue that these acts of creativity should be positioned in relation to the entrepreneurial guise given to childrearing practices within the context of neoliberal middle-class motherhood.⁵⁸ The creation of content about motherhood—think of the booming market of mummy blogging—and the revival of traditional female crafts on sites like Etsy capture the increased veneration of motherhood not seen since the "hypernatalist" 1950s, interpolated with a neoliberal context of increasing economic precarity, which drives to push all social interactions and practices within an economic realm.⁵⁹ These middle-class performances of motherhood are dependent on migrant and racialized women workers, thereby demonstrating the fractures in a politics based on precarity. Although, as Lorey argues, the "self-precarization" adopted historically by artists and creatives has become the typical way of living and working in neoliberal societies, the precarity endured by these domestic workers needs to be distinguished.⁶⁰ As suggested above, the experiences of racialized and migrant female workers is marked by ongoing manifestations of colonial history. This hammers home the idea that the normalization of precarity does not abolish inequality. There are, of course, no easy answers to these structural questions. But what I hope to

⁵⁵ Gutiérrez Rodríguez, *Migration*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸ Adkins, "Contingent Labour," 15.

⁵⁹ Susan Luckman, "Micro-enterprise as Work-Life 'Magical Solution,'" in *The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract*, 92.

⁶⁰ Puar, ed., "Precarity Talk," 164.

show in the next section is a selection of collective political practices formed around the care of debilitated bodies as a template for a new ethics which does not, as in the case of these narratives or, arguably, in the case of Dr. Gawande, pay lip- service to a politics of interdependency without scrutinizing the exploitation which undergirds neoliberal institutions of care.

Arts of Endurance: Immunity with Community to Produce Livable Lives

In “Sick Woman Theory”, performer, artist, and writer Johanna Hedva writes of their experience of the Black Lives Matter protests in late 2014. The Sick Woman is a collective term which stands in opposition to the fantastical immune subject, an

identity and body that can belong to anyone denied the privileged existence—or the cruelly optimistic promise of such an existence—of the white, straight, healthy, neurotypical, upper- and middle-class, cis- and able-bodied man who makes his home in a wealthy country, has never not had health insurance, and whose importance to society is everywhere recognized and made explicit by that society; whose importance and care dominates that society, at the expense of everyone else.

The Sick Woman is anyone who does not have this guarantee of care.

The Sick Woman is told that, to this society, her care, even her survival, does not matter.

The Sick Woman is all of the “dysfunctional,” “dangerous” and “in danger,” “badly behaved,” “crazy,” “incurable,” “traumatized,” “disordered,” “diseased,” “chronic,” “uninsurable,” “wretched,” “undesirable” and altogether “dysfunctional” bodies belonging to women, people of color, poor, ill, neuro-atypical, differently abled, queer, trans, and genderfluid people, who have been historically pathologized, hospitalized, institutionalized, brutalized, rendered “unmanageable,” and therefore made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible.⁶¹

At the time of writing, Hedva was based in MacArthur Park in Los Angeles. They live with chronic illness, and the Black Lives Matter protests coincided with a particularly devastating flare of their symptoms, leaving them bed-ridden. They write, “I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose

⁶¹ Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory,” *Mask Magazine*, Jan 1, 2016, <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.

up my sick woman fist, in solidarity.”⁶² Hedva’s inability to physically attend the protest led her to interrogate the exclusions of the Arendtian space of the political, which requires the assembly of bodies on the streets—thereby making invisible the participation of the sick, their carers, the imprisoned, those who face the threat of being fired, or of being a victim of police brutality.⁶³ As Hedva suggests, “the inevitability of violence at a demonstration—especially a demonstration that emerged to insist upon the importance of bodies who’ve been violently un-cared for—ensures that a certain amount of people won’t, because they can’t, show up.”⁶⁴ Lying in bed, unable to perform any of the actions associated with public forms of protest, or indeed to be visible as a political being, opens what Hedva designates the central question of Sick Woman Theory: “How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can’t get out of bed?”⁶⁵

Hedva points us toward Judith Butler’s analysis of public space and precarity to nuance our understanding of who gets to participate in public space, and how this can be useful in thinking about privatized modes of protest. For Butler, the forms of public assembly embodied in the Occupy movements, the Arab Spring, and anti-precarity demonstrations including Black Lives Matter provide a counteraction to the forms of neoliberal responsabilization discussed in chapter 1, which see the valorization of self-reliance and entrepreneurship against the stripping away of public services and the welfare state.⁶⁶ But, as Butler and Hedva argue, these forms of public protest have the potential to be partial and exclusionary. In Butler’s mind, the inability for all bodies to attend these protests asks us to consider the restrictive ways in which the public sphere and the category of “the people” are defined, but more significantly to reflect on the networks of support, the infrastructural conditions, and the living and institutional processes needed for all subjects to maintain what she terms a “livable life.” The idea, which Butler draws from disability studies, that every body requires support provides a template for a new kind of ethics which respects all our dependencies and relations.⁶⁷ Rather than presuming the capacity of individuals to be able to collect on the streets, Butler argues for the formulation of an ethics around an “invariant body and its permanent needs.”⁶⁸ She continues that this body should therefore become the gauge through which we measure the effectiveness of our economic and political organizations in encouraging or

⁶² Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory”.

⁶³ Ibid., Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

⁶⁴ Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory”.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 129.

destabilizing human flourishing.⁶⁹ For Butler, infrastructure and architecture must become “a collaborative actor” in the process of the political.⁷⁰

What would an ethics formulated around the production of livable life for the debilitated or sick or chronically ill look like? As one of my concluding thoughts, I will turn to the work of the activist group the Canaries. As I discovered in an enriching exchange with one its founders, Jesse Cohen, the Canaries began spontaneously as a conversation about experiences with autoimmunity between Cohen, Carolyn Lazard, and Bonnie Swencionis. Until their chance encounter, in which they were connected through mutual friends who recognized the overlap in their symptoms and experiences, all three individuals had been repeatedly confronted with the failure of the biomedical establishment to recognize their needs.⁷¹ Organically, this three-person conversation expanded to become a monthly support group, an email list, an art collective, and a website with resources for those with autoimmune conditions. The group, based predominantly in the United States, derives its name from the phrase “canary in the coal mine,” which reflects the idea that the physical responses that the group members have to their environments are “our bodies are registering and expressing issues that do ultimately affect us all.”⁷² Breaking down the idea of the bounded immune individual, in an interview Lazard and Cohen describe healing as requiring an understanding of the relationship “between not only the mind and the body but also between the body and the bodies of others, the environment, emotions, political movements, geological time, etc.”⁷³ Crucially, these experiences model what Ed Cohen describes as a long-standing framework of healing in which illnesses are partially a result of the imbalance between our inner and outer worlds.⁷⁴ Frustrated by the absence of spaces to talk about their experiences of illness “freely and narratively”, the group do not dismiss biomedical models of diagnosis and treatment, but see them alone as insufficient in describing the ways in which their illnesses affect their lives. Therefore, they advocate an alternative medical system, one based on intuition and information sharing.⁷⁵ As described on their website, they offer a holistic, all-encompassing approach to healing which includes alternative and biomedical treatments alongside an interpersonal approach, building

⁶⁹ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 129.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷¹ Jesse Cohen, interview by author, Los Angeles, May 11, 2016.

⁷² “About: We Are Canaries,” We Are Canaries, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://wearecanaries.com/contact/>.

⁷³ Jesse Cohen and Carolyn Lazard, interview by Terri C. Smith, in *Initial Conditions: Artists Make Spaces*, ed. Terri C. Smith (Stamford, CT: Franklin Street Works, 2015). Exhibition catalogue, accessed May 1, 2016, https://franklinstreetworksdocuments.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/initialconditions_booklet_final.pdf

⁷⁴ Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, 4.

⁷⁵ Cohen, interview by author.

“community and a commons of care.”⁷⁶ This community is formed in opposition to a corporatized medical system and enforced wellness culture. They note that for those with chronic conditions, symptoms become much worse at times when they are uninsured or made to fit into work schedules. This creates a vicious cycle. Prevented from financially and physically accessing services which are required, many of these individuals are forced to take on more work, which in turn makes them sicker, creating the inaccessibility of long-term treatment.⁷⁷

The Canaries were one group that participated in the curatorial project *Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism’s Temporal Bullying*, which took place at the EFA Project Space in New York in 2017, with satellite events in Houston, both locations marked by their association with finance and healthcare.⁷⁸ The exhibition was formulated around the idea that the temporalities of those structurally excluded—the racialized, debilitated, disabled, female, classed, indigenous, queer bodies, who, in Audre Lorde’s terms, were not meant to survive—act as a potentially resistant force to capitalism and other forms of oppression.⁷⁹ Curator Taraneh Fazeli claims:

Sick time is non-compliant. It refuses a fantasy of normalcy measured by either-in-or-out thresholds, demands care that exceeds that which the nuclear family unit can provide, and hints at how we might begin to tell capitalism to back the fuck off and keep its hands to itself (i.e. pretty please stop expropriating even our most basic reproductive labor and resources).⁸⁰

Alongside work by other artists in “fluctuating states of debility”, the Canaries produced *Notes for the Waiting Room*, which was composed of three parts: an informational booklet, an installation, and a distribution network which took the publication to art spaces and to the offices of medical practitioners.⁸¹ The informational booklet provides different approaches to healing, including practical advice such as a set of prep questions before a doctor’s appointment in a section entitled “Being Your Own Advocate” in order to aid

⁷⁶ “About: We Are Canaries.”

⁷⁷ Canaries, *Notes for the Waiting Room*, accessed May 1, 2016, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57798de320099e9ea5949651/t/59cd301ccd39c3e808d1edf3/1506619444570/NFTWR_LincoV5.pdf.

⁷⁸ Katie Anania, “Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism’s Temporal Bullying,” *Art Forum*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalism-s-temporal-bullying-68096>.

⁷⁹ Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Black Unicorn* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1978), 31–2.

⁸⁰ Taraneh Fazeli, “Notes for ‘Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism’s Temporal Bullying’ in conversation with the Canaries,” *Temporary Art Review*, May 26, 2016, <http://temporaryartreview.com/notes-for-sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time-against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying-in-conversation-with-the-canaries/>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

individuals in being able to voice their concerns clearly in the limited time available. After the various approaches to healing displayed, there is a bibliography which offers literary and theoretical texts, including many of the ones discussed in this thesis, that the group have found useful in their experience of being chronically ill. In their aims for the project, they state: “we hope it will challenge the unilateral and hierarchical transmission of information from doctor to patient and, much like the overall art and advocacy work of the Canaries, foster solidarity and embodied knowledge sharing instead.”⁸² As part of *Warp and Weft of Care*, the satellite programming series which took place in Houston, artists from the exhibition joined forces with long-standing community programs such as Project Row Houses’ Young Mothers Residential Program, which provides a culturally rich environment to give low-income single mothers in Houston’s Third Ward support in achieving independent and holistic lives, and the collaborative program between the art gallery FotoFest and Angela’s House, which aims to successfully transition women into society following incarceration. As proposed by *Warp and Weft of Care*’s creators: “The aim is to support creative exchange between communities of care in varying contexts, particularly those in red and purple states where poor institutional support has long synced with a prevailing ‘maverick’ ideology of independence and entrepreneurship.”⁸³ These projects collectively imagine the dependence of creative and domestic labor and move care from the private realm back into public space. In recognizing our interconnectedness and nurturing our difference, they model a version, as Esposito lays out, of immunity *with* community.

Of course, as a thesis which looks at contemporary fiction, it seems pertinent to ask by closing—what role, if any, can literature play in creating these new correlated ways of being? Throughout the course of this thesis, I have laid out the case for literature as a powerful tool for diagnosing the subtleties of existence under a neoliberal rationality. However, I am perhaps a little wary of fiction’s ability to create the communities *with* immunity that we see in the examples above. As Rachel Greenwald Smith has convincingly argued, the established humane ambition of the novel form to connect individuals by showing them the interior life of others has been perplexed by life under a neoliberal rationality that thrives on excessive individualization and affective labor that requires the strategic manipulation of one’s feelings.⁸⁴ While Greenwald Smith, akin to the case made in Mitchum Huehls’s *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, appeals for the importance of a counter-tradition of contemporary literature that exhibits emotional detachment, I claim going forward that we should looking backward,

⁸² Fazeli, “Notes.”

⁸³ “Survival Creativity,” EFA Project Space Program, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.projectspace-efanyc.org/events/survival-creativity>.

⁸⁴ Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 1–2; Huehls, *After Critique*, xi.

specifically to the biopolitically-engaged critical dystopias produced by authors who have not traditionally been afforded the privileges of immunity, such as Leslie Silko and Octavia E. Butler.⁸⁵ Silko's and Butler's literary trajectories span the intensification of a neoliberal rationality, and, analogous to immunitary narratives, both authors center the experiences of invariant and debilitated bodies at the heart of their fiction. However, they offer both a nuanced account of the entangled capitalist, racialized, environmental, and biopolitical dimensions of American history while offering these contaminated corporealities as a site of active resilience and resistance. Rather than mourning the loss of the protections and privileges that immunity once held, Silko's and Butler's novels offer strategies for moving together into an uncertain future.

⁸⁵ In particular see; Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993); Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1993); Butler, *Clay's Ark* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Butler, *Patternmaster* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1976); Butler, *Kindred* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1979); Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1987); Butler, *Adulthood Rites* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1988), *Imago* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1989); Silko, *Ceremony*; Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

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Summary

Sick Men of Late Capitalism: Immunity and Precarity in Recent American Fiction and Performance Art

This thesis explores the recurring trope of the debilitated male body in contemporary American fiction and late-twentieth-century performance art to prize open the complex biopolitical conditions of living under neoliberalism. It places novels by Joshua Ferris, Ben Marcus, and Hanya Yanagihara into dialogue with the endurance art of Ron Athey, Chris Burden, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, James Luna, and Tehching Hsieh to think about ways in which the disintegration of the body has been used as a metonym to consider the pressures put upon liberal ideas of sovereignty, citizenship, and labor in a globalized, corporatized world.

Samenvatting

Zieke mannen van het late kapitalisme: Immuniteit en precariteit in recente Amerikaanse fictie en performancekunst

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de troep van het verzwakte mannelijke lichaam in hedendaagse Amerikaanse fictie en laat-twintigste-eeuwse performancekunst met als doel de complexe biopolitieke condities van het leven onder het neoliberalisme te belichten. Het plaatst romans van Joshua Ferris, Ben Marcus en Hanya Yanagihara in dialoog met de uithoudingskunst van Ron Athey, Chris Burden, Coco Fusco en Guillermo Gómez-Peña, James Luna en Tehching Hsieh om te reflecteren over de manier waarop de desintegratie van het lichaam wordt gebruikt als metonymie voor het in de verdrukking komen van liberale ideeën van soevereiniteit, burgerschap en arbeid in een geglobaliseerde, gecorporatiseerde wereld.

