

The Difference Aesthetics Makes

On the Humanities “After Man”

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Cover art: Allan deSouza, “He gazed into the liquid
darkness in which desires drowned, from where the
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Introduction

The Difference Aesthetics Makes

Our present arrangements of knowledge . . . were put in place in the nineteenth century as a function of the epistemic/discursive constitution of the “figure of Man.” . . . Therefore, the unifying goal of minority discourse . . . will necessarily be to accelerate the conceptual “erasing” of the figure of Man. If it is to effect such a rupture, minority discourse must set out to bring closure to our present order of discourse. —SYLVIA WYNTER, “On Disenchanted Discourse”

I write in the conviction that sometimes it is best to sabotage what is inexorably to hand. —GAYATRI SPIVAK, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

While it is impossible to ignore the manifold adverse effects of the corporatization and intensifying privatization of the university on the humanities, neither is it possible to stand simply in defense of the disciplinary formations clustered under the rubric of “the humanities,” which have been and continue to be instrumental to the production and sustenance of social hierarchies and their subtending structures and material inequalities. This, the overarching proposition of this book, comes of acknowledging that the humanities and their corollary disciplinary structures have long been central to the organization and conduct of social life constituting Western Civilization.¹ The history of the humanities and the disciplinary structures organizing their emergence is of a piece with the history of the civilizational discourses subtending the legitimation of empire and capital, and bespeaks the onto-epistemologies that have come to secure liberal modernity’s common sense. In this light, the crisis confronting the humanities calls less for their

defense and instead prompts the crafting of a vision of what a defensible humanities might be and do, and how it differs from its dominant iteration.

This book pursues such a project. I try to elaborate the principles and concepts of this other humanities, derived from what I provisionally refer to as “illiberal humanisms.” Radically different from liberal humanism and its cognate humanities, these other humanisms, these other humanities, have long existed and percolate institutionally largely within and through minoritized discourses. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* records my effort to enunciate this alternative. The illiberal humanities are directed toward the protection and flourishing of people and of ways of being and knowing and of inhabiting the planet that liberal humanism, wrought through the defining structures of modernity, tries so hard to extinguish. They are part of the project of “bring[ing] to closure our present order of discourse,” as Sylvia Wynter elegantly puts it, such that “the human” is and can be thought and apprehended for the fullness and radical diversity of being aggressively discounted in and by bourgeois liberal humanism and its contemporary materialization through neoliberal ideologies.²

This project is pointedly inspired by Wynter, from whose writings this book takes its subtitle. Throughout her capacious work, she has insisted on taking Western humanism and its manifestations in the practices of racial colonialism as objects of knowledge. Several decades ago, Wynter cautioned against the seductions of incorporation into the institution in the course of theorizing the need to go “beyond the grounding analogic of the episteme or ‘fundamental arrangements of knowledge’ of which our present practice of literary criticism (in effect of normal ‘majority discourse’) is an interconnected component.”³ This includes going “beyond the ontology of the figure of man and the empowering *normalizing* discourses with which this ‘figure,’ as the projected model/criterion of being of the globally dominant Western-European bourgeoisie, is still enchantedly constituted.”⁴ Wynter establishes, in other words, the need for us to engage the human, to think and work “after Man.”

My effort to do so by drawing out illiberal humanisms and nominating them as such may be understood as an attempt to give positive weight to alternatives to liberal humanism—that is, to specify the content and contours of such alternatives so that in collective, collaborative form, they may shift the grounds of sensibility, from what we are called to stand against to what we will stand for under the penumbra of the humanities. For reasons

I discuss more fully later in this introduction, I emphasize and use aesthetic inquiry as a method necessary to bringing illiberal humanisms to the fore. Perhaps counterintuitively, because of the role of aesthetics in securing the common sense of bourgeois liberal modernity, aesthetic inquiry provides entry to the apprehension of illiberal, uncommon sensibilities. It is the procedure for calling into question the structures and processes of (e)valuation that subtend the *sensus communis* and the means by which sensibilities that differ and dissent from liberal common sense are brought to bear. This book unfolds by attending to this double-voiced quality of the aesthetic. As a method, aesthetic inquiry insists that we acknowledge a dialectical relationship between liberal and illiberal humanisms. By doing so, it illuminates the need to activate ways of knowing cognizant of the exponentially greater power and authority that has secured liberalism in the structuring of modernity, and submits that the defuncting of that authority cannot be accomplished without the elaboration of understandings of the human and cognate rationalities afforded by subjugated knowledges. As I suggest in what follows, aesthetic inquiry emphasizes sensibility as a crucial domain of knowledge and politics; it affords recognition of both the relations and practices of power that legitimate and naturalize certain ideas over others, and the knowledge and ways of living subjugated or disavowed in the process. My effort here is to emphasize poesis in critique—to amplify, by routing through aesthetics, the presence and potential of alternatives to liberal humanist onto-epistemologies that give rise to the narrow definition of the human around which the modern condition has been organized.⁵

I take as a point of departure for this project the by now familiar, wide-ranging critiques of liberal humanism. They have established the falsity of and damages done by its claims to universality and resoundingly decried its uses and dissemination toward the ends of imperialism and colonialism, White supremacy and capitalism, environmental devastation, patriarchy, and compulsory normativization of multiple kinds. Cathected to liberalism, this humanism has both relied on and naturalized the liberal subject as the ideal human. Accordingly, this reigning humanism advances the notion that goodness, prosperity, and freedom follow from humanity's constitution by discrete and self-conscious individuals in possession of the capacity to transcend subjective experience by sheer will tethered to the faculty of reason. Liberal humanism posits the sovereignty and autochthony of the human even as—or precisely because—it justifies the conquest and dispossession,

enslavement and eradication that constitute the course of liberalism in its intimate partnership with capitalism.

While others have responded to or advanced these critiques by focusing attention away from the human—toward objects and animals, for example—I hesitate to cede the ground of humanism, a reluctance out of which this book in part grew. I think we need more rather than less attention to and accounts of human activity and behavior, accounts that, contra liberal humanism, take as axiomatic the humanity and humanism of precisely those people sacrificed to the liberal ideal. I am interested not so much in arguing who counts as human as I am in claiming humanism as a name designating efforts to proliferate ways of being and knowing radically disidentified from its liberal iteration. To be clear, I am not arguing against other approaches to thinking in difference from liberal humanism; I am, instead, arguing for the emancipation of the human from liberalism's grasp. I wish to claim rather than cede the potency of the construct, to take seriously the parochiality of liberalism's account of the human and bring forward the articulations that insist on the human as a social entity and worldly being, that acknowledge the stubborn hold of liberalism but refuse to collapse into its fold.

I write from the belief that we need to articulate a common ground through the interaction of the specificities of our uncommon bases and practices of knowledge; we—those who are committed to the twofold project of critiquing normativities and the violence of the status quo, and working toward and for alternatives—need to activate ways of going beyond the sometimes strenuous demands of disciplinarity and professionalization, ways that are not so much interdisciplinary but are instead deliberately promiscuous. The dictates of the university demand that we identify categorically—as Asian Americanists, literary critics, historians, queer theorists, and so on—as a shorthand for our intellectual and political genealogies. My elaboration in this book of an illiberal humanities derives in part from the hunch that it may act as an intellectual space for collaborating across and in spite of institutionalized knowledge formations, to challenge disciplinary divisions and the continuing stultifying consequences of liberal and neoliberal multicultural ideologies and corresponding structures. Illiberal humanities in this respect is a construct I offer to provide theoretical leverage; it acts as a counterhegemonic point of entry into illuminating the relationship of knowledge practices to structures and relationships of power. They can thus no more be contained within specific programs or units than can theory

writ large. In this broad-scoping way, illiberal humanities bear the promise of gathering a critical mass constituted in and by an undisciplined relationship to the university. It is the site of the “strange affinities” of which Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong write, a space of encounters necessary to apprehending the world in uncommonsensical ways.⁶ In that spirit and against customary practice, here, I have paid little heed to remaining faithful to any intellectual tradition. I invoke Enlightenment philosophies alongside Caribbeanist epistemologies, Asian Americanist critique with theorizations of Blackness, queer theory and literary studies, and so on. My hope is that these perhaps unexpected encounters will create openings for thinking in unhabituated ways; I believe they have done so for me.

The humanisms sketched in this project are illiberal in their difference from liberalism’s tenets, but are not a simple substitute for liberal humanism. Rather, illiberal humanisms bespeak an orientation that recognizes liberal humanism as but one version, one that has come to have the effect of truth through the powerful machinery of modernity. Illiberal humanisms are palpable, available to apprehension, in the thought and creative work of precisely those subjugated by and in the name of liberal humanism. In and through them, relationality and entanglement rather than individuality and authochthony as the grounds of human ontology come to the fore; bourgeois aspirations are illuminated for their fundamental meanness; and a fuller, embodied accounting of reason and rationality emerges. In this, I follow the lead of the artists, writers, and thinkers—sometimes all in one—whose work prompts sustained attention to the human after Man. Langston Hughes, Lan Samantha Chang, Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Morrison, Ruth Ozeki, Monique Truong, Carrie Mae Weems, Sarah Sze, and Allan deSouza offer work that show and tell us of humanism in an illiberal key. I mean quite literally that I have followed their lead, in that the thinking I offer here comes of trying to make sense (out) of their work, by engaging their ideas and entering their sensibilities. Their work thus functions less as evidence for an argument than as primary interlocutors in this project. In fact, this relationship to their work and ideas is a facet of illiberal humanist pedagogy, wherein mastery is displaced by the prompt to collective thought, and subjects (critics) and objects (texts) are understood in their mutuality. Relationality, as this book suggests, is as much a principle for organizing knowledge production as it is a reference to a condition of being.

The overarching questions with which I am concerned are these: Can

the humanities be oriented toward the ends of generating and proliferating imaginaries disidentified from the ideologies and logics of liberalism and derived instead from attention to the entangled histories of and ongoing connection among the impoverishment of peoples and worlds, enslaved and gendered labor, Indigenous dispossession, developmentalism, and knowledge work? What pedagogies and practices afford the generation and proliferation of imaginaries organized by the radical, irrevocable relationality of these connections? The project at hand is to identify and undo the occlusions of entangled histories by such institutions of knowledge and acculturation as universities, and thus make our knowledge practices accountable to and for them. Concurrently, it is to elicit subjects and social structures disinvested in the consignment of such knowledge to either the realm of past history or the sanitized sphere of pure knowledge, and informed and shaped instead by its ongoingness, its presence and active impact in and on the here and now.

Contexts and Genealogies

Perhaps the influence of cultural studies on this present project is already clear. Explicitly, in a theoretical register, the political edge of aesthetic inquiry rests in its function as an approach that re-sounds what Stuart Hall, in a 1980 essay, helpfully identified as one of the key governing paradigms characterizing British cultural studies of that era, namely, the “culturalist.” Growing out of the work of Raymond Williams, the culturalist paradigm emphasizes the study of culture, theorized to refer to “a whole way of life” (Williams, quoted in Hall)—that is, as the analysis of “relationships between elements in a whole way of life.” Hall clarifies, “‘Culture’ is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the ‘mores and folkways’ of societies. . . . It is threaded through *all* social practices, and is the sum of their interrelationship.”⁷⁷ It is thus the task of the critic to illuminate and analyze “those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves—in ‘unexpected identities and correspondences’ as well as in ‘discontinuities of an unexpected kind’—within or underlying *all* social practices.”⁷⁸ Oriented thus, my use of the aesthetic is with a view toward investigating how it coordinates relationships between elements in the whole way of life to which we commonly give the name modernity, including those discontinuities, those subjugated ways

of life and knowing, that have persisted as integral if disavowed elements of the current conjuncture.

While Hall was writing in an era (the late 1970s–early ’80s) defined by the formalization of what we have become accustomed to calling neoliberalization in economic and social policies, the project of investigating the terrain of (un)common sensibility has renewed exigency now. As the recent surge of student activism on campuses across the world attests, the intensifying inequality along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, and caste that describes the global condition localizes in the curricular and social experiences of students. Understood as a historical phenomenon, globalization most often refers to the contemporary establishment and multifaceted and sometimes contradictory consequences of the worldwide integration of finance, technology, economy, and culture. Thoroughly uneven in influence and effect, the widening and acceleration of interconnectedness characteristic of this era has had a pronounced effect on both the idea and practical life of the university.

The realms of the economic and the educational, intimately linked from the inception of the university, now appear increasingly to dissolve into each other such that “audit culture” all too accurately describes the global scene of education as much as that of the corporation.⁹ As Ned Rossiter observes, despite the quite disparate effects of globalization across the world, there is a “distinctive homogeneity” in much of the educational policies of the globalized world.¹⁰ The everyday lives as well as career itineraries of academics are tethered to mechanisms of accounting whereby both material resources and capital accrue to productivity measured in quantity often delinked from questions of quality or social significance, and the embrace of metrics of efficiency buttresses the increasing reliance on contingent faculty who are regularly paid unlivable wages. As the university has transformed along these lines, that it may not be viable as a site of intellectual work critical of power and policy is emerging as an increasingly compelling truth.¹¹ The interests of the academy, the marketplace, and the state grow increasingly to be one and the same, with resources flowing to potentially patentable research and away from work less easily commodified.

In the domain of educational policy, both within and outside of the United States, the global now serves as an aspiration (e.g., the production of a global citizenry) as well as a marketing strategy, and is deployed toward the ends of enhancing national competitiveness in the global marketplace.

Globalization has wrought distinctive divisions of labor that correlate with the shift to the particular form capitalism has taken to establish what has saliently been called the Knowledge Economy. While modes of production and labor that emerged in earlier eras continue, they have been supplemented and in some respects overwritten by the commodification of innovation.¹² The university has in this context been a distinctively important site of globalization. In a Knowledge Economy, higher education gains greater prominence as an apparatus of national competitiveness, one dedicated to the production of innovation, and the enormous expansion of state-sponsored universities across the world bespeaks this condition.¹³ U.S. colleges and universities have leveraged the value of a U.S. degree in the global economic context by establishing and bolstering international branches.¹⁴ At the same time, internationalization of the student bodies of U.S. universities and colleges has proceeded apace, with a record high of some 975,000 international students in the 2014–15 academic year. Students from India, China, and Brazil account for most of the 10 percent growth from the previous academic year, and students from China constitute a third of the entire number. The internationalization of the student body in U.S. universities is clearly a function of the sharply heavier reliance that academic institutions must have on private sources (tuition dollars and private donors and foundations) in the face of the withdrawal of public funds, but is often rhetorically justified in terms of the opportunity it provides for domestic student interaction with their international counterparts—this, in order better to be prepared for the globalized world.¹⁵

Within this shifting context, belief in higher education's ability to secure the social mobility promised as part of the American dream is deeply shaken. Remember that social mobility is an index of the significance of demography to life circumstances and involves complex sets of interactions between inherited and acquired capital.¹⁶ In the United States especially, public education is meant to lessen this significance by providing opportunity to accumulate more capital regardless of circumstances of origin. The 1862 Morrill Act ("An Act donating Public lands to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts") established "the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college [in each state] where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the

mechanic arts . . . in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (Section 4), and became the basis for the establishment of public land grant universities. Designed to address the situation of White farmers who were confronting industrialization and corollary waning of their significance to the economy, the 1862 act had an 1890 iteration, which provided for what we now refer to as the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs.¹⁷ Along with the Homestead Act passed in the same year, the 1862 Morrill Act documents the seizure of Indigenous lands—some two million square miles—in the service of democracy.¹⁸ This was not only or even primarily a process of the direct transfer of land, but rather was characterized by the financialization of land—its transformation into real estate (the land was given to states to be sold, not to be built upon directly)—and, in this regard, enacts the concept of education as an investment in (the future of the nation through) its citizenry. The democratizing function of higher education was consolidated as a governing fantasy in the mid-twentieth century, characterized in the United States as a period of relative prosperity for more of the working population. “The collective settlement,” as Lauren Berlant concisely explains, “was that as long as the economy was expanding everyone would have a shot at creatively inventing their version of the good life, and not just assuming the position allotted to them by embedded class, racial, and gendered histories of devalued and unrecognized economic and social labor. The half century since the collective settlement was established embeds many generations in a binding fantasy.”¹⁹ The 1944 GI Bill (the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act) underwrote a substantial increase in college enrollment, followed by the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 that provided for the growth of community colleges, the Higher Education Act of 1964, and the 1972 creation of Pell Grants and the Indian Education Act, which collectively extended and further concretized the principles of access and the combination of preparation for work and liberal training embedded in the Morrill acts.

It is thus in light of this history of legislative/public commitment to education as a pathway to social mobility that the current withdrawal of public monies from education plays out as a sign of both transformation of the ideal of democracy and its relationship to the economic interests of the nation. As Berlant puts it, “the revocation of educational democracy, a stand for a public investment in everyone who wanted a shot [at the good life],” translates

W. E. B. Du Bois's incisive and era-defining question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" to "How does it feel to be a bad investment?"²⁰ Educational policies enacted in a variety of nations that are aspirational or active participants in the global economy echo this logic and rhetoric.²¹ What makes a citizen, a nation, competitive in the global marketplace? What is the value and content of education in this context?

It is unsurprising given these conditions that the defense of the humanities has largely taken the form of arguments for their instrumental relevance—for example, that businesses desire the kinds of critical thinking and writing skills that are the stuff of humanistic training, or that the encounters with diverse cultures afforded by a liberal arts curriculum are necessary preparation for the emergent global citizen. While I understand the traction such arguments have, this book takes a different tack in addressing the current situation, partly as a result of two observations. The first is the acknowledgment that insofar as such defenses are designed to forestall and reverse defunding, they have simply by and large failed. The weakness of liberalism as a defense against the voraciousness of racial capitalism and colonialism's pasts and presents is evident in every sector of society, not least in the university. Such failure presents not so much an opportunity—laden as that term is with optimistic connotation—as an exigent condition that compels reckoning with liberalism's end(s), with its participatory history in the precipitation of the current conjuncture. That is, and second, such arguments seem tacitly if not actively to affirm the rightness of the liberal vision, without regard for the destructive effects on the world and on most people of the developmental narrative advanced by the tethering of educational democracy to a liberal-capitalist vision of social mobility. In that light, I think we cannot be satisfied to remain within the dominant terms of debate. I hope with this book to bolster and contribute to a different kind of conversation, one that deliberately brackets the instrumental in order to invite attention to the foundational histories and assumptions underlying the defensive position.

I suggest that "the university" be understood as an idea and a site structured by the aspirations of a given social formation. While it is lived in the particularities of its manifestation as a specific institution, the idea of the university frames and reflects the general systems and hierarchies of value and evaluation that constitute a society's reigning ideals. Though academic discourse, however politically engaged it might be, is alone insufficient to

the task of transforming the world at large, the university remains an index of broad sociopolitical, cultural, and economic conditions such that its practices and arrangements cannot not be addressed. In the United States, only a small fraction of the population will attend college; smaller still the numbers who pursue graduate education, and yet even smaller those who will join the professoriate.²² If the twentieth century saw the deliberate expansion of access to college education under the provisions and resources of such manifestly nation-building policies as the GI Bill as well as the agendas of explicitly progressive-minded social movements, we are in this century witnessing the narrowing of educational access largely as a consequence of politico-economic policies that simultaneously increase and individualize costs.²³ That these foreclosures are occurring despite the presence and activities of politicized scholar-teachers and associated units in the university is a stark reminder that if the transformation of the university is to be meaningful in any substantial way, it cannot be by holding its perfectability as an ideal or goal to be pursued by means of striving for representational equality. Rather, we might bear in mind that the university is a specific site of the articulation of hegemonic ideologies and counterhegemonic formations; or, in other words, that the university socializes capital and the state.²⁴ The challenge, then, is to particularize how to take advantage of this positioning, not in defense of the university but instead to understand why and how it continues to operate as a technology of social stratification, and whether it may be made to work otherwise.

The promise of the good life at the core of the ideal of social mobility through educational investment is multiply structured as a sacrificial model.²⁵ Not only does it require individual sacrifice (often gendered and generational—e.g., on behalf of the children), but it also has demanded the compulsory and quite literal sacrifice of Indigenous and enslaved persons. The contemporary rhetoric of whether college is a good investment is in this regard of a piece with the principles of social mobility central to U.S. democracy; as a value, it disavows but is nevertheless contingent on the violence foundational to the nation. As Craig Steven Wilder has compellingly documented, U.S. universities are founded in the histories of conquest and dispossession, enslaved labor and global capital, that underlie the history of the United States. From the impact of the economies of slavery to the specific kinds of labor borne by people of color, and from the civilizing mission of colleges in their engagements with native peoples to the production

of race through racist knowledge, “American colleges were not innocent or passive beneficiaries of conquest and colonial slavery,” but instead “stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization build on bondage.”²⁶ Neither have they been institutions built upon gender and sex equality; the struggles of women to gain access to higher education unfold alongside the structurally supported social and cultural emphasis on the achievement of cis-heteronormative men of a certain class.²⁷ The contemporary resurgence of focus on racism and on violence against women on U.S. campuses reflects this long history and broad social context and exemplifies the inadequacy of access as a remedy for inequality organized by racial, colonial, and heteropatriarchal ideologies foundational to the U.S. nation-state. The oppositional social and political movements that transformed higher education in the late middle of the twentieth century built upon ideas and practices of dissent that were equally a part of the nation’s foundation, and contested anew the ongoingness of these histories of subjugation and exclusion and of the accumulation of wealth for a few by the impoverishment of many. The contributions of higher education to such processes of social hierarchization along intersecting axes of sociopolitical identity were called to task in ways that reflect the embeddedness of education in the fabric of the social.

Contemporary forms of activism call for renewed attention to that relationship in ways that acknowledge the long history of higher education’s complicity in making race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and other categories of sociopolitical identity in all their intersectionality matter to the possibilities of life and the distribution of death, both biological and social. In part, my concern in this book is to reflect on the work of what I will refer to as minoritized discourse formations given these grounds. Practitioners of politically engaged work, including those of feminist and queer theorizing, race and ethnic studies, disability and Indigenous studies—collectively, minoritized discourses—are explicitly aware of the structural conditions within which we work, an awareness that contextualizes and informs the ways we formulate and approach our objects of inquiry. As people whose scholarly genealogies are constitutively misaligned with, even as we are contextualized by, the university’s role as an apparatus of the nation-state and of capital, scholars of minoritized discourses cannot and do not easily inhabit the academy—a situation that Lisa Lowe cogently formulated two decades ago as an “inevitable paradox” resulting from the institutionalization of fields like ethnic studies.²⁸ Such institutionalization provides

material resources and yet also submits critical inquiry “to the demands of the university and its educative function of socializing subjects into the state.”²⁹ These institutionalized formations remain important sites for oppositional critique, and/but it is also the case that now, as Roderick Ferguson has shown, difference is contemporarily “managed” by universities in ways that attest to the effectiveness of liberal and neoliberal articulations of race, gender, and sexuality, ones that evacuate the historical materiality giving them meaning and displace the questions of power and legitimacy that drove their emergence as key terms of academic discourse.³⁰ Within this climate, urgency attaches to the work of creating and sustaining efforts to further the epistemological and institutional transformations of which the establishment of ethnic and women’s and gender studies programs was an important part, but was not the only or end goal. By emphasizing as a key part of such an agenda the wholesale and radical rethinking of our received humanist traditions of thought, we may, I believe, better position ourselves to remember that the establishment and protection of programs is but one facet of a much bigger project oriented toward the transformation of the social field.

I offer this book also as a contribution and response to the cogent critiques of identitarian politics and paradigms that have prompted critical reflection on identity as an organizing principle for institutionalized forms of politically engaged discourse. Relatedly, my aim is to contribute to efforts to address the (neo)liberal academy, characterized by an intense compartmentalization of knowledge that registers not only in disciplinarity, but also within disciplines as well. Criticism of the politics of identity has emerged along with the institutionalization of a variety of minority discourse formations, many of which are constitutively interdisciplinary. The institutional establishment of such fields as Asian American studies, women’s studies, LGBT studies, and so on has meant that existing disciplines could remain, at least at a radical level, relatively untouched by difference. Moreover, strikingly, the albeit uneven success of institutionalization correlates with increasing and multifaceted material inequality characterizing the present. What is the responsibility of politically engaged intellectual work in and to the present context?

In the present, characterized by the nonequivalent, thoroughly entangled phenomena of war, environmental disaster, new and continuing forms of settler colonialism, poverty, racism, gendered violence, and ongoing battles

over the legislation of desires and intimacies by which sexuality is publicly materialized, it is imperative to think hard about how the academy can proliferate alternatives to and critiques of the ideologies that would have us accept the inevitability of the status quo—which is to say, how it can proliferate pedagogies and practices of alterity through criticism and research and practices of imagination that originate from other(ed) grounds. Along these lines, I hope this book will encourage and invigorate the kind of work that is determined to collaborate across institutional boundaries, to challenge the stultifying consequences of (neo)liberal multiculturalism both within and outside of the academy, from standpoints that attempt in a variety of ways, all important and all delimited, to speak the condition of injustice and induce more livable worlds into being. This is not to posit the academy, academic work, or certainly this book as a remedy to neoliberal culture and politics, but instead to ask whether and how these conditions enjoin critical attention to our role in the reproduction of hegemonic social formations.

Accordingly, we might ask anew, how do and might the knowledge and teaching principles and practices we elaborate, occupy, and employ be recruited toward the broadly ethicopolitical aims of something like greater justice? Of lessening the determinative effects of the circumstances of the accidents of birth? Of illuminating the ways that the nonequivalent accidents of geography, class structure, racialization, gender relations, sexuality, indigeneity, and so on organize the material conditions of existence in aggressively hierarchical ways? These “accidents” are of course anything but random or neutral. Instead, they are structurally and culturally conditioned, coordinated by political and social relations unfolding in multiple scales. Naturalized narratives of the willful and rationally intentional liberal and neoliberal subject responsible for securing her or his own good life (the liberal-ethical subject), or the continuing stronghold of a developmental notion of civilization (dependent on the liberal-political subject), that asserts and assumes the privileged destiny of humanity, disavow that overdetermination. In concert with the abundance of meticulous studies that endeavor to suss out the purposeful grounds of these accidents, my hope is that this book will suggest ways that aesthetic inquiry has something distinctive to contribute to this work. This book unfolds by attending to particularities, to incommensurabilities, to incomparability, each as made available by aesthetics, in hopes of—with the hope of—suggesting the difference aesthetics makes.

The chapters that follow elaborate the characteristics introduced here. In the remainder of this introduction, I focus on explaining the importance of aesthetics to the project of bringing to bear illiberal humanisms. As I discuss in what follows, the history of the aesthetic gives it distinctive purchase in the critique of bourgeois liberalism and its corollary structures of knowledge, and makes aesthetics signally important to the project of thinking, working, and living after Man. Aesthetic inquiry as mobilized in this book orients critical focus on the conditions of possibility that subtend the dominant order, to the production and sustenance of the *sensus communis*—of common sense—and insists upon the double valence of sensibility as a reference to both what is held to be reasonable and what is viscerally experienced. Derived from subjugated and/or otherwise minoritized art and writings, aesthetic inquiry indexes the difference aesthetics has made and continues to make in the service of the Order of Man, and simultaneously gives texture and specificity to illiberal humanism.

On Aesthetic Inquiry

In the register of academic discourse, this book recalibrates the ways in which aesthetic inquiry and cultural studies appear to be oriented toward quite different and even fundamentally oppositional ends. Such an understanding is evident in the familiar story of the culture wars of the later twentieth century. In the context of literary studies in the United States, this story tells of the shift to cultural studies approaches underwritten by Marxist, post-structural, and postmodern theories: “works” become “texts,” and the definition of literary value and the politics of canonicity come to the fore as flashpoints of critical debate. Catalyzed by activists and critics (sometimes one and the same) of the post-civil rights era, that shift resulted from their illumination of the interrelation of education, acculturation, and social stratification.³¹ A variety of scholars taking ethnic studies and feminist approaches denounced divisions between “high” and “low” culture and undermined the idea of a bias-free subject as the arbiter of universal value. Aesthetics, strongly associated with such conservative formalist movements as New Criticism and aestheticism—movements working in the service of deeply entrenched hierarchized notions of culture—receded from prominence, and textual and curricular diversification increased quite substantially. In brief, where established modes of literary study aimed to advance a

putatively disinterested practice of evaluating greatness based on objectively neutral formal properties, feminist critics and scholars of ethnic literatures, among others, argued the nonneutrality and ideological underpinnings of objectivity and disinterestedness.

One consequence of the culture wars was the yoking of studies of ethnic and women's literatures to the institution of U.S. literary studies as a corrective to the erasure of minoritized subjects from the naturalized scene of the curriculum. In effect, the scholars/activists of that era were recognizing and responding to the racialization, class ordering, and gendering of literary studies by means of aestheticization, or in other words the production and hierarchization of difference according to a process of (e)valuation that disavowed its own historicity. The interrelated politics of canonicity and representation that organized the culture wars in the U.S. academy converged in such a way as to inaugurate cultural studies as an approach critically aware of such materialities and politics. For those working with canonical texts and writers, this shift to a cultural studies approach entailed acknowledging the ideological work and material specificity of cultural expression and practices of classification, including aesthetic inquiry. Curricular diversification and the ongoing and unevenly successful efforts to establish institutional formations (programs, institutes, departments) that take as their primary objects of study minoritized cultures, histories, and so on, describe this chapter of the culture wars.

Another and parallel story accompanies this one and takes as its protagonists those working with minoritized literatures, for whom the consequences of this shift from "literature" to "culture" and "work" to "text" were quite different. For one, that academic practices are ideological was a founding premise of minoritized discourses, meaning that its critics had a different point of departure for negotiating the role of aesthetics in critical practice. Even as minoritized literatures were being institutionalized by challenges to the idea of universality, the paradigm shift to cultural studies also complicated minoritized discourses' relationship to aesthetic inquiry by bringing with it what in hindsight has been understood as an overemphasis on minoritized writings as political or anthropological documents rather than artistic creations. Coupled with the institutional validation of minoritized literary studies as a sign of a commitment to diversity, such literatures have in the main been framed and studied in terms of authenticity, racism, and resistance rather than literariness *per se*. In other words, "greatness" and

“difference,” aesthetics and politics, were made to diverge, with the former tacitly if not explicitly associated with politically conservative scholarship, and the latter connoting various forms of minoritized discourse. Ethnic and women’s literatures have in this respect been conceptualized as important to study *because* of politics.³² Critically discussed and institutionally valued through standards of authenticity and bureaucratic investments in diversity, the distinctively aesthetic qualities of such work and the metacritical questions of whether or to what ends it is important to study those distinctive qualities has been underaddressed.³³ My point is not to argue the greatness of minoritized literatures per se; rather, it is to observe that in the segregation of aesthetics and politics, the aesthetics of minoritized literatures—the sensibilities and the genre of the human and cognate rationalities brought forward by them—have remained covered over.

I am among a number of critics who have taken up some version of these matters in the field of literary-cultural studies. This contemporary turn toward aesthetics finds broad traction in part because of the fatigue in such fields as Asian American studies with the kind of political critique that is somewhat predictable in its rendering of resistance, agency, and subjectivity. Some have emphasized formalist modes of criticism while others have centered affect as a critical approach alternative to rationalist political critique, and this latter work has enabled us to ask about our affiliative attachments to our objects of inquiry, as well as highlighting the limitations of rationalist critique in accounting for the complexities of lives and histories, subjectivities and politics.³⁴ The aesthetic turn and the affective turn are closely aligned moves in this sense—that is, in the ways that both are bracketing politics (as in, “the politics of”) to allow for other kinds of knowledge and other modes of apprehension to emerge. The historicity of the aesthetic and its relationship to the humanities—to aesthetic education in particular—underwrite its thematization in this book.

The aesthetic is perhaps most familiar as a term used to describe a set of characteristics (as in “the aesthetics of”) and judgments thereof, or precisely in contradistinction to politics (or, in other words, as without immediate material consequences and distant from the poles of power). Associated strongly in common critical discourse with the critical faculty of judgment and bearing conflicting legacies of deployment, the aesthetic can seem simultaneously so overdetermined and expansive a term as to be analytically meaningless. These uses belie its importance. Embraced or disavowed, its

persistent presence in the intellectual traditions that ground the epistemologies organizing our received knowledge practices is indicative of the ways in which the aesthetic is deeply embedded in the history and structures of modern thought.³⁵ Its persistence is thus suggestive of the promise that aesthetic inquiry holds as a method of illuminating the historicities and particular shape that dominant humanism and its corollary institutions take.

More specifically, the aesthetic's history as an axis along which the kinds of persons idealized as the modern liberal subject have been distinguished from those incapable of achieving such subjectivity speaks to the long-lived ways that it has operated as a limit test in the articulation of liberal humanism and underwrites its analytic and poetic power.³⁶ The turn away from theological explanations of human ontology and toward scientific rationalism that crystallizes in the eighteenth century posed as a central philosophical task the need for Reason to prove itself the secure ground out of which Truth would emerge.³⁷ How can we come to know ourselves? How do we achieve self-consciousness in ways alternative to deistic, theological understandings of the human's relation to the natural world? If all selves are sovereign—individual and unique—upon what basis are they (should they be) connected? Upon what basis does humanity cohere? The aesthetic experience—understood in this Enlightenment context as the pleasure experienced in the encounter with the beautiful and the sublime in especially the natural world—highlighted the limits of scientific rationalism to account fully for the aspirational humanity posited through the debates out of which Enlightenment emerged.³⁸

We can in light of this history understand critical recognition of the non-neutrality of standards of evaluation as registering a first-order distribution that occurs at the *proto*-political level to define and classify humanity according to the capacity for aesthetic judgment. The ability to make proper aesthetic judgments—to be capable of achieving proper awareness of the truthful beauty of something—is a fundamental characteristic of the idealized modern subject, that enlightened representative of human potentiality central to Western modernity.³⁹ This mythic subject, Man, stabilized through the nineteenth-century Western European consolidation and expansion of nation and empire and the concomitant subordination of a host of dissenting ideas and philosophies.⁴⁰ This history—and this is broadly Jacques Rancière's point—registers the ways that politics are constitutively aesthetic. In other words, this radical, constitutive comparison that sorts

humans into different kinds based on their abilities to reason through aesthetic experience may be understood as itself aesthetic.⁴¹ In short, aesthetization produces racial difference as sensible in both valences—as reasonable (common sense) and as affectively available to apprehension.

What I am rehearsing in this summary form is how the problem of human ontology—What is the nature of human beingness in the absence of a deistic explanation?—is answered in the aftermath of Enlightenment by suppressing the contradiction between positing sovereign, distinct individuality and establishing the general properties of humanity. Kant's anthropological writings especially register the taxonomic production of racial difference as organized by geography and especially biology.⁴² Such "biocentricity," Wynter has shown, narrowly casts the definition of the human as primarily biological rather than social, with the effect of consolidating the ascription of fundamental differences among capacities to the seemingly irreducible register of the natural.⁴³ Considerable uncertainty as to the grounds and boundaries of human subjectivity characterized the Western European eighteenth century, and the scientific racism of the era reflects a drive to order captured in the taxonomic imperative.⁴⁴ In broad strokes, we may observe that post-Enlightenment, such uncertainty is managed by an appeal to universal humanity in the form of identity, buttressed by the co-extensive emergence of the nation-state as the dominant geopolitical form of modernity. The philosophical subordination of difference to identity that ensues inaugurates representational and identity politics.⁴⁵ Backed by the policing authority of the nation-state, the liberal citizen-subject acts as the formal category of such a politics, which effaces and abstracts the very material conditions of its emergence, namely, those of empire and capitalism.⁴⁶ Corporealized into sub- or unhuman bodies by the materializing processes of capital, empire, and the imposition of the nation-state as the naturalized and dominant geopolitical formation, the incapacity for proper aesthetic judgment signaled the difference between those who would and would not realize human potential by achieving full self-consciousness.⁴⁷

Given this history, it is no wonder that aesthetics has been met with wariness if not complete dismissal. This history also raises the question, however, as to what might come of bringing into the foreground the possibilities that are suppressed or occluded by the effacement of the potentiality of aesthetic encounter. In other words, if modernity is understood to be characterized by a compulsory aesthetic othering, mining the

radical unpredictability of art and being—before its designation as “art” and “human”—bears promise for reconceiving otherness itself.⁴⁸

Historicize in this long view the contemporary—the age of Derridean deconstruction and the radical challenges to the naturalness and inevitability of such a definition of humanity—and consider in these terms the postmodern assertion of the manufacturedness and violence of the modern narrative of a coherent, universal humanity. Moreover, put the ontological and epistemological uncertainty elaborated by postmodern critique in conversation with the dominant discourses on contemporary globalization that herald the abrogation of national sovereignty concomitant with the rise of transnational capitalism, and the urgency of attending to the antinomy of the universal and the particular emerges with renewed force. For, what we are living in now is a condition in which the economic, hyperrational, and deeply individualist subject has displaced the sociopolitical (civic) subject as the avatar of the universal.⁴⁹ Accumulation serves as the pathway to, if not self-consciousness, then self-fulfillment, and purchase power is the defining feature of civic life. The economic, of course, no more exhaustively captures the textures and complexities of life than does the political fully account for the operations of power. The arguments that insist on the paranational movements of capital that characterize contemporary history push us to consider the consequences and possibilities inaugurated by recognizing this time as a time of massive historical and onto-epistemological change akin to and animated by the intensity and scope of transformation associated retrospectively with the age of Enlightenment. This is to observe that we live and operate with the dense, unified temporality of “crumpled time” wherein the presentness of the past is acutely apprehensible.⁵⁰ This means reckoning with the conquest and colonialism, racism and cis-heteropatriarchy, upon which bourgeois liberalism is not only founded but also continues to operate; it means, following Jodi Byrd, displacing the lamentability of the production and dispossession of Indians with the grievability of Indigenous peoples continuing to claim sovereignty within the concretized structures of settler colonialism.⁵¹ It means, following Lisa Lowe, understanding the “intimacies of four continents” as the deep foundations upon which the contemporary world has been built.⁵² It means, following Christina Sharpe, sinking into the wake of slavery and the ways that its dehumanization pervades the very material substrate out of which the contemporary takes shape.⁵³ It means, following José Muñoz, sussing out the desires, the erotics, queer to

and queerly persistent despite the powerful ideologies and institutions that would eradicate them.⁵⁴ These are the orientations of illiberal humanisms.

The distinctive contribution of minoritized discourses to matters like these rests in their general and persistent reminder that modernity and its cognates largely fail to produce peace or proliferate freedom or stability for the majority of the world.⁵⁵ The translation of Sovereign power (the power of the Sovereign) to sovereignty (the power of the citizenry to self-regulate) that modernity narrates has been coextensive with a variety of historical and ongoing violence, executed regularly in the name of the national sovereignty. Ongoing Indigenous struggles and ex-colonial nationalisms speak to the power of sovereignty—literally, understood as bearing power over life and death, and conceptually, as a compelling aspiration that registers the sovereign nation's fantastic (or perhaps phantasmatic) ability to distribute hope.⁵⁶ Self-knowledge and intentionality go hand in hand to enliven a mimetic relationship between political and individual sovereignty—or so the story goes according to liberalism. That state of identification is not only grossly unevenly distributed (this is what minoritized discourses have shown over and over again), but is also dependent on a willfulness difficult if not impossible to sustain. Contrary to the pedagogies of (neo)liberalism, individuals cannot overcome the accidents of birth simply by dint of sheer will. Challenging those pedagogies is especially vital in the U.S. context, characterized as it is by its exceptionalist and meritocratic ideologies.⁵⁷

In this light, what Bruno Latour provocatively declares of the classification of knowledge practices resonates strongly: we have never been modern.⁵⁸ That is, history belies the inevitability of progressive Enlightenment as a mode of securing the future and full realization of humanity. It is, then, for all these reasons that we might turn to aesthetics. For, like modernity's others, the aesthetic inhabits the suppressed contradictions of modernity. The subjective experience of art, of difference, as a realm that has been subordinated to general Reason names modernity's alterity. The aesthetic is, categorically, the particular that is subsumed by the universal.

Jacques Rancière helps to clarify the political stakes of aesthetic inquiry. Aesthetics for Rancière refers in a broad sense to what he calls the "distribution of the sensible"—the modes by which activities and objects are associated with certain perceptions and ideas, resulting in the identification of art as such. In his view, aesthetics "refers to a specific regime of identifying and reflecting on the arts: [it is] a mode of articulation between ways of doing

and making, [and of] thinking about their relationships.”⁵⁹ This distribution manifests historically as distinct but overlapping regimes, which are various orders that serve as the grounds of a common social experience and to organize that experience by delimiting the roles that individuals may play in civic life. Analogous to the ways that for Kant, a priori concepts translate experience into understanding,⁶⁰ aesthetics for Rancière condition “what presents itself to sense experience”—they are structures that proffer and frame what can be heard and seen.⁶¹ Understood in this way, aesthetics may be recognized as simultaneously political (that is, conditioned by relations of power and their material manifestations) and the grounds upon which the political is constituted and perceived. The material conditions of history may not only be indexed by aesthetics (the regulation and distribution of sensibility and artistic capacity), but are also themselves fundamentally aesthetic in that they are brought forward to be sensed by (historiographic, archival, methodological) practices that (re)shape the sensibilities held in common. This returns us to asking again after the terms by which the ideal (neo)liberal subject is naturalized by and enters the domain of common sense. By keying us into the *sensus communis*, aesthetic inquiry affords critical recognition of the terms and aspirations of the dominant social order of which common sense is both a product and a facet. It allows us to specify how corporeality and cognition interact within the bounds of and through the parameters of a specific regime of sensibility.

In classical, Aristotelian terms, *sensus communis* actively referred to corporeality—to that which enables the specific senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) to coordinate syncretically what each distinctively perceives.⁶² This corporeal common sense leaves the specificity of each sense intact, and understands each as equally but incommensurably contributing to the ability of the body to apprehend the world it traverses. In contrast to the primacy of sight, of the privileged economy of the visual in the apparatuses of modernity, which subtends the privileging and double meaning of representation as referring to both political standing and reflective image, this nonmodern understanding gives rise to a human subjectivity formed in fuller, embodied relation to the world. As used in this book, aesthetic inquiry reactivates this fuller meaning, suppressed by the long-dominant Kantian tradition in the prioritization of a narrow understanding of cognition. Kant uses “*sensus communis*” to refer to the a priori accounting for the

possible judgment of others that is a part of the act of the judgment of taste; it is a necessary condition for specifically aesthetic judgment: “it is only under the presupposition that there is a common sense . . . I say, that the judgment of taste can be laid down.”⁶³ This sense-in-common is a requirement to judge something beautiful, for we must presuppose the possible agreement of others, the possible correspondence by and communicability of our experience of the beautiful to others, in order for aesthetic judgment to be understood as partially objective, that is, as in relation to the characteristics of a specific object. The judgment of taste is thus for Kant a “subjective universal,” a construct that intersects the subjectivity of aesthetic experience with the objectivity of cognition.⁶⁴ In short, the *sensus communis* refers to common sense as an invocation of what is presumed to be reasonable. A series of questions follow, ones with which this book is concerned: How is the *sensus communis* that is the condition and measure of reasonability formed? What are its governing structures, its sources of authority? How is that knowledge made to stand as a product of reason? By what legitimating authorities? By what right and what understanding of reason?

Within these questions lies the overtly political edge of aesthetic inquiry. As Rancière explains, community is a condition of politics, and community is itself cohered by sensibilities held in common, that is, the *sensus communis*. These sensibilities are understood to be partitioned in that they organize intelligibility: it is an “order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.”⁶⁵ This partitioning of the sensible, which is the common sense, determines the boundaries of the community (who belongs) and who may speak in and for it (who is authorized). Political engagement thus requires aesthetics, which means the apprehension of the ordering of sensibility by the *sensus communis*.⁶⁶ Corporeal, cognitive, and political, the *sensus communis* links the phenomena of sensation to the operations of reason and the subtending orders and ideologies of a time and place. It is in this regard a way of understanding the aesthetic as emergent from and affording critical attention to the forms in and by which body, mind, and sociality are related and take shape within a whole way of life.

Propositions

The chapters that follow sink into ideas introduced here. Chapters 1 and 2 together explain why and how it is that liberalism organizes the humanities in ways that continue to racialize and hierarchize people, contrary to its abstract values but very much in accordance with its historical formation and uses. These chapters work in tandem to promote deliberate disidentification from the practices, horizons, and the human and humanism of the liberal order. Lan Samantha Chang, Allan deSouza, Carrie Mae Weems, Langston Hughes, and Toni Morrison precipitate heightened sensitivity to the promise of foregoing attachment to the received humanities. They help us apprehend and overtly politicize the sense and sensibility of disidentification, toward the ends of disarticulating humanism and the humanities from liberalism.

The latter half of the book, then, turns to considering how, from this disarticulated, disidentified state, alternative humanisms and humanities are unconcealed. Illiberal in their incommensurability with liberalism's dictates and parameters, and amplified in writings by Leslie Marmon Silko, Ruth Ozeki, and Monique Truong, these alternatives generate models of organizing a humanities grounded in aesthetic rationality. These latter chapters, in other words, sketch a praxis of an illiberal humanities.

Through their discussions, these chapters forward a series of propositions that it is my intent to offer. In summary form, they are as follows:

1. Given the function of the contemporary/liberal humanities as an apparatus of modern U.S. nationalism, and given the long history of the contribution of the liberal humanism that subtends the humanities to the decimation of peoples, cultures, and lands, it is necessary to disidentify deliberately and organizationally from them.
2. By remembering that the visual is cathected to liberal representational politics within the dominant regime and, especially, to secure the racist common sense of the human of liberalism through the production and disciplinary regulation of the beautiful, the urgency of the project of bringing this current order (of Man) to closure through aesthetic inquiry unconfident in the primacy of the visual is brought to bear.
3. The disarticulation of humanism and the humanities from liberalism involves the delegitimation of the rationalism that secures the

authority of liberal ideology. This process elucidates an illiberal understanding of the human and corollary rationality based in the historically grounded, embodied knowledge subordinated within the liberal regime, which may provisionally be referred to as an *aesthetic rationality*.

4. Among the effects of disidentification and disarticulation in these contexts is the reclamation not only of the grounds of what constitutes reasonability but also of the constitution and meaning of the universal. The realization of a university that correlates with this reclaimed universal emerges as a project for the illiberal humanities.

With these propositions, with this book, I mean to issue invitations, to elicit interest and engagement with the ideas that come of the work and worlds that the dominant order works so hard to suppress, eradicate, and dismiss. They bring to bear sensibilities—feeling, thinking, knowing, and being—that are of the thickness of history and life, that orient us toward neither hope nor despair, but simply to work that is under way and that needs doing in order to proliferate the humanities after Man.