

AESTHETIC IMPROPRIETY: PROPERTIES OF POLITICS AND LAW
IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Anna Rose Casey
February 2016

© 2016 Anna Rose Casey

AESTHETIC IMPROPRIETY: PROPERTIES OF POLITICS AND LAW IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

Anna Rose Casey, Ph.D.
Cornell University 2016

“Aesthetic Impropriety: Properties of Law and Politics in Postcolonial Literature” addresses the problem of property lying at the heart of many postcolonial novels. The complicated status of property as a construct, legal precept, and philosophy of self-ownership has not been fully considered in a postcolonial context, particularly as it has informed the genre of the novel. My research draws upon theorizations of property in political philosophy and American legal studies to examine how property has shaped anti-colonial literary form.

Chapter One builds on a long tradition of critiquing institutions of law, government, and the nation-state for being exclusionary, egoistic, and overly invested in the construct of property. Using the paradigm of “aesthetic impropriety,” I argue that postcolonial novels frequently configure non-proprietary forms of ethical relation. Chapter Two turns to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Using research into Indian inheritance and matrimonial law, I show how Roy’s novel confronts Indian property law’s gendered exclusions, countering the systematic dispossession of Indian women by establishing, through its non-proprietary, “improper” aesthetics, a relational mode of political life.

Chapter Three illuminates J. M. Coetzee’s late-apartheid novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* through contextual readings of apartheid’s racially exclusionary land and labor laws. I reveal this novel’s concern with the question of inheritance, arguing that it rejects the hereditary power of the ruling white minority by describing its black protagonist as part of an elective, democratic community. Chapter Four considers the relationship between aesthetic style and political form in

Ben Okri's 1991 novel, *The Famished Road*. Whereas critics typically describe Okri's novel as magical realist, I associate this novel's extravagant, excessive, and exuberant aesthetics as consonant with democracy's mode of functioning, affirming the Nigerian population's capacity to democratically achieve a fairer nation. Finally, my conclusion contributes to contemporary debates about modes of literary interpretation by exploring a possible method of improper reading.

Overall, my dissertation is interdisciplinary in its insights: it offers a new paradigm for postcolonial literary studies and it demonstrates, through sustained formal analysis, the necessary contributions of literary studies to analyzing privative economic, legal, and political systems and theorizing alternatives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rose Casey graduated from Oxford University in 2004 with a B.A. (Honors) degree in English Language and Literature. She gained an M.A. in English Literature from the University of British Columbia in 2008 and an M.A. in English from Cornell University in 2012. She received her Ph.D. in English from Cornell University in 2016.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks are owed to the diverse community that made possible the writing and completion of this dissertation.

For her intellectual curiosity, high expectations, and consistent mentorship, I owe immeasurable gratitude to Elizabeth Anker, who provided expert guidance through the process of developing this research project. Her sharpness of thought and breadth of knowledge has profoundly shaped this work and my own intellectual development, and I am immensely grateful for her ongoing support and professional guidance. Also at Cornell, Tracy McNulty and Natalie Melas proved excellent teachers, driving me to improve my claims through their probing questions, critical engagement, and literary and theoretical expertise. The many ways this project could be further refined and extended lie with me alone.

Earlier teachers profoundly influenced the development of my critical thinking, research capacities, and writing style; as such, they, too, deserve mention here. At the University of British Columbia, Mary Chapman offered a wonderful introduction to graduate research and academic life; she has gone on to be a valuable mentor and friend. Christina Lupton revealed new ways of combining theory with literary analysis in an influential directed reading course. She also modeled engaging, rigorous, and effective ways of delivering lectures to undergraduates, and her teaching has definitively informed my own. Finally, Laura Moss deserves special thanks for introducing me to my primary research area. Her classes were a highlight of my Masters program. At Oxford University, Jon Roberts and Valentine Cunningham profoundly influenced my mode of literary analysis, writing style, and general intellectual development. Finally, at Honley High School and Greenhead College respectively, Sue Clark

and Marion Power played an influential role in my pursuing English literary studies. They were both brilliant and inspiring teachers and I am honored to have studied with them.

Many additional debts have been incurred outside of academia. Particular thanks are due to my parents, Jackie Hughes and Mike Casey, without whose support this project would never have been completed. I am also grateful to Sally Casey, Joe Casey, Jack Casey, Olivia Casey, and Euan Casey for the many ways that they helped enable my work; I am very lucky to have such wonderful siblings. Simon Rolston provided immeasurable support in the final stages of this project: thank you.

In Ithaca, Julie Lind was the best friend anyone could ever ask for. I am so unendingly grateful for the many ways she offered support, encouragement, and an unceasing faith in my project's value and my ability to complete it. Life in Ithaca was also greatly enriched by many other valuable friendships: thanks go to my many Cornell friends and colleagues, and to the extended network in and around Hyers Street. Other friends also sustained this project: back home in England, Pella Frost, Laura Citron, Vic Kayee, Fay Schlesinger, and Belinda Platt proved friendship's utmost importance; in Vancouver, Wynn Deschner and Rachel Couix showed likewise. Special thanks are due to Kate Hallemeier, whose support and friendship has been invaluable: her wisdom has vastly improved my work and sustained me throughout this project, while her generous and constructive feedback on every chapter has immeasurably improved this dissertation. Thanks also go to Matthew Omelsky, whose feedback on the Roy and Okri chapters was likewise gratefully received.

For financial support, I am grateful to Cornell Graduate School for a Sage Fellowship in 2012-2013. I am also grateful to M. H. Abrams and the Cornell English Department for the M. H. Abrams Summer Graduate Fellowship in 2014.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION Declarations of Independence: Writing the Postcolonial Polis	1
CHAPTER ONE Property and Impropropriety: Aesthetics as Political Critique in Postcolonial Literature	15
Enclosure and Exclusion: Theorizing the Form of Possessive Individualism.....	18
Capitalism and Empire: On The Global Spread of Possessive Logic	24
Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of Containment in Modern Political Thought.....	35
Interruption, Invention, and Imagination: Art’s Politicality and Politics’ Aesthetics	50
CHAPTER TWO Possessive Politics and Improper Aesthetics: Property Rights and Female Dispossession in Arundhati Roy’s <i>The God of Small Things</i>	68
Dispossession & Divorce: Indian Property Law’s Possessive Delimitations.....	71
“My, My, My”: Possession and Dispossession in Indian Property Law	79
Aesthetic Impropropriety: Reimagining Politics and the Law	89
Utopia and Finitude; or, Tragedy’s Impropropriety	104
CHAPTER THREE Properties of Democracy: Rewriting the Apartheid State in J. M. Coetzee’s <i>Life & Times of Michael K</i>	116
Figuring Political Dispossession: Apartheid’s Land and Labor Laws	119
Constitutive Relation: Reimagining the Polity in <i>Life & Times of Michael K</i>	134
Envisioning Democracy through Narratives of Elective Association	151
CHAPTER FOUR Transformative Extravagance in Ben Okri’s <i>The Famished Road</i>	160
Extravagance and Extra-vagrancy: Challenging Dispossession in <i>The Famished Road</i>	164
Literary and Political Form: the Aesthetic Construction of a New Polis	176
Literary Interruptions and the Politics of Imagining	190
CONCLUSION Critical Impropropriety; or, Improper Reading.....	197
WORKS CITED	202

INTRODUCTION Declarations of Independence: Writing the Postcolonial Polis

We believe that it is the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil and have the necessities of life, so that they may have full opportunities of growth. We believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them the people have a further right to alter it or to abolish it. The British Government in India has not only deprived the Indian people of their freedom but has based itself on the exploitation of the masses, and has ruined India economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually. We believe, therefore, that India must sever the British connection and attain *Purna Swaraj*, or complete independence. (n.pag.)¹

On January 26, 1930, under the leadership of the future Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian National Congress declared *purna swaraj*, or “complete independence” from British colonial rule. The decision to aim not for dominion status, like former British colonies such as Canada, Australia, or the Irish Free State, but for full, sovereign independence, had been reached only at the very end of 1929 and came after a period of intense debate among the members of the All Parties Conference, a committee set up to challenge Britain’s reluctance to accept India’s demands for substantial constitutional reform. As the most powerful political organization in colonial India, the Congress wanted a commitment from Britain that, at the very least, India could be assured of becoming a British dominion in the near future. In the absence of any such promises, the Congress led its call for *purna swaraj*, a process that would be energized through the practice of *satyagraha* and non-violent resistance conceived by Mahatma Gandhi,

¹ The full Declaration is available in M. Gandhi, 384-5.

Nehru's closest ally and one of the most influential figures in the Congress.² In calling for political freedom as "the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people," the *Purna Swaraj* Declaration, excerpted above, draws on the discourse of universal human rights that has likewise been mobilized in other popular uprisings, beginning with the French and Haitian Revolutions.³ The Declaration advances a simultaneously universalist and particularist argument, at once referring to the human right to political liberty and identifying "the Indian people" as the specific population deserving redress in this instance. Marking a momentous point in modern Indian history, one that culminated in Independence in 1947, the Declaration condemns Britain for having "ruined India economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually." Framed as an argument not just about India but principally about its people, the Declaration denounces colonial Britain for its "exploitation of the masses," decrying the damage done to the political collectivity and calling for the Indian people's renewed sovereignty.

One of many similar proclamations issued from colonized regions across the British Empire in its final years, the *Purna Swaraj* Declaration displays a common interest not only in countering the afflictions of colonial rule but also in establishing a new or revitalized nation through the collective fashioning of an emergent political community. The anaphoristic "We believe," repeated three times in the Declaration's opening paragraph, reinforces Congress's stated objective of communicating a firm will to independence, just as it also registers the depth and breadth of conviction sustaining the collective body. Rhetorically positioned as both speaking for and as the people, the Declaration's frequent channeling through the pronoun "we" and possessive pronoun "our" conveys the sense of a nation united in its political vision. The

² See D. A. Low, especially 41-71.

³ On the discourse of human rights in the French Revolution, see Ranci re, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" On the Haitian Revolution, see Fischer, esp. 201-262; and Nesbitt, esp. 9-40.

vast community signaled in these collective pronouns is described in somewhat flexible terms, the subject of the “we” and “our” variously denoting the writers of the Declaration and the Indian people as a broad collectivity, as is demonstrated in the second paragraph: “The revenue derived from our people is out of all proportion to our income” (n. pag.) In its first instantiation, this “our” positions the writers as representatives of the people, not as the people themselves: the revenue in question comes not from “us,” as it would if the writers were here included as part of the collective, but from “our people.” In its second occurrence, however, the possessive pronoun refers to all Indians, including the writers: “The revenue . . . is out of all proportion to *our* income,” the Declaration avers, even though the first “our” would anticipate its accompanying possessive pronoun being “their.” Yet, when the Declaration goes on to proclaim, “Culturally, the system of education has torn us from our moorings, and our training has made us hug the very chains that bind us,” the pronouns “our” and possessive pronoun “us” have reverted to a vision of an expansive polity (n. pag.). In rejecting “the very chains that bind us” and reclaiming independent thought, the Declaration thus makes a broad claim for political solidarity among all Indian people, including the writers of the Declaration and the Indian National Congress more broadly. At the same time, in rhetorically figuring the plasticity of this collective through mobile pronouns, the Declaration identifies the community in question as a diverse composite rather than a static or unitary whole. The difference, as we shall come to see, lies between figuring a community in the possessive terms of most nationalisms and the still cohesive but more expansive framework of a flexible, more equitable community.

The rhetorical production of the political collectivity in the *Purna Swaraj* Declaration exemplifies a process that occurred repeatedly and in similar ways across diverse British colonies and their postcolonial successors. An issue of urgency in the years building up to

independence, the question of how the postcolonial state and its political community would be structured has, for many regions, remained of ongoing concern. Long after formally achieving sovereignty, postcolonial nations have grappled with the question of how independence was attained, what expectations have been met and which hopes have been dashed, and how the national polity might continue to be reshaped or re-imagined. Postcolonial literature, broadly conceived, likewise reveals a persistent interest in the form of the postcolonial nation, even across texts from vastly different cultures and with different experiences and durations of colonization.⁴ It should not be surprising that postcolonial literary texts are so frequently invested in interrogating the process of political reconstruction and in re-imagining the national community, given their writers' shared historical experience of colonial oppression and a similarly collective familiarity with decolonization's often slow and imperfect processes. Indeed, the question of what an ideal political community might look like, and how it might function, arguably bears more heavily on texts written in the context of emergent forms of political organization and a recent history of oppression than on those that have not experienced such pronounced upheaval.

The relationship between literature and politics lies at the heart of this dissertation, which takes as its focus novels that counter dominative systems of colonial rule and postcolonial neoliberal organization by aesthetically reconfiguring the polity to more equitable ends. Broadly exploring literature's capacities not just for representing the world but for participating in its material remaking, my analysis is channeled through novels from India, South Africa, and Nigeria: specifically, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. The novel genre is especially appropriate for

⁴ "Postcolonial literature" is a notoriously vexed category, frequently accused of being far too broad for any reasonable comparison. For an excellent overview of the debates, see Stuart Hall's influential essay, "When Was 'the Post-Colonial?' Thinking at the Limit." More recently, see Neil Lazarus 1-20.

considering questions related to the form of the postcolonial polity because of its frequent exploration of how relationships between people are organized. Most particularly, the novel form has long been associated with modern democracy, a connection that accrues from these literary and political modes' concurrent development as well as from their shared capacity to contain multitudes.^{5 6} If, as Nancy Ruttenburg describes, "The novel in its infinite capaciousness, its ability to comprehend all other literary forms—is the categorically protean, always contemporary genre," it functions in a markedly similar way to democracy, which is also "capaciou[s]", "comprehen[sive]," and "categorically protean" (6). Bearing not insignificant consequences for my analytic framework, colonized states generally aspired to democratic restructuring upon independence, whether through choice or imperial coercion. As Joseph Slaughter explains, a move toward democracy was, for many regions, a requirement imposed by colonial powers as part of acceding sovereignty.⁷ Given the broad correlation between democracy and the novel, therefore, and given the often expressly political interests found in postcolonial literature, novels from postcolonial regions are exemplary for exploring the relation between political and literary form.

The novels explored in "Aesthetic Impropriety" suggest that a fair and inclusionary political society can be achieved only by affirming the involvement of all people within structures of political life; as such, they make contradistinctive assumptions to the systems of political domination typically implemented by colonial powers, where the political relation between colonizers and colonized was frequently disavowed. Drawing upon the work of

⁵ Ian Watt's famous study, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* remains the foremost example of the argument that modern democracy and the genre of the novel developed in tandem, providing each other's conditions of possibility.

⁶ For an excellent overview of the debates regarding the relation between democracy and the novel, see the special edition of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, edited and introduced by Nancy Ruttenburg.

⁷ Through analyzing legal and political discourse alongside narrative form, Slaughter provides a comprehensive and convincing account of decolonization's predication upon democracy; in particular, see 86-139.

poststructuralist theorists such as Judith Butler and Leela Gandhi, who have recently challenged the privative structures of colonial and neoliberal political systems by describing contrastingly “relational” modes of democratic community, “Aesthetic Impropriety” argues that postcolonial novels frequently register their commitment to democratic politics through their associational aesthetic style: for example, through metaphors of connection, episodic or recursive narratives, and repeated linguistic refrains. The novels explored in this dissertation denounce the proprietary structure of multiple legal and political formations associated with colonial and neoliberal systems: in *The God of Small Things*, Roy challenges the gendered dispossession enacted through Indian property law; Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* denounces apartheid land and labor laws for the exclusions forced upon South Africa’s black population; and Okri’s *The Famished Road* addresses the criminalization of poverty through colonial vagrancy laws. These literary texts all, therefore, confront the punitive and exclusionary consequences of privative economic, legal, and political systems. Not only do they critique regnant systems of domination and exclusion but they also, through aesthetic formulations of relation, fashion alternative modes of political life.

As should be becoming clear, “Aesthetic Impropriety” suggests that the problem of property lies, largely unaddressed, at the heart of much postcolonial literature. Under colonial rule, governed populations were systematically dispossessed of rights, property, sovereignty and land. American literary studies has documented at length the connections between slavery, property law, and philosophies of ownership; however, the complicated status of property as a construct, legal precept, and philosophy of self-ownership has not been fully considered in the postcolonial context, particularly as it has informed the genre of the novel.⁸ Building upon

⁸ For analyses of property’s influence on American legal, economic, and political systems, see, among others, Edward Baptist, Eric Cheyfitz, Cheryl Harris, and Orlando Patterson (*Slavery and Social Death*).

theorizations of property in political philosophy and American legal studies, “Aesthetic Impropriety” explores the ways that property as an institution has shaped anti-colonial thought and literary form. As I argue throughout this dissertation, many postcolonial novels engage explicitly or implicitly with colonial and neoliberal systems of property ownership and philosophies of possession; moreover, they frequently challenge and recast the privative forms of law and politics set in motion by exclusionary systems of property ownership.

Underpinning much of my analysis is a view of modern political systems that was first systematized in C. B. Macpherson’s influential 1962 monograph, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Locke to Hobbes*.⁹ For Macpherson and the many who have followed in his wake—including, most recently, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou—modern systems of politics, economics, and law have been inflected by structures of possession in ways that far surpass any shared interest in the concept of property ownership or private property. My argument throughout this dissertation is not that political modernity is especially interested in possession as such, but that the very contours of modern political thought and its corresponding systems bear possessive forms and implications. The difference between these two claims is substantial, for all their shared subject matter and similar critical genealogy. While the former suggests that one of modernity’s distinguishing features is a persistent and widespread interest in material acquisition, the latter assumes that modern political thought frequently replicates possession’s self-contained, self-enclosed conceptual structure. Whereas the first example pertains to material history, the second is more attuned to epistemology: to the structures of logic, and forms of thought, that underpin the ideas and institutions that develop during political modernity. The difference, therefore, is between the now well-worn assertion that owning things

⁹ Butler’s collaborative work with Athena Athanasiou is the clearest exposition of her thought on this matter.

and accumulating property is a particularly modern impulse, and the more unusual and stimulating argument that modern political thought is predicated upon the logic of possession, or what Italian political philosopher, Roberto Esposito terms “the semantics of *proprium*”: that is, possession, property, and ownership (*Communitas* 2).

In describing “possession” as a logic, it should be noted that I am not making a totalizing claim regarding all forms of modern thought but identifying a notable trend within political modernity. In other words, I am suggesting that “possession,” while not modernity’s sole logic, is one that has proven significant and influential. Like Mary Poovey, who proceeds on similar grounds in *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, I contend that shared patterns of thought can be identified across diverse intellectual disciplines, usefully exposing continuities within a broad historical period. Poovey emphatically “rejects the claim, advanced by historians as diverse as Marxists and liberals, that history reveals the unfolding of a single ‘logic,’” whether “the logic of capital [. . . or] the logic of the liberal state”; instead, she defines history as “a continuous, if complex, process” that necessarily carries multiple distinct epistemologies (17). Situating herself between the intellectual historian and the literary critic, Poovey maintains the conviction, radical for history if not for literary studies, that “ideas cannot be separated from modes of representation,” that “*how an argument is conducted constitutes the argument itself*” (17; emphasis in original). Following Poovey’s association between ideas and their modes of representation, I similarly contend that knowledge is constituted not just by *what* is thought but also by thought’s very form.

Through attending to epistemological patterns evidenced across literary texts, political theoretical texts, and legal documents, this dissertation investigates overlapping structures of knowledge in political modernity: on the one hand, identifying the expansive persistence of

possessive logic in the modern political period, in Europe as well as in imperial and postcolonial locales; on the other, exploring the formal, conceptual, and substantive similarities between political and aesthetic form. To facilitate my analysis and to clarify the connection between political thought and literary aesthetics, I have devised the paradigm of “aesthetic impropriety.” Operating contradistinctively to the “proper” or “possessive” mode found repeatedly in modern political thought and practice, “improper” aesthetics participate in a movement of slowly reconfiguring possible ways of understanding modern political life. Through the paradigm of aesthetic impropriety, I have sought a way to assess non-realist postcolonial literature’s political commitments and to address the potentially interruptive or generative effects of literary expressions of political transformation. The paradigm likewise functions to identify commonalities across diverse regions, histories, and literary styles, without yet subsuming differences in any of these areas and more under a totalizing rubric.

As a descriptive literary concept, “aesthetic impropriety” serves to constellate and explain a set of representational strategies common to non-realist postcolonial novels. Examples of non-possessive, relational, “improper” aesthetic strategies include episodic, cyclical, or recursive narrative structures; metaphors of connection; tropes of imaginative possibility; and repeated linguistic refrains. As this set of examples suggests, loosely organized narratives can be made to cohere through imagery rather than chronology, forging connections across the temporal space of plot as well as the geographical expanse of setting. Other elements of aesthetic impropriety include synesthesia, which establishes connections between distinct senses, if not entities; metaphysically improbable events, like a character’s immediate transposition from one location to another a vast distance away; and representations of living beings and inanimate objects as exceeding their own structural confines and merging with others, such as a road joining with a

river or leaves becoming the sky. Even stylistic techniques that are less abstract in tenor might contribute to an overall suggestion of impropriety: as, for example, when an individualistic or divisive political economy is held up to critique through persistent metaphors of friendship, hospitality, and support.

As I show through my analysis of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Okri's *The Famished Road*, improper aesthetics both challenge dominative or possessive political formations and establish contrastingly relational forms of political association. Despite differences in style, tone, and genre, as well as in geographic and cultural locale, the three novels examined in this dissertation undermine the logic of possession and the exclusions it entails through their contrastingly relational modalities. On the one hand, therefore, aesthetic impropriety effects a reaction against the depredations of colonialism and certain other modern political and economic systems; on the other, it configures an alternative, relational system of community and political association within a given literary world. The relational capacities of improper aesthetics function against the *raison d'être* of colonialism, and as such constitute part of a formally delineated rejection of dominative and imperialist ideologies and policies. The paradigm of aesthetic impropriety thus exposes the extent of postcolonial literature's persistent interest in re-imagining the polity while also allowing for a thorough engagement with the way literary techniques, and literary texts, are actively involved in the process of formulating new versions of political community. Through the conjunction of narrative and literary style, of improper politics and improper aesthetics, the novels in question disrupt and reconfigure modernity's possessive logic.

Chapter One, "Possessive Politics and Improper Aesthetics," builds upon a long tradition of critiquing institutions of law, government, and the nation-state for being exclusionary,

egoistic, and overly invested in the construct of property. My argument advances in two ways: first, I show that the concepts of possession and property have long influenced models of community, resulting in privative legal and political formations; second, and contradistinctively, I argue that select global Anglophone novels configure alternative forms of political association that are grounded in non-proprietary modes of ethical relation. This chapter develops its claims by drawing on the political-theoretical work of Roberto Esposito and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as by introducing research from literary studies, law, history, and politics. As I argue, the logic of possession structuring modern legal and political thought bears exclusionary implications: its conceptual structures are of enclosure and self-containment. By contrast, as recent poststructuralist theory has demonstrated, the injurious effects of privative legal and political systems can be contested through differently formalizing political community as constitutively relational. As this chapter establishes, the paradigm of “aesthetic impropriety” serves to identify the creative and intellectual work undertaken by literary texts in the broader project of rethinking political community. Chapter One thus lays the groundwork for my dissertation’s argument that the aesthetic form of many global Anglophone novels confronts and reconfigures exclusionary political and legal institutions.

Chapter Two turns to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, offering an original perspective on its feminist critique and stylistic innovations. Drawing upon research into Indian inheritance and matrimonial law, this chapter argues that *The God of Small Things* confronts the legal and political logic authorizing female dispossession. Women in India have historically borne few rights to property ownership, the result of patriarchal systems established in the country’s colonial past as well as its pre-colonial history. The violence of legally codified female dispossession is evidenced most particularly in the death of Ammu, one of the protagonists, as a

direct result of her lack of property rights. As I argue, *The God of Small Things* reformulates what it identifies as India's privative social, legal, and political system through its relational aesthetic modality: including, for instance, its recursive narrative trajectory and its many connective tropes. I identify a contradistinctive connection between the possessive juridical economy of exclusive male property ownership and the non-proprietary, "improper" aesthetics of *The God of Small Things*. If India's gendered property law has systematically dispossessed women, *The God of Small Things* works to counter such exclusions by establishing an alternative structural logic.

My third chapter illuminates J. M. Coetzee's late-apartheid novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* through contextual readings of apartheid land and labor law. This novel charts the geographical and psychological journey of its eponymous protagonist as he moves from Cape Town into the rural Karoo and back again, his journey mirroring black South Africans' efforts to establish political sovereignty in their country. Through Michael K's repeated imprisonment in state internment camps and his desire to make decisions regarding his own labor, *Life & Times of Michael K* challenges the racially discriminatory land and labor laws that corralled black people into isolated residential areas and subservient employment roles. In a direct rejection of apartheid South Africa's political system, which secured white power through segregating and dispossessing the country's majority black population, *Life & Times of Michael K* describes an elective, racially democratic mode of political life. Coetzee's novel is typically understood to validate or valorize Michael K's desire for seclusion. Yet, as I argue, Michael K's persistent retreat from sociality also functions to reject his subjugation as a black man under apartheid. The novel's repeated turn to the trope of friendship suggests the importance of modes of community that are chosen rather than forced. Revealing this novel's concern with the question of political

and familial inheritance, I show that *Life & Times of Michael K* counters the racial exclusions of apartheid South Africa by attaching to its black protagonist a form of sociality based not on the hereditary power of the ruling white minority but on elective, democratic affiliation.

Finally, Chapter Four considers the relationship between aesthetic style and political form through a reading of Ben Okri's 1991 novel, *The Famished Road*. Set at the cusp of Nigerian independence in 1960, this novel poetically constructs a democratic polity that is missing from the early decades of postcolonial Nigeria. Whereas critics typically identify *The Famished Road*'s aesthetic form as magical realist, I associate its extravagant, excessive, and exuberant aesthetics as consonant with democracy's mode of functioning. I frame my analysis through theories of democracy, particularly Chantal Mouffe's poststructuralist analysis, and through aesthetic theory, especially Georges Bataille's theory of the general economy. As I argue, *The Famished Road* rejects existing political and legal systems, including colonial-era laws that punished the poor and effectively penalized poverty. In place of the corruption and vast economic inequity that secured power and wealth for a select minority during the process of political transition, *The Famished Road* affirms the Nigerian population's capacity to democratically achieve a fairer nation. In its frequent synesthesia, innumerable ontological relocations, open and relational textual schema, tropes of possibility, and decidedly exuberant tone, *The Famished Road* establishes the ideal of an expansive, egalitarian collectivity. Putting Okri's political commitments and stylistic experimentation into productive conversation, I argue that *The Famished Road*'s aesthetics perform the movement and reenactment necessary in a democratic polity.

Finally, in my conclusion, I bring this project's overarching interest in the relation between political and aesthetic form to bear on the question of literary interpretation. By

connecting the aesthetic theory developed throughout this dissertation to current critical debates about modes of reading, I make a case for literature's world-making capacities. As I suggest, attending to the interruptive and generative capacities of aesthetic form might modulate the interpretive, diagnostic mode in which literary analysis is generally conceived, influencing not only the kinds of conclusions we might draw from literary texts, but also how we read.

CHAPTER ONE Property and Impropriety: Aesthetics as Political Critique in Postcolonial Literature

Many modern political systems and their corresponding legal and economic modes of organization, especially those found in liberalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism, can be understood as marked by the logic of possession. The concept of *possession* has proven an extraordinarily capacious explanatory category, having characterized the workings of such broad historical processes as capitalism and imperialism; illuminated fundamental concepts in political theory including subjectivity and the polis; and constellated philosophical inquiries into rational thought, human autonomy, and the ethics of self-improvement. While the paradigm is not without its critics, who are wont to contest either its expansive application or the terms of its originary diagnosis in analyses of seventeenth-century English political philosophy, it has been widely accepted as an accurate and useful measure for identifying continuities of thought in political modernity. Arising in its economic guise from the structure of the European market economy, possessive logic was transported around the globe through the interrelated developments of mercantile imperialism, chattel slavery, and settler colonialism. The global transmission of European economic ideas and early capitalist structures involved the dispersal of the emergent system of private property ownership, while the very rationale of property ownership and property accumulation played a significant role in justifying territorial acquisition and establishing imperial control. Along with the circulation of modern economic systems came the transportation of related conceptions about self-enclosed subjectivity, rational industry, and human progress, bearing a structuring effect upon the political systems and forms of thought that thus developed across the globe.

The logic of possession marking political modernity is nowhere more obvious than in the form of private property ownership that has predominated in the West since the seventeenth century and that has spread around the globe under the aegis of colonial, imperial, and capitalist systems. So profound an impact has private property had upon structures of political life that it is frequently addressed from frameworks as varied as human rights, moral philosophy, civil society, liberalism and neoliberalism, and, of course, capitalism. From a political and philosophical perspective, modern formulations of both subjectivity and community are informed by the logic of possession, with the individual and the polity alike generally conceived as necessarily autonomous, self-sustaining, and exclusive. Similarly, many of modernity's core moral beliefs are constructed upon possessive logic, including commitments to self-improvement, economic independence, and historical progress. Just as the connections between the system of private property and modern political, economic and legal structures has been frequently discussed, so the generative relationship between these macro-historical frameworks and ethical beliefs concerning human value has also gained scholarly recognition. Perhaps most clearly encapsulating this latter point is the history of the Atlantic slave trade and its implementation of chattel slavery, under which system slaves belonged permanently to their owners as property to be used, bought, or sold, rather than as human beings with rights, dignity, and self-sovereignty. Despite reams of scholarship addressing the interconnection between property law and racial subjugation in the context of chattel slavery in the Americas, however, similar connections have not been fully developed in postcolonial studies, even though the structural and epistemological relationship between modernity's possessive systems and colonial rule is similarly substantial.

Of course, quite what is meant by “modernity” is a vexed question, not least in the context of colonial domination, which was frequently rationalized by European colonial powers as bringing modernity to putatively backward regions. Despite the risks of reductive and imperialist assumptions, however, “modernity” remains a useful category for facilitating critical analysis. Employed in a temporal sense by political theorists, the term signifies the period beginning in the early seventeenth century and continuing to the present.¹ At the same time, in a broadly anthropological approach, modernity can be understood as a global event:² just as colonialism is a constitutive condition of modernity, so modernity can be seen to have developed out of colonial as well as European thought and practice.³ Framed through these intersecting definitions, the concept of modernity is closely linked to imperial endeavors: most notably, to the acquisition of territory, power, and resources, but also in the connection between modern formulations of subjectivity and the systems of thought structuring imperial rule. As this chapter will demonstrate, modernity’s frequently possessive logic can be understood in epistemological terms in large part because it bears a consistent aesthetic shape. Like the ideological postulates of private property ownership and monadic individualism that formed an early part of the paradigm’s development, the logic of possession is distinguished by its enclosed and self-contained contours.

By connecting the *possessive* or *proper* with its opposite, the *non-possessive* or *improper*, I describe the existence of a provocative form of thinking about community that is manifest in certain strains of political theory and in certain postcolonial novels concerned with political

¹ For an excellent definition of the concept of “modernity” as it is used in political theory, see Jane Bennett.

² Early and influential examples include Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy.

³ In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott makes a case for “the modernity of colonial power,” arguing that “modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental *conditions* of choice” (19). Similarly, Nasser Hussain identifies colonialism as “the foundation on which the project of modernity is initiated” (28). Like Scott, he “views the colonies not as passive recipients but rather as productive forces in the conceptualization and delineation of Western idea and practices” (6).

form. Drawing upon Roberto Esposito's theory of expropriative subjectivity, through which improper subjects form a new type of non-possessive community, I suggest a model of improper relation and non-possessive association that functions as a response to modernity's entrenched exclusions. The aesthetics of relation that I associate with improper or non-possessive forms of association are particularly present in postcolonial novels, the result of postcolonial literature's consistent interest in forms of expansive and non-exclusionary political community. The crucial difference between possessive and non-possessive logics derives from their contradistinctive attitudes to relation's dispensation. Whereas the possessive and proprietary model widely practiced under colonial rule is based upon ownership, containment, and exclusion, the non-possessive model frequently developed in postcolonial literary aesthetics is open, connective, and adaptable. Through the framework of "aesthetic impropriety," I lay the groundwork for the case developed throughout this dissertation, which is that aesthetic forms are capable not just of representing but also of remaking the world, facilitating the transformation of broadly held assumptions and thus of thought's very structure.

Enclosure and Exclusion: Theorizing the Form of Possessive Individualism

The first political theorist to describe modern political thought through the optic of possession was, most likely, the Canadian political philosopher, C. B. Macpherson in 1962. Macpherson's rubric of "possessive individualism" so successfully captured the imaginations of Anglo-American political theorists and cultural commentators that it has become one of the principle explanatory categories for modern subjectivity.⁴ Indeed, so fully does possessive individualism seem to encompass modernity's political commitments that it has taken on a life of its own, even

⁴ For the most influential examples of careful assessments and considered critiques of Macpherson's argument, see the respective monographs of James Tully and John Dunn.

as the precise terms of Macpherson's inquiry, as well as his role in developing this new analytic lens, remain widely unacknowledged outside the disciplinary bounds of political theory.⁵

Effectively arguing that capitalism gave rise to possessive individualism, Macpherson connects the new economic structure of seventeenth-century English society to the model of individual subjectivity that came into existence during that period.⁶ He thus argues that alongside the development of a market economy—namely, an economy that assumes a market in labor as well as in products—there developed “a new belief in the rights and value of the individual” (3). The model of ownership that prevailed in this “possessive market economy” similarly informed new conceptualizations of the individual subject. In effect, “the relationship of ownership . . . was read back into the nature of the individual,” resulting in the individual being conceived as “the proprietor of his own person or capacities” and thus “as an owner of himself” (3).

According to Macpherson, possessive individualism informs the political theory of otherwise sharply divergent philosophers and movements. In the work of seventeenth-century English philosophers Thomas Hobbes, Geoffrey Harrington, and John Locke, as well as in the seventeenth-century political movement known as the Levellers, Macpherson identifies a shared commitment to both the individual *qua* individual and the individual's right to property ownership. If Hobbes defines society as a mechanical system of self-moving and self-interested individuals, Harrington defends the nobility's substantial land assets by connecting property ownership to citizenship; if the Levellers make their claim for an expanded franchise through the postulate that every man is naturally the proprietor of his own person, Locke stretches that assumption to its most extreme conclusion, arguing for the individual's right to unlimited

⁵ As Etienne Balibar observes, the category's success as an “instrument of historical analysis and ethical judgment” has “largely escaped the original intentions of the author” (299).

⁶ For a rejection of the view that capitalism gave rise to modernity, see Frederick Cooper 113-149, particularly 124-127. Cooper's principal objection is to the sweeping generalizations and lack of historical specificity in much postcolonial scholarship on this topic.

acquisition. Broadly speaking, therefore, and across the political spectrum, “[t]he individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself” (3). As a result of the individual’s formalization in proprietary terms, the structure of society also altered: in a possessive individualistic system, “[s]ociety becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors” (3). The reconfiguration of social relations prompted new forms of political organization, along with a new rationale for politics’ existence: “Political society,” Macpherson explains, “becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property [in the person] and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange” (3). The newly proprietary logic of the seventeenth-century is identifiable not just in conceptualizations of the individual, therefore, but also in formulations of society and the polity.

Lying at the heart of Macpherson’s analysis is the concept of “property in the person,” a formulation that is particularly important to his assessment of the Levellers and Locke. For the Levellers, the morally inflected notion of “self propriety” is the key to an expanded franchise for some and civil liberties for all; for Locke, the same concept justifies unlimited acquisition of wealth and property. In both cases, “property in the person” derives from conflating labor with ownership and subjectivity with self-possession. In a turn that reverberates well into the twenty-first century, the Levellers make self-possession a definitional aspect of humanity: “every one as he is himselfe,” they contend, “so he hath a self propriety, else he could not be himselfe” (quoted in Macpherson 142). According to Macpherson, “it is this property [in the person], this exclusion of others, that makes a man human Freedom is proprietorship of one’s own person and

capacities” (142).⁷ Locke takes an economic angle on the question of self-possession, famously arguing that man has a natural right to property ownership; that mixing labor with land makes that same land a man’s property; that labor, in being transferable into property, and in effecting ownership through that transfer, is alienable; that substantial property ownership accrues only through the use of other men’s alienable labor; that the accumulation of property is a marker of rational, industrious conduct; that only those who accumulate property can be considered rational; and that unlimited accumulation is an index of full rationality.

What Macpherson consistently implies but never quite articulates is that the seventeenth-century subject, or “possessive individual,” was imagined in terms of enclosure and containment, as the paradigm of “property in the person” suggests. According to this formulation, if labor is an entity that one owns, and if subjectivity is a property that one possesses, then both labor and subjectivity hold the contradictory status of being crucial elements of the self even as they are also alienable. To protect against the risk of the latter, the possessive individual is protective of its own borders; conceptually, in other words, the individual is imagined as necessarily self-enclosed and self-contained. Macpherson never makes this connection but it can be found in the more recent work of Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito, who surely draws on the former’s findings in developing his own theoretical interventions. Writing from the perspective of theorizing statehood and the polis rather than through an economic lens, Esposito similarly identifies the workings of possession, or what he describes as “immunity,” throughout political modernity, finding the so-called absolute individual of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* to be “bordered in such a way [as to be] isolated and protected” from the threat of conflict and the risk of death seen to inhere in political and social life (13). In describing the absolute individual as

⁷ For a trenchant and comprehensive critique of precisely this equation, see Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: the Performative in the Political*.

“bordered” or self-contained, Esposito thus identifies what remains only implicit in Macpherson’s famous paradigm of the possessive individual.

Since modern selfhood can be described as enclosed and self-contained, it can also be understood to have exclusionary contours. Indeed, modern selfhood’s possessive tenor cannot be extricated from the exclusions that form part of its own imagined production. The possessive individual came into being during an historical era famously concerned with rationality and free will, interests that were precipitated and buttressed by revolutions in science and philosophy; similarly, this period saw opportunities for property and business ownership that extended beyond the elite minority, as well as an interest in expanding male political citizenship beyond those who owned property. Despite the assumedly progressive nature of these developments, encompassing broader ranges of the polity thanks to innovations in science and philosophy, the very logic of possession involves the exclusion of some for the benefit of others, meaning that the structures of possession and exclusion are necessarily intertwined. Even those seventeenth-century theorists who professed seemingly liberal views about expanding political rights and citizenship were as beholden to the logic of exclusion as their more conservative counterparts. While the Levellers, for example, sought to expand the franchise to self-employed and artisanal classes by equating rationality with self-employment, and therefore with freedom from an employer’s will, their political claims bore exclusionary implications. By making freedom “a function of proprietorship” and arguing that “property in his own labour made a man free,” the Levellers espoused an exclusionary philosophy in which political citizenship belongs solely to those with full economic and rational self-possession (158, 148). Locke inaugurates additional exclusions by associating the fully rational, fully free individual with unlimited appropriation. As such, Locke’s rational individualism can “only fully be realized in accumulating property, and

therefore only realized by some, and only at the expense of the individuality of others” (255-256). Locke’s philosophy is not simply a defense of possession, therefore, but a formalization of both personhood and society upon the structure of restrictive, exclusionary ownership. It is this very conceptualization of the person as necessarily and absolutely self-possessed, and as accumulating property, rationality, and freedom through that self-possession, that has proven foundational to modern political thought.

As the preceding analysis makes clear, the possessive logic characterizing modernity emerged out of an historical conjunction in which new conceptualizations of both the individual subject and political society coincided with the development of capitalism as a major economic system. While the possessive logic of political modernity is partly predicated on an historical tendency to value the appropriation and accumulation of property, however, the acquisitive impulse is not, by itself, possessive. As my reading of the implied formal contours of Macpherson’s thought has suggested, possession bears a distinctive shape, one that corresponds to the particular terms of its emergence. What I term “the logic of possession,” much like Macpherson’s concept of possessive individualism, is marked by containment and enclosure; as such, it bears similar contours to the models of self-control, self-ownership, and self-propelled acquisition that were so clearly articulated in seventeenth-century political philosophy. On the one hand, therefore, the rubric of possessive logic references the particular historical confluence of economic, political, and philosophical systems identified by Macpherson; on the other, it signals my own identification of a persistent conceptual shape within modern political thought. The following sections examine the consistency of self-enclosure as one of modernity’s principle conceptual shapes, demonstrating how possessive formulations of economic and social life became increasingly entrenched across the globe.

Capitalism and Empire: On The Global Spread of Possessive Logic

While the origins of possessive logic lie in seventeenth-century England, centuries of European colonial rule and territorial expansion have given it a global reach. Indeed, the moral justification for property acquisition that is found in seventeenth-century philosophy, most particularly in Locke, served at least to vindicate colonial territorial expansion, if not to provide its very rationale. In *The Second Treatise*, for example, Locke argues that the cultivation of land is the fulfillment of God's will and therefore a Christian duty:

God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour, and the penury of his condition required it of him. God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life He that in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him. (V.32)

Locke's theory of the right to private property ownership demonstrates a commitment to enclosure and containment in ways that will fundamentally shape modern political ideas about private property. Through labor, Locke argues, the obedient man "annexed" his "property (in the person)" to the land, giving him exclusive right and title to it, and thus giving him the right to exclude others from the land through its enclosure and containment.

Notably, Locke's moral theory of property ownership, wherein land cultivation demonstrates "obedience" to God's "command," is informed by early settler colonialism, with Locke developing his argument by way of comparison with Native American land use.⁸ Unlike

⁸ As Gregory Alexander and Eduardo Peñalver observe, the most fundamental precept of Locke's natural law "is that human beings, as God's 'property,' are to be preserved" (37). Thus, the right and duty of self-preservation—that is, the protection of one's God-given property in the person—plays a crucial role in Locke's possessive theory of property ownership.

the English, according to Locke, “the Americans . . . are rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life [F]or want of improving [the land] by labour, [they] have not one hundredth part of the conveniences we enjoy” (S. 42). In identifying American land as uncultivated, Locke makes two significant assumptions: first, that Native Americans do not truly own their land, as ownership is assumedly effected through the kind of cultivation found in settled agricultural societies; and second, that Native Americans are seemingly morally deficient, not having fulfilled God’s command to “till and sow” the earth to “improve it for the benefit of life” (S.32). Locke sees no moral impediment to colonial settlement in the Americas, partly because the Native American cannot, under the terms of Locke’s argument, hold title to land that is not cultivated, and partly because the Englishman has an implied right to till American soil, because “God . . . gave the world in common to all mankind” (S.32). By Locke’s logic, therefore, derived from a markedly uninformed understanding of Native American practices of property ownership and land use, colonial territorial acquisition bears no moral prohibitions, but only obligations.

Locke’s influential thesis registers a culturally specific conceptualization of property as enclosed and privately owned, as Eric Cheyfitz observes in *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*. Drawing upon the eighteenth-century legal scholarship of William Blackstone, Cheyfitz argues that colonial settlement in the Americas was secured in no small part through the force of untranslatable legal concepts taken from English common law.⁹ In particular, the English concepts of *property*, *sovereignty*, *ownership*, and *possession* bore no relation to Native American models of communal property ownership and forms of land use, yet they were understood to have universal applicability by

⁹ Cheyfitz develops a theory of translation with regard to property ownership and imperial domination throughout *Poetics of Imperialism*. The above-referenced analysis cites Blackstone, cited in J. W. Erlich’s edited collection, *Erlich’s Blackstone*: see pages 240, 243, and 300.

early English settlers and the sovereign legal forces behind them.¹⁰ Cheyfitz argues that the model of possession taken by the English to the Americas was predicated upon privacy and enclosure, in contradistinction to the practices of communal ownership found in Native American kinship societies:

For Locke, who summarizes the history of Western thought on the subject, the very mark of property is the enclosure: the defining, or bounding, of a place that signals the *perceived* settling, or cultivation, of that place [I]t is this figure of enclosure that marks the frontier between the savage and the civilized; for, in Locke's words, 'the wild Indian . . . knows no enclosure and is still a tenant in common' (5.26)" (55; emphasis in original).

As Cheyfitz thus observes, the concept of property need not necessarily involve either individual ownership or enclosure; instead, the legal boundaries and physical enclosures implemented by the English pertain to a specific history of settled agriculture and emergent individualism.¹¹ In sixteenth-century England, the physical enclosure of the fence had served both to identify private property and to "divid[e] arable land from pasture" (56). In early America, as indicated in the extended quotation above, fences marked the putative civilizational difference between settlers and the continent's native inhabitants, an ideological function applauded by Locke and deplored by Cheyfitz. Thus, the colonial fence models the form of exclusionary property ownership characteristic of modernity's capitalist economic system, as well as the role of possessive logic and its concomitant practices in establishing imperial control and effecting territorial acquisition.

¹⁰ See Cheyfitz 46.

¹¹ Orlando Patterson contests the assumption that England only really became individualistic in the sixteenth century, noting that "the medieval lord was a thoroughly acquisitive man . . . and he was also very possessive in precisely the sense defined by Macpherson" (123). See also Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*.

The associations between private property, settled agriculture, territorial conquest, and the discourse of civility mark European empire from its Ancient Roman beginnings, a continuity that speaks to the documented modeling of English and colonial law on the earlier Mediterranean polity.¹² As Robert Young identifies, by way of Raymond Williams' etymology of the word *culture*, the very practice of crop cultivation is linguistically related to both territorial colonization and theories of cultural superiority. Deriving from two Latin terms, *cultura* and *colere*, "culture" is part of a large semantic field, with early meanings including *to inhabit, cultivate, attend, protect, and honor with worship*. Notably, "inhabit" came to be articulated through the Latin term *colonus*, or "farmer," from which the English word "colony" is derived. For Young, the shared etymology of "colony" and "culture" encapsulates the process whereby colonial control is achieved through cultural domination. Young's research into the shared etymology of culture, civilization, and colonization registers the model of enclosure and containment that I have identified as possessive:

The culture of land has always been, in fact, the primary form of colonization; the focus on soil emphasizes the physicality of the territory that is coveted, occupied, cultivated . . . and made unsuitable for indigenous nomadic tribes From the sixteenth century this sense of cultivation, the tending of natural growth, extended to the process of human development: the cultivation of the mind The social reference of cultivation was allied to the earlier distinction between the civil and the savage: to be civilized meant to be a citizen of the city (preferably walled), as opposed to the savage (wild man) outside or the more distant barbarian roaming in the lands beyond. (29)

¹² See Hussain, 23-4.

Reading Young's research in the context of my theory of possession as enclosure, it can be seen that the semantic cluster of culture, cultivation, and colonization encodes possessive and proprietary assumptions that come to the fore during European colonial expansion. Just as the cultivation of land is etymologically connected to both the agricultural practices of settler colonialism and "the cultivation of the mind," so the establishment of permanent, bounded areas of habitation is associated with civilized society. Unlike the putative "savage" or "barbarian," the supposedly "civilized" citizen of the "preferably walled" city lived a settled life on land whose ownership was clearly demarcated. As my analysis of Locke, Cheyfitz, and Young demonstrates, therefore, colonial ideas about property ownership were not new but were constructed upon deep ideological assumptions of enclosure's necessity, bearing a long history of exclusionary consequences.

Legal historians have shown how possessive conceptualizations of land ownership and their exclusionary implications were transported around the globe through English property law, itself both a vehicle and consequence of British imperial power. As Lauren Benton explains in *A Search for Sovereignty*, her study of legal systems and the imagining of imperial geography during this period, "[l]egal cultures traveled with imperial officials, merchants, sailors, soldiers, sojourners, settlers, captives, and even pirates"; similarly, "[t]ravelers' actions extended the reach of law" (3).¹³ As well as traveling through incidental means, English legal ideals were mobilized as a deliberate strategy of imperial control. For example, eligibility limitations on property ownership buttressed European claims to title, as Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler observe: "[i]n European colonies, property ownership was a prerequisite for proper political subjectivity and citizenship, but was also, at the same time, attached to race and gender

¹³ See also Benton's *Law and Colonial Cultures*, which examines how the rule of law was an instrument of accumulation and consolidation overseas.

requirements—that is, whiteness and maleness—that signified proper (and propertied) civilized human subjectivity” (26-27). In other words, the global transportation of political modernity’s system of private property ownership also involved the transmission of modern ideas about self-enclosed subjectivity. As Butler and Athanasiou recognize, modern formulations of property ownership have always been exclusionary, establishing “whiteness and maleness” as the sole designations of “civilized human subjectivity.”

The English conceit of the “rule of law” consolidated the assumed legitimacy of the colonial state and its very particular formulations of property ownership through association with “a much vaunted tradition of ancient English liberty and lawfulness,” as Nasser Hussain explains in his study of emergency and jurisprudence in British India (3).¹⁴ Benton agrees that imperial powers drew purposively and pragmatically upon European legal protocols, arguing that “the paramount interest of actors in empire and of their sponsors was not to establish absolute title to territory, or to assert the moral legitimacy of empire as debated by jurists in Europe, but to present evidence of rights to possession superior to that which other contenders could muster” (56). In effect, of course, “present[ing] evidence of rights of possession superior to . . . other contenders” did produce a *de facto* entitlement to territory, thereby establishing absolute control over sovereign possessions. Differently to Benton, my analysis has no need for assessing the motivations for establishing exclusive property rights over colonial holdings; inasmuch as imperial actors aimed to present “superior” rights of possession, they sought to exclude their territorial competitors from ownership and control, obtaining “absolute title” *de facto* if not *de*

¹⁴ Hussain emphasizes that “the rule of law” has a specific legal history, being known as *isonomia* until the seventeenth century (8). (See, also, Friedrich A. Hayek’s 156-8). Notably, Hussain argues that colonial politics were sustained through conquest and continued violence. However, see Nandini Sundar on the doctrine of “the rule of law,” which she describes as “one of the major cultural idioms of the British state,” noting its marketing as “the great gift of ‘Empire’ to its backward subjects” (335).

jure. In the process, imperial states enclosed new areas of the globe, incorporating their overseas territorial possessions into their economies and containing them within their own forms of law.

Notably, the intersecting histories of private property ownership and colonial expansion, of English law and territorial acquisition, remain at the core of Western property law as it stands today. While the common understanding of property is that it pertains to the ownership of things, the legal definition more correctly references “the collection of individual rights people have as against one another with respect to owned resources” (Alexander and Peñalver 2). Property law, that is, pertains not to the object that is owned, but to the status of ownership itself: to the right of ownership over any given item of property and against any given contender. In its very rhetorical contours, therefore, contemporary property law indicates the twinned histories of political modernity and European imperialism, both of which have upheld a particular vision of property ownership as private, possessive, and self-contained, and both of which have understood property as capable of (and vulnerable to) acquisition. The parallel histories of modern property law and imperial conquest are likewise evidenced in Cohen and Cohen’s useful explication of property not as an object but as a collection of rights. If “property is not a thing but the rights which extend over a thing,” and if “[t]he essence of property is in the relations among men arising out of their relation to things,” then “dominion over things is also *imperium* over our fellow human beings” (Cohen and Cohen 11, 10, 27). Just as territorial sovereignty confers power over a population, so rights over property simultaneously provide rights against other people. Gregory Alexander uses this relational aspect of property law to make a case for a more socially oriented understanding of property ownership, or what he terms “property as propriety” (1). However, he also acknowledges that the predominant modern view remains that of property as commodity, a formulation that bestows faith in the market while expressing an unwavering

belief in human progress through will (10).¹⁵ Thus, the characteristics of a possessive market society continue to be felt in modern property law, having also been transported around the globe through European legal protocols, and, in the specifically Anglophone context examined by this dissertation, through the colonial application of English law.

Of course, the most famous theorization of property as commodity was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, whose ideas continue to bear an impact on contemporary scholars with diverse methodological concerns and conclusions. Marx and Engels' account of private property, wage labor, and capital fits my analysis of modernity as "possessive" less because it attests to an undeniably acquisitive impulse in this period and more because it identifies as possessive the very form of modern property ownership. Specifically, Marxist theory recognizes enclosure to be a structuring modality within political modernity, one that pertains, on the one hand, to the particular type of property ownership that developed under capitalism and, on the other, to this economic system's mode of production. As Marx and Engels identify in their materialist account of European history, *The German Ideology*, capitalism's two defining economic features are private property and the division of labor, both of which operate according to what I have termed the possessive modality of enclosure. Arguing that the private, individual model of ownership that prevails under capitalism is particular to this economic system (and thus to modernity), Marx and Engels historicize modernity's naturalized model of private property by arguing that historical variations in ownership are always closely related to prevailing economic systems, whether nomadic, agricultural, guild-based, or industrial. Their aim is not simply to show "the connection of the social and political structure with [economic] production" but to directly associate labor with ownership (154). For example, when they argue

¹⁵ For a sustained critique of this insistence upon willed progress, see Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

that “[t]he various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownership,” they effectively correlate the fact of ownership with the act of work (151). In this regard, *The German Ideology* tacitly picks up the seventeenth-century idea of “property in the person,” repurposing Locke’s moral claim that man could use other men’s alienated labor to increase his own stock of property. In their conflation of labor with ownership, Marx and Engels implicitly use the postulate of the self-enclosed, self-possessed subject to elaborate their famous indictment of capitalism’s alienating effects.¹⁶

Europe’s burgeoning capitalist economic system, decried so resoundingly by Marx and Engels, was globalized over the long course of imperial rule and colonial conquest, traveling around the globe much like the continent’s legal ideals. Innumerable scholars have identified the close and generative relation between capitalism and colonialism, whose intersecting histories are not just parallel but shared. While the extent and form of their interdependence is debated, it is generally agreed that, as economic systems, capitalism and colonialism were both shaped by the other. Among their many points of convergence and divergence, capitalist and colonial economic principles uphold the principle of acquisition. From Eric Williams’s evidence that the Atlantic slave-trade and chattel slavery effectively financed the industrial revolution,¹⁷ to Frantz Fanon’s argument that Europe’s wealth was amassed through raw exports from the colonies, including slave labor¹⁸; from V. I. Lenin’s famous diagnosis of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalist exploitation,¹⁹ to Niall Ferguson’s politically diametric lauding of British

¹⁶ For a very different view on the cause and significance of the self-enclosed, self-possessed laborer, see Max Weber’s theory of the protestant work ethic: specifically, the logic of disciplined self-control and its effect on economic systems and productivity.

¹⁷ See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. See also Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*.

¹⁸ See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, esp. “On Violence,” 1-62.

¹⁹ See V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

imperialism for opening global markets and introducing modernity across the world,²⁰ it is widely agreed, by scholars from across the political spectrum, that both capitalism and colonialism are similarly acquisitive. Indeed, the acquisition of wealth and capital remained a constant motivator across all stages of European empire's four-hundred-year history: from its mercantile beginnings and the establishment of trading companies with area monopolies, to the inauguration of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade and plantation economies,²¹ through to the final stages of large-scale colonial occupation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when between eighty and ninety percent of the world was controlled by European or European-derived powers.²² Throughout European empire's long history, as a result both of the form and scale of imperial involvement, capitalist modes of production and their accompanying logics developed and became ingrained across much of the world.

Recent postcolonial scholarship has used the role of Europe's colonies in generating the continent's considerable wealth and global dominance to reveal the fault-lines of what David Scott terms "the consoling European fantasy of self-possession" (35). Scott's analysis is powerful less because it recognizes, along with so much antecedent research, that Europe and the West amassed vast wealth through rapacious colonial exploitation, and more because it identifies possession itself as a motivating (if fallacious) logic during European colonial rule. In his analysis of C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, an influential history of the Haitian Revolution, Scott shows how James rewrites the popular narrative regarding the extent of imperial power. In the Preface to *The Black Jacobins*, James describes the pivotal economic role of Haiti (then Saint Domingue) in France's empire: "It was an integral part of the economic life of the age, the

²⁰ Most particularly, see *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*.

²¹ On the correlation between America's wealth and its vast antebellum plantation economy, see Edward E. Baptist.

²² See Young 86. For an extensive statistical survey of European colonial power in the early-twentieth century, see Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, esp. 15-29 and 30-44.

greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation. The whole structure rested on the labour of half-a-million slaves” (cited in Scott, 35). As Scott explains, the crucial point of James’s analysis is his understated identification of the colony’s slaves as being at the heart of both Haiti’s output and imperial France’s wealth: “Against the dominant Eurocentric view that the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie were the generative economic agents of the dawning age of capital and markets, and the slaves merely dumb inputs into the process, James reverses the relation and says that, to the contrary, the ‘economic life of the age’ rested, in the end, ‘on the labour of half-a-million’ of these slaves” (35). By placing the slaves and their labor at the heart of his new history of Haiti, “James is quite self-consciously undermining the consoling European fantasy of self-possession” (35). In thus parsing James’ authoritative text, Scott recognizes that European colonialism was sustained by a powerful belief in its own capacity for possession, not only of places and people, but also of their output on its behalf.

Scott’s suggestive use of the term, “self-possession” to describe imperial Europe’s delusionary belief in its self-generative capacities gestures toward what I have described as the crucial role of possessive logic in sustaining both colonial power and capitalist accumulation. As I have argued throughout this section, European forms of possessive property ownership were transported around the globe over the long course of imperial rule, meaning that in a very material sense, capitalism and colonialism bear histories that are inextricably entwined. These two economic and ideological systems, both central to political modernity, grew up together, provided each other’s conditions of possibility, and produced enormous wealth for a very small minority. However, modernity’s possessive contours are evident not solely in material or acquisitive ways; instead, as Scott implies, the logic of possession marking both capitalism and

colonialism is also apparent in modern ideas regarding selfhood and political subjectivity. It is not just economic theory that has placed possession at its forefront, but numerous systems of knowledge and forms of thought during the modern period. Particularly important to my analysis is the possessive logic underpinning modern subjectivity, which traveled around the globe with colonial rule and the rise of global capital. Much as Scott describes the “fantasy of self-possession” as a self-sustaining logic that Europe employed to justify its accumulation of capital, territory, and sovereign control, I identify the epistemology of possession as indelibly marking modern political thought in ways that are of utmost import to both the colonial and postcolonial polity.

Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of Containment in Modern Political Thought

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the logic of possession has as much to do with the aesthetics of containment as an historical impulse to ownership, a conceptual turn that is nowhere more consequential than in modern formulations of subjectivity. Macpherson’s characterization of the modern individual as “possessive” has, of course, been widely adopted by theorists, yet his is simply one typology among many to identify autonomy and self-sufficiency as core features of modern subjectivity, and thus to imagine the modern individual with closed and contained contours. Much as Macpherson describes, the modern subject arose in the seventeenth-century with the wholesale restructuring of economic, social, and intellectual life. Various identified as “monadic,” “autonomous,” “possessive,” or “sovereign,” the prototypical individual of modernity most obviously exemplifies core liberal beliefs, the result of its seventeenth-century inauguration alongside the liberal state. Indeed, as innumerable scholars have shown, the very structure of modern subjectivity aligns with foundational liberal values

regarding sovereign decision-making and self-improvement,²³ rational thought and the securely embodied individual;²⁴ and “modern dreams of progress and perfectability” (Felski 11).²⁵ As well as arising from liberal political ideals, the development of modern subjectivity coincides with changes to global economic systems, as Macpherson so clearly signals. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou have recently revived Macpherson’s analysis in an effort to rally against systemic global dispossession, arguing that “property relations have come to structure and control our moral concepts of personhood, self-belonging, agency, and self-identity” (13).

Relatedly, in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Ian Baucom argues that modernity’s characteristically abstract mode of personhood results from “the colonization of human subjectivity by finance capital” (139). Part of what Baucom terms modernity’s “speculative revolution,” subjectivity has been molded by a confluence of historical developments that include, most particularly, the system of credit that allowed the trans-Atlantic slave trade to flourish; changes to the imagination heralded by the eighteenth-century novel; and theories of abstract reason championed by Enlightenment philosophy.²⁶ Finally, therefore, if the structure of the modern individual is notably informed by developments in politics (liberalism) and economics (capitalism and imperialism), it is also influenced by core beliefs sketched out in Enlightenment moral philosophy. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Immanuel Kant, eighteenth-

²³ For a critique of these ideological commands, and particularly of the connection, in liberal thought, between sovereignty and decision-making, see Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death.”

²⁴ Elizabeth S. Anker identifies the qualities of rational thought and secure embodiment as central to human rights discourse; see *Fictions of Dignity*.

²⁵ For a critique of Felski’s reading of tragedy’s relationship to sovereign subjectivity, see Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse.

²⁶ Baucom elaborates a complex argument that demonstrates the epistemological consequences of material developments (38). In particular, Baucom focuses on the relation between insurance and the slave trade, with the latter’s “conditions of possibility” identified as “the speculative, abstract, money-into-money trades [of] the turn-of-the-century financial revolution” (53). Quite simply, slaves were treated as both commodities and reserve deposits, for which captains would not get paid until after completing the third leg of the triangle that constituted the trans-Atlantic slave trade. For further detail, see Part I of *Specters of the Atlantic*, pages 1-169.

century philosophers consistently schematize subjectivity as self-enclosed and self-possessed. In placing self-containment, self-control, and self-governance at the heart of modern moral and political philosophy, these thinkers not only establish possession as a principle characteristic of modern subjectivity, but they also provide crystalline examples of possessive logic in its most abstract form. As such, they function to clarify the conceptual contours of possession as well as confirm its broad impact on modern political thought.

Of the many eighteenth-century formulations of subjectivity, the most influential is found in the work and legacy of Immanuel Kant. Indeed, the unitary, transcendental, self-sufficient Kantian subject should be understood as paradigmatic of modern subjectivity, even as it has not been accepted uncritically at any point in its long history.²⁷ Given the Kantian subject's historical influence, I will, in what follows, elucidate its relevance to my overarching argument while taking it as a model for modern subjectivity more generally, showing through the conceptual contours of Kant's philosophy how the logic of possession increasingly informed modern thought. At the heart of Kant's expansive philosophical inquiries, encompassing but not limited to his investigations into subjectivity, lies an unswerving commitment to human autonomy. In particular, he associates the autonomous, self-sufficient subject with the workings of reason, a connection that is developed most fully in his three Critiques: the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Under the terms of Kant's "transcendental dialectic"—that is, the dialectic between thinking and feeling, between formal concepts and their sensible conditions—the rational subject is deemed capable of overcoming material strictures through its very capacity to reason. As Pheng Cheah explains, Kant upholds "[t]he power of reason to transcend the finitude of nature

²⁷ For critical philosophical engagements with Kant's work, see Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. For an incisive postcolonial critique of the Kantian subject, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

through self-determination” (76). In other words, the Kantian subject derives its self-sufficiency from its assumed capacity for rational thought: from its assumed possession of its rational faculties. Whereas earlier political philosophers had formalized subjectivity in ways that were clearly informed by liberal economic structures, Kant makes the metaphysical concept of reason the engine of his self-sufficient, self-possessed subject.

Just as rational thought makes possible the Kantian subject’s self-sufficiency, so too does it form the basis for a notably detached and self-contained formulation of moral behavior. A broad reading of Kant’s corpus suggests that he conceptualizes the moral subject as “disinterested,” a paradigm that derives from the aesthetic theory outlined in *Critique of Judgment*, which counsels calm, rational, and detached consideration when making judgments of taste.²⁸ Inasmuch as the moral subject is disinterested, it is able to establish an affective distance from all those with whom it comes into contact; to reflect rationally on its decisions; and to maintain its own emotional and intellectual self-sufficiency. Notably, the disinterested subject by no means lacks interest in others; instead, it identifies and acknowledges their feelings while remaining emotionally consistent and self-contained.²⁹ “Disinterest” thus names a moral circumscription on sympathetic response, one that encourages a degree of feeling for fellow subjects but never so much as to be distracted, overwhelmed, or otherwise overly subject to influence. Sealed within itself through its very capacity to reason, the Kantian subject is protected from impulse and influence, its self-possession both a mechanism for undertaking objective judgment and a barrier against the world.

²⁸ See, in particular, “Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment” in “First Book: Analytic of the Beautiful.”

²⁹ Rei Terada provides an excellent example of Kant’s cognitive predilection for what I here term “consistency.” In her influential *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject,”* Terada writes: “As many people have noted, Kant is generally phobic about addiction. Within what he calls affect, however, Kant resubscribes to the usual philosophical bias toward ideal and repeatable principles. Unsurprisingly, Kant admires “admiration [*Bewunderung*], which is lasting,” over “surprise [*Verwunderung*], which is fleeting and transitory” (*Critique of Judgment*, 133 . . .).”

Kant's disinterested subject has proven particularly interesting to postcolonial scholars in recent years, not least because of its relevance to theories of cosmopolitanism and hence to ideas about possible forms of global association.³⁰ Modern cosmopolitan thought usually draws at least some inspiration from Kant's famous essay, "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," but postcolonial theorists are generally skeptical about cosmopolitanism's claims to value peaceful co-association on a global scale, just as they remain suspicious about the related model of disinterested subjectivity articulated elsewhere in Kant's writings. Baucom, for example, interprets "the sublimely disinterested historical spectator posited by Kant" as imperial sanctimony masquerading as cosmopolitan sympathy (222). As a rebuttal to Kant's ideological presuppositions and the centuries of thought they have occasioned, Baucom draws upon eighteenth-century anti-slavery tracts, as well as writings by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, to identify a longstanding counter-narrative within political modernity, one that places at its heart what Baucom terms the "interested witness" instead of the disinterested spectator authored by Kant. Leela Gandhi attacks Kantian disinterest even more roundly, condemning it for its "colonizing undercurrent [. . .], sovereign in its discursive mastery over difference" (161). As Gandhi explains, "[t]o be moral subjects in the Kantian sense, we must rigorously stand aloof from the contingencies of our humanness. . . . To be such a transcendental and unified ethical agent is thus to be constitutively free . . . from the distractions of experience" (126). It is this assumed capacity to be free from distraction that Gandhi associates with the "colonizing undercurrent" to Kantian thought. As she suggests, "Kant's hypostasized adult" exemplifies possessive imperial logic because it is seemingly "immune to the distractions of faith, nature,

³⁰ There are two predominant strains to scholarship on cosmopolitanism, one cautionary and the other optimistic. For the former, see Robbins and Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* and Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*; for the latter, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, and Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, particularly the essays "Of Mimicry and Man," "DissemiNation," and "How Newness Enters the World."

desire, and inclination” and contained within its own well-regulated borders (181). In its radical self-possession, in its disinterested and “immun[ized]” form, the Kantian subject models the same all-encompassing sovereignty pursued by colonial Britain, simply manifest in a self rather than a state.

Gandhi’s turn to the rhetoric of immunity reveals, with deliberate irony, how the possessive contours of disinterested subjectivity correspond to the fear of racial contagion and cultural disintegration embedded in imperial discourse. Edward Said famously shows how imperial discourse and its representative tropes create the so-called Orient as both a boundless space of imaginative freedom and “[a] stage on which the whole East is confined” (*Orientalism* 63). Whereas the Western subject (implicitly white and male) is understood as emotionally restrained and decidedly self-controlled, enclosed within its own rational subjectivity, the Oriental subject is imagined as possessing an excess of emotion that is at constant risk of overflowing: of leaking beyond its porous borders and contaminating others with its contagious irrationality. Inasmuch as the modern, disinterested subject functions as the normative opposite to Said’s Orientalist other, it should thus be understood not just as coincident with European imperialism but as one of empire’s enabling conditions. Anne McClintock similarly explores Victorian England’s conviction that female and non-white bodies threaten the self-contained rational subject in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Commenting that “[i]ncreasingly vigilant efforts to control women’s bodies, . . . were suffused with acute anxiety about the desecration of sexual boundaries and the consequences that racial contamination had for white male control of progeny, property and power,” she connects the “control” of bodily “boundaries” with fears over retaining “property and power” within the white, male, British imperial population (47). As such, McClintock makes explicit the

connection between property ownership and the exemplary self-possessed male figure of rational personhood. Moreover, by attending to the aesthetic manifestation of imperial ideas about race and gender, particularly through provocative analyses of nineteenth-century imperial adverts for household commodities, she shows how “[t]he poetics of contagion justified a politics of exclusion” (47). She thus makes the same connection between poetics and politics that underpins my own argument, demonstrating with clear and concrete examples that the formal contours of possessive logic are both an effect of, and a contributor to, possessive and exclusionary politics.

In making the case that possessive logic bears a poetic, or aesthetic, shape, I am doing nothing more than acknowledging the kind of relation that is already tacitly evident in Kant’s third *Critique*, where the disinterested subject shares a conceptual outline with the aesthetic theory in which it first appears. For Kant, “disinterestedness” names the separation of affective experience from the process of cognition. Whereas the “interested” is emotionally involved or affectively responsive, the “disinterested” is purely cognitive, capable of sealing itself off from subjective experience. It is this assumed distinction between interest and disinterest, between affect and cognition, between the subjective and the objective that allows Kant to argue that aesthetic judgments, being disinterested and based upon cognition, are universal in kind. As he argues in the *Critique of Judgment*, disinterest does not necessarily imply the absence of emotional or sensory response; instead, it requires that any such response be separate to the process of aesthetic judgment. Thus, we might take pleasure in an aesthetic object because we find it beautiful, but an aesthetic object can never be considered beautiful simply because it is found pleasurable. In developing his argument, Kant describes aesthetic judgment as “a faculty of judging of forms without the aid of concepts,” thereby associating aesthetics with the arrangement of constituent parts within a given aesthetic object (§42). Indeed, he explicitly

associates cognition and reason with form and structure: “I mean to refer strictly to the beautiful *forms* of nature,” he argues, “and to put to one side the *charms* which she is wont so lavishly to combine with them” (§42; emphasis in original). Just as the separation between “form” and “charm,” or objective structure and subjective response, is vital to the workings of Kant’s aesthetic judgment, so is it crucial to his formulation of the disinterested subject, whose capacity to rationally disengage from the distractions of experience underwrites modern ideas of possessive subjectivity.

Said’s passing observation, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that Kantian aesthetics is inextricably linked to the fear of contagion signals the connection between Kant’s forms of thought and contemporaneous imperial endeavors:

Cultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid, and if it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them. This is by no means a simple matter, since—I believe—it has been the essence of experience in the West at least since the late eighteenth century not only to acquire distant domination and reinforce hegemony, but also to divide the realms of culture and experience into apparently separate spheres. (68)

Said’s assessment of contamination and immunity is, not surprisingly, focused entirely on “cultural experience” and “cultural form[s],” yet the connection he makes between Kantian aesthetics and the “distant domination” practiced by empire is telling, and it warrants additional probing. For Said, the separation of the aesthetic domain from material conditions reinforces white, male, European power, an outcome that he suggests can be avoided by grounding aesthetic theory in relation to the world in which it was produced. Instead of assuming that the

aesthetic can be appreciated only through rational cognition, which would imply that art neither gains any meaning from affective engagement nor is informed by culturally specific ideas about beauty or creativity, Said insists that the aesthetic is always culturally and historically situated. Said thus takes on what Gandhi describes as, “the motivated lie of cultural immunity in Western thought,” by which she means that Said challenges the separation of the aesthetic and the material propagated by Kant. In his “worlding” of culture he provides inspiration for countless postcolonial scholars, who similarly follow “the logic of this flight—from cultural immunity toward cultural materialism” (152).

Much like Gandhi, I sympathize with Said’s analysis but remain suspicious of his conclusions, not least because they support the idea that literary analysis must be materialist for it to be sufficiently political, an assumption that is particularly widespread within postcolonial studies.³¹ Gandhi advances her own rebuttal of Said’s cultural materialism through the complex and highly original argument that Kant’s aesthetic theory conceals, under its well-documented impulse to isolation, a largely unrecognized effort to “dwell with difference,” prompting Gandhi to argue that Kant’s work is less isolationist than is commonly assumed (154).³² Leaving aside Gandhi’s compelling analysis for the time being, I want to make the related argument that Said’s reading also falls short because it identifies Kantian isolation only in its most conspicuous location. The issue is less that Kant sees the aesthetic and the material as distinct, as Said argues, and more that the very tenor of his thought is isolationist or possessive. As I have already suggested, the sovereign subject of Kant’s aesthetic theory models a markedly similar possessive logic to the sovereign colonial state. Thus, Said’s nascent observation regarding the relation between imperialism and Kant’s aesthetic theory should be understood not as infelicitous

³¹ See Gandhi 150-152.

³² Esposito, likewise, identifies a not insignificant communitarian strain to Kant’s thought; see 62-85.

coincidence, but as epistemological inevitability. While Said does acknowledge that both imperialism and the separation of “culture and experience” have been defining features of modernity since the late-eighteenth century, he fails to identify the thread connecting the two: namely, the possessive logic that underpins both Kant’s rational, self-contained individual and the similarly self-contained imperial state.

To draw attention to the connection between modern subjectivity and imperial rule is to build upon the work of other decolonial and postcolonial theorists, including not only Gandhi, as already suggested, but also Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Ranjana Khanna, among others. Fanon famously argues that the colonial and racial denigration of black people formed part of an attempt to shore up white self-possession and legitimate imperial rule.³³ Mbembe, meanwhile, delivers a scathing attack on the ubiquitous association of the Western individual with autonomous rationality, seeing this form of subject-formation as an ideological tool to “deny African societies any historical depth” and refuse Africans their humanity (11).³⁴ Finally, Khanna contends that the trope of *disposability* is at the heart of colonial and postcolonial notions of the subject, contrasting the apparent disposability of certain groups of people (for example, refugees) with the assumed sovereignty of the self-contained modern subject.³⁵ Implicitly, all of these critics understand the formal contours of modern subjectivity to correlate directly with those of colonialism as a broad political system. Just as the very subject of political modernity is self-possessed, in other words, so too is the mode of political organization that structures its daily life. Such an observation might seem somewhat Foucauldian in tenor, but as the legal scholar, Nasser Hussain, points out, Foucault largely omitted discussions of race and

³³ In particular, see “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks* 89-119. With regard to the material conditions of colonial rule, see “On Violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth* 1-62.

³⁴ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

³⁵ See Khanna, “Disposability.”

empire from his work, even as these topics held deep pertinence to his analytic modalities and epistemic conclusions. As Hussain explains, “[d]espite Foucault’s interest in the development of spaces of confinement, he never thoroughly investigated the construction of the epistemic space of the West itself as putatively self-contained and self-generative” (14). Like David Scott, therefore, whom I discussed earlier in this chapter, Hussain recognizes that European empire was sustained by a powerful belief in its capacity for sovereign self-generation, along with an equally powerful conviction that it was racially, culturally, and economically distinct from its many colonies.

While neither Scott nor Hussain describe their findings through the framework of “possessive logic,” they do both recognize the structuring import of self-possession upon colonial thought. Of course, European empire’s supposed self-generation disavows the human and material resources upon which the West relied to amass its vast wealth, while its feigned self-containment results from overlooking the systemic exploitation of a substantial proportion of the world’s population. Despite being built upon false premises, however, the idea that empire was self-generated and self-contained is a firm indicator of both the exclusions that inhere in possessive logic and the exclusionary assumptions underpinning European empire. Inasmuch as the presumptions of self-generation and self-containment deny external influence and imply absolute autonomy, that is, they adhere to the structure of enclosure and the aesthetics of containment that I have aligned with the logic of possession. My research into one of modernity’s principle logics thus confirms the findings made within postcolonial studies regarding the link between the sovereign subject and sovereign imperialism, while it also foregrounds the resoundingly possessive conceptual form of modern subjectivity, modern political systems, and, indeed, modern political thought.

For the clearest exposition of modernity's wholesale construction upon the logic of possession, we need, finally, to turn to the work of Roberto Esposito, whose etymological analysis of "community" and its inflection by "the semantics of *proprium*" both clarifies my claim that modern political thought bears a distinct conceptual structure and prompts my theory of the relation between aesthetic and political form (2). Crucially, Esposito assumes not that modern thought is preoccupied by the question of possession but that its very structure is possessive: readers familiar with his theory of biopolitics will know this schematic as the "immunitary paradigm."³⁶ By shifting attention to thought's precise form, rather than focusing primarily on its content, Esposito identifies the extent to which political theory has assumed a proprietary tenor, an endeavor that he sees as vital for reinvigorating theories of community. He develops his provocative reading of modernity's overarching structure in a series of three texts, *Communitas*, *Immunitas*, and *Bíos*, elaborating the stakes of his argument most fully in the trilogy's first installment, *Communitas*.³⁷ His ultimate aim, across these three works, is to explore the catastrophic failings of community in twentieth-century Europe, manifest most notably in the extremes of fascism and communism; his priority in *Communitas*, meanwhile, is to develop the political-philosophical grounds of his broader project. To this end, he charts an intellectual history of community, revealing that the structure of possession marks not only modern theories of subjectivity, as is widely recognized, but also those of community, too. Identifying as pervasive the troubling yet "ignored assumption that community is a 'property' belonging to subjects that join[s] them together," Esposito explains that almost all modern philosophies imagine community as "a 'fullness' or 'whole,' " as "a good [or] an essence," or as

³⁶ See the introduction to *Communitas* (pages 1-19) for Esposito's first articulation of this paradigm.

³⁷ The order of translation into English differs from the original publications in Italian: *Communitas* 1998 (transl. 2004), *Immunitas* 2002 (transl. 2011), and *Bíos* 2004 (transl. 2008).

“a ‘substance’ that is produced by [the] union [of subjects]” (2).³⁸ Understood primarily through the valence of belonging, that is, community is injected with substance and given object status. It becomes a substantive thing, an item with defined contours, and in its closure to those outside its domain it acquires an exclusionary tenor. Imagined in these terms, subjected to such figurations of thought, community maintains the same closed conceptual structure as the possessive individual. As such, in modern philosophies spanning the breadth of the political spectrum, community bears a largely fixed identity, effectively wary of change and suspicious of outsiders.

In his explanation of how community came to be conceptualized according to the logic of possession, Esposito demonstrates the intertwining of political thought on subjectivity, community, and the polis. Differentiating between *communitas* (the Latin for “community”) as an ideal, general category, and *community*, as the abstraction’s actualized form, Esposito explains that the possessive tenor these concepts acquire in modernity is not without precedent in previous eras. In early Christian communities and throughout medieval Europe, *communitas* was “associated with the concept of ‘belonging’” (9). Over time, as Esposito explains, it “[took] on the shape of a fixed territory,” as evidenced in its close lexical connection with *civitas* and *castrum*, both of which “signif[y] the defense of proper borders” (9). By the twelfth century, particularly in France and Italy, *communitas* had acquired a juridicopolitical tenor, coming to designate autonomous cities and identify them as “proprietors of themselves” (9). Finally, by the early-seventeenth century, the logic of proprietorship had thoroughly permeated political thought, characterizing theories of community and subjectivity alike. In a notably extreme example, Thomas Hobbes presumes that people share nothing more than the capacity to kill and be killed, a propensity which, Esposito argues, is “generalized to such a degree as to become the

³⁸ Esposito specifically references the philosophy of *Gemeinschaft*, American neo-communitarianism, the ethics of communication, the communist tradition, and Weber’s secularized community.

sole link that joins individuals who would otherwise be divided and independent” (26). As Hobbes believes the individual to be threatened by its mere existence within the political community, he identifies the state’s principal role as protecting its subjects from the risk of death. For all its immoderation, Hobbes’ theory of the polis usefully exemplifies the epistemological proximity of the categories of “community” and “subjectivity.” With Hobbes, as Esposito explains, “[m]odern individuals truly become that, the perfect individual, the ‘absolute’ individual, bordered in such a way that they are isolated and protected, but only if they are freed in advance from the ‘debt’ that binds them one to the other” (12-13). This imagery of enclosed subjectivity, of the individual as “bordered” and “protected” from the larger whole to which it unwillingly belongs, endows Esposito’s language with a literary tenor, his attentiveness to form suggesting the intimate connection between conceptual outline and aesthetic shape. By linguistically invoking modernity’s exclusionary contours, and emphasizing the supposed enclosure of the individual subject within its own “borders,” Esposito exposes the formal logic that underpins modern political thought.

Indeed, it is Esposito’s very attentiveness to form, logic, and semantics that allows him to “reintroduc[e] the question of community that modernity seem[s] to have completely closed off” (15). Modeling a methodology that informs my own theorization of aesthetic impropriety, Esposito rejects the logic of enclosure that has not only characterized modern thinking of community, but “completely closed” the topic from thought. As an alternative, he conceptualizes community according to a philosophy of openness, the exploratory nature of his endeavors indexed in their approach through the open modality of a “question.” With a nod to the French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, whom he credits with “clearing a way forward in the closed thought of community,” Esposito probes the limitations of existing theories and delineates his

alternative, non-exclusionary model (148). In a move with profound consequences for both intellectual history and political theory, he locates the morpheme “*munus*,” or “obligation,” at the heart of the term, “*communitas*.” Given that *munus* denotes an obligation or debt, one that is shared between the members of the community and that forms the structure of their relation, the original connotations of *communis* challenge the modern supposition that individuals are bound together by a substantive quality that they seemingly all possess. Instead, as Esposito explains, “the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or a possession. It isn’t having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack” (6). He continues:

The subjects of community are united by an ‘obligation,’ in the sense that we say ‘I owe *you* something,’ but not ‘you owe *me* something.’ This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more precisely expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity. . . . In the community, subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure They don’t find anything else except that void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves. (6-7)

By formulating community through the concept of *munus* and lack, Esposito “decenters the proprietary subject” and articulates a philosophy that is open and non-exclusionary. Instead of being predicated upon possession and enclosure, that is, Esposito’s philosophy is constructed upon expropriation and radical openness. Given the exclusionary consequences of modernity’s possessive epistemology, the injection of non-possessive logic into European philosophy bears profound implications for political thought.

In a lexical turn that inspires my own use of “impropriety” as both a political alternative to possessive logic and a literary style characterized by experimentation and relationality, Esposito contrasts “impropriety” with the rigidity and substantiality of the “proper.” For example, he describes the subjects of his theorized community as “[n]ot subjects. Or subjects of their own proper lack, of the lack of the proper. Subjects of a radical impropriety that coincides with an absolute contingency or just simply ‘coincides,’ that falls together” (7). Instead of forming a substantive whole, as with the widespread and often unacknowledged assumptions of modern political thought of all inclinations, these improper subjects come together relationally: they “simply ‘coincide.’” In place of the enclosed, exclusionary, substantive, and possessive logic of modernity, therefore, Esposito proposes an open, non-exclusionary, relational, and improper modality, one that steers clear of the exclusions that not only arise from the logic of possession but inhere in its very structure. It is this model of improper relation, of non-exclusion and non-possession posited as a response to the entrenched exclusions inhering in possessive modernity, that thus informs my theorization of aesthetic impropriety. Drawing upon Esposito’s substantial insights, this chapter now turns, in its final section, to examine the form and implications of improper aesthetics, and to make the case that impropriety is both politically and literarily profound.

Interruption, Invention, and Imagination: Art’s Politicality and Politics’ Aesthetics

If, as I have been arguing, forms of thought bear corresponding aesthetic contours—if epistemologies share formal patterns with art—then can it not also be argued that aesthetic styles bear political implications? That art’s very form might reveal much about prevailing political ideas? Indeed, that art might, through its formal characteristics, establish alternative modes of

political life? Just as the language of political theory addresses how politics necessarily involves modifying existing forms of thought and structures of being, so theories of the aesthetic might usefully consider art (in its broadest sense) not only as representing the world but also as participating in its reconfiguration. Among other things, my theory of aesthetic impropriety begins to develop a language for aesthetics that draws from radical political theory, proposing ways of discussing aesthetic form and, most particularly, literary aesthetics that acknowledges art's interruptive, inventive, and generative capacities.

Turning from political to aesthetic theory, I want to argue that the possessive logic marking political modernity is both rejected and rewritten through a contrastingly non-possessive, improper logic that is found not only in a strain of recent political theory and anti-imperialist thought but also in a category of non-realist postcolonial literature. Unlike the closed, exclusionary, and fixed modality of possessive logic, the structure of non-possession is open, connective, and adaptable. Inasmuch as the aforementioned schematic thereby undermines the "semantics of proprium," to use Esposito's turn of phrase, it can be characterized as "improper": not closed and possessive but open and non-exclusionary; not predicated upon ownership but predisposed to sharing; not respectable or conventional but imaginative, eccentric, and radical. Improper in all senses of the term, therefore, the modality that I name "aesthetic impropriety" contravenes the logic that sustains the political status quo, and in so doing it creatively reconfigures existing epistemologies and systems of power. Effectively rejecting the possessive logic upon which the twinned projects of modernity and European imperialism were largely built, improper aesthetics interrupt, disturb, and reconfigure the prevailing political order.

In contradistinction to modernity's possessive logic, which assumes the necessity of protecting both the individual and the community from what Esposito wryly terms "the

contagion of the relation with others,” the counter-model of impropriety insists that a fair and equitable polis is predicated upon relation (13). The crucial difference between possessive and non-possessive logics derives, therefore, from their contrasting attitudes to the role of relation within the structure of the polis. Whereas the possessive community is committed to curtailing contact between supposedly risky subjects and thus bears an exclusionary structure, the non-possessive community is built upon the assumption of relation’s necessity and is correspondingly expansive in principle and form. If the possessive community seemingly protects its subjects by separating them wherever possible and by excluding those not already of its number, the non-possessive community identifies relation as constitutive, constructive, and desirable. Instead of considering relationality to be harmful, in other words, the non-possessive community understands that relation provides its very conditions of possibility—that a community is such only insofar as it is relational.

My assessment of the requisite relationality of non-possessive political community is inspired, in part, by the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, upon whom Esposito also relies to develop both his theory of modernity’s “immunitary paradigm” and his alternative formulation of community as established through the *munus*, or lack.³⁹ Nancy describes the common neither as a substance, nor as the communion or fusion of its members, but as relation itself (xxxvii). As he explains, “[t]he community that becomes *a single* thing . . . necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common,” and in losing the connective “in” of commonality forsakes its relational quality (xxxix). In an argument that clearly also influences Esposito, Nancy contends that the substantiated political community is an exclusionary entity, one that has effectively precluded change and closed itself to potential participants. As an alternative, Nancy proposes that

³⁹ Nancy delineates his philosophy of community in *The Inoperative Community*, and in conversation with Maurice Blanchot’s essay, “The Negative Community” in *The Unavowable Community*. The philosophical conversation between Nancy and Blanchot has been continued, among others, by Giorgio Agamben; see *Coming Community*.

community should be conceptualized as an activity, one that “takes place always through others and for others It is not a communion It is the community of *others*” (15). Inasmuch as Nancy’s proposed community “takes place always through others,” its form depends not upon fusional “communion” but upon conceptualizing relation as an active and ongoing process that occurs, or “takes place,” through political subjects themselves. Nancy describes the constant movement of this activity as “sharing,” claiming that “singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*” (25). As this rhetoric of “distribution,” “placement,” and “spacing” suggests, the modality of “sharing” presumes an ongoing relationality, one that is maintained by its resistance to fusion and coalescence. The community conceptualized by Nancy is, therefore, neither the sum total of its members, nor an entity to which people belong, but the very act of relation itself.

Notably, the modality of “sharing” that underpins Nancy’s thought is premised as a compulsion rather than a choice, as an inevitability that constitutes the very domain of the political rather than one possible method of its organization. Differentiating between the “individual” in its possessive, modern form and the so-called “singular being” of his own philosophy, Nancy argues that each singularity inclines toward others: that singularities are in perpetual and constitutive contact. He explains, “[s]haring comes down to this: what community reveals to me . . . is my existence outside myself” (26). As the precise wording here suggests, it is not just others who exist beyond me; far more radically, I, too, exist beyond myself. Leaning beyond my own imagined confines, acknowledging not just “*an* existence outside myself,” but “*my* existence outside myself,” the “I” lacks the pronounced contours of the possessive individual (emphasis added). Inasmuch as the paradigm of “sharing” thus formalizes the singular being as inclined outwards, or as “exposed” to others, as Nancy elsewhere describes, it is a

radically non-possessive modality.⁴⁰ While “individuation” imagines political subjects as “closed off entities,” Nancy’s proposed idiom of singularity identifies them as constitutively relational (27). By his logic, singular beings are not separate entities that are capable of connection within a larger organizational body; rather, they are already “distributed” and “shared” in and among one another (27). Nancy’s philosophy of relational community is also, therefore, a philosophy of non-possessive subjectivity, a theory in which both community and subjectivity are conceptualized as radically, and constitutively, open and relational.

Despite its grounding in European philosophical traditions and political experience, Nancy’s philosophy of community has proven highly generative for postcolonial theorists addressing questions of anticolonial and postcolonial political community. Nancy’s appeal lies in his simultaneous diagnosis of the exclusionary consequences of modern formulations of subjectivity and community and his comprehensive articulation of a thoroughly relational modality as a non-exclusionary alternative. In *All the Difference in the World*, for example, Natalie Melas uses Nancy’s trope of “sharing” to elucidate the question of non-dominative, non-equivalizing comparison within a postcolonial context. Arguing that acts of comparison and theories of relation risk essentializing difference and reducing it to sameness, thereby supporting dominative structures of post-imperial power, Melas examines various “figures of incommensurability” that facilitate comparison without establishing equivalence. As she observes, “[t]he challenge postcoloniality poses is to conceive of community and communication across cultures in such a way that they do not rest on the shared ground of common humanity” (96). Nancy’s paradigm of “sharing” achieves precisely this goal because it conceptualizes

⁴⁰ Nancy’s formalization of “exposure” chimes clearly with Georges Bataille’s concept of “excess”; see Bataille, *Visions of Excess*. Both Nancy and Bataille describe the subject as inclining outside itself, their respective paradigms articulating the limits of existing formulations of community and proposing an alternative.

commonality in such a way as to maintain “alterity rather than assimilation” (99).⁴¹ His relational model, in other words, allows for comparison without equivalence, for commonality without generalization. Melas remains cognizant of Nancy’s limitations for postcolonial formulations of non-dominative community, notably observing that Nancy’s ontological analysis, not being tied to any specific locale, risks propagating the kind of universal logic upon which imperialism also relied.⁴² While Melas does concede that Nancy “provide[s] a model or an ethos for a different kind of politics,” a claim that underscores both her own and Nancy’s attentiveness to community’s formal construction, we might yet read Nancy, and the relational aesthetics upon which he depends, as more interruptive, more politically generative, than the rather passive connotations that the terms “model” and “ethos” imply (106).

Leela Gandhi reveals a similar assessment of Nancy in *Affective Communities*, a text that both explores the activities of western anti-imperialists in fin-de-siècle India and, by way of political philosophy, postcolonial criticism, and poststructuralist theory, conceptualizes the possible form of radical socialist community. Drawing upon Nancy’s motif of “compearance,” or “co-appearing,” Gandhi argues that non-dominative community is relational rather than isolationist, improvisational rather than imposed:

Neither a settled arrangement from above nor one from below, the axes of utopic community are horizontal and latitudinal, seeking cohesion in what Nancy identifies as a process of ‘compearance.’ . . . [T]he ethics of compearance

⁴¹ The poststructuralist concept of alterity has proven a popular concept within postcolonial theory, as it intersects with discussions regarding cultural or racial difference proceeding on a materialist or anthropological basis. The most prominent theorists of postcolonial alterity are Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak; see *The Location of Culture* and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, respectively. For a considered rebuttal of the work of ‘alterity’ in postcolonial studies, see Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, especially 114-160.

⁴² Melas compares Nancy’s theory of non-fusional community with Edouard Glissant’s theory of Relation, a paradigm that similarly formulates a version of non-possessive community but from within the specific context of Caribbean history. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant argues: “The generalizing universal is the sufficient pretension which permits the sublimation of the dignity of the person starting from the reality of private property. It is also the most conclusive weapon in the process of depersonalizing a dispossessed people” (cited in Melas 106).

defiantly contravenes the embargo on relationality through which power, colonial or otherwise, orchestrates its divisions and exclusions. (19-20)

Identifying “the axes of utopic community” as “horizontal and latitudinal,” Gandhi uses the image of a grid to describe utopian community’s resistance to domination. In schematizing political relation and its preclusion through a kind of extended metaphor, and in turning from the level of the abstract toward that of the concrete, Gandhi effectively represents a political idea through aesthetic form. While all political theories—indeed, all domains of cognition and language use—rely upon metaphor to explain abstract ideas, what Gandhi is doing here is slightly different. To the extent that her description of the differences between dominative and nondominative political form remain highly abstract, they continue to work in the rarefied domain of the theoretical; they veer toward metaphor but they are never finally concretized as such. In addition, Gandhi focuses on radical community’s formal contours, identifying its conceptual structure as integral to its claims. As I have been suggesting, literary readings of the political—like Gandhi’s—model new ways for reading the literary politically, exposing patterns of thought through corresponding forms of conceptual and aesthetic representation.

Significantly, Gandhi does not suggest that “compearance” is a way of achieving inclusion, even though she describes Nancy’s model as defying power’s exclusionary capacities. In the school of political thought from which Gandhi draws, it is understood that any expansion of the domain of political legitimacy to include those who had previously been excluded inaugurates new exclusions: for example, granting women political rights includes this population within the polis but it does not change the model of inclusion/exclusion that previously authorized their dispossession and that sanctions the continued exclusion of other groups. As the political theorist, Bonnie Honig, elsewhere observes, inclusion is not exclusion’s

true opposite: rather, “circles of solidarity and kinship are usually drawn in ways that not only include but also always exclude as one of their enabling conditions” (114). If, as Honig explains, any act of inclusion is also one of exclusion, then inclusion does not itself counter the exclusionary rationale and consequences of the divisive colonial polity. By contrast, the horizontal, relational, and improvisational form of compearance does establish the conditions for a radically more just political community, one allowing neither exclusion nor exclusionary inclusion, and one structured not upon dominance but upon constitutive relation. Gandhi’s theorization of an “improvisational politics,” manifest in “small, defiant flights from the fetters of belonging toward the unknown destinations of radical alterity,” thus describes the possible form of non-possessive political community (7).

To consider the latitudinal, non-dominative, unavoidable form of relation described here is to associate relationality with non-exclusionary aesthetics and non-possessive politics, and thus with my theorization of political and aesthetic impropriety. The relational is improper because it is not enclosed and contained, because it contradicts and undermines the logic of possession alongside which it arose, because it refuses even the capacity for exclusion, and because it flouts the logic of propriety. Alongside its normative impropriety and the challenges it presents to the status quo, therefore, the improper also bears a contradistinctive modality to that of the proper and possessive, evincing a form of relationality that is both constitutive and open. As Nancy’s formulation of relation as constitutive spacing has so influentially described, the aesthetics of “compearance,” or “co-appearing” rejects the possessive logic manifest in both modern formulations of the autonomous subject and twentieth-century models of totalized community. Indeed, as this chapter has explained, possessive logic structures modernity not just in terms of subjectivity and political community, but in diverse forms of social, juridical,

economic, and geopolitical organization. Given that possessive formations assume the necessity of curtailing all or certain types of relation, the sustained aesthetic delineation of relationality as both constitutive and open must be considered improper.

Aesthetic impropriety ties politics to literature in new ways because it links the underlying schematic cluster of possession, propriety and the proper to the contradistinctive formal schema found in both poststructuralist articulations of political community and poststructuralist aesthetic theory. The very connection between radical political theory (as elaborated by Jean-Luc Nancy, Georges Bataille, Bonnie Honig, Roberto Esposito, and others) and radical aesthetic thought (delineated, for example, by Jacques Rancière, Leela Gandhi, and Natalie Melas) relies on similarities of method as well as a shared interest in reimagining the polis. To a not insignificant extent, the connection between the aforementioned thinkers reflects the structural, historical, and theoretical associations between democracy and the novel that have been addressed in numerous studies over a substantial period of time.⁴³ However, the similarities between these political and literary theorists extend beyond the novel's constitutive interest in democracy (and vice versa), including also their comparable types of formal and aesthetic analysis. Just as political thought can be read through aesthetic means, as when formal contours and structural patterns are analyzed in order to reveal both continuities and discontinuities of thought, so the same method can be used to interpret aesthetic forms for their political valences. Crucially, therefore, aesthetic impropriety does not simply provide a model for alternative modes of political relation; far more radically, it reconfigures the domain of the possible, changes structures of thought, and makes genuine political interventions. I thus want to extend the important claim I have already made, in which I link politics with art by suggesting, like Lauren

⁴³ For an excellent overview, see Ruttenburg, "Introduction: Is the Novel Democratic," in the recent special issue on this topic in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

Berlant, that new aesthetic forms register shifts in historical consciousness: that improper aesthetics index a broad reaction against the exclusionary effects of modernity's possessive logic (7).⁴⁴ In addition, I want to argue that the aesthetic is, itself, capable of being politically generative, and that the heightened experimentation of non-realist aesthetics, in particular, facilitates the radical reformulation of prevailing structures of the political.

To theorize the generative and interruptive capacities of non-realist aesthetics requires a degree of linguistic innovation because our very aesthetic language is possessive. By this I mean that aesthetic discourse continues to invoke art's mimetic function even when a more critical, contemporary, or radical aesthetic interpretation is intended. While theories of the political frequently use verbs suggesting action and impact, aesthetic form is generally described in ways implying passivity and reflection. In literary studies, texts are commonly understood to "represent," "present," "depict," or "imagine" ideas or scenarios. With the exception of theoretical analyses addressing performativity, it is rare to find discussions of aesthetic form couched in more active terms: for example, suggesting that representational acts might "reconfigure" the world, "produce" new systems of thought, or "engender" new ways of being. Inasmuch as the aesthetic remains described primarily as a reflection, or "representation," of reality, it is implicitly understood as passive and secondary. Similarly, insofar as aesthetic "imagining" is generally conceived as distinct to the "real," it is considered capable only of recording historical changes rather than participating in them. In other words, even though it has been recognized for some time that artistic modalities including literature, visual art, and film are bound up with material history, aesthetic terminology continues to suggest otherwise. It is for this reason that I identify prevailing aesthetic discourse as possessive: its implicitly mimetic

⁴⁴ See also Jed Esty, for example, who in his study of postcolonial literature and narrative form argues, "changes in literary form and style register or reflect broader or deeper changes in history" (14).

assumptions circumscribe art's innovations, enclosing politics and aesthetics in a one-to-one relationship wherein the aesthetic is only ever a reflection of that which already exists. To the extent that our aesthetic language remains indebted to the logic—if not always the conclusions—of mimesis, it remains possessive in tenor.

In assessing art's politically interruptive capacities, my analysis bears affinities with Jacques Rancière's ongoing theorization of the relation between politics and aesthetics, which rejects the continuing dominance of mimesis in art theory and practice by recognizing politics' and aesthetics' shared formal modalities. Under the rubric of "dissensus," which is contrasted with the normative mode of "consensus," Rancière describes both the political and the aesthetic as bearing disruptive and generative potential. As is explained in "Ten Theses on Politics" and "The Paradoxes of Political Art," consensus is associated with the "proper," itself aligned with the state, while dissensus is associated with the improper, and thus with politics as such. Along similar lines to my own conception of propriety and impropriety, the proper, for Rancière, signals containment, homogeneity, and mimesis, while the improper connotes disruption, interruption, and remaking. Whereas my focus remains on the formal and epistemological connections between the conceptual contours of the proper and improper, however, Rancière uses the dichotomy of the proper and the improper as a passing exposition for his primary explanatory categories of consensus and dissensus. In part, these interrelated paradigms allow him to explicitly connect the aesthetic with the affective: in their embedded phonic element, "sense," both "consensus" and "dissensus" index the etymological intimacy between *aesthetics* and *aesthesis*, where the former corresponds to theories of art and its perception and the latter means the action of perception by sense. In addition, Rancière's model indicates his attentiveness

to political processes, whether of the kind of conciliation that sustains the status quo, as in *consensus*, or of disagreement and the generation of new political forms, as with *dissensus*.

If consensus describes social propriety, and as such is a name for tradition and verisimilitude, dissensus (which Rancière elsewhere terms “disagreement”) registers the flux caused through contestation and disputation, particularly through the making of new political subjects. On this latter point, Rancière’s preferred example is consistently the proto-feminist Olympe de Gouges, who argued during the French Revolution that since women could be sentenced to death, and thereby understood as universal human subjects, they should also be recognized, like men, as citizens with political rights. Rancière explains the process of political subjectivation exemplified by de Gouges in “Does Democracy Mean Something?”:

Democracy . . . entails that there is never merely *one* subject, since political subjects exist in the interval *between* different identities, between *Man* and *citizen*. . . . In this process, Man and citizen are used as political names whose legal inscription is itself the product of a political process. They are also conflictual names in the sense that their extension and comprehension is a litigious matter, which opens a space for their testing or verification (56)

As this example suggests, Rancière sees the political as a “process” because it is “conflictual” and “litigious,” meaning that its regime of signification and its operative form are constantly under negotiation. New political subjects come into being and existing structures are altered through politics’ “litigious” processes, so the political should be understood as disruptive and, indeed, creative. Tracy McNulty helpfully glosses this process in psychoanalytic terms, arguing that Rancière establishes and interrogates the connection between revolutionary class struggle and the symbolic order. “[Rancière] stresses that class struggle cannot be limited to a power

play,” McNulty explains; “it cannot simply be a mode of revolt, but must have a symbolic dimension if it is to ‘establish another order’ altogether, rather than merely expanding upon or revolting against the existing order” (38). In McNulty’s account, politics’ creative tenor derives from its symbolic functioning. Whereas the relation between politics and aesthetics tends to be drawn in terms that show art’s political capacities, McNulty emphasizes the opposite: that politics depends for its success upon the symbolic order, and thus upon a process that is typically understood in creative terms and identified through literary analysis—or, indeed, psychoanalytic examination.

McNulty’s psychoanalytic lens not only elucidates Rancière’s trenchant political theory but it also opens and expands his aesthetic analysis. For Rancière, the common functioning of dissensus in politics and aesthetics is aesthetic in principle, as it operates through the sensory dimension of aisthesis; as McNulty explains, however, Rancière’s political theory in fact extends beyond aisthesis and its associated aesthetic terminology, resting upon the symbolic order and its corresponding structures of thought. In “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” Rancière explains that aesthetic dissensus names a specific type of conflict, not simply conflict per se: it names “a conflict between *sense* and *sense* . . . between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it” (139). Similarly, politics is founded upon dissensus because it “breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order . . . by inventing new subjects” (139). For Rancière, therefore, both politics and aesthetics have to do with meaning and its interpretation: “Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time — in short, new bodily capacities” (139). As McNulty explains, “Rancière’s account of politics as a meeting up

of two orders—and thus as the staging of a polemic—departs not only from an understanding of politics as ‘representation,’ but also from any brand of revolutionary politics that emphasizes violent struggle . . . to the exclusion of the symbolic features of the political” (37). McNulty’s language hones the awareness Rancière seemingly holds but does not always reveal: that art’s innovative capacities derive from its formal innovations, and thus from its structural interventions rather than its mimetic representations.

In many ways, I agree with Rancière’s assessment of aesthetic experimentation’s radical propensities. Rancière has specific delimitations in mind regarding “politics” and “aesthetics”: he associates the political with democracy, arguably the only existing political formation allowing for the disruptive process of dissensus, and he identifies the aesthetic with experimentalism, assuming that mimetic art can never create new forms of thought, new modes of relation, or new ways of being. The latter claim is unusual, as art that is understood as politically engaged is typically mimetic, working in one of two ways: either by exposing the problems regarding a particular political issue in an attempt to change public behavior, or by turning everyday life into art, thereby suggesting that the aesthetic is only politically effective if it is engaged rather than rarefied. By contrast, the “aesthetic regime of art,” as Rancière calls it, is politically disruptive because it rejects any relation between its form and its aisthesis, or its imagined sensory effects. In other words, the aesthetic (that is, the non-mimetic) can provoke dissensus precisely because it has neither a clear objective nor a presumed sense of its practical utility. As Rancière explains, “‘Aesthetic’ designates the suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function” (138). The question still remains, though, as to how aesthetic interruptions take effect. In raising this omission, I do not mean to suggest that art should have identifiable political consequences, but that what also needs to be addressed is the

way aesthetic interruption—or the process of dissensus—might take place. By more thoroughly examining the conceptual and epistemological connections between politics and aesthetics, Rancière’s engaging analysis might be further extended, especially with regard to the intricacies of literary form.

The literary theorist, Isobel Armstrong, helps to clarify the precise tenor of the generative relationship between politics and aesthetics. Observing that “the aesthetic is not the political, but it may make the political possible,” Armstrong contends that literature opens space for new forms of thought to develop: that literature pre-empts political change (43). Under the category of “play,” she describes how literary devices such as metaphor effect “the transformation of categories, which constitutes a change in the structure of thought itself” (41). As Armstrong goes on to observe, thought’s transformation is “the prerequisite of political change,” a claim that seems so very obvious yet which holds relatively little traction within literary studies, an oversight suggesting that the association between aesthetic form and the structure of thought has been inadequately theorized. If the formal structure of aesthetics reveals an underlying logic, as I have argued throughout this chapter, then the process of aesthetic experimentation necessarily also signals changes to the structure of thought. Moreover, since literary form is related to epistemological form, it derives its political capacities as much from its formal contours as from any proclamations it makes or ideological investments it reveals.

While all aesthetic forms are somewhat related to prevailing epistemological structures, non-realist literature proves exemplary for exploring thought’s transformation because it more assuredly avows its distance from existing organizational systems and scientific laws than its realist counterpart; as such, it offers a crystalline expression of its underlying logic. By more clearly demonstrating the correlation between aesthetic structure and the structure of thought,

non-realist literature clarifies how formal innovations might participate in the adaptation of ideas and precipitate political change. My account of the transformational potential of experimental aesthetics thus advances similar claims to Melas in “Untimeliness,” her essay on Césaire’s *Notebook*, in which she aligns revolutionary politics with radical aesthetics. Addressing the way *négritude* functions as both an anticolonial cultural ideology and a poetics, Melas agrees with Jean-Paul Sartre that “Césaire’s words do not describe *négritude*, do not designate it, do not copy it from the outside as a painter does with a model: they make it [il l’a fait]; they compose it under our eyes” (quoted in Melas 578). It is this creative, generative element that is emphasized in my theory of aesthetic impropriety: this capacity for art to “make” such a radically new form as *négritude* through its compositional form. Melas advances her argument through close readings of *Notebook*’s lexical elements, showing how “the poem’s claim to its own present is by no means given but made through powerfully wrought paradox, artifice, and outburst” (579). In its use of “paradox, artifice, and outburst,” so Melas argues, Césaire’s poem achieves the same feat as *négritude* and creates its own “untimely” existence, bursting into the texture of colonial thought and making space for a radically new order of being. Similarly, the novels explored in this dissertation under the rubric of “aesthetic impropriety” all intervene in the possessive political economy upon which colonialism and its aftermath is structured, opening space through their own “powerfully wrought” impropriety for a newly relational, non-exclusionary schematic of political thought and structure of political community. Aesthetic impropriety is, therefore, not just a reaction against possessive logic (although it resoundingly rejects modernity’s possessive predicates), but is also the act of reformulating political thought and political relation. The improper aesthetics of postcolonial literature are not just a description of the world but the making of a new one.

Like those aforementioned literary and political theorists who practice radical formal analysis, I have suggested that aesthetic impropriety is interruptive and generative precisely because of its formal experimentation. Like Armstrong, who makes the case for “the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse” (2), and Gandhi, who argues that “disorganized spontaneity” and “defiant immaturity” produce the conditions that establish the “creative possibility for radical democracy” (186), I contend that aesthetic experimentation actively participates in the process of rearticulating prevailing structures of logic, thereby creating new forms of thought and new ways of being in the world. Similarly, like Rancière, who argues not only that “[p]olitics is aesthetic in principle,” but that “[p]olitical invention operates in acts that are at once argumentative and poetic” and that thus “open . . . worlds,” I understand aesthetic experimentation to be “argumentative,” or political, as well as “poetic,” or creative (*Disagreement* 58, 59).

The consequences of regarding non-realist postcolonial literature as politically engaged as well as formally experimental are not insignificant. Too often, postcolonial literature is examined for the social history it delineates, not its poetics⁴⁵—and yet, as I have argued in this chapter, and as my literary analyses in the following chapters will demonstrate in further detail, poetics are far from apolitical or antipolitical. Much as Gandhi aims “to unsettle the foundational claims of that realist epistemology to which our notions of the political have long been hostage,” I propose that the non-realist experimental aesthetics found in many postcolonial literary texts effect substantial political interventions (151). By reformulating the dominative, possessive, exclusionary mode of relation that characterizes political modernity and that is epitomized in the

⁴⁵ For related forms of this argument, see Gandhi, especially 142-176, and Scott, especially 1-22.

colonial polity, aesthetically improper postcolonial novels together participate in the development of new, non-exclusionary, non-possessive forms of political relation.

CHAPTER TWO Possessive Politics and Improper Aesthetics: Property Rights and Female Dispossession in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

On July 17, 2013, India's Cabinet approved the Marriage Laws (Amendment) Bill 2010, a piece of legislation that, once signed into law, would give women the right to a share in marital property upon divorce or separation, thereby providing economic protections that have long been lacking.¹ As women's activists and feminist legal scholars have emphasized in pressing for this legislative change, India's property laws have historically worked to exclude women from property ownership and authorize their legal and economic dispossession. The gendered dictates of Indian property law grew particularly pronounced during the nineteenth century, during which time colonial British law colluded with Indian patriarchies to further delimit women's already minimal property rights.² While significant legislative amendments were made in the twentieth century to provide greater economic protections for women, particularly regarding the right to inherit family property and the right to divorce, the economic and legal position of Indian women has long remained precarious. Until the new legislation comes into effect, women are eligible only for maintenance payments upon divorce, a situation that makes them economically dependent upon their ex-husbands and constitutes them as dependent legal subjects.³ Female economic security has been similarly compromised under Indian inheritance law: until 2005, most states excluded women from inheriting family property, effectively ensuring male financial dominance.⁴ The consequences of women's limited property rights amount to more than

¹ See Himanshi Dhawan, "New Bill."

² In particular, see Flavia Agnes 119-24. See also Mytheli Sreenivas 948-950 and Rachel Sturman 2.

³ For legislative details, see Singh; see also Agnes 129-32, 135-6.

⁴ See Siwan Anderson and Garance Genicot 4-5; and Singh, esp. 1-17.

systemic economic dispossession: property law's gendered exclusions also minimize women's legal subjectivity, underwrite their social subjugation, and authorize myriad daily aggressions.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* effects its incisive feminist critique through exposing the violence of law's exclusions, evidenced not least in the death of one of its protagonists, Ammu, as a direct result of India's gendered property laws. Ammu is forced from her natal family home by her brother, Chacko, in an unfair act of revenge for his daughter's accidental death. As *The God of Small Things* identifies on multiple occasions, Chacko's right to evict Ammu accrues only through his gender, which gives him substantial property rights while she has none. Ammu dies, therefore, not because she "wast[es] herself away into an unnecessary death," as Aijaz Ahmad declares, but because contemporary property law leaves her homeless, forcing her to live in squalor and without required medical treatment (106). Her untimely death from asthma, linked directly to her poor living conditions and lack of medical attention after her eviction, thus offers an extreme exemplification of Indian property law's historically violent and dispossessory effects. While *The God of Small Things* firmly establishes the causal correlation between Ammu's exile and her subsequent death, however, neither that connection nor its legal basis has been adequately addressed by critics.⁵ Part of the reason for this omission is the critical tendency to focus either on the novel's invective against caste or its attack on colonialism and global capitalism.⁶ The few critics that do undertake a sustained examination of Roy's feminist interventions, namely Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Tracy Lemaster, do so through the analytic lens of cultural critique, addressing Ammu's social ostracism rather than exploring her similarly precarious political and juridical status.

⁵ For a notable exception, see Elizabeth S. Anker 197-8. However, Anker primarily focuses on the liberal subject of human rights rather than on India's gendered property law.

⁶ For an example of the former, see Miriam Nandi; for the latter, see John Lutz.

While caste, geopolitical inequities, and gendered social norms are all important components of *The God of Small Things*, the novel's feminist legal critique warrants examination not only because it is perceptive and timely but also because it offers a crucial insight into the political implications of the novel's aesthetic style. Going beyond a sharply observant rebuttal of India's patriarchal property laws and dominative political economy, *The God of Small Things* elaborates an alternative formulation of political association through its relational aesthetic strategies. In what I term the "aesthetic impropriety" of its recursive narrative structure and relational symbolic economy, *The God of Small Things* undermines the proprietary and exclusionary logic of India's gendered property law. By addressing the structuring connection between property in its possessive contours and Roy's relational, im-proper aesthetic, this chapter extends existing conversations regarding the political characteristics of *The God of Small Things*, arguing that the novel's experimental form is the central site of its political interventions. If *The God of Small Things*' formal characteristics adhere to a relational logic that directly counters the possessive juridicopolitical economy of its setting, they can be seen to present an imagined political configuration that might provide greater protection for women in particular and for marginalized populations more generally. As this chapter demonstrates, Roy's aesthetic experimentation also bears political significance, as it conceptually configures a more inclusionary political economy. My argument therefore counters the charge frequently leveled against *The God of Small Things* that its rhetorical style is overly elaborate, with some critics suggesting that the novel's aesthetics evidence a cynical ploy to appeal to Western readers through orientalist tropes.⁷ On the contrary, Roy's aesthetic style is intimately involved in producing her political critique.

⁷ See, for example, Graham Huggan 58-81. For a feminist defense of Roy against such charges, see Elleke Boehmer.

Dispossession & Divorce: Indian Property Law's Possessive Delimitations

Set in Ayemenem, a village in the southern Indian state of Kerala, *The God of Small Things* takes place in both the late 1960s, when the main events of the novel unfold, and the mid 1990s, when their aftereffects are explored. It tells the story of Ammu, an uppercaste Syrian Christian woman, and her strained relationship with her landowning family, who disapprove of her leaving her violent, alcoholic husband to return to Kerala with her twins, Estha and Rahel. Ammu and her young children live in Ammu's natal family home along with her traditionalist mother, Mammachi; her overbearing brother, Chacko; her manipulative aunt, Baby Kochamma; and their housekeeper, Kochu Maria. In the course of the novel, Ammu establishes a short but impassioned relationship with Velutha, a so-called Untouchable man who has befriended her children and who works in the family pickle factory. On the night their liaison is discovered, Velutha disappears, knowing that the consequences for a sexual relationship with an uppercaste woman will be severe. For different reasons, the twins also run away, taking with them Chacko's daughter, Sophie Mol, who is visiting from England. Sophie Mol tragically dies when the children attempt to swim across the turbulent Meenachal River in the middle of the night, while Velutha is beaten to the point of certain death by a group of police officers, having been falsely accused by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma of sexually assaulting Ammu and kidnapping her children. In the aftermath of that night, Estha is sent back to his father in Bengal and separated from his beloved sister and mother, while Ammu is forced to leave the family home, dying alone and destitute only four years later.

To understand the feminist critique leveled by *The God of Small Things*, articulated primarily through Ammu's limited property rights and their role in her death, it is vital to garner some understanding of Indian property law, including its historical development in both the

precolonial period and under colonial rule. Throughout its rule over India, Britain made great fanfare of the legal reforms it enacted with respect to Indian women, positioning itself as India's moral savior by banning social mores that it considered barbaric.⁸ Legislation such as the Sati Regulation Act (1829), the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act (1856), the Age of Consent Acts (1860, 1891), the Prohibition of Female Infanticide Act (1872), and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) was used to shore up British claims to civilizational superiority and justify ongoing colonial rule.⁹ These legislative acts, culturalist in orientation, buttressed British claims to sovereign legitimacy by modeling the logic of benevolent imperialism. In each act of legislative reform, Britain seemingly proved itself to be the more advanced nation by demonstrating its tutelary commitment to India. Long past condoning practices such as child marriage, so these laws ostensibly demonstrated, Britain yet remained willing to educate India in the ways of civilization. While India was positioned as violently aggressive, not only permitting but also sanctioning regular violence against women, Britain was presented as civilized and law-abiding, protecting with powerful restraint India's vulnerable female population.

As legal scholars and feminist historians have shown, however, not only were the alleviating effects of these legislative acts used "to justify colonial rule and its modernizing mission by projecting indigenous systems as pre-modern and barbaric," but they obscured the violence inflicted by the colonial British judiciary on the legal status and economic security of women in India (Agnes 120). Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the status of Indian women diminished under colonial rule.¹⁰ Most particularly, the economic position of Indian

⁸ Nandini Sundar describes "the rule of law" as a "cultural idiom" in British India (335).

⁹ For a discussion of the contradictory effects of such legislative acts, which simultaneously improved women's daily lives and authorized other forms of gender violence, see Sreenivas, particularly 949, and Agnes, particularly 120-121. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous discussion of gender and colonialism vis-à-vis *sati* in "Subaltern" 296-307.

¹⁰ Agnes 120, Sturman 2-3, Sreenivas 949, and Sangari and Vaid 15-17.

women was affected by changes to laws governing property rights, lines of inheritance, and marriage and divorce. In the precolonial period, women in the subcontinent had maintained varying degrees of economic independence upon marriage, as well as in the case of widowhood or abandonment. During the nineteenth century, with the remodeling of existing property laws according to liberal political theory and the dictates of English case law, women lost customary economic safeguards and became more, not less, dependent on male family members. Thus, as has been argued by feminist scholars such as Flavia Agnes, Mytheli Sreenivas, and Rachel Sturman, property law bears a particular significance to the history of women's political status in colonial and postcolonial India, making the lack of attention to Roy's assessment of property rights especially compelling.

In the precolonial period, under both Islamic and Hindu law, women possessed minimal property rights compared to men. Various safeguards did exist, however, to protect female economic interests upon marriage. Of the two legal systems, Islamic law provided most securely for women's economic rights. As Flavia Agnes observes in her overview of women and property law in India, "From its inception in the seventh century, Islam redeemed marriage of the trappings of sacramental indissolubility and elevated it to the level of consensual, contractual unions" (108). In conceptualizing marriage contractually, hundreds of years before Europe followed suit, Islamic law conceived of women as deserving of economic safeguards to protect that contract's terms. Under the Islamic legal code of *mehr*, for example, a prospective husband was required to give an agreed sum of moveable or immoveable property to his prospective wife as part of the marriage contract. If the husband failed to provide the agreed amount, the woman could refuse cohabitation, a "stipulation [that] was meant to balance the husband's power of arbitrary oral divorce" (109). Similarly, the contractual character of Islamic law allowed women

to specify conditions in the marriage contract (*nikahnama*) or devise premarriage agreements (*kabin nama*) regarding individual property (Agnes 109). Most importantly, a married woman maintained the right to her own separate property, inaccessible to her husband without her consent, in sharp contradistinction to Hindu and European legal systems of the same period.

Different to Muslim legal stipulations regarding female property rights, precolonial Hindu law dictated that a woman largely lost the right to acquire and control property upon marriage (Agnes 111). Thus, Hindu property law has historically been more restrictive than Islamic legal codes, instead sharing the notion central to English common law (derived from Roman law) that a woman and her property, including her labor power, belong to her husband. According to the concept of *coverture* as it was developed in Roman law and practiced in Britain until at least 1882, a woman lost her legal status upon marriage and was placed under the tutelage of her husband. Subsumed into her husband's legal personality, the married woman bore no existence in law; as a result, the husband maintained control over all property, including any wages paid to the woman for her own work and any gifts or inheritances that she received (Sturman 13).¹¹ This state of affairs was not ameliorated in Britain until the passing of the Married Woman's Property Act in 1882, which gave women the full right to separate property, although married women remained legally subject to the category of *coverture* until 1935 (Agnes 118-119).¹²

Despite substantially negating the married woman's legal personality in a manner akin to European legal traditions, Hindu law did include safeguards that provided married women with a degree of economic security. According to Agnes, one such safeguard was the tradition of Joint

¹¹ See, for example, Mary Lyndon Shanley 8-9.

¹² "In 1935 the Married Women's Tortfeasors Act finally abolished the notion of *married* women and alleviated their status to that of single women" (Agnes 118-119). See also P. M. Bromley 425-35.

Family Property, or male coparcenary, under which system a woman's extended marital family bore the legal obligation to maintain her from the family property (111-112). While a married woman remained legally and economically dependent upon male family members, her financial interests were somewhat protected through the shared nature of property ownership. Under the coparcenary system, which still informs property law in India today, a family's estate was jointly owned by four generations of male family members. Despite thereby prioritizing male property interests, this system provided some protection for female economic rights: because property usually and substantially took the form of land, and because land is not easily alienable if jointly owned, it was less than straightforward to deprive a woman of either maintenance or residence. Agnes arguably overstates the case regarding the protections afforded to Hindu women by male coparcenary, as a system of legally codified dependence is manifestly open to abuse, as *The God of Small Things* makes clear.¹³ Nevertheless, Hindu law provided women with additional protections before the changes made under colonial rule. In addition to male coparcenary, Hindu law also allowed for a delimited form of female property ownership named *stridhan* or *stridhana*, according to which concept a married woman maintained absolute ownership over select categories of property: these generally included gifts received at marriage; gifts after marriage from her father, mother, brother, husband, or in-laws; and a marriage fee upon any subsequent marriage of her husband (Agnes 112-113; Sreenivas 939-940).¹⁴ While limited in its purview, the category of *stridhan* provided Hindu women with a measure of economic independence not available to their British contemporaries, who were excluded from all forms of property ownership. For all that colonial Britain relied upon its apparently more progressive

¹³ For a more critical appraisal of coparcenary with respect to the limitations it imposed on women, see Sreenivas, especially 940-1. Notably, Sreenivas argues that male coparcenary undermines women's economic, legal, and political status.

¹⁴ *Stridhan* reverted not to a woman's heirs upon her death, but to the heirs of the last male owner (Sreenivas 940). According to Hindu law, then, female ownership was only ever temporary and limited.

treatment of women to stake its claim for sovereign legitimacy in India, it allocated to its female subjects a juridicopolitical position that was less substantial than that previously experienced by women in the subcontinent.

Beyond these safeguards in Muslim and Hindu law, many local customs accorded additional property rights to women. For example, in some parts of the subcontinent it was customary to give each daughter a plot of land; among some northern tribes, property devolved upon the youngest daughter; and some castes and tribes were matrilineal and matrilocal, thereby giving greater weight to female, not male, property interests (Agnes 115). Indeed, matrilineality forms part of the backdrop to *The God of Small Things* as Kerala was, historically, a predominantly matrilineal society. Until the late-nineteenth century, when the effects of colonial disapprobation began to be felt more profoundly, matrilineality was practiced among the highly populous Nayar, or Nair, caste.¹⁵ As a corollary to matrilineal domestic formulations, women in South India, including both Kerala and its neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, have historically also enjoyed greater property rights than women in the north.¹⁶

The various legal codes and customary practices that had, to some extent, protected the economic interests of women in the subcontinent were largely eradicated in the colonial period, with laws derived from European jurisprudence serving to cement rather than ameliorate female subjugation. Legislative reform became increasingly rapid in the wake of the 1857 rebellion, as colonial Britain attempted to reassert its sovereignty by centralizing power both governmentally and juridically.¹⁷ The legal changes that all-but abolished female property rights in the

¹⁵ Prema Kurien 43-60.

¹⁶¹⁶ In Kerala, matrilineality took an attenuated form compared to its functioning in other parts of India. Despite being matrilineal, the head of the household was male and men possessed significantly greater property rights than women. See Kanakalatha Mukund 1342-3.

¹⁷ On new legal codes and the introduction of demographic analysis during this period, see Metcalf and Metcalf, esp. 108-112.

subcontinent ushered in a rule of law that was, on the one hand, profoundly shaped by the liberal theory of property that underpinned colonial governance¹⁸ and, on the other, influenced and sustained by family structures and local interests that were already highly patriarchal.¹⁹ According to Mytheli Sreenivas, “[Colonial] law effectually forged alliances with agrarian patriarchies, supporting the control by particular men—as husbands, fathers, and heads of families—of resources within agrarian society” (940).²⁰ In what is now Kerala, for example, colonists and missionaries described the matrilineal system practiced by the Nayar caste as an “abomination,” and at the behest of young Nayars, educated in colonial schools, the caste gradually adopted “more ‘respectable’ practices such as monogamy, patrilineality, patrilocality, and greater patriarchy” (Kurien 53).²¹ Thus, the reform of property rights that occurred in mid- to late-nineteenth century colonial India, and the ensuing diminishment of women’s already limited economic security, cannot be ascribed to colonial legislation alone but instead demonstrates the collusion of British colonialism with Indian patriarchy.²²

In their analyses of female dispossession, feminist historians of Indian property law have convincingly demonstrated the alliance between Indian patriarchal formations and the colonial administration. Patriarchal interests persisted and intensified during the radical overhaul of Indian jurisprudence and its corresponding juridicopolitical economy during the nineteenth century, with Britain achieving its goal of greater legislative and administrative control by

¹⁸ Sturman makes a provocative case for reassessing histories of women’s rights in India by showing the influence of liberal theories of property law on colonial governance.

¹⁹ See, for example, Sreenivas, particularly 938-941 and 949.

²⁰ Agarwal 158-80.

²¹ The decline of matrilineal descent patterns meant that women in these societies were “gradually removed from access to and control over property and resources” (Sreenivas 942). Also see Agarwal 153-93.

²² As Sturman describes, “the colonial state . . . remained committed to retaining and consolidating patriarchal power in a variety of ways” (2). Relatedly, see Agnes 120 and Sreenivas 938-40.

supporting the property interests of powerful men.²³ Sreenivas argues, for example, that colonial legislators for a long time permitted the traditional system of male coparcenary, or group ownership, because it reinforced male property rights and patriarchal power. Racehl Sturman, meanwhile, identifies the influence on Indian property law of the liberal paradigm of individual property rights and the power to alienate property. As she explains, “debates in the field of liberal political economy profoundly shaped colonial visions” while “a liberal theory of property likewise became embedded within the system of personal law” (9). Identifying propriety and the proper as governing logics within colonial India, Sturman implicitly connects the ideological and epistemological forms of political modernity with the system of colonial rule, particularly regarding legal and administrative practice. Within a relatively short period of time, the liberal paradigm of individual property rights largely replaced the traditional model of male coparcenary, a development that Sturman uses to make a claim for the fundamentally liberal form of modern Indian law, with its emphasis on individual ownership and the power to alienate property.

Extending Sturman’s and Sreenivas’s legal and historical analyses, I propose that the formal contours and concrete consequences of colonial jurisprudence and contemporary Indian property law exemplifies what I have described as modernity’s “possessive logic,” a term that draws on formulations in political analysis. As identified in Chapter One, political theorists use the term “possessive community” to describe a self-enclosed, exclusionary group, one that is possessive of its own borders and that seeks to exclude others from its domain. The term derives from an analysis of political modernity that sees the era as marked by the exclusionary logic of possession, or by what political theorist Roberto Esposito terms “the semantics of *proprium*.”

²³ See also Bina Agarwal 158-80.

that is, possession, property, and ownership (2). In an obvious sense, property law is necessarily concerned with regulating possession and therefore with bestowing proprietary capacities upon some juridical subjects at the expense of others. But the claim I am making extends beyond the law's requisite interest in possession, addressing as well the formalization of exclusionary juridical communities in Indian property law.

The tightening up of property law in nineteenth-century India—evident in its rationalized and streamlined character, its more capacious coverage of the subject population, its collusion with Indian patriarchies, and its resounding exclusion of women from ownership—means that in this era property law takes a highly possessive form. In effectively establishing a closed and exclusionary community of male property owners, colonial legislators facilitated a version of property law that is possessive in the extreme. Indeed, the exclusion of women from property ownership was so emphatically achieved in nineteenth-century colonial India that the property rights of Indian women have remained negligible throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, despite the tireless work of Indian feminists.²⁴ While significant amendments have been made to matrimonial law and inheritance law, most notably in the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act (1937) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956), Indian women have continued to hold only minimal property rights for much of the twentieth century, being “only partially and problematically conceptualized as ‘individuals’ within the law” (Sreenivas 949).

“My, My, My”: Possession and Dispossession in Indian Property Law

As this brief history of Indian property law indicates, the precarity of Ammu's position in *The God of Small Things* must be understood within the specific context of limited female property

²⁴ See, for example, the work of the Centre for Social Research, an NGO based in New Delhi.

rights, not just within what Ammu glibly refers to as “our wonderful male chauvinist society” (56). India’s legal history clarifies the extent to which Ammu’s narrative registers women’s economic dependence upon male relatives. In accordance with 1960s matrimonial law, Ammu continues to depend legally and economically upon her abusive ex-husband: as divorce grants her no rights to the marital property but entitles her only to maintenance payments (none of which she receives), she remains her ex-husband’s economic dependent. In addition to lacking property from her marriage, Ammu is legally prohibited from inheriting immovable property from her natal family. While India’s gendered inheritance laws provide her brother, Chacko, with a financial stake in the family home, Ammu bears no such rights to ownership. Women were deemed to have inherited their share of the family property through *stridhan*, or dowry, so the more substantial inheritance of immovable property (namely land) devolved upon men.²⁵ Not only is *stridhan* a smaller portion of the male share of inheritance but it is also far less secure, a vulnerability that is signaled in the theft of Ammu’s dowry by her ex-father-in-law immediately after her wedding. In condemning Ammu’s exclusion from property inheritance and economic independence, *The God of Small Things* participates in the same form of radical feminist intervention as pursued by Arundhati’s mother, Mary Roy, whose successful legal action against her brothers for a share in the family property forced a change in Keralite Syrian Christian property law in 1986, finally entitling women to a share in joint family property.²⁶

The God of Small Things conveys the considerable human costs of legal and economic dependence by showing that divorce bears a disproportionately negative impact on women compared to men. As critics have acknowledged, the most obvious manifestation of the suffering

²⁵ On the concept of *stridhan* and its de jure and de facto relevance to female property rights, see Singh, esp. 4-5 and 20-3. See, also, Agnes 112-3.

²⁶ See Bina Agarwal 224-6. As noted earlier in this chapter, the majority of Indian women did not receive the right to inherit joint family property until 2005; see Anderson and Genicot 4-5; and Singh. For a discussion of the case, see Agarwal 224-226 and Martha Nussbaum 169-170.

engendered by divorce in mid-twentieth century India is Ammu's social ostracism upon her return to Ayemenem. Unlike her similarly divorced brother, Chacko, she continually bears the disapprobation of her family and neighbors for leaving her husband. Her father, Pappachi, does not believe that her ex-husband wanted to prostitute her to his English manager, as the Anglophile Pappachi "didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42). She is subject to the daily hostility of her aunt, Baby Kochamma, who "subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home," and she is likewise aware of "the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval" in and around Ayemenem (45, 44). Furious about her fate, Ammu carries within her the "reckless rage of a suicide bomber," a perpetual anger that is offset only by "[t]he infinite tenderness" she feels toward her children (44). Her family and neighbors are well aware of their role in stoking the explosive concoction of her aggrieved feelings: "They sensed somehow that she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power. That a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (44). As this passage suggests, social disapprobation is compounded by legal exclusion: divorce leaves Ammu in a state of legal suspension, "in the penumbral shadows between two worlds." Within the patriarchal moral codes of mid-twentieth century Kerala and India, divorce is, for women, akin to social death.

Roy's narrative decries the injustice of Ammu's dispossession through the comparison established between Ammu and Chacko's respective experiences of divorce. Chacko's comparative freedom with regard to his business affairs and sexual liaisons, neither of which are in any way diminished by his status as a divorcé, functions as a foil to Ammu's distinctly female experience of social ostracism and economic insecurity. Chacko is feted on his return to

Ayemenem from England, where he had been studying at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, and unlike Ammu he is welcomed back into the family home. The many sexual liaisons he conducts with women from the family pickle factory are ignored by Mammachi, the family matriarch, on the basis that he has “Men’s Needs” (160). Indeed, Mammachi tacitly but actively encourages these liaisons by building a separate entrance to Chacko’s room, allowing Chacko to fulfill his sexual desires without allowing lowercaste women to walk through the family home. Roy sardonically undermines Mammachi’s old-fashioned perspective on sexuality and gender relations through the narratorial observation, focalized through Ammu, that Chacko “forc[es] his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood” (63). By fulfilling his own desires at the expense of women who cannot afford to refuse his advances, and whose socially inferior position is encoded within their known but invisible presence at the Ayemenem House, Chacko exemplifies the gender relations formalized within India’s juridicopolitical economy, where women are financially dependent upon men. In sharp contrast to her tacit encouragement of Chacko’s sexual activities, Mammachi is physically sickened by the knowledge that Ammu has developed a sexual relationship with Velutha, her disgust caused only in part by Velutha’s caste status as a so-called Untouchable, and motivated also by the conviction that respectable women do not engage in extramarital sex. While Chacko readily continues his sexual exploits and dictates the terms of intimate engagement, Ammu is acutely aware that “for her, life had been lived” (38). In the apt neologism of Comrade Pillai, the local Communist Party leader who fully endorses traditional sociopolitical organization despite his supposedly radical politics, “Die-voice” leaves Ammu with no socially accepted recourse for sexual fulfillment, a factor that plays a role in her short but impassioned affair with Velutha (124).

While the social and familial ostracism experienced by Ammu clearly has deleterious effects, the legal and economic dimensions of her dispossession are at least as profound and more far-reaching, making it notable that *The God of Small Things*' attack on Indian property law has not yet been critically addressed. As divorce amplifies the circumscriptions on legal personhood and economic security to which she is already subject, Ammu is not just socially ostracized after her divorce but her legal status and financial position are also compromised. Whereas Chacko can confidently return to the family home after his dalliances in intellectual life in England because he, as the male progeny, holds a financial stake in the property, Ammu, as a woman, bears no such right. In this context, Baby Kochamma's complaint that Ammu and her children really had "no right" to be in the Ayemenem House is more than a passing comment and instead carries legal weight (44). Like Baby Kochamma herself, Ammu and her children live there "on sufferance," not just emotionally but in the eyes of the law.

Roy most explicitly addresses women's attenuated legal personhood as a result of their minimal property rights through Chacko's forcible acquisition of the family pickle factory. The business had been established by Mammachi, who ran it to great local acclaim as a "small but profitable enterprise" (56). Operating successfully within the local economy, Mammachi had seen no reason to formalize her business in law. Her pickles were thus designated not by corporate branding but by reference to their producer and her first name, "Soshamma": "Until Chacko arrived in Ayemenem, Mammachi's factory had no name. Everybody just referred to her pickles and jams as Sosha's Tender Mango, or Sosha's Banana Jam" (56). Chacko seizes control of Mammachi's venture upon his return to Ayemenem after Pappachi's death. Disregarding Mammachi's personal investment in her enterprise, as signaled in the pickles' naming, Chacko takes ownership of the business, "had it registered as a partnership[,] and informed Mammachi

that she was the Sleeping Partner” (55). In failing to first consult with Mammachi, and in designating her a “sleeping” or silent partner, Chacko effectively excludes his mother from operational decisions while ensuring her continued financial involvement. This system benefits only Chacko: his abject failure as a business executive leads to huge financial losses, so he “mortgag[es] the family rice fields”—again without consultation—in an attempt to buoy the sinking business (56). Inasmuch as Chacko’s underhanded decisions threaten not only Mammachi’s commercial enterprise but, as symbolized by the mortgaged rice fields, her ability to feed herself, they exemplify a broader structural reality, in which women suffer economic insecurity due to their exclusion from male property interests.

Just as Mammachi is a participant in the family pickle business without being a beneficiary, so Ammu is involved in day-to-day business operations without gaining any economic benefit:

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* Factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally this was the case, because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property (56).

As well as revealing his arrogance, the proprietary tenor of Chacko’s “*my, my, my*” triptych signals the possessive logic of male-oriented property law. Chacko’s comparatively large property portfolio—he owns the factory, the pineapples, and the pickles—obtains from the substantial exclusion of women from property ownership, marked in both his easy appropriation of Mammachi’s business and Ammu’s inability to stake any such claim for the family inheritance. Moreover, Indian property law serves to uphold male dominance in all forms of social and political life, with Chacko gaining cultural capital by advertising his proprietary

position to state-sponsored business regulators such as inspectors and engineers. Ammu has no legal recourse to challenge her brother's ownership, despite her equal involvement in running the factory. Instead, she is diminished legally, economically, and socially by the power Chacko so delightfully wields.

As this scene exemplifies, male property ownership corresponds closely to female dispossession, Ammu suffering an immediate economic disadvantage compared to her brother because she does not possess any property rights. The juridical underpinnings of her destitution are signaled in one of the twins' many neologisms: as Chacko seemingly gloats to Estha and Rahel, Ammu has no "Locusts Stand I" (56). In the legal Latinate misheard by the twins, Ammu has no *locus standi*, or "place to stand," meaning she has no right to bring an action against Chacko, no right to stand and be heard in court. The incomprehensibility of such gender discrimination from a social justice perspective is conveyed through the twins' unsurprising failure to understand the term *locus standi* in its Latin guise. Just as *locus standi* is an idiom from a foreign and long-dead language, albeit one that has continued application in legal systems influenced by Roman law, so too is it an alien concept for Ammu's young children, as indicated by their translating it into a more familiar lexicon. Equally important, the twins' neologism diminishes the likelihood of a reader identifying the original term, not least because *locus standi* has a specific application to Indian property law and its tradition of joint family property that will be unknown to many readers, especially Roy's international audience.

By simultaneously demonstrating the twins' estrangement from the term and inculcating estrangement in her readership, Roy establishes a legally normative claim regarding *locus standi*. If, in legal discourse, "normativity" refers to how things should be rather than to their current state, this scene's presentation of *locus standi* as unintelligible to both the twins and the reader

aligns with the novel's conviction that Ammu's lack of legal standing should, from an ethical perspective, be inconceivable.²⁷ In presenting Ammu's exclusion from property rights as incomprehensible, in other words, *The God of Small Things* suggests that her juridical exclusion is unjust. The absurd humor underpinning the twins' malapropism goes some way to lightening this scene's tone, adding buoyancy to Roy's serious political critique and revealing her comic ear. More somberly, "Locusts Stand I" exemplifies the poignancy that affectively structures *The God of Small Things* and contributes to its emotional and political impact. While Estha and Rahel, being only seven years old, lack the legal and linguistic knowledge to understand the precise terms of their mother's dispossession, the locusts that so ominously swarm their youthful imaginary indicate their acute awareness of her vulnerability. Even as the conceit's nonsense phrasing indicates the twins' young age, therefore, its biblical symbolism suggests their affective intuition and emotional maturity. In its dual significance, the twins' neologism poignantly registers their early exposure to tragedy.

Ammu's lack of *locus standi* and her attenuated legal personage is symbolized in the means and manner of her death, itself the result of her legally sanctioned dispossession. As Roy's narrative structure makes clear, Ammu's death is a direct consequence of her permanent expulsion from her natal home at Chacko's behest: the result, that is, of female dispossession through juridically endorsed male dominance.²⁸ Reliant after her divorce on her natal family's financial support, Ammu depends also on their continued goodwill. The economic precariousness of her position, together with the slightness of her legal standing, is made stark after the death of Sophie Mol, for which Ammu is unfairly blamed. Chacko exploits his legal

²⁷ My claim regarding legal normativity, particularly in the context of literary analysis, draws on Ravit Reichman's theory of the same. See, esp., 5-6.

²⁸ While it is Baby Kochamma who recommends Ammu's expulsion, it is Chacko who enforces Ammu's exile. Baby Kochamma, like Ammu, lacks any real power.

right to a share in the family property, leveraging his “bigness[,] [h]is bullying power[,] [t]he enormity of his terrible grief” to banish Ammu from the Ayemenem House and separate her from her children, meting out revenge quid pro quo for his own separation from his only daughter (215). Left to fend for herself, Ammu takes a series of ill-paid positions that only add to her vulnerability, leaving her unable to afford adequate housing, pay her medical bills after she develops chronic asthma, or support her children financially. In a kind of perverse justice, in which her fate is tied directly within the novel’s symbolic economy to that of Sophie Mol, Ammu’s death from an asthma attack four years later replicates her niece’s death by drowning. While Sophie Mol dies in a tragic accident in the tumultuous Meenachal River, the result of an ill-fated night-time voyage orchestrated by her twin cousins, Ammu’s night-time drowning is in the tides of her own phlegm, in circumstances prompted by familial revenge and underwritten by the patriarchal juridicopolitical system that authorizes her legal and economic dependence.

Roy emphasizes the direct connections between Ammu’s lack of property rights and her tragic death by reiterating, in the scene of Ammu’s banishment, the metaphor of “Locusts Stand I.” Modulating the conceptual framing of *locus standi* to show the material consequences of this legal concept, the narratorial voice observes Ammu’s quiet response to Chacko’s command that she leave the house immediately: “Ammu, quiet outside, shaking inside, wouldn’t look up from her unnecessary hemming. The tin of colored ribbons would lie open on her lap, in the room where she had lost her Locusts Stand I” (215). Whereas “Locusts Stand I” first appears in the novel in its abstract form, referring figuratively to legal standing, here it takes on concrete significance, presented as an object that has been lost. Ammu, quite literally, has no place to stand: Indian property law leaves her homeless. Exiled from her natal family home, she possesses no assets from her terminated marriage and she lacks the means to provide for either

herself or her children. Thus, Ammu's death is an extreme illustration of the violence inflicted upon women through Indian property law, indexing in an immediate sense her diminished legal status and her consequent dependence on her brother's goodwill and symbolizing more broadly the juridical codification of female subordination within India's political economy.

That Ammu's economic and legal dependence upon her brother is a significant factor in not only her death but also the twins' loss of their mother is emphasized through the carefully placed repetition of a phrase first used by Chacko to delineate their burden upon him. In an otherwise minor disagreement while en route to fetch Sophie Mol and her mother from Cochin airport, Chacko angrily informs Ammu that she and the twins are "millstones around his neck" (82). Even as a seven year old, Rahel realizes the metaphor's ominous tone as well as the dangers that inhere in dependency, knowledge that derives from her love of Western films: "She and Estha knew about millstones. In *Mutiny on the Bounty*, when people died at sea, they were wrapped in white sheets and thrown overboard with millstones around their necks so that the corpses wouldn't float" (82). The fictional scene that helps Rahel make sense of Chacko's rash but pointedly accurate declaration of his undesired financial responsibility is later replayed in both the mode of Ammu's death (being a drowning of sorts) and the treatment of her corpse. Like those who die at sea, Ammu is wrapped only in "a dirty bedsheet" before her body's disposal, while she similarly lacks a final resting place, having been refused a church burial in Ayemenem and cremated instead, in a furnace whose "eternal fire" explicitly invokes Hell (154, 155). Thrown metaphorically overboard by her church as well as her family, she is deprived, in her lack of a burial, of the chance of spiritual salvation.

In the loss and guilt borne by Estha and Rahel, only seven years old when first informed of their dependent status and only eleven when their mother needlessly dies, Roy draws attention

to the expansive effects of female dispossession, impacting not only women but their children, too. Estha does not speak for fourteen years, his silence signaling his traumatized response to the tragic events in Ayemenem and his subsequent separation from his mother and sister. Rahel, meanwhile, finds herself in the same position as her mother, similarly marrying young and in haste, and similarly finding, on returning to Ayemenem as a divorcée aged thirty-one (the same age as Ammu when she died), that she is economically and juridically bereft: “She owned seven hundred dollars. And a gold bangle with snake-heads. . . . She had no plans. No plans. No Locusts Stand I” (179). The possessive logic of India’s juridicopolitical economy is thus evident in its endurance as much as its capacious extent. Just as its exclusionary schematic persists largely unchanged through the decades of postcolonial India’s existence, with Rahel in the same legal position as that faced by her mother fourteen years earlier, so its dispossessory effects are extremely long-lasting, as registered in Estha’s lost voice. As the twins’ experience of trauma and loss suggests, the gendered property law excoriated by *The God of Small Things* is possessive not only in its exclusionary structure, but in its enduring effects and expansive reach.

Aesthetic Impropriety: Reimagining Politics and the Law

I have been arguing that *The God of Small Things* explores the injurious effects of legally sanctioned dispossession and makes a convincing case against the gendered injustice evident in India’s property law. Roy’s political critique is more forceful and imaginative than straightforward opposition, however, despite the weight given to the novel’s contestatory stance by critics and reviewers.²⁹ Far more radically, Roy develops her critique of unjust property rights by not only exposing the structural violence of India’s juridicopolitical economy but by turning

²⁹ Lutz is one among many to applaud the novel for its opposition to injustice.

its possessive and exclusionary logic on its head. As the remainder of this chapter will elaborate, the relational aesthetic modality employed in *The God of Small Things* undermines the exclusions formalized in Indian property law, configuring instead a mode of open and relational political association that might provide justice for India's women (among other dispossessed populations) and facilitate their involvement in the juridicopolitical sphere. Crucially, therefore, my analysis differs to standard assessments of the political stakes of *The God of Small Things*, which tend to gauge the novel's political efficacy by whether or not it is deemed to delineate, in David Scott's words, "a narrative of revolutionary overcoming" (19).³⁰ Instead, I argue, *The God of Small Things* provides an account of Indian gender relations that is scathing in its political assessment and far-reaching in its implications, establishing an alternative model of political association by undermining and reconfiguring the very form of thinking that it attacks.

The God of Small Things carefully balances two principal epistemological structures, one being the possessive model that coincides with India's gendered juridicopolitical sphere and its exclusionary social codes, of which Roy is highly critical, and the other being a relational modality that offers a radically different configuration of political association. On the one hand, *The God of Small Things* repeatedly employs tropes of enclosure, from the Ipe family's confinement within their car during the Communist rally in Cochin, fearful of attack given their landowning status, to the opening scene of Sophie Mol lying trapped in her coffin; from Kerala's Foreign Returnees being "trapped outside the History House" of India by their newfound shame of their country of birth (134), to the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man cornering Estha at the Abhilash Talkies, first sexually abusing him and then warning "I know where your factory is" to confine him in the fear of further abuse (104). In their cumulative capacity, tropes of enclosure

³⁰ Most influentially, see Aijaz Ahmad.

such as these establish a sense of claustrophobia, of characters having little agency over their narrative trajectories. The repeated references to “History,” its capitalization serving to index its totalizing facility, offer an explanation for the affective claustrophobia established through these tropes of confinement. In a rather Foucauldian vein, the assessment seems to be that institutional formations inexorably structure our daily realities, an analysis seemingly also upheld in the deaths of both Ammu and Velutha after they contravene the so-called Love Laws prohibiting inter-caste sexual liaison.

On the other hand, however, *The God of Small Things* employs a relational aesthetic modality that consistently worries and undermines those tropes of enclosure and structures of possession that seem to dominate the lives of this novel’s characters. Examples include the cyclical and repetitive structure of the novel’s plot, in contradistinction to the more standard literary model of teleological development; the linguistic refrains (like the references to Pappachi’s moth) that echo throughout the text, subtly connecting seemingly disparate scenes that are instead shown to bear crucial bonds; and the imagery of excess that patterns this novel’s environmental descriptions, where objects consistently burst their bounds. Before the monsoon, for example, “the countryside turns an immodest green. . . . Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes in the highways” (3). As this last image exemplifies, living beings and inanimate objects are repeatedly represented as exceeding their own structural limitations, the confines of their own objecthood, and mixing with other elements from their surrounding environment. Thus, the creepers in Ayemenem “burst” and “spill” from their original locations, draping themselves over “flooded roads” that, similarly “immodest,” overstep the bounds of expectation by carrying boats to market and playing host to marine life. The

metaphysics of this scene contradicts the logic of containment that inheres in the systems of property and possession, undermining their exclusionary schematization through its associational modality.

In its self-professed immodesty, or “impropriety” in this dissertation’s terms, *The God of Small Things*’ aesthetic form suggests an alternative moral and political economy to that which underpins both Indian jurisprudence and Ayemenem’s rigid social codes. Whereas India’s gendered property laws and the social mores that sustain them are possessive and self-contained, the aesthetic modality of *The God of Small Things* is improper and relational. The formal argument that I am advancing here identifies a structural connection between propriety and impropriety, between property and its lack. Likewise, my analysis presupposes the similar epistemological structures of property, possession, and propriety, a cluster of concepts that, in their shared configuration upon lines of exclusion and enclosure, serve as organizing tropes in *The God of Small Things*. Scholars of property law widely acknowledge the close association between property and exclusion: as Cohen and Cohen explain, “the essence of private property is always the right to exclude others” (26).³¹ Also closely associated in legal thought are property and propriety: according to Gregory Alexander, property law’s primary concern is “maintaining the proper social order” (2).³² *The God of Small Things* similarly connects property ownership, legislated exclusion, and propriety, excoriating the rigid moral codes that sustain and facilitate women’s legal and economic dispossession.

From a formal perspective, *The God of Small Things* associates propriety with enclosure and impropriety with openness, a distinction that is perhaps most obvious in Mammachi’s and

³¹ Morris R. Cohen and Felix S. Cohen make their claim with regard to American property law but the statement holds true in other contexts. Indian has long had a private property system (the Mitakshara, from approximately the eleventh century CE, outlines male private property rights), even when said private property is jointly owned under the rules of male coparcenary.

³² See also Jeremy Waldron 32.

Ammu's radically different attitudes to social decorum. Whereas Mammachi "fit[s] properly into the conventional scheme of things," accepting her subservience to male family members, Ammu repeatedly and deliberately contravenes social norms (116). Mammachi's acquiescence includes her enervated submission to her physically abusive husband, Pappachi, whose "lurking manic violence . . . a sort of contained cruelty" is "contained" only insofar as it is effectively condoned by the prevailing social order; it is not infrequently unleashed on Mammachi (50). By comparison, Ammu's rebellion against the social and juridicopolitical economy's exclusionary and oppressively gendered configuration is registered in the way she consistently flouts rules and expectations: her liaison with Velutha, for example, demonstrates her rejection of "the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (167). Roy thereby encourages a direct comparison between the possessive or closed structure of propriety, evidenced in the way Mammachi "fit[s]" into the properly demarcated space of convention, and the open or relational structure of impropriety, shown through Ammu's contempt for "order." Moreover, *The God of Small Things* registers Ammu's impropriety not only through her refusal to conform to the possessive political order but also through her unpredictability, variously describing her as having a "reckless streak" and an "Unsafe Edge" (172, 44). Whereas Mammachi's behavior is predictable and proper, Ammu's is unpredictable and improper; whereas Mammachi adheres to convention, Ammu rejects social respectability. If the *proper* is carefully delineated, contained within careful boundaries, the *improper* thwarts such easy demarcation, and in its recklessness is less easily subject to control.

Roy builds a case for the political exigency of impropriety through Ammu's and the twins' persistent flouting of decorum and the logic of the proper. Ammu is notable for her "effrontery" and her refusal to abide by heteronormative codes of behavior, manifest not least in

her status as a divorcée, unusual for the period as well as for her caste (171). In addition, she actively considers reverting to her maiden name, an act that would symbolically undermine—by concealing—her legally codified dependence upon her ex-husband; she undercuts heteronormative family structures by insisting to her children that they need only her, that she can be their Ammu and their Baba (142); and she establishes a non-marital sexual relationship with a so-called Untouchable man, an act that allows *The God of Small Things* not only to challenge caste segregation but also, as Anuradha Needham argues, to “transform the ideological grounds of a hetero-normative family structure” (385).³³ Needham convincingly establishes her claim by identifying the reciprocity of power between Velutha and Ammu, as well as by determining the non-phallogocentric tenor of their sexual congress and Velutha’s “subversion of hetero-normative masculinity and sexuality” (379). Building upon Needham’s analysis, it might also be seen that Ammu’s refusal to adhere to gendered codes of behavior serves not only to disrupt existing types of social formation but also to model alternative possibilities. In this vein, and with similar effect, Estha and Rahel also disregard conventional gender roles, causing widespread familial and societal consternation. For example, Baby Kochamma cannot comprehend the pleasure derived by Estha from performing housework, a task that is firmly gendered female, while Rahel’s teachers are mystified by her “waywardness” (19): to their perturbation, “[i]t was . . . *as though she didn’t know how to be a girl*” (18, emphasis in original). Rahel’s teachers are concerned less with their pupil’s minor but persistent acts of disruption, such as stealing and setting alight a teacher’s false-hair bun, and more with her lack of interest in adhering to gender norms.

³³ Caste discrimination had been made illegal with the ratification of India’s Constitution, which came into effect on January 26, 1950; however, legislation does not necessarily precipitate a widespread change in social attitudes and caste prejudice remained widespread in 1960s India, as it continues to be.

Inasmuch as Rahel's "waywardness" implies her divergence from a designated path, it connotes not just disobedience but lateral movement; as such, it contributes to *The God of Small Things*' laterally associational organizing logic, evidenced most particularly in the novel's recursive plot. *The God of Small Things* immediately undercuts expectations and rejects novelistic propriety by beginning with Sophie Mol's funeral, the event that, for Ammu and her children, is in many ways an end. From the start of the novel, the reader knows that Sophie Mol dies in a tragic accident; that Ammu dies at the "viable die-able age" of thirty-one (5); that Velutha dies in suspicious circumstances, "dark blood spilling from his skull like a secret" (8); and that Estha and Rahel are separated for twenty-three years, during which time Estha is "steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man" (14). The novel's recursive plot, shifting continually between the 1960s and 1990s, bears two significant implications: on the one hand, it traps the reader in the certain knowledge of encountering death, loss, and long-lasting suffering, and through this confinement replicates the stifling effects of possessive logic; on the other, it creates an associational structure that is resolutely improper in its functioning, thereby modeling an alternative structural logic to that of the prevailing juridicopolitical economy.

The interference with narrative order that is writ large in the novel's overarching structure is also exemplified in the twins' childish delight in reading words backwards, thereby both frustrating adult etiquette and demonstrating their literacy. The twins initially begin their alternately directional reading practices as a subtle revolt against Baby Kochamma's Australian friend, Miss Mitten, who gives them "a baby book" that is significantly below their reading abilities (57). When the twins read the book backwards, demonstrating their frustrations with being infantilized while also linking their activities to Kerala's palindromic state language,

“Malayalam,” Miss Mitten takes offense and forces them to write “*In future we will not read backwards . . . A hundred times. Forwards*” (58, emphasis in original). When Miss Mitten is killed by a milk van a few months later, the twins find “hidden justice in the fact that the milk van had been *reversing*” (58). Beyond its admittedly macabre humor, this scene also holds structural significance because *The God of Small Things* consistently reveals “hidden justice” through its own improper “revers[als]” of plot and narrative order. If the twins’ morbidly gleeful response to Miss Mitten’s mode of death is improper because it lacks decorum, it is also improper because of its association with the twins’ practice of reading backwards, and thus with reversing and undermining the proper order of things.

The textual navigation of *The God of Small Things*’ complex plot and lateral structure is facilitated through linguistic refrains and recurrent imagery. Prominent examples include references to Pappachi’s moth and its “unusually dense dorsal tufts” (299), the lucky silver thimble brought by Sophie Mol from London to Ayemenem, and the sickly sweet smell of roses on a breeze. These motifs all index memories associated with fear and tragedy: Pappachi’s moth references his professional frustrations and his assertion of power through domestic violence, and as such its textual invocation is always an index of fear; Sophie Mol’s thimble is found clutched in her dead hand, not having provided her with the luck she knew she needed to safely cross the Meenachal River; and the sickly smell of roses is an olfactory reminder of the location of Velutha’s murder. As well as enabling Roy to address the workings of memory and of psychological trauma, as other critics have suggested, these motifs together establish a lateral, relational modality that bears political implications.³⁴ Like Aarthi Vadde, whose critical assessment of *The God of Small Things* focuses on the “ecological collectivity” evinced in its

³⁴ Elizabeth Outka associates the novel’s exploration of trauma with its temporally disjunctive narrative organization. See also Joanna Lipson Freed.

pages, I am thus making a case for “the revolutionary potential of Roy’s narratives of connection” (523).

By encouraging her reader to look for associational clues to understand *The God of Small Things*’ temporality, Roy undermines the exclusionary logic that enables Ammu’s dispossession. The novel’s lateral structure effectively refuses what Leela Gandhi terms “the crisis of nonrelation upon which juridico-transcendental and universalizing forms of power . . . are predicated” (184). If power is organized hierarchically and vertically, as Gandhi argues, the repeated tropes and refrains in Roy’s novel establish a lateral structure that registers a radically different vision of political association. Gandhi theorizes the dominative and exclusionary tenor of colonial power to explain the counter-colonial model of political organization that she identifies as operative in late nineteenth-century Britain and India. In marked contrast to the vertical direction of power in the colonial political economy, which in the late-nineteenth century was strongly influenced by utilitarian principles and by what Michel Foucault terms *governmentality*, the structure of political association among fin-de-siècle radicals was organized horizontally. In their coalitional politics, their “solidarity with foreigners,” and their eschewal of inherited communities of belonging, late nineteenth-century anti-colonialists undermined “the embargo on relationality through which power, colonial or otherwise, orchestrates its divisions and exclusions” (Gandhi 2, 20).

In *The God of Small Things*, the tragic outcome of relation’s embargo is most starkly evident in Velutha’s brutal beating by the Ayemenem police, an event that is underwritten by the exclusionary logic of the caste system and the officers’ acceptance of this inherited code. Estha and Rahel watch the event in horror, accidental witnesses to their friend’s assault: “Blue-lipped and dinner-plate-eyed, they watched, mesmerized, by something that they sensed but didn’t

understand: the absence of caprice in what the policemen did. The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all” (292). It seems clear to the officers that their actions are entirely warranted, Velutha having broken the bounds of propriety by having sexual contact with a Touchable woman. Under ancient Brahmanical codes, cemented and aggravated under British colonial rule, members of so-called Untouchable castes were required to maintain their distance from other Indians in order not to pollute their sanctity.³⁵ Roy excoriates the caste system’s inhumanity through the officers’ lack of feeling (“[t]he abyss where anger should have been”) and their abundance of control (“the absence of caprice”). Moreover, inasmuch as the officers’ attack is “sober,” “steady,” and “econom[ical],” it operates according to the closed logic of propriety: it is properly controlled and contained. Much as Gandhi associates hierarchical domination with what I have described as exclusion and possession, so Roy describes Velutha’s murder as “a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions . . . of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly” (292-3). In contradistinction to the lateral structure of relation established through *The God of Small Things*’ improper aesthetics, Velutha’s murder is sanctioned and made possible by dominative, hierarchical systems of thought.

In figuring Velutha’s murder through the twin concepts of “ascenden[t]” power and proper “contro[l],” *The God of Small Things* establishes a correspondence between the actions of the officers and the logic of the prevailing political order. Nothing more than “history’s henchmen” of the most brutal kind, the officers act in accordance with India’s exclusionary juridicopolitical economy, a system that denies self-possession to people like Velutha as well as Ammu (292). The conditions of possibility for Velutha’s death are established through the very

³⁵ See Kurien 45.

logic of possession that this novel also associates with “sober[ness],” “stead[iness],” and “economy,” operative in this instance through the caste system’s possessive predicates:

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exorcising fear (293).

In suggesting that the officers fail to feel any “kinship” with Velutha, *The God of Small Things* indicates the extent of the men’s assumed difference from their victim. Just as Ammu’s legal and political personhood is diminished under Indian property law, so Velutha’s human status is annihilated through the caste system’s enduring avowal of caste pollution. The exclusionary logic of caste segregation is registered in the violently anti-relational imagery used to describe the police officer’s assault of Velutha: any “kinship” or “connection” the officers might have felt for Velutha had long been “severed” through the caste system’s perpetuation. So absolute is the inherited affective division between Touchable perpetrators and Untouchable victim, in fact, that the officers not only fail to see Velutha as a fellow person but they fail to regard him as a “fellow creature.” Caste discrimination challenges Velutha’s legal personhood in positioning him not only as less than human, but, indeed, as less than animal.

The most poignant example of the relation between structural injustice in mid-twentieth century India and this novel’s configuration of an alternative form of non-dominative relation occurs in the police station immediately after Velutha’s death. On the wall of Inspector Thomas Mathew’s office, as we know from the novel’s opening pages, is a poster advertising the Ayemenem police force’s code of conduct:

Politeness.

Obedience.

Loyalty.

Intelligence.

Courtesy.

Efficiency. (10, emphasis in original)

On its first appearance, this poster had revealed the contradiction between Inspector Mathew's proclaimed values and his less than polite behavior: in response to Ammu's explanation that Velutha had been detained on false charges, Inspector Mathew had called her a *veshya* ("prostitute" in Hindi) and "tapped her breasts with his baton . . . as though he [were] choosing mangoes from a basket" (9-10). In its later appearance, the poster not only underscores, once again, the hypocrisy of Inspector Mathew and his police force, but it also schematically rewrites the dominative logic that it simultaneously conceals and reveals.

In the scene of this poster's later recurrence, the interruptive and recuperative capacities of aesthetic impropriety are suggested through the twins' improper reading practice. Waiting to be interviewed after Velutha's death and traumatized after witnessing his beating, Estha and Rahel react to their fear by reading the poster backwards:

"ssenetiloP," [Estha] said. "ssenetiloP, ecneidebO"

"ytlayoL, ecnegilletnI," Rahel said.

"ysetruoC."

"ycneiciffE." (297, emphasis in original)

While the children's reversal of the words is presented as an indicator of their shock—Inspector Mathew notes their "growing incoherence" and their "dilated pupils," identifying these with "the

human mind's . . . way of managing trauma"—their improper reading also makes a mockery of the sign's motto (297-8). In light of the assaulting officers' abject failure to show "[p]oliteness" or "[c]ourtesy" to Velutha, and in view of the calm "efficiency" with which the officers had carried out their sustained attack, the twins' linguistic inversion serves to undermine the propriety—or "politeness"—of the officers' "efficiency." In reversing the components of the vertical acronym that forms the Ayemenem police's motto, this scene challenges the hierarchical structure of power that authors a system of domination so extreme as to result in the death of an innocent man at the hands—quite literally—of the state's law enforcers. Moreover, inasmuch as reading backwards is associated with "hidden justice," as the twins' response to Miss Mitten suggests, Estha and Rahel's inversion of the police force's proclaimed values suggests a divergent formulation of justice in which, not being based upon hierarchy and domination, it is upheld rather than disavowed.

As an alternative to the possessive and exclusionary implications of prevailing legal and social systems, *The God of Small Things* elaborates a non-ascendant, laterally relational, non-dominative economy, evidenced not only in Ammu and Velutha's relationship but also in Estha and Rahel's extreme closeness.³⁶ Before Sophie Mol's death and its traumatic aftereffects, the twins had felt themselves to be "physically separate, but with joint identities": they "thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us" (5, 4). Rahel remembers, for example, "waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream," just as she remembers, even "though she hadn't been there," Estha's assault by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man (5). The splitting of the twins' shared identity occurs when Estha is "Returned" to his father in Bengal at the instigation of Baby Kochamma, who fears he might reveal her role in Velutha's

³⁶ Aarthi Vadde frames these variant epistemologies in cosmopolitan terms, arguing that Roy's novel advocates an "interdependent rather than ascendant model of the human" (536).

death. As Estha sits on the train at Cochin railway station, with Ammu and Rahel outside on the platform and Ammu holding his hand through the window, he is overcome by loss:

“Ammu!” Estha said as she disengaged her hand. Prising loose small finger after finger.

“Ammu! Feeling vomity!”

Estha’s voice lifted into a wail. . . . He left his voice behind.

On the station platform Rahel doubled over and screamed and screamed.

The train pulled out. The light pulled in. (309)

Estha and Rahel’s shared loss, and the psychological effects they carry well into adulthood, is signaled in their shared scream. In the moment that “Estha’s voice lift[s] into a wail” and promptly stops, Rahel “double[s] over” in pain, her own scream resuming the sound her beloved brother can no longer make. Estha’s silence persists until he is reunited with Rahel fourteen years later, his vocal and psychological hibernation being a strategy by which he copes with his grief and guilt. (His name, “Esthappen” in full, hints at his long hibernation—his estivation—from the world.) Rahel’s dormancy is emotional rather than verbal but like Estha’s it begins with their separation. She finds herself emptied with his departure and the scream she emits on his behalf: as the train pulls away, carrying her shared self, “[t]he light,” or emptiness, “pull[s] in.”

The God of Small Things reconnects the twins’ jointness through the sexual intimacy they share after returning to Ayemenem as adults. Within the logic of the novel’s plot, their single act of sexual union is psychologically restorative, enabling “Quietness and Emptiness” to “fi[t] together like stacked spoons” and rejoin what had been torn asunder (311). While “what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief,” the sharing of their sorrow seems to facilitate a peacefulness that had long been absent from the novel’s tone (311). It is therefore significant that the twins’ union occurs in the novel’s penultimate chapter, just before the

retrospective narration of Ammu and Velutha's sexual liaison. By concluding with Estha and Rahel's emotional reunification, as well as with Ammu and Velutha's relationship, *The God of Small Things* ends with the promise of future happiness, even as that promise is tempered by the "hideous grief" accompanying the twins' sexual coupling and the knowledge of Ammu and Velutha's certain deaths. The novel's conclusion is generally either applauded or denounced by critics, with some suggesting that Roy envisions an end to caste prejudice through Ammu and Velutha's romance and others arguing that she prescribes personal and erotic fulfillment as the only viable response to institutional injustice.³⁷ However, such readings initiate a false choice between optimism and despair, between creative reimagining and political critique, in a novel that has consistently balanced both possibilities. As I have argued throughout this chapter, *The God of Small Things* at once condemns existing conditions and imagines them otherwise. The significance of the novel's ending, therefore, lies not in the conscripted choices it gives its characters but in its concluding sentiment of hopefulness.

By inflecting with hope the narratives of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, *The God of Small Things* pointedly refuses the logic of exclusion that marks not only India's long history of caste segregation, as many critics have acknowledged, but also its patriarchal property laws. In particular, Estha and Rahel's brief coupling is a notable contribution to the novel's feminist critique, a detail that has been missed through the persistent critical focus on Ammu and Velutha's romance. On a basic level, the twins' incestuous congress contravenes the very same "Love Laws" transgressed by Ammu and Velutha, as it violates the societal codes that decree "who should be loved and how" (31). Much more than a marker of sexual transgression, however, Estha and Rahel's sexual union is "improper," in this dissertation's terms, because it

³⁷ On the former, see Anuradha Dingwaney Needham 382-6; on the latter, see Ahmad 104-5.

forms a response to the gendered property laws authorizing their long separation. Even as Estha's forcible return to his father is prompted by Chacko's "terrible grief" at the loss of Sophie Mol, and as such is a means of punishing Ammu for her children's survival when Chacko's only child has died, it is underwritten by the patriarchal codes of the prevailing juridicopolitical order (215). If Ammu's lack of Locusts Stand I both facilitates and registers her own dispossession, it also enables the twins' separation from each other and their mother: like Ammu, they possess no right to reside in the Ayemenem home. The impropriety of Estha and Rahel's unification should thus be seen as a symbolic response to the exclusionary codes of property law that had prompted their long separation. In reuniting the twins through an act whose physical intimacy matches their need for emotional unification, Roy establishes their improper relation as a fundamental riposte to the possessive, exclusionary logic that had severed their bond in the first place.

Utopia and Finitude; or, Tragedy's Impropriety

In arguing that Roy's relational aesthetic strategies construct a more just schematic of political association, one that functions against the extreme antirelationality and legally codified dispossession of this novel's political economy, I am suggesting not simply that *The God of Small Things* presents both a critique and its alternative, but that their balancing is of vital import to Roy's project. I am suggesting, in other words, that the political interventions made by *The God of Small Things* depend on its offering neither a story of embattled opposition against a possessive and totalizing system, nor a utopian narrative of imaginatively transcending deep political injustice, but an account that simultaneously presents these two very different possibilities.

My analysis of Roy's novel thus bears similarities with David Scott's argument in *Conscripts of Modernity* that tragedy is of especial political salience to the contemporary postcolonial moment. In Scott's reading of *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James's history of the Haitian revolution and its leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, he claims that narratives of revolution assume a particular trajectory—namely, “a vindicationist narrative of liberation”—that fails to accord with the entrenched geopolitical inequalities that remain after the end of colonialism (65). While postcolonial theory still tends to couch political engagement in the anticolonial terms of revolutionary overcoming, thereby aligning closely with the narrative trajectory found in the Romance tradition, the current postcolonial moment would be more accurately and usefully described through critical narratives that are plotted in the Tragic mode:

[W]here the anticolonial narrative is cast as an epic Romance, as the great progressive story of an oppressed and victimized people's struggle from Bondage to Freedom, . . . the tragic narrative is cast as a dramatic confrontation between contingency and freedom, between human will and its conditioning limits (135).

As Scott's identified conflict “between human will and its conditioning limits” suggests, tragedy simultaneously acknowledges the “will” for political change and the “conditioning limits” that inhibit any desired capacity for transformation. Tragedy therefore remains less idealistic, perhaps less naïve, than Romance, a conclusion that Scott reaches by assessing its different narrative structure. Claiming that tragedy is the “less determinative, more recursive” of the two genres, Scott argues that it challenges the “hubris” of total revolution and “reopens a path to formulating a criticism of the present” (135). In other words, Scott makes the compelling claim that tragedy is a genre whose plot structure applies as much to critical thought as to fictional narratives.

Scott's argument that radical change can be better conceived not as emancipatory overcoming but as opening up critical space corresponds closely to the modality and epistemology of *The God of Small Things*, whose narrative resignation to its tragic events by no means negates its political interventions. In particular, the novel's recursive plot structure functions similarly to the narrative mode outlined by Scott, as it both points to the possessive juridicopolitical economy in which its actions unfold and facilitates the imagining of an alternative mode of political association. The pivotal connection between, on the one hand, the political form critiqued in *The God of Small Things* and, on the other, the formal strategies used to reimagine India's juridicopolitical economy facilitates a narrative rich with the promise of future possibility yet cognizant of the structural limitations inhibiting that narrative's immediate realization. Like Scott's assessment of tragedy, my reading of Roy's novel through the framework of aesthetic impropriety refuses to choose utopia over resignation or vice versa: instead, it participates in a necessary project within postcolonial studies by making a case for the politically transformative potential of aesthetic form.

Reading Scott alongside Roy suggests that the space for critical intervention opened up by analyzing tragic narrative emplotments derives not only from tragedy's structural development—from the conflict that plays out between willfulness and finitude—but also from formal aspects internal to its narrative architecture: such elements include, among others, lexical choices, tone, and recurrent tropes. In making this claim, I am drawing out an element of Scott's argument that warrants further attention, extending his contention that the material conditions one might seek to overcome in fact structure the very ways by which that overcoming might be imagined. As Scott recognizes, the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture exemplifies this process,

L'Ouverture having famously used the language of human rights so crucial to the French Revolution to revolt against France's colonial rule in Saint Domingue (now Haiti):

Toussaint is a tragic subject of a colonial modernity to which he was, by force, conscripted. His tragedy inheres in the fact that, inescapably modern as he is obliged by the modern conditions of his life to be, he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity's rationality has sought his enslavement. (168)

By adopting the language and belief system of human rights, L'Ouverture effectively freed his fellow people from slavery and established Haiti as a sovereign nation. L'Ouverture is thus, according to Scott, a "tragic subject" because he "seek[s] his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations [of] his enslavement." Whereas James had presented L'Ouverture as a Romance hero in the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938, he described the revolutionary leader in tragic terms in his text's second edition, published after decolonization in 1962. Scott uses his assessment of *The Black Jacobins* to argue that, while Romantic narrative structures were particularly appropriate during the anticolonial period, as they "comported well with a historical present in which transformative horizons were still visible . . . [and] plausible," the Tragic mode is far more suitable for "a time of postcolonial crisis in which old horizons have collapsed or evaporated and new ones have not yet taken shape" (168). As Scott also suggests, however, and as my own analysis of *The God of Small Things* has maintained, tragedy need not simply be constrained by its limits: that is, by "old horizons" collapsing and "new ones" still waiting formation. Rather, tragedy might be seen to challenge those inevitable limits by using them to imagine otherwise.

Even as tragedy's self-reflexive capacities facilitate the production of critical distance, the genre's simultaneous balancing of "utopia" with "finitude" suggests a model not of detachment but of contingency and worldly imbrication. Indeed, as political theorist, Patchen Markell has argued, it is the very balancing of future possibility and constitutive limitations that generates tragedy's critical modality. In a provocative reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and in contradistinction to Hannah Arendt's reading of the play, Markell argues that Greek tragedy is as much about critique as remembrance. The *Antigone*, Markell contends, challenges the attempts at sovereignty and self-mastery undertaken by its protagonists, Antigone and Creon, revealing instead that individual lives are always constrained by material conditions as well as by the actions of others. Through what Aristotle terms tragic *anagnôrisis*, translated by Markell as "acknowledgment," the genre stages the necessary simultaneity of agency and finitude. As tragedy turns on the delicate equilibrium between possibility and constraint, it is, in Markell's terms, necessarily improper:

"Impropriety," in this sense, is not meant as a term of condemnation or disapproval. It refers not to a contingent moral failing but to a constitutive feature of human action: the very conditions that make us potent agents—our materiality, which ties us to the causal order of the world, and our plurality, which makes it possible for our acts to be meaningful—also make us potent beyond our control, exposing us to consequences and implications that we cannot predict and which are not up to us. Our acts, you might say, are always improper in the sense that they are never our property. (63-4)

Similar to my own theorization of impropriety, therefore, Markell implicitly associates the "improper" with openness and relationality, and "property" with containment and exclusion.

When he claims, “[o]ur acts . . . are always improper [as] they are never our property,” he identifies property with exclusivity and control, and impropriety with contingency and relation.

Despite not being a tragedy in the classical Greek sense, *The God of Small Things* is illuminated by Markell’s interpretation of the *Antigone*’s architecture and the implications of his formal analysis for political theory. To the extent that *The God of Small Things* immerses the reader in a narrative whose ending is immediately foretold, it bears a closed and possessive structure, one in which the lives of Ammu, Estha, Rahel, Velutha, and Sophie Mol are condemned from the beginning. At the same time, the improper aesthetics that Roy employs to tell this tale serve to continually undermine the framework in which they are contained, fundamentally rejecting the logic of possession that authorizes both exclusion and dispossession, and instead upholding a form of political association predicated upon openness and constitutive relation. Like Markell’s analysis of the *Antigone*, then, *The God of Small Things* insists on the constitutive impropriety of all human actions even as it adopts tragedy’s foreclosed plot.

The weight of both pathos and possibility, of violence and its opposite, is presented with particular acuteness through the conceit of Kathakali, Kerala’s traditional art form combining narrative, drama, and dance. Indeed, *The God of Small Things* bears a distinctly similar structure to Kathakali, which “discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones . . . you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. . . . You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t.” (218). In suggesting that audiences of “Great Stories . . . know how they end, yet . . . listen as though [they] don’t,” the narrator offers a belated piece of guidance on how to read *The God of Small Things*, advising the reader to encounter this novel as though its characters’ fates have not been revealed at the start. Notwithstanding the degree of hubris that obtains in comparing one’s first novel to a centuries-

old art form that is both sacred and renowned, the narrator's metatextual advice usefully signals *The God of Small Things*' impact as deriving from two, interrelated elements: first, the pathos of knowing the torment awaiting characters for whom the reader will likely come to care; and second, the merit of immersing oneself in a text despite knowing the events that will ensue. Roy suggests, in other words, that the power of a story obtains as much from its mode of telling as from the plot that it delineates: that is, from its detail (or "small things") as well as its narrative arc.

The God of Small Things is both as tragic and distressing as the Kathakali plays watched by Estha and Rahel after their return to Ayemenem as adults, and as hopeful for art's politically generative and psychologically healing capacities as the twins' restorative experience of watching the Kathakali performance. The actor playing Karna is described as "dangerous" that night: his craft is his "safety net" that "keep[s] him from crashing through the world like a falling stone" but the very same craft is also the source of his despair, something whose commodification he has participated in by performing for irreverent tourists, whose "lolling nakedness and . . . imported attention spans" demean the sanctity of his ancient art (220). The extent to which he is beholden to the forces of global capital is mirrored in the confinement marking the selected plays' narrative trajectories, as well as in his ironically reverse problem to most actors: "he strives not to *enter* a part but to escape it," to flee the despair he shares with the tragic figures he portrays (220). Similarly establishing the Kathakali episode's oppressive mood, the opening play echoes the tragedy that befell Ammu and the twins, telling of a woman, Kunti, who had been separated from her beloved son due to prohibitions against unmarried mothers and who again faces the loss of a child. Kunti "invoke[s] the Love Laws," memorably used to describe both Ammu and Velutha's relationship and Estha and Rahel's coupling, when she tracks

down her long-lost son, Karna, and begs him not to kill her five other sons during an impending battle (222). Karna cannot comply as he has already vouched loyalty to Duryodhana, his benefactor and his half-brothers' enemy, but he promises instead that Kunti will lose only one son: either he or Arjuna will die (222). This narrative of maternal and filial loss, as well as sworn fratricide, echoes the chain of events in *The God of Small Things*, wherein gendered social norms cause needless deaths and familial bereavement. Likewise, the emotional pain suffered by Kunti and Karna from their long separation recalls Estha's distress at being taken away from Ammu at only seven years' old: "Where were you, he asked her, when I needed you most? In reply Kunti took the regal face in her hands. . . . Did you know how much I missed you?" (221, emphasis in original). Poignantly, Kunti and Karna's reunification, despite its brevity, provides an assurance of affection that the watching Estha never received from Ammu after his "Return," despite Estha and his mother's reciprocal and far more profound love.

The affective claustrophobia that stems from the fated outcome in *Karna Shabadam* ("Karna's Oath") only intensifies after the actors segue into the second, related story, *Duryodhana Vadham* ("the Death of Duryodhana and his brother Dushasana"), a play that differently recalls *The God of Small Things* (223). Avenging the honor of Draupadi, a woman who had been won in a game of dice and who was "strangely angry only with the men that won her, not the ones that staked her," Bhima, one of Draupadi's husbands, clubs Dushasana to death (223). Like "[a]n ironsmith flattening a sheet of recalcitrant metal," Bhima attacks Dushasana with the simultaneous systematicity and violence that characterized the form of Velutha's tragic demise (224). "[W]ith his bare hands, [Bhima] tore the body open. He ripped its innards out and stooped to lap blood straight from the bowl of the torn carcass, his crazed eyes peeping over the rim, glittering with rage and hate and mad fulfillment" (224). The overt parallels between the

Kathakali play and *The God of Small Things* are conveyed through the twins' adult consciousnesses: "There was madness there that morning. Under the rose bowl. It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy. . . . The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that" (224). Whereas the "brutal extravagance" of Dushashana's murder is figured through extended sentences and violent imagery, including the association of Bhima with animality when "[he] stoop[s] to lap blood" from the body, its "savage economy" is signaled through the clipped syntax of Estha and Rahel's thoughts, the extreme brevity of these sentences and sentence fragments indexing the fractured consciousness associated with traumatic recall.

The God of Small Things describes the Kathakali episode in terms that defy the modality of possession structuring this novel's juridicopolitical economy, thereby rejecting the foreclosures implied in tragedy's preordained conclusions. Even though the Kathakali performance's structural, thematic, and affective resonances cause Estha and Rahel to revisit the trauma of their youth, this recurrence bears promise as well as pain. First, the plays are performed not for tourists' benefit but for the actors themselves, taking place not in a resort but in the traditional setting of a temple at night; as such, they serve as a small act of rebellion against the forces of globalization and the aftereffects of imperialism (even if the actors do yet "[go] home to beat their wives" in the patriarchal fashion excoriated by Roy) (224). Second, and more important, the performance facilitates the repair of Estha and Rahel's emotional intimacy, a closeness that had been interrupted by their long, enforced separation. When Estha silently arrives to join Rahel at the temple, his twin senses his presence:

Something altered in the air. And Rahel knew that Estha had come.

She didn't turn her head, but a glow spread inside her. *He's come.* She thought. *He's here. With me.*

Estha settled against a distant pillar and they sat through the performance like this, separated by the breadth of the kuthambalam, but joined by a story. And the memory of another mother.

The air grew warmer. Less damp. (222)

If the violent and long-duration effects of mid-twentieth century India's juridicopolitical economy are indexed in the twins' extended separation, their silent attendance at the Kathakali performance suggests tragic narrative's unificatory capacities. The twins are "joined by a story" in part because of their shared physical presence at this performance, their propinquity profound enough to make "[t]he air gr[o]w warmer" across the width of the "kuthambalam," or temple theater. More substantially, however, the twins are also connected by the performance's resonances with their own shared story: in prompting a "memory of another mother," the play has resubmerged them in a drama that they can anyway never leave, and that they are now jointly reliving through watching the performance together. Further, the twins are also "joined by a story" inasmuch as they are absorbed by a Kathakali tale with which they are intimately familiar, just as the reader of *The God of Small Things* is, at this point in the novel, immersed in a narrative whose sorrowful outcome they, too, already know.

Despite tragedy's structural predication on an ending foretold, therefore, its signification need not necessarily be destruction or despair. On the contrary, the tragic narrative mode in *The God of Small Things* operates in joint association with this novel's improper, relational aesthetics. Together, the novel's aesthetic impropriety and tragic structure model an improper interruption against the Indian juridicopolitical economy's own tragically gendered constraints.

Thus understood, the Kathakhali performance attended by Rahel and Estha is notably presented first in its promise rather than its destructive foreclosure. Rahel is called to the temple by “the sound of drums,” carried by the wind to her old room in Ayemenem and disrupting her “haunted” memories of the catastrophic night years before (182):

The direction of the breeze changed and brought her the sound of drums. A gift. The promise of a story. *Once upon a time*, they said, *there lived a*

Rahel lifted her head and listened. (182)

The “promise” held by Kathakali is signaled through the aposiopetic narrative uttered by the drums, their story being not only incomplete but unenclosed even by punctuation: “*Once upon a time*, they said, *there lived a*” For Rahel, who has heard the stories since she was a child, being given even the “promise of a story” is enough to persuade her to “lif[t] her head and liste[n].” Much as the reader knows the ending of *The God of Small Things* right from the start and yet reads the novel anyway, Rahel knows that immersion in a Kathakali performance will exceed the known details of its plot. As she later finds out, Estha carries the same knowledge, having also been called to the performance that night, whether by the same drums or Rahel’s departure. The story’s promise is more than fulfilled, as it is the twins’ joint presence at the temple that takes them from being “[a] pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative[,] . . . [u]nable, somehow, to change plays” (182), to devoted twins no longer separated by tragedy but “joined by a story” (222).

My reading of *The God of Small Things* has suggested that this novel’s promise of an alternative juridicopolitical economy inheres in the very structure in which it is constrained. In both its tragic narrative mode and relational aesthetics, *The God of Small Things* models an improper

interruption of Indian women's substantial exclusion from property rights and, more broadly, of the Indian juridicopolitical economy's tragically gendered constraints. By identifying and drawing out a precise connection between the possessive political form attacked by this novel and the non-possessive aesthetic form delineated in its stead, I have made a case for a more radical understanding of *The God of Small Things*' political and aesthetic interventions. As I have suggested, the novel's relational style brings into stark relief the possessive structures against which it rails; as such, my reading crystallizes the extent to which this novel's feminist critique is established through its condemnation of India's gendered property laws. In this context, *The God of Small Things*' structuring tropes of property, possession, and dispossession, as well as of propriety and impropriety, can be seen to bear significant conceptual and formal weight. Through an improper and expansive modality that suggests the beneficence of a similarly lateral mode of political relation, *The God of Small Things* adapts the very structures of thought that authorize female dispossession.

CHAPTER THREE Properties of Democracy: Rewriting the Apartheid State
in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:

that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no
government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the
people;

that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a
form of government founded on injustice and inequality;

that our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in
brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities;

that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all
their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;

And therefore, we, the people of South Africa, black and white together equals,
countrymen and brothers adopt this Freedom Charter;

And we pledge ourselves to strive together, sparing neither strength nor courage,
until the democratic changes here set out have been won. (n.pag.)

The South African Freedom Charter, drafted by the African National Congress (ANC) and unveiled at the Congress of the People in Kliptown, South Africa, on June 26, 1955, calls for an end to apartheid rule and the founding of a multi-racial democracy “based on the will of all people.” The Freedom Charter’s bold vision, set forth in eleven similarly structured proclamations of which the above excerpt forms the first, was not realized until April 27, 1994 when the country’s first democratic government was elected. Between the period of the Freedom Charter’s drafting and the point at which its aims were formally attained, the South African state

aggressively fought off all forms of political resistance, resulting in 11,000 political deaths and 80,000 political detentions for up to three years without trial.¹ As the Freedom Charter attests, the powerful collective resolve for “a democratic state, based on the will of all the people” derives from the conviction that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.” In describing a multi-racial polity through the register of belonging, the Freedom Charter evinces a vision of democracy that challenges the acute racial exclusions engendered by the apartheid state. Whereas South Africa under white minority rule largely excluded the country’s substantial black population from political life, the Freedom Charter promotes a form of collective ownership of the nation, shared by all “the People of South Africa, black and white together equals.”

J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*, published in 1983 in a period of increased state repression, expressly addresses the call for racial equality and full democracy described in the Freedom Charter. While *Life & Times of Michael K* has been the subject of much criticism for not fashioning a tale of organized political resistance—or “the story of a life lived in cages,” as its titular protagonist auspiciously laments—the novel is in fact acutely invested in the issue of racial justice in South Africa (181). As this chapter contends, *Life & Times of Michael K* deals directly with the material, economic, and affective forms of dispossession suffered by South Africa’s black population under the apartheid system.² Particular challenge is made to the exclusionary land and labor laws that corralled black people into isolated residential areas and subservient employment roles, and that thereby inflicted a state of precarious living that is economically, affectively, and psychologically injurious. Thus, *Life & Times of Michael K*

¹ These statistics derive from a 1997 Human Rights Commission report; see “HRC Submits.”

² I use “black” in the broad sense of African or mixed-race South African, preferring not to use the apartheid regime’s racial codifications. The terms, “Black,” “Coloured,” and “White” signal apartheid attempts to determine race biologically, so I use them only to reference specific apartheid laws or policies.

explicitly upholds the value of possession as part of its critique of apartheid, especially rights to possess one's labor, rights to land possession or habitation, and rights to territorial sovereignty. At one and the same time, therefore, *Life & Times of Michael K* confronts the racially exclusive form of ownership practiced under white minority rule and sustained through colonial belief systems, and it affirms the importance of possession for social justice. As such, it bears a comparable aim to Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's recent collaborative work, which likewise "articulate[s] aspirations to self-determination without seeking recourse to the grand narrative of the self-contained, self-sufficient individual" (95).

In this chapter, I argue that *Life & Times of Michael K* challenges the exclusionary suppositions of apartheid and the myriad forms of racialized dispossession this doctrine generated and endorsed. Whereas apartheid is based upon extreme racial segregation and separation, Coetzee's novel suggests that the political community is necessarily and constitutively relational: that a polity is made up of people who are necessarily in association with one another. Fittingly, given that two of the primary vehicles for apartheid domination and exclusion were property and labor laws, *Life & Times of Michael K*'s political critique is mobilized largely through addressing the interrelated problems of racial prohibitions on land rights and employment. In particular, *Life & Times of Michael K* disavows racially discriminatory forms of land use and possession through Michael K's unusual relationship to food and farming; it confronts the apartheid regime's reliance upon exploitative labor laws and detention without trial through its protagonist's confinement in various labor camps; and it rejects the separatist logic upon which apartheid was constructed through its insistence upon a polity's constitutively relational form. The intersection of Coetzee's novel with apartheid land and labor laws thus registers its construction of an alternative mode of political and ethical

association, a connection that has been overlooked because critical focus has remained on Michael K's social isolation and habitual reclusiveness. Despite the protagonist's well-documented attempts to minimize human contact, however, he is also shown to appreciate emotional attachment to others. Indeed, he is represented as very much part of a human community, not least because other characters repeatedly insist upon their obligations toward him. As this chapter argues, *Life & Times of Michael K* counters the racial exclusions of the apartheid South African polity by attaching to its black protagonist a form of sociality based not on the racially exclusionary, hereditary power of the ruling white minority but on elective, democratic affiliation.

Figuring Political Dispossession: Apartheid's Land and Labor Laws

Life & Times of Michael K is set in 1980s South Africa during a civil war whose fictionality belies its marked similarities to the strictures of the late-apartheid state, not the least of which include internment practices involving indefinite detention and forced labor; guerilla warfare, especially in the novel's sparsely populated border regions; controls on black employment and residence effected through a migrant labor system and racially discriminatory legislation; a political economy reliant upon a cheap black workforce and black dispossession; "resettlement" programs for the black population; restrictions on movement managed through stringent documentation laws; a substantial bureaucratic machinery; and the militarization of both police and state. Surprisingly, the extensive similarities between this fictional South Africa and its historical correlate have been substantially under-recognized by critics, many of whom identify the civil war of the novel's setting as occurring at some future point rather than as corresponding,

in any serious way, to 1980s South Africa.³ Indeed, critics have consistently affirmed this novel's detachment from material history: in its early days, *Life & Times of Michael K* was criticized by the South African literary establishment for its seeming faith in solitary retreat instead of advocacy for direct anti-apartheid activity;⁴ more recently, critics have approved of its metaphysical insights and aesthetic refinement, assumed to account for its literary longevity.⁵

Following the story of its titular protagonist as he leaves political unrest in Cape Town with his dying mother, *Life & Times of Michael K* stages the ethical quandary of whether, in times of political oppression, it is acceptable to prioritize self-survival over political activism. Michael K and his mother, Anna K, leave the Cape for the Karoo, the rural region where Anna K had remembered spending a happy childhood. Anna K collapses and dies en route but Michael K continues, determined to bury his mother's ashes on the farm of her youth, now abandoned by its Afrikaner owners, the Visagies. Attempting to set up home on the secluded farm, Michael K is compelled to leave after the sudden arrival of the Visagie grandson, a military absconder who attempts to make him his servant. Michael K retreats to the nearby mountains, usually home only to freedom fighters; before long, however, nearly delirious with hunger and not wishing to die, he returns to the town, where he is promptly arrested for vagrancy. Sent to Jakkalsdrif, a "resettlement camp" for forcibly displaced black laborers and their families, Michael K begins his political education through his friendship with a fellow internee, Robert (73).⁶ After his eventual escape and return to the Visagie farm, he spends several months growing pumpkins and

³ See, for example, Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 88, 90, 101; Attridge 49; and T. Wright 61. For a contrasting view, see Head (93-4), D. Wright (437) and Gordimer (n.p.). In the *New York Review of Books*, Gordimer argues that it would be a mistake to read "this magnificent novel" as "a vision of the future. . . . If it is set ahead in time at all, then this is done as a way of looking, as if it had come to the surface, at what lies under the surface of the present" (n.p.).

⁴ See Watson, who argues: "Michael K only escapes the camps by escaping history altogether. What sort of model does he provide for we readers who have to live in history and could not survive elsewhere?" (35).

⁵ See, for example, Hayes, esp. 1-32.

⁶ Chesney describes Robert as "[t]he main example of political consciousness within the novel" (311).

melons. Arrested again during a police raid, he is falsely accused of helping insurgents and detained in Kenilworth, a “rehabilitation camp” for insurrectionaries located in the Cape Town suburbs (131). While there, he effectively goes on hunger strike, leaving his wardens to reflect futilely on his unwillingness to eat. Miraculously, only weeks from death by starvation, he again escapes, finally returning to the Cape Town neighborhood, Sea Point, where his journey had begun. Here, he is befriended by a motley group who insist on giving him charity and sexual favors even as they also steal his only property: the pumpkin seeds he has carried with him from the farm. The narrative closes with Michael K reflecting on possible forms of sociality within the existing repressive regime, an episode that is, as this chapter will later show, crucial to comprehending Coetzee’s novel.

For all the persistent critical anxiety about relating this novel to the late-apartheid era, it must be read as a direct and critical engagement with that period. Unlike most of Coetzee’s early novels, *Life & Times of Michael K* is undeniably set in South Africa, as its geographic specificity makes clear. Michael K’s journey from Cape Town into the Karoo with his mother consistently records specific towns and villages, charting so detailed an itinerary that a reader could follow the route on a map. Similarly, existing state amenities and buildings are frequently referenced: among others, these include the South African military’s local headquarters at the Castle of Good Hope, whose nickname, “the Castle,” is usually interpreted as simply one of many literary allusions to Franz Kafka instead of being, as it is also, a political reference to a nodal point of late-apartheid state control.⁷ Equally important as *Life & Times of Michael K*’s geographic setting is its historical moment. For example, Michael and Anna K’s residential locations and forms of labor indicate their subjection to apartheid racial segregation laws; the migration of

⁷ See Attridge 51, footnote 33.

undocumented black South Africans to the cities from the so-called Homelands is figured in Greater Cape Town having been “flooded with people from the countryside looking for work of any kind” (13-14); and Michael K is interned in a “resettlement camp” for unemployed people, much like the camps found in the homelands (73). If, as so many other critics have suggested, *Life & Times of Michael K* can be understood as not quite 1980s South Africa, it is only because it maintains the degree of aesthetic distance necessary to make it a philosophical reflection and literary imagining instead of a dogmatic political tract.

Through its historical and geographic specificity, *Life & Times of Michael K* takes issue with the depredations of the apartheid state, which secured white self-possession by dispossessing black South Africans of rights, property, sovereignty, and land. Between 1948 and 1994, the ruling National Party restructured South Africa’s entire legal and political system upon the doctrine of strict racial separation. Building upon earlier segregationist laws, such as the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the Native Administration Act of 1927, the state introduced racially exclusionary legislation covering all aspects of political life, including suffrage, property rights, marriage and sexual relationships, employment, housing, freedom of movement, citizenship, education, taxation, and access to amenities.⁸ At the system’s legislative center was the Population Registration Act, a law whose categorization of South Africans according to rigid racial types made it “the essential prerequisite for the fulfillment of the apartheid goal” (Thompson 190). In classifying citizens as “White,” “Coloured,” or “Black,” the Population Registration Act established a system of “differential access to resources . . . and differential rights” by codifying putative racial difference (West 100).⁹ As Emile Boonzaier observes, “[t]he ideology of apartheid and its associated legislation [assumed that] the South African population

⁸ For excellent synopses of the various acts and their consequences, see Horrell 9-114.

⁹ On the transparent inventedness of apartheid South Africa’s racial categories, see Boonzaier 58-67.

consisted of a number of discrete and unassimilable groups. Indeed, it was the legislation that ossified these populations and rigidified the boundaries between them” (63). Significantly, *Life & Times of Michael K* rejects the principle of racial codification by leaving unclear whether Michael K would be classified as “Coloured” or “Black” under apartheid law. Accordingly, the only explicit instances that classify him according to apartheid racial types are contradictory: he is identified as “CM” (standing for “Coloured Male”) on the charge sheet written before his confinement in Jakkalsdrif (70), yet his home in Cape Town is described as a “hostel,” a form of housing historically used for “Black” people, who were largely forbidden from permanent city residence (16).¹⁰ By inconsistently signaling Michael K’s race according to apartheid taxonomy, this novel condemns the fallacies of apartheid’s biological determinism and rejects the racial exclusions extended and entrenched through the Population Registration Act. *Life & Times of Michael K* thus undermines the apartheid state’s exclusionary aims: as Martin West explains, “the overriding interest of the legislators was to define the white category to the exclusion of others . . . and thereby to maintain white power and privilege” (109-110).

Given that two of the primary vehicles for apartheid domination and exclusion were property and labor laws concerning land rights and employment conditions, it is notable that *Life & Times of Michael K*’s political critique is established primarily through addressing the interrelated problems of racial prohibitions on habitation and labor. The experiences of both Michael and Anna K indirectly register the apartheid laws that restricted black people’s places of residence and types of employment. For example, the neighborhood where Anna K has long worked and where the opening civil unrest occurs, Sea Point, is an exclusively white and upscale part of Cape Town, an unstated detail that registers black exclusion. Similarly, the home to

¹⁰ See Ramphele and Boonzaier, esp. 153 and 157.

which Anna K desperately longs to return was never her family's farm but rather that of their employers, the Visagie family; as Michael K later acknowledges of Afrikaner property traditions and South African property law, it was a farm to be "pass[ed] on to other generations," from white family to white family (101). Both Michael K and his mother live in cramped and isolated quarters, Michael K in a hostel, and thus in a single room in a racially segregated part of the city, and Anna K in an unused electrical cupboard converted into a windowless bedroom.¹¹ Likewise, both characters work as manual laborers to support the leisure of the white minority, Michael K as a city gardener in the heart of white Cape Town and Anna K as a maid for a wealthy white family. In a situation that both figures and critiques white benevolence, Anna K lives "in dread of the end of the Burhmann's charity," knowing that she could easily be dismissed because her dropsy makes her largely unable to work (6). Anna K is wholly dependent upon her employers, reliant upon individual goodwill in a system that structurally impairs black South Africans. In this context, Michael K's seeming attempts to retreat from sociality, whether to the Visagie farm or to the mountains, need not be seen as political disengagement but rather an attempt to evade the exclusionary form of political life that is the only one allowed to him in the apartheid polis.¹²

Life & Times of Michael K signals the affective as well as economic implications of black dispossession in Michael and Anna K's relationship to the farm. Anna K never makes it back to the area that she thinks of as home, while Michael K is repeatedly evicted from the place to which he develops a profound bond. His connection is not to the farm's buildings but to the land itself: "He felt at home at the dam as he had never felt in the house. . . . I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived. It is as simple

¹¹ Anna K's residence thus accords with the Group Areas Act's requirement that domestic staff live in lodgings outside employers' homes; see Mbembe 387.

¹² Gordimer famously argues, "while [this novel] is implicitly and highly political, Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it" (n.p.).

as that” (98-9). His disaffection with the logic of purposeful possession that underpins Afrikaner property beliefs as well as colonial and capitalist understandings of property ownership is similarly evidenced in his relationship to the vegetables he grows. Later interrogated by military officials, who assume that he has been growing food for insurgents, he is asked, “Who were these vegetables for?” (139). As he explains, however, he does not regard the vegetables in possessive terms: “They weren’t mine. They came from the earth What grows is for all of us” (139). In Michael K’s non-possessive attachment to the earth and its produce, Coetzee suggests an alternative form of belonging and coexistence to colonial models of ownership. Yet Coetzee does not simply dismiss the construct of possession as necessarily unfavorable. As is registered in Michael K’s response to the Visagie grandson’s arrival, racial prohibitions on land possession or residence make him politically and economically vulnerable. In one of many references to *Robinson Crusoe*, European literature’s paradigmatic narrative of territorial conquest and self-making, Michael K laments: “I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner” (61).¹³ Excluded from political life and the protections it brings, Michael K is subject to a white sovereign master, who owns what he cannot.

In the symbolic correlation between political dispossession and prohibitions on property ownership, residence, and labor, *Life & Times of Michael K* addresses the urgency of black sovereignty in 1980s South Africa. Most particularly, this novel’s invocation of the traditional Afrikaner pastoral novel, the *plaasroman*, functions as a critique of coincident policies of land alienation and their underwriting by the state’s exclusionary juridicopolitical institutions.¹⁴ As exemplified in the *plaasroman*’s narrative codes, traditional Afrikaner attitudes to property rights

¹³ During the apartheid era, South Africa’s white minority owned 87% of the land; only 12% of South Africa is arable. See Barnard 92 and Walker 808-9.

¹⁴ See Derek Wright’s analysis of “pastoral’s entanglement in the history of the South African state” (58).

aligned with a puritan ethic of land entitlement through labor, mobilized by Afrikaner nationalists to assert a general right to the South African nation.¹⁵ Indeed, the *plaasroman* was used to provide “transcendental justification for the ownership of the land,” as Coetzee explains in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (106). The Afrikaner pastoral tradition defends white land ownership and territorial sovereignty in two ways: by depicting an idealized and enduring Afrikaner farming tradition, and by largely ignoring the black labor upon which South Africa’s economy depended. The Visagie grandson’s misapprehension that Michael K is a “good farm servan[t]” rather than a settler on abandoned land signals the reliance of white farming families upon black workers, yet in spite of this dependency, the pastoral tradition attempts to deny black presence on Afrikaner farms (62). As Jennifer Wenzel explains, drawing on Coetzee’s *White Writing*: “Because both love and ownership of the farm are established through generations of family labor, the representation of black labor in the *plaasroman* poses a significant problem. Writers of the *plaasroman* . . . could not represent black labor without jeopardizing the larger aim of the narrative” (94).

The erasure of black labor formed part of white claims not only to land ownership but, more broadly, to inequitable resource distribution and territorial sovereignty. Rita Barnard identifies the significance of the *plaasroman* to black people’s exclusion from an ongoing relationship to the land in the Nationalist official M. C. Botha’s “denial of the fact that black South Africans also have a pastoral tradition—that they too have a sense of place and an attachment to ancestral land” (73). As Barnard explains, “the function of pastoral ideology in South Africa . . . was not so much to assert positive values like rootedness, simplicity, and tradition as to signify racial difference,” a feat achieved through the “symptomatic repression of

¹⁵ See Coetzee (“Cronjé”) 5-6. More generally, see Hickel 309 and Sachs 245.

the fact of black labor” (73, 87). Further, Barnard suggests, the pastoral also serves to occlude black love of the land, an affective component to territorial dispossession that is figured in Michael K’s desire to live where his mother grew up, where her ashes are scattered, and where he has developed his own attachments. By placing black labor and black topophilia at its narrative heart, *Life & Times of Michael K* rejects the Afrikaner nationalist claims to territorial sovereignty that are encoded in the *plaasroman*; instead, it signals the centrality of black labor to the South African economy.¹⁶ Moreover, in thus rewriting the pastoral, *Life & Times of Michael K* affirms that racially exclusionary property laws are intimately linked to labor migrancy, a system that was established through discriminatory housing policies; in turn, these regulations forced substantial numbers of the black population into such isolated areas that the only option was to travel for work.

Michael K can himself be read as a figure for the migrant laborer, not only because he had lived in a Cape Town migrant’s hostel but also because of the legislated temporariness of his relationship to the land. His frequent journeys, on routes sometimes chosen and sometimes forced, suggest the kind of exclusions and restrictions created by the migrant labor system, as well as the strength of black longing for political freedom. When Michael K escapes from the Jakkalsdrif internment camp by climbing over a three-meter barbed-wire barrier, he finds that, despite the seeming emptiness of the landscape, “every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway” (97). Figured in these boundary markers are both his enduring legal status as a “trespasser” and his temporary position as a “runaway,” legal designations that, like the fences, he cannot escape. Beyond asserting land ownership, the frequent fences register the apartheid legislation used to patrol land use and residency: namely,

¹⁶ Barnard argues that Coetzee does not reject the South African pastoral as a genre, despite condemning some of its ideals. Instead, unlike Gordimer, Coetzee maintains a “muted pastoral nostalgia” (83).

the prosecutions under the 1959 Trespass Act that prevented unauthorized black land occupation. According to its own text, this act's purpose was "[t]o prohibit the entry or presence upon land and the entry of or presence in buildings in certain circumstances" (n.p.). Significantly, the concept of "trespassing" was implicitly racialized, its application to only the black population indexing the firm belief that black people did not have the right to own or use South African land. As Michael Savage explains, "Trespass legislation enable[d] authorities to check and control the African population, to destroy squatter camps on the fringes of urban areas, to move Africans off white owned farms, [and] to carry out 'pass raids' on residential property" (17). Different to pass laws, which sought to regulate movement in and out of designated areas, the Trespass Act bore two objectives: in certain circumstances, to compel black people to enter the workforce when they were living off the land, and in others, to evict them if they visited black friends or family at a white employer's residence without authorization.¹⁷ Notably, the Trespass Act's principle aims—to force black entry into the wage labor economy and to constrain black freedom of movement—both apply to Michael K, the former exemplified when the Visagie grandson attempts to make him his "nursemaid" and the latter when Michael K is picked up by the police and sent to Jakkalsdrif for having no fixed abode (99).

If migrant labor is signaled through Michael K's own status as a disenchanting laborer who seeks to work on his own terms and not for the white minority's profit, it is also figured in Jakkalsdrif's function and designation as a "resettlement camp," a term that directly invokes the "resettlement" towns and villages found in the reserves and homelands (73).¹⁸ As a result of legislation such as the Group Areas Act (1950), the Bantu Authorities Act (1951), the Natives Resettlement Act (1954), and the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act (1959), members of

¹⁷ See Sachs 245-246.

¹⁸ Horrell 53; MacMillan 85.

the so-called Black and Coloured groups were subject to forcible relocation. The primary motivation for the aforementioned legislation was to reduce if not eradicate black presence in areas desired or inhabited by white South Africans,¹⁹ a process that was carried out with particular rigor in the 1960s, when one million black South Africans were relocated into the “Bantustans,” later known as “homelands.” Like the homelands, Jakkalsdrif is located in a “lonely part of the world where there was no work and where entire families had been turned off farms they had lived on for generations” (79). The camp’s occupants have been forced from their homes, arrested for vagrancy, and corralled into a small outdoor space marked by barbed-wire fences. Living in tents and huts with access to only the most basic amenities, they are forced to leave the camp daily to undertake manual and domestic labor nearby for nominal wages, just as they are forced to return to the camp at night. To the extent that Jakkalsdrif simultaneously segregates its conscripted population into a demarcated area and coercively expects it to depart for daily work elsewhere, it fulfils a markedly similar function to the resettlement villages that developed in the apartheid-era homelands as part of the intensification of labor migrancy.

The starkest correspondence between Jakkalsdrif and the related apartheid systems of land dispossession and labor migrancy is in the locals’ desire for cheap black labor but not black presence. As Robert explains, the camp’s inmates are employed under precarious conditions and for minimal returns by various entities in Prince Albert, including farmers, the state railway, and residents, all of whom benefit from getting “a day’s work blood cheap” (82). According to Robert,

What they would really like—this is my opinion—is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the

¹⁹ As Western explains, “Black” and “Coloured” populations were not relocated for health reasons, despite official claims to the contrary “The *location* of resettlement reveals an intent quite different from that of government pronouncements: it is one of social distancing and not concern for health hazards” (301).

middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean (82).

Robert's perceptive commentary signals the fallacy of the police captain's claim that Jakkalsdrif is "a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!*" (91). Far from being "lazy," the camp's inhabitants are expected to perform small miracles, leaving scenes of spotless domesticity by morning. In desiring the fantasy of black absence even as they demand black labor, the Karoo's white inhabitants bolster the pastoral myth of South Africa as a white, rural idyll. Their distaste at Jakkalsdrif's proximity to their town—they believe that Jakkalsdrif's inhabitants "breed disease"—is marked in the rhetoric of contamination that was likewise used to justify forced removals in apartheid South Africa (81).²⁰ As Robert explains, the cases of dysentery, measles, and flu in the camp's early days arose not from personal squalor but from the structural cause of a lack of sanitation measures. The consequences for individuals were so severe that the nurse sent to help "stood in the middle of the camp where everyone could see, and she cried" (88). The nurse's compassion is shared neither by Prince Albert's residents nor the state: as Robert suggests, Jakkalsdrif's current sanitary status is not the result of kindness or fellow-feeling but "because we look too terrible when we get sick and die" (88). In a typically Coetzee meditation upon humanity and sympathy, in this case addressing the limits of affective tenderness across legislatively distinct racial lines, the minimal care given to the camp's residents functions as a salve to the local population's conscience.

The exploitation of black labor that is figured in Michael K's experience at Jakkalsdrif is rewritten in the Visagie farm episodes, especially in his second visit after escaping from the camp. As this episode's mystical tone suggests, Michael K experiences overwhelming joy at

²⁰ See Thompson 28.

being outside in his carefully built subsistence economy. When he first returns after Jakkalsdrif and sees the stream that he had earlier used to cultivate his pumpkins and mealies, he “turned his face up like a flower, drinking and being bathed; he could not get enough of the water” (99). In similarly ecstatic terms, he finds himself “aching after the pleasures of digging and planting he had promised himself,” his horticultural desire for these “pleasures” helping him endure the discomforts of cold nights (99). His sojourns on the Visagie farm are by no means romanticized as a prelapsarian paradise or figurative political idyll, however: Michael K is no stranger to the cold and he is susceptible to loneliness, “recogniz[ing] that, cut off from human society, he was in danger of becoming more timorous than a mouse” (105). In bringing discomfort as well as bliss, the farm episodes signal a kind of grounded, non-transcendental freedom. On the one hand, these interludes acknowledge the disagreeable aspects of Michael K’s self-sufficient life, so they hardly represent a naive escape from the strictures of political reality; on the other, they describe a necessary reprieve from racial subjugation that allows vital rejuvenation for a character suffering under apartheid.

Rather different to critical orthodoxy, therefore, I would argue that Michael K’s relationship to the Visagie farm signals not this novel’s political apathy but its engagement.²¹ Typically, the farm episodes are understood as advocating for retreat and ethical detachment instead of political engagement and active dissent. On those occasions when Michael K’s non-appropriative relationship to the land is acknowledged for its provocative potential, it is ordinarily assessed through an ecological lens. I suggest, however, that the farm episodes also reveal this novel’s challenge to apartheid South Africa’s racially exclusionary legal and political

²¹ For an overview of responses charging Coetzee’s novel with elusion, see Attwell *Politics* 92-3.

system.²² Michael K's mode of living, during his time spent on the farm, implies a form of habitation and labor based not upon supremacy, domination, or control but on tenderness and equilibrium. Developing a sense of being one with the earth, he starts eating roots and can tell which were poisonous, "as though he had once been an animal" (102). Similarly, he feels an extreme sense of love for the pumpkins and melons that he grows: "As he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for food grew slighter and slighter" (101). Built on a philosophy of "tend[erness]," Michael K's agricultural techniques differ sharply to what Coetzee identifies, both here and elsewhere, as traditional Afrikaner relations to the land. As Wenzel shows in her analysis of Coetzee's fictionalized autobiography, *Boyhood*, "the narrator's rejection of even a desire for a relationship to the farm constituted through private, landed property sets him radically apart not only from grown-up, capitalist common sense, but also from traditional Afrikaner notions of what it means to live on the land" (108). In both *Boyhood* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee differentiates between home as a place of belonging and property as a site of ownership.

These scenes of tenderness also present a challenge to white control over black labor, as they show Michael K deriving pleasure from his surroundings and working only as much as he needs: "He was learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flowerbed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time" (115). In no longer performing "involuntary labor" and in "learning to love idleness," Michael K rejects the apartheid state's legislated requirements that black people should work in assigned types of employment, in specified locations, and for white South Africans' gain. His

²² For a critical assessment of the politics underpinning *Life & Times of Michael K*'s ecological concerns, see D. Wright; memorably, Wright describes Michael K as "a hero for the white ecological Eighties" (440).

new mode of behavior thus functions as an express rejection of apartheid land and labor law. In *White Writing*, Coetzee explains: “one of the commonplaces of the Discourse of the Cape is that the Hottentots are idle” (16). Hugh MacMillan similarly observes, in the context of an earlier period of white-minority rule, that the racist trope of black “idleness” conceals material reasons for black South Africans’ reluctance or inability to work, identifying “innumerable factors other than ‘undue preference for leisure’ which might account for ‘the unwillingness of natives to enter wage-paid employment under the existing frequently unattractive conditions’” (93). From this perspective, Michael K’s sojourns on the farm might be read not as detachment but as a rejection of South Africa’s racialized wage economy. Insofar as Michael K’s idleness differs to his remembered inactivity while working as a gardener in Cape Town, when he took “stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth,” it registers a new way of being. Alone in the Karoo, Michael K submits to a sublime “yielding up of himself to time,” asserting control of his life by merging with the place that he loves so profoundly (115).

Inasmuch as the Visagie farm episodes thus affirm the importance of self-sovereignty, they claim that racial justice requires rights to possession: in particular, rights to possess one’s own labor and rights to residence. At the same time, these episodes reject the form of discriminatory property ownership exemplified in the Visagie family’s ongoing proprietorship of the farm. Differently to colonial Afrikaner models of ownership, Michael K builds a home that is “careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging of the heartstrings,” taking care not to “found a new house, a rival line” (101, 104). As well as rejecting Afrikaner models of property ownership, the farm episodes disavow the proprietary relationship between white landowners and black laborers, as is registered in Michael K’s frustration at being mistaken for a servant by the Visagie grandson and in his later fear that the insurgents who visit the farm are

Afrikaner “runaway soldiers” or “off-duty policemen” who would likewise “turn [him] into a servant” (106). In place of these systems of exclusion, I suggest, the farm episodes model a form of reciprocity that bears political implications. During Michael K’s first stay on the farm, for example, he finds himself “bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate” (59), feeling a “cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam” (66). In direct contrast to the proscriptions on social and political relation enforced by the apartheid state, *Life & Times of Michael K* gestures toward a mode of political association that is neither hereditary nor insular, neither exclusionary nor discriminatory, neither hierarchical nor separatist. Instead, the model put forth in this novel is democratic, elective, and relational, exemplified in a “cord of tenderness.”

Constitutive Relation: Reimagining the Polity in *Life & Times of Michael K*

Life & Times of Michael K is demonstrably concerned with the variant forms of relation that necessarily exist between people in a polity. While Michael K is, admittedly, a solitary figure, his impulse to isolation is never as total as some have assumed. Even though he often desires to live well away from people—and not without cause, as the preceding analysis of apartheid domination has shown—the novel’s plot and structure do not allow him, for any length of time, to achieve his sought-after solitude. When he retreats to the Visagie farm for the first time, he is soon interrupted by the Visagie grandson; when he leaves for the mountains and remains there without food or drink, he quickly returns to the comparatively populous Prince Albert in search of sustenance; when he is interned in Jakkalsdrif, he accepts Robert’s offer of both friendship and help; and when he is relentlessly entreated by Kenilworth’s Medical Officer to tell his story and explain his seemingly intentional emaciation, he escapes from his tormentor by returning to

Cape Town and willingly associating with the city's remaining inhabitants. My interpretation of the novel thus differs to critical consensus, which holds that *Life & Times of Michael K* avers exceptional commitment to singularity, typically explained through Michael K's enjoyment of isolation and the austerity of Coetzee's prose. For example, David Attwell takes the formalist concept of defamiliarization or estrangement as central to Coetzee's modernist aesthetics, while Derek Attridge approaches Coetzee by way of the Derridean concept of singularity and the poststructuralist discourse of alterity.²³ Attwell and Attridge are far from alone in their analyses; many critics similarly draw on various aspects of poststructuralist theory, particularly Giorgio Agamben's paradigm of the state of exception, to make their claim for Michael K's singularity and the novel's ethical stakes.²⁴ Without disavowing *Life & Times of Michael K*'s profound interest in the ethical valences of Michael K's reclusiveness, I suggest that the degree to which Michael K both desires and thrives on affective intimacy has not yet been recognized. In defiance of apartheid's axiomatically separatist logic, not to mention capitalism's individualist commitments, *Life & Times of Michael K* recognizes that at the heart of any political formation is a complex set of relational beings whose association is as imperative as it is unavoidable.

As Coetzee recognizes in his essay on apartheid's most influential architect, Geoffrey Cronjé, the strict logic of separation upon which apartheid was constructed concealed the extent to which white South Africans remained constitutively connected to their black counterparts. In "The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)," Coetzee describes how Cronjé formulated "a system of (obsessive) order based on keeping things apart" (16).²⁵ Coetzee's article appeared

²³ See Attwell, "Coetzee's Estrangements," esp. 232-4. For Attridge, see, esp., 32-64.

²⁴ For example, Chesney builds his argument around understanding Michael K as a figure of silence and singularity; see, esp., 307-10.

²⁵ Cronjé was a member of the *Broederbond*, whose influence on South Africa's twentieth-century politics cannot be underestimated, and his published theories of apartheid profoundly influenced the National Party's first prime

eight years after *Life & Times of Michael K*, yet its perceptive analysis so substantially illuminates the form of thought running through the earlier novel as to make their literary pairing highly befitting, if rarely undertaken.²⁶ As Coetzee demonstrates, Cronjé both wants South Africa to be a place of absolute racial separation and yet, desiring that which also disgusts him, is perpetually drawn to the idea of racial mixing:

What Cronjé does not address in his text, what he repudiates at every turn, is a desire for *mixture*. Around *mixture* his mind obsessively turns. What is *mixture*? Rather than try to pin the concept down, I have consciously preferred to allow it to float in its endlessly attractive and endlessly repulsive allure. . . . It is mixture and the desire for mixture that is the secret enemy of Geoffrey Cronjé and the knights of apartheid, the baffling force that must be thwarted, imprisoned, shut away. Apartheid is many things, a mixture of things; one of the things it is is a scheme to make it impossible for the desire to mix to find fulfillment. (3)

Mirroring Cronjé's form of thought, the above passage describes, as apartheid's central motivating force, the control of repressed desire: "[W]hat [Cronjé] repudiates at every turn, is a desire for *mixture*. Around *mixture* his mind obsessively turns. What is *mixture*?" Through its syntactical contortions and obsessive returns, Coetzee's analysis performs Cronjé's anxious desire to prevent racial contact. Describing Cronjé's assessment of "mixture" as a "baffling force that must be thwarted, imprisoned, shut away," Coetzee sardonically likens apartheid's proponents to mythical knights who seek to "thwart" mixture and "imprison" it in a remote

minister, D. F. Malan, as evidenced in the latter's 1948 election manifestos; as such, they played a constitutive part in apartheid theory's actualization in the South African political system. See Coetzee, "Cronjé" 4.

²⁶ López makes a very brief connection between "The Mind of Apartheid" and *Life and Times of Michael K*; see 143.

tower. As such, Coetzee rightly associates apartheid's separatist logic with the concept of enclosure.

Coetzee identifies the exclusionary logic underpinning apartheid's demands for racial separation and sexual segregation in Cronjé's contradictory longing for both absolute racial containment and "the desire to mix." In a wonderfully adept rhetorical analysis of Cronjé's *'n Tuiste vir die nageslag* ("A Home for Posterity"), Coetzee shows how the dedication to "Afrikanermoeders" ("Afrikaner mothers") reveals the possessive formal contours of Cronjé's separatist thought. As Coetzee explains, the compact noun "Afrikanermoeder" signals a desire for the Afrikaner population's racial, sexual, and cultural exclusivity. Used in place of the more common *Afrikaanse moeder*, "Afrikanermoeder" is an express rejection of Dutch influence on the Afrikans language in a text that likewise describes racial purity through female sexual prohibition: "Unconsciously it is a morphological figure of introversion, exclusion, enclosure, embrace *Afrikanermoeder* is thus a morphological and lexical metaphor for *Afrikanereie*, the uniqueness of Afrikanerness" (7). In its linguistic form, Coetzee suggests, Cronjé's thought reveals the possessive, introverted, and exclusionary tenor it shares with apartheid ideology and juridicopolitical systems.

Crucially, Coetzee describes Cronjé's vision as "a counterattack upon desire" (18). As desire figures both the potentiality for physical contact with other people and actual affective connection, it risks undermining the separatist and exclusionary philosophy so carefully developed by apartheid intellectuals. Cronjé's demand for absolute racial separation might thus be seen as an attempt to curtail forceful feelings that, refusing to be contained, seep insistently beyond borders of propriety:

A cardinal point of this essay is that Cronjé's apartheid—and, to the extent that Cronjé's apartheid was realized in legislation, real apartheid—develops as a counterattack upon desire. . . . [T]he text of apartheid deserves to have restored to it the chapter that has been all too smoothly glossed over, censored out, removed: a denial and displacement and reprojection of desire re-enacted in further huge displaced projects of displacement: the redrawing of the maps of cities, the redivision of the countryside, the removal and resettling of populations. (18)

In arguing that the “denial,” “displacement,” and “reprojection” of desire can be read in the state's “displaced projects of displacement,” Coetzee offers a metonymic reading of apartheid in which the forced relocation of substantial numbers of the country's so-called Black and Coloured population is symptomatic of desire's own displacement. In effect, Coetzee claims that the apartheid state should be understood less through its separatist proclamations, evidenced in its “prescriptions for segregated suburbs and native reserves,” and more through its less obvious controls on desire. Without diminishing the relevance of apartheid doctrine's separatist logic, Coetzee thus acknowledges the affective dimensions of political life. What's more, he suggests that Cronjé knows that a polity is inevitably relational.

Revealing similar concerns to those later critiqued in “The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-),” *Life & Times of Michael K* reinserts affective relation into the heart of political association. In his Cronjé essay, Coetzee suggests that the entire apartheid program should be read as a huge project of denial, one that insists upon absolute racial difference in an attempt to create a uniquely non-affective political community. By contrast, *Life & Times of Michael K* affirms the constitutive sociality of the self and the polity, depicting South Africa as a place not of necessary separation but of inevitable relation. While Michael K has consistently been read as

a solitary figure, and while this novel's politics have been located in the protagonist's apparent rejection of domination through his extreme reclusion, *Life & Times of Michael K*'s political claims in fact inhere substantially in its insistence that all people within a polity have a

Life & Times of Michael K devotes considerable space to showing that forms of political association can be egalitarian as well as repressive, accepting as well as exclusionary. Michael K reflects frequently on friendship, decency, kindness, and care, all of which are forms of ethical engagement that correspond to this novel's political reimaginings. Demonstrating his faith in human kindness, Michael K assumes that his and his mother's journey into the Karoo will be relatively straightforward, despite being undertaken on foot with his mother in a makeshift cart, because he believes that "[p]eople were decent, people would stop and give them lifts" (18).

While his initial optimism proves to be overly naïve, it is never fully invalidated. After Anna K's death, for example, Michael K is offered a free journey out of Stellenbosch by an old man whose taciturn demeanor does not obviate his unconditional generosity in the face of tightly controlled movement and frequent police checks. Similarly, after Michael K arrives in the small town of Laingsburg following his release from the Touws River labor gang, he is offered assistance by a stranger who kindly advises, without prompt, that he should move indoors because the evening curfew has sounded. Like the farmer who had shared his cart even though "he did not need help" and thus did not expect anything in return, the stranger invites Michael K to stay for the night (35). Over dinner, it transpires that his hospitality derives from firm principles: in a discussion about the apparent risks of trespassing on farmland, he explains, "People must help each other, that's what I believe" (48). His collective imperative, "people must help each other," indicates a vision of human association that extends far beyond the racial and ethnic designations enforced by the apartheid state. For Michael K, the matter is less clear: "Do I believe in helping people?"

he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help” (48). Just as the convoluted structure of his thought registers his confusion about the concept of help, so too does it mark his anxiety about accepting assistance. Indeed, Michael K is both “[m]ortified” to find his hosts “trying to hush [the children] for the sake of the guest” the next morning and overwhelmed by gratefulness: “His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come” (48). Unsettled by feeling both embarrassment and gratitude, Michael K is also thankful for the kindness he receives.

Inasmuch as “help” is, of course, a form of relationality that frequently indicates power’s unequal dispersal, *Life & Times of Michael K* registers a necessary degree of skepticism in its variant representations of this modality. The Visagie grandson’s insistence that Michael K help him, for example, both reveals the potentially coercive and repressive uses to which aid or support can be put; in addition, the Visagie grandson’s claims register the white South African liberal argument for consensus and slow racial integration instead of full political rights: “I need your co-operation, Michael. You must help me. Otherwise there is no future for either of us. Do you see?” (65). The Visagie grandson’s formulation of help will not produce the mutual advantage implied in his invocation of “co-operation” but instead functions on the Afrikaner man’s terms and for his exclusive benefit: “*You* must help *me*,” he proclaims, the clearly demarcated subject and object of his command indicating the assumed distance between he (“me”) and Michael K (“you”). Encoded in the contrasting grammatical structures of the Visagie grandson’s injunction and the stranger’s reflection on help are two very different views of political association: the former reflects the apartheid state’s ideological and legislated separation between white and black citizens, while the latter corresponds to the alternate form of

community elaborated in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Much like the argument made in mid-to-late apartheid South Africa for gradual reform rather than radical change, the Visagie grandson effectively asks Michael K to sign away his own chance at a different “future,” free from subordination, in favor of continuing to act “help[fully]” and subserviently. Read in this light, Michael K’s immediate retreat to the mountains must be understood as a response to his sharp awareness that the Visagie grandson “had tried to turn him into a body-servant,” revealing a political acuity and emotional sensitivity that is frequently missed in critical commentary (65).

In a similar illustration of the oppressive form taken by the discourse of help in apartheid South Africa, the Afrikaner Medical Officer at Kenilworth repeatedly entreats Michael K to eat despite the latter’s refusal. His increasingly desperate attempts to persuade Michael K to eat are, as his first-person narrative demonstrates, also increasingly personal:

[H]e lies near the door under his heap of blankets looking like a corpse, refusing to eat. With his stick-arm he pushes away the feed bottle. ‘It’s not my kind of food’ is all he will say.

‘What the hell *is* your kind of food?’ I ask him. ‘And why are you treating us like this? Don’t you see we are trying to help you?’ He gives me a serenely indifferent look that really rouses my ire. (145)

Like the Visagie grandson’s command to Michael K, the Medical Officer’s plea is predicated on the sense of a benevolent, Afrikaner “we” against an ungrateful, black “you.” He is angered by Michael K’s “serenely indifferent look” because he sees only the merits of his efforts “to help” his patient, as signaled in the hypersensitivity of his question, “why are you treating us like this?” So certain is he of his own good intentions—he is the typical Coetzeean figure of assumed liberal virtue—that he fails to recognize, as a reader might, that his offer of “help” is far from

unconditional.²⁷ “We give you a nice bed and lots of food,” he argues, “but we expect something in return” (140). In making his case, the Medical Officer uses the same rhetoric of “co-operation” as the Visagie grandson: “If you don’t co-operate you will go to a place that is a lot worse than this!” he threatens. “You must co-operate,” he entreats (139); “Why can’t you co-operate?” he laments (145). Like the grandson, the Medical Officer fails to recognize that the state’s conceptualization of help takes a far from reciprocal form; likewise, he fails to realize that what he “expects in return” is much more substantial than a simple discussion. Demanding that Michael K not only explain why he was on the farm but also narrate his philosophy of being and his “stake in the future,” the Medical Officer requires not a confession but full entry into his patient’s psyche (140).

Given these efforts at total control, arguably a metaphor for white South Africa’s conduct toward the country’s black population, Michael K’s refusal to eat can be seen as an act of non-compliance that echoes the multiple hunger strikes held by political prisoners throughout the apartheid era.²⁸ Unlike Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who describe Michael K as a “figure of absolute refusal” yet one whose “refusal in itself is empty” (203, 204), I suggest that the historical context of frequent hunger strikes means that, in this deeply political novel, Michael K’s abnegation is far from “empty.” Within the novel’s plot structure, too, his act of starvation seems to facilitate his emotional distance from the regime and its representatives, thus making possible his escape from Kenilworth and his achievement of relative freedom in Cape Town.

²⁷ On the Medical Officer’s role as a figure of the white liberal, see T. Wright (61), who associates the Medical Officer with both the Magistrate from *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Coetzee himself.

²⁸ On the effectiveness of these strikes, see Buntman, including 29, 26, 36-39, and 52-3. For example, “in February 1989 about 800 detainees began a coordinated, nationwide hunger strike that effectively forced the government to release them” (29). Buntman explains, “The early years, from 1962 or 1963 until approximately 1966, were harsh for the political prisoners. The crucial turning point in the gradual improvement of conditions was a mass hunger strike in about 1966 by almost the entire prisoner population of over a thousand men. Slowly brutality decreased, food improved, and cultural, academic, and political activities were organized by the prisoners” (36).

Whereas Hardt and Negri see Michael K as a symbol of passive resistance and a figure of “mere man and nothing more,” I read him as a complex character who actively rejects the subservient and dependent role assigned to him by the apartheid state (204). Clearly resonating with Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist,” *Life & Times of Michael K* charts its protagonist’s efforts to establish autonomy not as a virtuosic artisan of the body, as in Kafka’s short story, but as a political subject.

Particularly important to this novel’s political critique and its formulation of an ethically alternative mode of political association is the concept of friendship. For example, the stranger who generously invites Michael K to stay for the night in Laingsburg is unobtrusively described as “[h]is friend,” suggesting that his help is offered unconditionally and between equals. Similarly, Michael K is befriended outside the Stellenbosch hospital by a man who, without prompt and without expectation, “[falls] into conversation with him” (29). The evenness of the power relations between the two men is evident in the complementarity of their needs: the man has money while Michael K does not, so the man offers to buy lunch for his new friend; Michael K is easily mobile while the man has a damaged leg, so Michael K collects food for them both. Upon the latter’s return, the two men sit and eat together, immediately establishing a level of friendship where they forego small talk to share family secrets. Michael K experiences a profound affective response to the situation, as registered in the narrative observation, “the pie was so delicious that tears came to his eyes” (30). Even though this thought must to some extent reflect his alimentary pleasure, his tears suggestively seem to correspond more to the act of sharing a meal with a new friend than to the food he consumes, as the narrator devotes more time to describing the friendship than the food. The narrative is framed to imply that Michael K gets

joy as much from experiencing friendship, generosity, and sincerity as from the food in his undernourished stomach.

Friendship, of course, carries particular significance for the question of political association, having long been understood as inextricable from politics in general and democracy in particular. As Jacques Derrida demonstrates in *The Politics of Friendship*, both the Greek and the Christian canon associate it with “a certain politics, a certain type of democracy” (34). What is especially interesting about Derrida’s comprehensive theorization of friendship, developed most particularly through his reading of Aristotle, is the political significance that he ascribes to friendship’s “elective familiarity” (6). Whereas democracy is often conceived through familial tropes, especially the concept of fraternity, Derrida argues that it should be understood not as an inherited modality but as an elective one. Derrida’s aim is not “to wage war [on the family or the neighbor] . . . but to think and live a politics, a friendship, a justice which *begin* [sic] by breaking with their naturalness or their homogeneity, with their alleged place of origin” (105, emphasis in original). The relevance of such thought to apartheid South Africa is striking: the state was constructed upon a system of racial inheritance that presupposed the “naturalness” of white rule, and its attempts to secure racial “homogeneity” resulted in widespread poverty for the majority of its population. *Life & Times of Michael K*’s affirmation of elective association, demonstrated through formulations of friendship, help, and care, thus challenges the apartheid system of white familial and national inheritance of territory and power. If friendship can be understood as paradigmatic of the political, as Derrida argues, then its appearance in a novel addressing the need for radical political restructuring can likewise be understood as an engagement with the question of politics’ possible forms—with the question, that is, of whether a polity should be inherited or elective.

Fittingly, given the associations made by Derrida between friendship and politics, the most sustained exploration of friendship in *Life & Times of Michael K* takes place at Jakkalsdrif, during which time Michael K's friendship with Robert awakens his political consciousness and helps him to realize the structural nature of apartheid violations and state-sponsored oppression. Robert consistently supports Michael K through guidance, friendship, and hospitality: for example, when Michael K is struggling on his first day at work as a result of his recent malnourishment, Robert pauses to offer advice: " 'Before you break your back, my friend,' he said, 'remember what they pay you. . . . [D]on't kill yourself. Go and take a pee. You've been in hospital, you're not well' " (81). Not only does Robert offer his friendship explicitly through the appellation, "my friend" but he also demonstrates it in his gentle acknowledgment of Michael K's physical condition. While Michael K clearly has greater need for support than Robert, the relationship between the two men is by no means lacking in reciprocity. Valuing Robert's esteem, Michael K maintains the friendship in his own way, by giving "half his wages to Robert" in exchange for shared meals with the family (84). Michael K is demonstrably influenced by Robert, whose assessment of Jakkalsdrif's role in the state's racially discriminatory economy is the prompt for Michael K's burgeoning political awareness. After the local police captain's brother-in-law has worked the Jakkalsdrif labor force to the bone, and after Robert has explained the incident as part of systemic exploitation, Michael K finally recognizes the scale of suffering within his country. Grieving for a baby who has died unnecessarily, and whose cries he had only recently found exasperating, he wonders: "Is this my education?. . . . Am I at last learning about life here in a camp?" (89). Characteristically, Coetzee leaves the questions unanswered; nevertheless, the episode marks a notable shift in Michael K's political awareness.

As friendship thus bears plot significance as well as politico-philosophical resonance, it can be understood as correlating to the political reimagining that I have identified in *Life & Times of Michael K*. To an extent, the preceding examples simply affirm Coetzee's sense that friendship and tenderness persisted in South Africa even under apartheid. More substantially, though, the philosophical associations between friendship and democracy mean that the aforementioned incidents also gesture toward alternative ways of configuring the polis. In this regard, *Life & Times of Michael K* bears similar political-theoretical stakes to the form of political relation developed by Judith Butler across a number of her recent works. Particularly useful is an essay from *Undoing Gender*, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy," in which she argues that grief is not a privatizing modality, as is commonly thought, but one that "exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order" (19). Butler identifies grief as exemplary for understanding the form and functioning of both subjectivity and political community:

[G]rief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (19).

Butler's theorization of the affective polis is partly built on the commonplace assumption that, as feeling beings, we cannot fail to be affected by those around us, to be "in the thrall of our relations with others." In this regard, she simply affirms a supposition whose persistence in a long line of thought begins, in its modern instantiation, with Locke and Hobbes, whose own philosophical efforts were substantially directed at inoculating the polis from the risks assumed to inhere in affective contagion, as Chapter One explained. Provocatively, however, Butler also

identifies affective transmission as a model to be embraced rather than feared, extending it to the political domain in order to examine how “the ties we have to others . . . constitute a sense of self [and] compose who we are” (18-19). As such, her theorization of constitutive relationality offers a way to think about both subjectivity and political community. In addition, as grief exemplifies, we do not possess relationships with others; instead, “we are in the thrall” of those relations, as a consequence of which “the very ‘I’ is called into question” (19).

Butler’s argument that “grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others” suggests that “we”—a broad invocation of “we” the human—are absolutely dependent on the fact of our relationality. By extending her extant work on embodiment and subjectivity, notably inspired by philosophies of relationality in Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas, Butler thus finds a way to reject the logic of possession that frequently structures modern political thinking on both community and subjectivity, in the process exposing the fallacy of possessive and separatist logic. Inasmuch as Butler’s interruptive, affective theory of relation “challenge[s] the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control,” it engages in a very similar project to that which I have identified in *Life & Times of Michael K*, whose own challenge to apartheid’s separatist logic is established, in part, through revising the classic narrative of autobiographical self-possession found in the *Bildungsroman* genre and referenced in this novel’s title and trajectory. Michael K’s travels in the Western Cape chronicle a journey of literal and psychological development, providing him with an increased political awareness and a greater attunement to his own ways of being. In thus narrating a journey of personal development, *Life & Times of Michael K* shares certain features of the *Bildungsroman* form.²⁹ Equally, however, in presenting Michael K’s journey as the

²⁹ On the relation between *Life & Times of Michael K* and the *Bildungsroman*, see Head 5 and 93, and Timothy Wright 67.

metaphorical coming-into-being of a politicized self, rather than as the more straightforward process of personal maturation that is traditionally found in the *Bildungsroman*, Coetzee's novel also reorients the genre for a South African or postcolonialist context.³⁰ Like other postcolonial novels that selectively employ features of the *Bildungsroman*, *Life & Times of Michael K* both charts apartheid South Africa's struggle for sovereignty and narrates changes to Michael K's political subjectivity during the process of attaining independence.

In the context of Butler's formulation of a constitutively relational polis composed of singular "bodily being[s], already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own," it becomes clearer how Michael K can be read not as a figure of extreme isolation, and certainly not of monadic individualism, but of persistence in the face of systemic dehumanization (22). Marshaling Spinoza and Hegel, Butler describes persistence as follows:

To say that the desire to persist in one's own being depends on norms of recognition is to say that the basis of one's autonomy, one's persistence as an "I" through time, depends fundamentally on a social norm that exceeds the "I," that positions that "I" ec-statically, outside of itself in a world of complex and historically changing norms. . . . In our very ability to persist, we are dependent on what is outside of us, on a broader sociality, and this dependency is the basis of our endurance and survivability. (32)

In her conceptualization of "ec-stati[c]" subjectivity, Butler implicitly takes a cue from Georges Bataille, the twentieth-century French philosopher whose profound influence on Esposito and Nancy means that his ideas inevitably inform my own thought, too. As the above quotation records, Butler acknowledges that a subject's autonomy, its "persistence as an 'I' through time,"

³⁰ On the political capacities and proscriptions in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, see Joseph Slaughter, especially 24-29 and 205-269.

is made possible through its being part of “a broader sociality.” Independence and self-determination do not happen on their own, she claims, but “depen[d] fundamentally on a social norm that exceeds the ‘I,’ that positions the ‘I’ ec-statically.” In other words, constitutive relation derives not just from affect’s inevitability within the polis but also from subjectivity itself being relationally constituted. The non-bounded, non-possessive tenor of Butler’s formulation of subjectivity allows for relation; in turn, relation is what makes subjectivity possible. If the character of Michael K is read in light of Butler’s analysis, tempered by my contention that relationality is neither possessive nor static but simply constitutive, then his various retreats—to the Visagie farm, to the mountains, and finally to Cape Town—are neither a rejection of sociality *per se* nor an attempt to achieve radical autonomy, but a way of allowing the “I” to “endur[e] and surviv[e]” in a system that attempts to enforce its isolation and subjugation. By shrinking from dehumanization and dispossession, but never being shown to attain absolute isolation or, indeed, to ultimately desire it, Michael K persists as a figure of endurance under a racially repressive regime.

Similarly to Butler, *Life & Times of Michael K* delicately balances the protagonist’s impulse to isolation with the narrative insistence that he is, fundamentally, part of the polis. His understated friendships, as I have demonstrated, register both his capacity to sustain emotional attachments and this novel’s interest in the question of friendship as a democratic form. Further, he never fully retreats from association with others, but in fact both desires and thrives on warm, tender, and supportive relationships. Indeed, his first apparent withdrawal from sociality, when he establishes a home on the Visagie farm, itself signals the depth and extent of his emotional affiliations. Given that he arrives while still grieving for his recently deceased mother, scattering her ashes on the land to which she was attached and to which he also grows devoted, his

withdrawal might be seen as symptomatic of his capacity to establish profound bonds with others. Just as Butler argues that grief models our constitutive “ties” with other people, so *Life & Times of Michael K* affirms, in Michael K’s very withdrawal, relationality’s imperative status.

If “[i]n our very ability to persist, we are dependent on what is outside of us,” as Butler contends, then Michael K’s own dogged persistence can be understood not just in terms of his self-preservationist instincts during a period of intense political violence and civil unrest, but also in the sense of his continuation as an idiosyncratic being (23). Thus, his peculiarities and reclusiveness might be read not simply as personality attributes but as contributing to the balance this novel strikes between maintaining individuation and affirming relational community. As critics have observed, Michael K often seems a strange, otherworldly, and singular being: his frequent hunger makes him weave in and out of consciousness in mystical ecstasies; his reception by characters such as the Medical Officer as “not of our world” registers his assumed ethereality (142); and his near-nonhuman reclusion is established through his association with, among other creatures, a stick insect (149, 150) and an earthworm (182), as well as in his preferred habitation in caves or burrows.

In the most intriguing recent account of Michael K’s singularity, Nancy Armstrong argues that *Life & Times of Michael K* exemplifies a turn away from traditional novelistic form, in which an empathetic protagonist holds the reader’s attention through being a “norm-bearing individual,” toward a new modality that “[breaks] the circuit of attraction and recognition in which we want to participate whenever we pick up a novel” (443). In an increasing number of contemporary works, she argues, the protagonist seems peculiar, strange, and distant: “For lack of [a] basis for identification,” Armstrong contends, “we must ask who these protagonists are, and what compels us to engage with them. How does that engagement recalibrate the circuit of

feeling into which novels have routinely hailed readers?” (443). Reading Michael K as both singular and part of an excluded population, Armstrong argues that *Life & Times of Michael K*'s narrative innovations are crucial to theories of the novel: “Though his is a grotesquely disfigured face and profoundly solitary disposition, Michael K is never alone. . . . Whether he is eluding capture or incarcerated, the novel cannot recount the life and times of Michael K without telling the story of a population constituted as such by repeated dislocation” (460). It might also be added that Armstrong's acknowledgement of Michael K as both relational and singular provides unusual insight into the political stakes of this novel, especially its formulation of an alternate, electively structured, racially inclusive democracy.

Envisioning Democracy through Narratives of Elective Association

As my readings of Butler and Armstrong suggest, the form of political community configured in *Life & Times of Michael K* directly contradicts the structure of the polity under apartheid, as it allows both self-determination and political participation, both individual sovereignty and political rights. Apartheid South Africa sustained, through its racial exclusions, a form of sovereignty that was vertical, hierarchical, and hereditary; by contrast, *Life & Times of Michael K* imagines a system that is lateral, democratic, and elective. The latter mode of political being is registered in the unconventional formulations of relation between Michael K and his mother, between Michael K and the farm, and between Michael K and the outcasts of the novel's final section. Notably, these aforementioned relationships can all be understood through the lens of inheritance, an optic that applies both literally and figuratively to Coetzee's novel and the South Africa that it fictionalizes. In the mid-1980s when *Life & Times of Michael K* was written and published, the question of who would inherit the nation was of particular urgency: while the ruling National Party meant to maintain white control, the anti-apartheid movement aimed to

force a transition to racial equality and full democracy. Effectively, anti-apartheid activists were calling for an end to exclusive white inheritance of the nation, while the state and its supporters wanted to maintain the sovereign power that they regarded as their birthright. *Life & Times of Michael K* engages in diverse ways with the issue of inheritance. Most obviously, Michael K is disinterested in procreation. As is frequently acknowledged, he has no progeny but only pumpkins that he terms his “children,” (63, 101) and, in a direct subversion of the apartheid state and the patriarchal ideals upon which it is founded, he has “no desire to father” (104). In less overt ways, too, Coetzee’s novel is invested in the question of inheritance: in contradistinction to Afrikaner nationalist ideological formations, it evinces a form of sociality that is matrilineal rather than patrilineal; it puts little stock in ownership and possession, as the farm episodes reveal, instead affirming connection with place and environment; and it avows elective forms of social and political life that impugn the reproductive basis of territorial inheritance that is modeled in the structure of Afrikaner farming families and, more broadly, the apartheid state.

Much of the disruption offered by this novel to apartheid political and social systems occurs through Michael K’s peculiarities and Coetzee’s similarly distanced, austere prose. Through its linguistic austerity, *Life & Times of Michael K* constructs the kind of loose association within a polity that simultaneously balances self-determination and political participation, singularity and relationality. From an aesthetic perspective, Michael K’s otherworldliness derives at least as much from this novel’s austere prose and its expression through a third-person narrator as from his putative character traits. His seeming peculiarity is largely established through his thoughts being expressed through a mediating element, whether that is an implied narrator, his own voice as refracted through the third-person narrator, or, as in the novel’s second section, the Kenilworth Medical Officer. Consequently, Michael K’s story is

neither cohesive nor singular, much as the novel's title and its missing demonstrative suggests: this is not "The" tale of Michael K's life, but simply *Life & Times*. As is implied in a metatextual observation near the novel's end, Michael K is confined by his character construction: "Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. . . . They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages" (181). The reader might interpret Michael K's frustrated observation as a commentary on the political incapacitation of black South Africans under apartheid, or on the political uses to which the genre of autobiography is often put. We might go further, though, and identify his distanced, otherworldly characterization as integral to this novel's aesthetic reimagining of political form.

Michael K's oddness derives in part from his aesthetic distance from the reader, conveyed not only through narrative voice but also through syntax and tone. While Coetzee's writing is famously spartan and measured, it is especially so in this novel, even when Michael K is presented as happy:

As he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for food grew slighter and slighter. Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die. What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust. (101)

The shortness of these sentences, and the presence of only one adjective ("barely," fittingly enough) suggests an emotional detachment that is belied by Michael K's pleasure in being back at the Visage farm and growing his own food once more. In the following-but-one paragraph, for example, itself preceded by a paragraph of only one sentence, we learn that "he felt a deep joy in his physical being. . . . It seemed possible to fly" (102). Through the starkness of the prose and

the narrative's distancing effect, the community or polity established in *Life & Times of Michael K* is bound loosely, if resolutely; it thus remains constitutively related without becoming homogeneous.

Michael and Anna K's relationship is the locus for this novel's rejection of patriarchal systems of family and political life. As figured in Michael K's own familial relationships and his education at Huis Norenius boarding school, strict and punitive authority is interpreted as male while female authority is viewed as caring and respectful:

My mother was the one whose ashes I brought back, he thought, and my father was Huis Norenius. My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, . . . and the woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we put on our khaki shirts and our khaki shorts and our black socks and our black shoes and marched two abreast to the church on Papegaai Street to be forgiven. They were my father, and my mother is buried and not yet risen. (105)

The final sentence of the above excerpt suggests that *Life & Times of Michael K* consciously envisions a new political order for South Africa, one that inverts the existing system just as Anna K's figuration as Christ—as being “buried and not yet risen”—inverts both the Christian origin story and apartheid South Africa's white, patriarchal order. Michael K honors his mother's wishes by bringing her ashes back to the farm where she was born, but he rejects fatherhood and its associated symbols of male authority, including “rules,” punishments, and the militaristic “khaki” uniforms he and his cohort wore to church in order to be cast as sinners.

Coetzee's critique of stereotypically and aggressively male attributes not only rejects some of Afrikaner nationalism's central tenets but also forms part of this novel's concern with

the question of inheritance. In this context, Michael K's awareness that "it was bad to be prodigal" offers more than just an example of Coetzee's wry humor, Michael K being the extreme opposite of prodigal in his consumption of meager food and resources (60). Recalling as well the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Michael K's assessment of the immorality of excess registers this novel's deep concern with inheritance. As is well known, the Parable of the Prodigal Son narrates a chastened son's return to the fold after hedonistically losing his share of the family fortune. *Life & Times of Michael K* makes multiple allusions to this parable: the goat that Michael K inexpertly slaughters recalls the goat butchered by the son's father to celebrate his return, for example, while Michael K's starvation echoes the famine suffered by the prodigal son before his welcome return to the family fold. These Biblical allusions resonate beyond an ironic reference to food scarcity during guerilla warfare, not least because the concept of inheritance is similarly interrogated in other episodes of the novel.

The question of inheritance and its relation to black political emancipation is also addressed in the novel's largely ignored third and final section, where the form of association established between Michael K and a group of Cape Town misfits serves to illuminate this novel's political stakes. Upon arrival back in Cape Town after escaping from Kenilworth, Michael K is befriended by a pimp who brings him into the fold of his reconstituted family, one based on chosen affiliations rather than generational ties. Guarding the doorway of a beachfront public lavatory, the man describes his elective family: " 'That one is my sister,' . . . indicating the woman in the water. 'The one in there'—he pointed over his shoulder—'is also my sister. Plenty of sisters I have. A big family' " (173). Given the wry smile with which this statement is delivered, the assertion that he has "plenty of sisters . . . [a] big family" seems at once too expansive to be biologically true and expansive enough to imply a reformulated familial

community, one whose stable functioning defies statutes attempting to segregate the population by genetics and formalize individual and territorial inheritance through race. Admittedly, the precise nature of the relationship between the group is left unclear, as its members change their names daily in order to evade the authorities: “‘His name is December,’ says one of the women when Michael K asks. ‘That is the name on his card. Tomorrow maybe he has a different name. A different card, a different name, for the police, so that they mix him up’” (178). Thus, this small group of Capetonians, comprising a man, two women, and one woman’s baby, is structured very differently to the nuclear family that the apartheid state attempted to manufacture among black communities. Under apartheid, housing policies favored a Western domestic model, assuming that nuclear families would make for quieter, more subservient, more “civilized” subjects.³¹ In this historical context, the group’s seemingly elective affiliations serve to reject the familial model of inheritance encouraged by the apartheid state, instead affirming alternative types of elective association.

While Michael K soon veers away from the group, realizing that they see him as “an object of charity,” their laterally and electively reconstituted sociality seemingly proves influential (181). Upon returning to the room that his mother had inhabited in Cape Town, and after thinking, with relief, “I am back,” he sees that another person has set up home, prompting thoughts of his own elected community (180). Imagining the room’s usual inhabitant as “the kind of old man the police ignored,” Michael K plans a return to the Karoo: “They could share a bed tonight; it had been done before; in the morning, at first light, they could go out searching . . . for an abandoned barrow; and if they were lucky the two of them could be spinning along the high road by ten o’clock” (183). Just as Michael K had previously set out for the Karoo with his

³¹ See Jason Hickel.

mother in “an abandoned barrow,” he now desires to leave with a stranger in the same way. The change in his thinking is substantial: at the beginning of the novel, he spent time with only his mother, and for the majority of his time away from Cape Town, he lived a life of extreme isolation. By the novel’s end, however, he hopes to travel and set up home with a new companion, having learnt the value of freedom of association.

The conclusion to *Life & Times of Michael K* turns on the protagonist’s envisioned new life in the Karoo with his unknown associate, an imagined future that effectively rewrites his recent history. This novel’s final scenes have generally been addressed through their suggestive closing conceit: a teaspoon that Michael K imagines using on the farm, which symbolically ties the novel’s ending to the opening episode, when Anna K fed her infant son milk from a teaspoon. I would argue, however, that this scene cannot be fully understood without recognizing that the reclusive Michael K seriously considers establishing a life with another person. In response to his imagined partner’s possible concerns about finding water, Michael K envisions using a teaspoon and a ball of string to slowly but ingeniously draw water from an underground spring. Much has been made of Michael K’s painstaking and impractical method of collecting drinking water: “and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live” (184). Yet, while the teaspoon’s evocative imagery has garnered substantial critical commentary, no attention has been given to what is, arguably, this closing episode’s crucial feature: this imagined form of living involves two people, not just the solitary protagonist. Much like the form of reconstituted family practiced by the small group in Cape Town, the relation between Michael K and his anonymous friend is both elective and a disruption to heteronormative familial forms. Michael K’s vision thus registers a very different formulation of social and political relation than that found in the apartheid state, one that has

been gradually established over the course of the narrative and that culminates in this final moment.

The import of this novel's closing scene is affirmed in the way it recalls an earlier fantasy narrated by the Kenilworth Medical Officer, one that, in retrospect, constitutes his most incisive assessment of Michael K. Bearing his own misgivings about the war, and fearing that his colleague, Noël, is drinking too much, the Medical Officer realizes that it might be time to leave Kenilworth and, indeed, the Cape Peninsula:

Perhaps the two of us should take a leaf out of Michael's book and go on a trip to one of the quieter parts of the country, the obscurer reaches of the Karoo for example, and set up house there, two gentleman deserters of modest means and sober habits. How to get as far as Michaels did without being picked up is the main difficulty. . . . I doubt we will ever look as nondescript as Michaels. (160)

Like Michael K's dream of a new life, where he avoids detection by "look[ing] . . . nondescript"—that is, by not conforming to strictly policed racial categories of personhood—the Medical Officer fantasizes about "set[ting] up house" with another man. While neither Michael K's nor the Medical Officer's fantasy is strictly sexualized, each substantially undermines the normative model of heterosexual domesticity endorsed by the apartheid state.

In the novel's concluding vision, Michael K lives no longer alone but with a male companion; he tends land not to lay claim to territorial sovereignty but only to grow food for sustenance; and he dwells on a family property that had symbolized white, Afrikaner power but that is now tended by two non-propertied men, at least one of whom is black. As these final episodes thus demonstrate, *Life & Times of Michael K* has quietly sketched out an alternative mode of political association to that found in the apartheid state. Configuring a loose model of

non-dominative relation that firmly endorses constitutive sociality as both unavoidable and ethically important, *Life & Times of Michael K* presents a version of political community that maintains singularity while rejecting both the bounded form of Afrikaner subjectivity and the systemic black dispossession caused by the state's racially exclusionary legislation.

CHAPTER FOUR Transformative Extravagance in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

At the heart of the foregoing discussions of postcolonial literary aesthetics has been a difficult question: how might a new, non-exclusionary, democratic form of the polis come into being after decolonization? Channeled through the lens of literary analysis, this question has little to do with the pragmatics of instituting massive political change in the transition from colonial statehood to independent sovereignty. Instead, the interest lies in how literary, aesthetic, and imaginative modalities might themselves contribute to the process of transforming political thought. As I have already suggested, the proposition that the aesthetic bears politically innovative capacities requires an attentiveness as much to political form as to its literary variant. From a formal perspective, different types of political association can be seen to take correspondingly distinct aesthetic styles: the autocratic might be described as conceptually self-enclosed and self-contained whereas the democratic can be framed as open and relational. Similarly, in a literary context, democracy's premise on participation and equality is commonly represented through tropes that evoke these same ideals. The relation between political and aesthetic form here described is exemplified in postcolonial literature, the result of this field's common concern with the transformation of political community following decolonization. Thus, postcolonial novels that reject the top-down, externally imposed, exclusionary form of colonial rule frequently describe their desired democratic alternative through a connective aesthetic style corresponding to democracy's participatory premise. Importantly, exploring the postcolonial polis through literary means offers more than just an imaginative representation of how things might be or could have been; in addition, literary texts can consider the process of transformation *qua*

transformation, thereby enabling more expansive, innovative ways of conceptualizing new forms of political community and facilitating the very transformation of thought.

In this final literary chapter, I turn to examine the democratic imaginings and aesthetic experimentation of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Set right at the cusp of Nigerian independence, Okri's novel is more directly concerned with the question of the postcolonial polity's possible form than either of the two literary texts discussed thus far, probably a consequence of its considering a different temporal moment in the decolonizing process. While Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* takes place some time after decolonization and J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is set during ongoing white minority rule, *The Famished Road* deals with the point of transition to independence when the question of the polity's form and future was of utmost urgency. Notably, *The Famished Road* is also more aesthetically and imaginatively exuberant than either Roy or Coetzee's novels, a distinction corresponding to its forlorn commitment to Nigeria's political transformation: at the time of this novel's publication, more than three decades after independence, any hope for an equitable and democratic postcolonial society remained largely unfulfilled. At one and the same time, therefore, *The Famished Road* consistently addresses expressly political questions while also remaining profoundly engaged with the aesthetic concerns of change, transformation, and flux. Given its mixture of unabashed aestheticism and political evangelism, *The Famished Road* presents an exemplary opportunity to reconsider the relationship between politics and aesthetics in general, and postcolonial literature's reimagining of political form in particular.

The Famished Road's commitment to the imagining of equitable political community is manifest through its extravagant, excessive, and exuberant aesthetics. Through stylistic techniques coincident with my formulation of aesthetic impropriety, Okri poetically constructs a

democratic polis that is neither exploitative nor possessive. In its frequent synesthesia, innumerable ontological relocations, open and relational textual schema, tropes of possibility, and decidedly exuberant tone, *The Famished Road* establishes an immersive, egalitarian collectivity that is missing from the actually existing Nigerian polis. Whereas *The God of Small Things* is most notable for its relational mode and *Life & Times of Michael K* for its austere intimate prose, *The Famished Road*'s imaginative excess establishes its aesthetic impropriety. The trope of "excess" is mine rather than Okri's, usefully registering both the material profligacy that forms the object of this novel's political critique and the stylistic extravagance through which the ruling elite's immoderation is attacked. The types of literary techniques that I outline here have certainly been the focus of critical attention, yet such efforts have ordinarily connected *The Famished Road*'s style not to its political critique but to creative naivety,¹ magical realism,² or indigenous aesthetics.³ The first two of these interpretive paradigms carry problematic implications: the supposed naivety of *The Famished Road*'s fantastical elements is easily challenged by addressing the novel's stylistic complexity and political commentary; describing the text as magical realist, meanwhile, exemplifies a reductive and generalizing process in which non-realist postcolonial novels are frequently grouped together under this term, in the process causing their depoliticization.⁴ In the geographic dislocation caused by magical realism's overly

¹ Adewale Maja-Pearce describes *The Famished Road* as "a tedious exercise in the fantastic for its own sake" (102-3); Derek Wright ultimately indicts the novel for its "bland metaphysical idealism," especially its faith that "the human spirit can somehow reclaim and repossess the world by inwardly 'redreaming' it" (160, 159-60); Andrew Smith decries Okri's "romantic privileging" of the imagination over the material (8); and Douglas McCabe identifies this novel with New Age spirituality.

² Brenda Cooper discusses *The Famished Road* in her book-length study of magical realism in West African fiction; see, esp. 67-114;

³ Margaret Cezair-Thompson argues that Okri's novel draws substantially on Yoruba mythology, rewriting some of its symbols to move "beyond the crises of history" (43). Derek Wright similarly relates descriptions and metaphors of interconnection to "the Yoruba worldview" (150).

⁴ For an incisive articulation of the limits and possibilities of the magical realist paradigm in Okri more generally, see Jennifer Wenzel, whose term "petro-magic-realism" bears "[the] potential to complicate and historicise the

expansive application, literary texts are unmoored from their historico-material location and politics is, as a consequence, also displaced. The broad use of magical realism as a rubric for the postcolonial also veers uncomfortably toward orientalism, implying that postcolonial authors incline away from the rational structures supposedly underpinning realist convention. By contrast, framing Okri's literary style in terms of aesthetic impropriety exposes the conceptual relationship not only between the greed of the colonial elite and the dispossessed masses, but, crucially, between the excesses of the nation's postcolonial leaders and their diametric failure of imagination regarding the necessary restructuring of the polis.

In framing its analysis through theories of democracy as well as radical aesthetics, this chapter both illuminates *The Famished Road's* political stakes and suggests the relevance of formal literary analysis to theorizing political community. Putting Okri's political commitments and aesthetic experimentation into productive conversation, I argue that *The Famished Road's* aesthetics, like literary language more generally, are not just fundamental to this novel's political interventions but are, in themselves, generative: that the form of this novel's experimental and highly elaborate literary aesthetics creates the momentum that establishes its intervention. If a radically democratic political community is not fixed but in constant movement, as the political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, suggests, then *The Famished Road's* aesthetics serve to establish the requisite sense of process and flux that facilitates the imagining of a just political community. In its unapologetic aestheticism, therefore, *The Famished Road* participates in the very process of reconfiguring the postcolonial Nigerian polis, providing an exemplary opportunity to invigorate, on the one hand, critical thought on community's form and process, and, on the other, how literary words intervene.

empty globalism of the label *magical realism*, in which the magical might be anything unfamiliar to a European or American reader" (456).

Extravagance and Extra-vagrancy: Challenging Dispossession in *The Famished Road*

The Famished Road charts Nigeria's coming-into-being as a postcolonial nation, retrospectively delineating the build-up to independence on October 1, 1960.⁵ Loosely located in the predominately Yoruba region of southwestern Nigeria, Okri's novel follows the epic wanderings of its narrator, Azaro, an *abiku* or spirit-child whose movement between the worlds of the spirits and the living awakens him to political consciousness as well as to human affects and attachments.⁶ Azaro's desire to break his binding pact with his spirit companions and remain in the world of the living means he must avoid succumbing to the cycle of death and rebirth by which *abiku* are ordinarily afflicted, a task that his spirit companions make immensely difficult through their endless machinations to draw him back to their domain (487). His frequent movement between worlds, signaling his psychological and ontological state of flux, is mirrored in the substantial amount of time he spends wandering within his community, particularly between the market, the forest, and the bar of Madame Koto, a prominent local business owner. To the relief of Azaro and his parents, "Mum" and "Dad," Madame Koto offers Azaro her patronage, thereby lessening the burden of the family's poverty. Recognizing Azaro's unbroken contact with the spirit world and convinced that he will bring her good luck and prosperity,

⁵ The trajectory followed by *The Famished Road* is part of a specific literary history, as Simon Gikandi observes: "From its very beginning, African literature in the twentieth century was obsessed and haunted by the ideology of the modern. It was concerned with a discourse of conversion in which the coming into being of the African as a modern subject was the inevitable subject of literary culture in general and narrative in particular" (7).

⁶ The *abiku* is the Yoruba equivalent to the Igbo *ogbanje*, commanding greater critical attention than any other aspect of *The Famished Road*. Elleke Boehmer situates Okri's use of the trope within postcolonial Nigerian literary history, identifying it as part of a set of "generative images" that originate with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Douglas McCabe laments Okri's departure from a rigidly anthropological understanding of *abiku* in Yoruba mythology, while Esther de Bruijn delivers an impassioned and convincing riposte to McCabe's literalist analysis. John C. Hawley describes the *abiku* motif as postmodern, while Ato Quayson reads it as ethnographic and a way to critique the postcolonial Nigerian state's failures. See also Laura M. Smalligan, esp. 359, and Maik Nwosu 102.

Madame Koto asks him to visit her bar each day after school; in return, she gives him food and provides financial support for his family. The arrangement seems to benefit Madame Koto, who grows increasingly rich and powerful as the novel progresses, the result of both her assumed alliance with supernatural beings (she is deemed a witch by most of the local population) and her acknowledged collusion with corrupt politicians.⁷ The benefits for Azaro are less assured, as the lure of Madame Koto's bar for a multitude of spirits makes it a prominent site for their attempts at abduction. While Madame Koto has grown irredeemably corrupt by the novel's end, Azaro has become ever more attached to the world of both hardship and beauty in which he lives, unwilling to leave either his parents or his wider community for the relative comfort of the spirit-world.

Set in the period immediately preceding decolonization but published in 1991 after thirty-one years of state corruption and political violence, *The Famished Road* offers both an indictment of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria's many failures and an affirmation of the country's future possibilities. Dealing at length with the effects of economic exploitation and income inequality upon the nation's substantially impoverished population, Okri's novel connects Nigeria's economy to the extractive system established under British colonial rule. As historians Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton explain, British efforts to "make the colonial endeavor self-sustaining . . . and profitable" were achieved by "creating an extractive economy based on the export of raw materials and the import of finished goods and luxury items" (111). The imbalanced political economy established in colonial Nigeria, which "favor[ed] the interests of the few at the expense of the many," is integral to both *The Famished Road*'s plot and its critique of twentieth-century Nigeria's enduring poverty (D. Smith 429). Historians and political

⁷ Ato Quayson, "Harvesting" 144; Anthony K. Appiah 146.

economists cite a number of reasons for Nigeria's continued economic inequality, including the regionalism established under British colonial rule;⁸ the consequences of resource extraction for the local economy;⁹ the collaboration of African businesses with foreign firms;¹⁰ the siphoning of public funds into private bank accounts through widespread political corruption;¹¹ and the reverberations of political and governmental instability.¹² On this latter point, as *The Famished Road* repeatedly emphasizes, Nigeria's experience of economic injustice is bound up with its prolonged political instability. In the decades following independence, Nigeria has experienced a devastating civil war, in which 2-3 million people died (1967-1970); successive military coups, resulting in extended military rule (1966-1979 and 1983-1999); state corruption on a massive scale, among civilian and military governments alike; quotidian political violence, especially under military regimes; and endemic poverty amid extreme wealth, despite plentiful natural resources and the infrastructural potential for rapid economic development.¹³ Since the reinstatement of civilian government in 1999, many of the country's most egregious failings have been addressed: Nigeria has transitioned to a democracy of sorts, political violence has significantly decreased, and while the majority of its citizens still live in poverty, the country's economic decline has slowed.¹⁴ Today, Nigeria is a relatively stable, relatively prosperous country. When *The Famished Road* was published, however, the failures of the independence

⁸ Paul Lubeck 5-10; Adamolekun 2-3; Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T. Suberu 16.

⁹ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton 110-135, 141-143; Frederick Cooper 96-97.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Bayart 100.

¹¹ Falola and Heaton 183-190; Bayart 73-4, 79.

¹² Ladipo Adamolekun 5-6.

¹³ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, particularly chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 (126-242). Falola and Heaton provide a thorough overview of Nigeria's history before, during, and after colonialism. See also Cooper 91-132, and Adamolekun, particularly 2-3 and 5-6.

¹⁴ Falola and Heaton 209-242.

period remained acute, as the novel's relentless focus on poverty, corruption, and political violence would attest.

In line with Nigeria's recent political history, *The Famished Road* condemns both the colonial regime and the postcolonial neoliberal state for perpetuating inherited structures of economic oppression. On one of his journeys within the city, for example, Azaro comes across a depot where, unbeknown to him, his father has been temporarily employed. Dad and his fellow workers carry heavy sacks of salt, cement, and garri (tapioca) on their backs, supporting the particular system of import and export developed by the colonial state.¹⁵ The workers are physically exhausted and psychologically demoralized: in both literal and metaphorical terms, the “absurd weight” of their bags “crushed their heads [and] compressed their necks, giving them “expressions . . . so contorted that they seemed almost inhuman” (144). Azaro is horrified by what he witnesses: “[I] saw a lot of men carrying loads, carrying monstrous sacks, as if they were damned, or as if they were working out an abysmal slavery” (144). As Azaro suggests, the laborers accept the “abysmal” working conditions of their informal colonial “slavery” because their poverty leaves them with little choice. The seeming “inhuman[ity]” and “monstro[sity]” of the laborers' bodies thus registers not only their physical labor's extreme form but also the ideological presuppositions of the colonial endeavor and its accompanying economic system. Significantly, Okri is equally condemnatory of the postcolonial Nigerian state: the rising elite “sprays money at parties and celebrations,” as some of the neighborhood women observe, revealing its profit from the region's exploitative and extroversive economy (105). The quotidian nature of the politicians', chiefs', and businessmen's casual disposal of funds is conveyed in the nonchalance of the women's response to this display of needless extravagance: affectively

¹⁵ See Falola 414-415; and Falola and Heaton 26 and 143.

unruffled, despite themselves living in poverty, they discuss the event in “voices low and sweet as they chatted away down the street” (105).

The material extravagance of the rising postcolonial elite is distilled in the figure of Madame Koto, whose size and stature expand over the course of *The Famished Road* in synchronicity with her amassed wealth. Donning increasingly elaborate clothing, she wears “fantastic dresses of silk and lace, edged with turquoise filigree, . . . expensive bangles of silver and gold . . . and necklaces of pearl and jade” (373-4). As she grows richer and more powerful, her presence is ever more loudly announced: in the symbolic conflation between her exaggerated body and mounting wealth, “[h]er eyelashes became more defined,” her “high-heeled shoes” make her taller, and even her “increasingly pronounced limp” commands attention (374). Holding no qualms about advertising her prosperity, Madame Koto accumulates wealth at the expense of others: as Azaro avers, it is obvious that “she prospered, while the rest of us suffered” (374). Clearly the beneficiary of an economic regime in which a select few profit at the expense of the many, Madame Koto grows increasingly unpopular. When she visits Dad while he recovers from his epic battle with the spirit, “Yellow Tyger,” her attempts at goodwill are met by the gathered family and friends with silent hostility, not least because “[h]er perfume filled the room and her expensive clothes illuminated everyone’s poverty” (360). Her very presence thus draws attention to the region’s pronounced inequality: just as her outfit reveals the disproportionate division of wealth between she and her neighbors, so her perfume’s expansive range signals not only her overbearing presence but also the influence she derives from her economic stature. Her wealth leads many to associate her with witchcraft and ritual sacrifice, and she becomes, “in the collective eyes of the people, a fabulous and monstrous creation” (374).¹⁶

¹⁶ For an illuminating anthropological analysis of the epistemological linkages between witchcraft and economics in modern Africa, see Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders 1-27. As Moore and Sanders argue, “[a] large body of

While Madame Koto increases her wealth through modernizing her business methods and cultivating a global entrepreneurial outlook, she also demonstrates a personal and commercial commitment to the Nigerian nation: like *The Famished Road*, albeit to different ends, she sustains both local and global allegiances. In her patronage of Azaro and other members of the local community, she preserves the clientelist economy traditionally used in many Nigerian societies and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In a clientelist system, a patron supports any number of clients and is afforded social and political prestige in return.¹⁷ Consequently, as Daniel Jordan Smith explains, “the structure of inequality in Nigeria, in which the affective and moral obligations of kinship intertwine with the inequalities and reciprocities of patron-clientilism, tends to link rather than oppose ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ ” (434). In this context, her patronage of Azaro is not entirely self-serving, as it might seem from the perspective of a liberal democratic system, but instead establishes a web of reciprocity that supports community cohesion. In her role as patron, Madame Koto provides Azaro with food and drink as payment for his presence at her bar (85); she gives money to Mum, via Azaro, when she knows the family has used up its last resources (371); she tends to Mum (55-59) and Dad (403-407) in their respective periods of near-fatal illness; and she offers Azaro an apprenticeship of sorts, educating him in Nigeria’s economic and political systems through his involvement with her business (75-6).¹⁸ Madame Koto is also said to sustain numerous other patron-client relationships: “Some said

evidence from Africa suggests that witchcraft and other occult practices are intimately bound up with people’s ideas about production, exchange and consumption” (15). With regard to *The Famished Road*, see Quayson, “Harvesting”: “[T]he commercial progress women make is seen as linked to witchcraft” (145).

¹⁷ According to economic historians Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, clientilism “has allowed [African political elites] to respond to the demands for protection, assistance and aid made by the members of their constituency communities [sic] in exchange for the recognition of the political prominence and social status which, as patrons, they crave” (14). See also Richard A. Joseph, esp. 55-68, for his description of Nigeria’s patron-client relationship as “prebendalism”; and Jean-François Bayart, 78 (on prebendalism and its theorists) and 218-222 (on clientilist networks).

¹⁸ The extent of Madame Koto’s support for her impoverished neighbors is little commented upon; an exception is Quayson, “Harvesting” 145-6.

she wasn't very rich, that she had too many people to support. Others maintained that she had so much money she could feed the entire ghetto for five years" (374-5). Within both the economic and narrative structures of *The Famished Road*, therefore, Madame Koto is inextricably connected to Azaro and the rest of the local community. In this sense, her increasing disregard for the patrons that she had initially supported, marked in her increasing material extravagance, is a direct betrayal of her local community and its modes of association.

It is against the political economy epitomized by Madame Koto and her associates that *The Famished Road* delineates its alternative form of the polis and makes its most provocative literary maneuvers. In its constant movement, relational structure, and extravagant aesthetics, *The Famished Road* establishes an equitable, democratic alternative to Nigeria's asymmetric and exclusionary economy. The alternative form of the polis constructed in *The Famished Road* is barely described in any explicit terms, so it must be defined largely against what it is not: it is not economically unjust, violent, or self-serving; it is not, unlike the rising nationalist elite and the political state they symbolize, greedy and profligate. Instead, it is a non-exclusionary political community that does justice to the experiences of the poor and the dispossessed, providing hope for an easier and less exhausting life and meeting the basic needs of all of its members. To an extent, the polity adumbrated in *The Famished Road* is a decidedly national community: the "we" and the "us" invoked by Azaro and others most certainly signifies Nigeria, evidenced not least in Dad's allegorical assertion: "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain" (478). Yet, even as this novel's newly imagined polity takes a specifically Nigerian form, it is not remotely insular but is instead African and cosmopolitan.¹⁹ Thus, the narrative's cognitive framework is always "the world";

¹⁹ On cosmopolitanism in *The Famished Road*, see Esther de Bruijn, particularly 179-184, and Brenda Cooper 98-99 and 106-108. De Bruijn is supportive of the cosmopolitan ideal (180-181), especially as it is conceptualized by

Azaro's friend, Jeremiah, is proud of his role as an "International Photographer"; and the group of beggars that Dad takes on as his followers are described as his "world constituency" (419). In its cosmopolitan outlook, *The Famished Road* situates its critique of wealth inequality and economic dispossession within a vast framework of colonial and neoliberal exploitation.

Even more broadly, *The Famished Road* avers a humanist commitment that is almost cosmic in scale. Toward the novel's end, for example, Azaro experiences a hallucinatory epiphany:

The wind of several lives blew into my eyes. The lives stretched far back and when I saw the great king of the spirit-world staring at me through the open doors of my eyes I knew that many things were calling me. It is probably because we have so many things in us that community is so important. (446)

Azaro's extraordinary capacity as an *abiku* to feel "[t]he wind of several lives" and hear "many things calling [him]" registers the contradistinctive structure of *The Famished Road's* imagining of political association to the insular form taken by the colonial and postcolonial Nigerian polity. Affirming the importance of a diverse political community in which all constituents are welcomed and involved, Azaro's sensory ability to experience the lives of multitudes suggests that the *abiku* motif bears specific political implications in this novel. Through Azaro, *The Famished Road* identifies the potential vastness and variety of political association, and, as such, the necessary expansiveness of the polity. Just as Azaro's non-possessive understanding of his own subjectivity is indexed in his realization that "we have so many things in us," so this novel's imaginatively non-possessive polis is signaled in its substantial cast, constant activity, and sensory profusion.

Appiah; Cooper, meanwhile, remains concerned that cosmopolitanism is inattentive to local experience and to systems of oppression (31, 106-108).

Given that, as an *abiku*, Azaro feels himself part of a community of beings in the broadest possible sense, he both models and facilitates the affective, sensory, and cognitive extravagance that operates in *The Famished Road* as an aesthetic counterpoise to the rising elite's material immoderation. Azaro's extraordinary capacities are reinforced and explained through the novel's extravagant aesthetics, not least its linguistic excess, sensory abundance, and associative, episodic structure. Teeming with minor characters, overflowing with sensory descriptions, and filled with words, *The Famished Road* makes its extravagant style crucial to understanding its narrative events and political stakes. The significance of aesthetic excess to the novel as a whole is registered in one crucial episode, whose own importance is marked through references to Okri's literary forebears, Chinua Achebe and Amos Tutuola. Azaro is walking in the forest following an altercation with one of Madame Koto's patrons when he "emerg[es] into another world" of mythical and literary substance, where he comes across "old bicycles resting on trees" (242). Azaro's encounter is reminiscent of a pivotal episode in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, recognized as postcolonial Nigeria's most influential novel, in which the appearance of a white man on a bicycle, or "iron horse," augurs the demise of traditional Igbo society and its accompanying juridicopolitical structures (138). Similarly, Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, commonly identified as the first Nigerian novel, is evoked both in plot detail and narrative style when Azaro chances upon a palm tree: "There was a tapper's gourd at its root and I was thirsty and drank of the new wine" (243). As well as making a claim for Okri's presence in the Nigerian literary canon, this scene's literary-historical significance registers its importance to *The Famished Road*. As Azaro explains through an offhand remark, this episode provides a way of reading the novel itself: "Darkness had grown over the forest. The noises of insects and birds had diminished. . . . Gradually the trees, the clearing, the open spaces, became obscure. Ordinary

things became riddles. In the obscurity of things I saw what was different (246). Like Azaro, who identifies change not through overt exposition but through obscurity, this novel demands looking “[i]n the obscurity of things” as part of the process of interpretation.

Azaro’s *abiku* status also makes him central to *The Famished Road*’s excessive, extravagant aesthetics because it necessitates his constant movement between worlds, and thus functions as a kind of vagrancy. Bearing particular pertinence to the colonial context, vagrancy laws were historically used to force colonial populations into wage labor, just as they have long been used to control the poor in Europe, where they originated in the Middle Ages. As Paul Ocobock describes in his introduction to an edited collection on vagrancy legislation, these laws “seek to describe poor, unemployed, and highly mobile people,” achieving an expansive scope through their purposeful vagueness (1). Indeed, as Ocobock argues, “Vagrancy laws are unique; while most crimes are defined by actions, vagrancy laws make no specific action or inaction illegal. Rather the laws are based on personal condition, state of being, and social and economic status” (1). Much as Ocobock describes, Azaro is “poor” and “highly mobile,” and thus susceptible to the kinds of restrictions imposed by colonial police forces to control impoverished populations.²⁰ Moreover, like vagrancy laws, which “make no specific action or inaction illegal,” Azaro’s own “personal condition” and “state of being” as an *abiku* is a more profound explanatory category within *The Famished Road* than his actions or those of others, which are often difficult to parse or enumerate.

Further, inasmuch as Azaro travels both locally and between worlds, his vagrancy is “extra-vagrant,” or extravagant, because it exceeds the borders of the living world and ventures frequently into the spirit realm. In an extreme version of the twins’ mental synergies in *The God*

²⁰ While vagrancy laws were much less a part of the colonial arsenal in Southern Nigeria than its northern neighbor or other colonial states, they were so commonly used throughout the British Empire that they can be understood as not just a historical detail but a representational trope.

of *Small Things* and of Arundhati Roy's improper representational style, Azaro is capable of exceeding his bodily and subjective limits to the extent that he shares sentient experience with surrounding humans, spirits, animals, and vegetation. In his early wanderings into the forest, for example, he not only encounters himself, in a form of out-of-body experience, but he also listens to trees that have been given voice by the spirits: "When I came to a grove of blue trees, I hid behind one of them. Inside the tree I heard loud and passionate voices as if from an important meeting. I took a path and to my shock I saw myself approaching" (66). Similarly, he finds himself able to understand the language of the many rats that devour his family's food at night. He even undergoes a planetary transformation while on a journey into the market in an attempt to find Mum: "My face became the moon and I stared, one-eyed, into the darkness of the marketplace. And then, with the moon's light inside me, filling the wide open spaces, I felt myself being lifted up by the darkness, pushed on by invisible hands. And the voices followed me, voices without bodies" (167). In each of these representative examples, either Azaro or his surroundings take on the capacities or sentient experience of nearby elements. It is in this sense that they are extravagant: they exceed their own bodily limits to effect or be affected by their surroundings.

The types of extravagant and excessive modalities thus described react against the damaging profligacy of the colonial Nigerian economy and its neoliberal successor because, as in Georges Bataille's theory of the general economy, they operate in a powerfully creative way. According to Bataille, the only way political problems can be solved is through exuberance, not anxiety. Making this claim in *The Accursed Share*, a philosophical account of the economy that is also, in a way, an aesthetic theory, Bataille argues against "the slumber of conventional knowledge," desiring instead "that violent movement, sudden and shocking, which jostles the

mind, taking away its tranquility” (11). Identifying a pattern to economic systems that have existed over the course of several centuries, from the Aztec empire’s sacrificial economy to the Marshall Plan of the mid-twentieth century, Bataille argues that the economy always functions through dispatching the excess that what will inevitably arise, a process that is achieved through useless or excessive consumption. “[F]or *living matter in general*,” Bataille argues, “energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance” (23 emphasis in original). Contrary to the teleological narrative of continued historical development and progression that holds fast in both popular and scholarly circles, Bataille argues, “[T]here is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance” (33). To think anxiously about political problems is thus to work against the “wild exuberance” that provokes “[t]he history of life on earth.”

What is most interesting about Bataille’s theory, certainly for my reading of *The Famished Road* and for aesthetic theory more generally, is his retrieval of “excess,” “extravagance,” and “exuberance” from the typically pejorative connotations they hold in modern political thought. Similarly important is the force he grants to this constellation of concepts, even though his recuperation of extravagance and excess as “luxurious squandering” rather than wastefulness rather downplays their creative power. As my reading of *The Famished Road* suggests, the excessive and extravagant can be recognized for their generative capacities without needing to be framed as part of a teleological or developmentalist trajectory. Creativity, in other words, does not necessarily imply an historical progression, but can take the form of radical difference. Despite these concerns, Bataille’s theory of the general economy bears several crucial implications for my reading of *The Famished Road*. In one respect, if read with a degree

of liberty, his insistence upon the generative energy of “excess,” “extravagance,” and “exuberance” models a way for reading the creative power of Okri’s sometimes overwhelming mass of details, tying them into *The Famished Road*’s broader project of rethinking the polis as well as to my claim for non-realist aesthetics’ genuinely productive capacities. Moreover, Bataille’s positive assessment of extravagance and excess explains how Okri might use similar means for vastly different ends, presenting a creative and recuperative alternative to the devastating effects of the Nigerian elite’s rapacious consumption.

Literary and Political Form: the Aesthetic Construction of a New Polis

In pairing extravagant aesthetics with concerted political critique, *The Famished Road* presents an exemplary opportunity to parse the proximal relation between aesthetic and political form. As my conception of aesthetic impropriety has suggested, aesthetic modes reflect patterns of thought; in this sense, aesthetic form coincides with coetaneous political logics. Benedict Anderson makes a related point in *Imagined Communities*, a text whose historical account of the rise of national feeling remains the most influential analysis of the nation and its imaginative production. Anderson identifies a confluence of historical developments that enabled the nation-state’s emergence, including capitalism, print production, vernacularization, and secularization. Anderson argues that this momentous convergence of historical conditions affected thought’s conceptual contours and “made it possible to ‘think’ the nation” (22). Implicit in Anderson’s historical materialist methodology, therefore, is an understanding that the imagination bears a conceptual or aesthetic form: that material conditions shape our thought, and that new ways of thinking likewise have a sculpting effect on emerging systems and procedures. Pheng Cheah gestures toward the nascent aesthetic critique in *Imagined Communities* when he claims, “this is

an argument about the genesis of a new *form* of consciousness; a formal argument about *how* nations are imagined rather than *what* they imagine themselves as” (6; emphasis in original). My reading of *The Famished Road* similarly attends to “*how* nations are imagined” through “a new *form* of consciousness,” but it does so not by emphasizing the causal factors prompting the nation’s invention, but by addressing the very form of that imagining. Shifting the emphasis onto the relation between thought’s formal contours and the specific form of the polity, my reading of *The Famished Road* elucidates politics’ aesthetic dimension, brought to the fore in Okri’s extravagant aesthetics.

If, following Chantal Mouffe, “[politics] is about the constitution of the political community, not something that takes place inside the political community,” then the formal structure of *The Famished Road*’s imagined polity signals both the process by which it comes into being and the type of community that it upholds (78). In Mouffe’s conception, the form, or “constitution,” of a political community reveals its definitional status: its very form indicates whether it is exclusionary or inclusive, autocratic or democratic, extroversive or self-sustaining. The mode of analysis proposed by Mouffe is, therefore, partly diagnostic, offering a way to address the assumptions encoded in a given community formation and to analyze the relation between forms of thought and their actualization. As well as bearing a diagnostic function, the capaciousness of Mouffe’s analytic modality carries radical implications as it disrupts standard assumptions regarding the possible forms of political association. For Mouffe, whose guiding question is “how to conceive of the nature of the political community under modern democratic conditions,” the implications of attending to a community’s form extend beyond a desire for accurate political analysis (70). When theorists focus on what “takes place *inside* the political community,” as they so often do, they conceive of that community in exclusionary terms: they

imagine, as Esposito et al. have demonstrated, that a community's borders are sealed and its form fixed (78 emphasis added). The only way to conceptualize a radical democratic community without undermining its radicality, Mouffe therefore contends, is to address its formal constitution. To do otherwise would be to engage in a mode of thinking that postulates political community as a closed and exclusionary entity.

Mouffe does not make explicit the connection between her thought and the continental philosophers upon whom Esposito later draws but her longstanding affiliation with Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, who likewise influenced Esposito, is signaled in her essay's publication alongside Nancy's "Of Being-in-Common" in a collection theorizing community and the political.²¹ In this context, her claim regarding the political significance of attending to formal structures of relation takes on greater resonance. Mouffe outlines her theory of political community by positioning herself against communitarian and liberal conceptualizations of citizenship while drawing upon their most productive facets. As she argues, "we need to conceive of a mode of political association that, although it does not postulate the existence of a substantive common good, nevertheless implies the idea of commonality" (75). On the one hand, therefore, Mouffe seeks to avoid the totalizing thrust of communitarian thought, which in postulating "a substantive common good" brings together its constituent members into a fusional unity; on the other, she rejects the isolating tendencies of liberal doctrine, which aims to keep the members of its community apart. Instead, she proposes a mode of radical democratic association that would facilitate political participation, per the communitarian ideal, while maintaining the liberal tenets of "pluralism" and "the idea of individual liberty" (72).

²¹ See *Community at Loose Ends* edited by the Miami Theory Collective.

In keeping with her recognition of form's importance, Mouffe describes her proposed type of political association through its structure: it would be "a community without a definite shape, a definite identity, and in continuous reenactment" (77). Successful democracies already function in this way, she argues, allowing "relative strangers" with "allegiances to specific communities" to still be considered part of a wider citizenry (76-7). According to Mouffe, therefore, it is not democracy as it actually exists but the political discourse used to theorize its functioning that is most lacking. With significant import for both this project and for theorizing political association more generally, Mouffe maintains that a political community's indefinite shape and indefinite identity make radical democracy possible. If the "continuous reenactment" of the polity's form facilitates its indefiniteness, it also performs its constant coming-into-being. Not fixed but in constant movement, the radical polity conceptualized by Mouffe is both creative and generative, continuously re-enacting its own status as political community and constantly reshaping the ties by which it is bound.

The nonexclusionary form of political association theorized by Mouffe resonates with the equitable polis constructed by Okri in *The Famished Road*. In Mouffe's call for a radically egalitarian form of political association as well as in Okri's improper aesthetics, the imagined community is expansive, participatory, and in a state of constant transformation. The type of political association thus described is exemplified in *The Famished Road's* representation of the local market, whose role as a community gathering-site and locus for neighborhood trade is evidenced in its perpetual bustle of activity.²² In contradistinction to the global market implicitly denounced by Okri in his critique of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, the market traders (primarily women) cater to their neighbors and within their own community. The marketplace

²² On the dominance of the marketplace in Igbo cosmology, see Daniel Jordan Smith, esp. 433-4.

thus bears a social function, facilitating the gathering of neighbors and nurturing the community connections and friendships that are sustained through a localized economic model. The market is far from idealized, however: it is neither a naïve illustration of an economic alternative to global markets nor a romanticized depiction of local community; instead, along with its affirmative connotations, it is also the site of exploitation and political repression. The market traders earn scarcely enough to pay the exorbitant rents for their homes, and the rental of a market stall is dependent upon lending support to the party whose threats and physical harassment give it control over the vicinity. Mum's refusal to lend her support leads to her eviction from the marketplace even though, as she reminds the men who remove her, she has always paid her rent and dues and never been subject to any complaints (168-70). As Mum's experience demonstrates, the marketplace is closely associated with corrupt politicians who gather there to hold rallies, intimidate voters and rivals, and compete with one another for power through such activities as distributing free, but poisoned milk. The marketplace thus carries both affirmative and pejorative connotations, a state of affairs that connects it to the expansive form of the democratic polis. Given that the marketplace facilitates the gathering of people of all types and beliefs, and given that it explores the range of affects associated with any informal space of public congregation, its representation is democratic in kind. Certainly, the colonial state and the rising postcolonial elite are shown to operate through exploitative and repressive means, not least at the marketplace where they publically gather; however, the expansive alternative polis developed through *The Famished Road's* improper aesthetics and modeled in the marketplace includes, of necessity, both favorable and unfavorable participants. The market scenes thus acknowledge the political system that this novel decries while aesthetically configuring an associational, expansive, participatory polis as a proposed alternative.

Much as Mouffe theorizes the radically democratic polity as of indefinite shape and identity and “in continuous reenactment,” *The Famished Road* describes the market as a site of “fantastic confusion,” as is figured in Azaro’s long list of all that can be seen and bought (161):

And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects.

Women with trays of big juicy tomatoes, basins of garri, or corn, or melon seeds, women who sold trinkets and plastic buckets and dyed cloth, men who sold coral charms and wooden combs and turtle-doves and string vests and cotton trousers and slippers, women who sold mosquito coils and magic love mirrors and hurricane lamps and tobacco leaves, with stalls of patterned cloths next to those of fresh-fish traders, jostled everywhere, filled the roadside, sprawled in fantastic confusion. (161)

The market’s turbulence and vivacity is conveyed through the above example’s syntax, not only through the proliferation of clauses, commas, and conjunctions, but also through the embedded subclauses that ultimately make it difficult to ascertain which subject relates to which object. After Azaro’s first mention of “[w]omen with trays of big juicy tomatoes,” the subject of each clause changes frequently, comprising first more women, then men, then women; then, in an abrupt taxonomic change, “stalls of patterned cloths”; and finally, in an absolute disruption of both taxonomy and grammar, an absent subject that “jostled everywhere.” It remains unclear whether the women or the stalls are the ones who “jostl[e]”; what is apparent from Azaro’s narrative, however, is that the market hosts constant activity and brings together many people, sights, sounds, and smells. Indeed, to the extent that this episode’s very grammar and syntax “jostl[e]” one another out of place, they serve to both index and effect the incessant movement

that *The Famished Road* associates with a participatory, democratic polis. If the market is the primary site in this novel where vast numbers of ordinary people are brought together, it can be read as exemplifying the form of political association envisaged in *The Famished Road*.

As Azaro's narrative signals, the affective implications of being part of a political community can be grueling and overwhelming as much as affirming and rewarding. Visiting the market is exhausting for Azaro, not least because its "jostling universe" repeatedly undermines his attempts to find Mum (162). Fearful that he cannot see "a single familiar face" and overwhelmed by "a strange panic," he finds himself "walk[ing] round and round the market spaces, unable to go any deeper, unable to find my way out, unable to go on because my feet hurt, and unable to stop because of the perpetually moving crowds who pushed me on or shoved me aside or trampled me or shouted at me and I was confused by everything and I sat under a stall of snails and wept without any tears" (162). The syntax of Okri's prose gives a sense of Azaro's terror and confusion among "the perpetually moving crowds," while the proliferation of conjunctions and the lack of separated clauses serve to textually create his rising panic. Temporarily, at least, he feels unable to escape from the confusion of the teeming marketplace, just as he feels overwhelmed by the incessant movement that thwarts his attempts to locate Mum.

Even as Okri acknowledges the affective disorientation that can result from a participatory polity's profusion and variety, however, he also identifies hopeful possibility in its profusion and constant motion. The marketplace's abundant community produces wonder as well as fear, its concatenation of voices leaving both Azaro and the reader with a sense of rich possibility even in the midst of rising panic. After consuming the food and drink offered by a strange old man, and thus failing to heed "Mum's warning about strangers," Azaro enters a space of transformed consciousness, through which Okri explores Nigeria's future possibility as well

as its coming political terror (165). Azaro describes the marketplace's manifold and many visitors in an increasingly mystical tone, giving a sense of the vastness of Nigeria and the world of which it is a part: "[a] million footfalls magnified on the earth. Voices of every kind rose in massive waves and distilled into whispers" (165). The voices take on a mystical tenor through their almost hallucinatory cadence, first rising and amplifying "in massive waves," then contracting and becoming quiet as they are "distilled into whispers" (165). Whether these hallucinatory voices belong to spirits or to the market's traders remains productively unclear, despite their disembodiment seeming to suggest their non-human status. Given that at least one of the voices is "not the voice of a spirit," the question of their ontological form is left open and unanswered (165).

In addition to their role in establishing the novel's complex affective atmosphere, the prophetic voices exemplify the necessary movement and reenactment in an expansive democratic polity: they come together in the midst of the market's turbulence, speak clearly and presciently as distinct entities, then once more drift apart. Their prophecies, relayed in a manner akin to a Greek chorus, are chillingly accurate and hauntingly beautiful, first addressing Azaro's symbolic resonance, and then examining the broader polity of which he is a part:

'Strange things are happening to us.'

'To our children.'

'They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.'

'They say he is looking for himself.'

'For his own spirit.'

'Which he lost when the white man came.'

...

‘Strange things are happening.’

‘The world is turning upside down.’

‘And madness is coming.’

‘And hunger is coming, like a dog with twelve heads.’

‘And confusion is coming.’

‘And war.’

‘And blood will grow in the eyes of men.’

‘And a whole generation will squander the richness of this earth.’ (167)

The precise and repetitive economy of this lyrical prose indicates *The Famished Road*'s sorrow at postcolonial Nigeria's political trajectory. While the prophecies have yet to be proven within the logic of the novel's own temporality, *The Famished Road*'s status as an historical novel renders them distressingly accurate. In lamenting that “[s]trange things are happening to us,” the voices are explicitly identified with the “us” of the Nigerian national community. At the same time, the voices lend an air not only of hope but also of generative possibility to this scene, their formal presentation affirming the kind of process by which an expansive polis might be formed.²³ As each voice is given its own line and role, it is represented as having a distinct subjectivity, so these voices do not constitute a fusional mass, despite their lack of individuation. Equally, however, the form of association performed in this scene upholds a principle of non-proprietary subjectivity, as none of the voices are named or, for that matter, embodied. That the voices do very much form a relational community is made clear through the anaphoric structure of the final six lines, joining the voices rhetorically as much as they are joined semantically through the conjunction, “and.” By speaking together to announce their prophecy,

²³ Both Appiah (147-148) and Derek Wright (159-160) criticize Okri for being sometimes too heavy-handed in expressing the novel's political claims.

the voices act as part of a unified community, but by quickly moving apart at their prediction's end, when they gently "drif[t] away on the air," they maintain the movement and singularity that precludes the tyranny of static political association (167).

The constant movement signaled within the prophetic episode at the marketplace exemplifies the state of flux established more broadly in *The Famished Road* through its narrative structure and formal techniques. As numerous critics have observed, *The Famished Road* bears structural similarities to the *Bildungsroman*, whose generic conventions it adapts for a postcolonial context.²⁴ Charting Nigeria's emergence as a postcolonial nation and Azaro's burgeoning desire to remain in the world of the living, *The Famished Road* delivers a quintessential postcolonial rewriting of the *Bildungsroman*. Critical analyses addressing movement in *The Famished Road* have thus tended to focus on parsing the novel's paradoxical relation to the genre: at once, *The Famished Road* relies on the teleology of personal and national development to narrate Nigeria's imminent sovereignty, and yet it rejects that trajectory in favor of a cyclical structure better suited to indigenous epistemologies and representational forms. In tending to address *The Famished Road's* cyclical structure and repetitive patterns through the lens of anticolonial politics, critical orthodoxy commonly argues either that Okri's novel expressly "writes back" to colonial systems of thought or that its aesthetic form demonstrates its indigenous resource-base.²⁵ José Santiago Fernández Vázquez claims, for example, that *The Famished Road* "violates the linear and teleological arrangement of classical childhood narratives" by connecting its diverse episodes through "repetitive patterns" and "syntactic

²⁴ For the most sustained analysis of *The Famished Road* as a *Bildungsroman*, see José Santiago Fernández Vázquez. For a more skeptical assessment of the novel's affinities to the *Bildungsroman*, see Neil ten Kortenaar, esp. 200-201.

²⁵ On the figure of the road as a rewriting of a colonial trope, see Cézair-Thompson. On Yoruba aesthetics, see Quayson, "Orality" and *Strategic Transformations* 121-152. For a convincing account of how Yoruba writers, Amos Tutuola and Yvonne Vera, are drawn on an indigenous resource-base, see Carolyn Hart, particularly 177-8.

parallelisms” (98). In a related vein, Margaret Cézair-Thompson identifies the trope of the road as representing Africa’s self-generative capacity for radical self-transformation. These valid assessments of *The Famished Road*’s complex aesthetic inheritance can be amplified by relating this novel’s representations of flux and movement to its political critique. The enigmatic and recursive structure of the road, which is “the worst hallucination” of the many experienced by Azaro, makes it an exemplary index of the fear that accrues from the transformation of a polity’s very constitution: “The roads seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves . . . twisting themselves into labyrinths. The road was the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it” (114). Whereas Mouffe’s account of “a community without a definite shape, a definite identity, and in continuous reenactment” remains only positively coded, *The Famished Road* acknowledges the affective turbulence that derives from being part of a diverse, associational polity experiencing tremendous political upheaval. It might be seen, through this representation of the affective consequences of political transformation, how literature and literary analysis complement political thought, being capable of exploring an aspect of the polity’s form that is less easily accounted for in political theory.

Just as the road’s flux produces the emotionally painful affects associated with the emergence of new political formations, so its incessant movement signals this novel’s formalization of political community as constantly and productively under negotiation. Indeed, the movement that underpins the structure of *The Famished Road* facilitates the generative and interruptive aesthetic modality that might challenge, per Mouffe’s theory, critical conceptions about democracy’s form and about the relation between politics and aesthetics. In this respect, it is not just the road as a trope of journeying toward independence that bears significance for *The*

Famished Road's imagining of a new postcolonial polis, but also instantiations of movement *qua* movement, whether marked through the road or through other figurative means. Crucially, Okri's novel represents movement not as intentional or unidirectional, as is the case in the classic *Bildungsroman*, but as multi-directional, processual, and unavoidable. The kind of activity established in *The Famished Road* thus operates as a non-possessive form of exchange, one that is not based upon specific or concrete relations between two people or objects but on constant engagement and fluctuation: on exchange rather than acquisition. The most significant such example in *The Famished Road* is Azaro's recurrent ontological relocations between the spirit world and the world of the living, not least because these transitions offer a more extreme instantiation of the kind of movement that Azaro anyway undertakes in his unceasing travels between the market, his home, and Madame Koto's bar. On one of the occasions that Azaro moves between the material and spirit worlds, for example, he is kidnapped from the bar while visibly remaining in the same place. Sitting one moment on a stool among a large crowd of customers, he is, in the next, in a world among the spirits. The act of being knocked from his stool seems to trigger his metaphysical relocation, but the indicators of his changed locale are purely sensory. While the bar still looks exactly the same, Azaro realizes that he is surrounded by strange odors and peculiar words: "I was nudged off my stool. The smells in the bar became terrible and strange, the smells of corpses and rain and oregano, of mangoes and rotting meat, of incense and goats' hair. And then, suddenly, I found I could no longer understand what anybody was saying. . . . They spoke in alien languages" (111). The swiftness of Azaro's worldly relocation is common to all such incidents in *The Famished Road*, resulting in affective disorientation not only for Azaro, who "suddenly" finds he "could no longer understand what

anybody was saying,” but also for the reader, who must work hard to keep up with the novel’s constant metaphysical reorganization.

In elaborating a metaphysics in which connections can be forged across spaces so vast that they traverse worlds, *The Famished Road* structurally undermines the exclusionary economic and political systems established under colonial rule and maintained after independence. The frequent and sudden relocations between the world of the spirits and that of the living serve to develop *The Famished Road*’s relational aesthetic modality, discretely elaborating a schema that operates in contradistinction to, on the one hand, Nigeria’s exclusionary and extractive economy and, on the other, the self-serving greed of the politicians and their cronies. In this light, Okri’s frequent recourse to synesthesia takes on greater resonance. Generally interpreted as a quirky stylistic attribute, one that identifies Okri’s interest in the realm of the impossible while marking his affiliation to magical realism, synesthesia is also one of the many literary devices that contribute toward *The Famished Road*’s relational aesthetic mode. When the night of political violence is underway, for example, Azaro twice describes the night’s violence through a synesthetic trope, “night of blue memories” (179): “We rushed out into the blue memory of a street crowded with shadows. Wild men were wreaking devastation on windows, wooden doors, and human bodies” (178). The “blue” color of the “memory” most obviously indicates the trauma that is experienced that night, symbolically indexing the community’s sorrow and evoking memory’s ill-defined contours. The synesthetic function of “blue memory” therefore serves, in part, to create the affective experience of violence so horrific that it is remembered only in its most general sense, with innumerable “[w]ild men” all “wreaking devastation” on buildings and on bodies. In the wider context of *The Famished Road*, however, synesthesia also operates to bring together distinct thoughts and feelings, gradually establishing a framework in

which diverse entities come into association across a vast space. Moreover, as synesthesia implies an exchange and interpenetration between the different senses and registers of knowing, it substantiates *The Famished Road*'s construction of a participatory polis based upon a non-possessive form of exchange.

If, as this chapter has been arguing, *The Famished Road* imagines the coming-into-being of a participatory Nigerian polis, thereby undermining the nation's exclusionary and extractive economy and its succession of despotic regimes, it does so by elaborating a form of political association that is open, transformational, and affectively engaging. Much like Anderson, who explores why nationalism has "aroused such deep attachments," Okri is acutely aware of affect's role in the development of a national community (4). The affective connections that mould and sustain a polity are primarily explored through Azaro's growing desire to remain in the world of the living instead of returning to the spirit world where he could exist with comparative ease. Despite the pain and hardship of the material world, with its "enshrined injustices" and human "heartlessness," Azaro's initial urge to rejoin his spirit companions is diminished by his increasingly acute sense of affective immersion in the world of the living (4). At first, his attempts to remain among the living derive from an extreme sensory curiosity: desiring "to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it," he wants to encounter all possible forms of affective experience in all their rich and painful variety (5). The longer he spends in the world, however, the more he develops significant ties to the people around him and the place in which he lives. It is this acute sense of being part of a community that ultimately motivates his rejection of the spirits' increasingly desperate attempts to lure him back. By the end of the novel, and in concert with his profound sense of being part of a community and of a place, Azaro finds himself "falling in love with life" (460).

Literary Interruptions and the Politics of Imagining

The Famished Road's extravagant aesthetics and expansive setting provide an exemplary opportunity for invigorating critical thinking regarding politics' aesthetic form and form's political capacities. Just as Mouffe argues that a radical democratic polis needs to undergo "continuous reenactment" to ensure that it permits the flourishing of both the individual and the community, so *The Famished Road* models this process of interminable renegotiation through its aesthetic form. The extravagant movement and affective excess that are created through *The Famished Road's* representational exuberance reference the imaginative expansiveness similarly required to reconstruct the Nigerian political system and establish a democratic, participatory, non-exploitative polis. If community is necessarily processual, and if its formation must take place continually and unceasingly, then the flux that is elaborated through this novel's formal strategies puts into practice the very mode of association that is also delineated in its pages. Through Azaro's constant movement from place to place and world to world, *The Famished Road* symbolically represents the process of imaginative transformation, and in thereby replicating the remodeling of thought, it also addresses the perceived need for Nigerian political restructuring. For the reader, as for Azaro, this incessant flux is exhausting. Evoked through long, convoluted sentences with many conjunctions, the sense of constant transformation results in a form of sensory overload, demonstrated in the following passage:

And the smoke and the smells were dense everywhere and it was impossible not to breathe them in and the mysteries of burning plants in the deep forest charged my head and I went around stumbling into trees, tripping over roots, walking up against the ochre palaces that were anthills, or wandering round in circles, or watching bicycles riding around among the trees without riders, or noticing

women pedaling the air without anything beneath them. Anthills which I had passed followed me. I became certain that the whole forest was moving. (243)

Mirroring Azaro's "certain[ty] that the whole forest was moving," this passage's use of polysyndeton, marked in the intensive repetition of "and" as well as "or," induces a similar sense of turbulence in the reader. As this excerpt exemplifies, the process of reading *The Famished Road* is an immersive experience, one that prioritizes sensory engagement over cognitive understanding. In this regard, *The Famished Road* submerges the reader into the narrative and creates, through the reading process, the very form of constitutively relational association that it aspires to for the Nigerian polity.

In "Ten Theses on Politics," Jacques Rancière argues that "[politics] consists in re-figuring space," a claim that resonates with Okri's literary mode due to its similar emphasis on the form, or aesthetic structure, of political life (37). According to Rancière, "politics" denotes not just the collective lives of a mass group of people, nor simply a specific type of power, but a very particular kind of subject, one derived from Aristotle's definition of the citizen as "he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled" (27). Aristotle's conceptualization of "partaking" is formative to Rancière's thought, as is apparent in the claim, "Everything about politics is contained in this specific relationship, this 'partaking' (*avoir-part*) that needs to be interrogated as to its meaning and conditions of possibility" (27). In ways that are crucial to understanding Rancière's aesthetic formalization of the political domain, "partaking" implies constitutive involvement in political life: of being part of, not simply subject to, politics.

Inasmuch as the subject comes into being and is sustained by its dual, paradoxical roles of both ruling and being ruled, it is located right in the midst of the political structure, and as such is necessarily affected by politics's processual nature. Unlike the type of authority that Rancière

names the “police,” the movement in politics is based not on the circulation of bodies in space but on its own constant transformation. Where the police regime is a “space of ‘moving-along’” in which those subjected to movement are inside, and separate to, the structure of control, the system of politics constantly undertakes its own refiguration, meaning that the subject is likewise involved in this process of reenactment. In modeling political transformation, *The Famished Road* does not promote a programmatic route for regime change, but instead engages in the transformation of thought itself. Much like Rancière claims of politics in his seventh thesis, *The Famished Road* establishes “an intervention in the visible and the sayable,” interrupting what can be seen and spoken through enacting thought’s incessant structural transmutation (37). In its aesthetic extravagance and its constantly changing form, *The Famished Road* intervenes in the thinking of political community in postcolonial Nigeria and in the wider world of which it is a part.

In Rancière’s similar claim to Mouffe that a democratic political community needs to be conceptualized as undergoing constant transformation, he likewise reveals the influence of Jean-Luc Nancy on his thought. According to Nancy, “the political is the place where community as such is brought into play” (xxxvii). Nancy thus operates on similar assumptions to Rancière, who identifies “the political” as “a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens” (37). Moreover, like other poststructuralist theorists who have developed what I describe as a non-possessive formulation of the political subject and the polis, Nancy theorizes community through the tropes of *sharing* and *exposure*. These two figures correspond to one another because they explain a non-possessive yet non-fusional relationship between the subject and the polis:

Sharing comes down to this: what community reveals to me . . . is my existence

outside myself. Which does not mean my existence reinvested in or by community, as if community were another subject that would sublimate me, in a dialectical or communal mode. *Community does not sublimate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.* (26; emphasis in original)

In arguing that community is nothing but the exposition of finitude, and in asserting that community reveals “my existence outside myself,” Nancy describes the political subject as inclined outward, or “exposed,” toward the community of beings of which it is necessarily and constitutively a part. In making this claim, Nancy is, as he acknowledges, indebted to Bataille’s theory of excessive and ecstatic subjectivity. Associating the question of community with the question of ecstasy, Nancy suggests that modernity’s possessive individualist subject has persisted because it has not been “*inclined . . . outside itself, over that edge that opens up its being-in-common*” (4). By contrast, Nancy identifies the exposed subject, or “singularity,” as constitutive of community. Each singularity “*shar[es]*” its finitude through its “*compearance (com-parution)*” or ‘co-appearance,’ and through this “*exposing-sharing*” establishes a community of beings that are inclined each toward the other (29). The constitutive relation through which these subjects exist-in-common does not form a substantive essence but instead functions as a shared relationality, allowing each singularity to “*co-appea[r] or compea[r] (com-parait)*” (28). The very capacity to exist in common thus depends on movement: on not being understood as an essence but as constantly co-appearing.

What Nancy’s theory risks suggesting, especially when it is applied in literary analysis, is that movement itself is inherently salvific. Such a conclusion would be incorrect, both as an interpretation of Nancy’s work and of movement as a concept, so it is worth clarifying the

distinction between these two very different lines of thought. For Nancy, describing community in terms of exposure and the action of sharing is a way of avoiding the essentialist, possessive models of community which, exemplified in National Socialism and Stalinist communism, proved so destructive in twentieth-century Europe. Instead of defining a community through a definitive list of qualities, as possessive nationalisms always do, Nancy identifies it through the linkages that constitute its existence. In so doing, Nancy describes a way of thinking about community that opens it up instead of closing it down, just as he also configures the subject as relational rather than resolutely individualist. In simple terms, he seems to be describing community as existing in a state of flux and constant process, and while such an element is present in his formulation, he in fact theorizes community not only as necessarily relational, but through the very relationality by which it is constituted. In this regard, his formulation of community functions in a more complex way to the mode of political association delineated in *The Famished Road*, which does, by my reading, affirm its democratic polity as functioning through its continuous transformation. At the same time, *The Famished Road* condemns the type of movement instantiated in the colonial and, later, postcolonial and neoliberal states, where flux can be associated with the economic and political insecurity experienced by the majority of the population. Bringing Nancy to bear on *The Famished Road* affirms this novel's political engagement against accusations that its transmutations signify the free play of the imagination. As Nancy so provocatively suggests, in ways that have yet to be adequately realized, the constant sharing and compearance of a radically democratic, community-oriented form of political association is precisely what allows the involvement of all of its participants.

Just as Nancy's theory of community offers a philosophical way of thinking about expansive political collectivities, so Okri's *The Famished Road* presents a literary reflection on

precisely the same topic. Azaro might even be seen as an exemplar of the “inclined” or “exposed” subject, given that his ties to the spirit world facilitate his inclining outside himself into the bodies or subjectivities of other beings, whether spirit, animal, or vegetal, and given that these same ties prompt his inclining into different locations within the world, and even into different worlds altogether. Like my earlier claims regarding Azaro’s extra-vagrancy, Nancy’s formulation of the exposed singularity imagines the subject as beside itself: as inclined outward, beyond any possessive sense of its own contours. Etymologically, *extravagance* and *exposure* derive, like *ecstasy*, from a set of Latin terms meaning, ‘to put outside of’: thus, “ecstasy,” from *exstasis*, meaning ‘to put out of place’; “expose,” from *expōnĕre*, ‘to put out or expose’; and “extravagant,” from *extrāvagārī*, ‘to wander or stray outside limits.’ The prefix, “ex,” concealed in “ecstasy” by the etymological permutation, “ecs,” denotes this sense of being placed outside. In both Nancy and *The Famished Road*, the exposed or extravagant subject is correlated with the relational, participatory, radically democratic community, suggesting that neither can exist without the other. Indeed, Azaro’s extraordinary capacities serve as a figure through which *The Famished Road* establishes its vision of expansive community: “I realised that an invisible space had entered my mind and dissolved part of the interior structure of my being” (445-6). Azaro’s interior dissolution demonstrates an ecstatic figuration of his subjectivity, the “invisible space” causing “the interior structure of [his] being” to “dissolv[e].” Whereas the business executives and corrupt politicians who associate increasingly with Madame Koto form an insular group, making Azaro feel like he is “in the midst of a secret society” when he happens to be at the bar at the same time as them, Azaro’s own narrative establishes an expansive version of society that is realized, in part, through his ecstatic conceptualization of his own being and its relation to those around him (254).

The exuberant force of Okri's prose, and the power that accrues from its sheer pace, serves to reinforce the expansive imaginings of *The Famished Road*. Much like "the strange currents of Dad's words," which is most especially acute when he outlines his ambitious plans for Nigeria's future, the novel's literary language establishes much of its transformative power (499). Whereas Dad naively believes that "[w]e can redream this world and make the dream real," however, *The Famished Road* makes a smaller claim, signaling the capacity for political transformation through its own aesthetic imaginings. Effecting a critique of the colonial and postcolonial Nigerian states in large part through its aesthetic modality, *The Famished Road's* exuberance and expanse prise open the closed forms of the colonial and neoliberal Nigerian states, configuring an alternative polis that is expansive in its imaginative implications. The alternative national community that is imagined in this novel is never delimited and closed down but is always open to constant renegotiation and reconfiguration. Markedly different to the exclusionary and exploitative community imagined by Nigeria's colonial and postcolonial leadership, the political community configured in *The Famished Road* is expansive and participatory. As well as rebutting the exclusionary form of the colonial state and its successors, *The Famished Road* also takes part, as my reading of its political form suggests, in an intellectual conversation that seeks to invigorate that which Esposito terms "the closed thought of community" (148). Through its extravagant aesthetics, *The Famished Road* suggests the possibility of an expansive version of postcolonial national community that is always in the process of coming-into-being. Configured by the very people who participate in its imagining, by the connections they form between themselves and the movement they perform, the imagined polis in *The Famished Road* is vibrant, generative, and full of hope for its own self-sustaining future.

CONCLUSION Critical Impropriety; or, Improper Reading

In the account of aesthetic impropriety that I have developed over the course of this dissertation, I have not only offered a theory of postcolonial aesthetics but also modeled a distinctive way of reading. Aesthetic impropriety, I have argued, functions against the possessive logic of modernity by configuring an alternatively relational mode of political association that is at once expansive and non-exclusionary. In this claim, developed through close readings of postcolonial novels as well as analyses of literary, political, and legal theory, is lodged both a new assessment of postcolonial literary aesthetics and some unusual assertions about how we read. Most controversially, I have made a case for the aesthetic's world-making capacities; I have argued that aesthetic form not only represents epistemological assumptions but also intervenes and restructures thought's very form. It is with this claim that I wish to conclude, expanding upon its implications for literary analysis in its broadest contours and extending beyond the field of postcolonial literature that frames this dissertation's inquiries.

The paradigm of aesthetic impropriety hinges upon a specific understanding of the relationship between aesthetic form and forms of thought, one that assumes there to be a somewhat reciprocal, processual movement between real and fictional worlds. My argument, briefly summarized, is that structures of thought bear corresponding conceptual structures, and that these conceptual forms are sometimes manifest in aesthetic ways: for example, the possessive logic that developed in modernity aligned with particular historical conditions and was manifest in conceptual figurations of enclosure and containment. Similarly, aesthetic forms bear conceptual structures that are often coincident with the particular material, cultural, political, or juridical conditions in which they developed or against which they operate. For instance, the relational aesthetics distinguishing postcolonial novels can be seen to reject political

modernity's possessive logic and delineate instead a vision of relational political association. The terms of my analysis are not simply descriptive or diagnostic, however; as well as making an argument about the development of epistemological and aesthetic forms, and as well as making the case for a general process of re-imagining political community in postcolonial literature, I also emphasize the creative elements of both my own analysis and the literary texts under consideration. The types of aesthetic experimentation that are indexed in the term "aesthetic impropriety" are politically interruptive not simply because the texts in which they occur take on expressly political themes, but also because they engage in the creative process of aesthetic innovation. As I have argued, non-realist literature's heightened aesthetic style exemplifies the extent to which formal experimentation both coincides with, and can also prompt, experiments in thought. Aesthetic impropriety is, therefore, a way also of describing how literature can participate, through its form, in reconfiguring prevailing structures of logic and creating new forms of thought. Literature need not simply describe the world, but it can remake it, too.

In constructing my account of aesthetic impropriety, I have sought to develop a more complex way of theorizing literature's political capacities, thereby introducing new ways of considering the relation between politics and literature as well as augmenting methodological ideas about literary reading. Part of the reason for this concern has been a sense of disciplinary urgency, as the relation between politics and aesthetics remains a vexed question in postcolonial studies, but it also speaks to a broader interest, across literary fields, regarding the return to aesthetics in literary analysis. In postcolonial literary studies in particular, the idea still persists that literary analysis must be materialist for it to be sufficiently political. While this belief is hardly likely to disappear any time soon—if ever—, it warrants continued probing until it becomes a little less entrenched. The paradigm of aesthetic impropriety suggests one way of

integrating historically grounded analysis into aesthetically minded critique. As my readings of three different versions of improper aesthetics have demonstrated, literature can stray far from realist protocols without also departing from political concerns. It should be clarified that I would by no means suggest that literary texts or aesthetic forms translate directly into political action. For a theory of the aesthetic in its creative capacities to be meaningful, it need not claim that formal techniques equate to immediate or practical interventions in the real world. On the contrary, any such argument would be both reductive and misguided: direct political interventions in unfolding events are often urgent and necessary, but literature cannot fulfill this role and nor can aesthetic theory. To rethink the powerfully creative and interruptive capacities of literary form, however, and particularly of experimental or non-realist aesthetics, is another matter altogether.

In her introduction to a special edition in *New Literary History (NLH)* on interpretive methodology in literary studies, Rita Felski makes the following claim: “Interpretation ties us to the past but also orients us to the future; it is interwoven with, rather than simply opposed to, description; it connotes creativity and human inspiration, while also connecting us to a humming, buzzing, signaling, deciphering, nonhuman world” (xi). Part of her ongoing concern with what she terms “the method wars,” Felski’s essay, and the special issue in which it appears, attempts not only to convene a series of discussions on current and evolving modes of reading, but to make a claim for methods that combine description with interpretation, analysis with creativity (v). Like Felski’s proposed model of reading, my aesthetically improper interpretations of postcolonial novels and a broad selection of modern theoretical texts have revealed a consistently creative yet analytic approach to the act of reading. In addition, though, I also understand aesthetic forms to similarly function in creative, generative, and interruptive ways. It is not that

aesthetically improper texts would make any immediate impact upon the world in any practical political sense. Rather, it is that aesthetic forms are involved in the process of thought's own formulation; that the correspondence between forms of thought and aesthetic forms means that the worlds opened up by literary experimentation might be seen to bear some relation to the transformation of thought, despite operating not in any immediately recognizable sense but always at some steps removed.

What might it mean, then, to read improperly? To not only read creatively as readers, but to read with some confidence in the creative capacities of aesthetic form itself? We can bring to literary study, I think, some of the lessons learned from the imaginative strains of political theorizing practiced by such thinkers as Roberto Esposito and Jacques Rancière, among others examined throughout the course of this dissertation, who take as a given that changes in thought effect changes in the structural forms of politics and its ways of thinking. Like Rancière, who claims that the innovations made by the aesthetic correspond to the creativity of politically inventive thought, I suggest that literary language can itself participate in creative acts. In other words, the form and ideas carried within literary texts can be understood to hold their own kind of power, just as the circulation of political ideas can command influence, whether or not they are attached to a particular figure. As Rancière describes, both political and aesthetic inventiveness can open worlds through “acts that are at once argumentative and poetic” (*Disagreement* 59). If we accept the basic terms of my argument—that literary texts should be understood as carrying their own poetic and creative potential—then the effects will be carried not only into assessments of literature's political capacities, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, but into theories that take up and extend this assumption of aesthetic force. As Felski argues in another of her articles addressing critical reading habits, “While particular

theories influence how we read, the reverse also holds true: practices of reading, governed by their own distinctive logic, rhythms, and history, covertly mold how theories are interpreted, taken up, and used” (“From Literary Theory” 110).

In developing my argument, I have implicitly assumed that a novel, a work of literary art, can be read for its logic and its formulation of thought. I have also maintained that a novel can engage with prevailing forms of political organization not simply through its overt claims or statements but through its aesthetic modality. The significance of these claims to postcolonial literary studies has been made clear throughout this dissertation; in addition, as my conclusion has begun to suggest, possibilities abound for invigorating critical thought on the relation between the political and the aesthetic not simply as mimetic, but as powerfully creative, innovative, and interruptive.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- Adamolekun, Ladipo. "Federalism in Nigeria: Toward Federal Democracy." *Publius* 21.4 (1991): 1-11.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- . *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Agnes, Flavia. "Women, Marriage, and the Subordination of Rights." *Community, Gender and Violence: Subaltern Studies XI*. Ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan. London: Hurst, 2000. 106-37.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. "Reading Arundhati Roy *Politically*." *Frontline* 8 Aug. 1997: 103-8.
- Alexander, Gregory S. *Commodity and Propriety: Competing Visions of Property in American Legal Thought, 1776-1970*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997.
- Alexander, Gregory S., and Eduardo M. Peñalver. *An Introduction to Property Theory*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O. G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Anderson, Siwan, and Garance Genicot. "Suicide and Property Rights in India." *BREAD (Bureau for Research and Economic Analysis of Development) Working Paper 353* (July 2012): 1-41.
- Anker, Elizabeth S. *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012.

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Appiah, Anthony K. "Spiritual Realism" *The Nation* 3-10 Aug. 1992. 146-148.
- Armstrong, Isobel. *The Radical Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Armstrong, Nancy. "The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 55.3 (2014): 441-465.
- Armstrong, Nancy, and Leonard Tennenhouse. "Sovereignty and the Form of Formlessness." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 20.2-3 (2009): 148-178.
- Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.
- Attwell, David. "Coetzee's Estrangements." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. 41.2-3 (2008): 229-243.
- . *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- Balibar, Etienne. "'Possessive Individualism' Reversed: From Locke to Derrida." *Constellations* 9.3 (2002): 299-317.
- Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.
- Barnard, Rita. *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: an Essay on General Economy. Vol. I: Consumption*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- Bataille, Georges, and Allan Stoekl. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985.

- Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Bayart, Jean-François. *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly*. 2nd edition. Trans. Mary Harper, Christopher Harrison and Elizabeth Harrison. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
- Bennett, Jane. "Modernity and Its Critics." *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 211-224.
- Benton, Lauren A. *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- . *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes In World History, 1400-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.
- . "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33.4 (2007): 754-780.
- Bhabha, Homi. *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Blackstone, William, and J. W Ehrlich. *Ehrlich's Blackstone*. San Carlos, CA: Nourse Publishing Company, 1959.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "The Negative Community." *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988. 1-26.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Achebe and His Influence in Some Contemporary African Writing." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.2 (2009): 141-153.
- . "East Is East and South Is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy." *Women* 11.1-2 (2000): 61-70.

- Boonzaier, Emile. “ ‘Race’ and the Race Paradigm.” *South African Keywords: The Uses & Abuses of Political Concepts*. Ed. Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp. Claremont: David Philip, 1988. 58-67.
- Brennan, Timothy. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Bromley, P.M. *Family Law*. 5th ed. London: Butterworth, 1976.
- Bruijn, Esther de. “Coming to Terms with New Ageist Contamination: Cosmopolitanism in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*.” *Research in African Literatures* 38.4 (2007): 170-186.
- Buelens, Gert and Dominiek Hoens. “Above and Beneath Classification: Bartleby, Life and Times of Michael K, and Syntagmatic Participation.” *diacritics* 37.2-3 (2007): 157-170.
- Buntman, Fran Lisa. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Malden: Polity, 2013.
- Centre for Social Research (CSR): An Institution for the Women and Girls in India. New Delhi, 2013.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Ed. Annette Smith. Trans. Clayton Eshleman. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001.
- Cézair-Thompson, Margaret. “Beyond the Postcolonial Novel: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* and its ‘Abiku’ Traveller.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31 (1996): 33-45.
- Chabal, Patrick and Jean-Pascal Daloz. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. London: The International African Institute in association with James Currey, Oxford, 1999.

- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.
- Cheah, Pheng. "Grounds of Comparison." *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*. Spec. issue of *Diacritics* 29.4 (1999): 2-18.
- . *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.
- Chesney, Duncan McColl. "Towards an Ethics of Silence: Michael K." *Criticism* 49.3 (2007): 307-325.
- Cheyfitz, Eric. *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*. Philadelphia: U of Penn P, 1997.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. New York: Viking, 1997. Print.
- . *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2004.
- . "The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)." *Social Dynamics* 17.1 (1991): 1-35.
- . *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- Cohen, Morris R., and Felix S. Cohen. *Readings in Jurisprudence and Legal Philosophy: I*. Frederick, MD: Beard Books, 2002.
- Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Cooper, Frederick. *Africa Since 1940: the Part of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- . *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005.
- Davenport, Rodney and Christopher Saunders. *South Africa: A Modern History*. 5th ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. London: Verso, 1997.

- Dhawan, Himanshi. "Govt. Goes One Step Back on Divorce Laws." *The Times of India* 15 May 2012.
- . "New Bill Gives Woman Share in Ex-Husband's Inherited Property." *Times of India* 17 July 2013.
- Dunn, John. *The Political Thought of John Locke: an Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- . *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010.
- . *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. Trans. Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity, 2011.
- Esty, Jed. *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Falola, Toyin. "'Salt is Gold': The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during World War II." *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 26.3 (1992): 412-436.
- Falola, Toyin, and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- . *Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Felski, Rita. "From Literary Theory to Critical Method." *Profession* (2008): 108-116.
- . "Introduction." *Interpretation and its Rivals*. Ed. Rita Felski. Spec. issue of *New Literary History* 45.2 (2014): v-xi.

- . "Introduction." *Rethinking Tragedy*. Ed. Rita Felski. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008.
- Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: the Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.
- Fischer, Sibylle. *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Freed, Joanne Lipson. "The Ethics of Identification: the Global Circulation of Traumatic Narrative in Silko's *Ceremony* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.2 (2011): 219-40.
- Gallagher, Susan VanZanten. *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.
- Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol. 42. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1958. 384-5.
- Gikandi, Simon. "African Literature and Modernity." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 35 (2007): 3-19.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Idea of Gardening." *The New York Review of Books*. The New York Review of Books, 2 Feb. 1984.
- Hall, Stuart. "When Was 'the Post-Colonial?' Thinking at the Limit." *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. Ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. London: Routledge, 1996. 242-260.

- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
- . *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1710-1791.
- Hart, Carolyn. "In Search of African Literary Aesthetics: Production and Reception of the Texts of Amos Tutuola and Yvonne Vera." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2009): 177-195.
- Hawley, John C. "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity." *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995): 30-39.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Hayes, Patrick. *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Head, Dominic. *J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Hegel, Georg. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. Allen W. Wood. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Hickel, Jason. "Social Engineering and Revolutionary Consciousness: Domestic Transformations in Colonial South Africa." *History and Anthropology* 23.3 (2012): 301-322.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Hobson, J. A. *Imperialism: A Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Horrell, Muriel. *Legislation and Race Relations: a Summary of the Main South African Laws which Affect Race Relations*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1971. *Aluka, Struggles for Freedom: Southern Africa*. JSTOR. Web. 18 Feb. 2015. <<https://www.aluka.org/struggles/collection/LRR>>.

“HRC Submits Apartheid Repression Book to Truth Body.” South African Press Association (SAPA). 27 May 1997. n.pag. Department of Justice & Constitutional Development, Republic of South Africa.

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Hussain, Nasser. *The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003.

James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Joseph, Richard A. *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

---. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.

---. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Ed. Paul Guyer. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

---. “Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.” *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. Trans. David L. Colclasure. Ed. Pauline Kleingeld. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 67-109.

Khanna, “Disposability.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 20.1 (2009): 181-198.

Kortenaar, Neil ten. “Oedipus, Ogbanje, and the Sons of Independence.” *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (2007): 181-205.

- Kurien, Prema A. *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Lazarus, Neil. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Lenin, V. I. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. Ed. C. B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980.
- López Sánchez-Vizcaíno, María Jesús *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J. M. Coetzee*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011.
- Low, D. A. *Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity 1929-1942*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Lubeck, Paul. "Nigeria: A Political Economy." *Africa Today* 24.4 (1977): 4-10.
- Lutz, John. "Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Mosaic* 42.3 (2009): 57-74.
- Macfarlane, Alan. *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property, and Social Transition*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- MacMillan, Hugh. "Economists, Apartheid and 'The Common Society.'" *Social Dynamics* 17.1 (1991): 78-100.
- Macpherson, C. B. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964.
- Maja-Pearce, Adewale. *A Mask Dancing: Nigerian Novelists of the Eighties*. New York: Hans Zell, 1992.
- Markell, Patchen. *Bound by Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.

- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "The German Ideology." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Aesthetics of Superfluity." *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 373-405.
- . *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: U of C Press, 2001.
- McCabe, Douglas. "'Higher Realities': New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Research in African Literatures* 36.4 (2005): 1-21.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- McNulty, Tracy. *Wrestling with the Angel: Experiments in Symbolic Life*. New York: Columbia UP, 2014.
- Melas, Natalie. *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007.
- . "Untimeliness, or Négritude and the Poetics of Contramodernity." *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 108.3 (2009). 563-580.
- Metcalf, Thomas R., and Barbara Daly Metcalf. *A Concise History of Modern India*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Miami Theory Collective, ed. *Community at Loose Ends*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991.
- Mintz, Sidney Wilfred. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- Moore, Henrietta L. and Todd Sanders. *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Mouffe, Chantal. "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community." 70-82. *Community at Loose Ends*. Ed. Miami Theory Collective. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.

- Mrs. Mary Roy v. State of Kerala and Others. A.I.R. 1986. SC. 1011.
- Mukund, Kanakalatha. "Women's Property Rights in South India: A Review." *Economic and Political Weekly* 34.22 (1999): 1352-8.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Of Being-in-Common." *Community at Loose Ends*. Ed. Miami Theory Collective. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991. 1-12.
- . *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Peter Connor. Trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
- Nandi, Miriam. "Longing for the Lost (M)Other: Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.2 (2010): 175-86.
- Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney. "'The Small Voice of History' in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Interventions* 7.3 (2005): 369-91.
- Nesbitt, Nick. *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2008.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Nwosu, Maik. "The River, the Earth, and the Spirit World: Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, and the Novel in Africa." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 35 (2007): 93-109.
- Ocobock, Paul, and A. L. Beier, eds. *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2008.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. New York: Anchor-Random House, 1993.

- Osaghae, Eghosa E, and Rotimi T. Suberu. *A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria*. Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford, 2005.
- Outka, Elizabeth. "Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Contemporary Literature* 52.1 (2011): 21-53.
- Patterson, Orlando. "Freedom, Slavery, and the Modern Construction of Rights." *The Cultural Values of Europe*. Ed. Hans Joas and Klaus Wiegandt. Trans. Alex Skinner. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008. 115-151.
- . *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Poovey, Mary. *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Quayson, Ato. "Orality-(Theory)-Textuality: Tutuola, Okri and the Relationship of Literary Practice to Oral Traditions." *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Tests, and the Telling of Tales*. Ed. Stewart Brown. Birmingham, U.K.: Centre of African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1995. 96-117.
- . *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality & History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri*. Oxford: James Currey, 1997.
- Ramphela, Mamphela, and Emile Boonzaier. "The Position of African Women: Race and Gender in South Africa." *South African Keywords: The Uses & Abuses of Political Concepts*. Ed. Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp. Claremont: David Philip, 1988. 153-166.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.

- . *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- . "Does Democracy Mean Something?" Rancière, *Dissensus* 45-61.
- . "Ten Theses on Politics." Rancière, *Dissensus* 27-44.
- . "The Paradoxes of Political Art." Rancière, *Dissensus* 134-151.
- . "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 103:2-3 (2004): 297-310.
- Reichman, Ravit. *The Affective Life of Law: Legal Modernism and the Literary Imagination*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Robbins and Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- Ruttenburg, Nancy. "Introduction: Is the Novel Democratic?" *Is the Novel Democratic?* Ed. Nancy Ruttenburg. Spec. issue of *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 47.1 (2014): 1-10.
- Sachs, Albie. "The Instruments of Domination in South Africa." *Change in Contemporary South Africa*. Eds. Leonard Thompson and Jeffrey Butler. Berkeley: U of California P, 1975. 223-249.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- . *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.
- Sanders, Mark. *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2002.
- Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.

- Savage, Michael. "Pass Laws and the Disorganisation and Reorganisation of the African Population in South Africa." *Carnegie Conference Paper No. 281*. Cape Town: 1984.
- SALDRU: Southern Africa Labour & Development Research Unit*. Web. 5 May. 2015.
- <<http://saldru.com.uct.ac.za/handle/11090/378>>.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. I. Ed. and trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Shanley, Mary Lyndon. *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Singh, Kirti. *Separated and Divorced Women in India: Economic Rights and Entitlements*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013.
- Skalnik, Peter. "Tribe as Colonial Category." *South African Keywords: The Uses & Abuses of Political Concepts*. Ed. Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp. Claremont: David Philip, 1988. 68-78.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: the World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.
- Smalligan, Laura M. "Navigating Between Worlds: Ben Okri's Abiku Child and the Oshogbo School of Art." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46 (2011): 359-375.
- Smith, Andrew. "Ben Okri and the Freedom Whose Walls are Closing In." *Race & Class* 47 (2005): 1-13.

- Smith, Daniel Jordan. "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria." *Cultural Anthropology* 19.3 (2004): 429-455.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999.
- . "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313.
- Sreenivas, Mytheli. "Conjugalities and Capital: Gender, Families, and Property under Colonial Law in India." *Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (2004): 937-60.
- Sturman, Rachel. *The Government of Social Life in India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women's Rights*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Sundar, Nandini. "Beyond the Bounds? Violence at the Margins of New Legal Geographies." *Violent Environments*. Ed. Nancy L. Peluso and Michael Watts. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. 328-53.
- Terada, Rei. *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the "Death of the Subject"*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey, 2005.
- Thompson, Leonard Montearth. *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- South Africa. Dept. of Justice & Constitutional Development. *Trespass Act*. Web. 23 Jun. 2015. <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/acts_full.html>
- Tully, James. *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his Adversaries*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.

- Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.
- Vadde, Aarthi. "The Backwaters Sphere: Ecological Collectivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Arundhati Roy." *MFS* 55.3 (2009): 522-44.
- Vázquez, José Santiago Fernández. "Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial *Bildungsroman*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 37 (2002): 85-106.
- Waldron, Jeremy. *The Right to Private Property*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988. Print.
- Walker, Cheryl. "The Limits to Land Reform: Rethinking 'the Land Question.'" *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 31.4 (2005): 805-824.
- Watson, Stephen. "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee." *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996. 13-36.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. London: Vintage, 2001.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Stephen Kalburg. 3rd Roxbury ed. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2002.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. "Petro-magic-realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature." *Postcolonial Studies* 9.4 (2006): 449-464.
- . "The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The Plaasroman Tradition in an Era of Land Reform." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 90-113.

- West, Martin. "Confusing Categories: Population Groups, National States and Citizenship." *South African Keywords: The Uses & Abuses of Political Concepts*. Ed. Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp. Claremont: David Philip, 1988. 100-110.
- Western, John. "Knowing One's Place: 'The Coloured People' and The Group Areas Act in Cape Town." *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*. Ed. David Ley and Marwyn S. Samuels. Chicago: Maaroufa Press, 1978. 297-318.
- Williams, Eric Eustace. *Capitalism & Slavery*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994. Print.
- Wright, Derek. "Black Earth, White Myth: Coetzee's *Michael K.*" *Modern Fiction Studies*. 38. (1992): 435-444.
- . *New Directions in African Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Wright, Timothy. "The Art of Evasion: Writing and the State in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K.*" *Journal of Literary Studies*. 28.3 (2012): 55-76.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.