

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RACIAL NEOLIBERALISM IN THE
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVEL

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CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVEL

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LAY ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses the influence of neoliberalism—the idea that capitalism represents the ideal model of organization for every aspect of human life—on Black and Asian British writing from the 1980s to the present. In the context of mainstream analysis of the June 2016 Brexit vote as an expression of “white working class” disaffection with rising inequality, I focus on how coming-of-age narratives by Black and Asian writers complicate an unspoken implication of this popular explanation: that neoliberal reforms have unduly advantaged so-called “model” racial minorities. Through readings that emphasize how the Muslim and/as racialized protagonists of these texts experience the recoding of racism either in the covert guise of Islamophobia or through the aspirational idea that Britain is “post-racial,” I demonstrate the highly tenuous nature of what social and political belonging racialized subjects can find amid the increasing individualism of contemporary British society.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation responds to the notion that the economic success and social integration of one imaginary figure, the “model minority,” can explain the downward mobility of another, the “white working class” in post-Brexit Britain. Through intersectional readings of Black and Asian British fiction written during and after Margaret Thatcher’s prime ministership, I examine the model minority myth as providing a racist explanation for rising inequality, but also as a burdensome imperative of neoliberal aspiration to which racialized British subjects are increasingly subject. I trace the origins of this exclusionary account of racialized belonging to the account in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* of the political possibilities resulting from the collapse of anti-racist solidarities under the sign of Black British identity in the 1980s. I show that the author’s non-fictional responses to the subsequent controversy known as the Rushdie Affair work to close off these possibilities, serving instead to justify Islamophobia one specific means by which racial neoliberalism functions as what David Theo Goldberg calls “racism without racism.” I develop this analysis of Islamophobia as form of racial neoliberalism by turning to two novels that depict coming of age for diasporic Muslim British women, contrasting Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* as a normative narrative of feminist becoming through assimilation with Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*, which complicates the agency assumed to be conferred on “Third World Women” who migrate to the Global North. In my third and final chapter, I trace the model minority trope across differences in Black and Asian British communities as evidence of the empty aspiration of “post-racial” Britain, contrasting the attempt in Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* to posit the figure of the “rudeboy” as an alternative “outsider” figure of aspiration, with Zadie Smith’s “insider” depiction of the social alienation that results from approaching the embodiment of this racialized ideal in *NW*.

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Introduction: The Model Minority as Subject of Racial Neoliberal Literature

Capitalism has [...] profoundly changed the subjective experience and political significance of migration.

—Benedict Anderson, “Long-Distance Nationalism” (8)

[I]f we've found one thing to be true in Britain recently it's that we, the British, can find ourselves behaving strangely when we allow material realities to turn into symbols.

—Zadie Smith, “Fences”

In the aftermath of the 23 June 2016 referendum on Britain’s EU membership, the state of the nation is reflected in the circulation of two imaginary figures. When Brexit is posed as a potential solution to the problems with what Conservative tabloids and politicians have dubbed “Broken Britain,” the implication is that the country is broken for the first of these figures: the “white working class.”¹ The tendency to ascribe whiteness to working-class identity is the context in which John Lanchester diagnoses a nativist shift in the Overton Window—a term for the range of conventional mainstream political opinions—in the period prior to Brexit (“Brexit Blues”). One troubling corollary of this presumption is that the nation has become unduly preoccupied with facilitating the (economic) inclusion of its subjects of colour, to the disadvantage of its white subjects.² Most obviously, working-class people come in various races, so the intersectional designation “white working class” produces distinctions between deserving and un-deserving national subjects.

¹ See Tom Slater on the etymology of “Broken Britain,” which dates from just before David Cameron’s 2010 election to Prime Minister (“Myth”). The phrase also recalls Enoch Powell’s preference for an organic (racially) holistic Englishness as against a Britishness compromised in relation to the uncontainable (racial) externalities of Empire:

² Many scholars have troubled this premise of working-class and racialized communities’ opposing interests, as Cassel Busse does in arguing that “white working-class and migrant (or racialized) figures [. . .are] *overdetermined* by a multiplicity of social, economic, and political structures” (6, emphasis original). For more on the history of this designation, see Elleke Boehmer (35-42), C. Hall (10), and Hall et al. and Tyler (79-82).

The cultural conversation surrounding the Brexit vote has also drawn attention to the national belonging of a conversely classed and racialized figure: the so-called “model minority.” Amit Rai and Jasbir Puar’s definition of this figure points to the multiple normative aspirations that this subjectivity fulfils: “a reference to economic exceptionalism, upward class mobility, and educational excellence” (77). Indeed, the Leave campaign could potentially have responded to charges of Brexit’s nativist implications by pointing to the support it enjoyed from a group whose members embody these exceptionalist coordinates: purveyors of that most gustatory symbol of multicultural Britain, the British Asian curry industry.³ Both immediately before and shortly after the referendum, several major British Asian restaurateurs lobbied in favour of Brexit, claiming that fewer EU migrants would allow for the immigration of more South Asian chefs to resolve a staff shortage that has seen two restaurants close every week as of 2016.⁴ The postcolonial South Asian migrant’s willingness to cook long hours for low pay to ensure the prosperity of the second generation recalls what Rey Chow would call Protestant ethnic morality, her name for the blend of aspiration and work ethic that is an integral feature of the ideal of model minority subjectivity (97-100). The labour shortages currently facing Britain’s curry houses reflect the lack of planning for the long-term sustenance of this (minority) business model, given that its operating premise had more to do with securing the financial means to facilitate intergenerational social mobility into the

³ As Rupa Huq notes, one indication that the mid-1990s epoch of “Cool Britannia” represented the high watermark of official multiculturalism in Britain was New Labour Foreign Secretary Robin Cook claiming curry as the national dish (“Curry Chefs”).

⁴ At the time there were a spate of newspaper profiles of Enam Ali, founder of the British Curry Awards and prominent Brexit supporter (Gutnick, Leftly).

professional classes, rather than building a lasting industry. The restaurateurs' stated motives for backing Leave proved misguided in the event, as the Theresa May government has not increased migration quotas from South Asia since the Brexit vote; in fact, recruiting chefs and keeping curry houses open has become more difficult since the referendum (Kirke). Summing up this seemingly ill-conceived alliance between the curry lobby and Vote Leave, Rupa Huq writes, "[w]hen I was growing up we were all Asians together. Now [...] no party can take Asian votes for granted. [...] I doubt that the curry constituency could have swung the result, but it was sorely misled." Huq demonstrates that the racially exclusionary premises of nationalism is still a problem even these most upwardly mobile of racialized British subjects; the stature accrued through the tradeoff of hard work in exchange for recognition did not in this instance produce the desired result.

That the divergent figures of the white working class and the model minority are both associated with the Leave campaign can be understood in relation to two commonplace readings of the political significance of Brexit vote. Mainstream left-liberal commentary often understands the success of Vote Leave as a coded protest vote, in which a downwardly mobile public delivers a symbolic blow to the edicts that issue anti-democratically from Brussels, a transnational governmentality that anti-democratically encourages the British government to pursue a neoliberal agenda of austerity. Another interpretation emphasizes that the campaign for Brexit provided renewed impetus for the expression of a populist nationalism that responds to worsening economic inequality by scapegoating the country's racialized and EU migrant populations. Here I am less interested in establishing the veracity of either account than in the residual racial logic

that emerges when the symbolic figures I discussed above are mapped on to these rationalizations of Brexit as a material social and political crisis. Take the white working class, for example: the downwardly mobile public fed up with supranational EU oversight in the first explanation is implicitly racialized as white. In this view, the opposition between these explanations implies a dichotomous moral judgment on the white working class with respect to their racial and economic position: either Leavers are essentially righteous in registering their discontent with the exhaustion of a social contract promising a life of relative security in exchange for hard work, or they are expressing racist *ressentiment* about the perceived role of government in subsidizing racialized subjects' access to aspirational paths to the good life.⁵ Beyond aiming to show the complementarity of these patterns of explanation in that they reify intersecting social formations such as the white working class, I want to suggest that they point to the urgency of understanding the co-implication of neoliberal capitalism and contemporary racism.

In this dissertation, I take up the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* as a site to investigate how the intersections between capitalist structures and racial hierarchies impinge on narratives of subject formation. Beginning with readings of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and non-fictional paratexts that take up the ensuing Rushdie Affair, I reflect in Chapter One on how the changing understanding of "Black British" identity in the Thatcherite era proliferated scripts that recruited racial minority subjects as

⁵ Tim Lott shows how the absent presence of whiteness in the interpretation of Brexit can be leveraged to scapegoating effect: "the discourse has not been about lifting working-class people into the elites. The language has been about lifting people from other disadvantaged groups—based around ethnicity, gender and sexuality, which are much more comfortable for politicians to talk about as they don't require the redistribution of wealth, only a change in attitude, which doesn't require the raising of taxes."

exemplary figures of neoliberal aspiration. In Chapter Two, I turn to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), contrasting how these novels engage with the presumption that migration to the Global North necessarily guarantees Muslim women relative economic and political agency in idealist and dissensual terms, respectively, in order to show how this Islamophobic vision of gendered empowerment entails success for some and failure for others. Finally, in Chapter Three, I examine two potential critiques of the model minority figure, from the outsider's perspective from which Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006) narrates the attempt among British Asian teenagers to posit "rudeboy" identity as an alternative to the normative script of racialized upward mobility, and from the insider account that Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) offers regarding the isolating and exhausting effects of embodying the figure of the "striver" and approximating the model minority as normative concept of racial belonging.

In this introduction, I move through three phases, beginning with this section's genealogy of the model minority as an idealized figure of racial neoliberal belonging. Next, I contextualize the notion of Brexit as the return of nativist British nationalism in relation to the genealogy of premising national belonging in racially exclusionary terms. Lastly, I return to the tenuous relation between the contemporary Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* and the condition of England novel as literary modes of reckoning with the state of the nation. Mark Stein points to this subgenre's historical investments of in the struggle for racial inclusion by categorizing it as a "Black British novel of transformation," a term that aims to play up its role in both recording and manifesting challenges to the political status quo of British society:

The Black British novel of transformation is about the *formation* of its protagonists—but, importantly, it is about the *transformation* of British society and cultural institutions [...] during the second half of the twentieth century, among them the collapse of Empire, large-scale immigration from the former colonies, and multiculturalism. (xiii-xiv, emphasis original)⁶

My argument is that the advent of neoliberalism challenges Stein’s progressive characterization of the historiography of postcolonial race relations in Britain, as neoliberalism facilitates the endurance of racist formations both by conveniently evading allegations of racism—as with Islamophobia—or by claiming to that racism has been surpassed. I see fictional engagements with the transformations characteristic of twenty-first-century British race relations as drawing attention to such problems underlying dominant conceptions of an ever-more inclusive multicultural society. Critical discussion of the racial meaning of neoliberalism in Britain tends to centre on how racism as a means of designating certain subjects as surplus to economic requirements, producing a dynamic that Imogen Tyler calls “social abjection”:

abject figures are ideological conductors mobilized to do the dirty work of neoliberal governmentality. They are [...] the mediating agencies through which the social decomposition effected by market deregulation and welfare retrenchment are legitimized. (9, emphasis original)⁷

Racism’s convenience and instrumentality for neoliberalism is a swift means of rendering anyone who belongs to certain segments of society liminal (Tyler 141). That social abjection for people of colour thus results in what Mohan Ambikaipaker calls “routine anti-racist failure” is a key motivation for my project (12). I examine Black and Asian

⁶ Ashley Dawson’s *Mongrel Nation* also interprets Black and Asian British writing in a similar vein as reflecting the status of British multiculturalism more broadly.

⁷ For more on the disposability of people of colour under neoliberalism, see for example Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Henry Giroux, and Loïc Wacquant, among many others.

British literature for the assessments it provides of what imaginary inducements exist that provide consent for racial neoliberal hegemony that is seemingly “designed to fail,” to borrow Tyler’s phrase (62). So even though the figure of the model minority represents an exceptionalist and largely unapproachable ideal, I argue that an analysis of its perceived cultural influence as a model for socialization under neoliberalism is no less crucial to grasping the racial meanings of neoliberalism in contemporary Britain.

The model minority as cultural ideal has been subject to widespread critique as a figure of relatively willing assimilation to the sociocultural norms of Global Northern capitalist societies. Now I want to draw attention to the fact that achieving this exemplary status typically entails attenuating one’s ties to communities of colour, in part through pressure to perform identity in accordance with stereotypes of cultural difference: a “coercive” form of “mimeticism,” as Rey Chow puts it (117).⁸ This double-bind indicates the aspirational aspect of the phenomenon that David Theo Goldberg calls racial neoliberalism, in which racism remains a structural social force even as the possibility of naming it as such recedes: “[t]he register of race has shifted from the broadly institutional, from which it is at least explicitly excised, to the micro-relational of everyday interactions, on the one hand, and the macro-political strategizing of geo-global interests, on the other” (25). As either a highly idiosyncratic and personalized irruption that contravenes a supposedly well-intentioned and tolerant racial regime, or else as a structure so radically beyond the subject’s spatiotemporal reference points that concrete

⁸ Chow goes on to argue that coercive mimeticism complicates the kernel of resistance that postcolonial theorists of hybridity after Homi Bhabha locate in slippages in the process of mimesis (104-106).

or immediate resistance is inherently impractical, the racism of racial neoliberal society amounts to “racism without racism” (23). In this view, the model minority subject is as likely to court resentment from racists as they are from others in communities of colour, recalling as a kind of colonial residue that figure of collaboration with imperialism, the comprador.⁹ In situations where systemic uncertainty comes to a head, however, the good racialized subject is never quite good enough, as has been the case with Brexit; the residues of colonial-era racism in neoliberal Britain means that even “good” racial neoliberal subjects are always available as scapegoats for popular unrest.¹⁰ Contemporary multiculturalism manages the inherent contradictions of this subject position by ascribing essentialist values of hard work and thrift to many racialized migrants’ cultures, which dovetail with the Protestant aspect of Global Northern capitalist subjectivity (Phung 104).

More recently, this subject position has been critiqued as a globalist emissary of the post-political subject of neoliberal capitalism.¹¹ For instance, Walter Benn Michaels reads the model minority trope in contemporary literature as symptomatic of a culture more concerned “about the subject positions available within neoliberalism [...] rather

⁹ The etymology of this term of derision for those who collaborated with imperialist regimes can be traced to colonial national liberation struggles (Dirlik and Williams 83).

¹⁰ Scapegoating as conventionally theorized presumes a Hobbesian notion of human community as perpetually at risk due to fundamentally violent instincts, and proposes to solve that essential violence by (arbitrarily) designating an outsider against whom violent urges can be expelled. Numerous critics have since reflected on the often-symbiotic relation between modern social organization’s violent foundations (including Giorgio Agamben, Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, Rene Girard, Max Weber, and Slavoj Zizek), but perhaps most topical is Tyler’s recent account of scapegoating as a central cultural logic for British neoliberal governmentality in *Revolt of Subjects*.

¹¹ See for example Chow (47-49), Melamed (152), and Mohanty (“Radical” 973-974).

than about alternatives to it” (“Model” 1028);¹² in a similar vein Betty Joseph sees the entrepreneurial subjectivities prized by globalizing capital as evidence of the supersession of the nation as a politically unifying signifier (72). This mode of critique provides a potential explanation of the curry lobby’s support for Brexit, as a kind of counterintuitive marketing pitch in favour of economic nationalism as against globalist multiculturalism; the emphasis is no longer on curry’s exotic qualities so much as on its familiarity, as (problematically) “British” as a cup of tea. Several critics have observed that as neoliberalism has become more fully hegemonic, its more narrowly economic principles of cutting back the state and deregulating the market have broadened into a biopolitical project, with particular respect to the cultural realm.¹³ A crucial aspect of this cultural turn has been the proliferation of entrepreneurial values as social norms in the guise of “meritocracy,” which Jo Littler dates to the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher’s “meritocratic appeal to consumerism as a general mode of participation in public life which invited people to identify with the notion of themselves as consumers rather than as workers or citizens in a range of public settings” (63).

Yet, the turn to meritocracy coupled with the resurgence of nationalism around the Brexit referendum recalls a different aspect of the genealogy of the model minority, one that dates from the inception of neoliberalism in Britain during the 1980s. Paul Gilroy’s

¹² Michaels’s critique of the model minority is part of his serial polemic against the rise of “identity politics” as a supposed replacement for class as a crosscutting analytical priority: see in particular his 2006 exchange with Bruce Robbins in the journal *n+1* (“On *The Trouble with Diversity*”).

¹³ See Jeremy Gilbert’s special issue of *New Formations* edited by Jeremy Gilbert on neoliberal culture (Gilbert 9). The biopolitical dimension of neoliberalism is what Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell refer to as “roll-out” neoliberalism, which in the British instance coincides with the election of the New Labour government in 1997 (388).

interpretation of a Conservative election poster from the 1983 election campaign exemplifies how upwardly mobile racialized subjectivity function to contain the transformative potential of racial difference within a monocultural national imaginary. The poster featured an image of a young Black man in a suit, with an all-caps bold caption that read, “Labour says he’s Black. Tories say he’s British” (*Ain’t No Black* 63-64). Despite the poster’s overt appeal to racial inclusivity, Gilroy observes that this image of upwardly mobile racial integration does not signal an anti-racist vision of the nation so much as a shift in racist emphasis from the legal realm of citizenship to that of cultural determination: “Blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct [. . .H]e is redeemed by his suit, a signifier of British civilization” (64). In the context of a national election fought over the Falkland War’s imperialist nostalgia, the tropes this poster invokes do not primarily reference the model minority as symbol of neoliberal takeover and the threat of national decline in the face of globalization, but more as a figure of racial depoliticization. His suit proves that the vision of Black subjectivity being idealized here is not just amenable to meritocracy, but in that very amenability is also uninterested in mounting a challenge to the nativist premises of British nationalism. This image accentuates the politically quietist dimensions of model minority tropology: respectability, thrift, and work ethic (Phung 104). This essentialist ascription of hard work and thrift to many racialized migrants’ cultures conveniently dovetails with the implicitly Protestant constitution of Global Northern capitalist subjectivity, even as it does not amount to a subjectivity that threatens the One Nation conception of nationality

through transformative policies like multiculturalism or affirmative action, or herald its obsolescence as an emissary of a capitalist globalization.¹⁴

From a nativist nationalist point of view, there is little need to reconcile the ostensible contradiction between regarding the model minority as predatory globalist coopting the national economic order on the one hand, or as the more domesticated figure of ethnic economic aspiration on the other. Both accounts terminate in the white supremacist conceit that a racialized presence in Britain ought not to do much to disturb its historical racial hierarchy. More recently, however, Gilroy has squared these two accounts of the model minority in his theorization of “Black vernacular neoliberalism.” Specifically, Gilroy observes that current images of minority aspiration surface a long-time libertarian streak in the Black American race-radical tradition, blended with the “revolutionary conservative” aestheticization of the Black hustler figure in global celebrity culture: both these tendencies are legible in proliferating “narratives [...] which terminate in the idea that if one is prepared to graft, even deeply entrenched racial hierarchy and inequality can be overcome” (“Fragments” 35). In this regard, Gilroy represents a key forerunner to my analysis of racial neoliberalism in contemporary British literature, given that critical work on cultural representations of upwardly mobile racialized subjectivity in relation to the neoliberal turn remain nascent in a British cultural context. In this respect, my theoretical archive brings together the primarily sociological analysis of racial neoliberalism in Britain with concepts drawn from American cultural

¹⁴ Economic motivations for migration go back millennia, as among the first recorded instances Robin Cohen points to are (pathologized) Homeric descriptions of Phoenician traders (83). In a more contemporary British context, labour shortages during the 1950s and 1960s impelled the postwar rise in postcolonial migration (Dawson 10-11).

studies including Jodi Melamed's discussion of how neoliberalism co-opts multiculturalism to provide an alibi for an exceptionalist politics of difference, and Roopali Mukherjee's genealogy of "post-racial" discourse that claims *avant la lettre* that meaningful racial grievances have already been surpassed.¹⁵

Class, Race, and National Reconciliation: The Condition of the Model Minority in the Brexit Moment

Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration, be it of Irish Catholics across the constituency or of Muslims from Gujarat in India or from Pakistan, principally from Kashmir. While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us.

—Jo Cox, inaugural speech to the Commons, 3 June 2015

With a view to establishing how the figure of the model minority becomes associated with an elite from whom Brexit supporters demand "our country back," I shift focus now to situate the referendum in relation to a history of the racist premises of national political reconciliation in Britain (Menon and Salter 1310). For Gurminder K. Bhambra, the pro-Brexit referendum result shows the links between the structures of race and neoliberal capitalism in the current struggle over the signification of British national identity:

¹⁵ *Revolting Subjects* represents a crucial source on the sociology of racial neoliberal Britain, but the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* has also published numerous articles in a similar vein (see for example Ambikaipaker, Lentin, Redclift and Valluvan). Nisha Kapoor's "The Advancement of Racial Neoliberalism in Britain" exemplifies the orientation of this analysis towards the critique of the state: "[w]hile discussions of racism and material inequality have been replaced by an emphasis on social interaction and adherence to 'British values', thereby muting the terms of race, the state has escalated the use of biopolitical technologies to govern certain segments of the population, which it legitimates under the 'war on' and 'threat of' terror" (1031).

I [...] felt growing unease about the complete erasure of understanding—on the right *and the left*—of how Britain came to look the way it does today. [...] There was an almost universally accepted belief [...] in a national history, with a national population, [which] then determined who should or should not have rights, including the rights to decent living conditions. / The right to belong and to have rights was associated with a perceived longstanding historical presence within the nation. (emphasis original)

I cite Bhambra at length because she contextualizes the Brexit vote not as an aberrant phenomenon in a stable history of British national identity, but as the latest intensification in a long-running struggle to resolve through nationality the challenges to class- and race-based narratives of social aspiration. On this account, the Brexit vote underscores the racist premises of the notion that the alleged economic promise of the nation to its population has been thwarted by immigration. As Bhambra observes, to understand the referendum result as an essentially populist protest by a “white working class” disaffected by thirty years of unabrogated neoliberal transfer of public goods into elite private hands is to traffic in a subtle (and racist) tautology: “[r]acializing the working-class in the context of a populist discourse that seeks to ‘take our country back’ both plays into and reinforces problematic assumptions about who belongs, who has rights, and whose quality of life should have priority in public policy.”¹⁶ The appeal to tradition here is a function of what Stuart Hall calls the “national-popular,” the tenacity of which brings home its ideological character: “the elements of ‘tradition’ [can] be rearranged, so that they articulate with different practices and positions, and take on a new meaning and

¹⁶ For critical analysis of recent commentary on the white working class in Britain, see also Valluvan (2246). Key texts on working-class identity in Britain include Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (1957), E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and more recently the work of S. Hall (see for example, “Gramsci”), Kathleen Paul’s *Whitewashing Britain* (1997), and Beverley Skeggs’s *Formations of Class & Gender* (1997), among others.

relevance” (450). Bhambra specifies that the immediate political interests that Brexit attempts to cloak with the historically consistent veneer of “tradition” is a notion that a person’s rights hinges on their citizenship status. I will return to the theory and history of the national-popular in Britain shortly, but first I want to discuss one of the more immediate implications of Bhambra’s analysis of the emblematic status claimed for the white working-class subject in the moment of the Brexit vote.

Bhambra frames the killing of MP Jo Cox on 16 June 2016, a week prior to the vote, as a tragic microcosm of the history of racial tensions catalyzed not only by the referendum itself, but also taps into the historical anxiety that British citizenship should codify extant racial hierarchies of belonging: “it was not until 1981 that there was a legal statute specifying British citizenship as a category distinct from the earlier forms that had created a common citizenship status across the populations of the UK and its colonies.” The immediate chronology of the event are as follows: a witness heard Thomas Mair shout “Britain First,” the name of a white supremacist group known for its Islamophobia, just before he fatally shot Cox. As a representative for the West Yorkshire riding of Batley and Spen, Cox had gained recognition prior to holding elected office for her efforts as a campaigner for Oxfam, and once in office she generated cross-party support for relief for refugees from the Syrian Civil War; the importance of these issues to her career is signaled by her debut speech to the Commons quoted in the epigraph to this section. The inference drawn by the mainstream press was that Mair aimed to deliver a violent rebuke to those supportive of expending government resources on subjects he—through a white supremacist conceptualization of British identity—deemed undeserving

of the right to have rights, including the right to a future that involves some form of economic security.¹⁷ If Brexit is perceived as a moment in a struggle over who should be allocated ever-scarcer resources in a neoliberalizing nation, then Mair’s grievance hinges on resentment towards politicians like Cox who, in working to bridge racial divides, are perceived to be redistributing wealth away from deserving (i.e. white) poor, and hence to write people like himself out of the national narrative. This narrative casts Mair as a martyr of the white working-class cause, blaming EU migrants and Britain’s racialized communities for economic disparities, as though these groups’ internal constitution did not reflect a cross-section of social mobility as well.¹⁸ At the same time, Cox’s status as both an MP and most significantly as a campaigner on behalf of immigrants’ rights makes her legible to a right-wing populist imaginary as part of a cultural elite in supposed thrall to “nonnative elements (persons and ideas) [that] are threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (Mudde 19). There has been much commentary on the relationship between the disaffection of Britain’s “white working class” and the recent uptick in white nationalism across the Global North.¹⁹ According to this scholarship, Brexit is the

¹⁷ Along with Bhambra, Nadine el-Enany and Daniel Renwick were others who responded early to the Brexit vote in this vein. Both el-Enany and Renwick emphasize that Cox’s killing epitomizes a forgetting of the ways in which the nationalist conceit of Britain as inherently benevolent is more a convenient imperialist rationalization than a materially demonstrable fact.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*’s early coverage of Mair’s background provided a sympathetic biography, portraying him as a quiet and bookish “jobbing [i.e. underemployed] gardener” who looked after his mother’s chronic care needs and found solace for depression through voluntarism (Pidd). Major newspapers were slow to cover evidence that Mair’s book collection included white supremacist literature and explosives manuals, and his long-time membership in the neo-Nazi National Alliance (Hatewatch).

¹⁹ For more on the Brexit vote as an expression of populist sentiment, see Iakhnis et al. On the transnational derivation of right-wing “anti-elitism,” see Richardson.

culmination of a way of thinking about national belonging that would inevitably be offended by the cultural circulation of the model minority, aspirational though this figure is. But media and public speculation that linked Mair's motives for killing Cox with Brexit only has symbolic efficiency inasmuch as both murderer and victim are perceived as metonymic figures for a broader Manichaean conflict between two worldviews: a racially exclusionary notion of British nationality as against a more syncretic multiculturalism. Events like Jo Cox's murder suggest the way that individual actors and situations become allegorized, shifting the discursive struggle at work within these texts to one over the reference points for allegory's metonymic function: who can be taken to be politically symbolic, and what vision of the social whole must they be symbolic of?

The allegorical significance of this incident in relation to nationalism indicates the importance of situating Brexit in relation to a populist tradition of British nationalism dating from the high imperialist moment of the mid-nineteenth century, one which explicitly defines racialized others out of the equation of economic reconciliation.²⁰ Crucial to this historiography of nationalism is the whitening of Britain's working class in what Stuart Hall might call the "national-popular" cultural imaginary, which can be traced to the extension of the franchise to non-property-holding men with the 1867 Reform Act. While Catherine Hall points out that as late as 1866, working-class activists had voiced solidarity with the idea of self-rule for colonial subjects after the Morant Bay

²⁰ A number of scholars observe this point; Linda Colley, historian of British nationalism, points to the resurgence of "Little Englandism" in Thatcherite times (313). For literary scholarship addressing this nativist tendency in British nationalism, see for instance Nadine Attewell (*Better Britons*), Ian Baucom (*Out of Place*), Jed Esty (*A Shrinking Island*), Michael Gardiner (*Return of England*), and Janice Ho (*Nation and Citizenship*).

rebellion in Jamaica, by the time of the 1867 Act, arguments for the franchise had come to hinge on defining white working class men as deserving and respectable through their gender and racial privilege, leading to legislation that ultimately delimited colonial subjects and/as women from the franchise: “white male radicals [...] had been received within the brotherhood of the nation, whilst black Jamaican males had been condemned to a racialized form of subjecthood” (29).²¹ In this respect, the Reform Act bore the influence of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli’s philosophy of One Nation Conservatism, which posited the chief problem in British politics as a conflict between “two nations”—rich and poor. One source of this class-based conception of nationhood is evident from the subtitle to Disraeli’s 1845 novel *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, which established a fictional pattern of framing the resolution to political struggle in Britain by emphasizing the priority of resolving classed social cleavages, and in turn inaugurated a literary tradition informed by this frame: the Condition of England novel.²² As Hall goes on to emphasize, the One Nation resolution to the conflict between rich and poor is national belonging, for which the family is a metaphor of choice:

The nation was a family, as was the Empire, but families, as everyone knew, had rules of belonging and the British Parliament [...] had decided and understood how the lines should be drawn and the white brotherhood of Britain reconstituted [...] as] ‘race’, gender, labour and level of civilization now determined who was included in and excluded from the political nation. (C. Hall 29)

The legacy of the Reform Act has thus been a political settlement regarding the franchise that corresponds to the very nationalist conceits that Bhambra ascribes to conventional

²¹ The Act also failed to extend voting rights to women, irrespective of class or race (29).

²² Other early practitioners of the Condition of England novel include Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Kingsley (Harvie 16).

concepts of British citizenship, which has in turn reinforced how racial and gendered hierarchies influence decisions about which British subjects have the right to have rights.

In the next section, I will return to the generic implications of the condition of England novel, but for now I want to examine further the influence of One Nation Conservatism over the ideas about nationalism circulating in contemporary British politics. With specific respect to the place of racial difference within the nation, the One Nation paradigm either regards racialized subjects as explicit threats to the country's economic fortunes, or else defines them out of the equation altogether. For Alan Sinfield, the spectre of a nativist English nationalism has shadowed successive visions of the postwar social contract, from social welfare consensus politics to neoliberalism:

Hence the persistent, though incoherent, strain of disaffection and aggression in postwar British society. We may observe it in youth cultures, in disputes and lack of co-operation at work and in education; in vandalism and other abuses of the environment; in indifference towards the official political system (including trades unions); in hostility to minorities such as Blacks, Asians and gays; in lack of consideration towards the disabled, the sick and the elderly; in drug abuse and civil disorder. (319)

In describing how racism fits into the exclusionary configuration of the national-popular that Linda Colley calls Little Englandism (313), Sinfield also indicates its recrudescent tendency at moments of crisis in the post-imperial epoch, as in the circumstances that gave rise to the success of the Leave Campaign in 2016.²³ In this context, consider that the Victorian metaphor of the nation as family became a strategic reference point to quell

²³ Baucom in particular details the importance of slippages between British and English identities to understanding post-imperial nationalism, as a “structure of feeling in which many English women and men simultaneously avow and disavow the British Empire, and in which Englishness, consequently, emerges as at once an embrace and a repudiation of the imperial beyond” (7). On the spurious pretext in Burkean philosophy for English nationalism, see also Gardiner (3-8).

dissent against the Thatcherite project of neoliberalizing Britain, precisely because it invoked the restoration of the national social contract as an alibi for policies that in practice exacerbated social inequality.²⁴ Just as domestic policy under Thatcher resuscitated nineteenth-century moralizing about respectability, particularly by decrying the so-called “undeserving” poor for living off welfare, neoliberal reforms were also defended in similarly moralistic terms; the thrifty household metaphor became a commonplace of Thatcherite calls for macroeconomic prudence (Hobsbawm 307-309). At the same time, the combination of decolonization and postwar postcolonial migration meant that by the 1980s, the issue of race could not be externalized in the manner it had been by the 1867 Reform Act.²⁵ In this light, populist tactics proved crucial as Thatcher was able to leaven the demographic panic Enoch Powell had aimed to incite with his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968, via the subtler dog-whistle racism of the “welfare scrounger” figure: “both figures [i.e. the scrounger and the ex-colonial invader] supposedly exploited the openness of the “permissive” state and contributed to the already “unfair” taxes and rates burden of the average (white) British citizen (A. Smith 179, Evans 106).²⁶ In this respect, Thatcher draws on the patriotic nationalism of One

²⁴ On some of the early-mid-twentieth-century history I pass over here, see Esty on the mid-century impact of a class rather than race-based vision of British citizenship, and the metaphor of household as economy (173-174). Busse also highlights the importance of the welfare state to a class-centric national “metanarrative” in her genealogy of the postwar national settlement (3-4). See also “The Origin of One-Nation Politics.”

²⁵ Powellite racism was deliberate in reconstructing post-imperial Britain’s racialized population as outsiders despite their legal rights as Commonwealth citizens, as Gilroy, *Union Jack* 41-80, and A. Smith, *New Right* 162-182, show.

²⁶ This is not to suggest that prior to Thatcher’s election, Powell lacked a constituency, or that his ideas did not impact immigration policy. On the longterm impacts of Powell’s

Nation Conservatism, but reframes it in individualist terms more amenable to free-market ideals, here presuming that the circulation of racist stereotypes about the Black family will reconfirm the ideal of the thrifty householder, in order to project neoliberal reform as a project of restoring balance to the national allegory of (white) family and nation (Evans 29). Thus, the neoliberal re-premising of society on individualist terms hinged on associating One Nation patriotism with economic individualism even while making its supposed concomitant promise of social mobility grow ever more distant.

The association between British nationalism and a narrative of class-based reconciliation has functioned as a kind of safety valve for the neoliberalizing British state during and after Thatcher, particularly given the abiding discontent among many who bore the brunt of the 1980s zeal for union-busting, privatization, centralization, and deregulation (S. Hall, “Revolution” 8-9). New Labour’s accommodation to neoliberalism through meritocracy also borrows from the One Nation paradigm, again with respect to the primacy of class over race. Specifically, the Blair government framed those who failed to measure up to the equation of economic self-sufficiency with national belonging as part of a socially abject and conspicuously racialized “underclass” (Tyler 159-160). This rhetoric drummed up consent for further criminalization of poor and racialized youth through numerous legislative measures such as the overblown expansion of the twenty-first-century British surveillance state, which made good on Blair’s infamous campaign promise to be “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime” at the same time as it made historically working-class neighbourhoods and council estates available as targets

well-known “Rivers of Blood” speech of 20 April 1968 on racial relations in Britain, see also Attewell 170-171, Busse 2-5, Dawson 8, and A. Smith 130-132.

for gentrification (“Tough”).²⁷ In this sense, the recent recourse to what Nadine Attewell calls “far-right indigenism” by Nick Griffin’s British National Party and Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party needs to be reframed as not altogether aberrant (176).²⁸ Rather, the BNP and UKIP are perhaps the most polarizing examples of efforts from across the political spectrum to mobilize nationalist sentiment, given competing attempts by both Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and former Labour Leader Ed Miliband to claim the mantle of Disraeli’s One Nation during the 2015 election, and the fact that Prime Minister Theresa May also invoked in a statement on 13 July 2016, less than a month after Leave won the referendum (Daponte-Smith; Wintour).²⁹ Despite the dubiousness of the radical right’s claims that nativist nationalism is somehow the expression of organic white working-class sentiment, what the increasingly universal desire to appeal of One Nation Conservatism does reinforce is the perception that the well-being of the white working-class subject is emblematic of that of the entire nation.³⁰ In such circumstances, the motives behind the murder of a well-known advocate of multiculturalism by a white supremacist nationalist can be connected with the “anti-elitist” populist sentiments that led to the Brexit vote. More importantly, the One Nation

²⁷ These measures run the gamut from the everyday indignities of stop-and-frisk and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) to the clampdown on civil liberties through Britain’s Orwellian video surveillance system, the 2006 Terrorism Act, and the spread of migrant detention centres (Tyler 60, 192-193)

²⁸ Attewell points here to the BNP’s citation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and coopting the rhetoric of Indigenous rights in order to justify a racist conceptualization of British national belonging (“Return” 175).

²⁹ See Tim Bale’s extended analysis of Miliband’s attempt to rebrand New Labour as One Nation Labour: “Concede and Move On? One Nation Labour and the Welfare State.”

³⁰ Benedict Anderson asserts that racism is not an inherent feature of nationalism, but is frequently expedient as a means of drumming up nationalistic public feelings (150-153).

vision of British nationality encodes an aporia with respect to Britain's racialized population, leaving them and their advocates all the more vulnerable to being reconstructed as "undeserving," hence pointing to the convenience of a reinvigorated nativist nationalism for the neoliberal biopolitics of British citizenship.

The Condition of Racial Neoliberal England in the Black and Asian British

Bildungsroman

...no racism story is ever a "simple" racism story, in which grinning evil people wearing white burn crosses in yards.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Now Is the Time to Talk about What We Are Talking About"

Having established the ongoing influence of One Nation Conservatism as a model that excises race from a class-centric national settlement, I want now to consider the current status of the cultural mode that this paradigm bequeathed: the Condition of England novel. Michael Ross lists some common identifying features of examples of this genre:

they focus on landmark movements in the society of their time [...] and their action often involves weighty public events. Typically these hinge on *class conflicts*: [... These] novels project a liberal vision [...] of concern with the lives not only of the most privileged but also of the most oppressed members of British society" ("Condition" 75, emphasis mine).

While in the modernist period, there were relatively fewer realist examples of the genre amid the pursuit of more formally innovative representation (Stonebridge and McKay 1), from the mid-century into Thatcherite times it returned in the microcosmic form of the campus novel: "the academic novel offers interesting opportunities to explore conflicts

and transitions between competing values and structures of belief” (Connor 70).³¹

Scholarship on Condition-of-England fiction from this period tends to reify its critical object in racially exclusionary terms, by focusing on novels from this period by white authors that dramatize class struggle through primarily white characters.³² While not always concerned with explicit institutions of education like the campus novel, I suggest that the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* may fill in this representation gap of Condition of England fiction with respect to race and nationality, given the pedagogical dimension Stein ascribes to the genre: “a novel of education for life through life, broadly speaking; its focus is an individual protagonist undergoing the process of character formation which takes him or her out of familial or educational institutions” (23). The Black and Asian *Bildungsroman* may not necessarily afford an equivalently expansive perspective on the state of racial politics in Britain as the Condition of England novel does with respect to class, but it does arguably work through metonymy to render a single subject’s coming-of-age narrative to illustrate the broader trajectory of the accommodation of racialized people in Britain.

Given this emphasis on subjective formation, I focus primarily on the contemporary Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* as an archive of struggles to come to grips with the burden and aspiration of this meritocratic ideal. There is something of a theoretical debate regarding the political reference point of the genre when it centres issues of race: whereas Stein sees Black and Asian British writers as narrating racialized

³¹ See also Harvie (225-226).

³² These include period texts by Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Jonathan Coe, Margaret Drabble, Maggie Gee, David Lodge, Ian McEwan, and Iain Sinclair. For more on the Condition of England novel, see also Kiliç (10-14) and Hutchinson (8-14).

becoming in relation to national belonging, Joseph Slaughter has theorized the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* as emplotting a critique of the universalist presumption of liberal rights-based discourse. Slaughter suggests that in “dissensual” versions where coming-of-age ends in disillusionment, the (failed) struggle articulates “a right to have rights” (182). But Slaughter’s theorization remains focused on dissensual *Bildung* emerging from former colonial settings, rather than in metropolitan post-imperial London, the setting of the texts I analyze. But some of the theoretical issues Slaughter raises remain pertinent even with a national frame of the genre’s metonymy. As Bhabra has emphasized, the increasing challenges to the belonging of non-white subjects in Britain have less to do with the spreading influence of imperfect global human rights covenants, however, but rather emerge from a national(-ist) framework, where exclusionary ideas on how membership in the category of “Britishness” have gained greater credibility in mainstream political discourse and citizenship policy (Ho 23). That citizenship remains what Janice Ho calls “a site of struggle” is certainly true in legal terms (14-17), as many scholars have noted that the history of changes in citizenship law have quite deliberately advanced a racist biopolitics, perhaps most spectacularly, with the 1981 Nationality Act that effectively replaced birthplace with parentage as the intergenerational criterion of citizenship (Baucom 7-8, Tyler 53-55). But rendering British nationality more accommodative of racial difference is as unfinished a cultural process as it is a legal one, particularly given that the intensification of economic measures of social belonging provides a convenient new rationale for what Gilroy calls the country’s condition of “postcolonial melancholia,” which he defines as a persistent reluctance to admit to the

troubling legacies of Britain's imperialist past (xv).³³ In particular, the past-ness of such transgressions becomes reassuring evidence merely of the “post-racial” character of the “perpetual present” to which postcolonial melancholia consigns Black and Asian British subjects; such presentism facilitates an amnesia about the actual violence and expropriation of Empire, which in turn enables the endurance of racism of racial neoliberalism (Mukherjee 50-51, Gilroy, *Melancholia* 123). To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, “we cannot not want” the transformation of a racially exclusionary nation, and yet the neoliberal multicultural terms on which such transformation takes place works to undermine racial justice by reifying an individualist approach to anti-racism.³⁴

This dissertation addresses the representational questions that this ongoing struggle entails: what does it mean for the postcolonial racialized subject to be located in a Britain where nationalist historiography increasingly constructs her as always already available for exclusion, irrespective of her actual historical experience? And how do the contradictory imperatives of the *Bildungsroman*—socialization and individuation—reflect the ambiguities of such existences? In particular, I want to view the representation of

³³ The influence of postcolonial melancholia on the nationalist appeal of the New Right movement that Thatcher ushered in has been widely discussed; see for a representative analysis Smith 129-182. However, the cross-party nature of appeals to nationalism is evident from the fact that Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown both went on the record defending British Empire: in a speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet in Nov. 1997, Blair said: “[t]here is a lot of rubbish talked about the Empire. In my view, we should not either be apologising for it or wringing our hands about it” (qtd. in Edgerton 125); while serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Jan. 2005, Brown commented: “the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over” (Milne). These comments have in turn buttressed the neo-imperialist rationalizations by liberal public intellectuals of Britain's leading role alongside the USA in the War on Terror, on which see Seymour's *The Liberal Defence of Murder*.

³⁴ The context for Spivak's equivocal endorsement of liberal universalism are American civil rights achievements such as *Roe v. Wade* (*Outside* 279).

unfolding racial neoliberal subjectivity in Britain through an intersectional lens. In this framing, I am guided by the critical understanding of intersectionality that Sirma Bilge calls for, which involves “paying proper attention to historical contingencies, to specific contexts, and [...] considering structural locations and power differentials” (420). While the exigency identified by Bilge has more to do with countering problematic tendencies in feminist intersectionality studies, I argue that attending to issues of contingency, context, and structure can also indicate how stories of racial neoliberal uplift involves socialization to individualist cultural norms. The historical context for the specific racial neoliberal formations I examine is the emergence in the 1980s of what Stuart Hall calls “new ethnicities,” as the notion of “Black British” as a term for racial identity across lines of ethnic difference came undone.³⁵ For Hall, there was much to celebrate about the rise of a dispensing with the moralism of liberal anti-racist representation, a “refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always ‘right-on’—in a word, always and only ‘positive’” (“Ethnicities” 449). With Hall, Talal Asad also celebrated the break from Black British identity by British Asians, emphasizing the resultant possibilities to articulate religious identity as inimical to this crosscutting category (264). Meanwhile, the very advent of “ethnicity” as a cultural category produces what Chow outlines as the double bind of the model minority, as inevitably a “turncoat” in the views of either white or ethnic minority communities,

³⁵ For Black and Asian British criticism in this coalitional vein, see for example C.L. Innes’s *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain*, David Olusoga’s *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, and Sukhdev Sandhu’s *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City*. I draw on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* for my framing of postcolonial historiography.

forced to chart a normatively sanctioned performance of racial identity (117). However, these impacts of the turn to ethnicity also represented fertile ground for new means of instrumentalizing racial difference as a racial neoliberal mode of exclusion: Islamophobia as a kind of racism that is masked by the voluntarist quality of religious faith on the one hand, and the impossible identitarian burdens borne by those who approach the model minority ideal, on the other.³⁶ Chapter One sets out the historical contingencies surrounding Black British organizing that led to this oppositional category's disintegration through a reading of *The Satanic Verses* as well as his non-fictional commentary in response to the Rushdie Affair; Chapter Two considers the *Bildungsroman*'s instrumentality for modelling minority integration through the figures of Muslim femininity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*; lastly, Chapter Three takes up contemporary reconfigurations in the *Bildungsroman*'s conventional spatial movement from periphery to centre in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* and Zadie Smith's *NW*, suggesting that the resultant individualism of neoliberal trajectories of socialization impedes forms of sociality that might challenge structural racism.

My reading of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in Chapter One focuses on how the novel fictionalizes the turn from a more general oppositional anti-racist premising of racial identity to an emphasis on the particularities of ethnic and religious difference. I read the oppositional characterization of the two British Asian protagonists of *The Satanic Verses*—Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta—as an attempt to work through the

³⁶ For more on the racial neoliberal character of Islamophobia, see for example Goldberg 165-166 and Rana 19.

antinomies underlying the oppositional anti-racism animating “Black British” racial identity, which led to the turn in a Thatcherite moment to ethnicity and identity politics.³⁷ By foregrounding the ironies of the assimilated Anglophile model minority Chamcha becoming a figurehead of the anti-racist movement in London, and the postcolonial nationalist Farishta returning to the post-imperial metropole to re-arrange London’s neo-colonial social hierarchies through divine agency, I assess both characters’ potential as figurations of challenges to Gilroy’s diagnosis of Britain’s postcolonial melancholia. However, I end the chapter by reflecting on how in attempting to bracket the heated cultural debate of the Rushdie Affair through appealing to authorship as granting decisive interpretive authority, Rushdie promotes an individualist logic of reconciling racial grievances that has proven expedient in the racial neoliberal epoch to come. In other words, he has effectively curtailed the postcolonial political possibilities I ascribed to the novel itself, by in effect promoting an interpretation of his own novel and his own freedom of speech that licenses Islamophobia.

I turn in Chapter Two to consider how two coming-of-age narratives focused on British Muslim women depict the pressures on racialized British subjects to assimilate to neoliberal cultural norms: Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005). In reading the influence of racial neoliberalism in the contemporary Black and Asian *Bildungsroman*, I follow Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins’s call to theorize “genres of neoliberalism” (1), by asking how racialized coming of age is impacted by the

³⁷ For views that stress ostensible advantages of the turn away from “Black Britain” for British Muslims, see for example Talal Asad and Tariq Modood; dissenting views on this reading include Sadia Abbas, *Freedom’s Limit*, Chetan Bhatt and A. Sivanandan.

tendency in neoliberal culture towards what Lauren Berlant calls “the waning of genre, and in particular older realist genres whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life” (6). Both Ali and Aboulela’s novels chart the coming-of-age of Muslim women in a neoliberal multicultural Britain where in pursuit of subjectivation compels them to reify Islamophobic perceptions of Islam.³⁸ *Brick Lane* demonstrates the increasingly exceptionalist terms on which successful racial neoliberal incorporation takes place, given the hegemony of Islamophobia in post-9/11 Britain. The novel charts the experience of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi migrant forced into marriage and brought to live in London’s Tower Hamlets council estate as a teenager. I focus on how Nazneen’s adherence to an assimilationist model of *Bildung*—moderating her Islamic faith and developing a sewing business alongside her friend Razia—are emphasized through contradistinction with two foils. First, her sister Haseena is imperiled by being stuck in a Bangladesh governed by Islamic patriarchy, while her husband Chanu’s ineffectuality prompts him to be abusive to his family, incur debts, and eventually leave his family in London for Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Aboulela’s *Minaret* depicts the struggles of Najwa, a Sudanese teenager, after her father’s imprisonment strands her in London without financial resources or family and community support. Najwa’s racial neoliberal coming-of-age narrative ends in diminishment by contrast with Nazneen’s, as her classed

³⁸ I follow Junaid Rana in understanding Islamophobia as a covert form of racialization (30). *Brick Lane* and *Minaret*’s publication dates are bookended by the 9/11 attacks and the 7/7 attack on London Transport, just as the New Labour government introduced anti-terrorist legislation that hinged on the slippage in Islamophobia between religion and race (see Mason and Poynting 374, and Rana 134-152).

upbringing leaves her ill-equipped to bootstrap herself on to the path of upward mobility. To cope with her diminished social standing and isolation, she becomes a convert to conservative Islam, explicitly challenging the feminist imperialist valorization of the relative agency the Global North affords women by contrast with the Muslim world.³⁹ Najwa's supposed agency results from a loss of class status and exile, in which context the neoliberal cultural premium on freedom of choice becomes more an indication of "suffering," as Jane Elliott has observed (84). The stark contrast between these two protagonists' trajectories complicates Stein's argument that the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* allegorizes a broader national transformation: taken together, these texts show that racial neoliberal belonging may well come at the expense of others both inside and outside Britain, and may afford rights whose exercise involves a choice between bad options. In other words, this chapter draws attention to the profound burdens that the British Muslim migrant woman bears, regardless of whether they succeed or fail to live up to the meritocratic yardstick of neoliberal multicultural belonging.

Having established how racial neoliberalism narrows the scope of the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* to allegorize the broader social mobility of Britain's Muslim communities, in Chapter Three I consider how the conventional geographical trajectory of upward mobility from rural periphery to urban centre that Franco Moretti ascribes to the genre becomes complicated in the racial neoliberal present. I begin by taking up the way in which Malkani's *Londonstani*'s plot ostensibly addresses the widespread perception of a "homegrown" terrorist threat posed by the increased British

³⁹ Melamed argues that neoliberal multiculturalism inhibits integration by "conservative" religious subjects (152).

Asian population in suburban London.⁴⁰ The novel's protagonist Jas engages in a kind of ethnography that seems pitched to challenge the pathologization of suburban British Asian ethnic enclaves over the course of his coming of age among a group of hypermasculine British Asian teenagers, self-styled as "rudeboys," before revealing that he is in fact white. I argue that the covert whiteness of the novel's protagonist Jas complicates the domesticating function of his anthropological gaze on hypermasculine British Asian teens and their communities, and that in fetishizing his own cultural knowledge he provides an alibi for white privilege's endurance in an ostensibly "post-racial" context; the rationale for this alibi becomes clear as Jas comes into conflict with a model minority figure named Sanjay. By rehearsing the notion that the narrative of racial neoliberal uplift excludes lower-middle-class white masculinity, *Londonstani* reifies the historical subject of "Two Nations" fiction, by contrast with the much more ambiguous manner in which Smith's *NW* engages with the model minority aspiration towards assimilable racialized subjectivity. The novel reflects on a group of men and women who grew up on the fictional Caldwell council estate in the northwest London borough of Kilburn. My reading focuses on the experience of Natalie (*née* Keisha) Blake, who has been drawn back into the neighbourhood after leaving for university and a successful law career. I interpret the irruptive effect of a sequence of disturbing encounters that Natalie has with others on the gentrifying grounds of the estate via Sara Ahmed's notion of the "strange encounter," her term for collisions between embodiments of difference that bring occluded historical entanglements to the surface. For Natalie, these particular encounters

⁴⁰ Following the 7/7 attacks on the London Transport system, tabloid journalism scare-mongered about terrorist cells developing in such neighbourhoods (Kapoor 1033).

bring up the cognitive dissonance of Natalie's own success as what Gilroy might call a racial neoliberal striver; Natalie's desire to return to the neighbourhood of her upbringing having made good are inevitably fraught as she reckons with how the "immaterial suburban" quality of the gentrification of outer London magnifies the perception that her success has come at her childhood peers' expense (Pope 165). When read alongside *NW*, *Londonstani*'s underlying presumption that the model minority has effectively replaced the lower-middle-class white subject of national allegory is complicated by the attention Smith draws to the fact that the individualist terms on which racial neoliberal uplift is achieved also compromises the formation of sustaining relationalities.

Taken together, my chapters articulate the layered and intersectional literary history of the emergence of racial neoliberalism in Britain, which is especially legible in the present reinvigoration of "national-popular" sentiment in the post-Brexit moment. Taking the view that the 2016 EU membership referendum result represents part of an unfolding process of what Goldberg calls "British sovereign exceptionalism" (179), the interrelations within and across the categories of my analysis of recent Black and British writing necessitate approaching the racial neoliberal subject formation in Britain as influenced by the three lens I take up: the historiography of One Nation nationalism's racially exclusionary premise, the generic imperative of the *Bildungsroman*'s turn from socialization through individuation to social atomization because of individualism, and the complication of conventional trajectories of coming of age in response to the transformation of urban and suburban spatial associations through Islamophobia and gentrification. If, as Maghan Keita puts it, "the infusion of race into [British]

historiography [...] is a relatively short-lived phenomenon” (17), then in a racial neoliberal context the legitimation of Britain’s racialized population increasingly takes place via a post-racial denial of the grave historical legacies of imperialism in them, as well as the contemporary influence of those legacies on national identification. Given that a genre on Berlant’s terms may be defined as “provid[ing] an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold” (7), the genre of the racial neoliberal British nation—the Black and Asian *Bildungsroman*—increasingly demonstrates the partial and dissensual unfolding of the social contract with respect to racialized British subjects. These narratives demonstrate the highly uneven distribution of national belonging in a postcolonial melancholic context, as so-called model minorities collide with racial neoliberal abjects in urban spaces subject to gentrification by late racial capitalism.

Chapter 1: *The Satanic Verses* and the Post-Racial End of the Rushdie Affair

What's irritated me about the whole direction of politics in the last thirty years is that it's always been towards the collectivist society. People have forgotten about the personal society. [...] And therefore, it isn't that I set out on economic policies; it's that I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.

-Margaret Thatcher

There can be no neat and tidy pluralistic separation of racial groups in this country. It is time to dispute with those positions which, when taken to their conclusions, say "there is no possibility of shared history and no human empathy."

-Paul Gilroy, "The End of Anti-Racism"

In view of Salman Rushdie's canonical status in the field of postcolonial studies, there have been numerous critiques of the way in which his work has ratified a debased form of cosmopolitanism. For instances, Pranav Jani's critique of Rushdie builds on arguments by Aijaz Ahmad and Timothy Brennan that the cosmopolitanism of postcolonial aesthetics hinges on a universalist projection of Western liberal humanism, and that the aesthetic preoccupations of the field coincide with Rushdie's own, which "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure" (qtd. in Jani 2-3).⁴¹ Is the

⁴¹ For Jani, the problem with this Rushdiean view of the postcolonial is not that it is altogether misplaced, but rather that to regard the cosmopolitan as the proper *topoi* of postcolonial critical inquiry works to downplay nation-centred formulations: "[b]y and large, a 'cosmopolitan' position such as Rushdie's is commonly recognized as 'postcolonial,' a term that has become associated with postnational and postmodern ways of seeing" (3). See also Nick Bentley's reading of the novel, which Ahmad's observation of Rushdie's "ideological moorings in the High Culture of the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie" (qtd. in Bentley 216).

cosmopolitan as a critical category completely compromised in political terms?⁴² Against Brennan’s charge that Rushdie articulates a “convenient cosmopolitanism,” I want to rethink the aesthetic politics of *The Satanic Verses* as having more critical cosmopolitan potential, building on Rebecca Walkowitz’s observation that “Rushdie uses strategies of flirtation and mix-up to offer an alternative to the opposition between accommodation and antagonism” (133).⁴³ Through the aesthetic political lens that Walkowitz and Bruce Robbins advocate, the specific spatiotemporal exigencies of the novel—shifts in political affiliation taking place in 1980s in Britain and globally—come into view. Rather than the easy charge that Rushdie’s cosmopolitanism was always already elitist liberal hubris, this chapter contends that *The Satanic Verses* is a significant cultural reflection on how postcoloniality profoundly reshaped the role of race in British politics.

This sketch of the cultural and historical situation contextualizes the literary historiographical role I attribute to *The Satanic Verses* in understanding the current debate as to whether contemporary British culture is somehow “post-racial.” What is “post-race,” and what does it have to do with the polarity of accommodation and antagonism that Walkowitz attributes to Rushdie’s aesthetic project? Barack Obama’s presidency provided an obvious occasion for reflecting on the putative arrival of what might be called post-racial formation,⁴⁴ which for Joshua Paul groups together utopian projects that aim to surpass race altogether, with a more conservative discourse that takes the tentative

⁴² Leela Gandhi and Neel Srivastava identify the influence of Rushdie-an cosmopolitanism on the Rushdie Generation of postcolonial writers publishing after the 1980 release of *Midnight’s Children* (Gandhi, *Postcolonial* 68, Srivastava 3).

⁴³ For a definition of “critical cosmopolitanism,” see Robbins, “Cosmopolitanism” 12.

⁴⁴ Roopali Mukherjee notes that the discourse on “post-race” peaked in intensity around Obama’s election (53-54).

and primarily representative thrust of official multicultural policies as evidence that race is no longer a significant social determinant, effectively assuming that racism has ended and only ever remains as an individual aberration (704-705).⁴⁵ While scholarship on the idea of a “post-racial” moment has fixated on the American example of Obama’s election, a corollary discourse on whether and how “post-racial” formations risk cynically sweeping aside genuine grievances remains as yet nascent in the context of Britain (let alone British literature).⁴⁶ This chapter traces a more domestic genealogy of post-racial formation in Britain to transformations in anti-racist politics taking place in the 1980s, a history that *The Satanic Verses* both reflects and represents in narrative form. My analysis will focus on the differently fraught affiliations with the British nation of two of the novel’s protagonists: the voice actor Salahuddin Chamchawala and former Bollywood star Gibreel Farishta. The two actors can be seen as poles on an emergent spectrum of migrant positionalities regarding national belonging, with Chamcha advocating for assimilation to preexisting British norms and the implicit racial hierarchies they entail, as against Farishta’s ironic fidelity to cultural syncretism.

In the first section of this chapter, I theorize the repeated oppositions between these two characters and their orientations towards the former imperial centre, suggesting that the suspended tension in which Rushdie keeps them draws out the inconsistencies of the nostalgic nationalism of the period. The Conservative government of Margaret

⁴⁵ See also David Theo Goldberg’s *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (20) and Jodi Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (2011).

⁴⁶ Literary cultural commentary in this vein includes essays such as Diran Adebayo’s “Barack: An Open Letter” (2008) and Zadie Smith’s “Speaking in Tongues” (2009).

Thatcher stoked a populist longing for bygone imperial glory through a neo-imperialist war with Argentina as a means to mobilize nationalist consent for its neoliberal redistribution of public wealth into elite private hands. Paul Gilroy has since termed the nostalgia of this political strategy “postcolonial melancholia” (*Mleancholia* xv). Gilroy’s concept demonstrates the growing influence of a more conservative strand of post-racial discourse, which in turn leads to the irony of racialized Britons having to contend with racism in their private lives even as the persistence of structural racism continues to be unacknowledged in the public sphere:

Neither Britain’s politicians nor its media are prepared to acknowledge that almost two generations have passed since anybody sat down and tried to make sense of the politics of race as a matter of policy. That compression of time might also be understood as a symptom. It makes the immigrants always seem to be stuck in the present. Devoid of historicity, their immediate circumstances are invested with an incontrovertible priority. (123)

In the polemic essay “The New Empire Within Britain,” originally aired on Channel 4 in 1982, Rushdie anticipates the interrelation between post-racial formation and what Gilroy diagnoses of postcolonial melancholia: “still the word ‘immigrant’ means ‘black immigrant’; the myth of ‘swamping’ [a reference to fears of racialized population growth used by Thatcher in a campaign speech] lingers on; and even British-born blacks and Asians are thought of as people whose real ‘home’ is elsewhere” (*Homelands* 132). In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie puts pressure on the assumed meaning of these social categories for a resurgent nationalism, depicting the immigrant Chamcha as the most “English” character in the text, and entertaining what it might mean for the social order, in London, at least, to actually be upended by postcolonial migrants, with Farishta acting

as catalyst for what might be called, in Louise Bennett’s memorable phrase, “colonization in reverse” (Bennett 179-180).⁴⁷

The third and fourth sections of the chapter engage with the focalization of the text through Chamcha and Farishta, respectively, and focus on how each protagonist unfolds opposing perspectives on the predicament of racialized migrants in a Britain. The predicament I mean to highlight is the juxtaposition between the ideals that impel economically motivated migration and its actual lived experience, as while the formal end of colonialism theoretically facilitated expanded access to the good life by migrating to the metropole, upon arrival they now had to contend with a Thatcher administration chipping away at the infrastructure on which conventional faith in the possibility of social uplift was founded, and frequently blaming them for the necessity of doing so. While Brennan, Jani, and others contribute to the ongoing reputation of *The Satanic Verses* as primarily heralding an ostensibly postnational era of neoliberal globalization, my interest here is in how the novel also records a transition in the chronotope of race in Britain *qua* nation.⁴⁸ Absent the template of racial hierarchy in the colonies after Empire’s formal end, the imaginary wellsprings of national greatness suddenly had to posit made-in-

⁴⁷ Ashley Dawson picks up on the resonances of Bennett’s poem of the same name as a way to frame the ongoing impact of contemporary postcolonial cultural formations in Britain (3-4), which includes an extended analysis of how *The Satanic Verses* “disrupted any lingering illusions about simplistic black-white binaries” (24; 121-148).

⁴⁸ Chronotope is Mikhail Bakhtin’s term for “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84); it works in this context as a shorthand for how the spatiotemporal connotations of race does not correspond precisely to the formal end of Empire; that is, the emergent cultural premises for racial difference (and racism) does not wholly replace the residue of prior associations.

Britain (a-)historical examples against the thesis of British post-imperial decline.⁴⁹ As the racial basis of nationalism turned inward, there were corresponding implications for the forms of racial oppression that anti-racist movements in Britain had to combat, and it is in this context that the novel engages with the internecine tensions within the intersectional grouping that had coalesced under the banner of Black British politics in the 1980s increasingly untenable.⁵⁰ The main purpose of this chapter is to examine how Rushdie counterpoints Chamcha and Farishta's responses to the ensuing interruptions of political cause and effect in postmodern culture, suggesting that such radical uncertainty regarding identitarian affiliation demonstrates the urgency of responding to the problematic of migrancy in intersectional terms. While the critical terminology of "intersectionality" draws on concepts from Black feminist and lesbian thought dating from the 1970s, its salience to the representation of postcolonial diasporic culture in Britain has to do with two aspects of the novel:⁵¹ first, its explicit fictionalization of internecine debates among feminist and anti-racist activists of the period around how best to organize "around issues such as wages and conditions of work, immigration law, fascist violence, reproductive rights, and domestic violence (Brah and Phoenix 78), and second, as a means of critiquing

⁴⁹ This is to observe the racial content of the ongoing obsession with celebrations of victory in World War II, as well as the industrial success of England as "workshop of the world," as such depictions often conveniently elide and/or downplay the constitutive role of colonialism in these successes by providing, respectively, conscripts and volunteers for the battlefield (or conceiving of the battlefield primarily as Europe) and captive markets for English goods. On the cultural meaning of World War II, see Gilroy, *Melancholia* (87-89), and for an example of a nationalist historiography of British industrialization after the repeal of the Corn Laws, see Ferguson (56-65).

⁵⁰ On this waning solidarity, see Griffin (10), S. Hall "Ethnicities" (444), and Stein (xv).

⁵¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" (140), but the origins of the concept are in foundational works of women of colour critique, such as *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977) and *The Bridge Called My Back* (1981).

the masculine account of postcolonial migration the novel provides through its focus on the interrelated experiences of Chamcha and Farishta.

An intersectional reading of *The Satanic Verses* as a critical cosmopolitan reorientation of Britain draws attention to the novel's significance for Islamophobia as a contemporary racial neoliberal formation, which in turn necessitates moving beyond narrative analysis to consider Rushdie's own paratextual production in the aftermath of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Feb. 14 1989 *fatwa* against him. In this final section, I read Rushdie's fiction against his non-fictional writings from the 1980s, arguing that while the former critiques a British national culture reckoning with the increased difficulty of assuming that belonging to a given social category would automatically entail certain political affiliations, the latter simply reifies such assumptions with particular respect to Islam as a category of belonging. In particular, the intense debate that marks the reception history of *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates how such contradictions are exigencies of the postmodernity of post-imperial British culture. The question here is what happens when a literary text is not so much informed by contextual confusion and uncertainty, but is itself the source of political controversy, as occurred with *The Satanic Verses*. Critics like Ana Cristina Mendes, Lisa Appignanesi, and Sara Maitland have shown how the pace of extra-narrative events like the *fatwa* and the protests that attended it—I group these events under the heading, “the Rushdie Affair”—have politicized the novel to a degree that makes it less amenable to conventional literary critical protocols.⁵² The furor of the novel's reception history may make it tempting to take a pseudo-New

⁵² See especially Appignanesi and Maitland's *The Rushdie File* (vii-ix).

Critical approach, to regard the text as “only a novel,” a view Rushdie himself eventually supported (*Homelands* 393). On the contrary, I regard the Rushdie Affair as a key addendum to the complex shifts in anti-racist movement politics that the narrative itself records, as the shifts in Rushdie’s self-construction through his commentary on the controversy evidence a far more exceptionalist and putatively colourblind path to migrant belonging in Britain than his novel advocated. Specifically, my approach to *The Satanic Verses* as a literary event—i.e. reading both text and its contexts as inextricable—regards the novel as both occasioned by and part of the occasion for the then-unprecedented acknowledgement of intersections between categories like race, gender, and class in 1980s Britain (Brah and Phoenix 76). Stuart Hall emphasizes the issue of historicity in describing the meaning of intersectionality for racial representation in Britain during this period: “[t]he end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation [...] and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity” (“Ethnicities” 444). With the turn from race to ethnicity that Hall describes, there could no longer be any easy assumptions that the British Muslim community would respond unanimously to the circulation of this novel; in other words, what an anti-racist position on the novel itself actually was had become emphatically unclear. Viewed in the light of what became known as the Rushdie Affair, *The Satanic Verses* sets in motion cultural tendencies that would later coalesce under the sign of “post-racial” formation in twenty-first-century Britain, as in many cases the necessary reformulation of struggles for racial justice also

provided fertile grounds in which Islamophobia as what David Theo Goldberg calls the “racism without race” of racial neoliberalism would begin to grow (23).

The Oscillations of Salahuddin Chamchawala and Gibreel Farishta: Between Resistance and Capture in Thatcher’s Britain

The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means.”

-Salman Rushdie, *Verses* 343

The film producer S.S. “Whisky” Sisodia, primarily notable in *The Satanic Verses* for deciding to cast Farishta after hitting him with his car, offers the above reflection on the uncontrollable and unforeseeable manner in which colonialism continues to shape linguistic meaning in English. The line seems barbed, yet it is simultaneously equivocal about the target of its ire. The element of doubt in Sisodia’s joke about the English being unaware of their colonial history is unintentional, as it derives from his stammer. But in Peter Hitchcock’s reading, Sisodia’s stammer affords two possible readings of this line (“Decolonizing” 759). Its overt content voices a wry preference for the more nativist implications of “English” as against the more capacious “British” as a designation of the colonizers’ nationality, but the uncertain mode of its delivery simultaneously grants an uncanny sense of unease to the expression of this anti-colonial insight in the language of the colonizer.⁵³ Sisodia’s utterance evokes a dynamic that Hitchcock has gone on to

⁵³ I am also drawing here on Walkowitz’s reading of Sisodia, where she cites both Stuart Hall and Robert Young on the distinction between English and British: “Hall’s formulation [...] distinguishes between British citizens, who may be black or white and whose backgrounds may be Indian or Scottish, and Englishmen, who are meant to be

describe as “oscillation,” his name for his refashioned account of dialectical materialism (3). The concept is a useful one for my discussion of postcolonial politics in this chapter, as a means of avoiding the determinist cul-de-sacs into which some materialist inquiry leads.⁵⁴

On the one hand, oscillation describes the pendulous movement between extremes that marks the “being” of capitalism, in all its contradictions; on the other, oscillation is a form of hesitation, a vacillation about what to do, a movement that is actually about a pause. In terms of social domination, oscillation is not just about hegemony’s violence or repression, but also about its doubt, its perplexity, its inkling of its own inability. (*Oscillate* 25)

Rather than framing the relationality between Chamcha and Farishta in dialectic terms, oscillation proves somewhat more amenable to the postmodern interpretive quandaries of their characterization in the context of Thatcherite neoliberalism. In Hitchcock’s own analysis of *The Satanic Verses*, he highlights the grounding of Sisodia’s observational humour in Rushdie’s non-fictional reflection on postcolonial melancholia as fundamental to Thatcher’s success, as his 1984 essay “Outside the Whale” connects a spate of TV adaptations of colonial novels with the populist fervour drummed up by the Falklands War (“Decolonizing” 753). While it is certainly true, as Alexander Adkins argues, that both Chamcha and Farishta are compromised inasmuch as they are “entrepreneurial [...and] cynical [...] ‘black British’ characters” (14), in reading them with respect to the oscillation inherent to Thatcherite hegemony, I draw attention to the potential germs of

white, native to England, and culturally homogenous” (136-137). On the implications of the rise of English nationalism, see also Attewell (172) and Baucom (12).

⁵⁴ The scientific predictive quality attributed to dialectical materialism after Louis Althusser is Hitchcock’s general target here, but in the specific response to postmodernism he also focuses especially on Terry Eagleton’s critique of the “cult of ambiguity” (Hitchcock 4, 44-49).

doubt that these characters encode regarding the status quo even though they are in many ways its beneficiaries.

Reading *Chamcha* and *Farishta* through the lens of oscillation is indicative of the theoretical aptitude of this concept for thinking about Thatcherism itself, *qua* hegemonic project with embedded contradictions in its framing of race and class.⁵⁵ At the same time as Thatcher assumed power on a promise of emphasizing meritocratic free market values that ostensibly transcended race, she also quite deliberately mobilized the country's melancholia regarding its colonial history—the target of Sisodia's ire here—in a manner that trades on the shift from a biological concept of “race” with a cultural one.⁵⁶ The specific tensions depicted in the novel and engaged in its fraught reception history are a register of the ambiguous meaning of the postmodern turn to culture for British Muslims. On the one hand, this shift involved British Muslims departing from this oppositional political coalition with a view to forming another one grounded more in their own distinctive cultural practices and historical investments,⁵⁷ while on the other hand it also enabled the rise of what Sherene Razack calls “race thinking” that undergirds Islamophobia as a force in Anglo-European societies, which permits the re-circulation of

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall provides a foundational analysis of Thatcherism in terms of Gramscian hegemony (*Renewal* 7), recalling Rushdie's interpretation of the populist appeal of the Falklands War to a postcolonial melancholic national imaginary hungry for neo-imperialist adventure (68-74).

⁵⁶ For accounts of how the New Right granted expanded moral cover for racism in the 1980s, see for instance Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (15-42) and Anna Marie Smith's *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (129-182).

⁵⁷ For critiques of the conservative intellectual foundations and pragmatic political consequences of the “Islam” that emerged from the auspices of Black British oppositional identity, see Abbas (97-148) and Bhatt (“Fetish”).

racist tropes regarding Muslims under the camouflage of cultural disagreement over a voluntary social category, religion.⁵⁸ As Gilroy observed in an essay from the period, this shift had significant implications for those who seek to challenge racism:

We increasingly face a racism [...] which has taken a necessary distance from crude ideas of biological inferiority and superiority and [...] answers the social and political turbulence of crisis and crisis management by the recovery of national greatness *in the imagination*. Its dreamlike construction of our sceptred isle as an ethnically purified one provides a special comfort against the ravages of decline. (Gilroy “Anti-Racism” 75, emphasis original)

With actually existing sites of colonization increasingly vestigial—the Falkland Islands were not quite the “jewel in the crown” of Empire—the imagination becomes the most explicit site of colonial contest. Hence the urgency of considering how a work like *The Satanic Verses* illuminates the search for new supplements to sustain the nationalist imagination of Britain’s racial hierarchy, supplements that could provide critical sustenance amid the hegemony of supposedly meritocratic neoliberalism.

Inasmuch as *The Satanic Verses* engages with the increasing prominence of postcolonial grievances in debates of the 1980s about national identity—debates to which Rushdie was very much a party—it also articulates a literary pre-history of post-racial formation. The novel shows how the incipient counter-hegemonic anti-racisms that sought to meet Thatcherism on its cultural terrain were prey to similar risks; they too, were subject to oscillation. Specifically, Rushdie satirizes responses by anti-racist

⁵⁸ As my reference to religion here indicates, Brah and Phoenix’s recourse to the shorthand of the so-called “trinity” of race, gender and class in their definition of intersectionality does not delimit the possible (crossings of) social categories to which it can refer. For this chapter’s purposes, Razack’s conception of the expansiveness of “race thinking,” as well as Junaid Rana’s extensive analysis of the intimacies between Islam and the history of European thought about race and/as European racism, ground my understanding of Islamophobia as “anti-Muslim racism” (Rana).

movements of the period to the nativism that enabled the Thatcher government's neoliberalization of Britain, drawing attention to the contradictions between their outward advocacy of social justice while attempting to screen from public view problematic internal practices and constitution.⁵⁹ Consider here the polarity between Chamcha and Farishta to which I referred at the chapter's outset. Farishta stands for an assertion of anti-colonial values through an embrace of India's cultural diversity, particularly insofar as his status as a Bollywood celebrity hinges on remaining recognizable across a diverse range of roles that are often defined in religious terms. An ostensibly Muslim actor in an industry that appeals to primarily Hindu audiences, whose "big break is the coming of the [primarily Hindu] theological movies" (*Verses* 24), Farishta flouts his personal faith not only through consuming alcohol but perhaps most importantly through trafficking in idolatry by being paid to play another religion's gods onscreen. By contrast, his trenchantly secular opposite number Chamcha shuns the pantheism of Bollywood in which Farishta has become a household name and gravitates instead towards assimilationism, moving to London to chase a dream of acting for British audiences. Faced with the endemic racism of Britain's entertainment industry, he must ultimately turn to his talent for vocal imitation, settling for a career voicing commercials—as his fellow voice actor Mimi Mamoulian notes wryly, "[t]hey [i.e. the British cultural

⁵⁹ Although Hitchcock continues to operate within a Marxist critical register of "socioeconomic determinism" (Szeman 5), I find oscillation productive in a postcolonial context owing to its acknowledgement of the urgency of cultural analysis for understanding the political: "[o]ne of the major achievements of cultural studies in its short history is not that it has masked culture as a preeminent form of politics but that it has significantly broadened the available knowledge about how culture is a ground of the political, and not just its passive effect" (*Oscillate* 13).

establishment] pay you to imitate them, as long as they don't have to look at you. Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face” (61). In becoming successful only as a voice actor, he symbolically defers his ostensible object: becoming (celebrated for acting) British. Despite his sense of the superiority of all things British and embarrassment about his subcontinental origins, Chamcha's racialization ensures that his Anglophilic comportment will always be limited to a performance. The only way to successfully elude what might be called, following Frantz Fanon, “the fact of his [Brown]ness” is a career in voice-acting, which hides the physical evidence of his racialization.⁶⁰

The pattern of ironic contrasts between Chamcha and his rival Farishta is established in their bifurcating career trajectories as well. The apostate Chamcha evinces greater symbolic fidelity to doctrinaire Islam than his Muslim counterpart, Farishta, whose celebrity is staked on the idolatry of playing Hindu deities. In other words, Chamcha avoids—albeit unintentionally—the blasphemy of acting out a corporeal embodiment of divinity because he never gets a chance to do so physically,⁶¹ which serves to counterbalance Farishta's concomitant superabundance of divine embodiments;

⁶⁰ The reference here is to Fanon's chapter “The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (82-108).

⁶¹ One counterpoint to Chamcha's ironic appearance of devotion consists in the disembodied descriptive authority of his voice as a narrator for commercials, which conforms to the well-known proscription on divine representation (aniconism) in Islam, a subject of ongoing theological debate, tends to emphasize the visual over the vocal: “[a]niconism has its basis in Qur'an's privileging of speech, the hadiths that warned against imitating God's creation, and according to some doctrines, the impossibility of representing the divine. The Qur'an prohibits representing God, but does not mention figurative representation in general. The point is that God is the only fashioner (al-musawwir) with whom humans cannot compete” (Marks 51). For a discussion of how *The Satanic Verses* might be read as imputing and contesting idolatry in the development of aniconic doctrine in Islam itself, see Brennan (146-147).

the actions of both characters can be read as differently expressive of devotion to and blasphemy against Islamic principles, undermining their supposedly opposed embodiments of Anglophilia and Anglophobia. Ian Baucom suggests that there is an affective link underlying Chamcha and Farishta's contrasting routes to this shared predicament, which both confirms and complicates Edouard Glissant's notion of a polarity of migrancy between reversion and assimilation: the "common sadness [of the novel's characters] suggests that even as the 'strategies' of reversion and assimilation are united in their pursuit of a single locality of belonging, they are unified also as failed epistemologies of redemption" (Baucom 206). I read the oscillation between their migrant positionalities, and the vacillation inherent in them, in intersectional terms. An intersectional view on these migrants' pretensions towards mimicry (Chamcha) and consistency (Farishta)—Baucom's assimilation and reversion—reveal both as inherently compromised practices of racialized life in Thatcherite Britain. To this end, the following sections track oscillations in the novel's presentation of two forms of migrant resistance under Thatcher. First, I will consider the putatively feminist implications of the novel's critique of a postcolonial politics of reclamation as primarily focalized through Chamcha's sojourn amongst a British Asian diaspora, affiliations he had formerly denied. My particular focus in this section is on how the assumed politics of Chamcha's assimilationism are complicated through his unlooked-for celebrity as a figurehead of anti-racist struggle. Second, I will consider the seeming radicalism of the challenge Farishta's magical realist transformation poses to postcolonial melancholia, manifesting a return of the postcolonial repressed as a means to figuratively colonize post-imperial

Britain in reverse. I evaluate both the postcolonial political interventions that Chamcha and Farishta embody through an intersectional lens, focusing on whether they incorporate or ignore the gendered implications of the kinds of anti-racist politics with which they become associated.

Oscillation I: Reclaiming “Rivers of Blood?”: Chamcha and the Critique of Counterstories to Thatcherite Hegemony

I acknowledge that I am taking a somewhat unlikely tack in tracing the potential sympathy of *The Satanic Verses* with intersectional feminism’s role in re-premising anti-racism through an analysis of the perspective of one of the novel’s male protagonists, Saladin Chamcha. Sara Suleri’s reading of the novel attributes such feminist potential to its patterns of reference, which she sees as providing “postcolonial narrative with a highly novel language of reconciliation and forgiveness” (205). By contrast, I argue that these themes of reconciliation and forgiveness are not limited to the novel’s formal elements, inasmuch as the novel’s narrative explicitly engages with the potential of reclamation as an anti-racist political tactic, filtering its depiction of 1980s Black British political organizing through the conservative Anglophile perspective of Chamcha, who is unwillingly forced to seek shelter among British Asian activists. The rubric of reclamation I will draw on here derives from Farah Godrej’s feminist delineation of the concept:

Reclamation requires the capacity to tell stories about ourselves and our world, stories that in turn resonate with us and acquire the authority to define us. Counterstories can alter the oppressed’s perceptions of themselves, by featuring certain details and moral ideas that the dominant story ignores or underplays and

retelling the story to invite conclusions that are at odds with the dominant ones.
(116)

Godrej's account is germane to an intersectional analysis of *The Satanic Verses* because it clearly establishes the possibility that linguistic reclamation is both analogous and relevant to what Hall calls a "counter-hegemonic strategy:" the resonances of "counterstories" can be the grounds on which the political status quo is rethought. At the same time, Godrej provides a critical genealogy that gauges the effect of reclamation in intersectional terms: what may seem like minor details of a grand political project—for present purposes, developing a mode of politics capable of challenging Thatcherism—become crucial to consider. Rushdie presents and assesses strategies of political possibility ambivalently, due to the simultaneous historical shifts that contextualize the text's publication: Britain's forestalled reckoning with postcoloniality and its transition to neoliberalism. In this light, the intersectional social locations of the characters in the novel—in terms of gender, race, and class—become crucial. For instance, as an assimilated model minority, Chamcha may seem a likely fit for the classed and gendered templates of neoliberal subjectivity, yet he remains no less vulnerable to the resurgent racism of national belonging under Thatcherism. Chamcha makes for an unlikely avatar of an anti-racist activism seeking to come to grips with neoliberal British culture, as a self-professed conservative Anglophile who seems altogether deferential to the nationalist alibi Thatcher provides for neoliberal reform.⁶² But the very unlikeliness that a Thatcherite model minority should convey an intersectional critique of the ambiguity of

⁶² Regarding the relationship between nativist nationalism and the rise of neoliberalism in Britain, see especially Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* and Anna Marie Smith's *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality, 1968-1990*.

reclamation as an anti-racist tactic, is what suggests that the potential cost of reclamation—traducing the memory of past oppression—may be worth the discursive political opening it provides. Taken together, these two aspects of his characterization indicate that the novel as a whole will thematize how avowed political allegiances are increasingly unreliable indices of ultimate political effects.

But Chamcha's Anglophilia is the target of irony from the outset of *The Satanic Verses*. One sign that his assimilative approach will be impossible to fulfill is his full name: Salahuddin Chamchawala. His given name refers to the famous Muslim leader who fought against Richard I during the Crusades (frequently Anglicized as Saladin), while his last translates from Urdu as "spoon man." A *chamcha* recalls the figure of the *babu*, the civil servant schooled in Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous pedagogical dictum of becoming "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (430) only to earn ridicule from both colonizer and colonized alike. Srinivas Aravamudan observes the sycophancy implicit in this surname: "*Chamcha* (often contracted in the novel to *chumch* or 'spoono') is [... a] common subcontinental term of derision" (*Guru* 204). Taken together, the names "Saladin" and "Chamcha" reference the ambiguity in contemporary British racism as a result of its specifically colonial genealogy, one that wavers between acknowledging that empire required colonized functionaries for its maintenance, even as such comprador figures always already encode a threat to violently upend the racist hierarchy upon which imperialism was based. Little wonder then that Chamcha's career as an actor in Britain ends up being in the ventriloquist capacity of voice acting, as his presence onstage would adduce the

discomfiting fact—both for the Anglophile actor wishing to pass as English and his (presumptively white) English audience—of his racialization. Hence the coordinates of Chamcha's characterization signal that assimilation is ultimately unlikely to shield him from the racism of postcolonial melancholic Britain. Irony is not the only consequence of Chamcha's ambiguity as a racialized British subject who self-consciously disaffiliates from the struggle for social justice along anti-racist lines, striving instead after the model minority ideal. As a kind of residual comprador, Chamcha embodies the oscillation that hegemonic neoliberalism introduces into the hegemony of postcolonial Britain. His demonic transfiguration brings home to him the unapproachability of Thatcherite model minority aspiration to which he had formerly ascribed, and grants his critique of reclamation an ethical quality, making him into both a critic of and a figure for the re-premising of anti-racist politics along intersectional lines taking place in 1980s Black and Asian Britain.

Chamcha's entanglement in the debate over the merits of anti-racist tactics like reclamation begins with his consignment to an ethnic enclave of London named Brickhall, a neighbourhood that has taken the opposite view on how to contend with the problem of diasporic belonging. A portmanteau of actual London neighbourhoods associated with large migrant enclaves, poverty, and conflict with police and racist National Front supporters—including Brixton, Southall, and, Sukhdev Sandhu argues, Hackney—Brickhall is the imaginary site to which Chamcha repairs, having first survived a plane crash into the Thames along with Farishta, escaped police custody, and been turned away from home by his ex-wife Pamela. Eventually he finds refuge from the racist

scrutiny of the Metropolitan Police with Muhammad and Hind Sufyan, proprietors of the Shaandaar Café. Chafing against the implication of fellowship in Mr. Sufyan's invitation to sojourn at his establishment—"Best place for you is here. [...] Where else but here, with us, among your own people, your own kind?" (261)—Chamcha consoles himself privately, "You're not my people. I've spent half my life trying to get away from you" (262). The irony of Chamcha's return to the country he loves is in its emphatic lack of triumph, as he must now depend on the generosity of would-be immigrants awaiting decisions on their applications for permanent residence that Shaandaar hosts in its upstairs rooms. The closest approximation of an ideological fellow traveller he can find in such a locale are the Sufyans' rebellious British-born daughters Mishal and Anahita:

he and the girls are the only people in the café who consider themselves 'English,' and further require him to recognize that though their respective Englands are radically dissimilar, they are nevertheless alike in their flirtations with Englishness and their rejections of the suit of a subcontinental past. (Baucom 205)

Chamcha is disturbed yet compelled by the restive idiosyncrasies of Mishal and Anahita's second-generation British Asian personalities, forged by a postmodern Englishness for which Kung Fu movies and American pop culture are ready touchstones, and an upbringing in a composite of boroughs that in the 1980s were sites of Black and Asian British protests against both the government and the police's inadequate and often-incendiary approach to prosecuting racial grievances. Rushdie locates the actual space to which Chamcha repairs on his return to Britain in an urban space being transformed by migrants, thereby bringing him into unsettling—to his Anglophile sensibility—proximity with fellow postcolonial migrants in Britain.

Given that urban renewal projects often target communities of migrants for redevelopment because of their precarious economic and citizenship status, it makes sense that the most readily apparent example of the thematic of reclamation in *The Satanic Verses* is in the inner city ethnic enclave of Brickhall.⁶³ Janice Ho emphasizes that anti-racist struggles in the novel have less to do with contesting reclamation in a gentrifying sense than they do with street-based conflicts with National Front supporting nationalists over neighbourhoods' perceived racialization;⁶⁴ this warlike framing of racial conflict in London becomes most evident from Mishal's "habit of talking about the Street as if it were a mythological battleground" (*Verses* 292, qtd. in Ho 217). Despite the potential that this subversion of the racist trope of migrants and/as racialized Britons as invaders might license violence, Ho opens up a reading of the Sufyan sisters' posturing as articulating with the interruptive spirit of collective expressions of Black British dissent and resistance in the period.⁶⁵ There is a latent ambiguity regarding the morality of this attempt to reclaim the racist trope of invasion, which demonstrates another function of the text's oscillating aesthetic. Hitchcock emphasizes that oscillation is not just a way of

⁶³ As James Baldwin argued in another context, "urban renewal [...] means negro removal" (Clark); for a more extensive and contemporary sociological analysis of gentrification targeting ethnic minority communities, see for example Lin 33. With respect to the racial and neoliberal implications of urban renewal in *The Satanic Verses*, Peter Kalliney connects the novel's representation of the gentrification of London with the Thatcherite project of redefining both the British nation and economy (177-210).

⁶⁴ For more on the London neighbourhoods of Brixton and Tottenham known both for their racialized demographics and for having experienced riots during the 1980s, see Aufheben.

⁶⁵ Influenced by Gilroy's analysis of this moment in the history of racial politics in Britain, Ho goes on to observe that patterns of cultural representation that affix the Black subject as always already lawless enable the racial state to rule through violence (Ho 218, see also Gilroy's "Babylon" (278-314).

thinking about how politics involves holding apparent antinomies in relation to one another; he emphasizes that vacillation is synonymous with his notion of oscillation, which he explains as both suggesting the instability of this tense relation that produces politics, but also as an embedded autocritical moment: “most progressive forms of materialism promote a radical skepticism both toward the objects of their critique (the bourgeois liberal state, the transnational corporation, or mutations of oppressive ideology) and toward materialism's founding principles themselves” (3). Given that Chamcha occupies the assimilative pole in the novel’s spectrum of migrant belonging, his skepticism regarding the political prospects of reclamation becomes a key source of reflexive critique about migrant politics, even if it appears to proceed from his disdain for his diasporic community.

Perhaps the most overt instance of reclamation as creative political strategy in *The Satanic Verses* is provided by a draft of Marxist Jamshed “Jumpy” Joshi’s poetry that Chamcha comes across, in which Joshi seeks to reclaim one of the most charged phrases in the history of British race relations. The nuances of Joshi’s poetic aspirations—which a lawyer and rival named Hanif Johnson exposes before Joshi is ready to publish—are worth quoting at length:

‘Upstairs on his desk there’s a piece of paper with some verses written on it. And a title: *The River of Blood*.’ [...] ‘We got a poet in our midst, Sufyan Sahib. Treat with respect. Handle with care. He says a street is a river and we are the flow; humanity is a river of blood, that’s the poet’s point. Also the individual human being,’ [...] Johnson] broke off to run around to the far side of an eight-seater table as Jumpy came after him, blushing furiously, flapping his arms. ‘In our very bodies, does the river of blood not flow?’ *Like the Roman*, the ferrety Enoch Powell had said, *I seem to see the river Tiber foaming with much blood*. Reclaim the metaphor, Jumpy Joshi had told himself. Turn it; make it a thing we can use.

‘This is like rape,’ he pleaded with Hanif. ‘For God’s sake, stop.’ (192, emphasis in original)

This effort to dislodge the racist connotation of “Rivers of Blood” comes amid a crisis for Joshi. Bereft after being turned out by his lover, Chamcha’s wife Pamela, Joshi seeks solace in the wry wit of the owner of the Shaandar Cafe, Mr. Sufyan, only to face still another unwanted exposure at the hands of Johnson. Joshi’s poetic appeal to humanism as a means of insisting that the particular and the general are not in tension but dialectical thus meets with a material contradiction at the very moment of its public utterance, in the form of Johnson’s teasing revelation of Joshi’s unfinished poetry. Exposed though Joshi feels by this action, it is reasonable to infer that his recapitulation of “Rivers of Blood” would inevitably be subject to some such public assessment, for, as Godrej points out, reclamation cannot be politically effective if it is a solitary or private pursuit, as the work of “repairing a damaged self-conception occurs in both the internal and the shared, public domain” (116). Nonetheless, given the simultaneity of their reference to public and private realms, acts of reclamation require subjective autonomy, not in the hypostasized sense of an internal dialogue walled off within an individual consciousness, but rather in the intersubjective sense of selfhood being an always-unfinished and constant process of becoming in dialogue with others and their own remembered and internalized voices (121-122). From this perspective, as much as Joshi regards Johnson reading from his unfinished work to be a violation, it becomes clear that reciting Powellite rhetoric without consulting others who have been directly affected by the racism it fomented is itself a violation.

When Joshi's effort at reclamation is revisited later in the novel, it is filtered through the perspective of Chamcha as he bears witness to the contradictions that emerge in the course of a campaign against Thatcherite racism. Dragged by Joshi to a meeting to plan solidarity actions after the dubious conviction of the prominent anti-racist activist Dr. Uhuru Simba for the so-called "Granny Ripper Murders," Chamcha notes some problematic aspects of the organization. These include essentialism—one of Simba's young followers is proud of the African-ness of his name despite being unsure of its specific origin (427)—and strategically downplaying Simba's history of abusing women. In particular, Chamcha faults Joshi for assuming that the mere presence of some of Simba's past victims at the meeting is enough to prove the overall priority of anti-racism, and overcome the genuine questions that its leader's violently misogynist past may provoke regarding his fitness for leadership (429). On this basis, Chamcha forms the opinion that the positioning of the organization as a whole is morally vacuous, an instance of the particular problems inherent in Joshi's poetic effort at political reclamation writ large:

[A] British Asian woman [...] was launching into Bob Dylan's song, *I Pity the Poor Immigrant* [sic]. Another false and imported note this: the song actually seemed rather hostile towards immigrants, though there were lines that struck chords, about the immigrant's visions shattering like glass, about how he was obliged to 'build his town with blood.' Jumpy, with his versifying attempts to redefine the old racist image of the rivers of blood, would appreciate that. (430)

Chamcha's ambivalent reaction to the rally recalls the unmooring of the coalitions between different racialized groups in the Black British anti-racist struggle of the 1980s and anticipates how the project of conjoining the divergent political grievances and

interests of its numerous constituencies would eventually become untenable.⁶⁶ Even as Chamcha is quick to stress any signs of collectivist forms of anti-oppressive organizing on the wane, his skepticism also warns against the tendency to abstract difference along the way to a broad-based Black British political coalition.

Chamcha's ambivalence about reclamation registers a concern with extrapolating too far from American race radicalism to the British cause of anti-racism, as well as about whether the readiness to reclaim a particular racist utterance to serve a general anti-racist politics signals a broader tendency to pass over the particular for the sake of the general.⁶⁷ His hesitancy can be thought about with reference to Sara Ahmed's theory of the politics of encounter in postcolonial situations:

Encounters are meetings [...] which are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters [...] and] the particular encounter both informs and is informed by the general: encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular—the face to face of the encounter—and the general—the framing of the encounter by broader relationships. The particular encounter always carries traces of those broader relationships (*Encounters* 8).

Where reclamation of racist epithets may be rationalized as destabilizing racial hierarchies in an American context, where the history of racism is difficult to ignore, the

⁶⁶ Gabriele Griffin accounts for this reconsideration of anti-racist premises in the introduction to her companion to Black and Asian British women playwrights: “the strategic utility of the term [i.e. Black British] had its limits in the very different needs and issues diverse communities faced[...]. In the same way that the question of arranged marriages, for instance, does not affect Caribbean communities, so the issue of single motherhood tends not to be foregrounded within Asian communities” (10). See also, for example, Mark Stein's discussion of “Black British” as a cultural category in his *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (xv, 7-20).

⁶⁷ Part of the decline of “Black Britain” as aspirational oppositional project in the late 1980s was the untenability of extrapolating from American Civil Rights campaigns, given the dissimilarities in the entanglements of American and British history with colonialism and slavery (Gilroy, “Anti-Racism” 82).

historical trace that the phrase “Rivers of Blood” bears is a pattern of cultural explanation of Powellite racism that dismisses it as an extreme case, one that denies the documented appeal and persistence of the sentiments to which he gave voice.⁶⁸ As Nadine Attewell points out, even though mainstream politicians and parties of the time were unanimous in repudiating the speech, and Powell was removed from the shadow cabinet, his ideas’ endurance is evident in the rise in Islamophobia and nativist nationalism following the 7/7 attacks in London and in the run-up and aftermath of the Brexit vote: “the last ten years have seen Powell partially rehabilitated, ‘Rivers of Blood’ acclaimed, even from within the ostensible mainstream, as a prophetic call to action” (170-171).⁶⁹ Given this background, Chamcha’s discomfort with reclaiming Powellism can be framed in relation to Ahmed’s notion of the politics of encounter; the problem with reclaiming a phrase like “Rivers of Blood” is that rather than ironically redeploing the rhetorical impact of a nativist catchphrase to opposite effect, it may simply serve as further evidence—another trace—of the broader tendency towards denying Powellism’s influence. To be sure, the questionable taste of Joshi’s attempt to reclaim this white supremacist catchphrase is not quite the same magnitude of ethical lapse as apologizing for sexual violence on the part of Simba, because of his importance to Black British community organizing. But Chamcha’s

⁶⁸ I am not suggesting that the American experience of racism involves any less denialism than in Britain, but that the historical differences between the two countries’ history of race relations facilitate a tendency to externalize problems of race in British historiography—i.e. this history that “happened overseas” in the colonial space of Empire, in Sisodia’s phrase, at least primarily until the Windrush Generation—from the British Isles themselves.

⁶⁹ Attewell draws on Kathleen Paul’s analysis of the transformative effect Powell had on race relations in Britain (178), but see also Anna Marie Smith’s chapter on Powellism (esp. pp. 169-182), Busse 2-5, Hall et al 245, and Olusoga 10-18.

skepticism probes the intersectional ethical implications of both Joshi's agitprop and Simba's leadership, which offers a perspective from which to query the priority of the general at the expense of ostensible stumbling blocks—whether the historical memory of Powellism's impact since 1968, or the disrespect for survivors of sexual violence that goes with elevating abusers in anti-oppressive movements—that are sometimes depicted as narrow particular interests. When viewed through the skeptical lens of Chamcha, Joshi's poetic attempt at reclamation becomes associated with a host of other well-intentioned if ultimately misguided attempts at anti-racist solidarity, which in turn demonstrates the challenge for would-be organizers of an anti-racist counter-hegemony to articulate a radical racial politics that manages the precarious balance between general histories of oppression and clever tactical responses to the particular political exigencies of the cultural moment.

In this context, I reconsider the conventional analysis of Rushdie's postmodern cosmopolitanism as symbolized by his profuse citationality, as this formal complexity of his referentiality also indicates the uncertainty regarding the actual effects of a given political tactic. While Rushdie's refutation of hegemonic discourse through satirical inversion may be postmodern, his style is nonetheless far from the ostensibly enervating aesthetic of pastiche that Fredric Jameson associates with postmodern style: blank parody.⁷⁰ Rather, an intersectional critical perspective indicates that Rushdie's layered

⁷⁰ It might be argued that *The Satanic Verses*, with its embedded reference to Jameson's theory of postmodernism—as is evident from Mimi Mamoulian's knowing dismissal of the possibility of a hermeneutic response to pastiche—reclaims this debased critical category itself through the migrant bringing competing systems of cultural reference into uneasy proximity. Mamoulian, a voice acting colleague of Chamcha's, describes her

patterns of reference coalesce into multiple grounds on which to interrogate Joshi's faith in a politics of reclamation. The song Joshi cites, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," raises the spectre of an equally off-pitch discursive strategy of anti-racist resistance—that is, the unapologetic cultural appropriation for which Bob Dylan has become known.⁷¹ For Dionne Brand, cultural appropriation is more than simply a charge to be levied against a single cultural work or its producer in isolation; rather, she observes that it is a "critical category [... that] challenges the author's anonymity; it questions the author's 'interests' in the text; it argues that the author is not 'innocent' of the relations of race, gender, sexuality and class" (127).⁷² In this view, riffing on "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" does not just superimpose an American reference point for activism on to a British context. The song's inauthenticity in its initial American context embeds an additional autocritical element of doubt regarding its status as a Civil Rights touchstone, much less as a rallying cry to be taken up by racial justice struggles elsewhere. Ironically, it suggests that

career in Jamesonian terms: "I am an intelligent female. I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with postmodernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society only capable of pastiche: a 'flattened' world. When I become the voice of a bubble bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly, understanding what I'm doing and why. Viz., I am earning cash" (270). The migrant's interstitial vantage point, however, suggests the value of a hermeneutics of closeness—as opposed to the more conventionally valorized critical distance—as Richard Dyer proposes in *Pastiche*: "[p]astiche embraces closeness; it accepts the possibility of being seduced, penetrated, dependent or ventriloquised, without seeing this as a significant and anxiety producing loss of autonomy" (138).

⁷¹ Daphne Brooks and Gayle Wald describe Dylan's fraught status with regard to a race-conscious history of American pop music: "[a]ny music wonk will tell you that Bob Dylan persists as a revered if surprisingly confounding racial trickster in popular music culture. His recordings must surely beckon thoughtful readings that take into account the politics of cultural appropriation and racial masquerade" (169).

⁷² While Brand addresses a Canadian mediascape here, I would argue that many of the protocols of cultural appropriation are shared across the nations that comprise the Black Atlantic, despite the historical differences of each location.

Chamcha's own status as outsider and critic of the movement makes him vulnerable to a similar charge of cultural appropriation. As an Anglophile with no love lost for a diasporic community whom he perceives as a liability for his own precarious Englishness, the motives for his skepticism about Simba's role in the anti-racist cause as a whole may not be altogether altruistic, even if the outcome is ethically sound. Even if Chamcha's magic realist transformation into a devil inevitably leads him to find common cause with the dispossessed migrants that he had scorned previously, his critical motives remain compromised. In other words, Chamcha's critique of Joshi's versifying attempt at reclaiming the "Rivers of Blood" suggests that the novel's satire itself is structured through oscillation, flushing out the hypocrisies of anti-racist political activism as much as it exposes the potential bad faith of its would-be critic.

Chamcha's own transformation into a demonic figure, complete with a cult following among the burgeoning dispossessed segments of Thatcherite London's migrant population, is, however, a form of reclamation that is more consistently valorized in *The Satanic Verses*. While staying with the Sufyans, who hide him and his physical metamorphosis into a representation of *Shaitan* (Arabic for the English, "Satan"), Chamcha starts appearing in the dreams of the entire neighbourhood (294-295). Initially interpreted as a shared nightmare, the transformed image of Chamcha as goatman eventually gives rise to a popular fad:

[v]ery quickly, because nothing takes a long time any more, the image of the dream-devil started catching on [... and] nocturnal brown-and-blacks found themselves cheering, in their sleep, this what-else-after-all-but-black-man, maybe a little twisted up by fate class race history, all that, but getting off his behind, bad and mad, to kick a little ass. [...] Asian retailers and manufacturers of button-badges sweatshirts posters understood the power of the dream, and then all of a

sudden he was everywhere, on the chests of young girls and in the windows protected against bricks by metal grilles, he was a defiance and a warning. [...] The kids in the Street started wearing rubber devil-horns on their heads, the way they used to wear pink-and-green balls jiggling on the ends of stiff wires a few years previously, when they preferred to imitate spacemen. The Symbol of the Goatman, his fist raised in might, began to crop up on banners at political demonstrations. [...] Police community relations officers point to the “growing devil-cult among young blacks and Asians” as a “deplorable tendency.” (295)

The goatman cult appeals to the postmodernity of everyday migrant life in London as depicted in the novel. The campaign has a faux-authentic local derivation, which could well be read as simulacra in part because of an accompanying merchandising campaign that effectively eclipses its referent, and appeals to an unspecified oppositional politics via overdetermined chains of cultural reference. All the more fitting, then, that Chamcha's transformed figure provides an avatar that recalls the dynamic that Graham Huggan terms the postcolonial exotic, his name for the way in which postcolonial literature itself suspends a tension between the poles of politicization and cooptation (6). Huggan suggests that cultural producers seeking to demonstrate oppositional investments in their work—what he terms “postcolonialism”—are always in danger of being compromised by their production and circulation through the conduits of global cultural and capital: “postcoloniality,” in his phrase (6).⁷³ On the one hand, the goatman figure embodies postcolonialism given his potential to transcend the splintering anti-racist movement caused by internecine tensions in and among Black and Asian communities, while on the other, Chamcha's situation in the migrant community of Brickhall prompts various unanticipated re-appropriations by those within and without his cult through the

⁷³ These distinctions roughly correspond to Fredric Jameson's theorization of the cultural dimension of “postmodernism” in his 1984 essay, and David Harvey's political economy of the historical turn to postmodernity in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989).

branding of his image and the attendant marketing campaign, signaling the complicities associated with postcoloniality.

Because Chamcha straddles these dual senses of the postcolonial as both a mode and a site of critique, it becomes all the more apt that Mishal Sufyan explicitly refers to the goatman as the reclamation of the devil's historically negative signification in normative English culture (296). Chamcha is thus doubly galvanizing in terms of postmodern identity politics. Not only does his reluctance to take on an active role mean that unlike Simba, his reputation does not reflect on the reputation of the resistance movement for whom he becomes a figurehead, but he also facilitates a more polyglot and less programmatic movement that is consequently unlikely to be undone by piecemeal transgressions of its constitutive principles. In other words, the goatman cult's followers revel in the impious quality of their politicization, being as likely to hawk T-shirts as they are to wear them while breaking windows. With Chamcha as ironic figurehead, the cult presents a postmodern challenge to liberal norms of political engagement, eschewing both hierarchy and respectability politics.⁷⁴ The cult's diversity of tactics is formidable, prompting the police to respond with a scaremongering campaign of their own.

The draw of the postmodern aesthetic of reclamation that gives rise to the goatman cult is clear from how the choice hangout of Brickhall's resistance is described: Club Hot Wax, "where the beat meets the street" (300). Consider how Rushdie describes the club's DJ:

⁷⁴ The perception of leaderless-ness among British communities of colour has provided a rationale for the state to negate the legitimacy of racialized grievances associated with protests and riots in the 1980s such as the Bradford Riots, what the British Asian activist group Southall Black Sisters call "take me to your leader syndrome" (Brown et al 89).

the prancing Pinkwalla, [...] a seven-foot albino, his hair the palest rose, the whites of his eyes likewise, his features unmistakably Indian, the haughty nose, long thin lips, a face from a *Hamza-nama* cloth. An Indian who has never seen India, East-India-man from the West Indies, white black man. A star. (301)

Pinkwalla epitomizes Rushdie's aesthetic of cosmopolitan mix-up, subverting normative British masculinity by physically embodying its most desirable and emblematic traits—height and the colour of his eyes, hair, and skin—while simultaneously demonstrating characteristics that undermine racializing presumptions that tie these attributes to white English identity (Walkowitz 133).⁷⁵ Pinkwalla is thus a fitting master of ceremonies to preside over a dance that symbolically rebalances the scales of Britain's colonial history, however temporarily. As patrons dance among wax figurines of resistance against colonial and/or domestic racisms, a trick of the lights and the dancers' reflected movements make them appear as animated participants in the revelry, even as other wax figurines, Enoch Powell and Margaret "Maggie Torture" Thatcher among them, are eventually hauled out to be climactically melted down in a spectacle of imaginary retribution for the violence of colonialism and racism (301). The fact that Margaret Thatcher is Club Hot Wax's most popular effigy⁷⁶ indicates how Chamcha as the figurehead for the club's clientele comes to be associated with anti-Thatcherite sentiment,

⁷⁵ The subversion here recalls the historical psychologization of British colonialism through a contest of masculinities, where Indian men were deemed to be effeminate, as discussed in Revathy Krishnaswamy's "The Economy of Colonial Desire" and Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy*.

⁷⁶ "Attendants move towards the tableau of hate-figures, pounce upon the night's sacrificial offering, the one most often selected, if truth be told; at least three times a week. Her permawaved coiffure, her pearls, her suit of blue. *Maggie-maggie-maggie*, bays the crowd. *Burn-burn-burn*" (302).

even if his own actions and protestations in the novel might make him more a catalyst than an active agent of such resistance.⁷⁷

Chamcha's very reluctance to actively associate with, much less lead, the anti-racist struggle on behalf of London's dispossessed migrant population is key to the success of this iteration of postcolonial reclamation in the novel. His ability to constellate dissent no longer stems from an espousal of elitist neo-imperialist English-ness,⁷⁸ but rather has to do with the bad faith he attributes to his own ability to represent the concerns of subaltern migrants given his privileged metropolitan social positioning. This hesitancy in Chamcha evinces a potentially unwitting regard for the problems of speaking on behalf of a vulnerable constituency whose political articulations suffer from structural constraints, negating the potential latent in postcoloniality for cooptation. In other words, to take deliberate leadership of the cult inspired by his demonic countenance would be to appropriate the cause for personal self-aggrandizement in the manner that Gayatri Spivak attributes to the "native informant":

the aura of identification with those distant objects of oppression clings to these [postcolonial] informants [... who] either undermines the struggle [...] by piecing together great legitimizing narratives of cultural and ethnic specificity and continuity, and of national identity [...] Or, and more recently, the more stellar

⁷⁷ To wit, consider, respectively, Chamcha's role as what "black radicals [...] nickname[d ...] 'Brown Uncle Tom'" on *The Aliens Show*, the Thatcherite Hal Valance's TV show that Chamcha refuses to admit propagates racist tropes regularly applied to migrants (63-64, 276), and his retort to Mishal's suggestion that he should get involved in the campaign being mounted under the banner of his likeness: "This isn't what I wanted. This is not what I meant, at all" (296).

⁷⁸ I want to stress again that Chamcha only gives up his dogged faith in Britain's position as the apogee of the (notional) global cultural hierarchy after his acknowledgement—thanks to pressure from his Brickhall caretakers, the Sufyan sisters—that such a cultural posture epitomizes the melancholic cultural impasse of the novel's moment as diagnosed by Gilroy.

level predicates upward class-mobility as resistance, confining the destabilization of the metropole merely to the changes in the ethnic composition of the population. The continuous and varied product of this dissimulation is an “other” or “ground level activity,” “emergent discourses” for postmodernity, a kind of built-in critical moment. Both the racial underclass and the subaltern South step back into the penumbra. (*Postcolonial Reason* 360-361)

Here Spivak reiterates her well-known claim that any speech on behalf of the subaltern from a privileged standpoint remains likely to re-inscribe oppression irrespective of whether the intentions are good or self-serving. At the same time, she also indicates that the emphasis on confronting the oppressions facing diasporic subjects in metropolitan contexts risks overshadowing more geographically distant—and potentially more intractable—subaltern subjectivities. Of course, as an Anglophile who cannot altogether escape his Indian background, Chamcha may not even be legible as a native informant, given that he wants an acting career but would quite happily mask his Indian background. On Spivak’s terms, he may be redeemed somewhat because he at least recognizes the bad faith of claiming a diasporic affiliation; even though he seeks shelter among an Indian migrant community, he makes no effort to hide his assimilationist predispositions to the Sufyans, Joshi, and everyone else in Brickhall he encounters. In his becoming a political avatar for migrant causes, therefore, he ironically negates the problematic ventriloquism in which he engages. Chamcha does not seek any enhancement of his own standing via the goatman cult, nor is he prone to any altruism regarding his role as figurehead.

But before concluding that Chamcha’s lack of political intentions point to the goatman cult as a more ethical reclamatory postcolonial politics, it is worth considering the more politically omnivorous nature of reclamation in the novel. For Kalliney, the juxtaposition of the apparent resolution to the pseudo-Freudian angst of Chamcha’s

family history with the correspondent lack of such resolution for the migrant community of Brickhall, the site of the transfigured Chamcha's sanctuary and postcolonial reeducation, is telling. At the novel's end, Chamcha's progressive unlearning of his heretofore unquestioning Anglophilia finally culminates in a newfound regard for his Indian homeland upon his return to India to make up with his dying parent. To conclude *The Satanic Verses* by resolving Chamcha's narrative conflicts through an individualistic allegory of domestic reconciliation is to stack the representative deck against the classed dimension of the predicament of migrancy in postcolonial Britain (Kalliney 208). Yet, Rushdie introduces one final complication regarding the idea that Chamcha has altogether given up his Anglophilia, as he turns from his father's deathbed on the family estate in Bombay and reflects inwardly:

He stood at the window of his childhood and looked out at the Arabian Sea. The moon was almost full; moonlight, stretching from the rocks of Scandal Point out to the far horizon, created the illusion of a silver pathway, like a parting in the water's shining hair, like a road to miraculous lands. He shook his head; could no longer believe in fairy-tales. Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born. (561)

On one level, Chamcha's attitude as he takes in the ocean view charts a radical break with his former dreams of finding success as an actor in Britain; his adopted homeland is legible as one of those "miraculous lands" whose lustre has faded. In acknowledging the way in which (internalized) racism has placed limitations on his childhood dream, however, Chamcha also begins to recognize the inherently plural signification of locations, whether England or India; it is perhaps conspicuous that having just reclaimed for himself a sense of filial ties with his father and homeland, he is nonetheless willing to

allow his childhood home to be demolished. The internal oscillation Chamcha undergoes here once again recalls the postcolonial exotic; for every potential political opening, there is an attendant vacillation, or a lack of guarantees as Hall might have put it at the time.⁷⁹

So how, then, does the distinction between postcolonialism and postcoloniality reveal the oscillation internal to Chamcha's observation and the conclusion overall? Just as his sojourn in Brickhall forced him to realize that his disdain for and disaffiliation with the British Asian diaspora involved ventriloquizing a racist sense of superiority, so it is actually the act of being hurried away from the scene of his father's death by Zeeny Vakil, a noted critic of contemporary Indian art and Chamcha's sometime lover, which leads him to reconsider a key presupposition of his Anglophilia: his dismissal of India.⁸⁰ Earlier in the novel, Zeeny states her intention to make of Chamcha a "reclamation project" (53) by illuminating to him the no less heterodox and vibrant culture of the postcolonial state of his birth. Once their affair reignites at the close of the novel, Chamcha is forced to confront the central contention of Zeeny's book, *The Only Good Indian*, a work of art criticism that advocates a cosmopolitan counterpoint to a postcolonial Indian nationalism that has produced the sectarian formation of *Hindutva*: "the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket with which she sought to

⁷⁹ I take this phrase from Hall's essay, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees" (1986). Huggan's own reading of *The Satanic Verses* identifies it as canny to the risks of cooptation under postcoloniality, focusing on the knowing ironies of Chamcha and Farishta's acting careers to locate the hybrid performances of identity in the novel (90-94).

⁸⁰ As Gayatri Spivak notes in her analysis of the novel, "[b]ecause the migrant as paradigm is a dominant theme in theorizations of post-coloniality, it is easy to overlook Rushdie's resolute effort to represent contemporary India" ("Reading *Verses*" 81).

replace with an ethic of historically validated eclecticism” (52).⁸¹ Just as Zeeny forced his father Changez to face up to the ultimately imaginary basis for one’s seemingly predetermined identifications with India, so she compels Chamcha to reconsider the basis for his professed allegiance to Britain;⁸² specifically, she shows Chamcha that his assimilationism hinges, similarly, on the fallacy of authenticity. Just as the nationalist mythology of imperial British greatness becomes increasingly tenuous in the absence of the colonial system that had propped it up, so globalization irrevocably pluralizes the horizon of identitarian affiliation, in both the imperial centre and former colonies like India. As Chamcha leaves his father’s deathbed while grappling with how outmoded it is to shun one potential site of belonging and valorize another, the novel confirms what Jameson might call the “weakening of [British imperial] historicity” (*Postmodernism* 5) as a reliable explanatory referent, or how post-imperial historiographies increasingly provincialize the capacity of Euro-American progress to epitomize historical agency.⁸³

⁸¹ Rushdie’s habit of deploying the sexual partners of Chamcha and Farishta as symbols of their characters’ changing political allegiances at any one point deserves a more sustained critical treatment, particularly in the light of work on the subject of gender and national belonging, than I can provide at present (perhaps most troubling is the murder-suicide of Farishta’s mistress Rekha Merchant and her children). On this tendency, see Leela Gandhi’s feminist postcolonial reading of the novel’s construction of masculinity (“‘Elloven, Deeowen’” 157-170).

⁸² Upon reading *The Only Good Indian*, Changez acknowledges the paradoxes inherent in the syncretic project of Indian nationalism (53), thus repudiating the patriarchal political tradition in which he had formerly been so invested, and into which he had brutally attempted to inaugurate his son, leading to the eventual fracturing of the filial bond (36-37).

⁸³ My implicit reference point in this line of argument is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. In Jameson’s account, postmodernism does not herald grand narratives’ end so much as a “weakening of historicity” accompanied by “an omnipresent, omnivorous and well-nigh libidinal historicism” (18). This so-called libidinal historicism

But in terms of the progress of the novel's own conflicting poles of postcolonial identity, Farishta's suicide next to the deathbed of Chamcha's father Changez appears to represent victory for Chamcha's side of the balance that *The Satanic Verses* had previously maintained. For Kalliney, "[t]he narrative transforms the uncomfortably real experiences of the South Asian community in East London into a dream with Chamcha at its center" (206); Chamcha's individual realization suddenly and belatedly takes priority over the more collective postcolonial significations with which the novel has been engaging. To understand Chamcha and Farishta as in a dialectical relation makes this ending defining of the novel's political turn towards individualism, but when viewed through the lens of oscillation, the autocritical dimension of Chamcha's skepticism and individualism discussed earlier can be accorded no less interpretive priority, whether in terms of his own biases for critiquing anti-racist politics, or in terms of the engaged political stances of the Sufyan sisters (Hitchcock 25).⁸⁴ In other words, when no act of either Chamcha or Farishta can be taken for granted as having a singular political valence due to Rushdie's studious negation of each principle before it can become dominant, it becomes difficult to derive authoritative significance out of one's living and the other's dying. In other words, the novel's ending may well anticipate the racial neoliberal imperative of model minority aspiration, but inasmuch as the novel also embeds a critique

is the increased interest in competing historiographies that mark the occlusions of so-called "*H*istory," which Marxists and others had previously mapped in Eurocentric terms.⁸⁴ Kalliney too cites Mishal Sufyan's savvy regarding the changing tactics of anti-racist struggle: "Thatcherism has its effect [...] No pitched battles these days. [...] The emphasis is on small-scale enterprises... In other words, five or six white bastards murdering us, one individual at a time" (qtd. in Kalliney 198).

of that position, it preserves the possibility of other more radical responses to the problematic of migrancy than Chamcha's assimilationism.

Oscillation II: The Ambiguities of Gibreel Farishta's "Tropicalization" as Solution to Postcolonial Melancholia

It is Farishta, then, who seems a fitting candidate to embody a form of postcolonial political possibility that is radically opposed to the outward symbolism of his assimilated rival Chamcha, given the former's embrace of a polyglot and primarily Indian celebrity culture of Bollywood. In my analysis of Farishta's characterization, I argue that he too embodies the contradictions of postcolonial possibility, only with respect to a differently oriented possibility: in his case the return of the repressed consciousness of Britain's historical role in colonizing the sites from which many of its migrants hail. The most overt expression of repressed postcolonial consciousness comes when Farishta transforms into a fictional analogue of his Qu'ranic namesake—Gibreel, the Angel of Recitation⁸⁵—before subsequently violently reordering the colonial hierarchies of London's racial geography. In this regard, Rushdie effectively entertains the scenario that Gilroy poses as the inevitable outcome of postcolonial melancholia's persistence: "the endless narrative of immigration as invasion" (*Melancholia* 150). And yet, because this transformation is magical (not to mention fictive), Farishta's symbolism of the very vengeful migrant takeover that figures as the nightmare of contemporary opponents of immigration poses a

⁸⁵ Specifically, Gibreel is the archangel who revealed the verses of the Qu'ran to the Prophet Muhammad. To drive home the symbolism, Rushdie gives his character the last name, "*farishta*," which translates to "angel" in English.

challenge to the grip of postcolonial melancholia over the British national imaginary. My analysis indicates that Farishta alternates between collective and individual valences, where the former constitutes what Édouard Glissant describes as the appeal of reversion to (de-colonial) origins as a mode of resistance to colonial contact, and the latter refers to a more psychoanalytic notion of repression (16). In order to assess the postcolonial potential of unleashing repressed consciousness of the ongoing legacies of British Empire, it is crucial not only to consider the Farishta's role in constellating the general grievances of many migrants, but also to think through how Farishta and others have themselves internalized the residues of colonial social relations, and that the consequences of such individuated "colonization of the mind" may render the expression of repressed grievance a more equivocal challenge to the racism of Thatcherite Britain.

To examine how the postcolonial political possibility of reversion emerges in *The Satanic Verses* requires thinking through the ethical issues of violence that rioting raises. To think through the riot in the novel in terms of reversion, involves adapting this mode of resistance to colonial ideology from the site of Glissant's exigency—the postcolony—to the predicaments facing postcolonial migrants to the former imperial centre. Here I draw on Ho's attribution of a migrant "politics of extremity" to the polarity embodied by Farishta, who is "characterized by the languages of war, militancy, rioting, and tropical heat [...] as a challenge to a tradition of English liberalism that inversely upheld the virtues of moderation and compromise" (208). Where Ho demonstrates that the increasingly incendiary collective and individual expressions of identity by Britain's racialized migrants threaten the ill-gotten—because colonial—basis of the British nation-

state's economic and political stability, I aim instead to consider how the oscillation between Farishta and Chamcha produces emergent avenues of political possibility that will become important in the aftermath of the historical political diagnosis she makes.

The riot at the novel's climax indicates the degree of political polarization in *The Satanic Verses*. Traversing the streets of London in angelic form with the *London A to Z* guidebook, Farishta declares his intention first to "tropicalize" the city (365), and, apparently dissatisfied with the early returns of cultural change in response to increased temperatures, he precipitates what becomes a riot with a blast through the horn Azraeel:

Little buds of flame spring up on the concrete, fuelled by the discarded heaps of possessions and dreams. [...] And now the buds are blossoming into bushes, they are climbing like creepers up the sides of the towers, they reach out towards their neighbours, forming hedges of multicoloured flame. It is like watching a luminous garden, its growth accelerated many thousands of times, a garden blossoming, flourishing, becoming overgrown, tangled, becoming impenetrable, a garden of dense intertwined chimeras, rivaling in its own incandescent fashion the thornwood that sprang up around the palace of the sleeping beauty in another fairy-tale, long ago. (477)⁸⁶

Ho's reading of this scene builds on her account of the militaristic discursive emphasis coupled with its depiction of material violence, emphasizing that this passage's fiery aesthetic and its punning diction combine to suggest that "the fire acts as a symbolic purification of racial tensions and as a rite-of-passage towards a distinctively ethnic political subjectivity" (221). In view of its symbolism as a potent ground-clearing mechanism for a future multicultural Britain, I want to emphasize the transitory aspect of

⁸⁶ Azraeel is the name in Islamic folklore of the Angel of Death (Netton 131-132), another ironic inversion given Farishta's supposed opposition to the devil-faced Chamcha. One further irony is the fact that Farishta is only moved to sound the horn of Azraeel after encountering a public housing project with some ambiguous distinguishing features, including a piece of graffiti evoking yet again the vexations of linguistic reclamation for anti-racism: "*Nigger eat white man's shit*" (476, emphasis original).

the symbolism flames as “chimeras” with respect to the country’s role as host to multiple ethnic communities from its former colonies. Or else the fire is less a mechanism, and the emphasis on the multicoloured quality of flames signifies instead Britain’s migrants, running high or low on energy depending on the availability of imaginary fuel: dreams of national belonging, of material success, etc. Evidently, multiple readings of this image are possible, and the absence of final interpretations is of a piece with the overall entanglement of cause and effect in the novel. Certainly, the above passage does not appear to reflect very deeply on the loss of life that an attempt to resolve postcolonial migrants’ predicaments through such violent means might entail.

The apparent moral lightness of this section of the text can be explained in two potential ways. Most obviously, the allusion to fairytale coupled with an overall hallucinatory tone edges delicately away from making realist reference to actual historical events, such as the riots that did in fact take place during the 1980s in the communities of which Brickhall is a fictional composite.⁸⁷ Rushdie does not disavow the potential consequences of rioting altogether; rather, through magic realism, he facilitates a metacommentary on the potential avenues to political expression that *The Satanic Verses* entertains, thus acknowledging the potential for corporeal harm to bodies that fire and by extension riot itself represents. That is to say, despite oscillation leading the novel into ethical cul-de-sacs at times, Ho argues that magical realism facilitates a kind of

⁸⁷ Importantly, too, excessive moralizing regarding riots involving racialized subjects draws on a similar cultural script to the racial panic around mugging that Hall et al famously analyze in *Policing the Crisis*. Nisha Kapoor observes that the (contested) depiction of 1980s demonstrations as “riots” has led to a pattern of disciplining racialized neoliberal subjects in the present (1032-1033).

“revolutionary optimism” in providing a representational route out of such binds (223). However, the momentary rendering of the fire in a beguiling horticultural idiom fades. As the narrative frame expands to consider the streets of Brickhall themselves, fire’s symbolism correspondingly shifts to provide a threatening atmosphere for what will be the grounds for Farishta’s encounter with his demonic opposite, Chamcha: “[t]he street has become red hot, molten, a river the colour of blood.—All, all is ablaze as he toots his merry horn, *giving the people what they want*, the hair and teeth of the citizenry are smoking and red, glass burns, and birds fly overhead on blazing wings” (477, emphasis original). If riot is the surfacing of a deeply and collectively held desire, then Farishta’s sounding of Azraeel is more imaginary catalyst than direct incitement, ultimately surfacing a demotic inclination that acknowledges riot’s potential tyranny.⁸⁸ Rushdie places emphasis on the populist dimension in this depiction of a postcolonial riot, which indicates this tactic at best treats the symptoms of postcolonial melancholia, as by shirking ethical qualms regarding violence and tyranny and thus piling on fresh injuries, such a tactic seems unlikely to be a persuasive means of redressing the submerged grievances of Britain’s imperial past. As with the potential linguistic sites of anti-racist reclamation that Rushdie recites here one more time—the Powellite racism of “*nigger*” and especially “a river the colour of blood” (476-477)—so with the return of the postcolonial repressed: the novel offers a skeptical assessment of both the perils and promises of riot as postcolonial political tactic.

⁸⁸ See particularly Baucom’s detailed reading of the politics of riot in both actually existing Brixton and “Brickhall” in *The Satanic Verses* (Baucom 196-200, 215-216).

By complicating the ethical qualms that moral panics over rioting produce, *The Satanic Verses* works against the conventional racist association between Black and Asian British communities and criminality. In short, it previews the instrumentality of such associations for Britain's transformation since Thatcher into a "traffic cop state," where racist tropes can be mobilized seemingly at will in order to discipline bad racial neoliberal subjects.⁸⁹ After the call of Azraeel, Farishta "stands motionless while small groups of residents rush past in different directions. Some (not all) carrying weapons. [...] *All of the groups contain white youngsters as well as black*" (477, emphasis mine). On the one hand, foregrounding the multiethnic composition of the rioting groups answers the question I posed above regarding those chimerical flames: the rioters are plainly as multicultural as the flames are multihued, raising profound problems for articulations of British nationalism founded on reified white supremacy.⁹⁰ On the other hand, as Baucom contends, the aesthetic of riot in *The Satanic Verses* situates the violent eruption in Brixton as a postcolonial entry in the peculiar history of English mobs' capacity to

⁸⁹ Classic reference points here include Stuart Hall et al's *Policing the Crisis* (especially "The Social Production of the News," pp. 53-76), as well as Gilroy's account in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* of the shifting representations of Black criminality in the particular context of the 1981 Brixton riots (see especially "1981-5 Street Crimes and Symbolic Locations," pp. 129-140). The term "traffic-cop state" is David Theo Goldberg's; for a more contemporary example of Britain in this capacity, see Tyler's analysis of the 2011 riots in Britain, in particular the dog-whistle racism of media analyses blaming "feral youth" and the "underclass" (179-206).

⁹⁰ Gilroy observes that Powellite racism drew on relatively uncontroversial patterns of cultural explanation, noting for instance the Powellite cast of Raymond Williams's account of British nationalism: "Williams [...] draws precisely the same picture of the relationship between 'race', national identity and citizenship as Powell" (*Ain't No Black* 51).

reignite populist understandings of nationality.⁹¹ But the seeming justice of the protesters' demands for recognition and belonging becomes problematic in view of their mediated reception: "Rushdie signals his awareness of the riot's hermeneutic indeterminacy by staging it [...] as an event on television" (Baucom 213). But even as such mediation threatens the potential radical openings of this action through the narrowly authoritarian lens that news cameras afford of this "riot," consider the effect of postmodern media culture of the instigator of this disorder, Farishta. On the one hand, he owes his celebrity to a career based on mimicry, as a Muslim famous for playing Hindu deities in the context of an India itself on the cusp of experiencing a similarly resurgence of nativism—the *Hindutva* of the Bharatiya Janata Party—as an alibi for neoliberalization as Thatcherism provided for this project in Britain.⁹² The ambiguity of his positioning as a mimic is whether he embeds a form of resistance in an increasingly Hindu nationalist regime of Bollywood representation, or if his celebrity is evidence that Indian Muslims can be coopted by *Hindutva*. Even as Farishta demonstrates how postmodern media culture increasingly reflects a lack of guarantees with respect to racial political affiliations, there remain some question that he compromises the very form of resistance he calls forth by association.

⁹¹ Baucom draws on historians E.P. Thompson and George Rudé to argue that Rushdie trades on associations of a rioting crowd or mob's "ordered disorder" that date from at least the eighteenth century into the twentieth, which in turn illuminates the length of time that colonial history has been so wilfully occluded (Baucom 212-213).

⁹² Chetan Bhatt dates the prominence of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics to the early 1980s, with the foundation of the BJP in 1980 and its spearheading of the controversial demolition of the Babri Masjid (2). On the relation between Bollywood cinema and Hindu nationalism, see Kumar.

The ambiguities of Farishta's celebrity status provide a way of thinking through the postcolonial possibility of migrant reversion, conceived as a return of the postcolonial repressed, in relation to its psychological, internalized dimension. In this view, to consider Farishta as himself oscillating between symbolic figure for a wider political movement and an individual in his own right, I turn now to consider the meaning of repression in terms of his inner life.⁹³ The metaphor of repression inevitably vacillates between the collective and the individual, but perhaps especially so in *The Satanic Verses*, where because of the magic realist quality of Farishta's reordering of the streets and climate, there is always the potential that this act is a figment of imagination, that the heuristic capacity of this form of resistance is limited to the individuated psychic space of his own mind. The description of the riot in Brickhall recalls the opening of *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which Sigmund Freud posits a visual analogy for total recall of a lifetime's memories: the ability to see all the buildings that have ever existed in Rome superimposed on top of one another. Though he concedes the anachronism of this palimpsest, Freud's point is that the visualization's inaptitude is itself revealing:

The assumption that everything past is preserved holds good even in mental life only on condition that the organ of the mind has remained intact [...]. But destructive influences which can be compared to causes of illness like these are never lacking in the history of a city, even if it has had a less chequered past than Rome, and even if, like London, it has hardly ever suffered from the visitations of an enemy. (18)

⁹³ Importantly, I would add, *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates an importantly material way in which the migrant condition testifies to a collectively oriented articulation of such a return. Baucom provides an important reading of this aspect in discussing the migrant families whose tenuous citizenship status in the UK leads them to hide in the Shandaar Café, which I will not repeat, as my own argument is focused more on more interiorized (because psychologized) iterations of this trope (204).

By making this analogy between trauma and the physical alterations in the landscape over time in a city with a history of war like Rome, let alone extrapolating it to London with its (supposedly) more peaceable history, Freud himself represses consciousness of the potential existence of external sources of trauma. Such repression is what allows a given social group—or civilization, as he calls it—to live peaceably among others. As he goes on to characterize London’s development as a natural and hence benign process where “demolitions and replacement of buildings [that] occur in the course of the most peaceful development of a city” (8), however, Freud occludes the history of manifold colonial violence that paid much of cost of the city’s construction in both corporeal and ideological terms. Given that the colonial basis of London’s and by extension Britain’s “chequered past” largely happened elsewhere—in Sisodia’s formulation—the value of Farishta’s magic realist roles becomes clear.

Here it is important to recall that *The Satanic Verses* was written at the advent of the post-Cold War era, where civilizational thinking would come to be associated less with Freud than the divisive thought of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, and their theories as to the next logical opponent of a victorious capitalist West.⁹⁴ The London of the novel’s setting, then, is both the historic seat of civilization, even as its notional goods of progress and morality are understood in conservative quarters as besieged by a threatening (ex-colonial) barbaric Other. In other words, the project of living together through internalizing discontents—Freud’s notion of civilization—becomes a burden borne primarily by Britain’s postcolonial migrant population, who may benefit from what

⁹⁴ On the post-Cold War origins of Islamophobia, see for example Kundnani *Muslims* (139-147). On “civilizational thinking” and Islamophobia, see Moallem 161.

Gilroy observes as the increased banality of postcolonial globalizing culture in the 1990s, but had to contend at the same time with the looming threat of racism's persistence.⁹⁵ The magical realism of Farishta's act of reordering addresses this context through an aspect of oscillation Hitchcock refers to as its "psychological cognates, at least in the aura of doubt it invokes" (15). Nested within Farishta's Freudian fantasy of recreating Britain as a space where postcolonial and/as migrant subjects must be doubly conscious of the colonial foundations of the society, is the sobering recognition of how difficult decolonizing the foundations of British society would actually be, particularly due to the fantastical nature of Farishta's attempt. Regardless of whether Farishta raises the temperature of London literally or figuratively (by precipitating riot), through his act the disruptions and exploitation of colonial projects that made London into a commercial metropolitan hub come to the surface; he brings to light the enduring asymmetrical benefits of the externalization of material violence and racist hierarchy underpinning the post-imperial belief in English national exceptionalism.

This Freudian angle on Farishta's turn as Angel of Recitation is not the only capacity in which question of race and gender intersect in his embodiment of the postcolonial possibility of postcolonial migrant reversion. Consider in this regard the other metaphor for Farishta's putative purification: "the thornwood that sprang up around the palace of the sleeping beauty in another fairy-tale, long ago" (477). The sleeping beauty myth has long been associated with adolescent sexuality. Bruno Bettelheim interprets the role of the thorns guaranteeing the charmed sleep of the fairytale's

⁹⁵ Arun Kundnani provides a cogent history of Muslims as particular targets of this form of racism in the post-Cold War moment in "The Roots of Liberal Rage" (222-284).

adolescent eponym as an allegory of social proscriptions of prepubescent female sexuality, sanctioning a delay before socially reproductive heteronormative sex can take place (233). With this context in mind, what Ho reads as the purifying function of riot in *The Satanic Verses* can also be read with a view to the allegorical significance of the sleeping beauty story's mythologization of feminine coming of age: the chaos of riot must be navigated to ensure the nation's reproduction. On this account, Rushdie effectively subverts the presumptive whiteness of the fairy-tale genre through his casting of the characters in this allegory of nationalist renewal, placing Farishta in the symbolic role of the agent with the capacity to navigate the wood to reach the princess. Farishta cannot effectively reinforce nativist national allegory through reenacting this fairytale, as his racialized embodiment exceeds the scope that a nationalist imaginary would likely have granted the male figure in this rite of passage. According to the myth's heteronormative national allegory, his arrival in this sacred grove—again, note the subversion of the pastoral imagery of the “scept’red isle”—would instead signal a form of social reproduction with a difference, not to mention the potential for comfort with such difference in view of his syncretic identity that would shake the racial—and racist—foundations of the nation dredged up to encourage consent for Thatcherism.

Even as Farishta may stand in for a form of postcolonial subversion in this regard, this metaphor hinges on a similarly violent patriarchal imaginary as this European allegory: in both contexts, national endurance is reiterated through fairy tales that symbolize heteronormative social reproduction. In *The Satanic Verses*, sexual relations that contravene the racist taboo against miscegenation also point to the possible

psychologization of anti-colonial metanarrative, in a manner that recalls the infamous thesis of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin/White Masks*. It is Chamcha, however, rather than Farishta, whose relationship most resembles those of the migrants to France that ground Fanon's hypermasculine ascription of symbolic resistance to sexual relations between racialized men and white women (Fanon 63-82). Chamcha marries Pamela Lovelace explicitly for both her elite racial and classed embodiments, which become most evident through her vocalization: "Chamcha was not in love with her at all, but with that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit" (*Verses* 186). Both partners in the relationship fetishize one another; Chamcha finds the classed whiteness of Pamela's clipped upper-class accent predictably desirable, in ironic contrast to Pamela's own effort to use her marriage and radical political positions to contravene the very conservative associations her voice has: "because she could not shake off her voice, she made it speak ideas which her conservative [...] parents would have anathematized. She married an Indian" (187). Although the fact that Chamcha's desire for Pamela is grounded in his figuration as a neo-colonial comprador seemingly confirms Fanon's claim that white womanhood's fetish status for men of colour is a specific neurosis of (post)colonial apologists rather than a feature of racialized masculinity,⁹⁶ it is also worth examining the racial structure of Pamela's desire on its own terms, considering her next relationship is with Joshi, another man of colour. Having begun their affair unknowingly on the very

⁹⁶ In his analysis of the René Maran character Jean Veneuse, Fanon emphasizes his status as a former comprador in the colonial regime: "Veneuse represents not an example of black-white relations, but a certain mode of behavior in a neurotic who by coincidence is black" (Fanon 79).

night of Chamcha's presumptive death in the plane crash, Pamela explains her exasperation with the symbolic basis of her absent husband's desire for her: "I was bloody Britannia. [...] But I'm really real, too, J.J.; I really am" (181). The attraction between Joshi and Pamela not only indicates that their shared leftism has the potential to suspend the asymmetrical power differentials that postcolonial history embeds in their interracial relationship. But to adumbrate this postcolonial analysis with the question of gender, is to raise the issue of the homosociality undergirding normative masculine heterosexuality, it is significant that it is in Chamcha's rival that Pamela has found a politically fulfilling attachment in both symbolic—Joshi's Indian-ness—and dispositional terms: his Marxism.⁹⁷ While postcolonial political resonances are encoded in the liaisons between Pamela and these men of colour, neither are there any guarantees of their anti-colonial *bona fides*. In other words, even though these interracial relationships may for Pamela promise the appearance of political oppositionality, they are also encounters that ultimately share a fundamentally normative (because homosocial) gender politics.

The homosocial dimension of the relationships the male protagonists of *The Satanic Verses* pursue risks compromising the apparent feminist potential of Chamcha's skepticism regarding the anti-racist movement in Britain. Many scholars have critiqued the frequent instrumentalization of the female body as a feature of the novel's masculine account of migrancy, but I want to emphasize here how the conflict between Chamcha

⁹⁷ Homosociality is evident from anecdotes that Joshi regales Pamela with about his past relationship with Chamcha, such as a memory of having allowed Chamcha to swoop in on a woman he was trying to pick up at a 1960s party: "[t]he bastard [...] had no shame, he was ready to be anything they wanted to buy, that read-your-palm bedspread-jacket Hare-Krishna dharma-bum [...] Face it, Jamshed, the girls never went for you, that's the truth, and the rest is envy" (180).

and Farishta over the affections of the famous mountaineer Alleluia Cone manifests the legacy of colonial ideologies of masculinity.⁹⁸ Chamcha resents that Farishta, a relative newcomer to England, should have earned the affections of this apparent paragon of white British femininity. Relying on his voice-acting skills, the so-called “Man of a Thousand Voices” undermines his rival’s new romance by delivering disguised and facile insinuations of infidelity over the phone to Farishta (*Verses* 458). While the blonde and blue-eyed Cone may appear to be the apotheosis of the Fanonian comprador’s fantasies, her Jewish ancestry and the physical prowess that underpins her success as a mountaineer complicates this categorically patriarchal paradigm. As Dawson observes, it is a significant problem for a masculinist anti-colonial imaginary that Cone falls short as an apparent embodiment of the racist ideal of white racial purity (141); her own racial background is a crucial reminder that diasporic migration must be thought of as a response to multiple histories of violence and dispossession, not just postcolonial ones. At one level, then, the Fanonian account of symbolic postcolonial resistance through sexual relations comes is subjected to Rushdiean satire, as this attempt at homosocial exchange results in self-sabotage: Chamcha’s taunts have the desired impact of prompting Farishta to leave Cone, but Chamcha fills the breach in her life not by becoming her lover but rather reluctantly consoling her (*Verses* 458). But there is a larger historical undertow to the fact that Chamcha and Farishta, who diverge so strongly in their attitudes towards their subcontinental origins, are identical in their treatment of women as objects to be

⁹⁸ Overviews of the novel’s gendered account of migrancy are provided in Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory* (123-158) and Leela Gandhi’s (167-168). For specific analyses of the subjection of Cone to a process of homosocial exchange, see also Dawson’s *Mongrel Nation* (141) and Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India* (197).

jockeyed over in managing the predicament of postcolonial life in London. Their jealousy over Allie indicates that they aim to stave off the possibility of effeminate (self-)perceptions, a struggle that can be dated to the intersection of imperial discourses of gender and race in former colonies like their diasporic homeland of India.⁹⁹

In other words, Chamcha and Farishta are effectively conveyances for projecting gendered postcolonial desire back from postcolonial India to metropolitan London. In this capacity, their relational characterization both attests to Rushdie's canny redeployment of the colonialist homosocial logic Fanon describes, and provides an opportunity to scrutinize the premises of postcolonial resistance inasmuch as it becomes a competition for masculine dominance in which the always already objectified bodies of women serve as mere objects over which to struggle.¹⁰⁰ Consider how the terms of Fanon's well-known provocation, "[w]hen my restless hands grasp those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine" (63), resemble Rushdie's description of Farishta's capacities as Angel of Recitation: "[h]e can reach into the breasts of men and

⁹⁹ For Krishnaswamy, "the term *effeminism* [...] refer[s] to the racialized construction of 'femininity-within-masculinity' as a pathological condition" (295). She goes on to describe the role of women as vessels in a colonial process of homosocial exchange (310).

¹⁰⁰ As I suggested above, I do not aim to argue that *The Satanic Verses* embeds an altogether feminist perspective. Rather, I am interested in how the novel deploys feminist arguments in the service of a critique of anti-colonial political strategies. Scholars have taken issue with several of Fanon's contentions with respect to his reading of interracial heteronormative sex's anti-colonial potential: in her summary assessment of feminist critiques of postcolonial nationalism, Leela Gandhi cites Partha Chatterjee's caution regarding the way Fanon redeploys colonialism's homosocial hierarchy, thus repeating the gendered oppression of colonialism in the context of an ostensibly resistant politics — "nationalist discourse is finally 'a discourse about women; women do not speak here'" (qtd. in Gandhi 94)—all over again. Gwen Bergner traces the erasure in Fanon's thought of women in general (81) as well as women of colour in particular (84).

women, pick out the desires of their inmost hearts, and make them real. He is the quencher of desires, the slaker of lusts, the fulfiller of dreams” (*Verses* 476). If Farishta’s aimless trajectory is thus understood as precipitating postcolonial desire in Fanonian terms, then it becomes significant that immediately prior to the sounding of Azraeel and the riot’s beginning, Farishta wanders into the Goodsway near King’s Cross station and encounters a group of sex workers, in whom he sees a resemblance with the prophet Mahound’s twelve wives about whom he has just dreamt (475). The dream Farishta recalls was set in Rushdie’s mock Makkah, Jahilia, and involves sex workers who pretend to be Mahound’s wives so as to appeal to converts to the new religion and thus capitalize on those who find adapting to the abstemious social mores of this new faith a hard adjustment (392-396). The ambivalence of this vision represents another ethical (because intersectional) check on a putative postcolonial politics, and raises a further question with respect to the potential consequences of the coming riot, especially if it were to involve a more than magical reordering of the city. I term this scene ambivalent because the section of the novel focusing on the conversion of the city of Jahilia to Mahound’s faith takes place immediately prior to the section focused on Farishta’s attempt at postcolonial revolution in London, which implies that this conversion may involve similar reactions to those that took place in Jahilia: much like the advent of the new religion, the end of postcolonial melancholia will leave in place social hierarchies like that of gender, despite the ferocity of Farishta’s magic powers.¹⁰¹ In this regard, Farishta’s encounter with these sex workers just prior to the ultimate moment of “tropicalization” is a reminder of the

¹⁰¹ The sections are subtitled, respectively, “Part VI: Return to Jahilia” (369-407), and “Part VII: The Angel Azraeel” (409-484).

lack of guarantees regarding the London that might emerge following its (imagined) transformation. In this framing, Rushdie demonstrates that it is impossible to be certain that the social order set to emerge post-tropicalization will not fetishize its own foundations, leading—again, as with the new religious order in Jahilia—to symbolic transgressions of the new postcolonial as an outlet to facilitate consent. In this context, Farishta’s pronouncement regarding his achievement includes what amounts to a principle of conservation of libidinal energy regarding transformational politics: “[t]his is the judgment of God in his wrath, [...] that men [sic] be granted their heart’s desires and by them be consumed” (476). In turn, to re-imagine Britain along postcolonial lines is to risk embedding in this new project the seeds of a future undoing. As I have argued, the novel depicts this possible undoing in intersectional terms, raising the question of whether a society that aims to deal justly with migrant postcolonial subjects will be any less riven by or even avoid exacerbating gendered inequities.

The urgency of thinking postcolonial possibility alongside the issue of gender foregrounds the precarious nature of the political balancing act that I argue *The Satanic Verses* stages. By entertaining postcolonial political projects on both collective and individual scales so as to probe the ethical stakes of these modes of resistance, Rushdie emphasizes the layered nature of identity and history within these movements, the effacement of which is so often deemed necessary due to political pragmatism. Spivak’s review of the novel articulates the impulse behind Rushdie’s generic practice here:

the point here is that a book such as this might at least be inviting us to consider the following question: who am I [i.e. Spivak], or [...] Salman Rushdie, to give resistance a speaking part? To “state the problem” is not bad politics. In fact, it

might be poor judgment to consider the academy or novel as straight blueprint for action on the street. (“Reading *Verses*” 86)

In Spivak’s phrase, the novel “states the problem” without claiming to present any authoritative solutions. And as both Spivak (85) and Suleri point out (198), the skepticism that Rushdie evinces through this kind of framing is not apolitical. The moment of reconciliation between Chamcha and Farishta after the riot demonstrates how this framing can work politically; while neither of them wins over Allie, Farishta ultimately saves Chamcha from being crushed by the smouldering remains of the Shaandar Café (*Verses* 483). Subsequently, Rushdie makes an apparent authorial interjection that queries the capacity to draw lasting moral lessons: “[i]s it possible that evil is never total, that its victory, no matter how overwhelming, is never absolute?” (482).¹⁰² This authorial interjection becomes comprehensible in light of the apparent heroism that both Chamcha and Farishta display. It is difficult to imagine the Chamcha of the novel’s opening scenes putting his life on the line in order to save the Sufyans, a diasporic South Asian family of the sort that he would have formerly disdained. Farishta remarks on the change:

‘Spoonoo [i.e. Chamcha],’ Gibreel nods at the fallen man. ‘You really fooled me, mister; seriously, you’re quite a guy.’ [...] Consider this fallen man. He sought without remorse to shatter the mind of a fellow human being; and exploited, to do so, an entirely blameless woman [i.e. Allie], at least partly owing to his own impossible and voyeuristic desire for her. Yet this same man has risked death, with scarcely any hesitation, in a foolhardy rescue attempt. (482)

While the cost of this attempted homosocial exchange for all concerned parties must be counted, it does provide evidence of the way in which the gulf between the nominally evil

¹⁰² Suleri finds this intervention off-pitch: “Rushdie moves curiously away from the language of cultural resolution into the more implicitly religious tropology of forgiveness” (197).

Chamcha and the ostensibly good Farishta can be bridged. That reconciliation is possible indicates that the purification Farishta sought through riot was not about attaining a resounding victory for his own principle, so much as coming into new knowledge of both self and other. The possibility for an affinity between them suggests that despite the appearance of enduring opposition between them on the politics of migrancy, the element of doubt lodged in each character regarding their preference for assimilation or reversion points to an affinity between them. Once each character discerns their own biases in the other, there is the possibility of mutual understanding and respect between them.

Even if the oscillation internal to each of Chamcha and Farishta's positions indicates that neither one by itself can settle the question of migrancy, which brings us to what I understand as the third term that helps to resolve this apparent antinomy: magic realism. Dispensing with the limits that realist representation imposes, magic realism allows for creative intercessions between reality and its representation that account for the multiplicity of possible dislocations characteristic of the migrant condition in 1980s London.¹⁰³ The overt effect of refracting Chamcha and Farishta's experience as migrants through the lens of magic realism is that it emphasizes the radical dislocations they undergo in the process. At the same time, I suggest it also draws attention to the limits of their own individual attempts to reckon with their postcolonial melancholic environment. A list of the major magic realist tropes in the text, as well as the associated antinomies of

¹⁰³ Magic realism has long been understood as a mode that is especially apt regarding the contradictions of postcolonial subjective experience: "magic realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of 'living on the margins,' encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems" (Slemon 10).

their experience of migrancy, includes: surviving a narrative-opening plunge, which references culture shock; transforming into opposing figures from the canon of divinity, which parodies both idealized and debased tropes of migrant identity from the model minority to the multicultural celebrant; and influencing the real world through elaborate dream sequences, which precipitates new forms of anti-racist activism, from the goatman cult in the climactic Brickhall riot. The reason that neither Chamcha's Anglophilic malleability nor Farishta's syncretic solidarity with the postcolonial emerges as a viable response to the predicament of postcolonial melancholia on their own terms is because their positions are less opposed than they seem; the relation of suspension between each other and within themselves implies that their co-presence is a necessary counterbalance to the negative implications of either polarity enjoying totality. Even as the novel's critical cosmopolitan aesthetic forestalls politically prescriptive narrative interpretations, its magical realism is also profoundly resonant with the postmodern moment of its setting. For example, consider that the hyperbolic magic realism of the goatman cult is attended by altogether familiar ambush marketing campaigns; that even an anti-racist movement based on a fantastical simulacrum should be subject to the vagaries of postmodern advertising culture indicates the increasing challenge altered conventions of social representation pose to any movement interested in controlling their message.

The oscillating aesthetic of *The Satanic Verses* approaches the potential of collective political possibilities in postimperial Britain with an insistence on intersectional critique. To return to the alleged elitism of Rushdie's cosmopolitanism, the contrast between Chamcha and Farishta's positioning shows that neither is worthy of

identification solely on their own terms. Rather, the novel proposes meeting postcolonial melancholia with what Ahmed might call the logic of the “strange encounter” writ large. Ahmed suggests that in postcolonial settings such as a Britain rife with imperial nostalgia, the ostensible isolation of single interactions often set off unpredictable chains of association. When framed in relation to the idea that Rushdie’s novel presents reversion and reclamation as political resolutions to postcolonial melancholia in an oscillating relation, Chamcha’s observation of how problematic it is for a known abuser like Dr. Uhuru Simba to lead an anti-racist cause is not necessarily undermining of the larger cause, as Joshi evidently worries such acknowledgement will lead to: “[s]ome of the women he’s attacked are in this room. Mishal, for example, is over there, look, in the corner by the stage. But this isn’t the time or place for that. Simba’s bull craziness is, you could say, a trouble in the family. What we have here is trouble with the man” (429). For Ahmed, the rubric of encounter assumes an “intimate relationship between ontology and politics (between being and acting)” (180); in this view, the cause of anti-racism cannot be effectively advanced when it takes place under the auspices of deferring the necessary work of accountability for the abuse Simba has committed. To regard anti-racism as a general good that takes priority over the particular concerns of women produces both intrinsic fractures with respect to the movement’s own constitution, as well as the potential for extrinsic critiques of an apparent dismissal of the interests of women. Evidently, the shifting premises for politics in the 1980s mean that there are no guarantees regarding who will lead the reorientation of the country’s social text towards an embrace of postcoloniality, and what form that might take. Such a process might

involve advocating an alternate model of activism, as Mishal Sufyan—notably, a survivor of violence at the hands of Simba—does in arguing that the populism of Chamcha’s goatman cult may catch on more effectively, precisely because of its less authoritarian and antagonistic premising may appeal to the decentralized structure of feeling in postmodernity (296). I am particularly interested here in how Rushdie critically assesses a hypothetical political project of reimagining a Britain where imperialist nostalgia is untenable because the political affiliations of social groups can no longer be assumed.

The inconstancies and hypocrisies that riddle Chamcha and Farishta’s fidelity to their positionalities of assimilation and reversion attest to the complex co-implication between the individual and collective scales on which anti-racist and migrant justice movements are constituted. If Hall frames the urgency for any would-be “counter-hegemony” to challenge Thatcherism “by precisely occupying *the same world* that Thatcherism does, and building from that a *different* form of society” (*Renewal* 15), then the layered oscillations of *The Satanic Verses* are an aesthetic that take up the challenge of rethinking political opposition to Thatcherite hegemony. The lesson of Chamcha as goatman figurehead for a renewed anti-racist political movement is that the older model of Black British organization needs to dispense with the elitism of native informants speaking for multifarious racialized populations. At the same time, in regarding Jumpy Joshi and Mishal Sufyan’s nostalgia for universalism and collectivism skeptically, Chamcha also signals the urgency of reconstituting movements along intersectional lines in order to avoid sedimenting the same unjust contradictions that had previously pertained. Meanwhile, Farishta’s tropicalization indicates that there can be no guarantees

that a Fanonian approach to upending a postcolonial melancholic social order through inverting its racial and gender norms will necessarily offer an inherently more ethical outcome. *The Satanic Verses* thus indexes the ambivalent *zeitgeist* of postcolonial Britain on the cusp of neoliberalization. The autocritical and suspended relationship between reclamation and reversion symbolized by Chamcha and Farishta indicates the risks of deploying these radical postcolonial tactics of political organization under atomizing terms of political reference; there can be no guarantee that the re-premising of oppositional political movements on this basis will not be co-opted.

The Aftermath of *The Satanic Verses* and the Production of Post-Racial Authorship

The fear that spread [...] was real because the threat was real. And yet the world of the book, in which free people made free choices, had to be defended.

—Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (150).

The reception history of *The Satanic Verses* registers a primary backlash by many Muslims to its portrayal of key Islamic tenets, which was followed by pushback from liberal commentators in favour of both the novel and its author's intentions and rights. Given such a fraught contest over textual signification, many scholars suggest that the novel and its contexts are no longer amenable to conventional modes of critique. With his 2013 memoir *Joseph Anton* capping numerous essays he wrote in response to the controversy, Rushdie himself has made significant contributions to the expansive set of secondary literature on the novel.¹⁰⁴ I close my analysis of *The Satanic Verses* by

¹⁰⁴ Early examples include Daniel Pipes's *The Rushdie Affair* (1990) and Malise Ruthven's *A Satanic Affair* (1990). Not long after the Rushdie Affair began, a special issue of *Public Culture* in 1989 too up the controversy and the novel that incited it, with

examining the paradoxes of Rushdie's post-*fatwa* writing on the Rushdie Affair, which I suggest countermands the oscillation of the narrative itself, by reconstructing and privileging his own intentions for the novel.

The commonplace liberal depiction of the Rushdie Affair recruits the author as a heroic defender of his right to free speech, and hence of the rights associated with Western civility.¹⁰⁵ One assessment typical of this strain comes from Rushdie's sometime friend Christopher Hitchens, in which he frames the controversy in terms of liberal freedoms, with Rushdie as their idealized defender and exemplar:

If literature and the ironic mind are to be defended to the death, then it is as well to have a superbly literate and ironic individual as the case in point. I cannot remember any moment when he [Rushdie] said or did anything crass or when he raised his voice unduly or responded in kind to those who were taunting or baiting him. [...] I was going to say that he never lost his sense of humor, but this would be to miss the one great exception, which was the awful and unctuous and convoluted prose of his declaration of adherence to Islam. (*Hitch-22* 279)

Hitchens's recollection exemplifies the mainstream framing of the Rushdie Affair in terms of freedom of speech under siege, casting Rushdie as a heroic avatar for the liberal cause, complete with fatal flaw—Rushdie's coerced apology and declaration of faith—and stereotyped British reserve. While Rushdie was perhaps less outspoken than Hitchens in this cause, he has published columns in support of the decision to invade Afghanistan

contributions by Gayatri Spivak and Charles Taylor among others. For a more complete critical catalogue, see Rushdie studies compendiums by Andrew Blake (2001), David Smale (2003), and Ana Cristina Mendes (2013).

¹⁰⁵ As Suleri wryly observed, the discursive climate for critical perspectives on the novel in the aftermath of the *fatwa* was constrained: “[t]he murderous intensity that is still attendant on the publication of *The Satanic Verses* retards the closely cultural reading that such a text demands, distracting its reader into a nervous literalism constrained to inquire, ‘What will happen to the body that wrote this book?’” (189).

and Iraq following the 9/11 attacks on the United States (Seymour, *Liberal* 10).¹⁰⁶ With the emergence of the War on Terror, the perceived threat to Rushdie's freedom of speech provides the author and fellow travellers like Hitchens moral cover in advocating liberal interventionism, for who better knows the risks to civilization posed by a notionally illiberal Islam than Rushdie?

But the legacy of the Rushdie Affair refers not only to the neo-imperialism of contemporary geopolitics. The continued attention lavished on his authorial person also indicates the individualizing horizon of cultural politics in Britain had its origins during the period of *The Satanic Verses*'s writing, in seeming correspondence with the neoliberalization ushered in by Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite governments. One recent theory of neoliberal aesthetics has ratified the nostalgia for artistic autonomy and distinction that Hitchens's defense of Rushdie betrays: according to Walter Benn Michaels, the death of the author has conferred outsized interpretive authority on consumers of art, who in becoming preoccupied with what he understands as superstructural "hierarchies of vision" are distracted from the ultimate and heroic—because basic—critical struggle against class inequality (*Beauty* 59).¹⁰⁷ When applied to

¹⁰⁶ Many of the same columnists and intellectuals who have contributed to Rushdie's reputation as a defender of free speech—figures such as Martin Amis, Richard Dawkins, Michael Ignatieff, and others—were among the jingoistic group who made the spurious (and murderous) case for the War on Terror, and whose prose Arun Kundnani characterizes as evocative of "liberal rage," an ironic reversal of the title of Bernard Lewis's infamous 1990 article in *The Atlantic* that presented an essentialist critique of "the Islamic world" as dominated by fundamentalism (222-286). In addition to Kundnani, see Robin (167) and Seymour, *Liberal* (239-243).

¹⁰⁷ The influence of this theory of neoliberal aesthetics is borne out in a British context through Sarah Brouillette's recent analysis of the cultural policy of the neo-Thatcherite

the contemporary cause of anti-racism, this view collapses all such struggles under the heading of a liberal multiculturalism that cannot envision anything beyond an exceptionalist politics of ameliorating the disadvantages faced by some racialized capitalist subjects. While this is not the space to argue whether anti-racism is entirely contained by neoliberalism, I would argue that the Foucaultian notion of the author function allows for post-Barthesian critique—including in such identitarian fields as postcolonial studies—to approach questions of authorial and artistic autonomy and distinction without reifying them, emphasizing their social production rather than the intrinsic merit of the celebrated author or work (110).

The case of the post-*fatwa* figure of Rushdie as author demonstrates the problems with the critical desire for the exhumation of intentionality, as the defense of individualistic artistic autonomy also (and ironically) redounds to the way in which inclusion on is meted out on exceptionalist terms under racial neoliberalism. To contextualize Rushdie's status as racial neoliberal author figure, consider Sarah Brouillette's accounts of literary circulation and production under late capitalism. In her analysis, Rushdie emerges as among the most privileged of a group of authors in terms of his circulation on the global literary market (*Postcolonial* 79-111), and she further argues that the British literary market in which he remains a significant player has been recruited to a creative class project of reifying individualistic and entrepreneurial cultural norms

New Labour government, which argues that literature has been instrumental in producing cultural consent for neoliberal hegemony in Britain (*Creative* 50-54).

(*Creative* 50-54).¹⁰⁸ Given this background, it seems crucial to set Rushdie's paratextual metacommentary on the misinterpretation of his work in the Rushdie Affair in relation to his continuing status as a highly marketable focal point of postcolonial literature.¹⁰⁹ The influence of the highly individualistic streak in the intellectual tradition of writing on racial freedom, which Gilroy regards as gaining renewed currency during the Thatcherite period and in the years since, is evidence of the racial neoliberal context in which Rushdie becomes enshrined.¹¹⁰ Roopali Mukherjee notes that one specific aspect of the emphasis on entrepreneurialism in racial neoliberal culture is the particular obligation on the racialized subject to fulfill an exemplary function:

Discourses of post-race valorize marketized modes of racial reform [... promoting] 'good risks' who are available to be channelled into privatized, and profitable, circuits of inclusion, advancement and civic care. Producing modes of consent vital to the construction of neoliberal subjects, post-race, thus, [...] delegitimize[s ...] alternative and more democratic antiracist paradigms including, for example, those that engage capitalist wage-labour relations, the gendered axes of contemporary proletarianization, imperialist modes of homonationalism, and so on. (Mukherjee 52)

The good post-racial subject authors a self-image that is fully assimilable to the neoliberal status quo of racial capitalism; in short, they provide reassurances regarding their intentions. When read with regard to the Rushdie Affair, the anti-democratic element of (Rushdie's) commentary on the *fatwa* emerges. Rather than think about Rushdie's

¹⁰⁸ Her description of Rushdie's privilege builds on Andrew Wernick's earlier account of Rushdie as a test case of the political economy of the author function under late capitalism (95-97)

¹⁰⁹ Jani's critique of the overwhelming dominance of Rushdie studies in postcolonial and South Asian diasporic literary studies is again apposite.

¹¹⁰ Gilroy traces the genealogy of these racial neoliberal "technologies of the free black self" back to nineteenth-century philosophy and to figures such as Martin Delany and Lewis Woodson ("Fragments" 26-27).

intentions according to conspiracy theories that circulated during and immediately after the Affair that he himself had somehow deliberately sought the notoriety of the *fatwa*, I want to suggest that in privileging his authorial intentionality as adjudicating the contest of cultural meanings around *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie puts himself at odds with the very forms of radical postcolonial possibility that I attributed to the novel in my above readings.¹¹¹ His complaints for his artistic autonomy are of a piece with his own self-identification with the acculturation presumed to fall on the “Western” side of the Orientalist dichotomy with the culturally determined Islamic “rest,” further rationalizing the (British) Muslim population’s social alienation and ultimate exclusion for their presumptive misreading of this cultural text.

Although in the above analysis of the narrative, I’ve emphasized how *The Satanic Verses* encodes possibilities that seem philosophically at odds with Rushdie’s later responses to the Rushdie Affair, the novel engages somewhat unevenly with the theme of intentionality. An autocritical element with respect to (authorial) intention is embedded in the very balance the text maintains between qualms about the internal dynamics of Black British political organizing on the one hand, and avoidance of impugning altogether the motivating concerns of anti-racism on the other. In particular, the narration of Farishta as he “tropicalizes” London comes from the perspective of Chamcha seething at his rival, and that this tactic is rejected on the specific grounds of intention:

–But, and again, but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?—Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being

¹¹¹ Hitchens for one observes the currency of this conspiratorial view of the time regarding Rushdie’s role in creating the violent controversy around his novel (267).

(ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, ‘pure’,—an utterly fantastic notion!—cannot, must not, suffice. (442)

To ascribe well-meaning intentions, much less good or evil, to either Chamcha or to Farishta, is to run counter to the novel’s narrative principle, which points out the inconsistencies and resemblances inherent in both sides of such a binary. The desire for purification, even of imperial Britain’s postcolonial melancholia, is the greater danger against which the characters’ oscillating relation guards. Further evidence of the novel’s skepticism regarding determination through authorial intent is evident from how authorship—including the author himself—becomes fertile ground for satire. The most obvious analogue for himself that Rushdie introduces into the text is the fictional scribe named Salman, whose authorship of the infamous verses proves that questions of authorial intent can generate a crisis over the meaning even of the *Qu’ran*, despite its source in divine revelation.¹¹² Rushdie’s presence in the text, as both interpretive authority and scribal figure, plays with the presumptively deterministic barrier between fictional works and reality. These are knowing postmodern gestures to the ways in which the author function accounts for how the author retains the function of constellating critical discourse even as the possibility that their intentions will remain determining has lapsed.

At the same time, *The Satanic Verses* contains what could be understood as a preliminary indication of the author’s eventual sympathy with the intentional fallacy.

¹¹² Aravamudan points to additional authorial self-insertions by noting the substantial resemblance between incidents from Rushdie’s biography and some traits and events in the lives of other characters like Chamcha and the satirist Baal (*Guru* 207). The irreverently experimental poetics of Jumpy Joshy’s versifying play with “Rivers of Blood” seems also to recall Rushdie’s stylistic irreverence.

While part of the novel's reputation is based on the numerous kinds of interruptions to the novel's diegetic flow, the above passage describing the tropicalization of London also contains an authorial self-insertion: "[i]s it possible that evil is never total, that its victory, no matter how overwhelming, is never absolute?" (*Verses* 482). For Suleri, there is a bad faith to the moralism that this particular interjection implies, given the ethical complexities of the novel as a whole, which in turn signals (197). I agree with Suleri that from this point in the narrative forward, the narrative evinces greater sympathy with the possibility of reversion, as against assimilation. Farishta, who embodies the former principle, goes on to save Chamcha from the riot he foments, before committing suicide at Chamcha's dying father's bedside, leaving Chamcha, the assimilated Anglophile as the vessel of a normative ending complete with reconciliation with his father and a new heterosexual coupling with Zeeny Vakil. Thus the moral triumph of reversion is evident in Chamcha, *qua* comprador, effectively adopting his erstwhile rival's principle, making peace both with his past in India, and beginning a relationship that indicates his future may also involve a continuing engagement with his diasporic homeland.

The thematic of moralism in this last authorial interjection, as well as its attendant consequences, is significant to note not only because it runs counter to the postmodern aesthetic of negation and play of the text's oscillating narration and characterization, but also because it anticipates the rather more fixed interpretive basis upon which Rushdie later sought to intercede in the Rushdie Affair. During the years-long controversy surrounding his novel and his person prompted by the *fatwa*, Rushdie periodically released missives in an apparent effort to set the record straight regarding interpretations

of his novel that occasioned the ongoing controversy. Rushdie published a series of essays on this theme from the late 1980s to the 1990s—“In God We Trust,” “In Good Faith,” and “Is Nothing Sacred?” are among the most prominent—and these were later followed by his 2013 memoir, *Joseph Anton*. Part of the project of this metacommentary is to stake out the position of his novel’s critics among Muslim communities and their sympathizers, even while marshaling evidence for the contention “that the original intentions of *The Satanic Verses* have been so thoroughly scrambled by events as to have been lost forever” (*Homelands* 403). Such an investment in his own intentions for the work seems strikingly discordant from the complex figure he cuts as an author on the strength of his actual fictional output.¹¹³ The irony that Rushdie’s own interventions in the Rushdie Affair have recourse to the very intentional fallacy that his book satirized can be explained, in part, by how emergent a formation postmodernism was at the time of *The Satanic Verses*’s writing. The ostensible paradox of Rushdie’s efforts at affixing an interpretation of his work *post-facto* is more an irony of the author function than an inconsistency with it.¹¹⁴

A further irony is that *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates that the context of a postcolonial melancholic imaginary leaves migrants to Britain suspended outside its

¹¹³ While I agree with Ana Cristina Mendes’s caution that “Rushdie’s fiction and his critical writing should not be correlated in any simplistic or reductive fashion” (155), as Rushdie’s own insertions of self imply, the notion of hard and fast interpretive distinctions between forms, fictional and non-, has eroded in the postmodern culture to which his own work contributes substantially, and it is in this sense that reading across these formal subcategories in his *oeuvre* makes sense.

¹¹⁴ Again, Foucault anticipates that as historical conditions alter, so too will the author function; the sentence quoted above continues: “still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even in existence” (119).

historiographical frame and “devoid of historicity” (*Melancholia* 123). During a debate about modern Indian poetry towards the end of the novel, a student named Swatilekha declares,

“These days [...] our positions must be stated with crystal clarity. All metaphors are capable of misinterpretation.” She offered her theory. Society was orchestrated by what she called *grand narratives*: history, economics, ethics. In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had “excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project.” As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of grand narratives, that is, religious faith. “But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political developments in an entirely retrogressive way.” (*The Satanic Verses* 551)

Having established through Chamcha and Farishta’s narratives a preference for oscillation over fidelity to singular principles, it is almost unnecessary for Rushdie to provide the rejoinder he offers to Swatilekha, as the poet with whom she is debating points out the condescension of such a doctrinaire political economy of India that locates the appeal of faith as epiphenomenal (551). When the novel’s fluctuating representational principle is applied to the notion that grand narratives are no longer totalizing with the onset of postmodernity, what emerges is the risk that postmodernism might replicate the very sorts of universalizing tendencies it was widely supposed to have ended.

Illuminating of its postmodern cultural context though the novel may be,¹¹⁵ the Rushdie Affair creates a sort of interpretive feedback loop. Swatilekha’s call for clear political stances thus comes to resemble Rushdie’s own plea that his intentionality be granted a more central place in the text’s interpretation, just as her concern about the vagaries of metaphor becomes reminiscent of liberal dismissals of interpretations of the

¹¹⁵ Sara Suleri considers at length how the text’s secular engagement with religious faith inevitably, despite and even because of its renunciation, attests to the “elegance of Islam” (193, 198-200).

text as blasphemous. Rushdie himself acknowledges how eerily imitative of his art life for him has become: “It’s true that some passages in *The Satanic Verses* have now acquired a prophetic quality that alarms even me” (1992 407). Throughout most of Rushdie’s metacommentary on his eponymous affair, even as he remains cautious about constructing himself as deserving of liberal rights to which many lack access, he nonetheless re-centres his own uncanny intentionality as author. Consider in this regard how his essay “In Good Faith” frames freedom of expression; he begins with a careful acknowledgement of the fundamental unevenness of the distribution of liberal rights: “The freedoms of the West are rightly vaunted, but many minorities—racial, sexual, political—just as rightly feel excluded from full possession of these liberties” (396). Acknowledging minority rights does not amount to consideration of such ongoing exclusions tap into oppressive histories of colonialism, cultural imperialism, and Orientalism. The legacies of these phenomena are borne into the present by the very migrants with which he populates his novel, as is illustrated by the response to the transformation of Chamcha into a devil. Despite being unable to explain sprouting horns, a tail, and cloven feet after miraculously surviving falling without a parachute from an airplane, equally confounding for Chamcha is the nonplussed reaction from the police to his extraordinary good fortune, as they proceed to arrest him with considerable brutality shortly after his plunge is reported (163). While in prison he voices his perplexity at the transformation of himself and his fellow captives into implausible mythological beings; another prisoner explains that this is an imposition by their (white British) captors, who “‘describe us,’ the other whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of

description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.” (174). This scene is rife with postcolonial insights, from the way the prisoner’s explanation of their lack of autonomy over his self-description recalls Fanon’s account of racialization as “the fact of Blackness,” to the materialization through vocalization of Orientalist discourse’s impact (78). In this light, Chamcha’s demonic transfiguration renders the absurdity of the deep sedimentation of colonial discourse in British culture. His magic realist appearance does not just draw out the imputations—of the other’s insuperable difference and even evil—of structural racism, but also underscores how its structuring of society renders it banal through the simultaneous nonchalance and brutality with which the police respond to the sight of him. Chamcha’s transformation first renders in hyperbolic form both the understanding of postmodernism as a growing profusion of categories with claims on one’s identity that extends the process of individuation beyond its traditional limits, and then provokes a disciplinary response that demonstrates how normative hierarchies retain the capacity to deploy dominant modes of cultural description in order to constrain such alternative (postcolonial) affiliations.

The casually racist rationalizations of the police for their brutality towards Chamcha not only indicate the novel’s own critique of the inherent unevennesses in the distribution of the supposedly inalienable right to freedom of expression, but also demonstrate the irony of Rushdie’s recourse in his metacommentary to the convention that authorial intention confers upon him interpretive acuity over *The Satanic Verses*. He is reaching for the very kind of authority his novel satirizes. Commenting on the

controversy a year after the *fatwa* was declared, Rushdie hovers between making such an individuated argument and disavowing its premise:

At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature. It has often seemed to me that people on all sides of the argument have lost sight of this simple fact [...] It felt impossible, amid such a hubbub, to insist on the fictionality of fiction. Let me be clear: I am not trying to say that *The Satanic Verses* is ‘only a novel’ [...] What I have wished to say, however, is that the point of view from which I have, all my life, attempted this process of literary renewal is the result of [...] my determination to create a literary language and literary forms in which the experience of formerly colonized, still-disadvantaged peoples might find full expression. (*Homelands* 393-394)

Here, Rushdie acknowledges the difficulties of interpreting *The Satanic Verses* in view of the critical cacophony the Rushdie Affair generated, by invoking the decadent aesthetic politics of *l’art pour l’art* in an attempt to forestall political interpretation. Even though he allows that a novel is never “only a novel,” in demanding greater priority for his intentions for the novel, Rushdie is not just intervening in the discourse surrounding the novel but enacting the axiom of the author function, as enforcing thrift in the meanings that can proliferate regarding his text. Rushdie’s description of his project as one of creating a new expressive mode for representing postcolonial subjectivities is thus paradoxical, inasmuch as he implies that valid readings of *The Satanic Verses* must exhume the good intentions of his own priorities in terms of meaning-making. Rushdie’s emphasis on his aim of creating a new language through which to depict migrant experience is curious in view of how it participates in the sort of problematic ventriloquization of migrant experience that the depiction of Chamcha as ethical leader—because of his critical distance and unwillingness—of migrant resistance in the novel takes such pains to avoid.

Rushdie strikes a contrarian figure with regard to the prominence due to literary fiction, and by extension, its authors. On the one hand, he argues in “Is Nothing Sacred?” for the novel’s “right to be the stage upon which the real debates of society can be conducted” (*Homelands* 420), while on the other hand he goes on to contend in “Step Across this Line,” a lecture on post-9/11 cultural production, that “artworks, unlike terrorists, change nothing” (*Step Across* 380).¹¹⁶ I argue that taken together these two statements do not represent a contradiction so much as a relatively fine distinction. Suggesting that political change does not necessarily follow from a cultural work is not the same as regarding art as inherently apolitical. On the contrary, Rushdie’s argument is that art to the extent that it is provocative is a qualitatively different kind of provocation than an act of terrorism. This claim is of course contextualized by the broader post-*fatwa* climate in which he has felt compelled to challenge the speculation of John le Carré among others¹¹⁷ that *The Satanic Verses* was deliberately pitched to generate sufficient notoriety to benefit the author (*Homelands* 407). The more particular context in which this comparison of cultural and terrorist productions appears, however, is just before Rushdie quotes George Bataille’s account of transgressive art: “Transgressions suspend taboos without suppressing them” (“Step Across” 103). Even accepting that he could not have anticipated the scale of response that the publication of a book containing sequences some read as blasphemous was to occasion, when applied to the comparison in question

¹¹⁶ As Mendes observes, this comment on art as politically inert compared with terror is somewhat baffling for a writer who has regularly claimed political influences on his work (154). Indeed, it seems to contradict the premise of “Step Across This Line” itself, as an essay on the role of art in the altered global geopolitical context post-9/11.

¹¹⁷ Later in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie complains about critical takes by Paul Gilroy and John Berger on *The Satanic Verses* and the Rushdie Affair (179).

the lesson of Bataille's principle is clear. In Rushdie's view, the fictionality of fiction demarcates it as a space apart from the world, a space for the testing out of social formations and movements' limits.

Given that he is the author of a text that so self-consciously parodies the idea that the individual controls their own self-construction, it is surprising that Rushdie stops short of conceiving of his own authorial predicament in similarly self-reflexive terms. In arguing that his intentions for his novel be deemed exceptional, however, Rushdie exhorts Muslims to submit to his own concept of tolerance, which works to reinforce certain (liberal) values over others. Wendy Brown stresses the asymmetries and individualism involved in projecting liberal humanism in this manner:

For the organicist creature [...] culture and religion (culture *as* religion, and religion *as* culture—equations that work only for this creature) are saturating and authoritative; for the liberal one, in contrast, culture and religion become “background,” can be “entered” and “exited,” and are thus rendered extrinsic to rather than constitutive of the subject. (153)

In pleading a case for literature as “the individual, idiosyncratic vision of one being (*Homelands* 412), Rushdie valorizes the author in the individuated subjective terms Brown suggests above. As much as he tries to differentiate his would-be audience for this case as exemplary—“the great mass of ordinary, decent, fair-minded Muslims, of the sort that I have known all my life” (1992 395)—Rushdie inevitably comes to resemble the figure of the liberal Westerner urging the illiberal other to get in line, to be more moderate. Rushdie's plea may inspire some sympathy in light of the immediate risk to his life, but when interpreted via the author function, the partiality of his effort to posit an aestheticized interpretation of his novel subsequent to the Rushdie Affair emerges.

Of course, what motivated Rushdie to make such efforts was the way that the controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* quite evidently altered perceptions not just of his authorship, but of his relationship with his own fictional subject: postcolonial migration. If the author function is a symptom of the postmodern untethering of foundationalist assumptions from their moorings, then the Rushdie Affair may have helped to generate—to paraphrase Gramsci—“an awareness of [... migrants’] own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (5). At the same time, the idea of Rushdie as organic intellectual conversant from intimate experience with the disadvantages of the diasporic community becomes more and more untenable as the Rushdie Affair progresses. That is to say, the paradox of Rushdie’s post-*fatwa* self-fashioning is that its appeal to his own liberal rights—universal equality and freedom of speech—are exemplary of how the regime of racial neoliberalism unfolds, as structural racism is licensed through covert means like the insistence that the voluntarism of religious faith inoculates Islamophobia against the charge of racism. By articulating a defense of his novel in terms that render culture an optional attribute for the civilized dominant and wholly determining for the barbaric migrant other—what Mahmood Mamdani has called “culture talk” (2)—Rushdie undermines his previous claims of intellectual alignment with the concerns of those *The Satanic Verses* professed to represent anew: subcontinental migrants to Britain. To cite Rushdie against himself, then, I maintain that his novel increasingly loses descriptive purchase regarding the potential openings it detects in the reactionary circumstances of Thatcherite Britain that might render the racist foundations of Britain more hospitable to postcolonial migrants.

One theme that indicates the influence of Rushdie's post-*fatwa* reflections on his authorial persona over the interpretation of his fiction is his self-conception as breaker of taboos. This conceit finds fuller expression in *Joseph Anton*, the novelist's memoir of his life up to and including the period during which he lived in hiding due to threats of violence against him motivated by the *fatwa*. The opening section, "A Faustian Contract in Reverse," lays out some further warrants for Rushdie's increasingly idiosyncratic understanding of artistic freedom; it begins with a recollection of his father's freewheeling interpretations of the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights* at bedtime, teaching him "two unforgettable lessons: first, that stories were not true [...], but by being untrue they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him, and second, that they all belonged to him, just as they belong to his father" (19). Added to these perceptions of irreverence about and ownership over stories is Rushdie's reinforcement of his own ethos on the subject of Islam by recounting his family's dispassionate (because secular) pastime of religious debate, including: his father's adoption of the surname Rushdie as a tribute to an early critic of literalist interpretations of the religion's doctrine (23); the historicity and fallibility of the revelation that gave rise to the Qu'ran (24); and his father's dream of a revised version of this transcription of Muhammad's message that was "clearer and easier to read" (25). At other points in the memoir Rushdie seems rather less certain of the wisdom of being so defensive in the face of the backlash. While discussing the thought process behind "In Good Faith," his first essay responding to his critics, he chastises himself for thinking that "if he could just show that the work had been seriously undertaken, and that it could honorably be

defended, then people—Muslims—would change their minds about it, and about him. In other words, he wanted to be popular” (212). He later reflects that the same belief had motivated a second essay, “Is Nothing Sacred?”, which failed to sway many more of his critics than the former did (252).

Having thus bolstered his interpretive authority over the thematic subject matter of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie records his initial shock at the level of reaction *The Satanic Verses* received: “[h]e thought he had made an artistic engagement with the phenomenon of revelation; an engagement from the point of view of an unbeliever, certainly, but a proper one nonetheless. How could that be thought offensive? The thin-skinned years of rage-defined identity politics that followed taught him [...] the answer to that question” (*Anton* 74). Rushdie details aspects of these “rage-defined identity politics” in subsequent sections focused on the campaign on his behalf, where he also directs attention to the cost to his personal life of being in hiding. Yet his sister Sameen’s perspective on the Rushdie Affair is most illuminating:

As for the British Muslim “leaders,” who exactly did they lead? They were leaders without followers [...] trying to make careers out of her brother’s misfortune. For a generation the politics of ethnic minorities in Britain had been secular and socialist. This was the mosques’ way of destroying that project and getting religion into the driving seat. British “Asians” had never splintered into Hindu, Muslim and Sikh factions before. (142)

The problem with Sameen Rushdie’s framing of anti-racist struggles in 1980s Britain is that it fails to question her brother’s own interests in framing these struggles in relation to the Rushdie Affair. Early in his memoir, Rushdie relays a possibly apocryphal story that held that *The Satanic Verses* had been sold without incident in Iran for the six months directly before the February 14 1989 *fatwa*: “he hoped it [i.e. the anecdote] was [true],

because it demonstrated what he believed: that the furor over his book was created from the top down, not from the bottom up” (*Anton* 61). But the tone of detachment of Rushdie’s initial description of the controversy as the work of demagogues trying to stir an underrepresented British Muslim community into a populist fervor eventually falls away; while reflecting on the fairness of the charges against the novel, he suggests that what they amounted to is an “imaginary novel [that] was the one against which the rage of Islam would be directed” (115), inaugurating the “Rage of Islam” as a kind of shorthand by which to always already dismiss as incoherent any critique of his novel, or of Islamophobia more generally (263, 438). He also frames Paul Trehwela’s essay in defence of the novel as courageous based on an essentialist conception of politics, because it addressed “an interesting question, a tough one for the left to deal with: How should one react when the masses were being irrational? Could ‘the people’ ever be, quite simply, wrong?” (124). While it may well be argued that these assessments of the Rushdie Affair function more as evidence of Rushdie’s perception of abandonment by the Left than embitterment towards individual Muslims,¹¹⁸ his autobiography does exhibit, however ambivalently, a readiness to render contrary viewpoints abstract and thereby dismiss them.

Joseph Anton represents the two-pronged nature of Rushdie’s defensive response to the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*. That the book grants depth to his point of view while rendering his critics’ stances with a flattening simplicity might be dismissed as a simple exigency of the memoir form, which is typically supposed to provide insight

¹¹⁸ In particular, Rushdie notes Gilroy’s critique of his having misjudged “the people” (179).

into the subject's perspective on events. But in this case the indulgence of the author's biases verges outside the ramifications of form, I would argue, given that the memoir is informed by the political context of the struggle over literary signification that is the Rushdie Affair; *Joseph Anton* demonstrates the distance travelled in the years since the controversy from the relatively more evenhanded—if satirical—aesthetic politics of *The Satanic Verses*. While the novel imagined what the possibilities for more intersectional anti-racisms might be on the new cultural terrain of political contest opened up by Thatcherism, it also bears the influence of the identity political currents of the era in which it was published. Understandable as it is that Rushdie would wish to refocus the debate on the ideas he imagines the novel to be engaging with, his efforts at re-centring his intentionality resemble in outline the complaint voiced by Chamcha at the unfairness of his predicament, having to take refuge among the very Brickhall subcontinental migrants he has strained to distance himself from after being beaten by racist police:

Had he not pursued his own idea of *the good*, sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness? Had he not worked hard, avoided trouble, striven to become new? [...] Could it be, in this inverted age, that he was being victimized [...] precisely *because of* his pursuit of 'the good'? That nowadays such a pursuit was considered wrong-headed, even evil?—Then how cruel these fates were, to instigate his rejection by the very world he had so determinedly courted. (265, emphasis original)

In view of the emphasis in *Joseph Anton* on the burdens of isolation and ignorance in which he was often kept while he was under the British secret service's protection, there is evidence to connect Rushdie's lament regarding the trials of being a ward of the state and the motivation of Chamcha's anguish at his Brickhall redoubt. The felt injustice of both author and character proceeds from a sense of disappointment at a lack of

compensation for having laboured under the burden of model minority representation. Rushdie's emphasis in this passage on the difficulty of his aesthetic work suggests that he, like Chamcha, reckons with the problematic of mimicry that commitment to an assimilable ethnic subjectivity entails, as a successful outcome is only ever adjacent to full belonging, while still paying the cost of disaffiliation with a (diasporic) ethnic community.¹¹⁹ To the extent that Rushdie's metacommentary on the Rushdie Affair privileges intentionality, it also recalls the morally exemplary attributes that the good post-racial subject is supposed to exemplify according to Gilroy and Mukherjee. With the emergence of racial neoliberalism, Ahmad and Brennan's critiques of the privileged metropolitan basis of Rushdie's cosmopolitanism regain their acuity. Inasmuch as the novel's ending represents an elitist solution to the problematic of migrancy, as Chamcha pursues while leaving behind the working-class denizens of Brickhall (Kalliney 207-208), the text's amenability to this individualist racial formation becomes clear. Although his aesthetic mix-up imagines intersectional alternatives to politics as usual, and although there is a fine balance of oscillation between Farishta's reversionism and Chamcha's assimilationism, the reception history of *The Satanic Verses* tilts the postmodern aesthetic balance of the novel away from a deeply informed attempt to resolve the problematic of racialized belonging in a postcolonial melancholic society, and towards the more atomized means of remedying racial grievances in Britain that endure today.

¹¹⁹ The problematic of the model minority as I articulate it here draws on Rey Chow's renovation of Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry in ethnic identification (Chow 110).

Chapter 2: The British Muslim *Bildungsroman* and the Problem of Neoliberal
Multicultural Belonging

This chapter considers two coming-of-age narratives in the light of the panic over postcolonial Muslim migration to Britain, arguing that both are informed by a racial neoliberal imperative to assimilate. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* work over the worried thread of postcolonial belonging in post-Rushdie Affair and post-9/11 Britain from the perspective of two migrant women from Bangladesh and Sudan, respectively. On the basis of Nazneen's abusive marriage and her sister's vulnerability to exploitation in Dhaka, Bangladeshi culture in *Brick Lane* is depicted as a stiflingly misogynist cultural determinism to be sloughed off in order for the newcomer to take full advantage of her migration to Britain. Meanwhile, *Minaret* is focalized on Najwa, who finds in a renewed Islamic faith a path to regaining a sense of community after being excluded from the bourgeois Sudanese diaspora as a *déclassé* and unmarried woman. Najwa's becoming plot complicates the idealization of agency as one of the perceived benefits for the Muslim migrant woman who assimilates to British society. Taking these examples of the Muslim British *Bildungsroman* as opportunities to reflect on the relative integration of religious minorities, the contrast between the coming of age of each of their heroines illuminates what it means to succeed and to fail as the regime of migration management becomes influenced by racial neoliberalism.

In order to frame the extended readings of *Brick Lane* and *Minaret* in this chapter, I first contextualize the cultural premium on the acculturation of specifically Muslim women migrants, as well as describe the relationship between racial neoliberalism and the

coming-of-age narrative or *Bildungsroman*. The specific cultural fervour around gender and Islam in an Islamophobic context can be explained via miriam cooke's conceptualization of the "Muslimwoman." cooke follows other critics who have noted how Islamophobia lives in gendered stereotypes,¹²⁰ but her conjoining of these religious and gendered signifiers so as to name the racist implications of the cultural hypervisibility of (especially the veiled) Muslim woman is particularly apposite to the current analysis:

The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a new singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity. A recent phenomenon tied to growing Islamophobia, this identification is created for Muslim women by outside forces, whether non-Muslims or Islamist men. (91)

The importance of the Muslimwoman as a *post-facto* rationale for the imperialism of the War on Terror is evident from how it circulates in political discourse prior to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. The figure is cited as justification for intervention by then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair: "[w]omen are treated in a way almost too revolting to be credible. First driven out of university; girls not allowed to go to school; no legal rights; unable to go out of doors without a man. Those that disobey are stoned" (2001).¹²¹ The yardstick of narratives of empowerment for such figures, then, is an Islamophobic cultural premium on life writing by Muslim women native informants that equates

¹²⁰ See Sherene Razack's tropology of Islamophobic gender discourse (5), as well as Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin on the circulation of such tropes in media (22-30), and Esra Mirze Santesso on their influence on contemporary British literature (28-56).

¹²¹ Laura Bush invokes this figure in similarly justificatory terms: "[this is] also a fight for the rights and dignity of [Afghan] women" (2001). While neither Blair nor Bush clearly identify such practices as Islamic, they also do not distinguish these practices from Islam; Junaid Rana observes how Islamophobia emerges from such semantic indeterminacies in political discourse (Rana). For more on Muslim women's "freedom" as a rationale for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, see Judith Butler's "Violence, Mourning, Politics" (19-50).

gender-based empowerment with exiled Muslim women's acquisition of Euro-American cultural norms.¹²² This figure feeds a feminist imperialist fantasy of the Global North as a site of relative gender and racial justice that in turn justifies the imperialist prosecution of the War on Terror in a notionally illiberal Islamic world, which bears out the legacies of colonial entanglements between gender and racial desire that, as I showed in relation to *The Satanic Verses*, are constitutive of postcolonial melancholia in Britain. At the same time, the Muslimwoman is also a highly contemporary figure for the management of racial difference in Britain through "neoliberal multiculturalism," Jodi Melamed's term for the entanglement of racial neoliberalism with neoliberal capitalism. A major feature of this governmentality that Melamed identifies is multicultural formalism (43), which she theorizes in her reading of Azar Nafisi's memoir of teaching in post-revolutionary Iran, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Melamed observes that Nafisi relies on the European canon to provide her students with lessons in how to make their culture and faith more compatible with neoliberalism: "literary sensibility forms a chain of associations that humanize and privilege rich, cosmopolitan, nominally religious Muslims, and in turn, dehumanize and stigmatize those who are working class, rural and devout" (170-171). On this account, education becomes a project of adapting Irani and Islamic culture through privileging those practices that are most amenable to neoliberal cultural goods. Such a curriculum aims to produce the kind of Muslim, or better, ex-Muslim, subjects that embody "flexible

¹²² cooke goes on to argue that memoirs by (ex-)Muslim women public intellectuals such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi have informed the gendered terms on which Islam becomes a figure of inherent threat to liberal freedom in the Islamophobic imaginary (94). In addition to cooke, this feminist imperialist mobilization of Muslim women's life writing is foregrounded by Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, as well as in the chapter by Melamed discussed below.

citizenship” as Aihwa Ong defines it (91). At the same time, those who do not exhibit flexibility in their religious practices further reify the image of Islam as inherently pre-modern and illiberal, and thus not conducive to market-based freedoms.

So, if the Muslimwoman as subject of assimilationist becoming is a prized trope of multicultural formalism then it makes sense to consider the genre of narratives like *Brick Lane* and *Minaret* that depict Muslim women coming of age. I am interested in how these texts conform to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*—which is defined generally as a coming-of-age novel, but is also be translated from German as “novel of education”—a genre Mark Stein theorizes as an important mode of narrating British diasporic subjectivities in postwar Black and Asian British writing. He terms this subgenre the “black British novel of transformation” (24-25):

the *novel of transformation* portrays *and* purveys the transformation, the reformation, the repeated “coming of age” of British cultures under the influence of outsiders within. [...] The black British novel of transformation [...] is about the *formation* of its protagonists—but, importantly, it is also about the *transformation* of British society and cultural institutions. (xii-xiii, emphasis original)

While Stein’s definition hinges on an understanding of Black British identity from the 1970s to 1980s, as a category that is inclusive of British Asians and/as Muslims, the historiography of racial neoliberalism I discussed through Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and the Rushdie Affair in Chapter One points to some of the reasons why this anti-racist coalitional basis for racial identity became untenable. Whereas *Verses* centres the complexity and multiplicity of group-based claims for postcolonial migrants’ belonging in Britain, Stein focuses on the way in which the diasporic coming-of-age novel allegorizes the search for belonging via metonymy—the struggle of the individual

migrant stands in for that of the whole. However, I want to ask how and to what effect novels like *Brick Lane* and *Minaret*, as texts informed by neoliberal multicultural norms that Stein addresses only in an incipient sense, have thrown into crisis the metonymic capacity of the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*.¹²³

To frame my analysis of Ali and Aboulela's novels, I draw together two arguments that complicate the notion of the *Bildungsroman* as socially exemplary in racial neoliberal times. First, recent analyses of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* have troubled the notion that the narrative of maturation via individuation necessarily proceeds smoothly. Jed Esty notes that the modernist *Bildungsroman* of both the high and late imperialist period often fails to demonstrate the expected benefits of experience with which the genre is associated, as its protagonists often register instead a disillusioning experience of stalled progress from youth to adulthood (6). Similarly, Joseph Slaughter posits a homology between the genre's idealist roots and twentieth-century human rights covenants and discourse, arguing that postcolonial examples of the genre are often "dissensual," registering the contradiction between emergent international human rights covenants as supposed guarantees of a "right to have rights," and actual lived experience of how partial such guarantees are (182). Taking the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* as document of what Esty calls "unseasonable youth" whose failure to develop towards the maturity that Slaughter associates with a liberal universalist telos, I explore how

¹²³ Specifically, Stein analyzes Hanif Kureishi's writing in relation to a concept he calls "postethnicity," a concept which for him denotes British culture having broadly accepted ethnic presence as a given on the one hand, and endorsed a racial neoliberal emphasis on voluntarism and individualism on the other (113).

neoliberal cultural imperatives further unsettle the constitutive inconstancy in normative models of socialization to which the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* attests.

The influence of neoliberalism thus represents the cultural context for my generic analysis of *Brick Lane* and *Minaret*. As neoliberal reforms have undermined the British social contract, the possibility of individual uplift standing in for more general mobility yields an increasingly exhausted narrative of the kind that Lauren Berlant addresses in *Cruel Optimism*. Berlant's book analyzes the impingement of neoliberalism on everyday life, focusing on tendencies in recent cultural production, including a

waning of genre, and in particular older realist genres [...] whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life. [...] In the present [...] conventions of reciprocity that ground how to live and imagine life are becoming undone in ways that force the gestures of ordinary improvisation within daily life into a greater explicitness affectively and aesthetically. (6-7)

Berlant's reference to the waning of realist generic conventions certainly could extend to the *Bildungsroman* in its classical definition as "the symbolic form of modernity," as industrialization and migration from the country to the city produces the modern notion of youth (Moretti 4-5). With Berlant, then, I propose that as social expectations recede, so too do generic expectations.¹²⁴ This is not to disagree with Stein regarding the relationship between the Black and Asian *Bildungsroman* and transformations in British society, exactly, but to put pressure on the notion that this is a metonymic relationship of inclusion: "[a]part from coming to terms with the protagonist's identity, the genre is about

¹²⁴ There is ongoing disagreement regarding the genre's conventions, as is evident from Marc Redfield's term for the emptiness of the *Bildungsroman* as a generic signifier: "phantom formation." Redfield usefully redirects genre analysis from a quantitative accounting of a text's generic criteria to the more qualitative (and ideological) dimension of the social meanings of a text's association with the genre (see esp. pp. 1-38).

the *voicing* of this identity. [...The genre] does not predominantly feature the privatist formation of an individual [...but] constitutes a symbolic act of carving out space, of creating a public sphere” (30, emphasis original). Rather, I show that contemporary diasporic coming-of-age narratives allegorize the transformation of British society in less progressive terms than Stein implies, indicating that the space that some make for themselves in Britain’s public sphere can result in others being carved out of it.¹²⁵

This chapter will show that when the intersecting oppressions faced by Muslim women in Islamophobic circumstances are acknowledged, the dominant fictional tendency is to frame these oppressions as individual aberrations amid a claimed general uplift.¹²⁶ Ali and Aboulela’s novels offer contrasting representations of the racialized individual compelled to rely on her own resources in order to mitigate racial grievances. My reading of *Brick Lane* focuses on Nazneen’s development of agential capacities as what might be called the successful neoliberal multicultural subject. I begin by examining the progress of her *Bildung*, defined as “a pragmatic process of autoproduction-as-identification that is both predestined and a ‘great task’” (Redfield 50), which is thrown into relief by character foils like her mother and sister, whose experiences in Bangladesh recall the inherently oppressed figure of the “Third World Woman” (Mohanty 22).

¹²⁵ In this sense, Margaret Thatcher’s well-known assessment, “there is no such thing as society,” ironically taps into a postmodern structure of feeling, in which what constitutes society for any given person is a wholly idiosyncratic product of that person’s social location. The unlikely implication of this infamous line chimes with Slaughter’s claim that the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* demonstrates that diasporic postcolonial communities have historically had discrepant experiences of metropolitan society’s conventional benefits (286).

¹²⁶ I understand Islamophobia in the specific sense that Junaid Rana and others do, as racism cloaked as religious disagreement (9).

Nazneen's expanded capacity to shoulder the burdens of social production *and* reproduction for her family in East London comes with a normative imperative attached, which becomes most palpable through the contrast with her abusive, negligent, and underemployed husband Chanu. But his role as a problematic patriarchal foil undercuts the legitimate postcolonial grievances that he voices; his dismissal indicates the extent to which the novel slips from a narrative of individuation into an argument for individualist racial neoliberal becoming. Where *Brick Lane* dramatizes the gendered implications of Nazneen's successful racial neoliberal *Bildung*, I turn to *Minaret* to consider the correspondent risk of failure that this individualist model entails. Here, my intersectional reading emphasizes the class dimension of Najwa's relation to the Muslimwoman figure, as her sheltered upbringing leaves her ill-equipped for the sudden task of finding relative empowerment through individual agency. While some read the post-migration deepening of Najwa's faith as an alibi for a globalized fundamentalist Islam (Abbas, Hewett, Hassan), I suggest a more attenuated reading of the compensations Islam provides in view of her dissensual *Bildung*; the fact that Najwa becomes a more devout Muslim also counterbalances the assimilationist paradigm of migration narratives involving the Muslimwoman figure. Despite the discrepancies between Nazneen and Najwa in terms of their social positions and the contexts of their migration to Britain, what unites them is the problem racism poses to their diasporic belonging and the individuated terms on which they struggle against it. Their experiences suggest that the *Bildungsroman* undergoes a racial neoliberal turn, inasmuch as the migrant subject's transition into individuated adulthood is an increasingly unreliable allegory of diasporic integration.

Politicizing the Makeover: Engendering the Racial Neoliberal Subject in *Brick Lane*

[...] we can see how beauty as a measure of moral character and feeling, which has a clear geopolitical dimension, also functions to regulate moral character and feeling, especially as a geopolitical exercise addressed to the individual and the collective as power's problem and beauty's mandate. As a glimpse of a desirable future, beauty is imagined to inspire contemplation, to foster respect for aliveness, to jar a viewer into "unselving" on behalf of the world. But these are not neutral mandates.

—Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty"

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* outlines a neoliberal multicultural paradigm of migration through the experience of its protagonist, Nazneen, a woman compelled to leave her village in Bangladesh for Britain after a forced marriage at the age of eighteen. Two major impediments make Nazneen's coming-of-age narrative resemble that of the Muslimwoman figure: the confining experience of her marriage to her abusive and ineffectual older husband Chanu, and related broader struggles with cultural dislocation and economic privation that her life in diaspora entails. My analysis of Ali's novel is divided into two sections, the first of which considers how Nazneen's narrative of migration registers as successful as she makes herself over in postfeminist terms into a neoliberal multicultural subject. Here I observe how the novel is focalized through the expansion of consciousness to become agential in accordance with the generic script of the *Bildungsroman*, particularly in her engagements with character foils, such as remembrances of her mother Rupban, epistolary contact with her sister Hasina, and domestic conflict with her husband Chanu. In the second section of my analysis, I consider how the instrumentality of Chanu as patriarchal impediment to Nazneen hinges on his legibility according to the colonial stereotype of the "babu," as well as through a

fatphobic satire of his egotism. The necessity of critiquing Chanu's patriarchy risks spilling over to de-legitimize the culture and history of Bangladesh in relation to British Empire, as well as the racism and underemployment facing racialized diasporic workers in post-Thatcherite Britain. When Nazneen and Chanu's characterizations are framed through the intersection of neoliberal multicultural notions of belonging and the so-called "makeover" paradigm of postfeminist subjectivity in the transnational context of the War on Terror, it is clear that the price of Nazneen's assimilationist *Bildung* is the abjection of Chanu as postcolonial remainder.

Extant academic and popular responses to *Brick Lane* show that the symbolic and thematic qualities of Nazneen's *Bildung* signal a gradual challenge to patriarchy and cultural dislocation, by highlighting the text's movement from closure to openness, or from domination to agency (Cormack, Cuming, Hiddleston). These framings—indicate that the novel is influenced by the Anglo-European cultural imaginary's perception of Islam in the post-9/11 period, which understands Muslim culture as coterminous with fundamentalist interpretations that are inimical to the ostensible cultural openness of secular society.¹²⁷ The text's source material and reception history both indicate that Ali aspires to reflect authentically on the particular status of Muslim women migrants to Britain. Several scholars suggest that the text courts pseudo-ethnographic status not only because it is set in and named for the East London street market that forms the Bangladeshi diaspora's commercial and social hub, but also due to Ali's

¹²⁷ Saba Mahmood observes that Charles Taylor's influential account of the modern secular self as "buffered" is defined in opposition to "nonsecular" or "premodern" selves, which are in turn relegated either to a "geospatial location of the 'non-West' or to a temporal past" ("Secularism" 294).

acknowledgement that Naila Kabeer's comparative anthropological study of women garment workers in Dhaka and London influenced her depiction of the trials of Nazneen and her sister Hasina in a globalizing economy of gendered labour (“‘Good’ Production” 201, Marx 4, Perfect 110).¹²⁸ The issue of authenticity has proved controversial with respect to the novel's reception history, since the perception that it sheds unflattering light on inequities within the Bangladeshi-British community provoked protest not altogether dissimilar from that of the Rushdie Affair.¹²⁹

Although Ali published a rebuttal of these complaints for imposing an undue burden of representation on the text (“Outrage”), the fact that she does not altogether demur from the notion that Nazneen's trajectory proceed from closure to openness suggests that her protagonist's becoming is legible as that of a Muslimwoman migrant.¹³⁰ In the same column, Ali observes: “[t]he story requires the reader to live inside Nazneen's head. For a fair old chunk of the novel she scarcely speaks.” Set following her initial arrival in Britain in 1980s, this “chunk” consists of a sequence of internalized realizations and that points to Nazneen to attain a distinctive voice, which in turn suggests that she grows out of the kind of subalternity to which she was consigned in view of her

¹²⁸ Garrett Ziegler notes that the novel received strong reviews, a Man Booker Prize nomination, and bestseller status (147). The book's academic reception has been more mixed, as even as its portrayal of the plight of women working in a globalized economy has been lauded, others have queried its valorization of agency through small business ownership (Cormack 27, Santesso 81).

¹²⁹ Grievances included the stereotyped depiction of gender norms in the enclave, as well as allegations of discrimination towards the Sylheti minority by the Bengali majority, and protests coincided with both the book's release and its subsequent film adaptation (Chakravorty).

¹³⁰ July 2006, Rushdie himself wrote a letter to *The Guardian* to support *Brick Lane*'s film adaptation in response to protests by Bangladeshi business owners.

circumstances on arrival, as an adolescent impoverished woman compelled to marry and leave rural Bangladesh for urban London. As Ali goes on to observe, “the story is told from the point of view of a marginalised voice [...] that [...] can be every bit as rich and nuanced, individual and interesting as any other.” In this light, Nazneen’s developmental progress towards openness is significant with respect to both the cultural and generic contexts of the novel. Her acquisition of a confident voice is thus a normative sign of attaining *Bildung*, while as a vocalization of a woman of colour’s marginalized experience, it is also a recognized good in both multicultural and intersectional terms.¹³¹

When approached through the intersecting gender and religious-based premises for contemporary Islamophobia, Ali’s framing of Nazneen’s trajectory away from marginality comes into question. While her becoming plot clearly traces her negotiation of her disadvantaged position with respect to the gendered labour regime of globalization, as her migration from poverty-stricken rural Bangladesh only leads to a hardscrabble existence and exploitative marriage in Tower Hamlets, *Brick Lane*’s thematic trajectory towards openness is also evident from the changing role that religion plays in her adaptation to life in Britain. In religious terms, Nazneen’s position at the outset recalls the imperialist feminist rationalizations of post-9/11 interventions as the salvation of the figure Sherene Razack calls the “imperilled Muslim woman.” For Razack, the urgency of ameliorating gendered marginality presumes on essentialist terms that Islam is inherently oppressive to women: “the Muslim woman, a body fixed in the Western imaginary as

¹³¹ The uptake of subaltern studies by literary postcolonial studies has been influential in the effort to bring to mainstream cultural works by lesser known voices; see, for instance, Varun Gulati and Garima Dalal’s recent collection *Multicultural and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature* (2017).

confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture” (107). The narrative emphasis on Nazneen’s own initiative in acquiring agency in the process of her *Bildung* reflects a shift from liberal to neoliberal premises in the formation of imperial feminism; rather than being subject to an interventionist white saviour paradigm, now the imperilled Muslim woman authors her own saviour narrative.¹³² Still, to paraphrase Lila Abu-Lughod, whether the agent of saving is extrinsic or intrinsic, every Muslimwoman saviour narrative presupposes not only an oppressive circumstance to be saved from, but also a “saving her *to* something” (788). By attending to the transformations in Nazneen’s dispositional orientations and self-making practices following her arrival in Britain, I understand her becoming plot in terms of a postfeminist makeover paradigm that recruits her *to* a vision of imperialist feminist freedom.¹³³ While Muslim women are far from unique in being subject to ever-intensifying pressures to conform to normative standards of beauty and conduct is not a unique imposition on, such standards become crucial rationales for overseas interventions so as to resolve the Muslimwoman’s inherent oppression. As Mimi Thi Nguyen contends:

Global feminisms that formulate the solution [to the oppressed Muslimwoman] as the marriage of self-esteem to entrepreneurial individualism and financial responsibility (echoing the fundamental precepts of neoliberal capitalism) here avoid the problem of the third-world-woman as an object of knowledge by grooming her as an agent in her own transformation—a manageable and comforting body laboring to become beautiful [...] to claim her freedom. (374)

¹³² The interventionism of imperialist feminism I’m referring to here operates both with respect to the lives of diasporic Muslims living in Euroamerican countries, as well as through the actions of NGOs who profit off the retroactive gender-based rationalizations for neo-imperialist interventions in situations like Afghanistan and Iraq. For more on the historical derivation of imperialist feminism, see Kumar.

¹³³ For more on this makeover paradigm, see Gill (442) and McRobbie (725).

Brick Lane as a migration narrative indicates the biopolitics of global feminism are as pertinent in post-9/11 Afghanistan as they are in the ethnic enclave of Brick Lane. Furthermore, in view of the gender-based oppression that is constitutive of “Islam” in the Islamophobic imaginary, I suggest that the text takes the measure of Muslim migrants’ *Bildung*—regardless of gender—through a racial neoliberal variant on the postfeminist makeover paradigm. According to these moralizing terms, Nazneen’s adaptations exemplify the assimilable Muslimwoman as good racial neoliberal subject, in contrast with the failed *Bildung* of Chanu, who symbolizes the “dangerous Muslim man” in Razack’s tropology (5). According to this rubric, Chanu becomes exemplary of what might happen to Nazneen should she fail as a would-be racial neoliberal subject.

The influence of postfeminist imperialist biopolitics is evident early in *Brick Lane*’s depiction of Nazneen’s circumstances as a newly arrived migrant to Britain. In the opening section of the novel, Nazneen is still eighteen and has found herself in the Tower Hamlets borough of London after leaving her birthplace in rural Bangladesh due to her father’s arrangement of a marriage to Chanu, a council worker more than twenty years her senior. Soon after arriving in this East London borough, which had become a centre of the Bangladeshi diaspora after the migration of numerous Bangladeshis following the 1971 war of independence, Nazneen finds herself drawn in by the glimpse of a couple figure skating on the television in their council flat (Alexander 210). She is startled by various aspects of the performance, from the seeming magic of moving so quickly on such an unfamiliar surface to the revealing outfits. This sequence of minor cultural shocks culminates in her interpretation of the defiant final pose that the woman skater strikes at

her routine's end: "[s]he stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for hers" (23). Ali relates this scene as an idealized this moment of female self-determination, attributing to it the heroic glow of Muslimwoman becoming: the scene foreshadows Nazneen's quest for enhanced capacities of self-determination. Immediately following this scene, however, Chanu squelches her desire to learn English, underscoring her difficulty with the consecutive "s" sounds in "ice skating," and dismissing her request to take language classes, asking, "[w]here's the need anyway?" (23). The unstated objection behind Chanu's rhetorical question is due to his utter confidence that Nazneen's role is and should primarily be the meeting of instrumental rather than aesthetic needs, primarily his own; she exists at the opposite pole of the symbolic economy she reads into the skater's posture, as her husband proceeds as though she exists only to serve him as a meek, and, in an Anglophone society, effectively mute, body. The conflict this scene establishes between Nazneen's social role and her interiority maps on to both generic and postfeminist models of uplift. In policing the bounds of Nazneen's social role, Chanu inaugurates a legitimacy crisis altogether typical of the *Bildungsroman*: "it is not sufficient [...] to subdue the drives that oppose the standards of 'normality.' It is also necessary that, as a 'free individual,' not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as *one's own*. One must *internalize* them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity" (Moretti 16). As a diasporic subject, Nazneen experiences this burden of internalization twice over, as her multiple national

affiliations makes it fundamentally uncertain which set of social norms—and gender norms, in particular—she must adapt in the process of coming of age. At the same time, Chanu’s cruel intercession in response to her barely articulated fantasy of uplift through figure skating and language learning hinges on the typical affects of humiliation and shame that Rosalind Gill sees as typical precipitating factors in a postfeminist makeover (442). In this view, the drama of the plot becomes whether Nazneen’s makeover will opt to consent for either of two sets of norms, or whether she will find a way to blend the two.

Because other character primarily function according to *Bildungsroman* convention as foils or counterpoints for Nazneen’s development, *Brick Lane*’s narration of her challenges to the strictures of convention and those who would enforce them reads as a familiar feminist arc of becoming. Numerous critics have observed that there is an implicit point-counterpoint procedure by which the novel charts Nazneen’s coming of age in relation to multiple foils. While Emily Cuming notes that coming-of-age narratives that focus on female protagonists typically impart gender lessons that accrue towards an inevitable marriage (342), Alistair Cormack points out that as Nazneen is married from the novel’s beginning, the conventional marital solution becomes a plot-defining predicament: “[s]he [i.e. Nazneen] arrives in England imprisoned by her quixotic husband and her Islamic fatalism [...but] she overcomes her submissiveness and becomes the forger of her own identity” (712). Nazneen’s life in diaspora begins in confining circumstances unpropitious for such individuation: confining not just in terms of gender but also of the spatial closeness of the council flat and the relative homogeneity of the diasporic Bangladeshi community Tower Hamlets. Cormack’s emphasis on the challenge

of overcoming fatalism and submissiveness points to the exemplary model of forbearance in Nazneen's life; her now-deceased mother Rupban, and the fatalistic interpretation of Islam she sought to instil in her. Fatalism's place in family lore is established through the tale of her mother's refusal to seek out medical help when the newborn Nazneen was unable to feed for the first five days: "[a]s Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. [...] Not once did Nazneen question the logic. [...] Indeed, she was grateful for her mother's quiet courage, her tearful stoicism that was almost daily in evidence" (4). To the extent that Nazneen's character arc departs from fatalism, then, she must challenge the sanctified memory of Rupban, who modelled resignation in the face of patriarchy and poverty.

Nazneen registers incipient challenges to her mother's fatalist example as she gradually realizes how she herself is subjected to and determined by others' gendered perceptions: first those of her husband Chanu, and later those of her lover Karim. Both men prize different self-making practices in Nazneen than those self-determining attributes that she ascribes to the skater on TV. A mere week after their marriage and arrival together in England, she overhears Chanu outline with brutal frankness the subordinate position he assigns to his wife, describing her on the phone as, "[n]ot beautiful, but not so ugly either," and, he adds: "what's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. [...] A girl from the village: totally unspoilt" (11). Although by 2001, the second time-period in which the book is set, Nazneen acts with agency in her sexual life by having an affair with Karim, a young British-born anti-racist activist on the housing estate, she gradually realizes that he too fetishizes her normative

Bangladeshi femininity in a way not so dissimilar from Chanu: “[h]ow did Karim see her? The real thing, he’d said. [...] A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother.” (382). This statement reminds her of Chanu’s attitude towards her, but by this point she has developed the self-possession to refuse to conform to the desires Karim projects on to her. Having avoided confinement to the gender normative roles that Chanu and Karim envision for her, Nazneen clearly departs from her mother’s fatalist response to patriarchal oppression.

The emphasis on gender empowerment as *Brick Lane* concludes is also evident in the primacy of Nazneen’s relationship with her friend Razia. Shortly after Nazneen ends her affair with Karim, Chanu succumbs to the “Going Home Syndrome” he had once decried in his fellow diasporic subjects and returns to Dhaka (19; 402),¹³⁴ and Nazneen remains in their council flat with their two daughters Shahana and Bibi, as well as Razia, who take her on a surprise trip to a local ice rink. When Nazneen initially demurs to lace up skates herself—saying “[b]ut you can’t skate in a sari”—Razia quickly counters: “[t]his is England. [...] You can do whatever you like” (415). This statement of English exceptionalism is the last line of the novel, and represents the culmination of, as Cuming puts it, how “Ali [...] uses the novelistic structure to spin a type of social fairy tale. [...] Nazneen becomes a ‘productive’ member of the entrepreneurial, manufacturing class,

¹³⁴ This is a salutary example of Chanu’s hypocrisy, as he had previously dismissed his fellow migrants’ desire to return to Bangladesh while posturing for his aloof and socially desirable acquaintance, Dr. Azad, whose coinage “Going Home Syndrome” is: “[t]hese people are basically peasants and they miss the land” (19). The irony is that this classist disaffiliation comes just after Chanu expresses his own wish to escape what he regards as the pernicious influence of British tolerance of drugs and alcohol: “[o]ur community is not educated about this, and much else besides. But, for my part, I don’t plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back [to Bangladesh] before they get spoiled” (18).

who is also able to redraw for herself a version of home and hearth backed by self-belief and sorority” (343). Razia is a particularly appropriate voice for this concluding testament to the hard-won possibility of agency that England represents for Bangladeshi women in the novel. Freed from an abusive and neglectful marriage following her husband’s death in an industrial accident (110) only to have to face her teenaged son’s drug use alone (295), Razia still finds time to help Nazneen out of an exploitative grey market arrangement tailoring for a usurious gossip named Mrs. Islam (101). Prior to their skating outing, the two friends found “Fusion Fashions,” a tailoring business that promises the financial independence to facilitate their self-determination as subjects without being beholden to male authority. Modelling the trajectory that Nazneen eventually lives out, Razia too has endured a seemingly bleak transition from the domesticity of her married life to being a working single mother, which brings with it newfound autonomy as well as the profoundly challenging responsibility of working what Arlie Hochschild famously called the “second shift.”¹³⁵ But as John Marx has argued, Ali does not simply hold up a realist mirror to the then-under-acknowledged challenges of Muslim women’s lives as workers in an exploitative global economy (18). Nazneen’s coming-of-age narrative is not pitched just to conform to the utilitarian conventions of Weberian subjective emergence, but also aestheticizes this process of becoming; in Moretti’s phrase, it effectively interiorizes the contradiction between socialization and individuation (36). Even though

¹³⁵ Naila Kabeer’s 2000 economic ethnography of Bangladeshi women garment workers, *The Power to Choose*, in addition to influencing *Brick Lane*’s account of gendered labour also precipitated a generation of academic research on the expanding role of women in the workforce of Muslim-majority societies, such as Saadia Zuhaidi’s *Fifty Million Rising*.

Nazneen's doubt about skating in a sari indicates an abiding ambivalence regarding cultural hybridity, the concluding celebration of British national belonging ultimately fulfils the generic requirement of an aesthetic supplement.¹³⁶ Though the oppression Razia and Nazneen endured took place in London, and their freedom takes the attenuated form of working what Arlie Hochschild calls the "second shift" that presumably leaves few opportunities to go skating, on balance the novel makes it clear that they are relatively better off doing garment work in Britain than they would be in Bangladesh (Marx 22). In this reading, their friendship and Fusion Fashions enterprise promise to provide sustaining female community and industry on the one hand, but it also associates the possibility of such a challenge to patriarchal modes of sociality with assimilation to British society.

The inaccessibility of a similarly empowering makeover narrative to Nazneen's (or even Razia's) for her sister Hasina is further evidence of how *Brick Lane* ratifies the Orientalist symbolic geography of global feminism. Hasina sends tragic epistles to Brick Lane that detail the exploitations and violence she faces as a marginally employed garment and care worker in Dhaka. Nazneen is concerned for her sister out of a sense of their contrasting regard for their mother's precepts regarding fate; "it worried her that Hasina kicked against fate," Nazneen thinks, not long after she arrives and begins receiving letters from her sister (10). Nazneen relates a memory of a childhood visit from her mother Rupban's sister seeking to escape her own oppressive husband, in which the two women cling to each other weeping and lamenting their shared sense of the

¹³⁶ See Santesso (81) and Upstone (339).

inevitability of patriarchal domination in their Bangladeshi village, as they react to news of a village herdsman kidnapping a local girl for three nights: “[w]e are just women. What can we do? / They know it. That’s why they act as they do” (80). Whereas in their childhood, Hasina lost patience with her family’s fatalistic laments, dragging her sister away from their inconsolable elders to play, Nazneen deferred to her mother’s approach: “[s]he longed to be enriched by this hardship [...] and begin to wear this suffering that was as rich and layered and deeply colored as the saris that enfolded Amma’s troubled bones” (80). Hasina’s independence goes on to cause her strife in her adult life, rather than permitting her to author her own salvation. After Hasina elopes to Dhaka with a parentally-unsanctioned love match—to her cost, as it turns out when he later abandons her—Hasina writes plaintively to Nazneen, “[e]verything has happen [sic] is because of me” (132). Hasina details to her sister in subsequent letters her precarious existence as a single woman under constant threat of losing her job and housing, a narrative that represents, as Michael Perfect has observed, a substantially skewed portrayal of the hardships faced by Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka.¹³⁷ For Perfect, the depiction of Bangladesh solely through the oppressive conditions described in Hasina’s letters and Nazneen’s childhood memories “serves to further emphasize and render extraordinary [...] Nazneen’s narrative of emancipation and enlightenment” (119). In other words, Hasina’s characterization functions in the ideological terms of the

¹³⁷ “Ali [...] obviously bases Hasina [...] on the testimonies recorded in *The Power to Choose*. [...] However, the testimonies which Ali appropriates for the purposes of Hasina’s letters are unfailingly the most despairing ones that Kabeer’s study has to offer. Many of the women in Dhaka that she quotes express increased (and increasing) wealth, autonomy, and agency” (Perfect 118).

Muslimwoman becoming narrative, as the inherently patriarchal conditions of Bangladesh necessarily inhibit her coming of age, which in turn implies that neoliberal multicultural Britain provides greater opportunities for liberatory self-fashioning so that Nazneen thus avoids the abject experience of Hasina. In other words, Hasina updates for an Islamophobic moment the archetypal “Third World Woman,” the subaltern figure who legitimates neo-colonial intervention from a supposedly enlightened Global North (Mohanty 22). The attenuation of her sister’s agency in Bangladesh exemplifies the relative advantage of Nazneen’s trajectory, who despite her own struggles has been at least fortunate enough to escape the supposed inherent gender oppression of her homeland.

Given Ali’s sense that she has obliged her readers to “live inside Nazneen’s head,” the progressive elements of Nazneen’s *Bildung* are not only evident through her departure from external foils like her mother, sister, and husband, but also through her internal responses to the conditions of her everyday experience of life in diasporic Britain. Specifically, the trajectory of Nazneen’s development involves transgressing the conventional border of the feminized private sphere, a movement which, following Wendy Brown, implies a liberal feminist notion of freedom (194). There are several moments in which Nazneen gains mastery over the sense of threat that her upbringing by Rupban has led her to assign to public spaces, which indicate how Nazneen’s coming-of-age narrative involves transgressing the gendering of the public-private divide. When Nazneen ventures out of the estate for the first time by herself and gets lost in the City, she is injured tripping over a man’s briefcase but takes no comfort in reciting a sura from

the Qu’ran she learned as a child (41). She also ventures into a pub in search of a toilet, a charged decision for a woman living according to *purdah* norms against mixing with unmarried men, not to mention the Islamic proscription against alcohol (45). As she dispenses with religious ritual out of its sheer inconvenience to meeting her needs as a gendered subject unaccustomed to navigating public surroundings alone, Nazneen learns to challenge her maternally sanctioned faith practice. Her ultimate break with fatalism takes place after Nazneen and Chanu’s first child Raqib is hospitalized and eventually dies of an undiagnosed illness. The contrast between the passivity Rupban displays in the face of her newborn daughter’s difficulty latching and Nazneen’s active efforts to seek medical help for her son prompts a disaffiliation with maternal influence: “[d]id she call piously for God to take what he would and leave her with nothing? Did she act, in short, like her mother? A saint?” (107). In accepting treatment for Raqib she sloughs off an inherited fatalism learned from her mother. Nazneen’s shift towards agency thus involves transcending the private realm of feminized (because embodied) knowledge in order to function in a masculinist public realm of reasoned decision-making (*Aversion* 63). But in this shift, Nazneen also comes to identify with a different side of the binary understanding of women’s agency and Islamic faith that Brown attributes to post-War on Terror geopolitics (189). Just as the liberal feminist subject who attains freedom by becoming an actor in the public realm does not meaningfully challenge the gendered nature of the public-private binary, so the rise of fundamentalist Islam is explicable as an imbalance between the properly privatized sense of culture and a public sphere constituted by rationality. Here the postfeminist makeover paradigm in the context of Nazneen’s

growing agency takes on a racial neoliberal character, producing a symbolic geography that presumes certain practices and locations—i.e. fatalist Islam in rural Bangladesh—to be inimical to feminist becoming. Consider the converse scenario: if fatalism represents an unthinking response to a situation of abject patriarchal domination—as Bangladesh appears to function in the novel—would Rupban attempting to exert agency as Nazneen does have changed anything? Hasina’s experience, however, suggests otherwise.

Viewed in terms of Nazneen’s progressive development towards agency, her departure from her mother’s example demonstrates that the *sine qua non* of expanding her individual capacity to move in public is exerting control over private qualms. As she masters her internal life, she can do more than just act in the interests of her own and her children’s health, as she also feels more able to act on desires unsanctioned by conventional gender norms. For example, her affair with Karim requires her to live with the risk that Chanu might discover them *in flagrante*, a risk that from a fatalist perspective may as well be a certainty (287). In this regard, Nazneen’s growing understanding that Islam is not necessarily in conflict with the principle of free will appears to contrast the conventional Islamophobic understanding of Muslim women’s assimilation to Global Northern contexts as a zero-sum game between submission and freedom; she plays both sides, frequently seeing the good in each. As Esre Mirze Santesso observes, Nazneen’s gradual realization that she can define her own relationship with Islam is part of a pattern in the novel of depicting the individual as the ethical ground from which all politics must proceed (79). But the decline in Nazneen’s fatalism in the course of her development can also be read as indicative of her refashioning her relationship with culture, rejecting the

idea that she is determined by it. Mahmood Mamdani has observed that Islamophobia invokes an Orientalist trope of “culture talk,” where culture is determining in the Islamic “East” while remaining an optional attribute in the “West”: “the attitude of Westerners towards their own culture is self-reflexive; [...] they build on the good, they correct the bad; their culture develops historically [...] Muslims are simply born into a culture, and are said to live it like a destiny” (2). As compelling as Nazneen’s growing autonomy is in terms of her own relationship with Islam, given the broader prevalence of culture talk regarding Islam, the politics of this becoming narrative are suddenly slightly more suspect.

One way of working through this impasse regarding role of culture in *Brick Lane* as coming-of-age narrative is to consider the divergent responses of Nazneen and Chanu to the terminal illness of their infant son Raqib, as their divergence manifests contrary notions of culture’s social role. Here, the *Bildungsroman*’s constitutive contradiction between individuation and socialization plays out in how Nazneen’s inward comparison between her own sense of personal responsibility for Raqib’s well-being with Chanu’s (Moretti 16). Nazneen’s approach to parenthood emphasizes individual sustenance, whereas thanks to the luxury that patriarchal detachment from childcare affords him, Chanu can fixate instead on Raqib’s future socialization: “the baby’s life was more real to her than her own. His life was full of needs: actual and urgent needs, which she could supply. [...] And [to] Chanu [...] the baby was a set of questions, an array of possibilities [...] He examined, from a distance, his progress and made plans for Raqib’s future” (62). This situation contrasts wife and husband on multiple levels: in strictly narrative terms,

here is yet more evidence of how Chanu presumes that Nazneen will engage in the socially reproductive labour of childcare that facilitates their child's individuation. Yet, on a generic reading, there is a gendered bifurcation of responsibility for the ostensibly contradictory imperatives of individuation (managed by Nazneen) and socialization (focused on by Chanu) in progressing to autonomous adulthood. Through a solely feminist lens, Nazneen's concern for Raqib's individual needs appears unimpeachable, but on generic and intersectional terms, the fault she finds with Chanu for projecting on to Raqib reads differently: "[w]hat did Chanu see when he looked at his son? An empty vessel to be filled with ideas. [...] A Chanu: this time with chances seized, not missed" (62). This impulse to project his own failure onto others is problematic, to be sure, but the concomitant implication that Chanu's failed agency is solely his responsibility points to the uncritical individualism of the makeover paradigm's privileging of "continuity between interior life and social order" (Nguyen 376). In intersectional terms, the limited omniscient narrative focus in *Brick Lane* on Nazneen's internal developmental arc attests to a feminist story of hard-won uplift, but also the individualistic limits of the text's feminist imagination. With a view to the Islamophobic context of the novel's writing, its feminist becoming narrative in relation to foils that are variously resigned (Rupban), saturated (Hasina), or privileged by a patriarchal Islamic cultural determinism; there is a postfeminist element to the continuity between interiority and sociality that she seeks to establish that reifies a one-sided account of the role of culture in Muslim women's lives. Her *Bildung* may represent the culmination of a story of individuation, but it also centres and valorizes individualism as a principle.

Fatphobia and the Abjection of Postcolonial Babu Masculinity

So far, my analysis of *Brick Lane* indicates that Nazneen's coming-of-age narrative manages the generic contradiction between the *Bildungsroman*'s imperatives of individuation and socialization in culturalist terms, as Nazneen's achievement of socialization comes through assimilating to an individualism associated by the narrative primarily with Britain. The corollary implication of this Orientalist binary is that motivation according to the extrinsic norms of deterministic cultures is inevitably ethically suspect, as the deference it presumes constrains individualism. In this section, I focus on Chanu as a figuration of the culturally determined impediments that Nazneen faces in her progress towards a becoming that fits a makeover paradigm aligned simultaneously with neoliberalism and Islamophobia. Her trajectory away from the closure essentialized as inherent to Muslim women's positioning and towards the openness presumed to be constitutive of the lives of women in Britain maps on to Jodi Melamed's account of "neoliberal multiculturalism" in the contemporary Global North. For Melamed, "multicultural formalism" is the yardstick of belonging in such societies:

terms of privilege accrue to individuals and groups, such as *multicultural*, *reasonable*, *feminist*, and *law-abiding*, that make them appear fit for neoliberal subjectivity, while others are stigmatized as *monocultural*, *irrational*, *regressive*, *patriarchal*, or *criminal*, and ruled out (152).

That Chanu's narrative role as foil to Nazneen's becoming leads him to be stigmatized in multicultural formalist terms is evident from an early scene in which Chanu hopes that hosting a dinner for Dr. Azad will impress the doctor into helping his chances for a promotion at the council office, believing (erroneously) his boss Mr. Dalloway to be one

of the doctor's patients.¹³⁸ During dinner, Nazneen observes the contrast between the upper-class Dr. Azad's immaculate white shirt and "an oily stain on her husband's shirt where he had dripped food" (19). Chanu's haste to secure a business connection is undone by the dramatic irony of his uncouth eating habits, which are typically uncommented upon in a home where he enjoys patriarchal privilege. The association between interiority and an ethical-because-individual politics in the novel grants this moment greater significance. Nazneen notices that her husband's uncouthness will ultimately doom his attempt at gaining influence, which indicates that Chanu's neglect of propriety regarding his embodiment foreshadows his overall inability to make himself over on the individualist terms conducive to the neoliberal multicultural belonging that his wife eventually does.

As an object of satire, Chanu serves an educative function with respect to Nazneen's *Bildung*, becoming instrumental proof that individualism is the proper path to successful migration. Both Dave Gunning and Santesso argue that *Brick Lane* is a text that tends towards the "personalization of politics" in recounting Nazneen's trajectory towards agency. Gunning regards the novel's depiction of the atmosphere of Tower Hamlets following 9/11 as evocative of this personalizing tendency (98-100). He sees good feminist reasons for this individuation of the political horizon when viewed in opposition "to the more conventional forms of political consciousness shown in the novel, particularly in relation to Chanu and Karim, but not an abandonment of the political per

¹³⁸ Ali Ahmad observes that the publicity campaign attending *Brick Lane* played up its self-consciously literary antecedence, for example by declining Maya Jaggi's request to interview her for *The Guardian* and writing a letter suggesting another, conspicuously white, interviewer (200).

se” (100). In other words, the state of Nazneen and Chanu’s marriage is of equal or even greater political significance to the content of Chanu’s armchair theorizing of racism in England or Karim’s efforts to come to terms with his second-generation identity crisis through involvement in anti-racist activism on the estate. This insight recasts how the death of Raqib functions as a watershed in Nazneen’s *Bildung*; not only does it provoke a reconsideration of the filial ties her mother’s memory enjoins upon her, but it also does the same for her relationship with Chanu. Exhausted from ministering to her ill son, Nazneen is surprised to find her husband both caring and capable of relieving her from the burden of cooking, capacities she had previously been unaware he possessed (100). The stress of Raqib’s illness leads Nazneen to reassess Chanu, to become more open and affectionate towards him:

Her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. For the first time she felt he was not so different. [...] Chanu worked his own method. [...] The degrees, the promotion, the Dhaka house, the library, the chair-restoring business, the import-export plans, the interminable reading. [...] Where Nazneen turned in, he turned out. Where she strove to accept, he was determined to struggle; where she attempted to dull her mind and numb her thoughts, he argued aloud; while she wanted to look neither to the past nor to the future, he lived exclusively in both. They took different paths but they had journeyed, so she realized, together. (94)

This passage models Nazneen’s development of a reasoning based on experience to re-evaluate the terms of her own situation. While she had resented Chanu from the first because she chafed against her father having chosen him as her husband, suddenly Nazneen has new information with which to assess her husband’s merits.¹³⁹ She can re-

¹³⁹ Just prior to the passage cited above, Ali emphasizes Nazneen’s trajectory from unfreedom to freedom of choice, as she writes: “Abba did not choose so badly. This was

evaluate the stock she had put in her parents' memory, which combines with the cautionary tale of her sister's love match to reframe the burdens of her arranged marriage. In this moment, Nazneen regards Chanu's fruitless attempts to gain qualifications, find a job, or start his own business, as not quite well-conceived or executed, but at least as well-intentioned. But her fresh appraisal of her husband must be weighed against the risk of overemphasizing the clarity that extremity—Raqib's illness—grants to her perception. Although Nazneen's expanding agency means that she grows to appreciate Chanu on her own terms, the revelation of his competence at domestic labour proves he is not simply unable to perform in this feminized domain, but rather more problematically that he willfully refuses to do so.¹⁴⁰

But the notion of Chanu as impediment is not simply a matter of willfulness, as the obstacle Chanu—or his body, as Ali implies—represents for Nazneen's path to individual agency also demonstrates the individualism with which agency is associated in *Brick Lane*. Through Nazneen's challenges to her normative feminine role of domestic labour in her marriage, her trajectory does represent a feminist reversal of the gendered Cartesian binary. Nonetheless, the novel stops short of contesting how that binary maps gender norms on to male embodiment. The narration is strewn with satirical barbs that yoke Chanu's embodiment to his inconsiderate manner of speaking to—not with—his family. For example, after his refusal to allow Nazneen to learn English, he provides a

not a bad man [...] now she understood what he [i.e. Chanu] was, and why. Love would follow understanding" (94).

¹⁴⁰ Chanu is not up to every domestic chore either, as when Nazneen later has a nervous breakdown and is prescribed bed-rest, Chanu lets the flat become a mess: "[o]nly the constant vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman, kept the household from crumbling" (272).

comparative class analysis of himself and Wilkie, the man with whom he is competing for a promotion all while Nazneen cleans up dinner: “[s]he needed to get to the cupboard that Chanu blocked with his body. He didn’t move, although she waited in front of him” (25). Just as Chanu’s classist disdain for Wilkie erodes the legitimacy of the complaint, so Ali’s account of Chanu’s embodiment is pitched as proof of the out-sized self-regard motivating his complaint; his preoccupation with his own predicament means he is blocking Nazneen from continuing with the domestic labour he takes for granted. Tempting though it may be to apologize for Ali’s metaphor as a deserved rebuke to prideful patriarchy, I aim here to balance the due critique of Chanu’s patriarchy by acknowledging the fatphobic quality of his characterization. The latter problem, I argue, indicates that the novel aestheticizes individualist solutions to racial grievance.

As a figuration of the patriarchal impediments to Nazneen’s narrative of empowerment, Chanu recalls the conventional role of masculinity in Islamophobic tropology. As Sherene Razack observes, “[g]ender is crucial to the confinement of the Muslim to the pre-modern. [...] Muslim men are [...] marked as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot” (16). Chanu does not quite fit the stereotype of the misogynist fundamentalist whose circulation as the *bête noir* of the post-9/11 Euroamerican popular imaginary stoked support for renditions and waterboarding, or what Razack calls the “eviction” of Muslims from Western legal frameworks (7). At the same time, his reactionary characterization dovetails with what Bonnie Mann understands as a post-9/11 tendency to fuse ideologies of masculinity with nationality, which points to the incentive to locate

Muslim men on the lowest tier of a hierarchy of racialized masculinities and thereby elevate American (and hence Western) masculinity.¹⁴¹ In view of the contrast between Chanu's tremulous responses to instances of racist violence on the council estate after 9/11 and the more militant activism of Karim and his male youth group the Bengal Tigers, Chanu does not quite fit the profile of "would-be terrorist" that keys the current transnational context of Muslim masculinity.¹⁴² However, as Mann observes, even the embodiment of some aspects of this Islamophobic stereotype can contribute to its reinforcement, which does not take place through a one-to-one emblematic logic but is instead a composite of seemingly discrepant masculine traits (47-65).

Chanu's characterization updates the colonial masculine archetype of the "Babu" for the tropology of post-9/11 Islamophobia. I follow Nasia Anam in reading Chanu's masculinity in terms of the Raj-era trope of the Babu, a "widely lampooned and reviled figure in British colonial discourse who emblemized the growing intermediary class of upwardly mobile Bengali clerks and cogs in the imperial machine" (Anam 3). Chanu's legibility as a Babu figure suggests the neo-coloniality of his role in *Brick Lane*'s drama of assimilation; he is in some sense an unresolved remainder of Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamously racist description of the ideal Indian civil service: "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in

¹⁴¹ The occasion that incites Mann's inquiry into transnationality and masculinity is testimony by an Iraqi former detainee of the US army, Dhia Al-Shweiri, in response to the spectacularization of Private Lynndie England's role in torture at Abu Ghraib became an infamous example of the emasculating abuse of Muslim men (ix).

¹⁴² In this regard, see Gunning's comparison of Karim and Chanu's political stances (99-102).

intellect” (34).¹⁴³ Fatness plays a key role in the pathologization of the Babu, as the description in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901) of the civil servant and spy Hurree Chunder Mukherjee—an “obese Babu whose stockinged legs shook with fat” (207)—makes plain. As Anam points out, Chanu’s reinstatement of this colonial archetype renders him anachronistic, which in turn tars his choice hobbyhorses, including British ignorance of colonial Bengal’s economic importance to imperialist historiography.¹⁴⁴ On the one hand, if Chanu is legible as a holdover from a colonial contest of masculinities, then the sense of racial grievance that defines his masculinity—specifically, his sense of the lack of recognition of Bengali culture and history as directly attributable to British imperialism and its legacies—is outmoded. Identification is seemingly impossible with this quixotic figure, whose interests resonate chiefly as idle preoccupations in the light of the responsibilities he so obliviously throws over on to Nazneen, as well as on to Shahana, the elder and more rebellious of their daughters. On the other hand, in view of Neelam Srivastava’s observation that Babu figures recur repeatedly in contemporary Anglo-Indian fiction,¹⁴⁵ Chanu is not so much anachronistic as a kind of testament to the living legacies of colonial gender discourse; his Babu masculinity can in this sense be

¹⁴³ As Neelam Srivastava notes, Babuism was an effective trope of colonial masculinity, with its traits including “effeminacy, deception, treachery, lack of manliness” (57).

¹⁴⁴ “Sixteenth century and seventeenth century. Dhaka was home of textiles. Who invented all this muslin and damask and every damn thing? It was us. . . . And when the British took control, this what gave them strength to take all India” (148).

¹⁴⁵ Srivastava nuances Tabish Khair’s provocative charge that Anglo-Indian fiction’s “stylized Indian English” repeats the Anglophilia of colonialist Babuism (qtd. in Srivastava, “Pidgin” 61). In *Babu Fictions*, Khair inveighs against the alienation of the idiomatic diction of writers like Salman Rushdie from actually existing linguistic referents; Srivastava suggests that on close analysis, his claim partly falls into the feedback loop of the authenticity debate, but is more warranted in terms of what she terms this linguistic mode’s “addressivity” problem, of speaking for the subaltern (63).

understood as what Raymond Williams's would call a "residual" cultural formation.¹⁴⁶

But in view of a neoliberal multicultural paradigm of migrant belonging, his advocacy for collective acknowledgement of British imperial history's ongoing effects comes to seem more like *ressentiment*: the only audience for his patriarchal sermonizing he can find is his family, who are reluctant listeners. In other words, taking his characterization as Babu-ish colonial holdover together with his status as hindrance to the progress of Nazneen's neoliberal multicultural *Bildung*, I suggest that Chanu's depiction discredits the legitimacy of racial grievances regarding the neo-colonial—and racial neoliberal—status quo of migration to Britain. As a patriarchal voice for recognition of the depredations of British imperialism on Bangladesh, Chanu is easy to pathologize on Islamophobic grounds.

The satire on Chanu does not necessarily reify an assimilationist solution to the disadvantages of Brick Lane's residents, however, as his embodiment represents a figurative apology for Britain's postcolonial melancholia. That the most direct critique of imperialist nostalgia in *Brick Lane* appears through such a hapless figure of ridicule indicates that the novel's critical perspective on British identity is ambiguous. Does Chanu merely represent a knowing satire on the Babu-ish anti-colonial patriarch of previous diasporic generations—along the lines of Dr. Uhuru Simba in *The Satanic Verses*—or does this satire impugn anti-colonial politics itself as an irrelevant preoccupation? The repeated attention to Chanu's bodily corpulence implies a moralism where fat is an overdetermined sign of the excesses caused by the patriarchal capacity to

¹⁴⁶ See Williams, *Marxism* 122-123.

neglect proper regimens of self-management and care. Consider this inexhaustive series of descriptions that follow closely upon the numerous episodes of patriarchal excess on Chanu's part. Immediately after the overheard phone call in which he reports Nazneen's advantages as a wife, there is a reference to "the rolls of fat that hung low from Chanu's stomach" (11). While recounting to Nazneen a conversation in which Dr. Azad had criticized the idea that Chanu should manage the mobile Bengali literature library he had been petitioning for, even though she plainly knows that this retelling is slanted to her husband's advantage, he is described in these terms: "[s]tomach growing goiter like over privates. Hands tucked between belly folds, exploring, weighing" (55). After violently beating Shahana for her disobedience and disinterest in Bengali language and literature lessons, the attention to his embodiment recurs yet again: "[h]is stomach rolled a little farther forward into its nest of thigh" (145). While I agree with Santesso's suggestion that these physical appraisals are connected to Nazneen's coming into sexual subjectivity with her affair with Karim (Santesso 76),¹⁴⁷ this fatphobic idiom is connected with the way in which the content of his lectures on Rabindranath Tagore and British imperialism seems unimportant because of his overbearing manner in delivering them, an equivalence that is expedient for racial neoliberalism: just like his body, his intellectual concerns seem overblown and pedantic. While in her affair with Karim, Nazneen exerts the agency and ownership over her own sexuality that had been denied her by her father's choice of Chanu as her husband, I want to suggest that in an Islamophobic context, the figuration of Chanu as an impediment to her becoming in Britain can also be read as an imperial

¹⁴⁷ Sander K. Gilman describe fat masculinity in contrast to the normative masculine ideal: "[i]t is hard to imagine a sexual fat man in modernity" (23).

feminist “social fairy tale,” to use Cuming’s phrase (343). Although I have already shown how in generic terms, Chanu’s unreflective patriarchy suggests he is a constraint on Nazneen’s neoliberal coming of age, his own relationship with neoliberal belonging becomes evident from the way Chanu’s fatness plays into the novel’s satire on his characterization. Julie Guthman has emphasized that neoliberal cultural logic exacerbates the normative moralistic discourse on obesity and fitness: “if neoliberalism as a project is concerned with creating subjects capable of making nominally free choices [...] it stands to reason that the good neoliberal subject would strive for fitness” (116). Following Guthman, Nazneen’s individuation and escape from—as opposed to fatalist resignation to—the brutal confines of her marriage becomes an ideological example, which starkly contrasts with Chanu’s failure to author his own individual migrant success story. In this analogy, his fatness is evidence of his outsized preoccupation with racist injustices past and present, which distracts him from taking responsibility for his roles as a father and husband, and worse, rationalizes his abusive behaviour. The satire on his postcolonial masculinity thus hinges on a fatphobic neoliberal moralism, which entails propositions such as: if only Chanu considered how other migrants got over colonialism and its ongoing impacts rather than coming up with futile ideas like a Bengali library that is unlikely to receive council funding, then he might well overcome the racism that inhibits his aspirations in work; if only Chanu were less concerned about racism, he might care better for both his family and for his own body.

The symbolism of Chanu’s fat embodiment in *Brick Lane* connotes an oblivious self-regard grounded in patriarchal presumption. The fact that Chanu faces oppression in

terms of race and embodiment is countervailed by his narrative role as the source of the gender-based disempowerment of Nazneen, including his unquestioned assumption of her domestic labour and his unemployment requiring her to take on tailoring piecework. At the same time, the moralizing portrayal of Chanu highlights the individualist character of Nazneen's coming of age, as I observed above in noting that descriptions of his fatness precede any moment in which his patriarchal self-regard becomes excessive. In certain moments, however, the logic is less cut and dried: the description, "Chanu smiled, his fat cheeks dimpled" (104), presages his admission that he has been pressured by the letters from his family in Bangladesh to conform to a narrative of migrant economic success. Just after Shahana's retort regarding Mr. Iqbal's benefiting from Right to Buy, her father's corpulence is up for scrutiny yet again: "Chanu explored his stomach, checking the texture, the density" (266). In these moments of vulnerability, fat as a metaphor for Chanu's immoderate self-regard recurs, and here as before it functions in the manner that Le'a Kent describes as typical of fatphobia: "in the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women's bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself, possible" (135). Kent's account of the gendered implications of fat reads differently in view of the role of masculinities in the context of postcolonial migrations. I would argue that it is particularly through Chanu's fatness that he updates the Babu figure from colonial anachronism to the more present-oriented context of postcolonial melancholia. On the one hand, the connection between Chanu's embodiment and his Babuism indexes his pretension to but ultimate inadequacy for the roles he aims to assume, whether it be

successful employment as a council worker or as a father and husband whose rule over his family is benevolently dictatorial. On the other hand, fatness also indicates how constrained Chanu is by normative masculinity, as those roles in which he proves adept—as a cook, and while caring for his wife as she convalesces following the death of their infant son—are associated with the very gustatory desires and conventionally feminized embodiment on which the satire of his character is based.

While the political stakes of fat as metaphor for Chanu's embodiment of excess are clear, the fatphobia in *Brick Lane* can also be understood as a function of the *Bildungsroman*'s generic logic, whereby he figures as an obstacle that Nazneen must learn to surpass on her route to agency. Viewed through a generic lens, Chanu becomes abject in a subtly different sense than the moralist view of the fat subject implies; I am drawing here on the notion of social abjection that Imogen Tyler develops as the inverse of the figure of the British neoliberal subject, "an excess that threatens from within, but which the system cannot fully expel" (20). As the abject in this coming-of-age narrative, identification with Chanu is impossible, yet his presence is ultimately necessary for the conflict impelling the novel. Tyler's formulation of social abjection as constitutive of neoliberal subjects is equally apt as an approach to Chanu's fatphobic characterization: "histories of aversive emotions against minority subjects are instrumentalized as technologies for garnering public consent" (27). Relying on aversive tropologies that associate fat masculinity with ugliness,¹⁴⁸ as well as Muslim men with misogyny, the

¹⁴⁸ See for instance Gilman's map of the connection in European thought between the contemporary panic over fat masculinity as health crisis and fat as ugliness according to Platonic ideals (38-41).

fatphobic narration of Chanu's patriarchal masculinity is an alibi for the ultimately uneven apportionment of the benefits of neoliberal subjectivity in *Brick Lane*.

The novel's recourse to fat as a symbol for Chanu's inflated ego overdetermines him in a specifically individualistic sense; he becomes the author of all his own failures, and of the strife facing his family. To follow this metaphor from the realm of the domestic to that of employment suggests that for the purposes of *Brick Lane*'s satire, all forms of bloat are proof of Chanu's deserving abjection. Whereas Nazneen is initially impressed by her husband's credentials, hung prominently in their flat and framed with gold leaf (9), she grows to understand that he thinks more about the status they confer than the actual work that comes after earning them, with visions of promotions and a house in Dhaka, and always promising himself and even others who write to him from Bangladesh unrealistic returns (105). While Nazneen's informal tailoring work takes off, Chanu quits his job with the council after failing to advance, develops numerous futile schemes to find more lucrative jobs, before resigning himself to work beneath his qualifications as a taxi driver (278). Just as Chanu's fatness is a metaphor of his unwarranted masculine pride, his obsessive credentialism is consistently connected with his failures at work; coming home after a desperate attempt to transfer to another department at the council job he has already quit, the narrative portrays his despondency with acerbic irony:

“Sorry he lost a good man. That's what he [i.e. Chanu's boss] said.” The toilet blocked persistently and the plaster had come off in the hallway. “Got to get on to my contacts,” but he made no move. / Nazneen sat down and looked at her hands. Chanu read his book. He no longer took courses. The number of certificates had stabilized, and they were waiting in the bottom of the wardrobe until someone had the energy to hang them. (148)

Domestic disarray and decrepitude give the lie to Chanu's good intentions, and the narrative draws attention to how Nazneen must manage the affective and economic impacts of her husband's failures in the workplace. Excessive though his confidence and bluster may be, Chanu's struggles also resemble those facing many underemployed migrant *desi* men in Britain in ways that suggest that he cannot be held solely to account for his failures to find work.¹⁴⁹ The implication is that Chanu can be found wanting for failing to make his relationship with cultural norms over as Nazneen does; the fact that Chanu fails to get ahead by going to the pub with his boss thus becomes more evidence of his determination by culture, rather than his achieving agency through subordinating cultural norms to self-interest.

The difference between Nazneen and Chanu's work experiences points to an intersection between structural racism and patriarchy, as she is left not only to make up for the shortfall in family income but also to do the emotional labour of managing her husband's disappointment by a post-Fordist labour regime.¹⁵⁰ The contrast between them also reflects a generational divide between the experience of those who migrated to the

¹⁴⁹ On the underemployment of degree-holding South Asian male migrants in Britain, see Battu and Sloane. Katherine Charsley, in her analysis of underemployed Pakistani British husbands of British Muslim women, writes that "sometimes aggressive attempts to assert control or authority may be read as efforts to shore up the fragile edifices of masculinity (as migrants, husbands, and fathers) under conditions in which it is challenged" (99).

¹⁵⁰ In the context of American post-Fordism, Jennifer M. Silva observes a similar dynamic in racialized heterosexual relationships; whereas Black American men "experience the labor market as stultifying, extinguishing their hopes of upward mobility over and over again, women read men's failure to move forward in life as a character flaw" (62).

Global North under liberal and neoliberal regimes of immigration.¹⁵¹ While education has remained a common criterion for the would-be immigrant under both these terms of reference, Chanu's (pride in his) credentials are actually another barrier among the many in a racial neoliberal labour market depress the earning potential for the very skilled workers that immigration legislation supposedly aims to recruit.¹⁵² On the other hand, the piecework that Nazneen picks up shows her to be relatively well-placed to participate in the so-called "gig economy," which has so far given little reason to believe that work is necessarily becoming less exploitative for racialized women in particular.¹⁵³ Yet, in generic terms, this history of migrant labour fades from view in favour of Chanu's instrumental role as satirical impediment to his wife's progress, as his inability to cope with the everyday racisms characteristic of migrancy highlights how Nazneen acquires agency in departing from her mother's fatalist example over the course of her *Bildung*.

The discrepancies between Nazneen and Chanu's agential capacities further complicate my above reading of one of Chanu's failed schemes: his failed petition for the mobile lending library. I have already observed how Chanu overstates Dr. Azad's willingness to back the petition in a later conversation with Nazneen. Ali registers her

¹⁵¹ I draw this distinction in immigration regimes by mapping Jodi Melamed's account of liberal and neoliberal multicultural racial regimes (xvi-xvii) on to the neoliberal shift Imogen Tyler describes in the biopolitics of British citizenship

¹⁵² Multiple studies have found that highly skilled immigrants to Britain often fail to find employment commensurate with their educations (Manacorda, Manning and Wadsworth 122, and Nickell and Salaheen 3). For a history of the British immigration regime over the period covered by *Brick Lane*, see Somerville 258-259.

¹⁵³ Silva contributes to a broader analysis of the gendered implications of the neoliberal casualization of labour (see also McRobbie "Top Girls?"), and in this regard builds on Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (1998) and Maria Mies's *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986), both of which anticipated the dubious gains that added "flexibility" in the labour market would offer women.

exasperated thoughts in response to her husband's editorialized retelling in italics: "I told him, 'Look, Azad (*I was there! Don't you remember? I was there, and you always call him "Doctor"*) [...] Are you telling me that if I am in charge it will turn from splendid to sordid? (*No, you didn't. You didn't say that.*)'" (56). However, the unquestioned "funding issue" facing this initiative speaks to the racist burden of proof borne by Chanu as council employee regarding the Bangladeshi community's interest in a Bengali-language library (56). Here, I argue, *Brick Lane* as *Bildungsroman* shifts from narrating individuation into elevating individualism. What the satire on Chanu's incompetence and his patriarchal behaviour passes over is the perspective that his petition's failure also demonstrates the neoliberalizing British state's disinterest in proactively providing for migrant communities, leaving the establishment and support of socially reproductive goods and institutions (like a Bengali mobile library) to individual actors' initiative. The fatphobic narration impedes an understanding of the novel as a reflection on the different crises of racial neoliberal everyday life for both Nazneen and Chanu; rather, Nazneen's individual responsibility becomes exemplary, whereas the gender implications of Chanu's outsized deference to cultural determinism become a rationale for social abjection.

Brick Lane does not altogether evacuate the question of migrant sociality, in view of the closing celebration of Razia and Nazneen's partnership and their excursion to the skating rink. But it does link the two women's reconciliation of the problem of diasporic homing desire and overall empowerment to an entrepreneurial initiative: Fusion Fashions. On the one hand, the two women may in this venture approach the kind of unconventional and more ambiguous sustaining relationalities that Rita Felski argues that the feminist

Bildungsroman proposes as an alternative to the convention of female narrative closure in marriage or death: “[f]emale community provides a means of access into society by linking the protagonist to a broader social group and thus rendering explicit the political basis of private experience [... and] it also functions as a barrier against, and a refuge from, the worst effects of a potentially threatening social order by opening up” (139). On the other hand, the gendered and informal nature of the garment business Razia and Nazneen contemplate also recalls the celebration of microcredit as a path-breaking made-in-Bangladesh solution to poverty in international development discourse.¹⁵⁴ The putative success of microcredit in the Global South produced an appetite for similar programs in a Global North subject to widening inequality, which indicates that microcredit provides a palatable (because individualist) rationale for the continuing exploitation of a deterritorialized transnational labouring class comprised primarily of women (Neff, Sassen 83-86). Ironically, Hasina, as a resident of the country perhaps most famous for microcredit, never even explores this route out of her poverty. Instead of acting as evidence of the growing identity between the challenges women workers face in both Britain and Bangladesh, Hasina’s primary function in *Brick Lane* is as an abjected Third World Woman who stands in moralizing contrast to the relative advantages of her sister’s diasporic experience in Britain where autonomy from gender-based oppression is thought

¹⁵⁴ The Grameen Bank model of small business loans has lost the lustre of Nobel Prize-winning poverty reduction strategy in the 1990s-2000s as over the longer term it has proven to facilitate the very casualized and decentralized approach to international development favoured by neoliberal governments and NGOs: “microfinance offers to neoliberals a highly visible way of being seen to be addressing the issue of poverty, but in a way that offers no real challenge to the existing structures of wealth and power” (Bateman and Chang 28).

to be conferred by participation in secular society. The fatphobic metaphor for Chanu's failed *Bildung* drives home the individualism of Nazneen's migration narrative; in these terms, migrants like Chanu are deserving authors of their own exclusion, while offering a neo-colonial apology for Britain's imperial past via the Babu masculinity he embodies.

The Muslimwoman and Suffering Agency: Inverting the Islamophobic Frame in

Minaret

[...] if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity.

—Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (14-15)

Early in Leila Aboulela's 2005 novel, *Minaret*, the protagonist Najwa, then a university student in mid-1980s Khartoum, watches from a distance as her fellow Muslim students perform their evening *salāt*, having forced their history professor to suspend lecture for the observance. Aboulela describes the faithful at prayer as a utopian moment in which hierarchies of social class and age are abrogated: "[o]ur Maths lecturer, who belonged to the Muslim Brothers, spread his white handkerchief on the grass. He stood, his shoulder brushing against the gardener's. The student who was leading recited the Qur'an in an effortless, buoyant style" (Aboulela 43). But what catches Najwa's attention most about the unscheduled rush to prayer is not so much its idealized social character as the aesthetic appeal of her Muslim women classmates' attire:

'Because he [i.e. the class's professor]'s a communist, he's not bothered about prayers,' smiled the girl next to me, the pretty one with the dimples. She passed me in a hurry to go out, calling out to her friends, her high-heeled slippers

slapping her heels. She wore a blue *tobe* today and looked even more cute. All the girls wore white *tobes* in the mornings and coloured ones in the evening. I liked watching the change in them, from the plain white in the morning to blue and pink flowers, patterns in bold colours. (43, emphasis added)

Like Najwa, my immediate concern is less with the somewhat rote idealization of Islam's democratizing potential here than with the stylistic signification of dress: that is, Najwa's suggestion that the *tobe*—a form of *hijab* composed of a distinctively folded rectangle of cloth and an indicator of modesty—can be understood as beautiful. As the *tobe*-wearing students join the rest of the faithful for prayers outside, their hold on Najwa's attention indicates how clothing that signals modesty need not be understood as only thus. By stressing the complex stylistic dimensions and the particular choice of the *tobe*—describing it as a garment that can be paired with “high-heeled slippers,” as well as varied throughout the day—Aboulela challenges the conventional Islamophobic shorthand in which the veil is and can only ever be a symbol of a prescribed modesty, a gendered form of embodiment that stems ultimately from customary patriarchal oppression. As I suggested in my reading of *Brick Lane*, Chanu's fatness reflects the other ways he is found wanting according to neoliberal biopolitics; the beauty ideal is thus a biopolitical measure of social value. In this light, it seems significant that *Minaret* opens by suggesting that Najwa subscribes to a different cultural ideal of beauty than that of her peers whose clothing she admires: she is clad in a less traditionally Sudanese outfit of a denim skirt and a red short-sleeved blouse (42).¹⁵⁵ Given the prevalence of imperial

¹⁵⁵ More than simply indicating the devotion of a Sudanese Arab woman, the history of the *tobe* itself illustrates the role of colonialism in the production of taste. Marie Grace Brown explains how the popularization of Lancashire-made cotton contributed to the

feminist ascriptions of inherent oppression to the *hijab*, it seems provocative for an ostensibly secular woman like Aboulela's protagonist to regard *tobes* as beautiful.¹⁵⁶

Najwa's aestheticization of a garment replete with religious and/as political significations foreshadows her broader life trajectory, or *Bildung*, in *Minaret's* larger plot. Najwa rediscovers her Islamic faith after being stranded in exile while on a visit to London from Khartoum, which coincides with a 1989 coup in which the new Sudanese military junta imprisons and ultimately executes her father, a former minister in the deposed government, on corruption charges. Aboulela concludes the novel by sewing up the apparent dissonance between Najwa's taste and her religiosity, as Najwa trades her denim and blouses in for the *hijab* just as she doffs passive secularism for a renewed devotion to Islam. Although clothing thus allegorizes this shift in Najwa's religious affiliation, some critics suggest her adoption of the veil is part of a heavy-handedly defensive depiction of Islam, a defensiveness that reveals the author conceives of Islam as a fundamentalist cultural monad.¹⁵⁷ In contrast, others interpret Aboulela's narrativization of a gendered Muslim experience in Britain as contributing to a Muslim feminism. For example, Santesso sees critical value in *Minaret's* depiction of Islam as a lived phenomenon that is fundamentally intersectional (91). Similarly, Susan Stanford

tobe's fashionable status, and made Sudan into an important captive market for the British fabric industry (see esp. pp. 42-43).

¹⁵⁶ See Nguyen for more on how "civilizational thinking" (qtd. in Moallem 161) militates against locating veiled women as individuated, and hence liberal rights-bearing, subjects (366-367).

¹⁵⁷ Esra Mirze Santesso notes that current scholarship on Aboulela's writing largely understands her central characters as "unsympathetic, unintelligent, and most importantly, that they exist only to facilitate a simplistic argument about Islamic conversion as an unambiguous good" (Santesso 91). Other skeptics of Aboulela's protagonists' feminist *bona fides* include Sadia Abbas, Wail Hassan, and Heather Hewett.

Friedman regards the valorization of Islam in Aboulela's fiction as an opportunity to bring religious identity into the frame of intersectional feminist and queer narrative analysis (110). Both scholars accentuate gender and religion in their approach to Aboulela's writing, finding in her women protagonists' faith an Islam that is something more than a narrative device to be overcome in the name of an individualist and Orientalist *Bildung*. However, Friedman does not account for how the attribution to Islam of a supposedly inherent misogyny in the current Islamophobic cultural context, which in turn means that she does not account for the context of Najwa's positioning in *Minaret* (108-109).¹⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Santesso problematizes the trajectory of Najwa's discovery of faith in feminist terms: "[t]he question here is whether Najwa should be praised for her individualism and perseverance or whether she is using Islam as an excuse to *relinquish* her agency and withdraw from public life" (92, emphasis in original). Even though Santesso carefully disaffiliates her critique from any suggestion that Najwa is a pawn in some kind of Islamist agitprop, her reading of the narrative symbolism of Najwa's growing faith and its signs—such as the *tobe*—as a giving in to civilizational stereotypes of Islam also hinges on conceiving of agency as an either/or proposition. According to this binary framing, the ability to transcend the dichotomy between public and private is the chief barometer of gendered empowerment under Islam.

¹⁵⁸ Friedman's model fails to reckon with the pervasive influence of Islamophobic views of Islam on Muslims; the closest she comes is in suggesting that common to all religions is an "institutional" element, which includes "the political, economic, educational, and spatio/temporal manifestations of a religion, incorporating the hierarchies within a given religion as well as the conflict between or cooperation of one with other religions" (105); what this does not account for is the force of an Islamophobia not solely produced through the agency of other religions, but also through a secular culture that disavows the imperialist and Christian bases of many of its norms.

As discussed above in relation to *Brick Lane*'s coming-of-age narrative, such a binary definition measures the agency of Muslim women primarily through the extent to which they can break out of practices that associate femininity with confinement to the private realm and hence to domesticity: such as the veil, or *purdah*. By reading Najwa's becoming narrative against Nazneen's, I seek to put in critical perspective the association of Islam with an essentialist opposition between submission and agency that the figure of Muslimwoman reinforces, as well as complicating normative notions of agency. The imperial feminist biopolitics of Islamophobic Britain are no less an influence on *Minaret* than on *Brick Lane*, but by applying a critical intersectional lens to the role of religion, gender, and class in Najwa's coming-of-age plot, I put pressure on the cultural imperialism of the conventional image of an empowered Muslim woman. In what follows, I begin by showing that Najwa's diminished economic expectations explain the expanding role of Islam in the course of her *Bildung*, before suggesting that the ostensibly conservative shape of her religiously inspired aspirations and fantasies present an alternative to the neoliberal multicultural makeover paradigm, specifically to the normative vision it entails regarding what an assimilable practice of Islam involves.

The fact that Najwa finally makes good on her incipient aestheticization of the *tobe* not in Khartoum but in the diasporic context of Britain suggests the overall difficulty of reading her coming-of-age narrative according to the normative script of the transnational Muslimwoman makeover paradigm. Instead, *Minaret* highlights the cultural specificity of the notion that challenging sartorial norms is tantamount to transcending the public-private split and in turn the patriarchy. As Wendy Brown puts it, the oppression

attributed to the veiled Muslim woman reifies a civilizational symbolic geography even as it serves to reconfirm the notional agency of marketized Western femininity: “the contrast between the nearly compulsory baring of skin by American teenage girls and compulsory veiling in a few Islamic societies is drawn routinely as absolute lack of choice [...] ‘over there’ and absolute freedom of choice [...] ‘over here’” (189). For Santesso, Najwa’s adoption of the practice of veiling expresses an inauthentic regard for Islam, serving as a pat resolution to her “disorientation,” the term by which Santesso encapsulates the challenges that Muslim women migrants face in the British diaspora (15). In view of the Islamophobia of the post-7/7 cultural climate in which the novel was written, the fact that Najwa’s dispositions do not necessarily alter as she traverses the cultural divide between Sudan and Britain at least appears to be politically productive. By wearing the *hijab* she mitigates the appearance-based anxieties she faces in Britain, preventing both an always already lurid male gaze as well as scrutiny on evidence of the aging process: it is “as much a product of physical doubt as spiritual doubt[, ... and s]he is still commodifying herself, just in a different way” (Santesso 93-94). For Santesso, the sartorial signs of Najwa’s increased devotion in her London exile are not simply the product of newfound faith, but also proceed from the same gender norms that influenced her secular upbringing in Khartoum. But I would emphasize the consistency rather than the authenticity of Najwa’s motivations for donning a *hijab*. A commodified rationale for wearing religious clothing may compromise the fidelity of her newfound belief, but her banal pragmatism also defies the Manichaeian civilizational framing that the Muslimwoman makeover paradigm attaches to decisions about faith.

Imperial feminism is a civilizational justification for neo-colonial development that has since the War on Terror become instrumental in fomenting Islamophobia, particularly through the proliferating doublet of compulsory veiling and intensified social valorization of near-nakedness that Brown identifies (189). With regard to religion, imperial feminism's Cartesian basis implies that religiosity properly proceeds from interior consciousness to inform outward shows of fealty.¹⁵⁹ By contrast, Saba Mahmood theorizes the faith of Muslim women as grounded in performativity: "outward bodily gestures and acts (such as *salāt* or wearing the veil) are indispensable aspects of the pious self" (*Piety* 133).¹⁶⁰ As I argued with respect to *Brick Lane*, the critical privilege attached to interior life as the wellspring of moral motivation contributes to a civilizational binary view of, where Nazneen's individualistic *Bildung* represents a route out of oppression by culturally deterministic Islam. Consider in this light how a similar Cartesian bias influences Santesso's view of Najwa as "not responding to [the] disorientation [of being a Sudanese Muslim woman in Britain], but surrendering to it" (96). Najwa may well be hypocritical in her postfeminist valorization of the *tobe*, even as she rationalizes her choice to veil herself defensively out of a desire to withdraw from British society. As

¹⁵⁹ The term "imperial feminism" was popularized by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar's 1984 article "Challenging Imperial Feminism" in *Feminist Review*, a critique of the (disavowed) entanglements of white feminism in histories of racialized women's oppression through the effects of colonialism and racism. On the Cartesian basis of liberal imperialism, see Brown but also Seymour's *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (especially pp. 241-2). Several of the sources I have engaged with in this chapter are themselves critiques of imperial feminism in the context of the War on Terror (Abu-Lughod, cooke, Moallem, Nguyen, Razack).

¹⁶⁰ See also Hewett on Mahmood's notion of Islamic piety as a rubric for understanding Aboulela's previous novel, *The Translator*: "[e]xteriority thus becomes a route to interiority" (262).

Mahmood observes, however, the question of whether one's motivations for turning to faith are aesthetic or ascetic does not necessarily matter much if the outcome is devotion.

What falls outside the frame of Santesso and other critics' assessments of Aboulela's fiction as overly deferential to a stereotyped fundamentalist Islam is *Minaret's* reckoning with the recalibration of agency from a political priority to a condition of suffering in neoliberal multicultural Britain. While Friedman and Santesso provide an intersectional analysis of Aboulela's work in reading religion as a factor in her coming-of-age narrative, I argue that in order to understand the particular conditions of her exile in a neoliberalizing Britain, it is crucial to consider her changing class position too. Jane Elliott coins the term "suffering agency" to name the way in which the hyper-individualism of neoliberal culture means that "choices made for oneself and according to one's own interests can still feel both imposed and appalling" (84). Elliott's concept indicates how the valorization of agency as the preeminent expression of freedom becomes problematic in neoliberal cultural circumstances where individualist narratives of upward mobility are hegemonic at the same time as austere governmentality relentlessly slashes what institutional supports remain for social uplift.¹⁶¹ This understanding of agency as an imposition is most evident in *Minaret* from the way that Najwa understands the effect of her family's shattered reputation. She refers to herself as having "come down in the world" three times, including at the outset of the novel's framing preamble titled "*Bism' Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem,*" the invocation of Allah as beneficent and merciful that opens all but one of the chapters of the *Qu'ran* (1, 154,

¹⁶¹ Mahmood emphasizes that locating agency or at least semi-autonomy has been a priority in feminist analyses of Muslim societies since the 1980s (6).

239). This refrain most obviously stresses the outwardly personal and religious dimensions to *Minaret*'s theme of decline, which in turn implies that Najwa's *Bildung* is to be seen through the primarily religious lens she adopts as an alternative to the secular dispositions of her upbringing as a scion of the former Sudanese despotic regime. On this account, her trajectory seems antithetical to that of the Muslimwoman becoming narrative, as intensifying religious devotion is on Mahmood's account typically regarded as antithetical to normative feminist accounts of freedom: "[a]gency, in this [conventional] form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (8). On this basis, Najwa's increasing devotion to Islam attenuates her experience of "coming down in the world" and thereby represents a challenge to the neoliberal multicultural makeover paradigm. But *Minaret* complicates the conventional celebration of the Muslimwoman's coming to agency given that Najwa's downward mobility suggests that she, like many living in neoliberal times, finds agency a Faustian bargain of choosing between diminishing returns of one kind or another.¹⁶² The notion of "suffering agency" informs my argument that the progress of Najwa's growing interest in aspects of Islamic practice and custom commonly regarded as anti-feminist and/or conservative is related to her reduced financial resources and overall class position. In foregrounding

¹⁶² Elliott theorizes "suffering agency" in response to spectacular crises exacerbated by neoliberalism, considering Hurricane Katrina alongside speculative fiction that follow the individualist logics of neoliberalism through to their dystopian conclusions. I also follow Carolyn Veldstra in extending Elliott's concept to encompass the more everyday experience of so-called agency as an impossible injunction in situations of impasse, or what Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* calls "crisis ordinariness" (10); see Veldstra 2014, especially pp. 144-145.

Aboulela's engagement with lived Islamophobia not only as a gender and racial but as a class formation, I further contend that Najwa's changing faith practice—perhaps like the widening appeal of religion more generally in a postsecular context¹⁶³—can also be understood as ameliorating her experience of falling through the cracks of the racial neoliberal exceptionalism of the contemporary migration regime in Britain.

Critics have focused on the seeming ease with which Najwa dismisses the relative autonomy that British society can afford in contrast with Sudan and her internalization of a rigid Islamic moralism.¹⁶⁴ Najwa describes freedom as an “empty space” moments after realizing that her experience of exile has left her without even the disciplinary dimension of a diasporic community. Her first sexual encounter with Anwar, a fellow exile and Marxist former classmate from her Khartoum university with whom she takes up in the interval between her mother's death and her rediscovery of Islam, is troubling because it brings home to her that she has no-one left in her life to be scandalized by the possibility of her getting pregnant out of wedlock (174-175): is the transgression of cultural norms absent a community to police them or inspire guilt really a transgression at all? In a subsequent scene, Najwa gains insight into her lingering bad feeling about sex with Anwar by comparing his subsequent treatment of her with the responsibility and care that Ali—a strict convert and husband of her friend Wafaa—shows his wife and children:

¹⁶³ Jurgen Habermas describes post-secularism this way: “three overlapping phenomena converge to create the impression of a worldwide ‘resurgence of religion’: the missionary expansion; a fundamentalist radicalization; and the political instrumentalization of the potential for violence innate in many of the world religions” (18).

¹⁶⁴ See Abbas and Hassan. Aboulela herself has also commented on gender and Islam in Chambers and Rashid, and an essay (“Restraint?”).

I knew Anwar well enough to guess what his reaction would be to what I was seeing and hearing around me. [...] Look at what happened in Sudan, look at human rights, look at freedom of speech and look at terrorism. But that was exactly where I got lost. I did not want to look at these big things because they overwhelmed me. I wanted me, my feelings and dreams, my fear of illness, old age and ugliness, my guilt when I was with him. It wasn't fundamentalists who killed my father, it wasn't fundamentalists who gave my brother drugs. (241-242)

Both Abbas and Hassan highlight this passage as a dismissal of the novel's sole critic of Islam, arguing that Ali and Wafaa's relationship stands in manipulative contrast with Najwa's relationship with Anwar, the manipulation being that this dichotomy valorizes the ostensibly reactionary version of Islam to which she turns after leaving Anwar (Abbas 90; Hassan 315). In this depiction of the lapse in Anwar's abstract political ideals when forced to engage with an actually existing woman, Aboulela recapitulates a generic trope that Felski attributes to the feminist *Bildungsroman*, which captures how "an asymmetry of power in male-female relations can be found in ostensibly 'progressive' circles, where [...] there are still] prevailing assumptions that the female protagonist will invariably place the needs and desires of a male partner before her own" (129). Hassan writes that Anwar is "the only character who comes close to expressing feminist views (notwithstanding his treatment of Najwa)" (315). So much passes under that "notwithstanding," including Anwar's victim-blaming response when she confronts him about his roommate sexually harassing her—"[y]ou're sophisticated enough to deal with this, Najwa. Don't make a big thing of it" (242) and Anwar's presumption that Najwa will bankroll his fees as an international student, which is for him a repayment of a debt she owes him due to her affluent upbringing as a beneficiary of the same former Sudanese regime that tortured him as a political prisoner (235). Just after she dips into her savings' principal to buy him

a computer on which to draft political pamphlets (155), Anwar asks Najwa: “[w]hat do you know of imprisonment or torture or of just plain poverty?” (157). Anwar’s moralizing critique of Najwa’s unearned trust fund is in bad faith given the way in which his financial demands impinge on the economic underpinnings of her agency. While trading on the memory of his relative disadvantage as a student activist in Khartoum, he also takes advantage of gender privilege in manipulating Najwa’s readiness to trust financial decisions to men like Anwar who feel no obligation to reciprocate. While Anwar’s characterization problematizes the extent to which he lives his leftist politics, much less his putative feminism, he is also a key obstacle for Najwa’s assimilation to the classed and cultural competence required to become financially self-sufficient; in this sense, Anwar recalls the figure of Chanu in that the political positions he claims outwardly are undermined by his actual conduct towards Najwa. The double-standard that Anwar trades in suggests that Najwa finds the vaunted “freedom” of life in Britain to be an “empty space” because gender and class continue to structure her experience of life in the Sudanese diaspora, only now to her disadvantage (215).

Najwa’s repeated emphasis on “coming down in the world” is thus not simply an exigency for her becoming conservative in religious practice, or even her expressing a need for spiritual fulfillment that secular culture cannot provide for her, whatever bad feelings may linger from the anonymity of her first sexual encounter. The last time the phrase recurs in *Minaret*, it is followed by the observation that the “process took so long, was mixed up and at times gave the illusion of better things. [...] There was the comfort of our holiday flat and my mother was generous with pocket money” (239). The agency

that Najwa has is all the more precarious for having lost emotional support following the death of her parents and Omar's incarceration, not to mention her financial means. Even as Abbas and Hassan regard *Minaret* as undercutting left alternatives in pursuit of a moralizing defence of normative Muslim sexual propriety, the gendered dimension to Anwar's acts could also be read in a more auto-critical vein. By manipulating Najwa's social isolation as an exile in a hostile diaspora as a daughter of a disgraced member of the Sudanese junta, Anwar finances his own schemes in a patriarchal manner not dissimilar to the exploitation of Nazneen by Chanu, not to mention Uhuru Simba of his position in the Black British activist community in *The Satanic Verses*. The problem is not so much Anwar's political convictions as his unwillingness to extend those principles into the private sphere. In intersectional terms, that Najwa seems compelled to live out a Muslimwoman becoming narrative in reverse is not simply an apology for fundamentalist gender norms, but also an index of the challenge that downward mobility poses to her individual agency as a migrant to Britain.

In challenging the prevailing perception of Islam as an obstacle according to the conventional premise of migration narratives, *Minaret* presents a counterpoint to the assimilationism of *Brick Lane*. In other words, Aboulela presents Islam otherwise than in the Orientalist terms of the Muslimwoman becoming plot: the faith in the ultimate superiority of Western secular values as against those of an Islam deemed inherently oppressive to women. The contrast between the two novels becomes particularly evident from the way the latter depicts Nazneen negotiating the problematic of "disorientation" as a diasporic Muslim woman (Santesso 15). The more conventional and accommodative

path taken by Nazneen to this re-negotiation is relatively far from Najwa's trajectory as a religious believer who rediscovers the faith she had formerly scorned after migration. While Nazneen does not abandon her Islamic beliefs altogether, by dispensing with her mother's fatalist example in favour of a more pragmatic approach to faith and entrepreneurial savvy, she makes herself over as amenable to the liberal feminist norms that are a prerequisite of neoliberal multiculturalism. In other words, the racial neoliberal fantasy of the Muslimwoman's assimilation also encodes a promise of class mobility; this association makes assimilation via moderation of belief into a kind of trade-off for material uplift in the particular context of diasporic Britain. Whereas *Brick Lane* stresses that successful adaptation to life in Britain hinges on developing the capacity to take individualized ownership of faith and life decisions, in *Minaret* religion becomes a means of accessing community once Najwa loses the requisite affluence to participate in the social life of the secular but highly class-conscious Sudanese diaspora in Britain. In view of Nazneen's roots in impoverished rural Bangladesh as against Najwa's background in the postcolonial Sudanese elite, these two women's class differences suggest their experiences of migration are not especially comparable, except for the fact that they secured passage to Britain through patriarchal circuits of capital in the form of Najwa's familial wealth and Nazneen's arranged marriage to Chanu. Another discrepancy between these women's characterization as agential subjects is evident in that Nazneen's motherhood gives her responsibilities of care that Najwa encounters in a different register, in her capacity as a domestic worker among the very diasporic elite to which she formerly belonged. In short, the everyday challenges of these women's lives share little

other than the rough coordinates of gender, religion, and the challenge of finding a new home in London.

The contrast between Nazneen and Najwa's orientations with respect to migration is sharply apparent in the depiction of an activity that both protagonists aestheticize: ice skating. Whereas in *Brick Lane* figure skating is a recurrent motif for Nazneen's desire for the freedom to determine her life circumstances, skating has a less aspirational and future-oriented signification in *Minaret*. During one of Najwa's dutiful visits to her brother Omar in prison, where he is serving time for a drug charge, the siblings revel in a remembered family visit to the rink:

'Do you remember ice skating in Queensway,' Omar smiles. 'I loved that place. There was a jukebox in the cafeteria. The first jukebox I had ever seen. We would put in ten pence and press the button, choose the song we wanted.' / 'How did we learn to skate? I can't remember!' I [i.e. Najwa] laugh—children from hot Khartoum coming to London every summer—walking into an ice skating rink as if they owned the place. Money did that. Money gave us rights. (94)

Najwa may long for this moment in a manner that recalls the aestheticized autonomy Ali's text deploys skating to symbolize. But what checks the glow of nostalgia accompanying this memory she shares with Omar is her regret for their loss of class privilege, and her consequent consciousness that such pastimes are now beyond their means. Although skating may carry warm associations for Najwa too, this memory does not act as the defiant woman figure skater on TV does for Nazneen—as a kind of aspirational talisman—but serves rather as a humbling reminder of how inaccessible such experiences are to her now. Aboulela's description of this scene draws attention not just to wealth as conferring a more abstract form of rights; in this case, class privilege's capacity to trump the stereotypes of racism.

But the fact that economic agency is a subject of nostalgia rather than an aspiration for Najwa demonstrates that *Minaret* posits a relationship between religious faith and agency that flouts Islamophobic convention. The reason that Najwa and Omar can no longer skate on the Queensway is not only because they lack the money, but also because he is imprisoned for dealing drugs. Without money for lawyers or well-placed connections who might commute Omar's sentence, Najwa believes her brother may benefit from the same solution she has used to assuage her own regrets: devotion to Islam. Both Sadia Abbas and Wail Hassan are quick to read into her sermonizing on visits to Omar a defence of the excesses of fundamentalist Islam. Najwa's fantasy of her brother receiving violent corporal punishment in accordance with *Shari'a* law (193) when he first used drugs reads to Abbas "as a rankly behaviourist solution to his violent drug addiction, which at the same time is polemical in the British context because of Islam's status as the religion of a despised minority" (86). Abbas's overall argument is that Aboulela deploys "the virtuous authority of domesticity" to encode an allegorical alibi for the Islamist chauvinism of Sudan's postcolonial history and its authoritarian Arab leadership (86).¹⁶⁵ But consider how equivocal Najwa is in relating this fantasy: "[t]here are *things that can't be said, words that never see the light of day*. I wish that he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to the Shariah—one hundred lashes. *I do wish it in a bitter, useless way* because it would have put him off, protected him for

¹⁶⁵ At the time of *Minaret*'s 2005 publication, President Omar al-Bashir's Arab-led regime was carrying out genocide in Darfur. The context for Abbas's argument is that the former general Al-Bashir, who took power in the 1989 coup that is the likely factual basis for the one in which Najwa's father is deposed, sowed the seeds of this conflict (among other episodes of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s) with a blanket policy of coercive Islamization. For more on the recent history of Islamism in Sudan, see de Waal.

himself” (193, emphasis mine). Whereas Abbas attributes to *Minaret* the individualism characteristic of racial neoliberalism because this apparent fantasy of self-abnegation valorizes a politically quietist Islam, I argue that the hesitancy Najwa expresses here renders her fantasy’s signification more complex.¹⁶⁶ In an earlier conversation with Omar, she immediately regrets expressing the thought that if their parents had raised them as better Muslims that they would have been shielded from the fallout of the coup by their faith: “‘Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn’t. So we were punished.’ I cannot talk fluently, convincingly. Always I come on too strong and fail” (94). Omar may not be wrong to suggest that Najwa is naïve in her desire for moral certainty, but in the next breath he shows that filial piety clouds his own judgement in stubbornly insisting on their father’s innocence (94). Najwa’s hesitancy here is not so much evidence of her diminishment by a religious practice that encourages women to doubt themselves; rather, the distinction between her thoughts and her expression indicates a processual relation with Islam. In this sense, Najwa’s expansive interiority recalls Nazneen’s, although her tentativeness suggests that no single character in *Minaret* enjoys a monopoly on moral clarity. Instead, Najwa fitfully learns that faith both can and cannot function as a guide to moral ambiguities where those she cares about do not share her beliefs. What she shares with her brother is a moral framework that can only offer imperfect rationalizations of her family’s downward mobility.

If Islam does not provide Najwa with a means of fully accounting for the bitterness of her own exile, let alone her brother’s incarceration, then the question of what

¹⁶⁶ See also Iqtidar.

exactly it does represent for her recurs. Like Abbas, Hassan's reading of the novel problematizes Najwa's apparently religiously informed idealization of normative gender roles, citing a daydream she falls into when her friend Shahinaz presses her to reconsider her attraction to the younger and wealthier Tamer, the son of her employer Doctora Zeinab. Najwa internalizes her self-abasement, sitting in silence in response to Shahinaz's scolding: "I stare down at my hands, my warped self and distorted desires. I would like to be his [i.e. Tamer's] family's concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time" (Aboulela 215). For Hassan, this inner monologue ironically reinforces an Islamophobic view of Islam as inherently oppressive, but in this interpretation he also psychologizes her relationship with the religion: "[t]his absurd preference for slavery [... that] can only be explained by her situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive" (Hassan 315). By leaving aside the moralistic terms in which Hassan responds to Najwa's concubine fantasy, multiple intersectional implications emerge. On the one hand, the fantasy tacitly acknowledges how hypocritical it is to overemphasize the exploitative character of sex work, in view of the urgency of addressing the broader exploitation of migrant women in the emotional service economy. Accustomed as Najwa is to meeting the emotional demands of Doctora Zeinab's family, it is not so difficult to imagine her work extending into a sexual role too.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, Najwa's description of this

¹⁶⁷ Claire Agustín critiques the moralizing tenor of the discourse on sex work in Europe in the context of human trafficking, in particular noting the naïveté of believing that outsourcing care work to racialized and migrant women will not inevitably lead to

fantasy as “distorted” and herself as “warped” also references the conditioning of her desire by circumstances in which she must constantly be on guard so that her connection to her disgraced father remains hidden. In an earlier scene, Najwa is terrified that her family history will come to light when Doctora Zeinab mentions the family’s connections to Khartoum during the interview for the housekeeping job: “[m]y heart starts to pound as it always does when there is a threat that somebody will know who I am, who I was, what I’ve become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?” (71). As Rey Chow observes, the colonial imperative of mimesis for diasporic subjects works both ways, requiring not so much assimilation but also a highly curated performance of racial difference: “the original that is supposed to be replicated is no longer the white man or his culture but rather an image, a stereotyped view of the ethnic” (107). Ethnic mimicry in this sense is not for Najwa a means of conforming to normative British cultural ideals, nor even a means of resuming a place in the bourgeois Sudanese diaspora for which her upbringing prepared her. Rather, her dissimulation facilitates her need to conceal her family background so as to avoid the constant threat of exposure and to seem like a more credible applicant for housekeeping work. In this sense, her fantasy speaks to a desire to inhabit a familiar social location, one that, if not quite offering membership in the social strata into which she was born, is at least adjacent to it. As Mahmood indicates in my epigraph for this section, the genuine challenge of living with (religious) difference is to dispense with a universalist account of progressive agency:

outsourcing in a sexual realm as well: “[t]reating sex as a taboo contributes to the marginalization not only of jobs in the sex industry but of domestic and caring tasks, since they often include sexual labor as well.” (384).

what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. (15)

In this sense, Najwa’s fantasies of religious punishment and sexual submission productively challenge the universalizing vision of agency that the Muslimwoman makeover paradigm entails (Nguyen 368). Her narrative brings into view not only the essentialist characterization of Islam under a neoliberal multicultural regime of migrant incorporation, but also how social and economic capital remains unevenly distributed.

Vicarious Life: Dissensual *Bildung* and the Racial Neoliberal Ideal in *Brick Lane* and *Minaret*

the fulfilment of the fully developed personality as a real growth of actual people in concrete circumstances [...] was dreamed of by the Renaissance and Enlightenment, but [...] always remained utopian in bourgeois society.

-György Lukács, *Goethe and His Age* (55).

Brick Lane and *Minaret* present contrasting takes on how diasporic coming-of-age narratives entail the refashioning of Muslim women’s relationships with their own religious faith. By posing these two novels’ contrast in relation to the specifically feminist and postcolonial potential of the *Bildungsroman*, I seek to further complicate an imperial feminist understanding of Najwa’s growing devotion in her exile in London as a form of negation. Slaughter’s account of the genre as emplotting an argument for liberal human rights—the protagonist’s individual development as a metonymy for a larger collectivity’s acquisition of “a right to have rights” (182)—is apt here, with particular respect to the subgenre he terms the dissensual *Bildungsroman*, which “depicts the

imperatives of modernization, socialization, and human personality development not as an idealist process of consensual harmonization, but neither does it discount such concordance as an absolute, abstract impossibility” (181). In this view, the ambivalence about responsibility with which *Minaret* concludes is typical of coming-of-age narratives that conclude without its protagonist forcing an internalized resolution to the basis for the genre’s drama in the antinomy between individualization and socialization. While I focus in this section on “dissensus” in Aboulela’s novel, it should already be clear that to situate the deepening of Najwa’s faith in London rather than in Sudan counters the Islamophobic presumption that Muslim women’s migration to the “West” inherently better positions them to discover their own individual agency.

The dissensual balance that *Minaret* maintains as a Muslim British *Bildungsroman* emerges both through the uncertainty of Najwa’s social and erotic desires, as well as the education of that desire through encounters with other women characters who act as role models. For example, her reaction to the news of Shahinaz’s acceptance at a prestigious London university, which Najwa learns about just moments after her concubine fantasy, indicates that she does not entirely eschew aspiration, or at least not deliberately. Having delayed her studies to have children, as well as requiring her husband’s support for and filling out of the application, Shahinaz has evidently made numerous trade-offs in order to combine her long-held scholarly ambitions with her role as mother in a patriarchal family. Not unlike *Brick Lane*’s Nazneen, Shahinaz is a migrant woman making good on a dream

of “having it all,” and is legible according to the postfeminist makeover paradigm.¹⁶⁸

Najwa’s response to Shahinaz’s news is to contrast their situations: “I am touched by her life, how it moves forwards, pulses and springs. There is no fragmentation, nothing stunted or wedged. I circle back, regress; the past doesn’t let go” (216). That Najwa finds her friend’s achievement admirable but ultimately external to her experience continues a pattern established in her other encounters with accomplished women, where her identification with their empowerment is leavened by a sense that she is ill-equipped to replicate them. The high regard in which Najwa holds the British-born women she meets in the mosque—“[they] puzzle me though I admire them. [...] They strike me as being very British, very at home in London. Some of them wear hijab, some don’t. They have individuality and an outspokenness I didn’t have when I was their age, but they lack the preciousness and glamour we girls in Khartoum had” (77)—is further evidence that Najwa is drawn to sociality with women, but feels out of place among them, here due to differences in age and class position. Whereas I already alluded in my analysis of *Brick Lane*’s concluding celebration of Nazneen and Razia’s camaraderie to how Felski identifies solidarity among women characters as a major element of the feminist *Bildungsroman*, (the absence of) relations between Najwa and other women indicates that such models of community are less available to her, given her precarious and liminal position in London’s Sudanese diasporic elite. Certainly, the intersecting categories that produce the expectation that Najwa’s coming of age will end with her belonging to this social fraction are themselves exclusionary; though she frequently rationalizes her

¹⁶⁸ For a critique of the neoliberal quality of the normative feminist ideal/obligation that women “have it all,” see Rottenberg.

“coming down in the world” as penance for her father’s transgressions, her nostalgia for the glamorous trappings of her adolescent female friendships suggests she does not altogether disaffiliate from the systemic asymmetries that have ultimately led to her own alienation as well. However, to regard the protagonist’s capacities as the sole determinants of whether or not they can craft a *Bildung* that will end with social acceptance is to ignore the possibility that “the social order may be so deformed and insular that no admission for the postulant is possible, no matter how much they are willing to compromise” (Slaughter 180-181). So, it is not entirely Najwa’s fault that she lacks the resources to emulate the agency she admires in these second-generation Muslim women; this ambiguity encodes dissensus, acknowledging the advantages that assimilation can confer while suggesting it is not above critique.

But it is not just age, class status, and her family’s disgraced reputation that inhibits Najwa’s ability to follow other women’s examples of a conventionally feminist becoming narrative. The perils of assimilation in Najwa’s dissensual *Bildung* are evident in her faltering pursuit of a friendship with Tamer’s elder sister, Lamya. A PhD student whose daughter, Mai, is Najwa’s charge during the days, Lamya is quick to see in her nanny’s outward devotion a rebuke to her secular and moneyed lifestyle. The day after being erroneously accused by Lamya of stealing a necklace, Najwa reflects:

She [Lamya] will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour, which is a shade darker than hers. [...] It disappoints me because [...] I admire her for the PhD she is doing, her dedication to her studies, her grooming and her taste in clothes. (116)

Though never directly stated, the hard and fast demarcation that Lamya enforces between herself and Najwa cuts across their intersectional differences in religion, class, and race,

to Lamya's benefit. The history of unpaid and gendered domestic labour produces an ambiguity regarding the position of those like Najwa who do so for financial compensation. Meanwhile, for Lamya to live out the postfeminist ideal of consumption-based criteria of gendered identity does not involve dispensing with the historical expectation that she engage in social reproduction, but rather delegating it. Chandra Mohanty details how in countries like Britain, such delegation requires the labour of migrant women, for whom "work becomes an extension of familial roles and loyalties and draws upon cultural and ethnic/racial ideologies of womanhood, domesticity, and entrepreneurship to cultivate patriarchal dependencies" (159).¹⁶⁹ A friendship between Najwa and Lamya would threaten to unravel the hierarchy whereby the former's domestic labour guarantees the latter's lifestyle, notwithstanding the fact that Najwa as nanny also interposes to Lamya's maternal relationship with her daughter Mai.¹⁷⁰ Lamya's classism, colourism, and lapsed religious morals underwrite the social divide between these two diasporic women.¹⁷¹ For Najwa to suggest that she aspires to friendship let alone upward

¹⁶⁹ Mohanty argues that transnational citizenship relies on such gendered asymmetries: "the citizen/consumer depends to a large degree on the definition and disciplining of producers/workers on whose backs the [...former] gains legitimacy" (141). For more on British Asian women's varied experiences of labour, see Brah (69-72).

¹⁷⁰ In addition to being Mai's nanny, Najwa, cooks irons, and cleans for the household.

¹⁷¹ Lamya's prejudice is part of a transnational genealogy of colourism, encompassing not only elite Sudanese society but also Britain, where such prejudice has long policed differences between women who can afford to outsource care work and those engaged in it, and migrant women of colour in particular. For a history of how colourism encouraged the racialization of women labourers in Britain, see McClintock's chapter "'Massa' and Maids: Power and Desire in the Imperial Metropolis" in *Imperial Leather*, especially pp. 84-88, on the racialization of maids as objects of sexual desire, and 100-108 on how imperialist formations of gender, class and race map on to the bodies of working-class women. For more on how the "homework" of British migrant women of colour in particular is produced as a category of unremunerated labour, see Mohanty pp. 156-159.

mobility would make her continuing employment untenable. The nonsense that the affective demands of Najwa's job makes of any separation between labour and care spills over into her approach to other relationships, making her even less likely to follow the aspirational examples of both the younger women from the mosque and Shahinaz. Instead she is left to watch from afar as other women make good on scholarly dreams and debate issues of faith and politics with confidence. By contrast, her work requires her to embody deference, making defiance, let alone transcendence, all the more elusive for her.

The divide between Lamya and Najwa is especially evident when their positions are framed through Melamed's notion of the formalism of identity under neoliberal multiculturalism, where religious devotion is regarded as inimical to flexible neoliberal subjectivity (170-171). While Lamya's outburst regarding the necklace highlights their class and occupational difference, the larger context in which these women make for unlikely friends is the intersection between religious and class identity in postcolonial Sudanese history, as Aboulela outlines in an interview:

This middle-class, urban generation of the 1960s and 1970s [...] thought that they had kicked off the veil, and [...] they were [...] postcolonial, nationalistic, against the West but also very close to the West. Then [...] there came disillusionment and running parallel to it a huge influx of rural-urban migration. [...] The families from the countryside came in with their customs, and they brought their own version of Islam along. (Rashid 617)

The irony is that both Lamya and Najwa were born into a Sudanese elite whose status became precarious with the collapse of the postcolonial nationalist consensus as the Second Sudanese Civil War beginning in 1983 (Ali Abdel Gadir, Elbadawi, and El-Batahani 203-208). While Najwa's life abroad is consequently that of a dispossessed exile, Lamya never lost the financial and dispositional wherewithal for global citizenship

that such origins granted her, a subject position with which overt signs of faith like the *hijab* Najwa wears are irreconcilable. Secularism's status as the *sine qua non* of neoliberal multicultural belonging emerges in a scene where Lamya hosts a party for her friends and university colleagues. One of her guests arrives dressed in a veil, only to strip as she dances across the room, to general amusement that Lamya is quick to explain away: "[w]e don't make fun of our religion, but just today, just once today" (223). On the one hand, Najwa does not take offence, dismissing the ardently protective Tamer's concerns by saying, "they are just young girls [...] playing, they don't mean anything. I can even dance better than them. It's nothing personal against me. I am nothing to them, nothing" (223). On the other hand, she is unmoved because of her awareness that her status as a maid gives her no standing to voice a complaint even if she felt so inclined. In this sense, it is Najwa who exhibits flexible subjectivity, as just after Tamer convinces her to stop diminishing herself, Lamya walks in on a kiss that breaks the erotic tension between the couple, precipitating the end of Najwa's employment with the family, and the narrative soon thereafter (224). Just as Najwa is about to demonstrate that she is not solely governed by the idiosyncratic Islamic moral absolutism she has taken comfort in during her exile, the supposedly flexible citizen Lamya intervenes to police the class hierarchy dividing maid from employer, reinforcing for Najwa that acting on her sexual desire is to evince an improper aspiration, and must therefore be quelled—a punishment for her family's past disgrace. This deference is compelled in both sexual and financial terms, as Doctora Zeinab buys her silence in exchange for enough money to perform *hajj*. As Santesso points out, Najwa's willingness to be bought off seems contradictory given

that her exile has resulted from her family's past bribe-taking, a record from which she sought to distance herself by pursuing moral clarity through religious belief (104).

Although here Najwa seems oddly willing to contravene her own religious principles by raising the spectre of her father's transgression, her own transgression shows that Islam only offers a partial refuge from neoliberal multiculturalism, a mode of consolation that cannot entirely elude its logic.

In political terms, the divergence in Najwa and Lamya's trajectories casts the former as a failed neoliberal multicultural subject. Najwa's "coming down in the world" is in this sense a retreat from whatever (post-)feminist aspirations she may have had to the certainties of a moralizing Islam, which in turn makes her the more unlikely to attain the flexible cosmopolitanism prescribed by idealist migration narratives. Her upbringing makes it difficult for her to adjust to new expectations; her struggle to adapt is as evident in her everyday financial decisions as it is in her approach to learning. Just prior to her mother's death, she lingers after lunch with her rich uncle who is leaving for Canada:

I could order a glass of wine. Who would stop me or even look surprised? [...] If I wasn't too lazy, I would have crossed the street and gone into Selfridges, tried some of the new summer fashions. I decided to save money by taking the underground instead of a taxi. I could buy one of those rude magazines, the ones always kept on the top shelf. No one would stop me or look surprised. [...] In Khartoum I would never wear such a short skirt in public. I might wear it in the club or when visiting friends by car, but not for walking in the street. My stomach was too full. I burped garlic. (128-129)

Alongside the litany of moralisms this passage attaches to various forms of consumption—alcohol, pornography, revealing clothing, and gluttony—the diction here also gives the measure of Najwa's coming of age. Aboulela might contend that "for young people in the West, freedom of choice just becomes a kind of confusion" (99), but

there is an intersectional dimension to this claim granted by the affective adjustment required of Najwa to go from her privileged upbringing to an adult life as a housekeeper. The challenges of Najwa's *déclassé Bildung*—whether it's learning to take public transport or to wear second-hand clothing (252)—do not necessarily inspire empathy. For Abbas and Hassan, these aspects of Najwa's characterization seem to deliberately discourage identification with her (Abbas 84, Hassan 313). I would argue, however, that in centring on the coming-of-age narrative of a so-called “unlikable and complicit protagonist of late-twentieth-century [sic] taste,” *Minaret* poses a challenge to the racial neoliberal logic of exceptionality that migration narratives like *Brick Lane* reinforce (Abbas 82). Both Nazneen and Najwa are pressured to be what Mamdani might call a “good” Muslim on terms that racial neoliberal Britain can accommodate (2). In this assimilationist view, the only good Muslim woman migrant is a Muslimwoman willing to relegate religion from its ostensibly deterministic role to a subordinate position, as one among many attributes of her individuated—and ideally individualist—self. Nazneen does make good on that normative expectation in the course of her narrative trajectory, but this arc also reifies the convention that social uplift for the migrant takes place through hard-won accommodations to implicitly secularist norms, which is accommodative in neoliberal multicultural formalist terms. Furthermore, the function of the satire on Chanu *qua* postcolonial Babu as a means of defining Nazneen's “right to have rights” through dismissing the possibility of his subjectivity, *Brick Lane* inhibits a historicized perspective on how Islamophobia has rendered Muslims increasingly subject to eviction from Western law. In generic terms, then, Ali's novel is less dissensual

Bildungsroman than its idealist variant, a genre that for Slaughter has a fundamentally conservative role in postcolonial contexts of “legitimat[ing] authority by normalizing the dominant sociopolitical practices and patterns of nation-statist modernity and by affirming the capacity of those systems to distinguish good citizens from bad subjects” (124). The exceptionalist vision of diasporic belonging presented in the novel contributes to the endurance of postcolonial melancholia in British society, as is exemplified in the geographical contrast between Nazneen’s experience of uplift in diasporic Brick Lane, as against Hasina’s oppression as a garment worker in Dhaka. In this sense, *Brick Lane* rehearses an imperial feminist apology for the asymmetries of neoliberal global capitalism, which makes Britain as putative space of freedom for women all the more of deserving of its exceptional position as against its former colonies like Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, the intersections between religion, class, and gender in the becoming plot of *Minaret* work to complicate a regime of Islamophobic representation. Najwa’s *Bildung* in the novel highlights the cruel optimism involved in posing feminist becoming through the formula of choice-based agency, as *Brick Lane* does (Berlant 10). In a sense, Najwa’s *Bildung* is not necessarily dissensual, but has effectively receded altogether; her failure is less a lesson for her than the precondition of her employer’s own becoming narrative. Lamya’s postfeminist makeover hinges on a distribution of socially reproductive labour that presumes the availability of other migrant women’s labour, which points to the fact that neoliberal multicultural agency requires the submission of others on the one hand, even as it promotes a Cartesian concept of agency as the subject’s proper relationship with religion on the other. The dissensual element of Najwa’s

becoming narrative, or rather her vicarious role of guaranteeing another's agency, draws attention to the idealist directionality Stein assigns to the transformations that Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman* records. The voicing of identity is central to *Minaret*, but the extrapolation possible from Najwa's coming-of-age narrative is that she is less likely than other migrants to contribute to a broader project of "redefining Britishness" (Stein 30). In this sense, Najwa's characterization recalls the urgency to think Muslim British representation in similar anti-essentialist terms to Stuart Hall's 1988 argument: "[y]ou can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject" ("Ethnicities" 444). Najwa may be challenging to identify with, and her rediscovery of Islam may not resemble the choice-based agency familiar to the Cartesian plot of feminist becoming. Her halting progress on her path towards faith represents, if not quite wholesale resistance to the conventions of neoliberal multicultural migration narrative, then at least a means of problematizing its individualism. Islamophobia formalizes Muslim belonging under neoliberal multiculturalism, providing a moralistic rubric by which to assess a given Muslim subject's fitness as a subject of racial capitalist aspiration. Religion in this sense no longer enjoys a monopoly on moralism; it is equally moralizing to advocate choice-based agency as the path to migrant women's empowerment, while downplaying both the fact that choice is often more culturally determined than is acknowledged, and that what agency looks like in a climate of receding institutional and social supports may be decidedly unconventional.

Chapter 3: Model Minority Trajectories: Racial Neoliberal Coming of Age in

Londonstani and *NW*¹⁷²

*There's many a difference quickly found
Between the different races,
But the only essential
Differential
Is living different places*

—Ogden Nash, “Goody For Our Side And Your Side Too”

Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) address two charged moments in the history of racial relations in Britain, each involving different racialized constituencies. Published a year after the 7 July 2005 (7/7) bombings on London public transportation, *Londonstani* focuses on a group of teenagers coming of age in Hounslow, Southwest London, a suburb with a reputation as an ethnic enclave that immediately made it a target of paranoid coverage in the New Right tabloid press and print, including Melanie Phillips's race-baiting polemic *Londonistan: How Britain is Creating a Terror State Within* (2006). Meanwhile, *NW*'s 2012 release occurred around the uprisings in cities across the UK following the police killing of Mark Duggan on 4 August 2011, and is focalized through four characters who have grown apart after being brought up on a council estate in Kilburn, Northwest London.

What interests me here is that in charting these groups' coming of age, both texts take up the myth of the model minority mythology as a figuration of racial neoliberal uplift. The four main characters of *Londonstani* are self-proclaimed “rudeboys,” taking

¹⁷² This chapter's analysis of *Londonstani* builds on some material and concepts from my previously published article on the novel, in which I take up the entanglement of neoliberal cultural logic with South Asian masculinity in the novel (“Bling-Bling”).

their hypermasculine cultural bearings from a *mélange* of bhangra, Bollywood, and the moralisms of American gangster films and rap, and defining their opposition to the model minority aspirations of their more studious classmates: “coconuts,” as they call them (23).¹⁷³ Meanwhile, if the model minority is taken as the ideal of belonging in contemporary neoliberal multiculturalism, then *NW* demonstrates the difficulty of eluding cruel optimism no matter how close one may be to attaining this idealized positionality (Berlant 10). Since the four main characters’ school days in Kilburn, Northwest London, they have diverged in part through radically dissimilar experiences of the individualistic path to the neoliberal good life, producing a discrepant positioning with respect to the gentrification of their neighbourhood that brings them into conflict after one of the four, Felix Cooper, is murdered. It is the critical premise of this chapter that, as these texts trace their protagonists’ trajectories across different social and physical locations, refracting conventional framings of how the urban/suburban distinction predicts life outcomes, both works also highlight the attenuation of ostensibly successful coming-of-age narratives in racial neoliberal Britain.

In this chapter, I show that the contradiction between the dual imperatives of socialization and individuation in Black and Asian British variants of the genre cannot be managed by the conventional reference to the imaginary container of the nation. Inasmuch as both *Londonstani* and *NW*’s coming-of-age plots take up crises in London’s spatial coordinates, such as changes in the conventional suburban-urban dichotomy, or the re-signification of a particular neighbourhood through gentrification, they also take up

¹⁷³ Phoenix has observed how racialized masculinities are often in opposition to education as normative path to upward mobility in contemporary British schools (229-239).

trajectories that epitomize the challenge that post-racial identity poses for conventional reference points of British nationality.¹⁷⁴ In Jed Esty's account of the colonial *Bildungsroman*, he observes that as imperial narrative can no longer presume a given national geography, it becomes increasingly unlikely that the progress of a colonial becoming plot will reflect an uncomplicated orientation towards the "traditional forms of identity" bound up with British nationality (49). With formal decolonization precipitating a new trajectory of migration from ex-colonial periphery to metropolitan centre, a growing postcolonial diasporic population goes on to produce a perspectival shift in postcolonial examples of the *Bildungsroman* set in Britain, given that these migrants like their colonial forebears must contend with multiple possible sites of national belonging, as well as racist impediments, on their paths towards socialization. In particular, post-imperial migration produces the migration narrative paradigm, which entails the deferred promise of national belonging that Sara Ahmed describes in her analysis of the way "melancholy migrants" are perceived to author their own exclusion from a putatively happy national body politic (*Happiness*).¹⁷⁵ So where the postwar Black and Asian British

¹⁷⁴ Another shared quality of these two novels is that they both defied exoticist pre-publication expectations regarding their content (on exoticism, see Huggan and Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*). The popularity of *White Teeth* led to anticipation regarding *NW* as Smith's return to the setting of her first novel with its "upbeat multicultural imaginary" (James 211), which was confounded by the unresolved social antagonisms of the latter novel's post-austerity aesthetics (Marcus 71-72). There was a bidding war over *Londonstani*'s manuscript due in part to a post-*White Teeth* climate of speculation around British authors of colour, but also because of the expectation that the narrative might directly engage with so-called "homegrown" terrorism (Graham n. pag.).

¹⁷⁵ One example of the currency of the notion that racialized Britons author their own exclusion is the British government's inquiry into the 2001 riots in Yorkshire cities, which blames the alleged insularity of British Asian communities: "[t]hat a host of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities had lived in neighbourhoods among Britain's

Bildungsroman differs from the modernist examples of the genre from the colonial era is that the former troubles the presumed reference to a singular nation as a representational brake on the scope of the subject's development.¹⁷⁶ The resulting crisis of conventional signifiers of nationality has only been exacerbated by decolonization and postcolonial migration, both of which are key historical contexts for the Black and Asian *Bildungsroman*. Now it is not just that the linguistic, historical or territorial reference points for British national identity are open to question, but protagonists themselves must navigate a multiplicity of potential affiliations with actually existing nations and, as I discussed in the previous chapter, transnational formations like Islam. This uncertainty points to the fundamentally heterogeneous nature of the objects to which what Avtar Brah calls "homing desire" can attach (194); the site to which the Black and Asian *Bildungsroman* subject's belonging attaches is almost inevitably ambiguous.

In a contemporary post-imperial moment where neither countryside nor colony are the common symbolic sites of impetus for youth to set out in search of future possibilities, London still retains the metropolitan allure it had for the heroes of the early *Bildungsroman*, even if its draw is now more as a centre of global commerce that shrouds (neo-) imperialist continuities with the veneer of globalism and official multiculturalism

most impoverished 1 per cent and in areas such as Oldham where the local authority had been found guilty of operating a segregationist housing policy as recently as 1993 [...] received scant attention. Rather, the suggestion that there had been an increase in racist attacks by the self-segregating young Pakistani and Bangladeshi men was emphasized" (Kapoor 1035-1036).

¹⁷⁶ The problem of multiple national affiliations in Black and Asian British coming-of-age narratives is thus qualitatively different from the crisis of a (singular) nationality faced by the subject of the modernist *Bildungsroman*, which Esty attributes to the destabilizations of imperialism (Esty 6).

(Eade 2).¹⁷⁷ While both texts take the model minority as the epitome of normative socialization in neoliberal multicultural Britain for granted, I read *Londonstani* and *NW* as presenting outsider and insider challenges, respectively, to this meritocratic racial mythology. *Londonstani* depicts the antagonistic hypermasculinity of rudeboy culture through the narrative voice of his protagonist Jas, charting his progress from outsider status in relation to the group through a process of identification and dis-identification. Malkani attempts to banalize the everyday lives of British Asian teenaged boys, who become focal points of Islamophobic anxiety about a growing British Asian presence making suburbs like Hounslow into homegrown hotbeds of what Sara Ahmed has called “could be terrorists” (*Emotion* 75). The novel centres on the boredom of the path of model minority uplift and the risks attached to veering from it to become a rudeboy, suggesting that the text wrestles with a racialized threat of economic takeover rather than terrorist violence. The progress of Jas towards becoming a rudeboy seems to frame his *Bildung*’s trajectory as an outsider being brought into a social fold, yet his covert whiteness, disclosed climactically at the narrative’s conclusion, renders him an outsider in a double sense. I argue that as a racial outsider his relation with and commentary on his peers’ performance of masculinity becomes suspect, a problem that becomes all the more apparent as in the transition from suburb to city, Jas’s “rudeboy” identity is drawn into comparison with its ostensible opposite through the model minority figure of Sanjay. In juxtaposing Jas’s tenuous post-racial *Bildung* with the pernicious exceptionalism of

¹⁷⁷ In Saskia Sassen’s *The Global City*, which takes London as one of its case studies, she observes that as high concentrations of increasingly deregulated capital are invested in cities, there is a correspondent demand for transnationalized flexible labour, which capitalizes on existing social disparities of gender and race, as well as class (245-320).

Sanjay's model minority successes, the novel ironically re-centres white masculinity as the indispensable subject national reconciliation, which implicitly applies a post-racial lens to the narration of national transformation that Stein sees as the generic symbolism of the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*; Jas effectively becomes a covert figure for the white working-class.

By contrast with how *Londonstani* purports to represent a larger social group through the metonymy of the narrative's focalization through Jas, the polyphony of *NW* demurs from this generic and nationalistic predilection towards metonymic social description. This emphasis on internalized complexity reflects the insider critique of the model minority figure that the character of Natalie facilitates. One measure of her misgivings regarding her narrative of neoliberal becoming is in her complex affiliations with those of her peers who, like Nathan Bogle, never left the Caldwell estate, and whose associations with Kilburn are correspondingly discrepant from hers. Nathan's immobility marks him out as socially abject in a neoliberal Britain where assumptions about the process of acculturation to such sites looms large in moralizing poverty discourse: "[t]he council estate became the metonymic shorthand for [... a] 'new class of problem people,' and the poverty associated with these places was imagined as a self-induced pathological problem" (Tyler 161). The section of the novel that focuses on Keisha/Natalie's trajectory proceeds in a series of numbered episodic scenes. The narration of this section, titled "host," effectively stages jarring collisions between those with upward mobility and those

who are written out of racial neoliberal fantasies of the good life.¹⁷⁸ In particular, I read a pair of discrete interactions that Natalie has with others left out by the exceptionalist model of racial neoliberal upward mobility in Kilburn through the rubric of what Ahmed calls a “strange encounter” (*Encounters* 8), and emphasize that these experiences jostle her out of the individualism and exceptionalism that otherwise characterizes her entanglement in variously cruelly optimistic trajectories of upward mobility.

Whereas my previous two chapters have outlined how the lack of guarantees regarding racial politics has created the conditions in which an exceptionalist racial neoliberal account of belonging has become normative, this chapter turns to the question of how the racialized British subject’s *Bildung* is reshaped by the restructuring of the spatial landmarks that had formerly been associated with coming of age. In this way, both *Londonstani* and *NW* present different approaches to the model minority as figuring the inclusion of racialized bodies within normative coming-of-age narratives, trajectories that are made all the more exceptional in a neoliberal context where the national social contract is effectively in decline. Malkani presumes the model minority’s effectiveness as a model for inclusion, which in turn makes *Bildung* into a predicament for a white male subjectivity that had historically benefited from the asymmetrical coordinates of social uplift; Jas’s mimicry of the rudeboys is informed by a London where conventional maps of peripheries and centres—say, the racialized inner city in opposition to the white suburbs—are turned on their head. However, the ambivalent returns of Natalie’s *Bildung* are indicative of Smith’s refusal to take the compensations of model minority inclusion

¹⁷⁸ David James observes that the numbered vignettes that make up the Keisha/Natalie section recalls “Joyce’s ‘Aeolus’ chapter” in *Ulysses* (206).

for granted. The novel portrays how gentrification overlays a contradictory web of associations on to Kilburn both as a physical urban space as well as a site of imaginary investments in Keisha/Natalie's cognitive map. The insider critique of the model minority ideal provides a more thoroughgoing critique of the desire to extrapolate from the proliferation of normative becoming plots about racialized subjects a view of the broader arc of British national history as bending towards racial justice. In other words, Natalie's experiences of alienation from herself and others in the process of striving for racial neoliberal success are not aberrant exceptions of an ultimately expansive social vision. Rather, they are evidence of the persistent exceptionalist vision of inclusion that the racial neoliberal ideal of the model minority encodes.

The Rudeboy vs. the Model Minority: Post-Racial Identity in *Londonstani*

I was [...] interested in the way young people increasingly fictionalize and perform new class, gender, and ethnic identities and so fiction seemed the natural form for this book. [...] It was easier to distill the central conclusions of my research into a novel than into a piece of academic work because I didn't have to keep qualifying them. I just focused on characters for whom those conclusions applied most clearly and without qualification—their aggressive assertion of their ethnic identity is a straightforward proxy for the reaffirmation of their masculinity.

—Gautam Malkani, “A Conversation with Gautam Malkani”

The above quotation from a book club reading guide is one of numerous paratexts Gautam Malkani circulated in tandem with his novel *Londonstani*, demonstrating his interest in managing its interpretation. Throughout this metacommentary on the novel, he indicates his aim of authentically representing the experience of the discrete ethnic community of teens he grew up around in Hounslow, Southwest London. Many of these paratext focus on his concern to capture in the novel the British Asian slang common in

the area during his late 1990s adolescence, as a tactic for establishing authenticity.¹⁷⁹ Malkani's concern with authenticity in *Londonstani* mirrors the anxiety of its protagonist, Jas, to fit in with a popular gang of British Asian rudeboys. Although Jas's efforts to endear himself to the group appear motivated by overcoming a stammer and shyness, the issues of authenticity that the novel raises with respect to youth identity formation encode racial meanings as well. At the end of the novel, the ethnically ambiguous moniker "Jas" is revealed to be a ruse to mask his whiteness throughout the foregoing narrative, as his full name is revealed to be Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden (340). Whereas Sarah Brouillette has argued that the resemblance between Jas and Malkani's anxieties about authenticity is an attempt to disaffiliate from the very exoticist diversity marketing strategies of the creative literary economy that ultimately end up circumscribing the text,¹⁸⁰ my reading draws attention to the contradictions of Jas's efforts to authenticate himself on post-racial terms, demonstrating how this notional racial formation reinforces extant racial hierarchies.

Following US President Barack Obama's election in 2008, two years after the release of *Londonstani*, the diagnosis of a post-racial turn was at the height of its currency. Roopali Mukherjee demonstrates the contradictions of the colourblind approach to race this entails: "post-race re-envision[s] the scriptures of colour-blindness by firmly acknowledging a specified range of racial differences that serve to disavow any vestige of their consequence for anyone—of any race—who can fashion themselves as properly

¹⁷⁹ Malkani's field research included interviews with British Asian male teens in Hounslow (O'Connell); see also the articles published on *GautamMalkani.com* (2006).

¹⁸⁰ See Brouillette (*Creative* 116-152).

neoliberal subjects” (50). This is the context in which Jas develops familiarity with a specified range of knowledge about British Asian cultural difference, a specifically hypermasculine version of *desi* identity that allows him to fit in with a group of male teenagers he idealizes. The plot follows Jas and his friends Harjit, Amit, and Ravi as they go through masculine rites of passage in opposition to their rival religious cliques, events which range from the fracturing of the Hindu “rudeboys” over Jas’s crush on a Muslim classmate, Samira, to a staged fistfight between the Hindu protagonists’ clique and their Muslim counterparts carried out before a large group of multiethnic youth (*Londonstani* 48, 99-100). Malkani’s sociological research investigated British Asian teens’ role in resuscitating the rudeboy as a cultural figure of oppositional Black masculinity from recently-decolonized 1960s Jamaica as an alternative to the model minority myth.¹⁸¹

Why were they discarding the British Asian youth stereotype of disciplined, academically and grammatically conscientious citizens and instead asserting their ethnicity with an aggression usually associated with black-skinned [sic] kids? This was ironic given the prejudices Asian families have typically had against black communities. (Malkani “Asian boys”)

For Malkani, the emergence of the rudeboy figure in British Asian youth culture seems to present an antidote to the model minority as a hegemonic ideal of assimilated racial difference. But whether the rudeboy represents a genuine alternative to racial neoliberal subjectivity, or if the resistance it offers is primarily in the ritualistic style of a subcultural posture, is another question.

Certainly, the appeal of the rudeboy as a theoretical alternative to the model minority as British Asian aspiration derives in part from the suburban sites and modes of

¹⁸¹ For more on the origins of the rudeboy figure, see Thomas 72-73.

sociality in which it emerges. The suburban setting of *Londonstani* is Hounslow, an area of West London notable primarily for middlebrow South Asian respectability, due in part to its proximity to Heathrow Airport, which employs numerous British Asian staff. The currency of this impression of the neighbourhood as an ethnic enclave, however, runs counter to its historical reputation as something close to Britain's ur-suburb.¹⁸² Hounslow is proximate to Surbiton, popularly known as "Suburbaton," and this pair of emblematic suburbs was the subject of a Monty Python sketch that played on their status as "home of Middle England" (Jeevendrampillai 290-291), satirizing the seemingly contradictory associations of suburbia with (racial) particularity and (class) indeterminacy.¹⁸³ There is some debate as to whether the recasting of these historical repositories of white middle-class Englishness by multiple generations of British Asian families constitutes a form of symbolic postcolonial resistance. The dominant view of the suburbs in Black and British Asian cultural studies is summed up for Sukhdev Sandhu by Hanif Kureishi's representations of them as "a leaving place" characterized by monocultural boredom, white racism, and intergenerational conflict (235-236), but Rupa Huq attenuates this assessment in her reading of suburban-set British Asian writing: "many second generation Asians—the children of suburbia—have actively chosen suburbia as their residential location on becoming adults themselves" (12). This debate takes a slightly different form

¹⁸² See Liao's reading of *Londonstani* for evidence of the contemporary impression of Hounslow's racialization.

¹⁸³ David Matless notes that the boom in suburban development peaked in the interwar years between 1927 and 1934, with four million new homes built, a preponderance of which were located in suburban areas (57). On the white middlebrow reputation of the Home Counties, see also Watt 688-689. For the Python sketch, see "Mr. and Mrs. Brian Norris's Ford Popular."

in mainstream cultural debate, where Hounslow as British Asian enclave is both known as a site of celebrated hybridity—Gurinder Chadha filmed *Bend It Like Beckham* in the area, and it was regarded in the mid-2000s as “a hotbed of [British Asian] creativity” (Malkani, “Manor”)—as well as terroristic infamy: Hounslow residents have been implicated following the investigations of some suicide attacks, including the 7/7 London bombings (Liao 43-44). In other words, by the time of *Londonstani*'s publication, the climate of post-9/11 and post-7/7 Islamophobia was clearly challenging Hounslow's status as a conventional suburb notable for little besides middlebrow if now multiethnic tedium.¹⁸⁴

At the same time, much discussion of the racialization of urban space tends to focus less on actual demographics than on the affective level of public perception: “certain areas are *felt* to be ‘black’ or ‘Asian’, even if they numerically contain a larger number of white residents” (Nayak 2374). The fact that *Londonstani*'s title plays on *Londonistan*, the title of Melanie Phillips's book-length critique of British multiculturalism indicates how the novel aims to challenge the racism of such spatial perceptions in a post-War on Terror context.¹⁸⁵ The increasing Islamophobia towards British Asians after 9/11, particularly in the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks on London Transport, generated pre-publication speculation that the novel would address the disaffection to which this latter act of ostensibly “home-grown” terrorism attests (Brouillette, *Creative* 135). In a review of Malkani's novel, Gary Younge traces the

¹⁸⁴ See Wei Li on the rise of the ethnoburb, middle-class suburban ethnic enclaves, across the Global North (4-5).

¹⁸⁵ On the demonization of multiculturalism by Phillips and her peers on the New Right as a wellspring of Western decline, see Saunders (19-23).

transatlantic derivation of the epithet “Londonistan” in paranoid American media

coverage of the Muslim presence in London in the wake of the 7/7 bombings:

so entrenched was the notion that the British capital had become a mutinous outpost of the Islamist diaspora that American reporters were determined to rename the capital Londonistan. The word, which I had never heard used in England before, was employed at least nine times in different American papers in the six days following the attacks. (“Londonistan Calling”)¹⁸⁶

The spectre of neighbourhood takeover looms large in this attempt to yoke multicultural tolerance to the radicalization of young Muslim British men: “as you travel across London you notice district after district seems to have become a distinctive Muslim neighborhood. [...] these Muslim enclaves are just that: areas of separate development which are not integrated with the rest of the town” (Phillips 2). Phillips and her New Right fellow travellers find in Islamophobia a fertile rationale for the recurrent episodes of racist violence in post-imperial Britain, which has accompanied the ongoing adjustment to Empire’s loss that Esty calls anthropological modeling (*Shrinking*). As Salman Rushdie put it in “The New Empire Within Britain,” an essay prompted by the 1981 Nationality Act, “the British authorities, no longer capable of exporting governments, have chosen instead to import a new Empire, a new community of subject

¹⁸⁶ These impressions of Muslim takeover have continued to influence hard-right American perspectives on Britain, given the 2015 claims of self-styled “terrorism expert” Steven Emerson during Fox News coverage following the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*’s offices: “[i]n Britain, there are actual cities like Birmingham that are totally Muslim where non-Muslims just simply don’t go in [sic]. And, parts of London [sic], there are actually Muslim religious police that actually beat and actually wound seriously anyone who doesn’t dress according to religious Muslim attire” (Rawlinson). Emerson later apologized, but Donald Trump remained convinced of the Islamization of Britain as of a 7 Dec. 2015 interview with MSNBC: “[w]e have places in London and other places that are so radicalised that the police are afraid for their own lives” (Buchanan).

peoples” (*Homelands* 134). In short, in the context of a globalized War on Terror, the reconstruction of Hounslow as ethnoburb fans the flames of nativist English nationalism.

Numerous critics have observed that *Londonstani* itself displays an anthropological bent all its own, albeit with an impetus of demystifying the very racialized people and communities regarding whom Phillips seeks to sow panic. Brouillette suggests that Malkani seeks out the controversy over authenticity in a failed bid to elude the exoticist imperatives of the creative literary economy (136). Meanwhile, James Graham and Michael Perfect draw attention to an article that Malkani, who at the time also edited the *Financial Times*’s “creative business” section, released on the eve of his novel’s publication (Graham n. p., Perfect 145). Entitled “What’s right with Asian boys,” Malkani’s article describes the efflorescence of the second-generation music scene in Hounslow—posed against the older generation’s emphasis on diasporic roots—as evidence of the cultural assimilation of British Asian youth. He thus demurs from the rhetoric of alarmist moral panic about second-generation teens post-9/11: “British boys, who loved cricket and helped disabled children, had somehow been so radicalized [...] that they were prepared to murder their fellow citizens in huge numbers” (Phillips viii). Unlike Phillips, Malkani downplays race in order to raise the question of gender’s role in this alienation, with an implicit view to equating the hypermasculinity of British Asian teens with the phases that an average (i.e. white) adolescent British boy goes through, making both domesticable through normative socialization. This homology leaves the role of race in relation to British national identity unquestioned. The fact that Jas’s progress towards inclusion with the rudeboys hinges on concealing his whiteness for the

large part of the novel reflects the post-racial nature of the reassurance both the novel and Malkani's op-ed aim to provide: the kids are all right because they are more assimilated than their masculinist assertion of their cultural authenticity may make them seem.

The ostensible anti-Islamophobic impetus of *Londonstani* becomes complicated insofar Jas's narrative voice allows him to act as "quasi-anthropological outsider," as a narratorial guide to Hounslow's rudeboy subculture (Brouillette 141). In effect, the covert nature of his white identity means he can fulfil the same desire for an insider account of British Asian culture not so dissimilar from the tabloid journalism of Phillips's *Londonistan*, only with the added authenticity granted by what is effective narratorial brownface. Malkani's paratextual rationalizations for his emphasis on the gendered motivations of the rudeboys' antagonistic behaviour become significant here. In an interview, he observes that racism's impact on domestic life exacerbates the draw of hegemonic masculinity for male British Asian teens:

[...] the gender lines are interesting because if you think about racism, it makes people feel emasculated. It's not simply about a bunch of Asian boys fighting back. They're fighting back against their domineering mothers as much as they're fighting against the system. (Hundal)

Malkani posits a homology between the feeling of disempowerment attendant upon racial injury and the emasculation accompanying the failure to project a sufficiently masculine image. In this way, Malkani contends that as British Asian teens navigate public and domestic spheres, they face competing claims of identification with mainstream British culture and their own ethnic backgrounds.¹⁸⁷ The pressure of normative diasporic family

¹⁸⁷ In a previous analysis of *Londonstani*, I discuss how this characterization of the British Asian family in the novel recalls press coverage that singles out dysfunction in singular

dynamics becomes evident in *Londonstani* through the families of the central characters, in which parent figures perform authority according to the model minority stereotype: all the fathers in the text are emotionally unavailable workaholics, leaving mothers to play an outsized role in the domestic realm of social reproduction.¹⁸⁸ Jas observes that this type of parent-child relationship has broader consequences for teenage male socialization: “[y]ou gotta be the man a the house by being harder than your mum stead a being like your dad. All this shit’d be a lot easier if your dad was harder than your mum cos it’s gotta be easier to be like your dad than it is to try an not be like your mum” (*Londonstani* 324). Here Jas is responding to his own parents’ relationship, where his father is preoccupied with his work as a cell phone wholesaler and his mother is the primary caregiving parent. However, he also ventriloquizes Malkani’s views on young men’s masculinity being defined “in *opposition* to their (overbearing) mothers rather than in *relation* to their (emotionally detached) fathers” (“About *Londonstani*,” emphasis original). The equation between Jas’s parents and those of his British Asian peers disavows the concrete histories of imperialist racism that inform how gender roles operate differently in his own family than in those of his British Asian peers’ families.¹⁸⁹

(often pathologized) racialized families in order to drum up a moral panic regarding the broader community, and name this tendency “imagined domesticity” for how it inverts the logic of Benedict Anderson’s theory of national constitution (“Bling-bling” 3).

¹⁸⁸ Avtar Brah argues that diasporic gender roles were juridically codified in the context of twentieth-century migration to Britain: “[i]mmigration law defined men as prospective workers who posed a threat to the indigenous labour market, but the women and children were regarded as ‘dependants’” (74).

¹⁸⁹ Brah historicizes the production of the British Asian family as oppressive in relation to Anglo-Indian relations since the British Raj (72-79)

The troubling implications of Jas as an outsider vocalizing this critical perspective on the pathologization of the British Asian family are an exigency of the covert whiteness of his characterization. In an article on his novel's website, Malkani argues that the plot twist proves the rudeboys' aggressive behaviour is not inevitable, but is rather chosen:

your ethnic identity can often be something you *choose* to express or not—like other aspects of your identity, you can switch it on or off depending on the context. After all, we all select our identities. Nobody tells us who we are anymore—we just have to 'be' us by selecting our 'self' from different sources. (“About *Londonstani*”)

In effecting Jas's aspirational performance of rudeboy masculinity, Malkani not only relies on a narrow account of ethnicity that reinforces hegemonic cultural impressions of first-generation British Asian gender norms; he also effaces the role of whiteness in Jas's post-racial performance. In this sense the whiteness of Jas as “quasi-anthropological outsider” becomes problematic in relation to how he gives access to the rudeboys, as his white privilege enables not only his post-racial performance of but also his metacommentary on British Asian masculinity. For Sara Ahmed, white identity formation is redolent of the classed narrative of upward mobility: “[b]ecoming white as an institutional line is closely related to the vertical promise of class mobility: you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body” (“Whiteness” 160). In *Londonstani*, Jas's trajectory adapts the *Bildungsroman*'s conventional movement from periphery to centre for a neoliberal context; he journeys from humdrum suburban Hounslow to the financialized centre of London, where he is drawn into the corrupt cell phone shipping scheme of Sanjay, a banker in the City and alumnus of his school. The ending to Jas's developmental plot is disillusioning, however, as Sanjay first exploits Jas

as a means to access his father's cell phone warehouse, leaving Jas beaten and back in a Hounslow hospital.¹⁹⁰ Jas's desire to integrate into the hegemonic British Asian masculinity of Hounslow's youth culture is instrumental in this plot. The opportunity Jas sees in connecting with Sanjay to make good on post-racial *Bildung* turns out to be a ruse, and having his aspirations thwarted by a neoliberal model minority figure effectively is a metonymy for the aspirational middle-class white subject out of the class-centred narrative of national reconciliation.

What facilitates Jas's performance of *desi* identity is post-racial formation, which in *Londonstani* can be understood as an exigency of neoliberal multiculturalism. Jodi Melamed observes the expedience of fetishizing race under neoliberal capitalism, abstracting it from the socially materialist processes through which racialization occurs:

Neoliberal-multicultural discourse [...involves] a kind of multicultural formalism that is able to circumvent traditional knowledge systems by placing their objects within a system of rationality that calculates with formalized and ideological representations of difference. (Melamed 43)

Formalism is for Melamed the neoliberal aspect of multiculturalism as a system of managing racial difference; instead of acknowledging the degree of internal differentiation within categories like "Asian," "Black," or "Muslim," multicultural formalist accommodation proceeds on the basis of stereotyping identitarian categories.¹⁹¹ Malkani's paratextual commentary emphasizes his sense that his characters could simply

¹⁹⁰ See Chapter Two for a more sustained discussion of Joseph Slaughter's notion of the "dissensual" postcolonial Bildungsroman ending in disillusion, and its adaptability to post-imperial metropolitan Britain in the context of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*.

¹⁹¹ In this light, recall Rey Chow's account of the model minority as subject to "coercive mimeticism," i.e. the pressure to be recognizably "ethnic" in a stereotyped sense even as she is also subject to the pressure to assimilate to white cultural norms (95-127).

choose not to be hypermasculine (“About *Londonstani*”). There are echoes of this emphasis on choice in Malkani’s articulation of *desi* identity, which signifies the final stage of a “transformation of an ethnic identity into a youth subculture that exists in equilibrium with mainstream society and other subcultures” (“A Conversation”). This vision of *desi* identity as a more assimilated, assimilable category is referenced in the novel’s organizing structure, as it forms the subtitle of the final section of the novel itself (*Londonstani* 271). The subtitles of the two prior sections suggest a passage from victimhood—the first being the racial slur “Paki”—through aggression—the title of the central section, “Sher,” means tiger, and is also the name of a well-known Sikh gang—before concluding with the more neutral subject position implied by “Desi,” which Malkani suggests can be roughly translated into English as “homeboy” (“A Conversation”).¹⁹² If Jas’s identity is understood as proceeding through this series of phases during the narrative, then the climactic disclosure of his whiteness at the close of the “Desi” section suggests that the novel challenges the racist derogation of British Asian identity through the spectacle of a white character who wishes to identify with it (“Spectacle 269). On Stuart Hall’s account, undermining racializing systems of representations involves making “elaborate play with ‘looking’, hoping... to ‘make it strange’—that is to de-familiarize it” (274); a notion of identitarian play is certainly at work in a narrative in which a white teenager chooses to go through the hallmarks of a second-generation *desi* upbringing at the same time as effectively concealing his whiteness, which does entail a challenge to conventional concepts of race.

¹⁹² The gendered implication to Malkani’s definition aside, “desi” is more typically translated simply as a catchall designation of South Asian descent (“Desi”).

To the extent that the narrative revolves around Jas exhibiting identitarian flexibility and voluntarism, his character arguably symbolizes post-racial formation as completing the shift in the race concept from the biological to the cultural realm through severing the material referent of visible racialization. Early in *Londonstani*, Jas relates seven rules of rudeboy conduct that he learns in the course of being inducted to the group of rudeboys led by Harjit—a muscle-bound Sikh teen whose aspiration to hard-bodied masculinity leads him to pronounce his name “Hardjit”—and which also includes two Hindu boys, Amit and Ravi (39-61). The rules update the style and “moralities of ghetto culture” ascribed to 1960s Jamaican rudeboys for the moral paradoxes of contemporary middlebrow suburban upbringing (Thomas 73). Lying to parents and the police is justifiable as long as the lies are bulletproof (39, 42), but at the same time, only semi-autonomy from adult authority—through owning a fancy mobile phone that his parents pay for—is desirable (41). Hardjit’s Rudeboy Rules not only have Caribbean roots, as these dicta recall Gilroy’s analysis of the convergence between revolutionary conservatism and neoliberal self-help discourse in rapper 50 Cent’s co-authored guide to social and business conduct, *The 50th Law*:

Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Malcolm X, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and a host of other notables were ventriloquised to facilitate the reconfiguration of African American culture as a paean to the psychological and moral attributes of the hyper-individuated, neo-liberal self, cast in the ideal form of the merciless and fearless business leader unencumbered by doubt of any kind. (“Fragments” 32)¹⁹³

The polyglot referentiality and Black Atlantic genealogies of individualism that Gilroy traces in his theorization of a “Black vernacular” neoliberal subjectivity are evident

¹⁹³ On self-help, self-care, and wellness’s amenability to neoliberal culture, see Ahmed (*Happiness* 3-12).

influences on Hardjit's Rudeboy Rules. Jas understands this masculine code of conduct as a means of approaching Hardjit's status as masculine hegemon, as epitomized by Hardjit's "*designer desiness*," which entails a "perfectly built body," not to mention "his perfectly shaped facial hair and his perfectly groomed garms that made it look like he went shopping with P Diddy" (4). To the extent that the extremity and homoerotics of Hardjit's performance and prescription of rudeboy identity make British Asian hypermasculinity a subject of irony, then the novel may read as a challenge, in Hall's sense, to stereotyped regimes of representing British Asians as threatening.

The narrative function of the Rudeboy Rules renders this ironic reading a little less tenable, as is evident from their introduction in the novel's opening. The chapter begins *in medias res* with Hardjit viciously beating Daniel, a white classmate, for allegedly saying the racist epithet "Paki." The scene reads like a British Asian take on a 1990s gangster rap video by Diddy or Snoop Dogg, the latter of whom led Gilroy to theorize "revolutionary conservatism" as promoting a depoliticizing Black aesthetic that centres violence and a "joyless rigidity of [...] gender roles" ("Love Has Gone" 75). As relayed through Jas, an aspirational post-racial rudeboy, the Rudeboy Rules structure the plot's action and generates ironic metacommentary. Here, Jas's outsider role begins to open up critical distance from Hardjit's code; for instance, Jas aspires to Hardjit's sculpted masculine physicality less for aesthetic reasons than for its capacity to lend weight to "his front," which Jas goes on to explain as, "a person's linguistic prowess or his debating dexterity or someshit. Hardjit always knew exactly how to tell others that it just weren't right to describe all desi boys as Pakis" (4). The opening scene establishes a

tendency for the narration to linger over such contradictions in the rudeboys' masculine codes, even as Jas as narrator is ostensibly invested in becoming a practitioner himself. But here a further contradiction regarding the masking of Jas's whiteness emerges. Rudeboy masculinity becomes at least available for irony in this moment, as the moral clarity of Hardjit's stand against racism is not the target so much as the seemingly more gratuitous elements of the American gangsta rap archetype he also espouses, as evident from his vicious beating of Daniel. In valorizing "front" for its anti-racist potential but not for its violence, Jas implicitly recites the model minority position from an American genealogy of Black Atlantic culture—specifically, the culture war between the problematic radicalism of gangsta rap against the nostalgic respectability of the model minority—to critique the attempt to cultivate a less moralizing vision of racialized identity in a British context.¹⁹⁴ If Jas were readily legible as a pseudo-anthropological white outsider, his metacommentary on acceptable racial difference in this scene would lack credibility, but because he reads here as a racialized would-be rudeboy his multicultural formalist parcelling out of the acceptable aspects of "front" has the sheen of authenticity.

Jas's self-consciousness about his performance of *desi* identity draws attention to the developmentalist aspect of *Londonstani* as a coming-of-age-narrative. Jed Esty observes that a point-counterpoint model of subject formation often characterizes the

¹⁹⁴ On this debate, see Gilroy's derogation of "revolutionary conservatism" in American gangsta rap of the 1980s and 1990s, a perspective that arguably romanticizes Civil Rights-era modes of protest and culture that are more palatable to a mainstream imaginary of anti-racism (Murray 14). On hip-hop as challenge to respectability, see for instance Perry (29).

Bildungsroman, pointing out that many examples “turn on their ability to reconcile narrativity and closure, youth and adulthood, free self-making and social determination. [...] the genre both reflects and produces social consent, for it negotiates a flexible and wily compromise between inner and outer directives in subject formation” (*Unseasonable* 4). In this light, there is another explanation for Jas’s initial willingness to subscribe to the rudeboy rules, to watch the violent beating from the sidelines raising any qualms. Even though Jas seems to doubt that Daniel ever actually said “Paki,” Jas doesn’t challenge Hardjit, whether to avoid jeopardizing his hard-won rudeboy cred or out of sheer self-preservation is not entirely clear (12). When *designer desiness* is understood as a contestable category with behavioural prescriptions and prohibitions as the modes by which consent for its hegemony is perpetuated, the eventual disillusionment of Jas regarding the code makes sense. However, the novel’s play between opposing forces of self-determination, on the one hand, and external imperatives, on the other, also resembles the aspiration to ceaseless self-fashioning that Jodi Dean regards as characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity. As she points out:

neoliberal ideology does not produce its subjects by interpellating them into symbolically anchored identities (structured according to conventions of gender, race, work, and national citizenship). Instead, it enjoins subjects to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality. (66)

Jas’s shift from an unquestioning effort to live up to Hardjit’s precepts to a more fully-fledged espousal of his own imaginary ideals suggests the way in which conventions of the *Bildungsroman* are inflected by the novel’s wider context, reflecting on the broader cultural imperative under neoliberalism of ceaseless self-fashioning. The gradual manner in which Jas learns these rules effectively confirms *desi* identity’s discursivity, which in

turn indicates how this identity formation is equally subject to Hall's observation that within a given discursive system, "since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories" ("Spectacle" 274). From this perspective, "*designer desiness*" represents British Asian identity repackaged for this moment, as a racialized category where seeming oppositionality is ultimately recontained by hegemony, a generic drama of socialization altogether fitting for neoliberal culture. Meanwhile, Jas's internalized qualms regarding the hegemonic British Asian masculinity that Hardjit prescribes makes Jas seem to demystify suburban *desi* hypermasculinity, but the concealment of his whiteness compromises the ethics of this ostensible insider account.

Owing to the seeming resemblance between Jas's racialization and that of the other rudeboys for the greater part of *Londonstani*'s narrative, the inevitability of his break with Hardjit's conceptualization of the rudeboy identity becomes clear primarily in hindsight. As Brouillette observes, Jas's "quasi-anthropological" narration not only confers authority upon him, but also buttresses his status as an interpreter of *desi* culture: he is "perched between conflicting modes of self-presentation and lionized for the self-reflexivity that he alone possesses" (141). Once Jas's whiteness is revealed, however, his numerous efforts to interpret *desi* culture, and the apparent self-consciousness he displays in doing so, scan differently. Of particular note in this regard is the lengthy chapter in which Jas advises Amit's older brother Arun, who finds himself in constant disputes with his parents regarding his impending marriage (Malkani 228-244). When Jas asks why he puts up with their interference, Arun mounts an intellectual defence of *izzat*, the code of family honour that dictates that the bride's family make additional shows of respect to the

groom's, in an attempt to stave off depression about his family's behaviour regarding the marriage. Jas's advice is to "be a man, Arun. Course traditions in't there to be honoured [...] Cos nothin'd ever change. There'd be no equal rights for men an [sic] women, no crime committed when a husband rapes his wife" (237). This advice has a dual signification; it both recalls Malkani's autoreferential account of masculinity—especially in view of Brouillette's argument that Jas is a figure for the author himself (141)—and it also leads Hounslow's *desi* community to perceive Jas as responsible for Arun's suicide (*Londonstani* 284). Honour-based codes like *izzat* may well appear as ephemeral as the computer-generated "dream world" of *The Matrix*, the analogy Jas offers to Arun as a model for resisting parentally-enforced tradition (238). As his parents engage with *desi* culture to the minimum degree necessary to humour him (331), Jas as white outsider may have some insight into the construction of tradition, Hindu or otherwise. At the same time, he lacks the requisite personal experience that would have taught him to transgress such codes is to risk serious emotional and material consequences.

While Jas's self-confidence in his own perceptions is at least partially responsible for his encouragement of Arun's ill-fated rebellion, his performance is at least equally aimed at impressing another person who hears him deliver this advice: a Muslim teen girl named Samira. This represents a subsidiary benefit to Jas's powers of self-reflection; throughout his argument with Arun, lines in italics reveal what he hopes for in terms of Samira's reactions to his evident verbal facility, ranging from innuendo—"You like the way I use my tongue, girl?"—to premature self-congratulation: "You gotta hand it to me girl, it's pretty slick advice" (237-239). From the first time his crush on Samira is

mentioned, Jas seems well aware that pursuing her is off-limits for observant Sikhs and Hindus like Hardjit, Ravi, Amit, and, in diegetic terms, Jas himself (48-49). Nevertheless, the seventh and final Rudeboy Rule—“[i]n situations that involve defending or rescuing a fit lady, you can stand tall with your front intact even if all your crew walk out on you or try an thapparh you” (61)—suggests that heterosexual desire is the lone exemption from the rule of fidelity to the rudeboy crew. This modulated form of chivalry quickly becomes Jas’s rationale for pursuing Samira without his friends’ knowledge. There remains, however, some question as to whether Rudeboy Rule #7 applies as much to Jas as it does to his peers. As the episode with Arun indicates, the ease with which Jas criticizes tradition is a function of how his whiteness shields him from the consequences faced by those he aims to influence. Certainly, the novel suggests that the punishment from Samira’s family would be severe were any non-Muslim to date her, irrespective of race or religion. Nevertheless, Jas’s reflection on the proscription of interreligious relationships implies that he may not be equivalently subject to its force:

If any a us ever got with Samira, her mum an dad’d probly kill her and then try an kill us. [...] Mr Ashwood had taught us bout the bloody partition a India an Pakistan during History lessons. What we din’t learn though, was how some people who weren’t even born when it happened or awake during History lessons remembered the bloodshed better than the people who were. (49)

This passage indicates Jas’s pride in his superior understanding of what he deems to be the past-ness of Partition—indeed, he faults his peers for failing to attend to this history in its proper place, the classroom—and any tensions it may continue to inspire. Again, given the posed neutrality of his quasi-anthropological narration, Jas’s chastisement of his peers

reads as a fundamentally ahistorical attempt to disavow the lasting intersectional impacts of race, class and religion from that moment on rudeboy masculinity.

Regarding the past as bracketed off somehow from the present forecloses a view of rudeboy masculinity as produced partially by colonial ideologies of masculinity. Ashis Nandy, among others, has characterized the colonization of India as a homosocial contest among masculinities;¹⁹⁵ he observes that the heyday of British imperialism coincided with the “supplanting [of] cultural traits which had become identified with femininity, childhood, and later on, ‘primitivism,’” a redefinition of hegemonic masculinity that was effected in large part by the pathologization of such traits, and their subsequent transcription on to the colonized other. In Britain’s South Asian diaspora, Rushdie’s so-called “New Empire within Britain,” these tensions plainly still have influence.¹⁹⁶ Malkani indicates that the same conservative cultural politics that makes Non-Resident Indians key backers of Hindu nationalism in the diasporic homeland also produces a sympathy for neoliberal policies in Britain, as Ravi’s accountant father explains in an anti-government tirade: “[w]hy to pay the government? For what? So they can pay dole money to lazy people who call my family Pakis when they come into my brother’s shop to spend their dole money on beer and cigarettes? They get lung cancer and I pay for their

¹⁹⁵ See also Krishnaswamy, “The Economy of Colonial Desire.”

¹⁹⁶ As Ashis Nandy observes, class played a crucial role in this process, as traits such as childishness and deference to authority were valorized through a homology between the two groups thought to exhibit them; the British working class, who laboured in the imperial army, and “the devoted, obedient martial races of India” (37-38). For more on the persistence of colonial ideologies in postcolonial Britain, see Bains, “Southall Youth.”

hospital. Bhanchods” (*Londonstani* 181).¹⁹⁷ The irony with which Jas relates the persistence of Hindu-Muslim tensions in the context of an affluent London suburb like Hounslow makes his critique somewhat more ambiguous than a simple call for an end to violence; in the same breath, he subtly elevates himself above the fray of neo-colonial sectarianism. This inconsistency brings into question the way Jas later reflects on his friends’ replication of post-Partition tensions in diaspora in a staged fight between Hardjit and the leader of a rival Muslim gang (*Londonstani* 210); again, his insistence on the past-ness of Partition is, as Dave Gunning points out as well, denies the persistent cultural influence of a profoundly traumatic event (125-126). Jas’s whiteness is key here once again, as he is not simply a perspicacious and disinterested observer. To regard the lingering influence of Partition as what Wendy Brown might call a “wounded attachment” is to conveniently obscure Britain’s own role in fomenting the enduring tensions between Indians and Pakistanis, Hindus and Muslims.¹⁹⁸ Jas’s pose of neutral observation and critique thus replicates in miniature the problem of “postcolonial melancholia” in a neoliberal context (Gilroy xv). Even as he adopts rudeboy cultural knowledge as and when it suits his individual needs, the freedom he feels to imply that British Asians should somehow get over the legacy of colonization is unsurprising, given that the majority of British people still feel there is little to be ashamed of regarding the legacies of Empire.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ For more on the role of NRIs in supporting Hindu nationalism, see Prashad’s chapter “On Yankee Hindutva” (133-156).

¹⁹⁸ See “Wounded Attachments” (*Injury* 52-76).

¹⁹⁹ For example, a 2014 YouGov poll found that 59% of respondents regarded the British Empire “something to be proud of,” as against 19% who were “ashamed” of it.

As his relative freedom to pursue a relationship with Samira indicates, however exceptional Jas's critical faculties may be, they are also informed by a history that has unevenly distributed the cultural capital attending the performance of *desi* identity, which draws attention to how the enduring ascendancy of the whiteness structures Jas's ostensibly post-racial identity. While Ravi and Amit readily fantasize about Samira, they also carefully distinguish between indirect hypermasculine bravado and a genuine expression of sexual desire, indicating how high the stakes of trespassing the bounds of religious custom are for them (48). Once again, Jas's covert whiteness means that he enjoys a seemingly inexplicable semi-autonomy from the religious strictures that prevent his friends from actually approaching Samira. Here, multicultural formalism demonstrates the meaning of race for the subject under neoliberalism as described by Jodi Dean, for whom "symbolic prohibitive norms are increasingly replaced by *imaginary* ideals" (Dean 67). Whereas Jas can code switch and enact *desiness* as and when it suits his self-interest, the reverse is not true for Ravi and Amit, who are not white. Samira implicitly identifies this double-standard in response to Jas's worries that her family's social conservatism will be dangerous for him: "[s]o what did you think, just because you're not Muslim my dad's going to grab a butcher's knife and turn you into halal meat? You've been watching the news or listening to all those Hindu elders too much, Jas" (251). *Desi* cultural connoisseurs like Jas may be especially prone to reinscribing the stereotyped expectation of the traditional Muslim household as inherently oppressive to women. In this sense, Jas benefits from the asymmetrical racial logics of neoliberal multiculturalism:

terms of privilege accrue to individuals and groups, such as *multicultural*, *reasonable*, *feminist*, and *law-abiding*, that make them appear fit for neoliberal

subjectivity, while others are stigmatized as *monocultural, irrational, regressive, patriarchal, or criminal* and ruled out. Such individualization camouflages the structural and material relations positioning persons within modes of production and structures of governance. (Melamed 148)

Despite his investment in an authentic performance of *desi* identity, Jas's whiteness remains ever-present as a kind of identitarian fall-back position, exemplifying the constitutive unevenness of what could be called neoliberal multicultural capital. At the same time, Samira's comments gesture at the historical intensification of constraints on British Asians' capacity for self-definition; the assumption of her family's hostility to non-Muslims proceeds from sensationalist media coverage of events like "the Rushdie Affair" and the Bradford riots of 2001, which have exacerbated perceptions that the Muslim family in particular violently polices tradition and discourages partnerships that cross lines of race.²⁰⁰

From Hounslow to the Club on Thursday Nights: Pursuing (the) Neoliberal Multicultural Capital

Londonstani presents a contradictory and reified representation of *desi* masculinity in relation to multicultural formalist subject formation, contradictions that are formally resolved by concealing the whiteness of its narrator who affords an anthropological window on the ethnoburb of Hounslow. Even as the novel thus re-centres whiteness as normative in its attempt to banalize suburban British Asian masculinities, I want now to consider the implications of the spatial objective of the rudeboys as budding racial

²⁰⁰ I rely here on Hall et al's *Policing the Crisis*, in which they examine the role of the media in fomenting an atmosphere of public moral panic around the perceived racialized threat of muggings in 1970s Britain (53-76).

neoliberal subjects: the central London hub of finance capital. This shift of critical emphasis shifts my discussion of the relationship between postcolonial melancholia and neoliberalism in the novel from the issues of characterization and narration to focus more squarely on the generic trajectory of the novel's plot. Specifically, *Londonstani* adapts for the contemporary urban geography of Britain the historic spatialization of the journey of socialization with which the *Bildungsroman* is associated: from rural poverty to urban riches. Having established how Jas's pseudo-anthropological narration reifies the paranoid nationalist impressions attaching to the ethnic enclaves of British Asian suburbia, I compare the *Bildung* of Jas as he approaches the rudeboy ideal of accessing the financialized glitz of central London's club scene, with that of his mentor Sanjay, who adapts the model minority trope as a convenient "front" of his own pursuit of neoliberal success.

At least in outline, the conventional spatial route of the contemporary Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*'s hero from periphery to centre reflects the classical trajectory of the genre, in Franco Moretti's view. Moretti observes that by the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* tended to thematize two key social attributes of capitalist modernity in relation to the path from rural poverty to urban opportunity: the ways in which "new and destabilizing forces of capitalism impose a hitherto unknown mobility [.. and] generat[e] an interiority not only fuller than before, but also [...] perennially dissatisfied" (4). The dissatisfaction that Moretti impels *Bildung* not just as an internal process of psychological maturation but through the protagonist's physical relocation from countryside to city, a geographical trajectory that would seem anachronistic in as

highly urbanized a country as contemporary Britain. Nonetheless, there remain good reasons to view the representation of postcolonial racialized British subjects' coming of age as a guide to the ongoing salience of the country-to-city paradigm in the current moment. Consider in this light the role Raymond Williams attributes to Empire of providing material support to British industrialization in the nineteenth century: “[t]he traditional relationship between city and country was then thoroughly rebuilt on an international scale. Distant lands became the rural areas of industrial Britain, with heavy consequent effects on its own surviving rural areas” (*Country* 280).²⁰¹ For Mikhail Bakhtin, the Goethean *Bildungsroman* registers the expanded visuality afforded by the imperialist remapping of the “country-to-the-city” metaphor on a global scale: “[t]he immensely growing real material contact (economic and then cultural) with almost all of the geographical world” (44). But even as Bakhtin acknowledges the contradictory implications of the Enlightenment’s increased cartographical and scientific determination of the globe for representative culture as imagination’s role in filling in the gaps in reality eroded, he conspicuously does not specify the perspective for which the world became newly “determined” (44). Specifically, the price of expanded determination was not just the decline of “ideal, fantastic, and utopian worlds” (43), but also the violent colonial

²⁰¹ As Williams goes on to claim, the colonies played a symbolic role in ensuring the continuing stability of Britain’s metropolitan urban centres—especially London—as imaginary externalizations of the “country,” even as the actual existing British countryside was suffering from neglect (280). The fixation on developing and expanding Empire’s reach dovetailed with the impoverishment of rural Britain, conditions that as Moretti observes provided the impetus for the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* (4).

means by which it was established and maintained.²⁰² Moretti acknowledges such encoding of hierarchies in the genre by observing that the ostensible rewards of successful *Bildung* are, historically speaking, racialized and gendered: “wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom—for a long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly on these, which made him a sort of structural *sine qua non* of the genre” (ix).²⁰³ In view of the contemporary contexts of globalization and postcolonial melancholic nationalism that inform post-imperial Britain, Williams’s argument that imperialism scales the dyad of country and city up from the national level to the global remains relatively apposite, even though first-generation diasporic migration to the former metropolitan heart of Empire indicates that the directionality of mobility can no longer be assumed. Even though globalism may be one context of Black and Asian coming-of-age narratives, they remain set at least in part within the geographical confines of the United Kingdom as nation, as Jas and the rudeboys’ journey from the suburb of Hounslow to central London demonstrates.

²⁰² In omitting the issue of perspective in his analysis of Goethe’s aesthetics, Bakhtin does not reckon with what Edward Said observes to be the Orientalist character of Goethean *Weltliteratur*: “its practical meaning and operating ideology were that, so far as literature and culture were concerned, Europe led the way and was the main subject of interest” (*Culture* 41). I’m also drawing here on Nicholas Mirzoeff’s analysis of the capacity to visualize history as “a manifestation of the authority of the visualizer” (474), and the shift from a plantation to imperial complex of visibility between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (480).

²⁰³ As Esty notes, the characteristics of the genre also shifted in response to the history of imperialism. As the *Bildungsroman* hero tends to stall along the generic path of maturation in colonial coming-of-age novels, this figure of “unseasonable youth” allegorizes the double tendency of imperialism—continued capitalist growth in the metropole and stagnation in the colonial periphery—in correspondence with the history of imperial apex and decline during the late Victorian and modernist periods (210).

Near the opening of *Londonstani*, Jas expresses his desire to escape Hounslow in explicitly racially coded terms:

In't no desi needin to kiss the white man's butt these days, an you definitely din't need to actually act like a gora. [...] Din't matter what you called them. Coconuts, Bounty bars, Oreo biscuits or any other fuckin food that was white on the inside. Good desi boys who din't ever cause no trouble. But how many a them'll still be there in Hounslow in ten years' time, workin in Heathrow fuckin airport helpin goras catch planes to places so they could turn their own skin brown? (23)

It is ironic, then, that the very person who facilitates the rudeboys' movement from marginal Hounslow to central London, Sanjay, is introduced to them in similar terms to those Jas deprecates above. Their former teacher Mr. Ashwood suggests they visit him for mentorship after he catches them trying to steal his cell phone; Sanjay lingers over his formal achievements: an Oxbridge education, and a job in the City, and a Porsche, Amit promptly dubs him "king a da coconuts" (131). After meeting with him in his penthouse flat, the rudeboys are quickly drawn into Sanjay's cell-phone shipping fraud that exploits irregularities in EU regulation (170-171). Sanjay's keenness to recruit the rudeboys has to do with their dubiously legal sideline in jail-breaking mobiles, but Jas in particular is singled out for attention by Sanjay; he mentors Jas on music, clothing, and restaurant taste, before lending him his Porsche to take Samira on a date, and getting them into a club despite their being underage (215). Suddenly, Jas seems to be the closest of the group to making good on the rudeboys' London-centred fantasies, whether fixating on membership at an exclusive west London health club where Hardjit's "*designer desiness*" can be better honed (186), or escaping bleak undifferentiated Hounslow: "[i]t's just one car park after another around here: grey fields a empty spaces, concrete bollards, those giant bins for shop rubbish, a couple a crap cars an pay-an-display ticket machines" (88).

But just as he is poised to make good on his “bling-bling” *Bildung*, Jas learns he has been set up for blackmail. Sanjay threatens to send compromising photos of him and Samira in the Porsche, unless Jas provides his accomplices access to his own father’s cellphone warehouse; when he follows through, they beat him and steal the inventory, burning the evidence of their theft (322-323).

Here the contrast between Sanjay and Jas in the generic terms of the *Bildungsroman* becomes most palpable. Sanjay has evidently lived out the normative ideal of the trajectory out of unglamorous peripheral Hounslow; if the material basis of his success involves criminal methods, it is a sanctioned form of neoliberal graft.²⁰⁴ For Jas’s part, he eschews his suburban origins no less, given his deadpan “[w]elcome to the London Borough of Hounslow, car park capital of the world, [...full of] newsagents, halal kebab shops an minicab companies with Special Autumn Airport Fares” (89). But the affinity between Jas and Sanjay goes beyond their suburban origins, in view of the fact that Jas’s efforts to ingratiate himself with Hardjit and the other rudeboys also represent a disaffiliation with his own past as an A student in GCSE history, as well as other more studious British Asian friends on the model minority path that he now claims to deplore (133, 147). The fact that Sanjay acts first as the conveyor and then as the (brutal) limit to Jas’s own *Bildung* runs counter to the cultural script that connects whiteness with class mobility (Ahmed, “Whiteness” 160). As Beverley Skeggs observes, references to “mobility”—as in the phenomenon of white flight—often underplay the issue of “who has

²⁰⁴ Busse’s reading of the novel highlights Sanjay as a neoliberal variant on the model minority myth, embodying the economic component to the postcolonial melancholic sense of the threat to white supremacy in Britain (165; 183-188).

control [...] over [...] mobility and connectivity, [...] capacity to withdraw and connect” (50). Bruce Robbins describes the welfare state’s role in literature is as conveyance for upward mobility narratives, a vocation that neoliberalism does not meaningfully alter (*Mobility* 7-8). Rather, Robbins sees neoliberalism’s meaning for upward mobility less as an end to the relationship between the narrative’s subject and institutional bolsters of their expanding capacities and agency, and more as a recasting of this relationship in antagonistic terms where enlightened individuals exploit systemic flaws in order to elevate themselves (193). Malkani seemingly agrees that the welfare state persists in the context of coming of age under neoliberalism even if he does not place it in critical perspective. In a paratext he observes that the text’s most explicit images of dominant British culture are the institutions of the welfare state (“About *Londonstani*”). For instance, a hospital medical chart reveal Jas’s full name, undermining his rudeboy “front” (340). Similarly, the rudeboys’ preference for what Gilroy calls the “hustler ethic” as path to the Black vernacular neoliberal ideal (“Fragments” 34) is evident from how they repeatedly pathologize “plebs” throughout the novel, who not only don’t know enough to go to the club on Thursday night, but who also take public transport when they do go (209). In view of Skeggs’s and Robbins’s insights into the conventional narrative links between whiteness and social mobility, I want to emphasize less the institutional sites that facilitate socialization through class elevation in the novel, but rather the educative role of its character foils, reading Sanjay in relation to Jas so as to suggest how socialization proceeds in the novel.

Malkani gives the conventional One Nation Conservative resolution to the problem of class conflict a post-racial twist as Sanjay deceives Jas into thinking there is room for them both at the top of a hierarchy in this “subculture that worships affluence” (171). In allegorical terms, just as the ostensibly aspirational white male subject (Jas) of the national narrative of reconciliation is poised to leave behind his humble suburban origins for good, it turns out that the so-called minority model (Sanjay) controls access to the urban sites of neoliberal attainment. The comparison between Sanjay’s and Jas’s *Bildung* grants a different aspect to Malkani’s reference to the appeal of rudeboy oppositionality over model minority aspiration in his article “What’s Right with Asian Boys.” Consider the contradiction of Jas’s characterization with respect to this ideal at the narrative’s outset in the suburban periphery, where he is introduced as the voice of an anthropological critique of the containment of Hardjit’s “*designer desiness*” by racial neoliberal norms, who nonetheless goes on to adopt this pose in order to pursue his own racial neoliberal ambitions of gaining access to the centre. Jas is undermined on the point of accessing his dream by Sanjay, whose seeming embodiment of the model minority ideal combined with violent proclivities Cassel Busse reads as an embodiment of post-7/7 anxieties regarding the possibility that ostensibly integrated British Asians could yet be “homegrown” terrorists (184). But these attributes embody not just the potential for racial terror; to read Jas’s progress in relation to Sanjay’s with respect to the conventional trajectory of *Bildung* is to observe the ostensible threat of the model minority in racial neoliberal terms. In generic terms, Sanjay’s attainment of racial neoliberal *Bildung* is the condition of Jas’s own exclusion, which in turn suggests that the model minority’s

ostensible social advantages are highly unstable: either their total integration is impossible to verify altogether (and they remain legible as a harbinger of the threat of racial terror) or else they are too well integrated (and their multicultural integration is understood as the cause of white disadvantage). In other words, the persistent association between whiteness and social mobility is not effectively challenged by the process of post-racial subject formation: “by firmly acknowledging a specified range of racial differences that serve to disavow any vestige of their consequence for anyone—of any race—who can fashion themselves as properly neoliberal subjects” (Mukherjee 50). So as much as Sanjay appears to win a zero-sum game of socialization at Jas’s expense, were their fortunes reversed, he would lack the cushion of white privilege as a rationale for his grievance. Jas as both narrator and focal point experiences what Slaughter would call a “dissensual” coming-of-age plot, which registers the plaint of lost white privilege with respect to a class-centric nationalist narrative of social mobility that omits race (265).

At the end, all that Jas has left is the social capital of his pseudo-anthropological expertise on Hounslow’s South Asian community; the novel closes with him chatting up a nurse by thanking her in Punjabi for refilling his water (342). On the one hand, this ending could work to valorize post-racial formation, to the extent that Jas’s Hounslow upbringing inculcated in him the social norms of what Gilroy calls Britain’s “ordinary multicultural,” where “[w]hite kids routinely speak patois and borrow strategically from Punjabi” (*Melancholia* 131). On the other hand, there are good reasons to be sceptical about heralding a post-racial solution to racial grievance in Britain. Indeed, *Londonstani* attests to the urgency of addressing the impact of increased Islamophobia in the aftermath

of 9/11 and 7/7 on British Asians generally, not just Muslims, in one of Hardjit's first satirical monologues on masculine conduct, here concerning the racist epithet "Paki":

[i]t ain't necessary for u 2 b a Pakistani to call a Pakistani a Paki [...] or for u 2 call any Paki a Paki for dat matter. But u gots 2 b call'd a Paki yourself. U gots 2 b, like an honorary Paki or someshit. Can't be callin someone a Paki less u also call'd a Paki, innit. So if you hear Jas, Amit, Ravi or me callin anyone a Paki, dat don't mean u can call him one als. We b honorary Pakis n u ain't. (6)

Even at this early stage, Jas's perception is conspicuous by being more convincing than the leader of the rudeboys' muddled rationalization: "Hardjit's thesis [...] failed to recognise [...] that] many Hindus an Sikhs'd spit blood if they ever got linked to anthing to do with Pakistan" (7). As the depiction of British Asian youth coming of age in Islamophobic and racial neoliberal times filtered through the anthropological lens of Jas's narration, *Londonstani* effectively manufactures consent for racial neoliberal social norms according to the point-counterpoint model that Esty ascribes to the *Bildungsroman* (4). Whether relating from the conspicuously safe sidelines the staged fight between Hardjit and Tariq (98-103), leader of the rudeboys' Muslim rivals, or criticizing himself for feeling powerless to avoid repeating the homophobic and misogynous "proper words" dictated by Hardjit's Rudeboy Rule #4 (45-46), Jas maintains a cautious distance from ever fully embodying *desi* masculinity. Most troublingly, the conclusion depicts Jas as continuing to discount the possibility that he may have implicated himself in Arun's suicide by advising him to stand up to his mother, which in turn ignores the fact that respecting cultural traditions—however constraining and oppressive—represents a necessary survival strategy for some British Asian teens (323). These disaffiliations from his friends render him an exceptional (because tolerable) neoliberal multicultural subject

with whom identification is possible through his reformulation of rudeboy identity to suit multicultural formalist limits, which conversely detracts from the potential legitimacy of British Asian grievance.²⁰⁵ While the rudeboys' disenchantment is no justification for their violence, misogyny, or homophobia, their assiduity to perform hypermasculinity nonetheless do need to be situated in relation to troubling sociohistorical events of the past (colonial legacies) and present (the increasing racism of post-7/7 Britain). This foreclosure of cultural narrative is what Jas in his role as anthropological interpreter seems to facilitate, a repudiation of the impact of racial histories or pasts on contemporary British Asian masculinities: a perspective that Malkani's paratextual commentary indicates he shares. As the novel tacitly acknowledges, Jas's peers cannot simply opt out of being racialized or the religious codes their domestic lives entail. Sanjay's apparent success within the neoliberal economy is also attenuated by his racialization, which makes his criminality available according to the recent tendency to put asymmetries in the social contract down to the unfairness of catering to the "special interests" people of colour, which screens from view the systemic cutthroat nature of neoliberal economics that predicate upward mobility on being ever more "leanly and meanly autonomous" (Robbins 193).²⁰⁶ As a coming-of-age narrative, *Londonstani* ratifies racial neoliberal cultural scripts through its overt drama of a (failed) post-racial performance of *desi*

²⁰⁵ See also the critique of the cultural work of contemporary discourses of multicultural tolerance with respect to Muslims, in Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 148-175.

²⁰⁶ Busse has effectively read Sanjay's characterization with reference to Jodi Dean's discussion of the doublet of "criminal" and "consumer" as neoliberal archetypes (165), and the tendency to designate racialized subjects as inherently "criminal" is a well-established of racist discourse in general (Hall et al), and as applied to British Asians in particular (Worley).

identity. Malkani's novel thus works to re-centre white masculinity as the presumed subject of socialization, which at the same time serves to downplay the persistence of material and affective disadvantages of actual racialization in contemporary Britain.

From Kilburn to Hampstead and Back Again: Gentrification and the Post-Racial

Model Minority in *NW*

First, while Kilburn may have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares. [...] People's routes through the place, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make [...] between here and the rest of the world vary enormously. [...] Moreover, not only does "Kilburn," then, have many identities [...] it is also [...] (or ought to be) impossible to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history.

—Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place"

Near the end of Zadie Smith's *NW*, Natalie (*née* Keisha) Blake bumps into an acquaintance from her youth, Nathan Bogle, who joins her on a lengthy walk around Northwest London.²⁰⁷ On the way, the pair catches up after having fallen out of touch over the years, and as they traverse Hampstead Heath the following exchange takes place:

[Natalie:] You never came up here?

[Nathan:] Nope.

[Natalie:] Never. You never were on Hampstead Heath. When we were kids. You never came up here.

[Nathan:] Why would I come up here?

[Natalie:] I don't know—because it's free, because it's beautiful. Trees, fresh air, ponds, grass.

[Nathan:] Weren't my scene.

[Natalie:] What do you mean it wasn't your scene? It's everybody's scene. It's nature! (278)

²⁰⁷ A note on nomenclature: to reflect the name change Natalie goes through, I will refer to her as Keisha only when referring to points in the narrative prior to her name change, and use Natalie in all other instances.

Natalie and Nathan’s divergent life trajectories, which had taken them apart before bringing them back together, inform the contrast in their reactions to this London landmark. Regular outings to Hampstead Heath fit the mould of Natalie’s upbringing as a Pentecostal Christian who seems to have bootstrapped her way out of Caldwell—a fictionalized variant of the South Kilburn housing estate—to become the postfeminist ideal, a composite of “highly educated black woman,” “successful lawyer,” “banker’s wife,” and mother (260). Meanwhile, it makes sense that Nathan, the high school heartthrob who was “good at everything,” is disinterested in the park because his own route off the estate was derailed on another kind of green space: the competitive football pitch of a Premiership trial, where a tendon problem precipitated what Nathan calls his “bad luck” (267): being expelled from Brayton grammar school and ending up in a street-involved existence that includes drug use and sex trafficking (162). According to the typology of racial aspiration that *Londonstani* posits, Natalie’s proximity to the model minority ideal would earn her only resentment—indeed, the first mention of her in the novel is as a “coconut” (9)—whereas Nathan fits the profile of the Black masculine “hustler” that the rudeboys idealize.²⁰⁸

The glaring contrast between Nathan and Natalie’s social trajectories recalls the problematic exceptionalism of normative racialized coming-of-age narratives that I discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the diminishment of collective resources to facilitate upwardly mobility that Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism” (10). Whereas the contrast between *Brick Lane* and *Minaret* shows that the Islamophobic narrative of the

²⁰⁸ On the “hustler” as a figure of Black masculine aspiration that accommodates itself to racism, see Gilroy and Mercer (“Fragments” 31, 144).

oppressed Muslim women acquiring agency through migrating to the Global North also serves as a cover story for the neoliberal clampdown on material support for women's agency everywhere, *Londonstani* and *NW* show that this civilizational framing of migration is just one possible alibi for racial neoliberalism. Paul Gilroy highlights the current celebration of exceptionalism in Black British culture, as he argues that the popularity of celebrities like *Apprentice*-winning entrepreneur Tim Campbell and Olympic gold medal-winning runner Mo Farah provides moral cover for a neoliberal Britain that finds addressing or even acknowledging structural racism inconvenient: "the story of striving—today's 'aspiration'—becomes more generally appealing when it is presented as the vindication or redemption of racialized forms of both natural difference and social suffering" ("Fragments" 27). The exceptionalist success stories of Black vernacular neoliberalism mask the downsides of neoliberal multicultural formalism for Britain's racialized population. Nisha Kapoor outlines major features of this governmentality, including: post-7/7 anti-terror legislation that rationalizes imperialist foreign policy, the increasingly racist policing of citizenship, and the "withdrawal of New Labour [not to mention the post-2010 Conservative government] from more egalitarian measures of provision and commitment to addressing material inequalities" (1039). So even as striving after the model minority ideal could also be described as a means of avoiding what Tyler calls "social abjection" (9), *NW* demonstrates that those who approach this racial neoliberal ideal still incur steep affective and social costs in finding belonging on such exceptionalist terms.

In an early review of the novel, Adam Mars-Jones effectively accuses Smith of downplaying the entanglements of race and neoliberalism in his critique of the novel's focus on the perceived middlebrow angst of its two central women characters: Natalie and her childhood friend Leah Hanwell. The broader contours of both women's lives attest to relative comfort and social mobility, but their doubts about their achievements ring false to this reviewer: "*NW* even abuts on the territory of the 'Hampstead novel' [...], that antique dismissive term for novels in which middle-class people alternately gloat and lament over their privileges." Mars-Jones is at least apologetic for resuscitating this critical sneer against woman-centred fiction of the 1960s and 1970s by the likes of Margaret Drabble, Penelope Lively, and Fay Weldon (Kellaway). But what would it mean to take seriously the idea of Smith as an inheritor of this derogated tradition? Many critics have foregrounded the marked tonal shift away from the optimism of Smith's earlier works towards a focus on seemingly more private struggles in *NW*. For Alexander Beaumont, the latter novel revises the "earlier celebration of flexible models of subjectivity" in *White Teeth* (203), and David Marcus suggests the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity that followed it influenced the more sober reflective mode of *NW* (71-72); indeed, as Smith herself has observed, "[i]t's true enough that my novels were once sunnier places" ("On Optimism"). This change is in part a stylistic one, as suddenly Smith's interventionist narratorial voice—whose repeated adjudication of the significances of *White Teeth*'s profuse cosmopolitan referentiality was the source of James Wood's well-known designation of Smith's style as "hysterical realism" ("Human" n. pag.)—is altogether less consistent:

the narrator no longer relies on the convenience of stylish aphorisms to reassure us that figures like Natalie will survive their personal and familial crises. Whatever beauty exists here is woven into the fabric of tragedy, as tender and exquisitely delineated snapshots of the physical world turn up in situations of calamity. (James 211)

Here David James points to the lack of diegetic interruption as informing the more pessimistic outlook on multicultural London in *NW*. I read this stylistic shift of Smith towards mimetic realism along the lines proposed by Alberto Carbajal and by Lynn Wells: building on Carbajal's emphasis on how "[t]he physical came first, always" for Leah in the course of developing a queer postcolonial reading of the text (6), and Wells's observation that only Leah is aware of the secret of Natalie's sexual drive from their teenaged closeness (108), I want to think through the coincidence between Smith's newfound emphasis on physicality with the muting of her narrative interventionism. Specifically, I will argue that the irruptive potential of Natalie's motivations in all areas of her life manifests primarily through moments of interpersonal, often physical, encounter. I read these moments as key ruptures in Natalie's ongoing process of accreting normative qualifications of marriage, career, and property, attesting to what Berlant might call the "crisis ordinariness" of the Hampstead novel under racial neoliberalism (10).

The allegedly middlebrow angst of the novel's protagonists reflects their inevitable yet not necessarily willing entanglement in the economic gentrification of Kilburn itself, as well as a symbolic form of gentrification of their own selves. As the neighbourhood that prompted Doreen Massey's well-known theorization of a "global sense of place," the diversity of Kilburn and other outer London boroughs paved the way for the city's global reputation for hybridity and cosmopolitanism in the context of "Cool

Britannia,” the name for the optimistic multicultural *zeitgeist* that followed the mid-1990s election of New Labour, a mood that Smith notably distilled in her first novel, *White Teeth* (2000). Massey’s reading of Kilburn also points to an emphatically different genealogy of the suburbs’ shifting associations with race in the British cultural imaginary. After further historicizing the urban geographical engagements of Black and Asian British writing, I will consider two encounters in which Natalie herself becomes imbricated in the emergent suburban norms intruding on her neighbourhood. These encounters are reminders of the collective sociality that grounded the sense of familiarity that draws Natalie back to Kilburn, and thus function simultaneously to unsettle the individualistic trajectory of her post-racial *Bildung*.

The encounter between Nathan and Natalie on the Heath that I referenced above is recast in light of the contested quality of the suburban and urban duality of spatial associations in *NW*, as well as the influence of broader shifts in the intersections between race and class in British culture on those associations. In stating that Hampstead Heath isn’t his scene, Nathan identifies with an essentialized urban Black masculinity more in keeping with an enduring grittier strain of Black British fiction, an aesthetic which for Modhumita Roy definitely does not include Smith’s previous, more cosmopolitan works (103). *NW* is not much of a departure for Smith, despite (or indeed because of) Nathan’s presence, for while the narrative largely centres on Leah and Natalie’s expression of misgivings from a privileged vantage point, Nathan’s role in the novel is primarily liminal, as a threatening outsider figure. The discrepancy between these characters’ “scenes,” however, has consequences for how gentrification impacts them. Where Natalie

chalks up her familiarity with the Heath to childhood picnics with her family's Pentecostal church, Nathan's retort suggests that her experience of upward mobility better explains her comfort in such spaces that are racially coded as white (278); from his perspective, she clearly embodies the model minority. Certainly, Black masculinity in *NW* is not limited to Nathan's perspective; bifurcating the novel's two major sections, "host" (centring the adult Leah's perspective) and "visitation" (a numbered series of episodes from Natalie's upbringing through to her adulthood), is "ghost," a shorter interlude focused on Felix Cooper, another former "Caldie" kid who narrowly avoids a similar spiral of addiction to Nathan, leaving behind drug use and marginal employment through a new relationship and an apprenticeship as a mechanic. Felix's tentative steps towards "Black vernacular" neoliberal *Bildung* are cut short when Nathan (allegedly) murders him, seemingly at random and immediately prior to his ramble with Natalie. Beaumont notes that Felix and Nathan are linked not through the stereotyped association of Black masculinity and criminality, but rather by an inability to escape Caldwell given the "worldview predicated on individual enterprise," a worldview the expectations of which Natalie has proven so adept at meeting (199).²⁰⁹ While the conventional historical association between twentieth-century suburban expansion and the emergence of a racialized split between suburb and city through white flight is in evidence in London, urban Britain in the post-Windrush period has been characterized by an increasing "ordinariness" of suburban multiculturalism (Procter 129). The anxieties stirred by the

²⁰⁹ The fact that Nathan joins Natalie on her walk just after allegedly murdering Felix suggests that an alibi is one possible motive for his willingness to go in her company outside of his "scene" and on to the Heath.

late 1990s phenomenon of what Rupa Huq calls “brown flight” recalls my reading of *Londonstani* (13).²¹⁰ As Huq contends, the literary representation of an upwardly mobile racialized presence in the suburbs has been focused more on the British Asian than the Black British community, which in turn makes the ostensibly suburban focus of Smith’s novel a notable exception to this tendency.

As my above analysis of *Londonstani* established, the acuity of the conventional association of the suburbs with banality and whiteness is waning given shifts in the actual urban geography of London. Yet as Nathan’s rejoinder to Natalie shows in deprecating her seeming comfort with Hampstead Heath, one suburban space in which the residual impression of the suburbs as white space lingers particularly strongly. The way that Nathan’s barb recalls Mars-Jones’s critical condescension points to an intersectional genealogy for this enduring impression of the suburbs as inauthentic, both as an actually existing space and as a setting for cultural texts. Apart from their historical association with whiteness, the literary history of the suburb in twentieth-century fiction is as a setting for ostensibly middlebrow women-centred narratives. In part, this reading represents a masculinist backlash to literary representations of the 1970s feminist maxim that the “personal is political”;²¹¹ Hampstead, the neighbourhood that takes its name from the nearby Heath, is taken to be emblematic of the complaints of middle-class privilege

²¹⁰ Claire Dwyer et al. also observe the variegated distribution of religious minority communities, including Muslims, throughout suburban Britain (408).

²¹¹ On the feminist challenge to the conventional gendered account of the public-private split, see for example Nancy Fraser’s classic article, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” For a historiography of the intersections of class politics with 1970s British feminist activism, see Beckett 220-233.

masquerading as feminism.²¹² Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election campaign was a watershed moment for the cultural reputation of suburbia, as its messaging effectively rearticulated British nationalist values as Conservative middlebrow ones through a celebration of everyday suburban life.²¹³ The deftness with which Thatcher rhetorically capitalized on suburbia's associations with the private and domestic sphere is evident from the fact that her infamous catchphrase—"there is no such thing as society"—was first published in an interview she gave to the lifestyle magazine *Woman's Own*, with its presumptively suburban readership. Thatcher's populism also appealed to lower-middle-class values of aspiration and hard work, which are often dismissed in similarly gendered terms as the suburbs (Felski, "Nothing" 43). While as Jo Littler observes, in "figuring the nation as a household with a consumer purse [Thatcher] created a gendered appeal" (63), this discursive manoeuvre is a means of playing up the contributions of white women to the racially exclusive national allegory of the "Two Nations," the class-based model of national political reconciliation I discussed in the Introduction. In literary terms, Jean-Thomas Tremblay observes the political potential of inaugural so-called Hampstead novels of the 1970s, as they "mobilize the material spaces of elite and bourgeois institutions to stage a drama, and at times a comedy, of liberal collapse" (Tremblay,

²¹² This specific reputation of Hampstead is ahistorical, according to Margaret Drabble, the writer with whom the "Hampstead novel" is most often identified: "Drabble [...] explains patiently that Hampstead was not at all as people imagined. It used not to be rich at all: 'It used to be intellectual, progressive, benign.' Nor was it exclusively middle class, or, in all its aspects, picturesque" (Kellaway).

²¹³ See Alan Walks's analysis of the growth in the geographical polarization of political party support between (Conservative) suburbs and (Labour) urban centres (506-510). On the gendered management of post-industrial malaise through rearticulating

n.pag.).²¹⁴ The subgenre's comedy of liberal collapse lapses into the cruelly optimistic neoliberal present that *NW* depicts, as suburban affluence is much more precarious in gentrifying settings like Kilburn, which make social contact between the winners and losers in this upwardly mobile trajectory much more likely, and more likely to be fraught.²¹⁵ In this light, the exceptionalist model of uplift generates the kind of resentment that leads Nathan to snipe at Natalie for her racial inauthenticity, as her comfort amid Hampstead's exclusivity becomes proof for him that her proximity to the model minority ideal also makes her fit a national allegory that retains a racially exclusionary premise.

The convergence between the genres of the *Bildungsroman* and the Hampstead novel indicated above extends beyond their engagement with the normative features of the good life, however, to demonstrate their evanescent constitution. The fact that both genres are difficult to define is appropriate to the ambiguous characteristics of suburban sociality. Whereas Marc Redfield understands the *Bildungsroman* as a “phantom genre” (57)—inasmuch as relatively few of even the most often-cited examples contain very many of its conventional tropes (202)—Kate Kellaway more explicitly describes the Hampstead novel as something of a pseudo-genre, noting that relatively few of the alleged practitioners of this “slippery mirage of a genre” actually lived in or set many books in the area itself. This shared quality may be explained in *NW*'s case as a feature of

²¹⁴ For more on how canonical ideas about emergent subjectivity and its associated milestones derogate the woman-centred *Bildungsroman*, see Felski (133-138). Moretti points out the genre's historically masculinist premises (ix).

²¹⁵ Felski might read Mars-Jones's critical bias as towards a conventional modernist view: “the horror of the mass in modernism is often a horror of a newly visible and expanding lower middle class. The social threat, in England at least, now lies less in the revolting proletariat than in the consuming petite bourgeoisie” (36).

representing London's suburbs in a contemporary moment. Ged Pope's study of suburban London fiction takes the semantic indeterminacy of primarily domestic spaces to be its defining feature (11). This problem of definition becomes heightened given how contemporary gentrification renders the affective associations of the suburb ever less applicable to distinct geographical areas; in this context, to continue to make implicitly racializing distinctions between inner cities and suburbia is to cite what are effectively spatial phantom formations. The "immaterial suburb" is Pope's phrase for this phenomenon of lapsed urban-suburban distinctions (165), which he theorizes in relation to Smith's depictions of various London suburbs in *White Teeth* and *NW* as evocative of a "crisis of the self" (168-175). As these distinctions blur in the context of neoliberal individualism, subjects shaped through radically disparate cultural experiences (of suburb and city, of neoliberal achievement or failure) are increasingly likely to encounter one another, even as they are less equipped to bridge the gaps in their experience. Early in the novel, as Leah and her mother take a bus from the nearby borough of Willesden to Kilburn, Smith's free indirect discourse records the landscape as it passes by the bus windows: "[u]ngentrified, ungentrifiable. Boom and bust never come here. Here bust is permanent" (42). And yet, in 2014, two years after *NW*'s release, two of the towers of South Kilburn estate, the basis for Caldwell, were demolished as part of a £600 million regeneration scheme. At the same time, Smith herself published an essay decrying the closure of nearby Willesden public library as proof of the gentrification of her childhood neighbourhood, the setting for *White Teeth* ("London Blues").

NW bears out these real-world challenges to Leah's confidence in her neighbourhood's capacity to withstand the pressures to gentrify. Part of the problem is that even unwilling individuals such as Leah are subject to similar kinds of pressures as the spaces they inhabit, to refashion themselves in an image more suited to the needs of capital, or what Sarah Schulman calls the gentrification of the mind: "[g]entrification [of the mind] replaces most people's experiences with the perceptions of the privileged and calls that reality. In this way gentrification is [... dependent] on telling us that things are better than they are—and this is supposed to make us feel happy" (93-94). Schulman's concept draws attention to how every subject is forced to modulate their ideas of happiness and make minor collusions with oppressive power structures in the course of everyday life.²¹⁶ The denial of self-knowledge associated with the gentrification of Natalie's mind leads her to believe that by returning to Kilburn she will have made her striving worthwhile. A triumphant return would append to her lifetime of effort a clear goal that, Smith suggests, eluded Keisha even while excelling at school as a child:

Wasn't it possible that what others mistook for intelligence was in fact only a sort of mutation of the will? She could sit in one place for longer than other children, be bored for hours without complaint [...] She was unable to glean real satisfaction from accidents. In the child's mind a breach now appeared: between what she believed she knew of herself, *essentially*, and her essence as others seemed to understand it. (155-156, emphasis original)

The problem of Keisha's "will" is that over the course of her life, she seems to buy into others' perception of her as defining; that others see her drive as Keisha/Natalie's defining trait recalls Rey Chow's account of the model minority who must aspire to a

²¹⁶ In situating Natalie in relation to "gentrification of the mind," I'm guided by how Sarah Brophy applies Schulman's concept in her own reading of *NW* (2-3).

vision of economic excellence that hovers between aspirational whiteness and a sanctioned performance of racial difference (95). In this sense, Schulman’s analysis of the affective component of gentrification, when taken together with Pope’s conception of the immaterial suburb, brings home the significance I see in how *NW* evokes the Hampstead novel. In narrating Natalie’s attempts to re-establish and maintain sustaining relationalities that her pursuit of racial neoliberal striving had led her to neglect, the novel is not simply providing an itinerary of bourgeois dissatisfaction as Mars-Jones implies. Rather, the gentrifying spatial flux of Kilburn reflects the uncertain place to which striving has led Natalie, having strained ties with the very community whose validation of her efforts would mean the most, suggesting that the model minority myth as normative aspiration does not guarantee fulfillment even to those who most closely approximate it.

Kilburn Returns: Post-Racial Encounters of the (Immaterially) Suburban Kind

Nat, the girl done good from their thousand-kid madhouse; done too good, maybe, to recall where she came from. To live like this you would have to forget everything that came before. How else could you manage?

—Smith, *NW* (55).

An overwhelming sense of “suburban shame” is what impels Natalie to go wandering in Nathan’s company (266). Her shameful self-perception is a result of being discovered by her husband Frank to be living a double life, using an email account—conspicuously under her former name, “KeishaNW@gmail.com” (259), which Frank doesn’t recognize as he knows her only as Natalie—to tentatively arrange sexual liaisons with other men (266). Wells regards Natalie’s need for secrecy as an attempt to negotiate something akin to the gentrification of the mind: “secrecy is essential to individual liberty but is faced by

the spatial demands of social control which is essentially panoptic, in that all individuals become perhaps uncomfortably complicit in each other's oppression" (99-100). Pope observes that the suburb's undifferentiated appearance has long been thought to hinder morally clear perception, raising the suspicion that no-one is who they seem to be and that they hide transgressions just below the surface (39-40). In this context, Natalie's use of the racialized birth name that recalls her Caldwell upbringing in her secret email account suggests the artificiality of the many different performances required of her by the various social roles she plays, all of which effectively estrange her from herself: "[d]aughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican Drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic" (245). Natalie's return to the neighbourhood of her birth comes not just with a new name—she discarded "Keisha" for the more ethnically ambiguous "Natalie" along with her Pentecostal faith for (neo-)liberal politics at university (178)—but also with a corporate law career, a marriage to Frank De Angelis, a half-Trinidadian investment banker and scion of Italian aristocracy, two children (Naomi and Spike) whose appearance provokes fawning comment (292), and, last but not least, a semi-detached house with a view of a park (239).²¹⁷ Given that these dubious comforts of suburban identity attend Natalie's return to Kilburn, her trajectory can be read as a subjective embodying immaterial suburban life, which raises the question: what kind of identitarian

²¹⁷ On the utopian symbolism of the interracial child, see Ibrahim (vii).

crisis will she undergo as a result of the shame that striving and failing to consistently meet its identitarian demands provokes in her?

“Host,” the section of the narrative focused on Keisha/Natalie, focuses on how conditioned her imagination is by her striving towards what could be called the non-place of post-racial attainment. There is a sense of mediation to Natalie’s experience of the events of her own upwardly mobile trajectory of striving by narrating them through a numbered series of episodes, that the events of her life are a series of episodes that don’t quite coalesce into a *Bildung* upon which she can reflect, much less offer a mature vantage point. Her pursuit of a legal career bears out these qualities of fragmentation and alienation as it has done more than take her away from Caldwell physically. The affective cost of transcending social hierarchies of class, race, and gender by escaping social housing and qualifying through the elitist Inns of Court to become a corporate lawyer is that her claim to a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood is threatened too. While she begins her career in a Harlesden legal aid clinic, she is unable to maintain the fiction that she identifies with those whose efforts at striving have not been as effective as hers (219). Similarly, when she agrees to speak at a Black women’s collective funded by Leah’s lottery fund agency, Natalie touts truisms of meritocratic racial uplift such as “time management” and “respecting oneself and one’s partner,” but inwardly contradicts this advice by musing enviously on the sexual chemistry so evident between Leah and her Algerian-Guadeloupian husband Michel, a physical connection absent in her own marriage (252). Throughout *NW*, then Natalie’s characterization frequently lampoons the notion that the individual’s success against the odds substitutes for a more generalized

racial uplift, drawing attention to the dissatisfactions of even ostensibly successful racial neoliberal *Bildung*. Consider the description of a lavishly lazy brunch she and her husband Frank have with her college ex- Imran and his wife Ameeta: “[t]hey were all four of them providing a service for the rest of the people in the café, simply by being here. They were the ‘local vibrancy’ to which the estate agents referred. For this reason too, they needn’t concern themselves too much with politics. They simply *were* political facts, in their very persons” (221, emphasis original).²¹⁸ The distanced narration of the brunch scene implies a satirical edge; the inference is that those taken in by estate agents’ promise of “local vibrancy”—an audience likely to fetishize the multicultural group at the next brunch table—are likely to be (white) gentrifiers, seeking to buy into Kilburn’s “global sense of place.”

When seen through the lens of racial formation, scenes like this one suggests that the collusions with normative hierarchies that Schulman names through her metaphor of the gentrification of the mind amount to the production of post-racial identity. One attestation of the individualized benefits of such collusion emerges in an anecdote she relates at brunch: concerning her and Imran’s plan during their days at Bristol to take a convoy of ambulances to provide relief in the Bosnian civil war, the story (and convoy) ends with Natalie breaking up with Imran before they actually leave (220). Thus, Natalie’s ostensible politicization while an undergraduate at Bristol does not result in her actual politicization; with gentrification of the mind, personal experience that *sounds* political is effectively re-contained as cultural capital. The events of the anecdote itself

²¹⁸ On the depthless quality of the racial neoliberal aspirations Natalie is drawn into, see Beaumont (199) and Brophy (7).

are most beneficial as they removed impediments to her racial neoliberal *Bildung*, as going to university and dating occasioned her break both with her religious faith and her first long-term monogamous relationship with Rodney, a studious boy from her Pentecostal church, who follows her to Bristol from Brayton (183). Rodney's lack of class-climbing *savoir faire* eventually renders him a liability as far as Keisha's upwardly mobile trajectory is concerned, and she dispenses with him as she dispenses with her name. Not long after splitting up with Rodney, Natalie ends up meeting and dating her future husband Frank, whose blend of classed and mixed-race privilege initially makes her bristle: "[h]e was made of parts Natalie considered mutually exclusive [...] Like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by Ralph Lauren" (179). Leah, while visiting her friend in Bristol just after the breakup, relays a chance encounter with Natalie's ex: "I just saw Rodney in Sainsburys! [...] I looked in his basket. He had a meat pie and two cans of ginger beer and a bottle of that hot sauce [i.e. the general] you put on everything" (187). As Jodi Melamed observes, consent for neoliberal multicultural norms hinges on "[e]steeming some people of color of the same race, according to conventional categories, [which] makes it easier to accept that others of the same race may be treated unequally" (153). Natalie's striving is identifiably neoliberal because her acquisition of past political experience is safely neutralized through the anecdote; she learns to spice her meals not with hot sauce but rather with enticing stories of a youthful radicalism safely confined in the past. Leah's affirmation of her friend's decision to disentangle herself from Rodney is also a classist rationalization, in the sneer with which she lists Rodney's groceries: such signifiers of working-class Caribbean roots must be

dispensed with in the *Bildung* of the striver. But the cautionary tale of the shopping basket does not totally convince Natalie; following her subsequent move back to Caldwell, she finds herself nostalgic for the gustatory delights of her mother's cooking and sets out for a Caribbean grocery store. On the way to the store, Natalie begins to reflect with self-satisfaction on the image of parental grit she projects in pushing cranky toddlers through the rain. Smith contrasts Natalie's desire for strangers' approbation for this performance—she “looked up to see if anyone was admiring her maternal calm in the face of such impossible provocation”—with a decidedly different scene of motherhood playing out at the checkout, as a woman ahead of her in line with four children is caught trying to shoplift (243). The narrator intervenes to observe that “Natalie Blake had completely forgotten what it was like to be poor. It was a language she'd stopped being able to speak, or even to understand” (243). In this moment of forgetting, Natalie's upwardly mobile path has opened up a gulf of class and racial difference that disconnects her from the culture of her upbringing.

I want now to turn to an encounter that shows how Natalie's imbrication in post-racial *Bildung* complicates her relationship with Kilburn as a gentrifying space, focusing here on her own mobilization of stranger danger discourse in an encounter with a teenager on a Kilburn playground. After the teen—named Marcus—is drawn to her attention by an old white woman who had taken abuse from him after asking that he put his cigarette out, Natalie approaches him with her daughter Naomi in her arms, and a crowd quickly joins her to collectively berate the teenager for his conduct. In his aggressive response, Marcus presumes ownership over his turf in class and race terms—“if someone comes

disrespecting me [...] I'm gonna tell them to get off my fucking case" and "[y]ou can't really chat to me. I'm Hackney, so" (247). One of the concerned citizens gathered to inveigh against the teen's antisocial behavior, a Rastafarian social worker, warns him of an ominously unspecified bad future while taking him to be symbolic of a broader social whole: "[y]ou're the reason why we're where we are right now" (247). The scene recalls the racist implications of media hand-wringing regarding youth and crime following the August 2011 urban riots that swept the country after the Metropolitan police shot Mark Duggan. Mainstream commentators found a convenient alibi for the multi-ethnic composition of the rioters, of which Conservative pundit David Starkey's comment on *BBC Newsnight* is exemplary: "the whites have become black" (*Newsnight*). Areas like Kilburn, with its concentration of social housing and racially mixed population have, in a post-imperial moment, been reconstructed as a "new empire within Britain" (Rushdie 134, Tyler 58), which makes their populations available as candidates for social stigmas new, and as in the case of this resuscitated moral panic over "going native," old.

Over the course of this scene, shifts in Natalie's affect suggest that the ties of neighbourhood and race retain a residual hold over her nominally post-racial subjectivity (246). Initially, Natalie takes the situation in with an insouciant but knowing eye, fitting Marcus and his friends' desultory posturing readily into a remembered archive of adolescent feeling: she knows that the way the girl sits between her boyfriend's legs resting elbows on his knees is called "lounging" or "plotting." Even as she makes a show of joining in and telling Marcus off she remains recalcitrant, reflecting inwardly that "she really did not have strong feelings about second-hand smoke, particularly when it was

outside in the open air” (247). She soon finds herself unable to account for the growing intensity of her response: “Natalie did not know why she was shouting. She began to fear she was making herself ridiculous” (248). This disidentification with her own actions suggests the mimetic emphasis of the narrative of upward mobility Natalie lives out; having pushed herself on to a post-racial trajectory, she is now swept along by events irrespective of her intentions. But when Marcus retorts that he is not facing the kind of future that the Rastafarian implies because he has a paying job, suddenly Natalie can contribute more effectively to the group’s condemnation of Marcus. She says, “I’m a lawyer mate. That’s paid. That’s really paid,” before delivering the *coup de grace*:

[i]f you had any real self-respect or self-esteem, argued Natalie, one person asking you to put a cigarette out in a fucking playground would not register as an attack on your precious little ego. [...] This last point of Natalie’s was a great popular success, and she sensed her victory as surely as if a jury had gasped at a cache of photographs in her hand. Easing into triumph, she accidentally locked eyes with Marcus—briefly causing her to stutter—but soon she found a void above his right shoulder and addressed all further remarks to this vanishing point. (249)

To an onlooker otherwise unaware of Natalie’s background, her remonstrance with this teen conveys upper-middle-class maternal propriety without necessarily indicating her long-time connection to the area. Yet she finds herself enlisted in a gentrifying project somewhat unaccountably, in this case, through leading a moralizing enforcement of anti-smoking bylaws, which have since their origins as work safety regulations gradually accrued the classed connotation of facilitating the exclusion of working-class people from public spaces like playgrounds (Thunderstorm n. pag.). Following Gilroy, she is the striving neighbourhood girl made good playing out the respectability politics of Black vernacular neoliberalism (“Fragments” 27). Her unwillingness to meet Marcus’s eye

suggests an abiding awareness that there might be grounds on which others would contest the authenticity of own relationship to Kilburn. The thematic function of this moment of misrecognition is to acknowledge that her success on neoliberal terms renders her return to the neighbourhood less triumphant than she might wish, as her own belonging is not much less open to question than Marcus's.

Natalie's performance is not consistently hollow—she is effective when she snarls an ironic repetition of Marcus's defence, "I get paid, I do all right" (249) before completing her classist put-down—and she has command of an idiom that gives her away as feeling a stake in the neighbourhood that a simple gentrifier might not. Once she was not Natalie but Keisha, a local who wouldn't have thought twice to say "[j]ust put it out, man," but who now can't recall when she last ended a sentence with "man" (248), the sort of speech that makes a person more easily identifiable as having come from Caldwell. At the same time, since moving back to the neighbourhood, her *bona fides* as a "Caldie" kid have been repeatedly questioned: by her sister Cheryl who sees the disparagement behind her offer to help her move out of a crowded Caldwell flat—" [t]his is a nice place! There's a lot worse. You done all right out of it" (228); by her childhood friend Layla Dean whom she regales with a litany of her achievements at a boozy lunch ostensibly about reconnecting—" [y]ou always wanted to make it clear you weren't like the rest of us. You're still doing it (244)—and even by Leah, who can't believe Natalie's defensiveness when she compares bankers to "parasites": "[o]h, Nat. Everybody's nice. Everybody works hard. Everybody's a friend of Frank's. What's that got to do with anything? (217)." I understand her outburst at Marcus, which punctuates this series of disillusioning

incidents, as a strange encounter in Sara Ahmed's sense, one in which Natalie's unexpectedly vigorous affect in prosecuting the complaint against a teenaged smoker becomes the register of these prior histories of encounter. Here again, the lack of a narrative voice interceding to square the difference between the so-called "circle of judgement" and restive cigarette-smoking youth through an appeal to multicultural social holism is notable (James 211). The comparatively muted aesthetic of multicultural London in *NW*, "post-hysterics" in David Marcus's phrase, becomes evident through the repeated thwarting of Natalie's longed-for sense of identification with others, a pattern of failed connection that forces her to face up to how the exceptionality of her experience of neoliberal multicultural success hampers her ability to relate with others (Marcus 67). For Schulman, the gentrification of the mind consists in a reluctance to face up to the discomfiting aspects of normative aspirations: "[w]e have a concept of happiness that excludes asking uncomfortable questions and saying things that are true but which might make us and others uncomfortable. [...] As a result, we have a society in which the happiness of the privileged is based on never starting the process towards becoming accountable" (97). For Natalie, her own inability to account for her own investment in getting Marcus to stop smoking derives from how her incessant racial neoliberal striving has estranged her from questioning motivation. Frustrated by others' refusal to celebrate her own gentrified sense of happiness, her belief that she can still claim a sense of belonging in her old neighbourhood now that she has a racial neoliberal variant of the "role models" she once sung about in Pentecostal choir with Layla (164), she redirects her own sense of being judged by making Marcus feel that he is not welcome either.

But the detached manner in which Natalie joins in the effort to stop Marcus smoking on the playground operates not only on an individual register of these prior histories of encounter, but also suggests her uncertainty regarding her own implication in the broader social changes in the spatialization of race taking place in gentrifying contemporary London. In these broader terms, Natalie's attempt to police the behaviour of Marcus, himself a stranger to the area being from the east London neighbourhood of Hackney, conveys from both their perspectives the increasing immateriality of the spatial references crucial to establishing authenticity. She can summon the necessary front to match Marcus, but her detachment suggests uncertainty about her own grounding, given she wants standing in the seemingly opposed terms of upward mobility and an authentic "Caldie." Marcus's own presumption that "Hackney" remains a reliable signifier within this urban symbolic economy is equally questionable, given Hackney's status at the time of the novel's setting as a primary site of redevelopment and property speculation in the lead-up to the 2012 London Olympics.²¹⁹ While neither Marcus nor Natalie can rely any longer on neighbourhood origin as signifier of a nebulous urban authenticity, she is a party to producing Marcus and his friends as strangers both gender and racial terms. Her maternal embodiment—recall that she is holding her toddler Naomi in her arms—attaches to her a vulnerability that is of a piece with the deference that the white woman's age might be expected to inspire, while being a "real paid" lawyer confers unambiguous social status. In the context of Caldwell, the fact of Natalie's Blackness suddenly

²¹⁹ In Alberto Duman's words, by 2012—one year after *NW*'s publication—the impact of Olympics-related redevelopment had made Hackney "the frontline of gentrification" in East London (674).

becomes a more significant source of authority than the advantages of her gender and class positioning, confirming Mary Pattillo’s contention that in circumstances of contemporary neighbourhood change, “*the black position becomes many positions, split along lines of seniority in the neighborhood, profession, home ownership, age, and taste. Along any one of these axes, one side may launch efforts to shame, stigmatize, silence, or ‘disappear’ the other*” (3).²²⁰ As my reading of Natalie’s characterization suggests, the “Kilburn” position, so to speak, has become similarly variegated in intersectional terms. Importantly, even as Natalie attempts to trade on the authority this position supposedly grants in contests over inner city credibility, her anxiety that she does not live up to it—indeed, that she never did—produces her defensive reference to the fact that her success as a racial neoliberal “striver” makes her “real paid,” which, ironically, merely reinforces the questions about her belonging in Caldwell. To acknowledge the intersectional determinations by which subjects in gentrifying situations are socially located is to consider the broader historical implications of the setting of *NW* in an urban Britain where readymade associations regarding suburban and urban designations are on the wane. Even as the spread of the normative imperatives of the suburb outside of their historical geography increasingly dovetails with racial neoliberal biopolitics, the collisions between such differently located subjects that take place under these circumstances draw attention to the difficulties of rebuilding sociality on less asymmetrical terms. These tenuous geographies produce the strangeness of the encounters that *NW* stages, between Natalie and Marcus, and between Natalie and Nathan, moments that illuminate the hyper-

²²⁰ The immediate context that Pattillo addresses is the role of Black middle and upper-middle classes in Oakland’s gentrification.

individualistic trajectory of racial neoliberal *Bildung* as a hindrance to the maintenance of sustaining relationships.

Dissensual Returns: Circuitous Trajectories of Racial Neoliberal (Un-) Becoming in Post-Imperial London

When Natalie thought of adult life now (she hardly ever thought of it) she envisioned a long corridor, off which came many rooms—a communal kitchen, a single gigantic bed in which all would sleep and screw, a world governed by principles of friendship.
—*NW* (186)

Mark Stein observes that the ending of the *Bildungsroman* often involves a “crisis, before [...] a return to the fold” (23). Both *Londonstani* and *NW* conclude with their central characters engaging in such a return to familiar ground and company, but in view of the genre’s overall developmental imperative I want to investigate how they assimilate their formative spatial trajectories. Jas may have been concussed and broken a few bones, his father’s warehouse may have been robbed, and he may be on the outs with his rudeboy crew, but *Londonstani* still ends with him calling on his ability to approximate rudeboy “front,” as he is last seen “chirps-ing” his British Asian nurse from his hospital bed (340). Filtered through the covertly white narrative perspective of Jas, the oppositional hypermasculinity of the rudeboys appears safely domesticated as an exigency of adolescence, in turn indicating that the suburban banality of Hounslow endures in defiance of right-wing scaremongering about the threat of “homegrown” racial terror. Meanwhile, *NW*’s closing section, titled “visitation,” includes a final conversation between Natalie and Leah that points to a similar restoration of normative order. The friends speculate that the ramble Natalie went on with Nathan must have taken place after

he had killed Felix Cooper, before going on to hypothesize about why they had a different experience of coming of age than Felix and Nathan, given that all four were “Caldie” kids. When Leah asks Natalie to rationalize how they managed to avoid such violent fates, Natalie’s first instinct is to refer to the neoliberal multicultural terms of individual work ethic: “[b]ecause we worked harder. [...] People like Bogle—they didn’t want it enough” (293). Leah voices her misgivings about this utilitarian rationale before changing the conversation, but ultimately she agrees to look up the police’s number, thus colluding with Natalie in informing on Nathan (293). Natalie “disguises her voice with her voice” (294), and in giving the police the name of Keisha Blake strategically reverts to her Caldwell past (Brophy 14; Wells 109). As with the email account she used to arrange her secret assignments, her recourse to her birth name provides a plausible distancing device while contravening social norms, whether of marital fidelity or of the proscription on so-called “snitching” (Rosenfeld et al 291). The rationalizations they spin to each other for their rectitude in so tipping off the police effectively close off the possibilities for a deeper reconsideration of the costs of her pursuit of *Bildung* the encounter with Nathan might have opened up. At least in outline, then, the plots of both texts suggest that the crisis of (racial neo-) liberal collapse is averted, and immaterial suburban narcissisms of minor differences are resumed, forestalling a fuller reckoning with postcolonial melancholia (*Melancholia* 65).

But to move from thinking about their discrepant coming-of-age trajectories in terms according to the plot’s chronology to the microcosm of their internalized responses, I want to emphasize the ambiguity of the ostensible dichotomy between the outsider and

insider positions I suggested that Jas and Natalie embody with respect to the model minority as figure of racial neoliberal attainment. Here the question becomes how a spatial geography of centre and periphery becomes legible in these texts' with respect to their protagonists' relative proximity to this trope, or even this trope's status as ideal, by the narrative's end. To address the outsider perspective that *Londonstani* affords first, a generous reading would have it that to the extent that ethnic minority cultures emerge in the novel as a model for a white protagonist, the text presents a productive challenge to normative racial hierarchy. As an ostensible critique of the perceived threat of racial terror emanating from London's suburban ethnic enclaves, the text demonstrates the extent to which a white subject can and should be implicated in tackling the Islamophobic dimension of Britain's unresolved imperial legacies. In other words, the challenge that Jas's characterization poses to the spectre of the racial takeover of Hounslow, former buttoned-up bastion of white middlebrow English provincialism, would seem to suggest a form of anti-racist solidarity: Malkani's suggestion is that the kids are in fact all right *because* they are "going native." At the same time, a more pessimistic reading would query the ultimate benefits of Jas's putative solidarity. In this view, the domestication of British Asian teenaged oppositionality through the revelation of Jas's whiteness does not do much to counter what David Theo Goldberg would call "racism without race" (23). And in this context, the presence in the novel of a neoliberal caricature of the model minority figure, Sanjay, becomes crucial to view in relation to the conventional route of coming of age. Here Jas's outsider status with respect to British Asian identity is a liability, as the thwarting of his *Bildung* in spatial terms—specifically, the access to

central London and its entailed racial neoliberal cultural capital— becomes the condition of Sanjay’s continued success. Certainly, the villainous monologues Sanjay delivers on his exceptionalist worldview of “Bling-Bling Economics” manifest a critique of the model minority myth through *reductio ad absurdum*. This critique remains something less than systematic, troublingly: Sanjay’s caricatured depiction may inspire incredulity about racial neoliberalism, but he also functions as a racialized impediment to white male *Bildung*, the historical subjectivity whose socialization and individuation the genre has typically sought to manage.

As an insider approximation of the model minority myth in *NW*, Natalie may not embody as Manichaean a threat to normative white male inclusion as Sanjay does. Yet in a scene like the playground anti-smoking intervention, she clearly mobilizes her neoliberal multicultural capital in order to police social belonging. Whereas Sanjay is hollowed out as a function of his narrative role of deceiving and then betraying Jas, Natalie’s inability to account for her motivations and lack of self-knowledge suggests she represents a more immanent reflection on the costs borne by a racialized subject hewing to the cruelly optimistic path of neoliberal success. The closing conversation between Natalie and Leah is thus a return to the fold in the sense that she resumes participating in her own life with her previous detachment, after a brief interlude of clarity and direct engagement with Nathan on the Heath. As the two friends discuss what to do about Nathan, the normative function that such conversations have for Natalie of re-containing political experience, as established at brunch, resurfaces. For instance, consider how she relays the encounter with Marcus on the playground to Leah:

Natalie told a story about a boy smoking in the park, emphasizing her own heroic opposition to persistent incivility. She told a story about how mean and miserable their mutual acquaintance Layla Dean had become, in ways intended to subtly flatter herself [...] Leah told a story about her mother being impossible. Natalie defended Leah's right to be outraged. Natalie noticed with anxiety that Leah's stories had no special emphasis or intention. (259)

The anxiety that Natalie feels about Leah's failure to compartmentalize her daily life as she does stems from how differently they are exposed to the "crisis ordinariness" of racial neoliberalism (Berlant 10). Leah lives out the remoteness of established narratives of opportunity and mobility in the context of cruel optimism producing what Berlant calls "impasse" (10), registering her dissatisfaction with her marriage, job, and social life in an affective comportment characterized by "incoherence, doubt and stasis" (Beaumont 211).²²¹ Meanwhile, Natalie's facility at assimilating her experience and moving on is for Leah part of the exceptionality that she has come to resent in her friend, as the epigraph to this section indicates. Yet as from the perspective of Natalie's own inner life, beneath this model minority façade lies an uncertainty about what she is striving towards: what worries Natalie is that Leah's lack of emphasis reflects the possibility that her own actions are as lacking in intention. In this sense, *NW* offers an insider account of the hollowness of the racial neoliberal injunction towards self-improving mobility.

Despite Natalie's investment in this racial neoliberal aspiration, her ramble with Nathan illuminates that she is not immune to the potential for strange encounters to break open the normative container of racial neoliberal cultural logic. Nathan leaves her standing alone on the railing of Hornsey Lane Bridge, looking in vain for the house where

²²¹ In addition to Beaumont, other scholars who've reflected on the immobility of Leah's characterization include Brophy (5-7), Carbajal (7-8), and Wells (104-108).

she has left her children and husband; she can see clearly from here both the towers of the City, hub of global finance capital, as well as her own house in Kilburn (281-282). The contrast between what is visible and what is hidden from her is telling. Racial neoliberal striving has given her access to the financialized spaces of the city that the Sanjays of the world inhabit, but in the process she has become accustomed to maintaining social attachments only insofar as they are advantageous to her upwardly mobile trajectory, a tendency that has precipitated the crisis of the secret of her less normatively sanctioned desires becoming known. She has traversed the long corridor towards adulthood she imagined during her university days, but she has left behind the doors to the rooms behind which sources of friendship and sustenance lie. Consider in this regard the spatial terms by which Smith describes Natalie's contemplation of resolving her conundrum through suicide:

She had the sense of being in the country. In the country, if a woman could not face her children, or her friends, or her family—if she were covered in shame—she would probably only need to lay herself down in a field and take her leave by merging, first with the grass underneath her, then with the mulch under that. A city child, Natalie Blake had always been naïve about country matters. Still, when it came to the city, she was not mistaken. Here nothing less than a break—a sudden and total rupture—would do. (282)

Other critics have stressed the formalist implications of the conclusions Natalie reaches in this scene. But to James's sense of the "fiercer edge" of Smith's lyrical realism here, a stylistic shift that produces for Wells a kind of irresolute fragmentation that Smith's so-called "hysterical realism" would not previously have admitted (109), I want to add that Natalie's sense of having returned to the country despite being a "city child" can also be read in light of Stein's notion of the *Bildungsroman* thematic of return (James 211; Wells

109). The allusion to *Hamlet's* “country matters” highlights the multiple generic significations of her sense of being in the country. The reference is at once a pun on Natalie’s online affairs, yet it also points to role of the country in Moretti’s generic scheme as the point of departure for restless youth’s journeys of self-discovery. From her own personal perspective, then, perhaps she never left the “country,” as the promise that successful *Bildung* will afford a mature perspective that can reconcile the twin imperatives of individuation and socialization that Moretti names as the “problem of youth” turns out to be false. At the same time, she must now also reckon with the eventual relegation of her own *Bildung's* status to the periphery of the coming-of-age narratives of her own children, Naomi and Spike. So the insider perspective that Natalie grants regarding model minority *Bildung* highlights what Slaughter might call its “dissensual” aspect: the seeming promise of a good life never quite materializes, notwithstanding her outward success at striving (Slaughter 265). Occasional epiphanies like this one on Hornsey Lane Bridge may illuminate the tenuous satisfactions that her approach to the good life ultimately provides, but ultimately these insights fade, and Natalie is left to remain on the continuous developmental path demanded by neoliberal subjectivity, with its imperatives of ceaseless self-fashioning.

Near the end of *Londonstani*, Jas has a similar glimmer of insight into the cruelty of the optimism underlying his own aspirations, when he realizes, just before attempting to break into his father’s warehouse on Sanjay’s behalf, that there are some circumstances in which his post-racial fantasy falls flat:

real life sucks. In real life Samira dumps you. In real life all them fit ladies only let you into those nightclubs cos you were with Sanjay an they only flashed their skin

through see-through dresses cos you were with Hardjit an he's fit. In real life Arun dies and everyone feels sorry for his fuckin mum. (322-323)

He may have garnered some measure of the hypermasculine “front” of the rudeboys along the way, but to do so he has compromised his friendship with them, as they refuse his company at Arun’s funeral, as they suspect him of playing a role in his death. The maintenance of Jas’s self-regard here in this reckoning with the vacuity of his achievements, however is telling; although he acknowledges that he benefited largely from proximity to Sanjay and the rudeboys, he cannot face up to having betrayed his father, and perhaps most egregiously, how his own advice implicates him in Arun’s suicide. His trajectory towards the centre (of London) plainly has exacted a price. In the process of striving after this ideal, Jas represents a kind of inverse to the hollowness that Natalie finds in the model minority position, as his anthropological critique of the hegemony of British Asian hypermasculinity among Hounslow teens is itself compromised by his refusal to own up to his white privilege. In this sense, while Jas’s characterization reifies the whiteness of British national identity through his figuration of the banality of supposed terrorist threat lodged in this ethnic enclave, his narration suggests there remains a correspondent (if contradictory) unwillingness to relinquish the benefits of white supremacy even in the process of attempting to identify with multiculturalism. As Gilroy might put it, to continue to ascribe to the rudeboy image while failing to own up to his effect on others around him, Jas “is symptomatic of neoliberalism’s preferences for post- and virtual sociality over the slow labour of building solidarity in real time” (33).

Their trajectories to London and back to its liminal geographies are perhaps all that unite these two protagonists' actual relationships with racial neoliberalism, apart perhaps from their willingness to strive. Yet in terms of what Stein might call the generic returns of their pursuit of racial neoliberal ideals on emphatically different models, the degree of insight afforded Natalie and Jas when they reflect on their striving is mixed at best. That is perhaps unsurprising, as Moretti points out that with youth's recruitment as a symbol of economic dynamism for industrial capitalism, the *Bildungsroman*'s endpoint tends no longer to be a conclusion where youth becomes available as a subject for mature reflection; instead, the register of maturity is an awareness of youth as lost object (90). So the shared dissensual quality of the coming-of-age narratives in *NW* and *Londonstani* reflects an element of continuity regarding this genre's imaginary relation with capitalism. At the same time, both Jas and Natalie raise different problems with the model minority as cultural ideal, with a particular view to its promise as a means of easing one's navigation of the increasingly uncertain spatial trajectories of racial neoliberal *Bildung* in contemporary Britain. In Jas's case, his proximity to Sanjay is both the condition of possibility for his trajectory out of Hounslow and into central London, as well as of its eventual attenuation. *Londonstani* facilitates generic closure through the displacement of Jas's loss on to Sanjay, a conveniently racialized other, which implies a somewhat troubling metonymy of the presumptively white masculine subject of *Bildung* experiencing the model minority as ultimately an impediment to his access to the centre. Meanwhile, Natalie's trajectory may thus be evidence that the lack of racial political guarantees Hall diagnosed with the turn to ethnicity now reflects a lack of spatial and

affective guarantees in neoliberal culture; an exceptional few racialized British subjects may now benefit from the social contract more than they did before, just as Kilburn can go from being notable primarily for its council housing estate to speculative real estate opportunity. But Natalie's racialization means that she is unable to call on whiteness in order to displace the losses her coming of age has entailed on to another social group than her own. The fact that she takes Nathan's downwardly mobile trajectory as validation of her superior facility with Black vernacular neoliberal respectability politics brings home the ethical dimension of an immanent critique of the model minority as cultural ideal, as opposed to the more touristic view of neoliberal *desi* identity that *Londonstani* affords. In other words, the model minority trope as it appears under the anthropological lens of Jas's narration does not ultimately contribute to a systemic critique of the hegemony of racial neoliberalism because of the narrative disavowal of his whiteness. By contrast, Natalie's experience of alienation in *NW* demonstrates that the exceptionalist terms on which model minority aspiration claims to address structural racism are in fact symptomatic of its endurance.

Conclusion: Intersectionality Against Neoliberal Multicultural Moralism

...we live at the end of capitalism, at the end of the neoliberal dream. And when you watch TV you can see [...] that we are at the end of morality. People do bad things in terms of justifying their families, for instance. So I wonder whether there is any morality left, [whether] anybody believes in any ethics apart from that of money.

-- Hanif Kureishi, "Middle Class"

In a June 2018 radio interview, the British-Pakistani author Hanif Kureishi argues that the Brexit vote has created a permissive climate for racist sentiment, going on to suggest that this turn shows that the end of the neoliberal dream has been accompanied by moral collapse. This insight into contemporary racial neoliberal culture is conditioned by Kureishi's literary career, in which he has reflected in film and fiction on the complex cultural shifts that began in the 1980s with the rise of Thatcherism and identity politics in the 1980s. As I observed at the outset of this project, many understand the advent of Brexit as proof that neoliberalism has lost whatever credibility it ever had as a political programme that might fulfil the basic needs of the British public, let alone as vision of the good life that could be broadly shared. Jeremy Gilbert points out that a key part of the appeal of Vote Leave was the desire to do something—anything—about the utter failure of mainstream political parties to acknowledge the scope and longevity of neoliberal governmentality, much less convincingly provide an alternative that would meaningfully address the ever-widening inequality to which it has given rise: "[t]hat alternative narrative [...] would involve pointing out, simply and clearly, that since [...] 1975 [...] successive UK governments have served the interests of finance capital rather than serving the interests of the people" ("Forty Years"). But in this light, there is an irony in Kureishi exclaiming over this perception that moral decline has attended the exhaustion

of neoliberalism, given that he effectively staked his career on challenging the economic and cultural dimensions of Thatcherism with his script for his 1985 breakthrough film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In one scene, for example, the Pakistani businessman and slumlord Nasser Ali, uncle to the film's protagonist Omar, orders Johnny—his nephew's lover and a former white supremacist—to evict a Black poet who cannot pay his rent. Johnny initially balks at the idea, saying to Nasser, “[w]hat would your enemies have to say about this, eh? Ain't exactly integration, is it?” Nasser retorts, “I'm a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani. There's no question of race in the new enterprise culture.” As he inducts Omar into his business empire by allowing him to manage a laundrette, Nasser aims for his nephew to dispense with Johnny's sense of a vaguely more ethical route to “integration.” Instead, Nasser preaches the free market values associated with the “neo-liberal revolution” inaugurated by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, which in fact encouraged a distinctly less egalitarian mode of what Johnny calls “integration” (S. Hall, “Revolution”). As Kim Duff has pointed out, this eviction scene captures the period's political zeitgeist, with cross-racial solidarity superseded by the amoral individualist capitalist subject characteristic of Thatcherism (117). Even though Nasser claims to be more concerned with class-climbing than anti-racism, his racialization remains nonetheless crucial, in my view, to understanding his social positioning; he is an archetypal model minority.

My dissertation has examined how Black and Asian British writing reflects on the model minority as normative aspiration of racial neoliberal belonging, pointing out the unapproachable and unfulfilling aspects of this ideal. But Stuart Hall celebrates *My*

Beautiful Laundrette precisely because it is unafraid to depict racialized subjects transgressing moral codes, locating a challenge to the shibboleths of racial liberal representational culture in the film's "refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always 'right-on'—in a word, always and only 'positive'" ("Ethnicities" 449). Part of Hall's point here is that cultural texts that encourage identification with racialized British subjects insofar as they adhere to normative moral codes are in fact proof of the precarious nature of multicultural inclusivity. However, let me add that such representations leave in place a double-standard where moral slip-ups by Black and Asian British subjects provoke questions about their national belonging that would not be raised about similar transgressions by their white counterparts. Given Kureishi's reputation for highlighting the hypocrisies of normative morality, it is ironic that his 2018 comment on the state of neoliberal capitalist culture mistakes a decline in morality for what could better be described as a rise in what Wendy Brown calls political moralism:

Because the realm of politics cannot be ordered by will and intention, but is a complex domain of unintended consequences that follow the unpredictable collisions of human, historical, and natural forces, a politics of abstract principle risks missing its aim and indeed producing the opposite of the wished-for result [...W]hen the limitations of a politics of morality reveal [... themselves] a moral politics inevitably begins to acquire some of the trappings of a moralizing one. (*Politics* 27)

For Brown, moral systems are potentially too rigid to act as effective guides to the multiple contingencies that a given political situation may involve, making them likely to lead to perfunctory and performative modes of political engagement.

In closing, I want to briefly consider the future of the model minority as moralistic figure of racial neoliberal aspiration in the era of Brexit Britain. The currency that the model minority figure retains in this climate is clear from the celebration of Sadiq Khan’s trajectory from civil rights lawyer for Metropolitan police officers of colour to Labour MP, Minister of Transport, and on to mayor of London in 2016. Media profiles from the election campaign repeatedly draw attention to his visibility as a devout Muslim, while also grafting meritocratic bootstrapping credibility on to his coming-of-age story through ubiquitous references to his being “the son of a Pakistani bus driver” (Knight):²²²

A word I think you’ll hear overused in the leadership contest [of 2015 to replace former Labour leader Ed Miliband] is “aspiration.” It’s used in a pejorative way to suggest we didn’t understand what it meant. I understand what it means. It means your dad working all the overtime hours that London Transport will give you, aspiration means your mum, notwithstanding having eight children, works as a seamstress at home as well to make ends meet. Aspiration means, as a 24-year-old trainee solicitor, sleeping on a bunk bed in your mum and dad’s home to save for a deposit. (Hattenstone)

Left-liberal newspapers may regard the election of Khan as globalist London’s riposte to the anti-EU British hinterland, but the recitation of what Rey Chow might call Protestant ethnic tropes about bootstrapping in narratives about his upbringing make him equally recognizable according to a nationalist model reconciliation that traditionally emphasizes class-based reconciliation (Chow 34, Guttenplan, Hattenstone); his credibility as a model minority is thus established in both racial neoliberal and One Nation Conservative terms.

²²² Khan is not the only such visible minority figure in British politics: Conservative Home Secretary Sajid Javid is another British-Pakistani politician whose own bus-driving father is frequently mentioned in profiles, as well as former Conservative Minister and Party Chair Baroness Sayeeda Warsi’s roots in Yorkshire’s large Pakistani diasporic community (Akhtar), and Remain campaigner and Labour MP Chuka Umunna’s background as the child of working-class Nigerian immigrants (Parker).

Pace Khan, I want to reflect on how “aspiration” can be understood as pejorative in a different sense, in specific relation to the intersections between class and race, as well as other social categories. In the body of this dissertation, I have highlighted the moralizing character of the model minority as normative aspiration under neoliberal multicultural formalism. As Jodi Melamed suggests, multicultural formalism dilutes movements and principles like feminism and multiculturalism, which are reduced to become criteria by which to assess certain groups and individuals’ fitness for neoliberal subjectivity (Melamed 152). Multicultural formalism is not only problematic in relation to the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*, however, for it also indicates that intersectional critique itself may be prey to moralism. In response to the increasing circulation of radical political commitments in watered-down guises under neoliberal multiculturalism, which requires the presumption that such commitments have largely been made good on in the Global North, Sirma Bilge posits the emergence of “ornamental intersectionality” (408).²²³ As I noted in the Introduction, what Bilge advocates to counter this depoliticized and rote species of intersectional analysis is a much more selective and situated approach (419). In applying a critical intersectional lens to the contemporary Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*, I have focused in particular on moments where the apparent seamlessness of neoliberal multicultural subject formation is interrupted, and

²²³ Such ornamental tendencies include: meta-theoretical speculation that lack a grounding in actually existing political situations, and “whitened” framings that play up the feminist component of its background in Black feminist critique, as well as calling for a proliferation of the categories encompassed by intersectionality in a manner that effectively drowns out critical race approaches (411-419).

the formalistic quality of this theory of belonging comes to light, moments, in other words, that manifest the slide of emergent political morality into neoliberal moralism.

One example of how my intersectional reading practice draws out the moralistic character of racial neoliberal belonging is the role of gender in the Black and Asian British *Bildungsroman*. Consider for example how the coming-of-age narratives I take up in Chapter Two demonstrate that racial neoliberalism as a cultural formation articulates with the growing neoliberalization of gender norms.²²⁴ In this view, the resuscitation of the “Third World Woman” in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* works in tandem with a racial neoliberal biopolitics of migration, reifying a postfeminist symbolic geography that idealizes Britain as a space uniquely conducive to Muslim women saving themselves. Meanwhile, as a dissensual *Bildungsroman*, Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* effectively demonstrates how the inaccessibility of racial neoliberal aspiration for some migrant women makes their labour available to elevate others’ capacity to succeed in these terms. Although gender does not emerge as a subject of systematized analysis throughout my dissertation, I think that as a category it draws out how I develop a critical intersectional methodology on the terms that Bilge advocates. One illustrative example of this criticality is the fact that despite analyzing two narrative sequences in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and *Brick Lane* that resemble one another in the way they take up race and gender, the texts’ differing historical situations with respect to these categories’ intersections leads me to quite different interpretations of each. In Chapter One, I read

²²⁴ For example, Catherine Rottenberg has traced the influence of neoliberal cultural logics on the postfeminist turn in the Global North (420), whereas Sara R. Farris documents the neoliberal political economy of Islamophobia as a gendered formation contemporary migration regimes (115-145).

with the grain of Saladin Chamcha's skepticism about Dr. Uhuru Simba, a leading anti-racist activist whose history of violence against women is an open secret that is willingly downplayed by his fellow activists. Chamcha voices an intersectional critique of the notion that the anti-racist cause is well-served by suppressing a reckoning with gender-based violence by its own membership. Meanwhile, in Chapter Two, I have suggested that the fatphobic presentation of Chanu, another abusive racialized man, reinforces postcolonial melancholia by depicting anti-colonial historiography as the overblown preoccupation of an obscene pedant.

The differing historical contexts of these proximally similar circumstances are key to the critical intersectional perspective I take to each of them. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, the 27 March 1989 demonstration by Women Against Fundamentalism on behalf of Rushdie's right to provide a critical depiction of misogyny in Muslim-majority cultures is evidence that the novel captures a structure of feeling where former guarantees regarding the constitution of the radical position in race radical politics were being questioned along intersectional lines (Dawson 123). Thus, the context for the intersectional critique of Simba is the re-premising of anti-oppressive activism during the 1980s, as the as-yet-unnamed concept of intersectionality was then incipient in the work of Black British feminist activists and critics who contested the predominance of masculinist frameworks of anti-racism (Mirza 5). At the same time, what impels me to critique *Brick Lane* for its characterization of Chanu through the resurrection of the "Babu" figure, a colonial-era trope of ineffectual South Asian masculinity, rather than placing critical emphasis on his patriarchal neglect and violence towards his family, is the

novel's contextualization by the War on Terror. In this light, Chanu reifies the implicit symbolic geography behind feminist imperialist arguments for intervening in Afghanistan in order to “save brown women from brown men” (Spivak, *Postcolonial* 284). Chanu's dismissal on multicultural formalist grounds facilitates in part the recruitment of Nazneen's coming-of-age narrative to a moralizing aestheticization of England as postfeminist utopia, where “you can do whatever you like” (Ali 415). Different circumstances inform how other characters (and even readers) encounter Simba and Chanu, with “encounter” understood here in Sara Ahmed's sense, as a rubric where “contemporary modes of proximity [such as globalization, migration, and multiculturalism] *reopen prior histories of encounter*” (13). My point here is that in view of a specifically neoliberal mode of multicultural proximity, the critique of Simba is situated as a politically moral exigency of anti-racist activism of the period of *The Satanic Verses*' writing, whereas the critique of Chanu recalls feminist imperialist justifications for the War on Terror, which served to provide moralizing alibis for neo-imperialist interventions abroad, as well as for domestic policies that functioned to normalize Islamophobic racial profiling and surveillance regimes.

A critical intersectional practice of reading sheds light on the moralistic quality of neoliberal cultural formations. I close by reapplying that lens to Sadiq Khan as a highly visible figure of the model minority aspiration's enduring cultural influence in Britain. In general, Khan's vocal opposition to the turn to nativist right-wing populism both domestically and transnationally, from reassuring EU migrants living in London after

Brexit (Hooton) to his Twitter spat with then-presidential candidate Donald Trump that began in response to a query about the then-proposed “Ban on All Muslims”:

I think Donald Trump has ignorant views about Islam. It's not just about me. ... It's about my friends, family, and others, from all around the world ... and my concern is he's playing into the hands of extremists who say it's not compatible to be Western and mainstream Muslim. (Calamur)

These comments played well on social and establishment media, and public pressure by Khan was widely credited with a role in Trump's cancellation of his attendance at the opening of a new American embassy in London in February 2018 (Buchan). In relation to Brexit and Trump, Khan comes across as a vocal defender of the rights of vulnerable people both within and without the UK, from Muslims to EU migrants.

However, the warm glow of minority uplift commonly ascribed to Khan masks the potential for moralism behind his seemingly principled stands, as a critical intersectional perspective reveals. There is for example the fact that whenever answering questions about whether his feud with Trump might affect economic relations with the United States, Khan is quick to reply with the caveat that his job as London mayor involves speaking up for the city's economic interests, and dealing with whomever is necessary in the process (Calamur, Hervey). In this capacity, Khan is not just guarding the interests of London's EU citizens, then, but also aiming to avoid the possibility that “London may lose some business to Dublin, Luxembourg and Paris as a consequence of Brexit” (Ingham 132). There is also the troubling background of Khan's *bona fides* in relation to the interests of British Muslims, given that in 2007 while a parliamentary aide to then-Labour Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, he was instrumental in writing and passing anti-terror legislation enabling detainees to be held without charge through the House of

Commons (Knight). Such contradictions could be explained away as the inevitable contingencies of life as a politician in a deeply flawed representative democracy. On the other hand, former colleagues and clients' perception that Khan jettisoned the ethics to which his background in civil rights litigation in mercenary pursuit of career success is reminiscent of Natalie Blake's law career in *NW*. Her time as a "Harlesden hero" in a legal aid clinic only burnishes the impression of her worthiness when she decides to return to the path of corporate law: "exceptional to be taken back into the Middle Temple fold, but then Natalie Blake was in many ways an exceptional candidate [...] Something about Natalie inspired patronage, as though in helping her you helped an unseen multitude" (219). By placing narratives of minority social mobility in critical intersectional perspective, my dissertation shows the exhaustion of the Black and Asian *Bildungsroman* as a metonymy for broader racial integration in the context of racial neoliberalism. In Natalie's case, the hollowness she finds in her seeming success at striving demonstrates that inasmuch as meritocracy represents neoliberal morality, it is more a vacuous moralism that insists on optimism in the face of spreading inequality: "'hard work' is connected [...] to *the necessity of having aspirations*: [...] to lack either is a moral failure" (Littler 68, emphasis original). Just as the notion that Natalie's exceptionality can provide a model of aspiration for others to follow is increasingly exhausted, so an understanding of Sadiq Khan as a racial neoliberal exception indicates the precarity of the Black and Asian British population in Brexit Britain, as well as the urgency of grasping the precarious nature of these communities' national belonging in relation to the multiple social categories by which they are legible.

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