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ENGL 866: Insecure
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30 May, 2011

Insecure Bodies: “Slow Death,” the Case of Organ Trafficking, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s
Tropic of Orange

In a densely theoretical discussion of “biotechnological power” within capitalism’s current instantiation, Rosi Braidotti points out that “the body needs to be disciplined so as to be made docile, productive, and reproductive”—in other words, the body must become “raw material” in addition to a unit of labor (44-45). Braidotti here echoes David Harvey, who in turn cites Marx: he notes that capitalism oversees “the skilling, deskilling, and reskilling of the powers of labor in accord with technological requirements,” and dictates the “frequent subordinations of bodily rhythms and desires ‘as an appendage of the machine’” (Harvey 103-104). Harvey’s particular deployment of Marx is fitting here: the individual body discursively becomes a ‘part’—significantly, an “appendage”—of the ‘body’ that is the capitalist “machine.” In fact, capitalism is often marked by this subtle corporeal metaphor, which Matthew G. Hannah sketches through the history of the modern corporation. “Corporation,” from the Latin “corpora,” meaning to embody, can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to indicate “a number of persons united” or “a *body* of persons” (*my emphasis*, “Corporation”). Hannah notes that, in the United States, the corporation solidified its juridical identity in the nineteenth century when it became officially deemed an “individual,” a “legal person” with the same rights afforded ordinary citizens, including rights of contracts and protections under the Fourteenth Amendment (Hannah 9). With this shift came a radical re-organization—and, it turns out, a fundamental re-conceptualization—of what Hannah perhaps naively identifies as the network of “*biopolitical care*” (original emphasis, 13). In other words, as legal individuals, corporations have come to compete with *actual* people, draining state funds and other resources from the public and thus diverting “practices of biopower originally developed for the care of the living” (Hannah 10). Through this ideological expansion, the corporation now occupies a significant role of governance, wielding tremendous power in terms of social, economic, and political control. These developments reveal the tension and ambivalence present over the nature and role of bodies under capitalism in the neoliberal era.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” (2). But as a discourse—in fact a global discursive hegemon—how does neoliberalism burst onto the stage of the material and attach itself to the bodies (and the bodily practices) of contemporary citizen-subjects? The rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s has coincided with what might be considered a widespread, growing crisis of the body. People in different parts of the world face bodily, (health) threats on all fronts: toxic chemical exposure, military conflicts, (lack of) healthcare, hunger, obesity, malnutrition, increased vulnerability to new and old diseases, even “coerced gifting” and risk of organ theft during routine surgeries (Scheper-Hughes 35). Not one of these problems is isolated from the complex network of capital flows and market fluctuations that occur under globalization, but pinpointing the intersections and following the trail of influence—for instance, tracing the system of debt peonage that leads to “compensated gifting” of kidneys in the slums of many postcolonial nations (Scheper-Hughes 35), which in turn fuels a black market of organs and

tissues that clearly benefits a global elite with the purchasing power to buy their way off transplant lists (Comaroff and Comaroff)—is certainly not easy: locating something like causality is clearly impossible. As Lisa Duggan notes, “the categories” through which neoliberalism articulates itself “*actively obscure* the connections among these organizing terms” (3). Mobilizing what are now essentially empty signifiers—“*public vs. private*” as well as “the *state*, the *economy*, *civil society*, and the *family*” (original emphasis, Duggan 4)—neoliberalism manifests as a particular ideology, one which catalyzes the material movement of capital while simultaneously constructing a powerful *narrative* to obfuscate the inequalities effected by these movements, and to dissuade us from making connections between and about these inequalities. However, I would argue that neoliberalism-as-alibi registers most perniciously—and, on the other hand, most visibly—when it is confronted with the bodies of its own subjects-in-crisis or, as Lauren Berlant theorizes, bodies in “crisis ordinariness,” a term she uses to characterize the contemporary phenomenon of “slow death” (762). In other words, by zooming in on how (certain) bodies have been literally beaten down and worn out within this particular capitalist regime—by highlighting the vulnerable, toxic, and generally insecure bodies—we might put pressure on this narrative, opening up a unique opportunity for critical analysis of the routes and roots of neoliberal capitalism.

This essay, then, is about marking out the biopolitical sphere of neoliberalism, addressing directly the difficulties of representation posed by “global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (Berlant 754). Foucault’s well-known description of biopower, the capacity to “administer, optimize, and multiply” life, or in other words, the power to “*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (259), lends itself well to the management of bodies—and the normativizing of life—overseen by neoliberalism. Berlant makes this connection succinctly in “Slow Death,” pointing out in both cases a shift in the concept of *sovereignty*:

Foucault dissolves the attention to scenes of *control* over individual life and death under sovereign regimes and refocuses on the dispersed *management* of the biological threat posed by certain populations to the reproduction of the normatively framed general good life of a society. (756)

What Berlant recasts as “practical sovereignty” not only expresses a change in the style of governance, though—it is also an attempt to convey the altered sovereignty of the contemporary subject, and to understand the immensely problematic question of individual agency within these insidious networks of power. Using the scene of “slow death” to capture “the condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life,” and to explain how agency gets co-opted—or better, re-routed—in this scenario, morphing into a struggle over banal survival, of ‘getting by’ rather than flourishing or ‘making life,’ Berlant does not dismiss agency under neoliberal biopolitics, but argues that it is “inhabited differently” (759, 779). Employing the example of the obesity epidemic, she demonstrates that this particular corporeal “crisis ordinariness”—the reality that a high percentage of poor, minority citizens in the U.S. regularly over-consume unhealthy foods—is continually and sometimes intentionally misread as either an index of total ignorance (individuals blindly succumbing to the advertising machine), or as evidence of willfully poor decision-making (an argument that becomes fodder for the right in further blaming the lower classes and cutting programs that would benefit them). Neither stance accounts for the nuances of agency and rationality, the real discrepancies within contemporary foodscapes, or the broader social arena in which individual and collective choices are negotiated and ultimately made.

Tabling this question of agency for the moment, though, I am interested in the seemingly obvious point that Berlant and others make, namely, that vast disparities emerge in tracing the lines—mapping out the populations—of neoliberal biopower. “[S]low death describes populations *marked out for wearing out*,” Berlant writes in a footnote (original emphasis, 761). The globalization of capital may not operate schizophrenically, but instead might be diagnosed as a kind of global bipolar—or *bio-polar*—disorder, whereby some bodies get marked as manic (over-consuming, to stick with Berlant’s obesity example) while others are cast quite literally as depressed (poor, deprived, hungry). My point is not that geographical (global North/South), racial, or class hierarchies are maintained and exploited within this system, although they certainly are. Rather, this paper attempts to unpack how, specifically, corporeal insecurity gets doled out, how the intricacies of biopower, practical sovereignty, slow death, the “molecularization of life” (Braun) and “lateral agency” (Berlant) contribute to the obfuscation of power Duggan discusses. I turn to the case of organ trafficking—a somewhat different and perhaps polemical example compared to Berlant’s deployment of obesity—to highlight some of these complexities in a setting that literalizes the crisis of the commodification of the body in our current moment. Ultimately, the (legal and illegal) organ trade dramatizes the problems of agency evoked by “slow death,” putting pressure on Berlant’s concept (temporally but also, arguably, in terms of “ordinariness”) for productive critical ends. Shifting focus to Berlant’s caution about the rhetoric of crisis, I then conduct a reading of a literary text—Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997)—to give texture to my argument about the problem of representation at the heart of the neoliberal/biopolitical machine. Yamashita’s novel, which employs magical realism to thematize neoliberal globalization, has also been classified as a work of “Los Angeles disaster fiction,” a genre that clearly trades on a rhetoric of crisis (Rody 139). *Tropic of Orange* is at once another case study—like organ trafficking—through which to discern the subtle turns and effects of biopower, and also its own critical theory *about* neoliberal biopower (an interesting valence considering that the novel comments on the very conditions of possibility that produce it as both a material and an ideological object). Through the excessive (what is more excessive than the magical?) performance of crisis—a crisis so vast that it encompasses hemispheric migration, drug smuggling, organ trafficking, homelessness, and state violence, to name a few textual examples—Yamashita’s text highlights its own aesthetic performativity. While the language of “crisis” embodies the particular dilemma about how to represent slow-moving, structural conditions accurately, but still to spark a desire for action and change, *Tropic* playfully walks this line. The novel, exaggerating “crisis” to the point at which this frantic narrative turns in on itself, disorienting characters and readers alike, gives way, in the end, ironically, to two scenes of slow death. Untethered to generic conventions or the strictures of realism, the text gestures toward the potential of the aesthetic, its unique ability to reveal the very plotlines of neoliberalism, to expose the “capillary forms” of power routed “across the surfaces of bodies in their disciplinary regimes” (Hardt and Negri 31), and ultimately, it enables us to glimpse that bigger picture, the “grid” that the character of Manzanar Murakami beautifully perceives as the musical layers of a city-turned-hemisphere-wide orchestra, which he conducts from the top of a freeway overpass (Yamashita 57).

Organ Trafficking: The New Global Movement of Body Parts

“Organ trafficking presents the triumph of a very specific form of capitalism,” notes Henriette Roos in an article about literary and filmic representations of organ harvesting and trading (52). Focusing on the relatively recent but alarmingly widespread phenomenon that is

the global black market in human organs, we get a sense of what this “specific form of capitalism” is and, most importantly, how it operates on and manages the bodies circulating—quite literally *as commodities*—within it. On the one hand, the statistics and anthropological evidence resoundingly point toward the material, bio-polarized effects of the trade.

“Commercialized transplant medicine has allowed global society to be divided into two decidedly unequal populations—organ givers and organ receivers,” writes Nancy Scheper-Hughes (4), an anthropologist at UC Berkeley who runs the “Organs Watch” program. This group, made up of four anthropological and medical scholars, was assembled to “investigate reports and rumors of human rights abuses surrounding organ trafficking, identify hot spots where abuse may be occurring and begin to define the line between ethical transplant surgery and practices that are exploitative or corrupt” (McBroom). Scheper-Hughes, whose work for the most part has dealt with the illegal trading in human kidneys, became something of a mainstream authority on the matter when she was featured in a *Newsweek* article in 2009, but especially after her (mostly undercover) research led to the FBI arrest of a group of rabbis from New York and New Jersey charged with organ trafficking. While we might be cynical about the obvious focus of the mainstream media in reporting on organ trafficking—Scheper-Hughes, for instance, only seems to have been featured upon following her work back to the U.S. to report that ‘*this happens here, too*’—but there is an important dimension to sketching out bodily inequalities along more than simply geographical lines. Although the poor in the Third world are certainly most vulnerable, if we take the international organ trade as “a new form of imperialism,” as anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff do (282), then this must be a more nuanced conceptualization of colonization, one which takes into account the facts, that “trading in human organs has developed along class, gender and racial lines, with organs flowing from the poor to the rich, from women to men and from brown- and black-skinned to white-skinned peoples” (McBroom). The initial *Newsweek* story, which uses Scheper-Hughes’s anecdote about a “Kentucky woman” who wanted “to sell her kidney or part of her liver so that she could buy some desperately needed dentures” begins, then—if only gesturally—to move us toward thinking about broader, structural issues like inadequate health care and the gendered face of poverty (Interlandi).

The case of organ trafficking also, though, provides a particularly apt opportunity to engage on a theoretical level with neoliberal biopower and its politics of representation, as well as to (re)examine Foucault’s sovereignty and Berlant’s “slow death.” For instance, we might return to Braidotti’s discussion of biotechnology mentioned in the opening of this paper, or even Scheper-Hughes’s comments about “commercialized transplant medicine,” to shift focus onto not only the ‘positive’ side of the bio-polarity of corporeal landscapes (the ‘manic’ rather than the ‘depressed’ bodies), but also the rhetoric of agency, of “personal responsibility” and “taking control” of one’s own health, that underpins medical discourses under neoliberalism. Also, though, an undeniable effect of medical-technological breakthroughs is a change in the fundamental ways subjects view their own bodies. Bruce Braun calls this a “molecularization of life,” which increasingly configures the body as consisting of an assemblage of smaller and smaller parts (organs, reproductive tissues, chromosomes, genes (Braun 6). Following Nikolas Rose, Braun finds that this represents a “shift within the biopolitical regimes of modernity, from political rationalities directed toward management of risk at the level of populations to the individual management of one’s own body” (Braun 6). Not only do new biotechnologies mobilize liberal abstractions like freedom, self-possession, autonomy, and individual choice, but the molecularization of life hailed by these advances clearly resonates with Randy Martin’s

Financialization of Daily Life: both capitalize on the symbolic logic of “risk,” a “rhetoric of the future that is really about the present” and therefore at once a kind of always-deferred promise as well as a naturalization (Martin calls it a “routinization”) of the current economic or socio-medical arrangement (Martin 105, 107). “Risk,” then, is a kind of alibi by which the unequal distribution of neoliberal power and resources (in terms of finances or health) is obfuscated via a rhetoric of agency and self-management. It is also a potent narrative—and by now, almost a kind of *genre*—that covers over the myriad ways in which agency gets restricted *for all*, though differently for different populations/bodies. While certain populations may get selected for “wearing out,” inhabiting “survival as slow death” (Berlant 780), it seems that most populations under capitalism are forced to negotiate these same dilemmas over sovereignty and agency.

Turning away from organ trafficking for a moment, the example of new reproductive technologies, or “reprogenetics,” encapsulates this dilemma particularly well. Because of the vast discrepancies in access to fertility solutions like IVF, cryopreservation, and germinal choice technology, not to mention the less technologically-based transnational adoption and/or surrogacy, reproductive technology is an industry that is really only available to the global (white, wealthy) elite. Thus, it is a rather obvious manifestation of the way in which neoliberal biopower operates—without a sovereign “deliberately . . . implant[ing] qualities in a collection of bodies” (Berlant 765)—to normalize and *literally* reproduce (both the capitalist hegemony, the very conditions of reproduction, and the material/corporeal hierarchy itself). However, for those privileged few with access to these technologies, questions about agency and ethics do not disappear, but only shift. William Wilkerson argues that “reprogenetics functions as a free market eugenics” (64), registering a kind of “panoptical power” that dictates “self-regulation”:
The state need merely provide that competition in the form of scarcity and free markets exist, and we will practice eugenics upon ourselves and, by extension, practice the biopolitical management of populations through individual action.
(67-68)

While this case perhaps serves as the inverse of “slow death,” I would attest that it nevertheless captures the ambivalent agency Berlant focuses on. While those with access might acknowledge the ethical problems with germinal choice, they will still, I think, utilize this technology as a means of ‘getting ahead,’ if not in this lifetime, then in the future figured as the genetically modified child. The case of reprogenetics more generally also gives us conceptual access to how biopower regulates the bodies of the privileged, those who are not ‘picked’ for “wearing out.” Mobilizing the rhetoric of “managing risk” and “optimizing life” to an excessive degree, these technologies violently obscure the ways in which even those emboldened with the capacity to genetically determine the characteristics of their offspring are still subject(ed) to the normativizing forces of neoliberal biopower.

The “purchase of fertility” at this point, though, occurs mostly through the often transnational exchange of women’s clinical labor, eggs and reproductive tissues, and even children (Cooper and Waldby 58). Thus, in reality, we can see a more direct correspondence—as with the case of organ trafficking—between the literal “siphoning off the essence,” or life, from Third world, poor, and racialized bodies, and its transfer to the bodies in the First world, the wealthy, and the white (Comaroff and Comaroff 282). In a theoretical sense, this signals not only the transfer of life but of a kind of future, manifested most literally in the figure of the (adopted) child, but also, with little stretch, in the reified reproductive tissues that circulate inside and outside the system of legal gifting. This raises particularly significant implications

for the gendered valences of biopower in the new global economy. But while Cooper and Waldby make explicit mention of “the commodification of the biological future inherent in *women’s* bodies” (emphasis added 59), I would argue that the exchange of the complete range of bodies and parts—from children, to oocytes, to kidneys—signals a commodification of the biological future inherent in *all* bodies, and that this does not detract but only complicates the gendered unfolding of biopower.

Framing organ and tissue exchange in terms of temporality, as a ‘gift’ of life and the future, becomes especially compelling in light of Derrida’s discussion of the “gift economy” at the heart of his ethics. For Derrida, “the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*” (41). Offered unexpectedly, the gift resides—if only briefly—outside of the economy of return, epitomizing delay in its deferral of exchange. While this idealized, excessive gift economy is impossible to sustain—return is, in fact inevitable—Derrida argues that the gift represents the ethical imperative to the other, the always-ungraspable justice that we must continue to seek in the face of failure. The international regulations set by the World Health Organization and national laws that govern organ and tissue exchange together delineate a system of “legal gifting” aligned with Derrida’s gift economy that is perhaps even exemplary of it, considering the literal and symbolic future embedded in such body parts. For this reason, organ and tissue trafficking, driven by the market into new, illicit avenues of ‘production’ and consumption, emerges as particularly disturbing. The realities of “compensated” and “coerced gifting,” articulated through the anthropological evidence of Scheper-Hughes (35), reveals the extent to which the very notion of the gift has been nightmarishly co-opted. Now located firmly within the economy of exchange and return, but remaining cloaked within a rhetoric of ethics and gifting, human tissues and organs may serve as critical markers of a neoliberal biopolitics and its powerful drive toward the commoditization of the globe.

Finally, returning to this idea of the future ushered in by the gift, I’d like to revisit Berlant’s concept of “slow death,” not only to rehash bio-polarity and the shift toward “lateral agency,” but especially to think about temporality for those on the giving end of the organ and tissue trades—to highlight the “slow” in slow death. While using one’s kidney as collateral for a loan, or selling one’s eggs to alleviate massive debt are probably not examples Berlant had in mind while theorizing slow death, I think the term might be usefully employed as a lens through which to view such cases, as a means of articulating what kind of agency is at work, as well as what kind of purchase on the future such acts denote. Slow death registers along a series of stress points, as a process in which subjects commit unhealthy acts, such as eating fast food, smoking, or failing to exercise. Indeed, compensated organ donation may be simply an extreme form of these activities—while it is difficult on one’s body, it does not, in most cases, result in immediate death. Also, Berlant makes clear that unhealthy behaviors are not unconscious habits, but rather modes of survival, ones that do not quite register as active forms of resistance. Eating—and eating badly—Berlant suggests, may be a way, under the increasingly exhausting regime of capitalism, to get through the day, to extend one’s body into the world in the most accessible means possible. Like selling one’s organ, the example of eating suggests that we ‘choose’—but peripherally, “laterally,” and with severely circumscribed options to begin with—slow death as a way of life.

One possible, unintentional by-product of employing organ trafficking (as both a polemic and an actually-existing example) as an articulation of slow death is the language of crisis—and with it, a corresponding temporal acceleration—against which Berlant cautions: this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional

tactic, a distorting or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis seems already to have called for. (760)

Attempts to mobilize collective action with crisis rhetoric are misdirected, then, precisely because such urgency “belies the constitutive point—that slow death . . . is neither a state of exception nor the opposite” (Berlant 761). Whether organ selling verges too closely on the exceptional—although, the work of Scheper-Hughes and others suggests that it does not—is less important here than the stubborn dilemma, again, over representation within neoliberal biopolitics. Unfolding through the management rather than the control of bodies, slowly and structurally as opposed to rapidly through crisis, and co-opting agency itself so that subjects in effect *participate* in their own (bodily) disciplining, biopower in the neoliberal era is subtle and particularly insidious, nearly impossible to locate, situate, and actively resist on all fronts.

Aesthetic Interventions: (Excessive) Crisis and Slow Death in *Tropic of Orange*

Karen Tei Yamashita’s vibrant and experimental 1997 novel, a blend of magical realism, film noir-style detective fiction, Los Angeles disaster literature, political satire, and postmodern metafiction (Wallace 148), marks itself quite explicitly as a participant in the critical conversations over neoliberalism and globalization. Plotted along the grid of its “Hypercontexts,” a kind of cartographic table of contents that appears at the opening, the novel follows seven characters over seven fantastic days, in which the Tropic of Cancer, becoming embedded in an Aztlán orange that then gets exported—or rather, carried along by Latino migrants seeking work—north, resulting in a geographic shift whereby the entire global South literally travels to that metropole of capital: Los Angeles. The diverse characters, scattered across the hemisphere and yet all in some way connected, include Buzzworm, a “big black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet” who roams the streets as an “*Angel of Mercy*,” a kind of “walking social services” in the ‘hood (27); Bobby Ngu, a “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown,” a street-smart, hardworking owner of a janitorial company (15); Rafaela Cortes, Bobby’s wife and the mother of their son (Sol), a smart and politically conscious Chicana, who talks about “solidarity” and joins—to Bobby’s dismay—“Justice for Janitors” (17); and Archangel, a mythical figure representing the Latin American people and their colonial (and neocolonial) history, who carries the orange north and, at the novel’s close, transforms into “El Gran Mojado” (“the Big Wetback”), a masked wrestling character who battles SUPERNAFTA at Los Angeles’s “Pacific Rim Auditorium” in a symbolic “*clash of a flat world / with a round world*,” which is really “*the clash of the same world / with itself*” (262-3). Engaging a range of topics—from migration and diaspora, to multiculturalism, to the media, to conspiracy theories (including organ trafficking)—through characters who display a range in levels of consciousness, *Tropic of Orange* serves as a dynamic attempt to plot neoliberalism, both its broad effects and personal incursions in the lives (and on the bodies) of its subjects. It is thus an *aesthetic* example that nicely buttresses my discussion of organ and reproductive tissue trafficking, raising similar questions about the commodification of the body, bio-polarity, discourses of risk, agency, and temporality under the regime of (biopolitical) neoliberalism. However, rather than chart these similarities explicitly, I use Yamashita’s text as a kind of bookend, tracing in it a potential avenue for thinking through the problem of representation of—and within—capitalism.

Berlant’s warning against crisis rhetoric clearly goes unheeded in this novel: when a

driver on a Los Angeles freeway bites into a cocaine-laced “spiked orange” and crashes his Porsche, it causes a chain of accidents that leave the freeway gridlocked and boxed between two off-ramps that have become gasoline-fed infernos. The owners of the cars flee, and a mass of homeless people, smoked out of the “dense hidden community living on the no-man’s-land of public property,” descend on the lot of empty vehicles, taking up residence in Cadillacs, setting up food stands in Volvos, fashioning gardens in the hoods of Mercedes, even shooting the news—featuring Buzzworm and a cast of homeless anchors, reporters, and special correspondents—out of a van stranded in the diamond lane (120). However, the response to this disaster, this spontaneous event of “life fill[ing] a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways” is itself predictable (121): as the citizens of L.A. “watched on TV sets or from the edges of the freeway canyon, there were the usual questions of police protection, insurance coverage, and acts of God” (122). As Neil Smith writes, “there’s no such thing as a natural disaster”. The police (or some paramilitary group—it is unclear) respond to the citizens’ concern over private property with a devastating airborne attack, firing into the masses and causing widespread casualties, including Emi’s, a news producer and one of the novel’s main characters. Caroline Rody notes that this scene represents a shift in tone from the fantastic to stark political realism (143).

While these rapid transitions in genre mark the turbulent pace of the narrative, *Tropic* in fact deftly negotiates the pitfalls of employing a language of crisis. On the one hand, the novel manages to convey the urgency of a global situation that, for instance, ignites a transnational organ trade or ignores a system of migration and labor premised on exploitation. These are problems we must confront directly, the way El Gran Mojado confronts SUPERNAFTA. On the other hand, though, the text exaggerates its own discourse of crisis to the point at which it becomes so frenzied and unrealistic, it turns magical. When the “villain”—a shadowy figure in a Jaguar, seemingly in concert with the mysterious “C. Juarez” who is behind the spiked oranges and infant organ trafficking plots—captures Rafaela, she transforms into “a muscular serpent” (220). This is a moment in which the magical erupts, signaling a narrative performativity of crisis that functions quite specifically: confronted with the familiar fantasy of the faceless, nameless “villain” who is responsible for the vast misfortunes of humanity, we recognize a familiar trope that is in fact a pillar of the neoliberal narrative. Forcing this dissonance upon us, then, Yamashita invites us to reflect on the ways in which the subtle, structural workings of power—not villainous men in Jaguars—drive a complex capitalist machine that triggers widespread poverty, ecological destruction, and even (as this particular textual example shows) gender violence.

While the novel’s pace is frantic and the shifts between realist and magical registers confer upon each storyline a pervasive atmosphere of crisis, there are, nevertheless, moments in which the ‘slowness’ of Berlant’s “slow death” unmistakably appears, when the structural nature of neoliberal problems is treated plainly. For example, the opening chapter, following Rafaela through her calm, domestic activities in Mazatlán, at Gabriel’s hacienda-in-progress, is quiet in the way Manzanar Murakami might find it. Rafaela plants cactus and peppers, oversees the workers building a wall along the property (and, it turns out, along the invisible Tropic of Cancer), visits her neighbor’s house to use the telephone, and cleans Gabriel’s property, sweeping up a “mound of dead and wiggling things” that include an iguana, a mouse, and, strangely—the house is located hundreds of miles from the sea—a *crab*. From the opening page, then, *Tropic* hints at a ‘crisis’ that is not flashy like the freeway disaster—there are no explosions or helicopters, for instance, and no twenty-four-hours-a-day news coverage—nor is

it a particularly fantastic instance, but is, perhaps, equally disconcerting. The specter of ecological crisis thus haunts the text as a whole, framing the other, action-packed disaster sections (fittingly, the story takes place during Emi's network's "Disaster Movie Week") as a slow-moving, less visible catastrophe.

This environmental consciousness gets taken up by the character of Buzzworm, who, we learn, has "a thing for palm trees" (30). A kind of informal social worker/drug counselor/gang violence outreach worker, Buzzworm treks through the rough sections of East L.A. where he grew up, listening to the radio (his walkman headphones are a permanent fixture on him), chatting with street vendors, collecting a vast array of useless watches, and helping those in need. The palm trees are the only greenery to be found in this landscape. Buzzworm, astoundingly knowledgeable about the history and species names of the "Family Palmaceae," will lecture to anyone who listens:

I just want to let you know the age of these fine specimens. Been standin' here a long time and will continue to long after you and I are gone. These trees're like my watches here, markin' time. Palm tree's smart, knows the time for everything. Knows to put out flowers and fruit when the time's right, even though out here don't seem like there's any seasons to speak of. Suppose we could learn something from a palm tree that knows the seasons better than us. (31)

Palm trees, for Buzzworm, represent natural harmony, something "we" humans—who, for instance, ship and consume produce (oranges) without regard to season—should "learn something from." The trees also stand as figures of an alternate temporality, an ecological deep time that Buzzworm, the character most attuned to the intricacies of time, symbolized by his many valueless watches, alone can appreciate. Finally, a kind of perspective comes into focus through the trees: for the most part, they go unnoticed by the busy residents living out their lives on the ground—for palm trees, Buzz admits, do not look like much more than "gray-brown poles" leading "up to the sky" (32). The trees themselves, though, mark out the unnoticed human lifeworlds below them:

you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever. Only thing you could see that anybody might take notice of were the palm trees. That was what the palm trees were there for. To make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed. And the palm trees were like the eyes of his neighborhood, watching the rest of the city, watching it sleep and eat and play and die. There was a beauty about those palm trees, a beauty neither he nor anybody down there next to them could appreciate, a beauty you could only notice if you were far away. Everything going on down under those palm trees might be poor and crazy, ugly or beautiful, honest or shameful—all sorts of life that could only be imagined from far away. (33)

Reflecting first on the urban reality of a contemporary city, Buzzworm articulates how the poor are routinely *spatially* cut off from the rest of the population, barricaded by freeways and stranded without public transportation in desolate, depressed sections of town. The palm trees signal this inequality: they "make sure that people noticed." Marking out the often unrecognized—but beautiful, vibrant—lives that take place in those neighborhoods that are often rendered socially un-representable in the aesthetic regime of our current (neoliberal) moment, the palm trees also gesture outward, reversing the gaze onto the "rest of the city." They provide a more general, and ecological-ethical perspective as well. Rody argues along these lines in discussing

the natural border—the Tropic of Cancer—that animates the action (and literal movement) of the narrative: she discerns throughout the novel “an ethical politics derived from a vision of human subsumption in a wider ecology” (140).

‘Slowness’ also registers at certain points in the text as slow death. Ironically, this is most apparent in the fast-paced narration of Bobby Ngu’s sections. Originally a kind of unofficial refugee, “ever since he’s been here” in the U.S., Bobby has “never stopped working”:

Always working. Washing dishes. Chopping vegetables. Cleaning floors.
Cooking hamburgers. Painting walls. Laying brick. Cutting hedges. Mowing
lawn. Digging ditches. Sweeping trash. Fixing pipes. Pumping toilets.
Scrubbing urinals. Washing clothes. Pressing clothes. Sewing clothes. Planting
trees. Changing tires. Changing oil and filters. Stocking shelves. Lifting sacks.
Loading trucks. Smashing trash. Recycling plastic. Recycling aluminum.
Recycling cans and glass. Drilling asphalt. Pouring cement. Building up.
Tearing down. Fixing up. Cleaning up. Keeping up. (79)

This tediously repetitive passage mimics the monotony of a laboring life under capitalism. The list of manual jobs references commodities—especially clothes—as the products of labor, but also the result for the worker. Bobby himself gets reified by the end of the section: the objects of the verbs, at first things like “floors,” “hamburgers” and “brick,” disappear, signaling that it is Bobby who becomes ‘built,’ ‘torn,’ ‘fixed,’ ‘cleaned’ and ‘kept up.’ Interestingly, three of the jobs mentioned cite recycling, indicating—in light of *Tropic*’s underlying ecological themes—that the circulation of commodities under capitalism is to a certain extent *invested* in activities that appear environmentally conscious, but in fact promote consumerism and waste. Through these jobs, Bobby gradually builds for himself and his family an image of the good life: eventually able to start his own janitorial business, Bobby is able to buy a Camaro for his wife and fancy clothes for his son, and to furnish their home with expensive electronics (80). Bobby even takes out life insurance, noting at once point that “pretty soon he’ll be worth more dead than alive” (160). Molly Wallace argues that Bobby’s story, which is also an immigrant narrative, presents the way in which ‘becoming American’ blurs with ‘becoming an American consumer’. Playing on the “visa” and the “Visa card,” she makes an excellent case for how “Yamashita’s United States is a landscape thoroughly mortgaged to global capital,” with “consumerism replacing nationalism” (155).

Paralleling the ‘wearing out’ through labor that Bobby’s plot narrates is his slow death through smoking—“Never stops smoking either. Gonna die from smoking. He can’t stop. Daytime, works the mailroom at a big-time newspaper. Sorts mail nonstop. Tons of it. Never stops” (16). These lines, highlighting the word “stop,” produce an interesting slippage between smoking, dying, the objects of labor (the mail), and labor itself. The mail—and his sorting of it—“Never stops,” but neither does Bobby’s smoking, nor the reality of death that hangs over this ceaselessly laboring life. However, like work, Bobby has a choice in the matter: “Gonna lose that smoking urge,” he decides when Rafaela leaves him (102). Yet, what we witness is not the overcoming of an addiction but its replacement, as Bobby takes up drinking pure ginseng instead (97). Slow death, marking a means of ‘getting by’ and extending one’s body into the world—and the future—in any small way, unfolds through what Berlant calls “lateral agency.” Bobby knows cigarettes and excessive amounts of ginseng are unhealthy the way he knows that he is in effect working himself ‘to death’ (which is the explicit reason Rafaela leaves him). While “Bobby got time to kill,” it is clear that time—slow time, the time of labor

and of smoking—is really killing Bobby (97). Yet, American (consumer) identity and the good life remain an irresistible lure to him, as do the small pleasures of tobacco and caffeine that break up the monotonous workday. In the midst of this fantastic, crisis-driven novel, then, slow death emerges with elegant realism to round off the text’s critique of neoliberal hegemony.

I would like to conclude with one of *Tropic*’s final scenes, in which a particularly disturbing realization unites the (no longer opposing) threads of crisis and slow death that run throughout the novel. This is in fact the finale of the organ trafficking narrative, a subplot in Gabriel’s section of the text that coincides with the spiked orange smuggling conspiracy. Gabriel, a journalist following a tip from Buzzworm, tracks down a woman and her baby at the airport, where they have just arrived, baggage-less, on an international flight from Mexico City. Following her to the hospital, Gabe hears that the woman “pumps her breast milk and brings it here every day,” and so he imagines at first that he has not stumbled on any illegal activity but rather one of the strange results of neoliberal globalization: “International breast milk. Who’d a thought!” (90-91). However, this is a misrecognition: Gabriel initially mistakes what is actually participation in the black market infant organ trade for a more acceptable form of reproductive trafficking. He soon learns, though, from Rafaela who has discovered an infant heart in a cooler and overheard her neighbor’s son (possibly the “villain”) discussing sale and transplant on the phone, that this is indeed part of a greater underworld scheme. In fact, the black market occupies a relatively prominent position throughout the novel, as an alternate economy in which the laws of capitalism are stretched to their logical ends, dictating the movement and exchange of commodities like drugs and oranges as well as commodified body parts (organs) and even whole bodies, like that of Bobby’s cousin from Singapore, whom he must buy from a “Chinatown snakehead” smuggler in order to set her free (97). The organ trafficking plot, though, framed in Chandler-esque language as a straightforward detective narrative, is never really resolved. Gabriel sets up an online newsgroup in which a chatroom serves as a forum for “people claiming to have received illegally farmed organs” to discuss their ethical dilemmas, discovering only that the phenomenon is more widespread (and cheaper—Emi reports that “*Baby hearts are going for a mere \$30 thou*”) than he had guessed (247-8). He also receives the infant heart in the cooler, stolen and shipped by a reckless Rafaela, but, following the trail down to Mexico in hopes of uncovering C. Juarez’s international crime syndicate, Gabriel leaves the cooler with Buzzworm and leaves the novel as well. The frantic, penultimate chapter occurs just after all the airbags in all the stranded cars on the freeway have spontaneously and simultaneously burst as if on cue, halting the military assault on the homeless masses. The scene follows Buzzworm as he “saunter[s] through the wreckage” (263). For a moment, the fantastic seemingly gives way to stark realism, as Buzzworm notices a familiar trio of starving, homeless addicts “doing barbecue” at the end of an off-ramp. However, upon glimpsing “the scatter of blue and white baby Igloo coolers” and the “things getting toasted like marshmallows,” we experience a jolting revelation, although Buzzworm himself simply “skirted the trio” and “walked away.” The infant organs have wound up in Los Angeles, like the rest of the hemisphere, to be literally consumed by the starving victims of this catastrophe (264). This scene thus presents a deeply cynical cycle whereby slow death itself, accumulated to the point at which it becomes the material, corporeal commodity that is the harvested infant heart, is recycled through—even cannibalized by—the bodies picked for ‘wearing out’ under the capitalist regime. In this disturbing textual moment, realism and fantasy recede; the frenzied pace of crisis and the plodding pace of slow death are left in tension, irreconcilable, and yet

both pointing toward the reality that something has gone horribly wrong.

Conclusion: Following the Bodies, Tracing the Grid

Caroline Rody has suggested that the character of Manzanar Murakami in *Tropic of Orange* is a possible stand-in for the author: Yamashita is “a writer who seems, like her alter ego Manzanar, to view our collective life from a position of unusually expansive vistas” (131). Manzanar’s gift, alongside his remarkable ability to hear and ‘conduct’ all the sounds of the city in a vast symphony, lies in seeing his surroundings as a series of maps: “The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56). This “grid” is made up of myriad layers, including underground civil utilities like gas and water pipes, sewage, and electrical and telephone wires; above those, the layers of sidewalks and roadways; the houses and vehicles; and finally, people, the mass of humanity that carries out its existence within this grid, for the most part unwittingly. Ultimately, the grid is, for Manzanar, an “organic living entity. It was nothing more than a great writhing concrete dinosaur and nothing less than the greatest orchestra on Earth” (37). Clearly, the grid indicates a musical/harmonious significance for Manzanar. However, a former surgeon, this analogy to an “organic living entity” is also compelling for thinking about his character as possessing the unique capacity to ‘diagnose’ the literally collapsing world around him, and to identify the problem as being in some way tied to the human body.

Recalling Lisa Duggan, it is essentially this ‘stepping back’ to see the ‘big picture’ of the “grid” that neoliberal (bio)power prevents. Mobilizing the logic of risk management and hailing a conceptual shift captured in the “molecularization of life,” neoliberal power unfolds along sharply delineated divisions, mapping a vast bio-polarity that marks populations as well as particular bodies (for “wearing out”), and becomes hypervisible through tracing specific cases, like organ trafficking. Putting pressure on such cases, or *following the bodies*, as it were, allows us to see not only the nuances and far-reaching effects of capitalism, but to note the ideological stakes as well, to witness how agency gets co-opted and re-appropriated, for instance, or how temporality—the “gift” of life and the future—becomes a loaded, value-laden field. Seeing (through) biopower as a kind of “slow death,” following Berlant, brings into focus the difficulty of representation under this system: slow death is *slow*, and therefore employing a rhetoric of crisis fails to evoke its subtle, structural nature. Ultimately, then, neoliberal biopower presents an *aesthetic* problem—a hegemony of images and narratives, it manifests as a stranglehold on how we can imagine the world, the future, and even resistance. It is in this con-text that *Tropic of Orange* may provide an initial intervention. Flouting the laws of generic convention, especially in its frequent lapses into the fantastic, the novel self-consciously—and often comically—*performs* crisis, consequently causing an internal rupture in which the reader may glimpse this very crisis as failure. *Tropic*’s performative crisis also creates a space, though, that allows for the representation of slow death to occur. Providing us with an imaginative, human (“organic”) grid, Yamashita-as-Manzanar orchestrates a text that, ultimately, sets its reader to work on chasing a story, like Gabriel Balboa, who departs from view—significantly, before any of the other six characters—in order to get to the bottom of a vast organ trafficking conspiracy.

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