

Briana Brickley, Kultej Dhariwal, Christopher Eng, and Frances Tran

Dr. Ashley Dawson

Engl 86600

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Introduction

Embodied Subjects and Subjected Bodies: Mapping Neoliberal Insecurity

A paradox of neoliberalism, both in theory and in practice, is that it constrains by enabling. While it rests upon an assumption that the best way to maximize the global flow and accumulation of capital—or, in more palatable terms, to consistently produce ‘economic growth’—is through cultivating the freedom of private entities, the freedom that it prescribes has the narrow meaning of economic agency within a terrain of competitive market relations. This is as true for human entities as it is for corporate ones. Neoliberalism, that is, does not only stand for a mode of organizing governments or economies; it also signifies a mode of subjectivity, a way of understanding one’s relation’s to oneself, one’s own body, and others, typically with an eye to the circuits of capital and the potential for profit. Demeaned under its hegemony is the will to live and act co-operatively, which, along with feelings of interdependence and economically ‘irrational’ inclinations to nurture the common good, consequently slips away into irrelevance. It is in this sense that neoliberal states can accurately be described as biopolitical: they foster certain forms of life while causing others to wither and perish, all in an effort to optimize human populations for smooth harmonization with the global capitalist system.¹

The four papers collected for this dossier confront both aspects of this biopolitical dynamic, with particular focus on the embodied subjects and subjected bodies who experience it. Our common point of entry is the conviction that oppositional discourse overlooks the

¹ See Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, 239-263.

government of subjectivity under neoliberalism only at great peril to its own critical purchase. In his paper “The Neoliberal Subject of Power: Revisiting Foucault,” Kultej Dhariwal conducts a close reading of Matthew G. Hannah’s recent essay on “Biopower, Life and Left Politics,” which envisions a revolutionary global program premised upon a life-affirming reconceptualization of the notion of biopower. Dhariwal demonstrates that neoliberal hegemony may be altogether too versatile to be susceptible to the counter-hegemonic thrust of this kind of large-scale idealism, precisely because of the seeming reasonability of its articulation of individual self-determination. The implication, he proposes, is that an analysis of the construction of the neoliberal subject is vital and necessary for the left imaginary.

In this vein, our papers investigate, on the one hand, the constrained variety of liberty that neoliberalism enables for some subjects and, on the other, the bodies in global society that must bear the corollary burden of morbidity—the biological, social, or symbolic death requisite for the flourishing of the system as a whole. What kinds of insecurity, we ask, what kinds of exploitation, vulnerability, and disempowerment, follow upon the enforcement of neoliberal biopower? In “Insecure Bodies: Bio-Polarization and the Global Movement of Body Parts” Briana Brickley teases out the strange contradiction of a state form that invests deeply in the well-being of corporations even as it denies care to living people. The former grow grotesquely in power and influence, she observes, while the latter are prompted to ever more troubling levels of self-commodification, especially when the paucity of options for survival made available by globalization necessitates their entry into the international marketplace for fertility and body parts. Frances Tran’s paper, “Toxic Risks: Contesting Neoliberalist Biopower in *My Year of Meats*,” complementing Brickley’s discussion of the extent of capital’s colonization of the body for profit, calls attention to a different but equally intense bodily incursion—toxicity. Tran

indicates that, in their social and environmental irresponsibility, corporations are exposing human bodies to potentially harmful toxins as never before. What result are widespread feelings of vulnerability, which become compounded through proliferating representations in the media. Yet, Tran contends, the dominant framing of such toxicity in our world occludes the needs exhibited by various bodies that are both physically and metaphorically “toxic,” and ultimately shores up neoliberal biopower’s discursive foundations instead. Christopher Eng notes a comparable tactic in “It’s a Fat World After All: Securing the Spectral Fat Child Body in a Neoliberalist Disney State,” where the bodies at issue are, if not toxic, then at least alarming to mainstream sensibilities. Fat bodies, and particularly fat children, he argues, are currently standout biopolitical targets in the U.S., made to feel shameful and guilty due to their supposed failure to live up to standards of healthy consumption. For Eng, however, the pertinent concern is not really the material weight of these bodies, but the symbolic one that has (unjustly, he suggests) accrued: fatness becomes a premier site for the projection of anxieties about rampant neoliberal globalization, while the unhealthful practices of corporations and their governmental sponsors evade scrutiny altogether. The imbalance is glaring, as it is in all of the contemporary discursive formations and material realities we scrutinize, making it clear that the operations of neoliberal biopower, whether in making live or letting die, reflect only “the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital” (Harvey 7).

This new order mapped by neoliberalism dictates the particular sites and bodies to which resources are extended, while distributing conditions of vulnerability toward others. As Zygmunt Bauman pointedly asserts: "In the world of global freedom and equality, lands and population have been arranged in a hierarchy of castes" (59). Fracturing the illusion of globalization as benevolent progress, Bauman reveals how neoliberalism signals the collusion of nation-states

with the interests of multinational corporations and organizations to enact policies that produce what Brickley aptly terms "bio-polarization," the condition by which insecurity is unequally distributed to bodies along lines of geography (global North/South) as well as those of race, class, and gender.

Bio-polarization indexes the sedimentation of a complex assemblage of geographies, histories, temporalities, and material contexts coalescing around neoliberalism. By locating our site of inquiry on the insecure body and its place within bio-polarization, we aim to track the past social and material conditions that facilitated the emergence of the present globalized neoliberal regime. That is, bio-polarization not only marks the condition of a radically unequal distribution of vulnerability, but also the means through which such conditions are produced by an accumulation of policies and practices that gradually construct a bio-polarized world order under global capital. This concretized order, in turn, provides the structure that creates the very grounds for the reproduction and flourishing of these neoliberal practices. Engaging with Hannah's assertion that neoliberalism conjures a "futurist" form of biopolitics aimed at "ensuring the survival of the Same in the future" at the expense of present bodies (15), we argue that attending to multiple insecure bio-polarized bodies can help trace the increasingly visible fissures in the current state of neoliberalism that threaten its continued reproduction.

Our projects thus foreground what Dhariwal articulates as the historical contingency of contemporary versions of personhood in order to interrogate the current modes of apprehending the body that are rendered (un)available under neoliberalism. As we endure an economic crisis that only serves as the most recent and visible manifestation of neoliberalism's contradictions and inability to sustain itself, Brickley and Tran point toward the ways in which the notion of concrete national and corporeal borders—upon which neoliberalism relies—are increasingly

deteriorating. Brickley discusses the means through which racialized bodies of the global South function not only as labor, but also physically as commodities for the interests of the global North. Looking specifically at the flourishing “corporeal economy” in organ-trafficking, she examines how neoliberalism constructs the national sites of the global North as dependent upon the spaces of the global South.

In our current moment, however, the management of neoliberalism's consequences is no longer containable purely through a hierarchical global order. The unmanageable flow of toxins, as Tran argues, further troubles the notion that insecurity and the consequences of neoliberalism can be spatially contained within Third World nations and bodies located outside the national body. Exposing the threat of toxicity in its capacity to permeate national and corporeal boundaries, Tran also asserts that toxins accumulate both physically and symbolically onto specific geographical sites and racialized communities. In other words, the waste of neoliberalism comes back to haunt its key perpetrator: the global North. Consequently, the dark children of neoliberalism become framed in terms of insecurity that violates "*personal safety: threats and fears to human bodies*" (Bauman 52; emphasis in original). This return presents a crisis in neoliberalism, demanding a need for new tactics to address the consequences within domestic borders that can no longer be obscured.

Through interrogating the social contexts that emerge from the site of the body and its insecurities, our papers collectively demonstrate that the distribution of risk under neoliberalism has never been exclusively confined to the spaces outside the borders delineating the multiple national spaces within the global North. Examining the biopolitical effects of neoliberalism as practiced by the United States in relation to the international arena, Lisa Duggan's trenchant assertion echoes Bauman's aforementioned view of the current world order: "*The goal of raising*

corporate profits has never been pursued separately from the rearticulation of hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States and around the globe" (14; emphasis in original). As such, neoliberalism flourishes through the necessary management of inequity within national borders, in which the distribution of risk is mapped along very specific lines that divide the body politic of 'developed' nation-states along categories of difference—categories that then mark the dividing point between wealth and poverty, flourishing and decaying, and, most fundamentally, living and dying.

This logic inherent in neoliberalism manifests in the blatant contradictions of issues that seem to be purely nationalist in their premises. Eng's examination of the ways in which the obesity epidemic, despite its construction as an issue of national security that universally plagues the American body politic, reveals how this is ironically framed as a problem specifically localized within the bodies of poor racialized communities. While the presence of these contradictions gestures toward the material flaws of neoliberalism, these structural inequities are often glossed over by the very rhetoric employed by neoliberal discourse. Indeed, the very material consequences and conditions of possibility for the reproduction of neoliberal policies are fundamentally produced and sustained by a number of discursive strategies which construct narratives that displace the social onto the individual.

Clearly, then, in addition to the material manifestations of neoliberal biopower, we must interrogate its subtler, discursive valences. For instance, the way in which bio-polarization unfolds (and is authorized) often occurs through particular narratives, one of which centers around "risk" and its twin notion of self-responsibilization. Animating diverse discussions—from the economy to public health to education—and triggering a complex interplay of positive and negative associations relating to both individuals and populations, "risk" mobilizes a

powerful symbolic-economic logic that penetrates “right down to the fund-amentals of subjectivity,” as Dhariwal remarks in his contribution. Randy Martin’s *Financialization of Daily Life* points out that the notion of risk has come to dominate the new global financial imaginary; a “rhetoric of the future that is really about the present,” risk represents a strategy of ‘living in the moment’ in order to capitalize on the promise of the future (105). However, the effect of this future-orientation—this deferral—is a “routinization,” which, Martin argues, “makes a particular historical and economic arrangement appear to be natural” (107). A similar trend occurs within discourses of health and education, in which ‘at risk’ populations—representing the dark side of this ‘promise’ of the future—are saddled with the logic of self-responsibility and, essentially, blamed for the very “exclusionary social effects” that marginalize them in the first place (109). As Brickley states, risk “is a kind of alibi,” a narrative tactic, “by which the unequal distribution of neoliberal power and resources (in terms of finances or health) is obfuscated via a rhetoric of personal responsibility and self-management.”

Risk thus operates as a trope that signals a particular kind of neoliberal *genre*, of which Priscilla Wald’s “outbreak narrative”² and Marc Abélès’s narrative of survival³ may be considered examples. Tran’s paper, perhaps most explicitly in this collection, takes up the question of “narratives of risk”—here, in terms of toxicity—in order to demonstrate how such narratives “produce certain forms of knowledge while obscuring others.” Engaging a *National Geographic* piece titled “The Pollution Within,” which follows journalist David Ewing Duncan on his “journey of chemical self-discovery,” she points out that representations such as these not

² Wald demonstrates that the outbreak narrative, a familiar plotline to contemporary film audiences and fiction readers alike, “fuses the transformative force of myth with the authority of science” (33). Registering an anxiety about globalization—the alarming expansion of the imagined community—outbreak narratives thus respond in a relatively direct way to the implications of neoliberalism.

³ While Abeles does not refer to the new emphasis on survival as a narrative per se, he insists that this trend reflects the interiorization of neoliberalism—its subtle imprinting on our collective consciousness—and, therefore, “survival” here articulates the less textual, and more discursive, valence of “narrative.”

only highlight the individual rather than structural dimensions of toxicity, but in fact actively veil the “more serious tales of toxic exposure.” The bodies most vulnerable to harmful chemicals—those living closest to toxic sites in the developing countries of the global South but also scattered throughout the so-called First World—are, therefore, invisible within the *National Geographic* piece, eclipsed by the affluent, white male body of Duncan whose chemical “risk” is deemed more important, and yet also more manageable and open to “self-discovery.”

Eng’s paper also notes how those bodies most vulnerable to a particular risk (in this case, obesity) are rendered un-representable. “[H]aunted by the specter of the Fat Child Body,” he argues, the commercials of the Disney Channel’s *Magic of Healthy Living* and the First Lady Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move!* campaigns serve as polemics for “exercise, healthy consumption, and recycling,” while failing to interrogate the dangerous neoliberal practices, enacted by corporations, that structure inequitable foodscapes. Thus, if the fat child remains an invisible presence in these idyllic portrayals of American vitality (sustainable productivity), so too does the corporate/structural face of the problem—the “epidemic”—of obesity.

This shift, in which vulnerable, or insecure, bodies become burdened by what Eng calls a “symbolic weight” and Brickley, following Bruce Braun, discusses as the “molecularization of life” (qtd. in Hannah) ushers in a dangerous tautology which, as Tran notes, authorizes “both political leaders and the general public to postpone or ignore the need for social and legal action.” Essentially, this is Dhariwal’s Foucauldian argument about how biopower in our current moment has subtly—and, we might say, *rhetorically*—produced a global populace of responsabilized subjects well-suited for today’s socially predacious flexible labor markets. In all of these papers, then, the material and the *metaphoric* valences of risk mingle, pointing to the complex operations of the new, neoliberal biopower, but also suggesting a point of entry for

imagining an effective oppositional politics, one which puts pressure on discursive resistance and hijacks the narrative of risk to new ends. In other words, if risk and responsibility ultimately represent the two sides of a single, hegemonic narrative of neoliberal *subjectivity*, then Dhariwal's call for "a theoretical framework that might allow us both to grasp the operations of neoliberal omnipresence, and to conceive of possible modes of transformation at the level of the individual—which is, after all, neoliberalism's privileged terrain"—becomes an immensely important *aesthetic* project with real, material implications.

As a result, while the papers in this collection explore the particular violence that neoliberalism enacts through its employment (or emplotment) of various narratives of risk and insecurity, they also expose the constructed and artificial nature of these narratives. In our work we attempt to illustrate the possibility of writing against the discursive regimes of neoliberalism, of producing alternative imaginaries and narratives that enable a different kind of engagement with the body. Therefore, rather than succumbing to the pessimism and negativity neoliberalism engenders through its narratives of risk, we gesture towards a potential for hope. The form of hope we discuss and convey through our papers is, however, not rooted in lofty idealism; it stems from a recognition that to combat pervasive feelings of insecurity and political apathy, hope becomes a necessary affect for creating an oppositional politics capable of inducing social change within both local communities and the larger planetary space we inhabit. Our papers suggest that material transformations cannot occur without first shifting the discursive grounds of neoliberalism and that, in order to make this shift "happen," hope is essential. As José Esteban Muñoz states in *Cruising Utopia*, hope serves as both "a critical affect and a methodology" that enables us to envision future utopian possibilities in the present (4).

Our research has taken us in different directions, toward specific subjects of study and questions concerning the intersections between discourses of neoliberalism, biopower and the body. Consequently, the kinds of potentialities we explore arise from unique sources and manifest differently in each paper. Dhariwal's research in "The Neoliberal Subject of Power," for instance, challenges us to imagine alternatives to the liberal human subject of Enlightenment philosophy. For him, the "radical openness of the human" provides opportunities for thinking against the liberal subject that, as "*homo oeconomicus*," continues to sustain neoliberal hegemony. He describes how the traits that animate this re-formed liberal subject have been incorporated into a rhetoric that promulgates the importance of individualism and personal responsibility to justify a shift from governmental to self regulation, thus absolving public institutions of the burden of providing for social welfare. Yet, Dhariwal argues that the always "unfinished" quality of the human subject" opens up possibilities for alternative configurations of "the self, liberty, and value that lie beyond the restrictive bounds afforded by liberalism." His analysis of Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, a fascinating transnational and transhistorical novel, suggests that the unpredictable and always changing characteristics of the body allow it to figure as the site from which this re-imagining of human subjectivity can begin. Rather than passively embodying the role of "*homo oeconomicus*," Dhariwal asks us to recognize the enormous potentialities embedded in our precarious, yet powerful bodies.

Eng's "It's a Fat Body After All" shifts our conversation from human subjectivity and representational bodies to the violence neoliberalism performs on specific kinds of "at risk" bodies, namely, the fat or obese body. He suggests that new possibilities can be made visible if we shift the discursive grounds of campaigns like Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!," which place blame on the (more or less spectral) "Fat Child," and instead demand that the "U.S. nation-

state... take responsibility for the violence and inequities that are wrought globally and increasingly invisibly within American borders.” Eng thus compellingly argues that instead of launching critiques against the fat body itself, we should attend to the persisting conditions of socio-economic and political inequality that have been exacerbated in an age of neoliberalism.

Finally, Brickley and Tran’s papers deal explicitly with how we might experience and mobilize feelings of hope to create the conditions of possibility for achieving social justice. Their work, while dealing with perhaps some of the most vulnerable bodies, bodies made precarious through organ trafficking and toxic environments, nevertheless illustrate how circumstances of intense precarity can also produce new forms of relationality essential to political coalition building. For Brickley and Tran, the *aesthetic*, in particular, possesses a unique capacity to stimulate hope, allowing us to access the kinds of transformative visions that appear absent in today’s political sphere. Their respective analyses of Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* and Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* suggest that aesthetic texts provide a way to overcome the paralysis of a contemporary leftist politics, thereby reinvigorating our efforts to fashion a dynamic oppositional politics capable of articulating rights claims as well as implementing projects for achieving social justice. As Tran states, “the *aesthetic* creates an imaginary that not only challenges the narratives of risk produced through neoliberal biopower, but also allows us to envision possibility in insecurity.” These critical projects, however, do not merely end as meditations on the aesthetic. On the contrary, they suggest that an engagement with literary texts opens up opportunities for analyzing the material implications of neoliberalism’s narratives of risk and thus for developing practical strategies to respond to specific permutations of corporeal violence, whether this violence manifests in the organ trade that profits from vulnerable bodies in

the global South or in the increasing toxicity that is circulated and exacerbated through transnational capitalism.

As a result, the diverse collection of papers we propose, and the distinct way each attempts to convey possibilities for existing in a world other than the one shaped by neoliberal hegemony, illustrates the enormous potential of comparative and collaborative thinking. Ultimately, it is this kind of critical work that is necessary for establishing the grounds on which to re-imagine an oppositional leftist politics with the capacity to address persisting issues of inequality and injustice and achieve actual social transformation.

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