Between Seeing and Showing: The Bildungsroman in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Raven Leilani's *Luster*

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This project interrogates the aesthetics and construction of identity amidst conditions of racial violence in two novels: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Luster* by Raven Leilani. I use these novels as a conduit for uncovering how systems of racial and gender oppression are internalized and expressed by those that bear the brunt of them. As such, the resulting work extends beyond the ambit of the novel to interrogate the racial politics of the publishing industry, as well as the role of the white, Western reader in sustaining the racialized status quo of the literary field. Each novel uses the bildungsroman as a formal sedimentation of the social and institutional violence experienced by women of colour in the United States. Through a comparative analysis, however, this thesis contends that each novel's engagement and formal play with the bildungsroman expresses dramatically different narrative and political investments relative to the imagined Western reader. Drawing on the work of Graham Huggan, Lisa Lau, Sarah Brouillette and Pierre Bourdieu, chapter one contends that *Americanah* grapples with a dual and conflicting drive to both appeal to the Western gaze, while simultaneously expressing a metafictional aestheticization of the very process of writing as a racialized person. The blog, I argue, refracts Adichie's own awareness of the market context that she is operating within as a Black, postcolonial subject. Chapter two turns to *Luster* to consider how Edie interpolates the reader as a voyeur, and how this enables a kind of 'making strange'—and in so doing, making visible— the structures and micro aggressions of racism in the American context. Inspired by the work of Lauren Berlant, Christina Sharpe and Raymond Williams, I argue that *Luster* uses the bildungsroman as a way of focalizing affective expressions of Black female

subjectivity in a late stage capitalist context. Resultantly, the novel foregrounds social critique over the self-fulfilling linear plot structure typical of the European bildungsroman.

Résumé

Ce projet examine l'esthétique de l'identité et sa construction sous des conditions de violence raciale dans deux romans : *Americanah* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie et *Luster* de Raven Leilani. J'utilise ces deux romans pour mettre en lumière les façons dont des systèmes d'oppression raciale et de genre sont internalisés et exprimés par ceux qui en sont les plus touchés. Ainsi, ce travail ne se limite pas aux deux romans seulement, mais interroge aussi les enjeux politiques liés à la race dans le milieu de l'édition, ainsi que le rôle joué par le lecteur occidental blanc dans le maintien du statu quo du domaine littéraire. Chacun de ces romans utilise le bildungsroman pour procéder à une sédimentation formelle de la violence sociale et institutionnelle vécue par les femmes racisées aux États-Unis. Je soutiens toutefois, par le biais d'une analyse comparative, que chacun des deux romans interagit et joue formellement avec le genre du bildungsroman d'une façon qui exprime des intérêts narratifs et politiques drastiquement différents en ce qui a trait au lecteur occidental imaginé. En s'appuyant sur les travaux de Graham Huggan, Lisa Lau, Sarah Brouillette et Pierre Bourdieu, le premier chapitre avance qu'*Americanah* met en scène une volonté contradictoire de vouloir charmer le lecteur occidental tout en exprimant aussi une esthétisation métafictionnelle du processus d'écriture en tant que personne racisée. J'avance que le blogue reflète que possède Adichie du marché dans lequel elle évolue en tant que sujet postcolonial Noir. Le deuxième chapitre se tourne vers *Luster* afin d'analyser la façon dont Edie interpelle le lecteur comme un voyeur, et comment cette interpellation permet de 'rendre étranges' – et ainsi, rendre visibles—les structures et les microagressions du racisme dans le contexte des États-Unis. Inspirée par les travaux de Lauren Berlant, Christina Sharpe et Raymond Williams, j'avance que *Luster* utilise le bildungsroman

comme une façon de focaliser les expressions affectives de la subjectivité féminine Noire en contexte de capitalisme tardif. Ainsi, le roman met de l'avant une critique sociale plutôt que la structure narrative typique du bildungsroman européen.

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Introduction

This thesis interrogates the formal politics and aesthetics of Black subjectivity in two novels: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Luster* by Raven Leilani. Form—the process of *how* a story is narrated, in tandem with *what* is being narrated—is a critical consideration of this project. The self-fashioning of both narrators of these novels happens via the bildungsroman, originally canonized as a genre that chronicled the formation, socialization, and de-radicalization of the European, typically male subject[1] In its modern and contemporary iterations, however, the genre has adapted to account for the lived experiences of those whose historiosocial status, gender, and racial identities complicate, or resist the western patriarchal socialization process. The bildungsroman provides a useful formal sedimentation of the social and institutional violence experienced by women of colour in the United States by offering "a space where subjectivity construction is privileged, where social relations and their importance to survival and to the making of a healthy identity are demonstrated, at the same time as it offers flexibility to showcase individual expression" (Cholant 35). Both *Americanah* and *Luster*'s bildungsroman ask the reader what it means to 'grow up', or 'come of age' as a Black woman in America, exposing "the particular difficulties of self-expression and self-identification" for Black lives that are overdetermined by structures of white capitalism and ongoing racial hegemony (Avery 1). Pairing these two novels allows for a comparative analysis of their aesthetic differences; despite using the same formal vessel of the bildungsroman, Ifemelu and Edie's

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[1] While not central to my particular analysis of the genre, Franco Moretti's inaugural text on the European bildungsroman, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture,* is a canonical analysis on the emergence of the nineteenth century European bildungsroman in the context of early modernity. My subsequent examination of the bildungsroman in some ways builds from, and also contests, Moretti's theoretical formation of the bildungsroman.

construction of self and positionality relative to the imagined white reader, are dramatically different. This thesis aims to chronicle these differences in order to expose the political stakes of acquiescing—or refusing to acquiesce—to the marketing and aestheticization of one's own marginality.

The Black author, much like her protagonist, experiences a sort of artistic overdetermination by virtue of her racialized status within the white centred literary field. Thus, the method of this thesis combines both close reading and a sociological analysis of each novel's status—and resistance of—what Jodi Melamed calls a "race novel"—"[d]efined as literature about race by African American authors that transmitted rare and intimate information about black consciousness and conditions to white audiences in a way that uniquely aroused their sympathies, race novels were perceived as enabling changes in white attitudes that were presumed to have a levelling effect on racial disparity" (Melamed 54). This thesis is one invested in exploring the aesthetic methods that cultivate these attitudes in white readers. In doing so, I move between text to paratext in order to argue that each novel's distinctive formal methods and narrative voice foster a different reader receptions and critical acclaim.

This thesis focuses its attention on one specific iteration of the bildungsroman: the American bildungsroman, and, as a correlate, the Diasporic bildungsroman. To explore the political implications and tactical considerations of using this as a form to convey narratives about racial discrimination, it is necessary to define and historicize the genre. At the heart of the American bildungsroman is the ideology of the 'American Dream', which maintains that "all citizens can improve their circumstances, however deprived their origin" (Graham 117). Interestingly, "American novelists have used the bildungsroman more than any other genre to

expose the nation's shortcomings…A turbulent history of civil and international wars, slavery, migration, economic decline, and inequalities in class, race and gender contest the dependability of its ideologies" (Graham 117). Further, the American bildungsroman finds that

> the past, whether individual, familial or national, weighs heavily upon [the narrator], and they see little in the adult world to encourage them in optimism about the future. Their disquiet about growing up and the disillusionment that often results from their journey to maturity signifies wider anxieties about the nation's prospects and principles (Graham 118).

The Harlem Renaissance witnessed a proliferation of novels that centre around the coming-of-age crisis of Black protagonists in America, where "themes of fear and loathing are often associated with [their] narrative trajectory" (Avery 1). These novels move beyond merely exposing the fiction of the American Dream, they equally focalize the Black protagonist's encounters with state violence, psychological oppression, tacit and explicit racism, police brutality, and structural/infrastructural barriers that keep them in a state of financial and cultural disenfranchisement. Alienation, anxiety, paranoia, depression and dark satire equally permeate the narrative voices of these protagonists, "often expressed and represented in the novel through shocking mechanisms, such as the stark juxtaposition of romantic (traditionally bildungsroman) narration against ultraviolent, hyper sexualized episodes filled with ebonic vernacular and high symbolism" (Avery 2). These narrative techniques include "flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, and streams of consciousness, and are unorthodox in terms of the traditional bildungsroman's affiliation with chronological realism" (Avery 2). It is unjust to speak of the Harlem bildungsroman without invoking Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. The novel centres

around an unnamed protagonist who navigates, and eventually sequesters from American society, his tale narrated in a combination of traditional realism, surrealism, satire, flashbacks, and dream sequences.

While the American bildungsroman, the postcolonial bildungsroman, and the female bildungsroman have undoubtedly afforded a privileged literary expression of marginality and subaltern experience, this thesis is centrally concerned with how these expressions have come to be warped and overdetermined by the demands of the broader western literary marketplace—and what strategies are employed as a way of circumventing such pigeonholing.

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings

This thesis examines the form of the bildungsroman by drawing on insights, in particular, from sociology of literature and affect theory. Pierre Bourdieu's delineation of the literary field, as outlined in "The Field of Cultural Production" (1993) acknowledges the idea of artistic positionality within the bounded, deterministic, and relational field of cultural production. Rather than conceiving of artistic production as an autonomous system with individual actors, Bourdieu defines a specific field—one replete with agents and politics of prestige, that are constantly configuring and reconfiguring every "position" within that field. He writes that the

> literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces…Every position-taking is defined in relation to the space of possibles which is objectively realized as a problematic in the form of the actual or potential position-takings corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-

> takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by *delimiting* it" (Bourdieu 30, italics mine).

According to Bourdieu's field-relational theory, then, literary autonomy within the field of cultural production is not only impossible, but a farce that conceals and obfuscates the real conditions under which art is made and artists are established. It is thus necessary to think about artistic production in general, and literature in particular, as relational systems dependent on "a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital" (Bourdieu 30). So too, "position taking" is not a neutral practice. Formal and aesthetic choices are determined by "the space of possibles" available to an author, which consequently influences not only the aesthetic dimension of their work, but also their specific authorial position relative to their intended readership.

Literary sociologists that have followed in Bourdieu's footsteps, and whose work also informs my project, include Jodi Melamed's *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, where she theorizes white readership and what she terms the "race novel" as an abstracted, fetishistic, and "privileged mode for getting to know difference" (Melamed 23) through a white racial frame. Of particular importance to both chapter one and two is Graham Huggan's tome, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, paired with Sarah Brouillette's critical retort and expansion on Huggan's theory in her text *Postcolonial Writers in the Literary Marketplace.* Taken in tandem, all of these texts inform the literary sociological analysis of this project by offering insight into the workings of the literary field and its investment in reader reception.

Chapter two, which takes *Luster* as its primary text, uses a combination of the literary sociological methods mentioned above, combined with affect theory. In particular, chapter two is informed by Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," which argues that the material and social strivings propounded by a late capitalist society are ultimately to our mental and emotional detriment. Berlant challenges the concept of the "good life" as one that is inherently not good for us. Edie's dysphoric relationship to suburbia and the material privileges of the new white world that she lives in are a perfect example of cruel optimism. Taking an affective theoretical approach to analyzing Edie's conflicting emotions in suburbia allows for a deeper engagement with the historical traces of white supremacy, redlining, and interracial violence that are buried in the subtext of her narrative and character formation. Christina Sharpe's texts *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, as well as *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post Slavery Subjects* follow in Berlant's theoretical footsteps, but take a more racially focused stance in analyzing affective expressions of pain rooted in violence against Black women in particular.

It is necessary to address the limitations of this train of thinking, which begs the question: can racialized, or otherwise minoritized authors ever write from a place of artistic self-determination if they are always operating within the bounds of a white-centric literary field? While the answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper, I do seek to target and assess various aesthetic dimensions of my two primary texts in order to demonstrate how they speak to —and sometimes speak back—to the aforementioned racialized literary overdetermination. Lisa Lau writes that "self-representation, as much as any other form of representation, is vulnerable to abuse, misrepresentation, distortion, and inauthenticity" (Lau 2). The following

chapters performs a two-part analysis of how this distortion manifests in each of my primary texts.

Textual Choices and Chapter Outlines

The pairing of these two primary texts was very intentional. *Americanah* is a difficult and complex novel that proved very challenging to write about for a few reasons. For one, the novel refuses to stay in one lane. It is a novel about diasporic reality, racism, romance, Black womanhood, the American Dream, European immigration, the affordances of the digital sphere, mental health, the police state, and, of course, Black hair. The novel spans across three different continents (Africa, the United States, and Europe), and follows Ifemelu over the course of many years, from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s. To condense a novel of this scope down to an analysis of one or two of its many themes feels wrong and incomplete, which is why I am writing this note; my study of *Americanah* does not do justice to its entirety.

There are many academics that have concentrated their efforts on studying *Americanah*'s intricate literary ecosystem, many of which have been credited in my thesis. A blindspot of many of these analyses, however, is the paratextual dimension of *Americanah* as a novel, and of Adichie as a literary icon. This is the critical intervention of my project. *Americanah* is a text that at once resists the exoticization of marginality typical of the North American literary field, while also acquiescing to a vision of the American Dream that doesn't disquiet the white readerly conscience. Put differently, *Americanah* is a deeply self-reflective text, one that aestheticizes the processes and anxieties of writing for a white audience as a Black person. At the same time, the novel strikes an extremely careful balance of appealing to white readers in a neoliberal sense by fostering a narrative of upward mobility achieved through hard work and perseverance. The

challenge of writing about a novel that flirts in both of these narrative camps is tricky. It is tempting to cast *Americanah* as binaristically either "doing the right thing—resisting the white gaze!", or "doing the wrong thing—protecting the feelings and comfort of white readers!," because realistically, it does both at the same time. Chapter one walks this thin line, attempting to track where it begins and ends by analyzing the curation of Adichie's author persona, coupled with close reading and an analysis of the novel's reception. Using *Americanah* as a primary text affords an analysis of how author personae and literary fame are carefully curated processes that involve various interlocking actors: author, publisher, reader, and critic. *Americanah* is incredibly self-conscious of these processes, and this self-awareness is dramatized by the aestheticization of literary production through the blog, as well as the foregrounding of the reader/writer relationship between Ifemelu (the Black writer) and the various white audiences that she interacts with.

Chapter two turns to *Luster* to assess how the novel's formal and aesthetic dimensions resist a clear or consistent image of Black life and consciousness. *Luster* is a bildungsroman of an artist—one that can paint everything, and everyone, but herself. Edie's inability to paint her own portrait metaphorizes Leilani's authorial resistance to portraying a coherent image of Black subjectivity. As a character, Edie represents the irony of a bildungsroman that cannot catalogue or cogently outline the self, which is, at its core, a truer representation of selfhood than the bounded and linear presentation of self that Ifemelu performs for *Americanah*'s internal and external audiences. Taking a page from Ellison's book, *Luster* is written in large part as a stream of consciousness, first person narrative, the result of which both confronts and discomforts the white reader's desire for the kind of cathartic easing of white guilt promised by the traditional

"race novel". While *Luster* is, in a sense, a "[purveyor] of white sympathy", it makes no subsequent effort to stroke the white racial consciousness, nor to reduce its Black female protagonist to a neat image of Black American life. Edie is poor, alienated, and financially dependent on a man that serially abuses her. She is messy and often makes decision that are inchoate to the reader and even to herself. Where Ifemelu ultimately transcends conditions of financial and cultural disenfranchisement through the mass success of her blog, Edie remains stagnant in every facet of her life. *Luster* is not a novel of hope, nor is it a novel of neoliberal racial liberalism—it is the narration of Black American subjectivity in a late stage capitalist context that foregrounds critique over the self-fulfilling linear plot structure typical of the European bildungsroman.

Chapter 1

This chapter grapples with *Americanah*'s inconsistent narrative investments. While critical and popular reception of *Americanah* has typically emphasized the novel's proficient engagement with race and immigration, very little has been written about its aesthetics of self-consciousness that are integrated into the novel via the blog. As a narrative technique, the blog aestheticizes the relationship between Black writers and white readers, and the various pressures faced by the former to write in a way the doesn't upset or disquiet white assumptions and beliefs about Blackness. On a broader metafictional level, this is also the careful balance that Adichie performs in the literary marketplace as a Black Nigerian author who is, self-admittedly, aware and concerned about the dangers of representing a single vision of Black life—what she calls "a single story" (Adichie Ted Talk 2012). At the same time, however, Adichie also plays into the specific demands of self-exoticization demanded by the literary marketplace in order to achieve success as a Black author. This specific mix of self-reflexivity and self-exoticization is at the core of *Americanah*'s narrative struggle. This chapter is invested in documenting this struggle as a way of arguing that *Americanah* aesthetizes the very bind that so many racialized writers find themselves in: stuck between the desire to subvert the dispossessing artistic demands of the white publishing world and, at the same time, grappling with the desire for success in that very world. *Americanah's* aestheticization of the process of writing as a raced person functions as a form of metafictional bridging between paratext and inter text so as to signal, however subtly, the artistic confines of writing as a Black diasporic woman. Thus, while *Americanah* ultimately feeds into a narrative trajectory that is comfortable for white readers—by granting Ifemelu institutional and

financial success, as well as social mobility despite the initial barriers that she faces—it also dramatizes the anxieties and self consciousness of writing such a narrative.

Part one contextualizes the diasporic bildungsroman in a neoliberal narrative context. By establishing Ifemelu's gaze as hybrid and therefore as "outsider," she is positioned as a racial spokesperson with unique insight into the strange and often violent workings of American neocolonialism. While she holds this gaze, and by extension, this authority over representation, Ifemelu's narrative trajectory is ultimately one of great financial and social success. She achieves, in others words, the American Dream, and lives out a fantasy that encourages the neoliberal sensibilities of white readers. By first establishing Ifemelu's positionality as a racial spokesperson and informant, followed by a narrative of American success, part one emphasizes the novel's investment in gaining literary success by acquiescing to the status of a "race novel" (Melamed 54). In contrast, part two turns to Ifemelu's blog, as well as various moments of free indirect discourse that metafictionalize the anxieties and pressures of writing as a racialized person, thus highlighting the novel's political investment in resisting the white gaze by identifying and aestheticizing it. The last section of this chapter shifts to *Americanah*'s paratext, performing close reading of the novel's reviews as well as the notable cultural agents that have imbued the novel with its prestige. Doing so reveals the extent of *Americanah*'s artistic subtlety. Adichie sums this up perfectly when she says, "[w]riting about race should be lyrical and poetic and never quite definite. Very Proustian. And at the end the reader should feel exactly the same as they felt at the start" (Adichie in *The New Republic Magazine*, 2013). Though, I might add, if you look closely enough, the receipts are in plain sight: *Americanah* is in conflict with itself from

start to finish, never entirely comfortable with being a race novel, and yet not so bold that it raises the eyebrows of white critics and publishers.

I. The Exotic Gaze: Contextualizing the Diasporic Bildungsroman

Americanah is a bildungsroman narrative that maps the diasporic development of its protagonist, Ifemelu. At the age of nineteen, Ifemelu leaves her family and boyfriend Obinze in Nigeria with the hope of cultivating a more cosmopolitan life in the United States. She recalls the television shows that she followed in Nigeria that are set in America, where she first learns about the discourse of American exceptionalism. She

> followed shows she had watched in Nigeria—*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *A Different World*—and discovered new shows she had not known—*Friends*, *The Simpsons*— but it was the commercials that captivated her. She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America, the America she would only see when she moved to school in the autumn (Adichie 139).

These intertextual references are telling: *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* corroborates the fantasy of the American dream, whereby a Black man transcends systemic barriers and inequalities and lives a life of riches and privilege; *A Different World* follows the lives of students that attend a fictional black university and tackle social justice issues; *Friends* does not even feign being racially conscientious— there is not a single Black character introduced to the series until season 9, and the show features offensive comments about African cultural signifiers, such as when Monica comes back from vacation with cornrows, and the group shuns her (linkreducation.com, Can the Show f.r.i.e.n.d.s. Be Anymore Misrepresentative of Races?); finally, *The Simpsons*

propounds a version of American society that attempts to be more racially inclusive, but nevertheless defines "'normative' American identity [which is] coded as white, middle class, suburban, and Protestant (i.e., as traditionally WASP)" (Henry 46).

In a similar discourse, upon arriving in America, one of Ifemelu's professor's prompts the question: "let's talk about the ways in which history can be sacrificed for entertainment" (Adichie 170). Left unspoken here is who, exactly, this entertainment is for. Whiteness, as a default, is almost always invisible. The classroom to which this question was asked is notably, majority white. Ahistoricity then—the silencing and erasure of violence against colonized peoples—is advantageous to the advancement of North America's vision of post racialism. In both instances, historical specificity and it's corollary to contemporary social relations is erased, which consequently corroborates a narrative of white American exceptionalism and post-racialism. Ironically, and despite the veneer of authentic African diasporic representation, Ifemelu ultimately meets the same fate as Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince*—as someone who is able to transcend material inequalities and live the fantasy of the American dream.

In dealing with the idea of the diasporic bildungsroman, it is important to define what, exactly, is meant by this specific narrative position. Accio Harry Potter writes that

> Diasporic Coming-of-age Novels focus on the internal development of culturally-hybrid subjects as they puzzle over how their identities awkwardly fit into the diasporic settings they inhabit…[this model] empowers readers to think of identity as complex and dynamic, thus attune to the globalized world in which this genre emerged: to resist rather than show the difficult attainment of stereotypical societal roles, in deference to nuanced portrayals (Harry Potter 10).

Fascinatingly, a definition of diasporic positionality includes a reference to a latently white readership as part of its critical function. To "empower [white] readers to think of identity as complex and dynamic"—is still a function of appealing to a white gaze. The target audience of the diasporic bildungsroman is thus one that implicitly has no relation to diasporic identity, and no concept of how such an identity navigates a foreign, usually white-centric environment. Diasporic protagonists thus grapple with their identities not only for self-discovery, but also as a means to educate or enlighten the presumed white reader about the intricacies of the diasporic experience. Ifemelu often struggles with her roots, her place in the diaspora, and a clash of cultural identities, serving as both mirrors and windows for readers. The goal is not merely to tell a story but to bridge the cultural gap of understanding between diasporic and non-diasporic experiences, with an implicit acknowledgment that the latter holds a certain social capital in the Western literary marketplace.

In the initial summer of her immigration to the United States, Ifemelu finds herself suspended in a state of anticipation, where the elusive promise of the "real America" lingers tantalizingly just beyond her reach, promising a refuge from the starkness of her current reality: "That first summer was Ifemeu's summer of waiting; the real America, she felt, was just around the next corner she would turn…There was a stripped-down quality to her life, a kindling starkness, without parents and friends and home, the familiar landmarks that made her who she was" (Adichie 136). Her search for the "real," in contrast to the starker reality that she faces in America, reflects the desire to consolidate the confusing and disorienting nature of her diasporic existence. She is, on the one hand, lost and overwhelmed by a sense of "bleakness and borderlessness," a persistent sense of "amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary

glints of other lives she could be living" (Adichie 7). These opposing sentiments—homesickness and hope—form the crux of her diasporic gaze, encapsulating the existential tension between longing for the familiarity of her Nigerian roots and the allure of the idealized America that she found depicted in popular media, such as *The Fresh Prince*. These contrasting emotions, rooted in a search for authenticity amidst the disorienting flux of diasporic existence, become the driving force behind Ifemelu's narrative journey.

On the other hand, and equally crucial to the narrative development of Ifemelu's diasporic journey, is the fact that her navigation of race and identity are framed within a narrative arc that emphasizes self-discovery, empowerment, and ultimate financial and cultural prestige. These themes are particularly appealing to a Western readership; by focalizing Ifemelu's trajectory of individualism and self-determination in spite of the many systemic barriers that she faces, the discourse of neoliberalism is carefully blended into the aesthetic parameters of the diasporic bildungsroman to create an illusion of racial authenticity while latently supporting a crafted narrative of the American dream. As Lisa Lau writes, "coping and managing to rise to the top in such a vortex of complexity, the successful [postcolonial] authors have devised—and employ—a whole range of strategies in order to tell their tale, be heard, and maintain authority" (Lau 8). The neoliberal bent of *Americanah*'s narrative can thus be read as a kind of strategizing, by using one's own authorial position of marginality as a way of pandering to a Western racial conscience that emphasizes individual success in spite of—and in willful ignorance of—system racial and gender barriers.

Ifemelu's diasporic gaze can also be described through the lens of what the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines as the "outsider within" perspective. Collins writes that "group

insiders have similar worldviews, acquired through similar educational and professional training….social class, gender, and racial background…insiders have undergone similar experiences, possess a common history, and share taken-for-granted knowledge that characterizes "thinking as usual" (Collins 525-526). Conversely, the "outsider within" perspective describes Black women's experienced realities, "both prior to contact and after initiation [of society's lengthy socialization process]… [providing] them with "special perspectives and insights…available to that category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system" (Merton 29 qtd in Collins 526). Ifemelu's outsider within perspective is evident in the observations of her blog and the critical analyses of race and identity in America woven into the free indirect discourse of the novel at large. Drawing from her unique positionality as both an insider and an outsider, Ifemelu offers nuanced insights into the lived realities of Black women navigating a white supremacist society. One of her first blog posts expresses this aptly, when she writes "when you make the choice to come to America, you become black" (Adichie 273). This process of becoming a raced subject forms the basis of her blog, and ultimately, of her success as a writer.

At the beginning of Graham Huggan's text *The Post Colonial Exotic*, he defines conventional exoticism as "an aestheticizing process through which the cultural other is translated, [and] relayed back through the familiar. Yet in the postcolonial context, exoticism is effectively repoliticised, redeployed both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power" (Huggan ix-x). *Americanah*'s literary project follows in this repoliticization and redeployment of Otherness, but ultimately brushes up against, and eventually acquiesces to its own exoticism by playing into the

narrative of the American dream that it purports to critique. When Ifemelu arrives in America, she faces a series of racial microviolences and discrimination. She falls into depression, debt, and rapidly realizes that the American dream that was sold to her is, in fact, a nightmare. Despite the struggles that she faces upon first immigrating to America, Ifemelu ultimately achieves upward mobility, wealth, and cultural status as a blogger and racial spokesperson. She transcends the racial and gendered barriers that she initially encounters, implying that hard work and perseverance ultimately lead to success—the very definition of neoliberalism. In this way, *Americanah* offers a veneer of subversiveness while simultaneously establishing a narrative that is palatable for Western audiences.

II. The Blog as Metafiction: Mapping Adichie and Ifemelu's Overlapping Author Functions

The author, as a consumable figure, is far from dead. The postcolonial author in particular has come to occupy an increasingly significant role in the marketing and aesthetics of marginality in the global literary market. Sarah Brouillette documents the increasing importance of this authorial positionality in her text *Postcolonial Writers in the Literary Marketplace.* She draws on Michel Foucault's theory of the author, which posits that "the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (305). The Author Function refers to the discourse that surrounds an author and their oeuvre; in this sense, authorship can be considered as a sort of product that amasses cultural capital by taking specific positions within the cultural marketplace. In Foucault's framework, the author is not considered as a person with their own subjectivity, they only occupy a symbolic or discursive position in relation to their body of work. Postcolonial writers are becoming increasingly aware of the marketability of their author function, and integrating this very awareness into their

fiction. Brouillette's text is a pioneering analysis of the symbiosis between the sociological functionings of the literary market and the emerging aesthetic patterns refracted in contemporary postcolonial writing. Postcolonial writing "shares and is shaped by what [Brouillette] describes as the simultaneous extension and centralization of the publishing business" (Marx 812). The ever increasing encroachment of publishing demands on the aesthetic parameters and sensibilities of postcolonial texts is of chief importance in an analysis of both Ifemelu's blog and Adichie's own authorial self-consciousness.

Once Ifemelu's blog gains massive popularity, and she is invited into a corporation to give a "diversity workshop" (Adichie 376). Upon arrival to the workshop, she scans the room to find that "they were all white. Her presentation was titled "How to Talk About Race With Colleagues of Other Races," but who, she wondered, would they be talking to, since they were all white?" (Adichie 377). After receiving a hostile and racist email from the corporation after her presentation, Ifemelu reflects that "the point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence. They had not read her blog but they had heard that she was a "leading blogger" about race" (Adichie 377). The corporation uses Ifemelu's Author Function, i.e. the discursive signifiers surrounding her identity —black, female, immigrant— rather than the actual content of her blog. As such, her Author Function aligns perfectly with the dominant corporate zeal for "diversity", despite these corporations "refusing to address the socioeconomic constraints that make freedom and empowerment impossible for the large majority of women" (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 11). This moment sparks a realization for Ifemelu: the companies, organizations, and schools that

invite her to give talks about the importance of diversity and multiculturalism are not, in a real sense, interested in what she has to say, nor are they interested in concertedly or earnestly addressing the effects of systemic racism. Ifemelu contends that the point of these workshops is "to leave people feeling good about themselves" (377)—a manifestation of White fragility that restores a state of White equilibrium (Diangelo 106), or the "racial status quo" (Diangelo 4), which is variously sustained by mechanisms of denouncing, avoiding, and detouring from addressing the topic of racism directly. Ifemelu further acknowledges that "[t]hey did not want the content of her ideas, they merely wanted the gesture of her presence" (Adichie 377) as a token minority meant to showcase, more symbolically than literally, the company's ostensible commitment to equity.

The irony of Ifemelu's situation — being a spokesperson for cross-racial contact in an all-white room,— parallels Adichie's position of the literary field. As an acclaimed Black author, Adichie commands a significant platform, yet the reception and marketing of her work often underscore a reductionist framing of her narratives as educational tools for a predominantly white audience. This dynamic hints at a broader issue within the literary marketplace, where the works of marginalized authors are often valued not for their artistic merit or the universality of their themes but for their ability to serve as windows into the "Other" for a white readership. Thus, it is not only Ifemelu's blog posts that offer a meta-social criticism—this criticism is integrated into the form and structure of the entire novel.

The paraliterary function of Ifemelu's blog posts is such that "readers encounter cultural commentary by an outsider who becomes an insider" (McCoy 281). It is a literal truncation of *Americanah*'s broader literary project. After Ifemelu's blog gains popularity, her academic

boyfriend Blaine cautions that "people are not reading you as entertainment, they're reading you as cultural commentary. That's a real responsibility. There are kids writing college essays about your blog," (Adichie 386). Blaine's warning is a perfect analog for both Ifemelu and Adichie's broader Author Functions as Black women operating within a white literary marketplace. Ifemelu's success as an author depends heavily on her ability to cater to a specific niche of white readers. The blog, as well as the novel writ large, are intended as instructive texts—ones that, as Blaine suggests, will be used as scholastic materials for future students. Adichie, and Ifemelu by proxy, have hindered creative mobility that is limited by the space of possibles available to them in their given literary arena that is made up primarily of white readers in a North America. Blaine's warning is also a metafictional moment of anxiety over the readerly reception of one's work as someone that is marketed as a Black writer. Brouillette identifies this narrative pattern that she sees emerging in postcolonial novels in particular. Postcolonial authors, she writes, "use their texts to register anxiety about the political parameters of the literary marketplace… expressions of self-consciousness, whether ultimately self-exempting or self-implicating, are a constitutive feature of the postcolonial field, at once eminently saleable and productive of the patterns of taste through which postcolonial literature is consumed and understood (Brouillette 1). Similar to the definition of the diasporic bildungsroman, Brouillette acknowledges that a key aspect of postcolonial writing involves the presumed reader, as well as the demands of the literary market writ large. The following passage speaks to the literary pattern that Brouillette identifies; in a moment of meta-fictitious free indirect discourse, Shan, Blaine's sister, remarks that

> 'You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too obvious. Black writers who do literary fiction in this country, all three of them, not the ten thousand who write about those bullshit ghetto books with the bright covers, have two choices, they can do precious or they can do pretentious. When you do neither, nobody knows what to do with you. So if you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't even know it's about race (Adichie 417).

Shan's commentary about the process of writing Black fiction is rooted in cultural and market conditions that sensationalize narratives of Black bombast, suffering, and pathology. These texts often depict a vision of Blackness that dehumanizes and decontextualizes the historical and systemic conditions that have led to the disenfranchisement of Black communities. So too, popular Black fiction is often cast as self-mythologizing fiction, a tactic that ties author to protagonist as a way of producing what Roland Barthes terms "the reality effect" (Barthes 141). That Ifemelu is a writer, just like Adichie herself, that she occupies a distinctly diasporic identity, and, most importantly, that the paratextual commentary of her blog is incorporated as a significant part of the novel, speaks to the very phenomenon that Brouillette documents.

This historicization allows for a better understanding of the artistic and market constraints faced by Adichie and other Black writers, who are stuck in a bind between appealing to the white readerly gaze, becoming irrelevant or, as Shan puts it, "unbelievable" (Adichie 417). Meditating on the process of writing as a marginalized author reflects "a real intervention in the logic of the market and marketing by writers who play, and play with, their part in this enterprise" (Marx 816). So too, moments such as that highlighted in the passage refract Adichie's own awareness

of the market context that she is operating within as a Black, postcolonial subject—it is a moment that contemplates on what the novel concedes and refuses to concede about the process of writing as a raced person in the contemporary global literary market.

II.I Reading the Blog

As a genre that is integrated into the broader discourse of the text, the blog becomes, quite literally, separated from the rest of the novel's dialogue and prose. Visually, the blog announces its break with the rest of the text with distinctive titles and a change in font—these stylistic shifts indicate a suspension from the narrative-verse of *Americanah* to the meta-verse of the blogosphere—an educational space where the very act of writing is aestheticized and distinguished through the formal container of the blog. In this way, the blog functions as a vehicle for exploring, and sometimes ironizing the Black writer/white reader dynamic. The emphasis on writing, as a process with political stakes, becomes clear in several of Ifemelu's blogs. Take, for instance, the post where she directly calls attention to her implied white readership:

> In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not. So if you haven't lynched somebody then you can't be called a racist. If you're not a bloodsucking monster, then you can't be called a racist. Somebody has to be able to say that racists are not monsters. They are people with loving families, regular folk who pay taxes. Somebody needs to get the job of deciding who is racist and who isn't. Or maybe it's time to just scrap the word "racist." Find something new. Like Racial Disorder

> Syndrome. And we could have different categories for sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute (Adichie 390).

Ifemelu addresses the white neoliberal tendency to think of oneself as anti-racist while refusing to acknowledge or articulate the very system of racial oppression that sustains white power. Interestingly, and what makes this post ironic, is the fact that Ifemelu is latently aware of the specific kind of white reader that is reading not only the blog, but also *Americanah* at large: one that considers themselves anti-racist by virtue of reading a novel about race. The self-figuration of the reader specifically is called out here, in a tongue-and-cheek way that confronts the neoliberal discourse of liberal multiculturalism (Guillory 11). The particular kind of antiracism that Ifemelu calls attention to in this passage expresses itself through empty, performative gestures that profess alleged solidarity with the oppressed, while bearing little to no energy, time, sacrifice or consequence on behalf of those professing it.

In another post that toes the line between satire and seriousness, Ifemelu addresses the concept of white privilege by providing a literal copy-pasted quiz from the internet. This moment once again collapses the narratorial barrier between blog-post reader and the readers of *Americanah*, crystallizing a moment of metafiction. The post is titled "What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White" (Adichie 429). She writes:

> PS- Professor hunk just suggested I post this, a test for White privilege, copyright a pretty cool woman called Peggy Macintosh. If you answer mostly no, then congratulations, you have white privilege. What's the point of this you ask? Seriously? I have no idea. I guess

> it's just good to know. So you can gloat from time to time, lift you up when you're depressed, that sort of thing (Adichie 429).

The post goes on for several pages, with a series of questions that prompt the reader to think about that ways in which race overtly figures as a barrier (or lack thereof) in their lives. Irony does a lot of heavy lifting in this passage for dramatizing the metafictional tone of the blog post. Ifemelu's suggestion that the point of taking a white privilege quiz is to feel good about oneself perfectly highlights the often performative nature of white allyship that presents itself through empty gestures that are ultimately more self-fulfilling than they are an earnest engagement in anti-racist behaviour. To read about race, in other words, is often rooted in a desire for white readers to signal their antiracist bonafides, rather than a desire to earnestly dismantle the structures of privilege that sustain their lives. This post breaks the narratorial barrier between author and reader in a way that nudges the white reader to think of the ways in which their reading practices are complicit in the kind of navel-gazing racial privilege that Ifemelu critiques. It prompts the reader, in other words, to think about their motives for reading a novel that is, for all intents and purposes, specifically marketed about race.

III. *Americanah* in the Literary Marketplace

New York Magazine's elusive review describes *Americanah* as "a work of a different order", claiming that "Adichie is to blackness what Philip Roth is to Jewishness". The Washington Post uses similar language, describing Adichie as "uniquely positioned to compare racial hierarchies in the United States to social striving in her native Nigeria". These reviews posit an essentializing marker of identity, connecting Adichie's status as a Black author with her authority to speak on behalf of an imagined broader Black community in both America and

Nigeria. Another review by the Globe and Mail says that *Americanah* "leaves you feeling grateful that even though in America 'you're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things,' Adichie is just too perceptive and brave not to". This statement is directed at a presumed white audience who can afford to "pretend not to notice things," thus affirming the novel's positionality as one that appeals to an imagined, racially ignorant readership who is approaching the novel as a pedagogical resource. Within this highly racialized reader-writer dynamic, Adichie functions as a kind of informant that teaches white liberal readers what racism is and how it is felt as an embodied, lived experience.

A main actor that has endorsed *Americanah* is Oprah, whose review is on the back cover of the novel, thus denoting how influential she is as a cultural icon who is likely to draw more attention to the book. According to Rita Barnard, Oprah's book club has "established her as a cultural figure of unprecedented influence," commanding a level of trust and cultural know-how to rouse 650,000 people to spend at least 20 to 50 dollars on a hardcover book" (Barnard 86). Barnard goes on to describe the reading strategies that Oprah espouses as being "emotional, utilitarian, and efferently hermeneutic," encouraging her readers to search for a connection between the author, the characters, and themselves (Barnard 86) . Indeed, the reviews on the back of *Americanah* do make a concerted effort to bridge these three vectors. But, as Barnard aptly points out, this reading strategy blurs the distinction between fiction and lived experience in a way that actually erases the subjectivity of both author and character, rendering the work not only intensely self-gratifying, but also ahistorical. When the white, North American reader is imagined at the centre of a text, authors of colour are coerced into performative roles. Instead of describing *Americanah* as the intimate, complex, and masterful portrayal of one Black woman's

multi-faceted and multidimensional life, a large chunk of the novels reviews revolve almost exclusively around the topic of race, thus reaffirming Adichie's iconographic role as a Black spokesperson.

Conclusion

Americanah highlights the lived experiences of being a Black diasporic woman navigating interlocking systems of oppression amidst the search for self. The blogosphere, coupled with the novel's free indirect discourse about the process of raced writing, combine to critique the white-centric gaze that dominates the literary field from production to reception. Ifemelu's engagement with *Americanah*'s various internal white audiences also exposes the performative bent of white racial allyship as an expression of corporate zeal and the bolstering of the white racial conscience, rather than a sincere desire to dismantle systems of oppression. While the novel criticizes this ubiquitous white readerly gaze by satirizing the process of writing as a racialized person, it also adheres to a narrative of racial triumph that comforts, rather than disrupts, the very same gaze. In this way, the production and reception of Ifemelu's blog mirrors Adichie's own fraught navigation of the global literary market as someone desiring authentic representation in the face of more powerful forces that aim to market her marginalized status.

Chapter 2

"My biggest issue when I look into the mirror is that sometimes the face I see doesn't feel like mine" (Leilani 58).

If the bildungsroman is about character formation, *Luster* crucially begs the question of who, and what exactly, are being formed. Edie's characterization creates a sense of narrative instability and unreliability that rejects the bildungsroman's tendency towards realism and narrative traceability while creating a sense of defamiliarization, a concept that Bertolt Brecht defines as such: "[t]he performer wishes to appear alien to the spectator. Alien to the point of arousing surprise. This he manages by seeing himself and his performance as alien. In this way the things he does on the stage become astonishing. By this craft everyday things are removed from the realm of the self-evident" (Brecht 131). To this end, the spectator "feels his way into the actor as into an observer. In this manner an observing, watching attitude is cultivated" (Brecht 131). *Luster*'s voyeurism is unsettling and destabilizing because it refuses to acquiesce to a clear image of Black American social development. This refusal is equally a rejection of Black authorial expectation. Dissecting *Luster*'s critical reception in comparison to *Americanah*'s reveals how prestige, popularity, and artistic acclaim are fundamentally racialized. I argue that while *Americanah*'s massive success is, in large part, a result of its palatability and ease of reading in a way that doesn't unsettle the racial consciousness of white readers, *Luster*'s narrative power lies in its pushing back against constrictive representations of Black life.

This chapter addresses the politics of representation inherent to Edie's precarious and often vulnerable position in white-centric suburbia and her intimate relationship with Eric and, be extension, Rebecca and Akila. I consider how Edie interpolates the reader as a voyeur, and

how this enables a kind of 'making strange'—and in so doing, making visible— the structures and micro aggressions of racism in the North American context. In addition, I draw on Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" to dissect Edie's cognitive dissonance in relation to white space and subjectivity. In Eric and Rebecca's New Jersey suburban home, Edie expresses a racially estranged narrative gaze while supporting—through sexual, emotional, and manual labour—the members of the white family. She enters the home as a mistress, is sexualized by the white man in this environment, and is constrained by monetary insecurity that in large part keep her trapped in this space and relationship. She employs a 'way of seeing' informed by her outsider status within the white home, and this scopophilic method reveals specific affective reactions to being Black in racially exploitative and exclusionary spaces. An analysis of romantic intimacy in relationships that grapple with disparities in class, gender, and race must crucially account for how the "social is always past," and the personal is always political. Raymond Williams defines a "structure of feeling," as "a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" (Williams 132). If, for Williams, these 'idiosyncratic', subjective feelings are most often manifest in literature and visual art, the first person narrative of *Luster* offers another element of immediacy—of access to affective reactions and displays that are available for analysis. This conceptual framework emphasizes how feeling, experience, and social relations are necessarily informed by broader historical structures that manifest "at the very edge of semantic availability" (Williams 134). The merging of " the 'aesthetic' and the 'psychological' produces "a sense of instance and process, where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled" (Williams 129).

My argument builds from these sociohistorical and methodological frameworks in order to explore how expressions of Black female self manifest amidst conditions of social and material violence. While Edie displays fear, frustration, vulnerability, and dysphoria[2] at the semantic level, this chapter dissects the historical truths that are left in the recesses and subtexts of these affective expressions. *Luster* presents, almost as a matter of course, a significant amount of violence against Edie that is so common that it almost becomes mundane. This chapter historicizes such violence and the spaces in which it occurs in order to illuminate the affective dimension of Edie's narrative and conception of identity/ identity dysphoria. In so doing, I aim to reveal how "the ordinary [feels] shocking but also [makes] shocking the fact that it feels ordinary" (Levine 591). Beginning with contextualizing the suburbs as a cite of historically-charged racial discrimination, I then analyze how Edie's dependent and abusive relationship to Eric reveals a reenactment of the master-servant dynamic inherited from Antebellum slavery. An exposed, historicized version of the social powers that govern Edie's life help us understand how her character development and conception of self is understandably both dysphoric and inaccessible to her. Put differently, in a world that defines Edie's value based on the emotional and physical labour that she provides to the white people around her, it is no wonder that *Luster*'s bildungsroman refuses easy classification. Instead, her identity is mapped incoherently and with great struggle. Finally, this chapter shifts to a sociological analysis of *Luster*'s critical and popular reception in order to argue that because of this very incoherence, the novel refuses to be classified as what Jodi Melamed terms a "race novel" on a broader sociological level.

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[2] Dysphoria, in this context, is used to indicate a feeling of racialized estrangement relative to the white supremacist social and historical context that surrounds Edie.

I. The Exploitation of Black Women and Their Labour: Contextualizing Edie's Identity-Dysphoria in Suburbia

Luster takes place, to a great extent, in the suburbs, and it is here where the relationship between space and power becomes most obvious. As Bieger writes, "narratives exist and are meaningful only because they are situated in and across space, within networks of stories and trajectories, and with a distinct spatiality that is molded from the specific relations among all the actors…brought together in a particular network" (Bieger 15). Thus, a historicization of the suburbs is appropriate for understanding the racial dynamics that both structure and perpetuate the narrative. In *Luster*, space is essential to the production of narrative, and narrative in turn is essential to the production of space. The suburbs have long been a site of racial tension. White flight, a phenomenon that emerged in the 1970s in the United States, refers to the deliberate and widespread emigration of white families from urban centres to the suburbs, as cities became denser and more culturally and ethnically diverse. White flight produced racial divisions along geographical lines, marking the suburbs as a white enclave in the cultural imaginary of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In *Luster*, there is a clear geographical delineation between suburbia and urban space. The conceptual production of space "participates in the lived production of space in the habits, tales, and images that charge space with symbolic or ritualistic value" (Bieger 14). The suburbs, unlike the city, were meant to reflect a veneer of racial homogeneity that radically and systematically excluded racial Others. Karen Tongson affirms this when she writes that "[t]he postwar suburbs would serve as sanctuaries of the good life where racial and economic homogeneity guaranteed "safety," while satisfying the white middle classes' desires for a lived environment that struck a delicate balance between privacy and

community" (Tongson 2). The emphasis on "privacy, the rejection of the street, and the spacing out of houses distanced the public sphere as a locus for uncontrolled exposure to and interaction with otherness", writes Andrea Vesentini (Vesentini 59). The architectural style of American suburban landscapes thus reflects a broader sociohistorical anxiety rooted in bigotry and classism —namely, the belief in the threat of Otherness encroaching on the ostensibly safe enclave of white community.

In contrast to the racial and architectural homogeneity of the suburbs, the diverse, cosmopolitan culture of the turn-of-the-century metropolis was "achieved only by aggressively excluding and stereotyping African Americans and by upholding entrenched patterns of racial segregation. In short, the new mass culture reinforced a mutual constitutive relationship between *public* and *white*" (Avila 4). Postwar suburbanization reached a pinnacle in the years between 1945 and 1970, and further sanctified racial divisions along geographical lines, marking the city as space increasingly associated with Blackness, and the suburbs with whiteness (Avila 4-5). Postwar suburbanization fostered an insular provinciality that further nurtured the development of a white identity that was largely defined by "privatized, consumer-oriented subjectivity premised upon patriarchy, whiteness, and suburban home ownership" (Avila 8). It is a consciousness premised on the systematic and federal exclusion of racialized people. Thus marks the sociohistorical context that Edie navigates. Her experiences reflect the traces of this racial redlining, and a deep lasting "suburban white consciousness" (Avila 9).

Edie writes about the affective dimension of her own racial exclusion in suburbia. In an impulsive moment of jealousy, she breaks into Eric's home and starts going through his wife's (Rebecca) closet. She is caught, and runs out of the house in panic and shame: "I see a neighbour

kid watching from his aboveground pool, and I am embarrassed, shamed by the lazy tenor of the cul-de-sac. The gardenias and unsecured bicycles and me, breathing heavily over someone's wife" (Leilani 49). Edie is not, it seems, primarily embarrassed of having trespassed out of jealousy, nor for being caught by the wife of the man she is having an affair with. She is most ashamed of her estrangement among the "gardenias and unsecured bicycles" —in other words, by the suburban landscape itself and her alien status therein. The sociogeographical satire in this sentence is subtle, but present, invoked by the 'gardenias' and the word 'unsecured'. The gardenias draw attention to the artifice of suburban landscapes, reminiscent of the pastoral tradition's glorification of "the (re)turn to a less urbanized, more "natural" state of existence" (Buell 31). In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell writes that "[l]iterary and artistic representations of natural sublimity came to be seen as an arm of American manifest destiny, creating for the Euro-American male "a veritable world elsewhere where he could rewrite and reread national policies of commercialism and expansionism in quite ideal terms"" (Buell 35). Buell stresses the distinctly colonial cast of American pastoral ideology, arguing that the glorification of natural landscapes emphasizes the American obsession with land possession, domination, and national expansion. This imperial ideology espouses a vision of the 'good American life' as "exurban, green, pastoral, even wild" (Buell 32). The gardenias, then, signify the Euro-American obsession with owning and manicuring natural landscapes, and the white suburban idealization of siloed space and architecture. The uniformity of the gardenias and the ostensible strangeness of Edie's Black body among them beckons to a suburban anxiety over what is controllable, a desire to contain, possess, and micromanage one's lived environment as a way of both distancing and ostracizing Otherness.

Later in the novel, Edie similarly remarks upon “the suburban quiet, the soft hybrid hum, the monastic baying of land-protecting dogs, the laughter of clear-skinned kids, [and] a chorus of perpetually unlatched screen doors” (Leilani 105). Beyond the undeniable class resentment that rings through these lines, Edie is keenly aware of how the mundane happenings of the suburbs are profoundly unfamiliar to her. The compound adjectives in the sentence do much by way of unsettling white habits of perception (Levine 590). Reference to ‘land-protecting dogs’ alludes to the historical fact that land ownership is predominantly a facet of white reality, with Black people acting as labourers that maintain that land, rather than inhabit it. The “perpetually unlatched screen doors” highlight the abstract, rather than the probable threat of domestic trespassing in suburbia, mirroring Edie’s notice of the ‘unsecured bicycles” earlier in the novel. The passage focuses on the sensory dimension of suburban life, notably the auditory. Edie references a ‘hum’, a ‘monastic baying’, ‘laughter’, and a ‘chorus’. What all of these descriptors share is the implication of uniformity and cohesion—qualities that mirror the very architecture and landscaping of suburbia.

When Edie first moves into Eric and Rebecca’s New Jersey suburban home, she remarks upon the space’s “cohesive domesticity” that she finds “weird and a little threatening,” but nevertheless “fills [her] with a yearning to retrieve [her] toaster oven from storage and find a place to plug it in” (Leilani 100-101). Edie expresses a form of dual and conflicting desire—what Lauren Berlant aptly terms “cruel optimism”: “[a]ll attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (Berlant 23). For Berlant, objects of desire and attachment often conflict with that which will actually bring the individual a sense of

wellbeing and stability, due to their inherent internal logical contradictions. Put differently, Berlant argues that objects of desire often push up against—and find their limitations in—larger structures of historical oppression. Edie's desire to plug in her toaster, to consolidate a sense of domestic belonging in a space she finds "weird and threatening" is a perfect instance of cruel optimism. The suburban home represents a false promise of upward mobility, familial unity, and intergenerational affluence—qualities that Edie recognizes she is unlikely to attain as a Black woman. Nevertheless, she is attached to the version of the "good life" that the suburban home represents. Edie expresses this affective inconsistency when she says: "I'm aware of the breadth of the house, even as I try to take up as little space as possible. I'm aware that the room is owned, each square foot considered and likely free of mice" (Leilani 100). Formally, the sentence lingers on certain facts that dramatize Edie's own sense of racial alienation and hyperawareness of private property. The sentence reveals little about the descriptive, pictorial imagery of the home, and instead focalizes Edie's estranged relationship to space. The sentence expresses, in other words, a relationality between the protagonist and the suburban home as a signifier for her object of desire. Cruel optimism reveals a

> relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well- being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the

> subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world (Berlant 24).

Relations of attachment are often structured by systems of hegemony that have become warped in the cultural imagination as something to strive towards—"as the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world". These relations promise success, happiness, and peace, despite being fundamentally rooted in systems that produce and reproduce capitalistic relationships and behaviours that are entrenched in classism, racism, and sexism. Objects of desire hide behind an affective veneer that promises a good, stable, and contented life, while being the very vehicle that drives subjects towards choices that proliferate the conditions that produced the need for affective attachment to begin with. Thus, it is not so much the private property or cohesive domesticity that Edie craves, but the sense of purpose that materializes in the pursuit of such things, despite this sense of purpose being compromised at best and unattainable at worst.

There are several occasions where Edie remarks that it is not Eric specifically that she is attracted to, but the wealth and racial privilege that he represents: "It occurs to me that maybe he is not interesting and is just older than me, someone who has blown through his budget for failure and landed on the other side with a 401(k)…I think of how keenly I've been wrong. I think of all the gods I have made out of feeble men" (Leilani 192). In another moment of affective estrangement, she similarly acknowledges that Eric is "the most obvious thing that has ever happened to me, and all around the city it is happening to other silly, half-formed women excited by men who've simply met the prerequisite of living a little more life, a terribly unspecial thing…Instead I let myself be awed by his middling command of the wine list"

(Leilani 208). These are moments of narrative and affective rupture, where optimism turns cruel and reality sets in. Edie's desire was never about Eric as a person, but about the version of comfortable life that his racial and financial status signify. She is "positioned through sex and proximity to power to secure the right to a future" (Sharpe 13), because the prospect of achieving upward mobility on her own is systemically nearly impossible. These moments of narrative rupture, where Edie lingers on the social schism between she and Eric, "allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in [her attachment], not as confirmation of [her] irrationality but as an explanation of the sense of [her] endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises" (Berlant 23).

Upon breaking into Eric's house and being caught by Rebecca, Edie is coerced into attending their anniversary party. As Eric and Edie sit in front of Edie's apartment building after Eric drives her home, he says, spontaneously,

> I feel like I want to hurt you…I mean I'd like to hit you". Edie replies: "I mean, okay… and it's odd how he rolls up his sleeve, the premeditation of it, the procedural flexing of his hand…no guidelines have been established per se, but somehow I just know to present my face, to close my eyes…it is a little impolite how gamely he satisfies this request (Leilani 62-63).

The normative, ritualistic quality of the interaction, coupled with the smooth cadence of the paragraph, beckons to a pattern of historical violence between Black women and white men; Edie has trespassed the white home, infringing on Eric's life with his white wife and his white friends in his white suburban neighbourhood. He therefore feels it is his right to hit her, to reestablish the social quota, to remind her that she does not belong in the broader scope of his

life. His impulse to hit Edie escapes semantic meaning, but manifests in the body as a visceral response to the transgression of domestic ideals—ideals that are, fundamentally, rooted in the subordination of Black women and the upholding of white women's supposed purity. Eric elaborates: "Do you understand that this is not not okay? This is my family…I don't owe you anything. I was clear. I have a life, a job, a wife" (Leilani 61). In other words, Edie is ancillary to the white domestic household, meant to be invisible and kept at a distance from the rest of Eric's 'respectable' life. This moment dramatizes Edie's lack of social power, her financial and emotional vulnerability, and Eric's sense of entitlement to hurt her when he is frustrated; "a third of intimate partners commit physical violence against women; these numbers rise significantly for women of colour" (Angel 25). Black women are often the first to fall at the brunt of various sociopolitical violences, and Eric plays into this uneven dynamic willingly, and as a matter of course. That Edie is young, Black, woman, broke, and depressed puts her in a position of immense dependency, and the moment Eric hits her emphasizes his willingness to exploit that dependency. Respectability politics also dictate this encounter—Black women have historically been cast as less respectable than white women, less worthy of care and commitment both interpersonally and systemically. Edie is therefore a safer receptacle of Eric's aggression, his privilege granting him a level of immunity from potential legal prosecution and social backlash. Thavolia Glymph writes of the plantation household, acknowledging it as "a principal site for the construction of southern white womanhood" (Glymph 65);

> to function and meet the standards of domesticity, the plantation household required the labor of enslaved women— to beautify, clean, order, and thus civilize it. At the same time, it required negative representations of enslaved women and their labor—filthy,

> disordered—to deny them consideration as anything more than tools of the civilizing mission (Glymph 65).

Edie occupies a similar discursive position within the white home—as ancillary, available to satisfy Eric's sexual desire, as domestic help, and as a Black mother figure to Akila—but it is made clear, in Eric's neglect and routinized violence, that she will never occupy the position of 'respectable partner' in the same way that his white wife does. It is thus unsurprising that this moment of violence occurs right after a scene centred on the performance of white, domestic ideology: a wedding anniversary, where "the makeup of the party [is] so homogeneous it gives [Edie] up as a matter of course…someone is deep in an account of a deck renovation and simultaneously a screed about the sympathy we should all have for the police" (Leilani 52, 54). The moment is clownish: a celebration revolving around love and commitment narrated from the perspective of the husband's mistress. The dramatic irony, paired with Edie's racial alienation in the sea of white guests, produces a satire of heterosocial domesticity.

Structures of power such as slavery continue to manifest in the present, although they rear their head often insidiously, at the level of affective action and reaction. Christina Sharpe acknowledges this when she writes about the "internalization and perpetuation of [post-slavery] violence in various forms of power and desire among the formerly enslaved and those who claimed ownership over them." She argues that "the complicated articulations of sex, violence, and use, the occupying or refusing to occupy the space of the other, are necessary to understanding power in relationships on the intimate level and in their larger historical expression" (Sharpe 5). The violence expressed in the passage reads as a form of routine—Edie's willingness to 'present her face,' speaks to an inherited post-slavery subjectivity,

"connected, then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (Sharpe 3). In the same vain, Eric abuses "the greater social power her wields over her," and "the knowledge that women"—especially BIPOC women—"rarely report assault and have the odds stacked against them if they do" (Angel 31). There is, in other words, too wide of a privilege gap, too many sociohistorical forces that are at play between Edie and Eric's relationship, to qualify their sexual experiences as truly consensual. Angel writes that the "sexuality of women of colour is still often perceived through colonialist and orientalist fantasies of animality and exoticness…in the antebellum South in the US, the rape of enslaved black women was not a crime, with stereotypes of black women as unchaste disqualifying them from the law's ambit" (Angel 13). How, then, can Edie even give consent if her 'yes' isn't considered meaningful or particularly important?

> The perception of a black woman as always already saying 'yes' to sex creates insidious positions for her: a no is less likely to be heard as a no, and a yes is presumed. If her desire is seen as confirming what is already presumed, then her own statements about her desire are irrelevant—which means, in turn, that sex can never be violence, that rape is impossible. If a 'no' is meaningless, then how can a 'yes' be meaningful? And how does insisting on the emphatic expression of desire serve women whose utterances of yes and no are emptied out? (Angel 14).

Applying to the passage what Sharon Marcus terms "the grammar of violence" highlights the fact that Edie never provides Eric with an enthusiastic 'yes' to being hit (Marcus 392). Grammar acts as a metaphor for "the rules and structure which assign people to positions within a script…this grammar predicates white men as legitimate subjects of violence between all men

and as subjects of legitimate sexual violence against all women" (Marcus 392). The moment is not erotic, but is borne of something that escapes semantic expression but is nevertheless rooted in an ongoing history of violence that routinely abuses and then erases Black women's sexual traumas. Edie's response to Eric telling her that he wants to his her is, simply: "I mean, okay." There is no yes, no suggestion that she will enjoy being hit, no "rules or boundaries" established between them that would justify this kind of contact. Dwelling on this 'ordinary'—as in, normalized— violence makes "the ordinary feel shocking but also [makes] shocking the fact that it feels ordinary" (Levine 591). And yet, Edie decides to continue seeing Eric, and has sex with him after he hits her—a moment of hyperbolized cruel optimism. Even though she knows that the relationship is harmful both emotionally and physically, she persists in clinging to the ideal of what such a relationship represents and promises, but ultimately fails to deliver.

II. The Search for Self: A Bildungsroman Athwart

In the introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison writes about how his unnamed protagonist came to be:

> I was already having enough difficulty trying to avoid writing what might turn out to be nothing more than another novel of racial protest instead of the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be, and the voice appeared to be leading me precisely in that direction. But then as I listened to its taunting laughter and speculated as to what kind of individual would speak in such accents, I decided that it would be one who had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic (Ellison xviii).

Ellison was well acquainted with literary scene that preceded him—his reference to the "racial protest" novel—an implicit dig at Richard Wright's *Native Son*—suggests a certain awareness of the politics of the literary field and his own positionality as a Black writer therein. Ellison is clear about the novel's project: to write a story stripped of racial performativity, one that speaks earnestly about the plight of Black Americans. The narrator tells his story from the literal underground of an American city, which also acts as a perfect metaphor for the type of expository narrative that he tells—one that focalizes America's dark underbelly of Black dispossession and state violence. To be invisible, writes the narrator, is to "doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other peoples minds…You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you" (Ellison 4). The desire for recognition, and the insidious possibility that one might never be really seen as whole, is rooted in what W.E.B. Du Bois terms 'double consciousness'—the idea of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the nape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 14). To be invisible then, is to be overlooked through judgement and prejudice—in effect, to be erased. I invoke *Invisible Man* as a prototype for the distinctive narrative voice adopted in *Luster*. A review of the novel in *The New Yorker* reads: There is more than a touch of Ralph Ellison here, the hyper visible invisible woman who is cast by the world in categorial terms while trying to be seen for herself" (Schwartz 2020). Indeed, Edie's desperate and at times manic search for identity amidst conditions of racial and gender violence emphasizes the degree to which this "hypervisible invisibility" manifests as a crippling and blinding double-consciousness.

From the first chapter of the novel, Edie establishes her status as an artist—one who is about to paint a picture and tell a story, despite being out of practice: "I look for my paints, and when I find them, they are mostly congealed…The last time I painted, I was twenty-one. The president was black. I had more serotonin and I was less afraid of men…I work with the paint, let the acrylic dry, and when it isn't right I rework it again. I remain as faithful as I can to scale" (Leilani 17). In these lines, Edie metaphorizes her relationship to the reader and to the text, promising to 'remain faithful to scale', to transcribe the particular condition of Black, female existence as accurately as she can. She expresses a commitment to authenticity while elaborating on her particular relationship to art as a vehicle for truth telling. It is through this metaphor that Edie forms a textual pact between reader and narrator,—one that commits to an experiential realism rather than a linear and performative vision of Black American life.

Edie, too, is invisible in the very same way as Ellison's protagonist: " "high visibility" actually rendered one *un*-visible" (Ellison xv). By dint of her Blackness, Edie is both hyper visible and invisible—no one can really *see* her pain or trauma, her goals, her passions—she is systematically denied a sense of full personhood because she is Black, poor, and dispossessed. So too, Black women's pain has historically been so denied and normalized that it is rendered, as is the case for Edie, invisible. Analogous to the many Black female protagonists that precede her, Edie suffers, it seems, as a matter of course[3]. Her character development, including the scenes from her childhood, describe her suffering and the suffering of the Black women around her in a

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[3] It is important to note that although Leilani makes strides to radicalize the representation of Black female subjectivity, the literary marketplace still conditions a particular kind of Black narrative—one of suffering and struggle—as more commodifiable for a western, white readership.

way that is so casual that it becomes shocking: “When I get up in the morning, I look in the mirror and I see only my mother’s face…This morning I look in the mirror and find a bruise that makes the resemblance more pronounced, and it makes my bowels a little shy” (Leilani 68). It is telling, if not also devastating, that the only part of herself that she is able to paint are marks of abuse—essentially, Edie cannot fathom or construct a self devoid of suffering. Physical markers of pain are the only conduit through which Edie is able to conceive of herself, thus dramatizing the extent of her double consciousness, of seeing herself through the lens of the violence inflicted upon her. The fact that the bruise on her face remind her of her mother’s face also invokes the intergenerational nature of Black women’s suffering. Edie’s allusion to her mother suggests an effort, though subconscious, to excavate a sense of self and identity through history and kinship —in turning to the past to make sense of her present. And while Edie draws the connection between her history, her mother’s history, and their shared pain, the trauma of this acknowledgement seems to be both unbearable and intolerable. Her introspection is interrupted by ‘shy bowels’,—a physical response—followed by actions that can be classified as a form of psychological coping (the destruction of her room). The invocation of her bowels equally invokes that which is uncontrollable and usually private— a signal to the abject as something more genuine and honest, in contrast to the prescribed public performance that is required of Black women, and that disconnects Edie from a true understanding of herself. To invoke the bowels, and the body more generally in this way drives the attention towards that which is “jagged and sublimated” (Leilani 2020). It is only in these recesses of self, in the private and usually the ugly, that Edie can excavate her own identity devoid of double consciousness.

The grammatical determinisms in the sentences that follow dramatize the interconnectedness of violence, the search for identity, and artistic expression; “I retreat to my room, where I kill a few roaches, take a few pictures of my face, and do some quick acrylic studies. I have never been able to finish a self-portrait, but in these studies, in the burnt Sienna and purple that is meant to be my face, I see the bruises clearly, and it fills me with relief (Leilani 68-69). Edie’s visceral reaction to witnessing the bruises manifests in a subsequent violent act, of killing the roaches in her room, as a symbolic act of squandering the trauma evoked in witnessing her pain. It is only then that she can attempt to produce a self-portrait—one that is ultimately a visual reflection of her double consciousness, the only conduit through which she can represent herself.

While pain is one avenue of Edie’s search for self representation, various forms of labour are another. As she integrates into Eric and Rebecca’s house, she becomes more and more aware of her alien and exploited status therein, making it even more challenging for her to paint a self-portrait. In a society that defines and determines Black women’s worth based on the labour and emotional servitude that they provide to white society, it is no wonder that Edie struggles to define herself outside of this paradigm. Her character arc is built upon her relationship to various forms of social power both within and outside of the home:

> I still cannot manage a self portrait. When I try, there is a miscommunication, some synaptic failure between my brain and my hand. I try to find another way toward the self-portrait. I close my door and destroy my room and take a picture of the mess. I approach the drawing optimistically, but I am not there. The next time the house is clear, I take an opposite track and clean. I take out the garbage and then I take a picture of the bags on

> the curb. I clean the bathroom and take a picture of the tongue of hair I pull from the drain, and at night I render these pictures, hoping to see myself. When I don't, when I have completed a series on folded laundry and grout and still am not there, I keep cleaning. And then one morning while I am shining the faucets, Rebecca tells me she is planning a party and she would like me to help (Leilani 156).

In her desire to find a proxy through which to paint her own portrait, Edie is also invoking a longer history of Black women's disenfranchisement and dependency on white society— in particularly, the history of Black women's oppression in white domestic spaces. Despite being welcomed into Eric and Rebecca's home ostensibly as a guest, Edie's presence is inextricably linked to the labor that she provides for the white household. Not long after she moves, in, she begins cleaning the house, often in exchange for money, which is placed on her night table at the end of each week. The dynamics within Eric and Rebecca's household echo the racial relations embedded in the historical legacy of southern slavery—power dynamics that resonate with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's analysis of the ideal of white Antebellum womanhood: white slaveholder women possessed an ideal of womanhood that was related "to the ability to command the bodies and labor of others" (Fox-Genovese 49). In this context, Rebecca aligns herself with the social power wielded by Eric, reinforcing a structure where Edie's continued stay is contingent upon her capacity and willingness to labor—both physically and emotionally—for her white financiers. The South "had a slave system within a capitalist mode of production… Antebellum slave society…originated in the determination to provide labor for plantation agriculture; it emerged during the expansion of the capitalist world market" (Fox-Genovese 55). Edie's relationship to the white household cannot be divorced from relations of production and

reproduction, reinforcing a cycle in which her agency is constrained by the historical inheritances that continue to shape the racial power dynamics within the domestic sphere. Her expressions of alienation and exploitation are intertwined with her search for self-representation and identity. In other words, in order for Edie to understand who she is, she must first confront the painful fact that she exists in a repertory of violence and vulnerability, wherein the white world looks upon her as a vessel of labour available for the exploitation, production, and reproduction of existing social relations.

The maternal expectations forced upon Edie at the inception of her stay with Eric and Rebecca also inform the development of her identity as a caretaker as well as a narrative critic. When Rebecca discloses her concern over Akila's isolation in white suburbia, Edie reflects: "I feel suckered into admitting it, that it matters, that I have thought about it, the apparent isolation of their child, a thing immediately recognizable to me for being myself that thing which is both hypervisible and invisible: black and alone" (Leilani 99). Ellison's prologue is once again invoked here as a way of signalling a united historical lineage of Black being and consciousness —to be hyper visible by dint of one's colour, and simultaneously invisible for the very same reason. Edie witnesses this bind in Akila and is struck with a pang of sympathy. Rebecca's suggestion that Edie would be a better maternal figure for Akila is rooted in the fact that she is more accustomed to conditions of spontaneous and systemic violence. Christina Sharpe summarizes this when she asks: "What kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one's child? Is it mothering if one knows that one's child might be killed at any time in the hold, in the wake by the state no matter who wields the gun?" (Sharpe 78). Along with Sharpe, Aida Levy-Hussen,

Toni Morrison, and other Black scholars write extensively about the long history of Black maternity both in the context of transatlantic slavery and its wake. Sara Clarke Kaplan writes specifically of the Black reproductive as a form of contemporary chattel slavery: the "contradiction of Black maternity in the face of Black dispossession…is at the heart of the Black reproductive" (Clarke Kaplan 32). Black mothers have lived and continue to live a painful history of systematic alienation from their children. Chattel slavery was an institution of total objectification whereby the children of Black slaves were commodities, valued only for their labour potential. In this framework, the mothers that bore those children were merely vessels in a larger historical project of racial instrumentalization, erasure, and disenfranchisement. Slaves were treated as " 'a kind of raw material', to be commoditized at will" (Clarke Kaplan 33). Using the image of Aunt Jemima as a signifier for the ways that the Black reproductive operates both iconographically and materially, Clarke Kaplan argues that similar to Aunt Jemima, Black women occupy an objectified position that both sustains and reproduces white heteropatriarchy. She writes that

> the go-to ready-mix for white households in the rapidly industrializing North and Midwest of the early twentieth century…offered effortless sustenance for white bodies and the seamless reproduction of white supremacy for white people and aspiring nonwhites alike. Moreover, Aunt Jemima's role in reproducing the nation-state cannot be separated from the icon's construction as the face of Black female reproductive servitude (Clarke Kaplan 34).

That Rebecca asks Edie to essentially mother Akila speaks to the very dispossession that Clarke Kaplan writes about; just as slaves were forced to care for the children of white slave owners

despite being natally alienated from them, Edie's domestic security is contingent upon her ongoing mothering of Akila along with the domestic labour that she performs. She affirms this when she ponders why Rebecca asked her to move in: "she is moving toward her most natural conclusion, which is to engage me not as a person who has just watched her dissect a man but as a person who is black, and who is, because of that, available for her support" (Leilani 98). She is recruited not out of compassion, but out of a latent desire for racial servitude. In the white household, Edie is not treated as a person, but as someone available for physical and emotional labour. She expresses this sense of being a non-person when she asserts, rather tragically, that she could "walk the length of Broadway without a face. I could perish in a fire and have no one realize until a firefighter came across my teeth in the ash" (Leilani 110). This is just one of many instances where Edie expresses an unbridled racial consciousness—a sense of loneliness and dissociation that is symptomatic of her status as a racialized Other.

Akila's youth, innocence, and racial shielding by proxy to Eric and Rebecca's white privilege has largely—though not entirely—insulated her from the experiences of racial violence that Edie has experienced. Akila mostly stays in her room, playing video games and writing comic strips. She has been adopted by multiple white families only to be given up shortly thereafter. I am not suggesting that Akila has been spared the effects of systemic racism,—to be sure, her alienation in suburbia and the ever-watchful white gaze of her neighbours surely inflicts some degree of psychic damage. Rather, I argue that her limited range of experience with racial violence narratively positions her as a kind of tabula-rasa relative to Edie. The scene where Edie and Akila are stopped, interrogated, and harassed by police officers in front of their house crystallizes this experiential gap:

> One of the officers turns to look at [Akila], and I can feel the impending spiral of this exchange, my fear of the officers' increasing proximity tempered somewhat by the oddness of our shared incredulity at Akila's departure from the script…This is my home, Akila says, and I know that the moment between when a black boy is upright and capable of speech and when he is prostrate in his own blood is almost imperceptible, due in great part to the tacit conversation that is happening beyond him, that has happened before him, and that resists his effort to enter it before it concludes. I know that the event horizon is swift because of the gulf between the greeting and the pavement, but in real time, as they press Akila to the ground, every second is long (Leilani 214).

Akila's naïveté is what catalyzes such a specifically sociohistorical description of police brutality, as Edie is "frustrated for what she [Akila] hasn't been told" (Leilani 214). Dynamically, there are two social actors and one critic in this scene: the police officers, Akila, and Edie (the critic), respectively. While not entirely removed from the scene, Edie seemingly narrates from a distance as a narrator, critic, and historian. The passage switches tones and even genres, beginning in the realm of the descriptive and swiftly moving to that of the critical. Her critique of the unfolding scene is juxtaposed against her immersion in it, a duality that underscores the complexity of her position as a raced subject and storyteller. She is hyperaware of the white supremacy and national violence that perpetuates the historical "tacit conversation" and "script" that Akila diverges from, and yet, despite her critical stance, Edie finds herself trapped in the same cycle of violence and vulnerability, akin to a submerged onlooker. This position is paradoxical, oscillating between critical analysis and a palpable, immediate vulnerability, dramatizing the limitations faced by Black women who are unable to fully distance themselves

from the societal violences that they critique. The duality of Edie's perspective reveals the intricate interplay between critical consciousness and the tangible threats posed by systemic oppression.

III: *Luster* in the Literary Marketplace: A Novel of Resistance

Literary prestige, and more precisely, the commodification of the author, are far from neutral practices. These processes are deeply entrenched in an ecosystem of institutional prestige that pigeonholes authors of colour into specific creative confines, limiting their artistic mobility by forcing them to exoticize racial difference through narrative. Huggan writes prolifically of the inter-dynamics of the literary market: the three aspects "of commodity fetishism—mystification (or levelling-out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects—help these books and their authors acquire an almost talismanic status" (Huggan 19). As evidenced by Adichie's global prestige, and *Americanah*'s global acclaim, novels that fetishize racialized experiences are typically the quickest to gain popularity, precisely because they acquiesce to a colonial gaze.

Once again, it feels relevant to compare Leilani's literary project to that of Ellison, precisely because of their shared refusal to write a story about Black life that is either predictable or exotic, in the Huggansian sense of the word. *Invisible Man* is often contrasted with Richard Wright's *Native Son* for precisely this reason: while *Native Son* portrays a version of Black masculinity that validates the white association between Black maleness and violence, *Invisible Man* does quite the opposite. Rather than depicting a character that murderously rails against the

institutions that fail to support him, *Invisible Man* focalizes the institutions themselves as sites of manipulation and insidious racism.

Reviews of *Luster*[4] emphasize its alignment with Ellison's aesthetic sensibilities, marking it as a complex novel that refuses to commit to the singular narrative trajectory and characterization typical of the race novel: "There is nothing on offer like *Luster*—the story of a Black woman who is neither heroic nor unduly tragic…She is destructive but tender, ravenous for experience but deeply vulnerable—and often wickedly funny" (Sehgal, 2020). This review signals the common binary in "race novels" to portray the protagonist as either heroic or tragic—a tendency that ultimately strips the character of agency, complexity, and personhood. Juxtaposed against this binaristic character is Edie, in all of her messiness and confusion, refusing simple classification by virtue of her unpredictability and fallibility. Other reviews tellingly describe *Luster* in racially neutral language, despite it being a novel that is, overwhelmingly, about being young and Black and woman: "An electric swirl of shifting power dynamics and calculated intimacies…Leilani has a special gift for reconstructing the way late-stage millennials breathlessly narrate their lives in her prose, with Edie's internal monologue barreling through the hairpin turns of her life as if to lay claim to its tragedies before anyone else can" (Batkie 2020). There is no mention of race in this review, but instead, a claim about an ostensibly universal millennial experience, devoid of racial or gender specificity. Although this review echoes the "I don't see colour" discourse reminiscent of the early 2010s, it is noteworthy to emphasize the irony that in a literary marketplace where authors' racial identities are often meticulously

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[4] I have chosen to confine my analysis to the reviews that are printed on the physical paperback of the novel, as these reviews were chosen with intention by publishers and literary agents.

highlighted for marketing purposes, there is a conspicuous absence of such mention for a novel that undeniably revolves around the theme of race. The next review is also void of race, but does identify *Luster*'s unique prosaic techniques: "A rocket-paced, sensual fever dream of sex, trauma, relationships, and conflicting perceptions…*Luster* is intoxicating and surprising, never letting readers settle into recognizable patterns. Leilani has crafted an unforgettable novel about a young woman making her own way" (Shelf Awareness, 2020). Of chief interest in this review is the identification of "recognizable patterns"—while vague, this could very well be a gesture towards the "exoticist spectacle…and aesthetics of decontextualization…[typical] in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts" (Huggan 20). These 'recognizable patterns' may refer to aesthetic and narrative formulas inherent to many postcolonial, or otherwise racialized novels. However, this term equally affords a certain agency to the reader, highlighting the various ways in which familiar consumption habits, perceptual tendencies, and ingrained biases are operative in the act of reading work by racialized authors. A review by Shondaland celebrates Leilani's artistic talent, emphasizing how her masterful prose both delights and upends white habits of perception: "This debut novel from powerhouse writer Raven Leilani…deftly subverts the white gaze while also crafting an unforgettable protagonist. But the real fire here is Leilani's writing. Her sentences are gorgeous, and both the prose and the content will make you sweat" (Shondaland, 2020). As a cultural agent renowned for her own subversive screenwriting, Shonda Rhimes has positioned Shondaland as a production company dedicated to the representation of Black and female perspectives, frequently centering these marginalized viewpoints in its cinematic productions. In a parallel vein, Leilani's literary project shares in Shondaland's dedication to amplifying real representations of Black female life. Both

creators—one literary, and one visual— dismantle existing aesthetic and perspectival paradigms, fostering a more inclusive and representative artistic landscape. Reviews from *The New Republic* and *The Paris Review*, respectively, identify the latent historicism infused in *Luster*'s prose: "Leilani has a blistering talent for describing a moment while refusing to name its undercurrents…" (Livingstone 2020); "*Luster* feels new…[Edie's] sharp analysis of race and class cuts through every interaction…The novel grapples deeply with the very idea of surface, of what might lie beneath the breathless present tense of youth, the trappings that make up a life" (Spiegelman 2020). What Livingstone and Spiegelman identify here is akin to Williams's "structure of feeling,"—an experience on the periphery of linguistic expression, present yet unspoken (Williams 132;134).

Twitter offers another public facing repository for analyzing *Luster*'s public reception. Jordan Marie Smith (@itsjmsftw) and @hopeisreading, two Black-identified twitter users, tweet respectively: "I don't want Sally Rooney. I don't want my year of rest and relaxation. I want, for once, the unhinged girl in a novel to be Black. Why can't our psychosis be romanticized instead of demonized. We deserve to be feral beauties too" (@itsjmsftw, July 2022); "I deffo get teary eyed when reading Luster, reading about Luster and reading Raven Leilani's interviews because I think it's the one and only time I've felt SEEN in literature" (@hopeisreading, January 2020). These tweets collectively affirm *Luster*'s ability to capture and communicate the affective realities of being both Black and a woman. Interestingly, the first tweet implies *Luster*'s aesthetic adjacency with other millennial novels such as the oeuvre of Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and while these novels do speak to contemporary conditions of alienation, financial precarity, and the shifting landscape of romantic intimacy, they

are overwhelmingly about the experience of being white and privileged. Edie, positioned neither as "tragic" nor "heroic", is nonetheless portrayed with sincere empathy in spite of— and even because of,— all of her messiness. The second tweet emphasizes the lack of truly relatable Black female characters across the contemporary literary field. Overcharacterized, overdetermined, and typically a figment of the white imagination, it is no wonder why this user hasn't found a version of herself in the existing repertoire of Black-coded literature.

Leilani is transparent across various platforms about her working against established Black literary paradigms and discourses, and the particular difficulties of writing a Black woman who defies expectations of how a Black character should be and how she should be written. An analysis of author interviews further crystallizes the intentions for her literary project. In an interview for The Millions magazine, she declares,

> I wanted to afford a Black woman the latitude to be fallible. I wanted to write against the idea that there is a particular way to comport yourself to earn the right to empathy. Black women are especially subject to this expectation, and I think to have to expertly navigate racist and sexist terrain to survive and be denied the right to a human response is to deny that person dignity. It's a recipe for a repressed, combustible person. I've been there, and I'm still unlearning that reflexive curation as we speak, so it was a relief to write a Black woman who leads with her id. It was a relief to write toward her want and rage without apology, which is, unfortunately, what some people might find unlikeable (Leilani 2021).

Here, Leilani draws a direct connection between Edie's life as a Black woman and her own. This analog adds a layer of metafiction to her work—to the process of writing and navigating the world of publishing as a Black author defying the expectations placed upon her by a broader

literary marketplace. Even more impressive is Leilani's ability to openly connect herself to her character while maintaining the boundary between fiction and reality. Put differently, though *Luster* does draw on Leilani's lived experiences of being Black, a woman, and an artist, *Luster* is not a work of autofiction. The impulse to attribute the author to their work—a reading tendency that is growing prevalent among contemporary readers—is especially damaging for Black authors. The work of authors of colour in general, and Black authors in particular, is always being produced and circulated in an asymmetrical literary marketplace. The concept where "both the object of narrative and the performance of authorship" work symbiotically to create a bestseller is what Kinohi Nishikawa terms "the reality effect". In speaking transparently of her writing process, Leilani identifies the "reflexive curation" of Blackness that she must actively work towards mentally deconstructing when she creates—this deconstruction is equally a stand against acquiescing to the status of Black spokesperson that is expected of her. Ultimately, *Luster* is a novel about a lot of things, writes Leilani: "Art, God, sex, Comic Con" (Leilani 2020). What undergirds all of these themes, however, is a fundamental drive to humanize and de-exoticize Blackness.

On characterization, Leilani acknowledges the need for contradiction:

> "It felt more true and more interesting to write toward what is surprising, unexpected. Because of that, I got to write about the ooze, the parts that are jagged and sublimated. For Edie, and for a lot of Black women, these parts are entirely at odds with the public performance required of us. A misfit is often a person who has to hide, who has to be studious of her environment in order to survive, and this is distancing, infuriating. Misfits are forged in this kind of rejection" (Leilani 2020).

Perhaps it is only through being a misfit and, in many ways, a loner, that Edie can tell her story. Even when she is surrounded by others, her narrative perspective is that of someone who is utterly alone, distanced, and infuriated. Leilani was obviously cognizant of the particular affordances of positioning Edie this way, which, as elaborated earlier, allows for a specific critical gaze despite being an immersed onlooker. To narratologically stand from a distance allows for a contemplative buffer between scene and character, and within that buffer, a critical space emerges. For Edie, this space is also historical, a moment to extract the subtext and present it to the reader in exacting and arresting sentences.

Luster presents a narrative of discovery in a world where Edie is simultaneously both hyper visible and invisible. Setting such a narrative in, predominantly, suburbia, allows for a deeper engagement with the historical charges at play between Eric, Edie, Rebecca, and Akila. This narrative is teeming with tension—the tension of being Black in a historically white space; the tension of being a young, poor, Black woman who is both dependent upon and romantically attached to an older white man; the tension of performing domestic and maternal labour and the historical memory of slavery that lurks in the not-so-distant past. By focalizing Edie's Black female point of view in this space, *Luster* lays bare a vast critical terrain that is ripe for extracting the historical traces that saturate the interpersonal dynamics of the aforementioned characters. In this way, *Luster* engages in a critical project as much as a literary one: by following in Ellison's aesthetic footsteps, *Luster* creates a form of Black art that operates on its own terms by refusing to acquiesce to the expectations of linear character development typically associated with the bildungsroman. Instead, Edie's story unfolds through a series of disjunctive experiences and affective states that disrupt the conventional arc of Eurocentric maturation and social

development. This refusal mirrors the novel’s broader thematic resistance against simplistic representations of Black life and identity. Through Edie's eyes, readers are invited into an intimate understanding of how the intersections of race, gender, and class shape the contours of Black female identity in contemporary America.

Between Seeing and Showing

In her book *Bad Sex*, Nona Willis Aronowitz coins the term "woke misogynist" to describe a man "who talks a big game about gender equality and consent…he prefers to date feminists and may freely call himself one too—then turns around and harasses you, assaults you, or belittles you. As with the word *woke* itself, he's comfortable with both performance and appropriation" (Aronowitz 146). I read this passage in the early days before the idea for this project touched paper, and it struck me how the language of third wave feminism has become so saturated within our cultural lexicon—so much so, that as Aronowitz writes, it is often appropriated as a way of performing one's own allegiances. This should be a good thing, right? Decentralizing feminism, spreading it outwards, normalizing its discourse. And yet, misogyny is alive, but misogynists are somehow dead—after all, if they can recite a script, identify as feminists, and verbally align themselves with women's rights, how could they possibly hate women? The idea of the "woke misogynist" is an interesting analog for thinking about how and why white readers consume texts written by Black writers writing about Blackness. In the same vein, this project questions the often performative bent of white literary consumption, as a way of signalling one's anti-racist alignment, if not as a kind of educational crutch that promises to bridge a gap for white readers who lack meaningful cross-racial contact. There is perhaps no better symbol of "woke" racist behaviour than the mass posting of black squares to instagram in June 2020. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, millions of white people took to instagram to express their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement by posting a single black square, with the caption "#blackout day". Far from spreading earnest and useful awareness about systemic violence against racialized people, the function of these posts serves to stroke the egos

of white people that wish to present on the "right side of history". Posting a black square signals a performative and appropriated allyship without having to do any real antiracist work or expend any energy on informing oneself about the history of Black dispossession. The broader effects of this mass posting effectively silenced the voices of Black people and genuine allies while hindering the spread of informational resources about racism, history, and Black subjectivity.

The critical intervention of this thesis is one that addresses the white performance of anti-racism by analyzing the literary construction of Black identity and the critical reception of these constructed identities. Weaving together various different topics: aesthetics, self-representation, the bildungsroman, the author/reader, and the racial politics of the literary field, this research suggests an essential interplay between the construction of racial identity in literature and the demands of the white-centric literary marketplace. I analyze the bildungsroman as a vehicle for self-representation amid conditions of racial violence in both *Americanah* and *Luster*, arguing that each text's aesthetic alignment and use of the bildungsroman reveals its differing positionality relative to the white readerly gaze. In doing so, this research follows in Lau's contention that the "power imbalance where the creation and reception of knowledge is concerned—which still remains highly Western-centric in many fields—has many and far-reaching consequences as far as the shaping of a narrative is concerned, and, subsequently, on whom the narrative is targeted towards" (Lau 3-4).

Similar to the mass posting of black squares in June 2020, *Americanah*'s critical and popular reception reveal the extent to which the novel was read as an essentialized marker of Black identity for white readers. This performative textual engagement as well as Ifemelu's diasporic authority and neoliberal narrative trajectory combine to produce a narrative that makes

the reader "feel exactly the same as they felt at the start" (Adichie in *The New Republic Magazine*, 2013). At the same time, Adichie is conscious of her minoritized position within the Western literary market, and she plays with the potential that this position affords her. *Americanah* is thus a text that both appeals to the white readerly conscience while simultaneously aestheticizing and ironizing the very process of Black literary production and reception. To this end, Adichie walks a fine line between self-exoticization and criticism of the very field that produces the need for self-exoticization.

Luster, on the other hand, uses the bildungsroman as a way of thwarting white readerly expectations of Black identity by refusing to acquiesce to a sensationalized vision of Black life. Edie's identity formation is largely flatlined by the various racial and gender barriers that she encounters. To this end, *Luster* participates in a literary project that prioritizes the expression of Black self and all of its historical traces—of racial servitude in the white household, of suburban redlining and white flight, of police violence, and of the disenfranchisement and devaluation of Black labour. *Luster* is a text deeply invested in mining the historical traces of Black suffering by focalizing Edie's affective world. Her self-fashionning, as well as the lens through which the reader perceives her, happens through affective prose and the historical pain that it bears. Edie's narrative is marked by stagnation rather than progression, prioritizes affect over plot, and lays bare the realities of racial and gender oppression without the veneer of neoliberal success. Leilani refuses to sanitize or simplify Edie's experiences for the sake white comfort. This thesis urges a reevaluation of the ways in which readers—particularly white readers—consume texts by Black authors, encouraging a shift away from performative reading towards informed and self reflective engagement with one's own status as a beneficiary of white privilege.

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