***On Beauty* and the Politics of Academic Institutionality**

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*I.*

Halfway through Zadie Smith’s well-received and commercially successful 2005 novel, *On Beauty*,1 a significant moment occurs between the text’s two central female characters as they stand looking together at a painting by a Haitian artist that depicts Erzulie, the great Voodoo goddess. Carlene Kipps, the painting’s owner, describes the work to her new friend, Kiki Belsey:

It’s a Hyppolite. It’s worth a great deal, I believe, but that’s not why I love it. I got it in Haiti itself on my very first visit, before I met my husband. . . . She’s a great Voodoo goddess, Erzulie. She’s called the Black Virgin—also, the Violent Venus. . . . She represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon . . . and she’s the mystère of jealousy, vengeance and discord, and, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune. (Smith 175)

Beyond the symbolic chaos of Erzulie herself, the ekphrastic passage and the section that surrounds it represent the unpredictable attachments that are made possible through art, and provide a generative point of entry with which to discuss *On Beauty’s* complex engagement with aesthetics, one that ultimately bears on the more obviously political questions of multiculturalism and equality at the center of the novel. At the point of this scene, we already know Kiki Belsey to be the irreverent matriarch of the multiracial Belsey family: witty, beautiful, African-American, large in personality and stature, and extremely kind. Carlene Kipps is, in some ways, Kiki’s foil: frail and sickly, also black but Afro-British, she is the demure wife and mother of the conservative Kipps family. Aside from their most visible identity markers, the two women of color are set up to have little in common. On the surface, then, the scene of Carlene and Kiki looking together at the painting of a naked black woman is unremarkable, if surprising: it depicts the blossoming affection between two women who, due to their obvious personal differences and to the very public scholarly dispute between their art historian husbands, might be indifferent neighbors or even rivals by association, but become friends instead.

One might be tempted to read this initial glimpse of unlikely friendship as a celebratory moment indicative of art’s capacity to transcend social and material differences, but as it unfolds in the presence of an artwork that comes to signify in multiple and often contradictory ways throughout the novel, this scene actually gestures toward a more nuanced aesthetics offered up by *On Beauty*. While the Erzulie piece is beautiful it is also, as Carlene says, “worth a great deal,” and not only economically. Located at the symbolic center of a Haitian national movement taking place in the novel’s northeastern college town setting, the painting’s ownership is contested, raising issues about the fetishization and appropriation of “primitive” and “exotic” art from the Global South. Its possession is further complicated by the fact that Carlene acquired the work before her marriage, a seemingly minor point about gender that takes on greater significance after Carlene’s death, when it is revealed that she has left the painting to Kiki. This lateral (as opposed to generational) transfer of property between women of color proves a highly scandalous act of friendship. Defying the dominant logics of ownership, property, and the nuclear family, it is a move catalyzed by the joint experience of sensing beauty—notably, a beauty that reflects the two women’s own gendered and racialized bodies—that represents the potential of shared aesthetic experience to produce meaningful and often unpredictable attachments across lines of difference, while nonetheless remaining firmly rooted in the politics, social interactions, identity categories, literal bodies, and, generally, the materialities of everyday life.

This essay examines how such a unique aesthetics plays out in—and ultimately comes to bear on—a specific material context: the site of the academic institution that lies at the center of the novel. Indeed, the university with its disciplines, bureaucracies, rivalries and politics plays such an important role in the text that critics often refer to *On Beauty* as a “campus novel.”2 We see this when Kiki first lays eyes on the painting of Erzulie. Her initial response is “She’s *fabulous*,” but self-consciousness prompts her to quickly revise this claim, and her second comment awkwardly employs the academic language of her husband, Howard. Calling Erzulie “interesting,” Kiki goes on to timidly remark how the goddess seems to defy the structure of dominant Judeo-Christian philosophy because “we’re so binary, of course, in the way we think” (Smith 175). Despite the fact that this scene occurs outside the sites of official knowledge that permeate the text, taking place not between the art history scholars but their non-expert wives, the institutional language of aesthetic judgment nevertheless creeps into Carlene and Kiki’s friendly conversation. While Kiki’s particular observation is arguably accurate, its dogmatic academicism is alienating, inhibiting rather than promoting collective reflection. A central thematic in *On Beauty* firmly locates aesthetics—defined by Jacques Rancière as “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts” that broadly “defines what is visible or not in a common space”—at or in relation to the site of the neoliberal academy. Playing on how designations of beauty are routed through and subjected to the disciplinary regimes of institutionalized knowledge, the novel insists on the pervasiveness of academic discourse that affects even aesthetic experience that occurs outside the institution, or away from the traditional sphere of art (Rancière 10, 13). Yet Carlene’s reaction to Kiki’s uncomfortable academic mimicry reveals the limits of institutionalized aesthetic authority: “That’s a clever way to put it,” she gently tells Kiki, then simply “I like her parrots.” While the modest act of finding pleasure in the painted parrots is not in itself indicative of an aesthetic intervention, the scenario in which the two women model an encounter that is to some extent left open-ended and undecided, immune to the imperative to fix meaning through interpretation, gestures toward the way *On Beauty* invites a reconsideration of the grounds of aesthetic judgment. Beyond Carlene’s statement, the scene itself recalls that there are as many aesthetic judgments as individuals, that reactions to art are neither prescriptive nor predictable. Prompting us to reflect on how the institution elevates and sanctions particular aesthetic judgments, the novel asks how we might—and, in Carlene’s case, *do*—not only escape but engage with discursive regimes to be, perhaps fleetingly, unpredictably, struck by the beauty of parrots.

*On Beauty* tells the story of the Belseys, a quirky, educated, progressive, multiracial and multinational family living in the fictional northeast college town of Wellington. Kiki’s husband Howard, a white Englishman, is an adjunct professor of art history at the college. The butt of many of the novel’s satirical jabs at the jargon-laden language of high theory and the misguided political struggles that can occur within academic institutions, Howard is a radical poststructuralist who hates all representational art and teaches his students that beauty is “the mask that power wears.” He is also a vocal champion of Wellington’s unofficial affirmative action policies, and in general a staunch leftist whose politics do not always align with his personal actions. Howard and Kiki’s oldest son, Jerome, is an undergraduate at Brown, an earnest and sensitive nerd whose recent forays into Christianity are perplexing to his mother and alarming to his father. Their daughter, Zora, on the other hand, is a mirror of Howard. An insecure college freshman at Wellington, Zora’s aspirations to become an intellectual make her a cringe-worthy cliché, the kind who references Foucault in casual conversation. The youngest Belsey is Levi, a hip-hop-loving teenager engaged in understanding his black identity and, somewhat comically, cultivating a persona he boasts as being “street.” The novel begins amidst a comedic familial crisis: Jerome, who is studying abroad in England, writes home about his engagement to the daughter of Howard’s longtime academic arch-nemesis, Monty Kipps. Although the romantic entanglement between Jerome and Victoria Kipps is short-lived, it sets in motion a family rivalry that is intensified when the Kipps family moves to Wellington, where Monty has taken a job as distinguished professor of art history and will continue his tenure as neoconservative public intellectual.

This feuding families plotline, based loosely on E.M. Forster’s 1910 classic, *Howards End*, serves as scaffolding for the novel’s interwoven aesthetic and political threads. As Dorothy Hale notes, “the lives of Smith’s socially diverse characters are filled with aesthetic experience, and their individual attempts to understand that experience . . . highlight the power relations and social alliances that give meaning to even the most embodied sensory perceptions” (815). This points toward the way *On Beauty* widens the scope of its own context, toggling between moments of personal (aesthetic) experience and shared intimacy, and broader institutional (and global) politics through which conflicts over affirmative action, diversity, and multiculturalism are constantly being played out. Hale’s comment points to the fact that the text’s scales are multiple and deeply imbricated. In other words, the embodied experience at the core of aesthetics achieves legibility through social, cultural and historical valences. But the corollary to Hale’s point is that grappling with such experience—particularly for the “socially diverse” characters in the novel—has the potential to shed light on the very politics and institutions that circumscribe this experience. In this way, *On Beauty*’s minoritized characters offer a unique aesthetic insight, one that is not necessarily tied to the purely sensible or bound up with the longstanding, institutionalized traditions of Western philosophy and art-with-a-capital-A. In fact, theirs is a subtle defiance that turns its gaze back on the dominant aesthetic regime, and opens up the possibility for forming personal attachments like the kind we glimpse between Carlene and Kiki.3 What is glimpsed here is an *intersectional* aesthetics, tied to the material particularities (and often the burden) of social embodiment and indicating access to a kind of critique of the organizing logics of dominant aesthetics and, it turns out, of its primary institution: the neoliberal university. This creative intervention proves timely and relevant, as the twenty-first century continues to see an emphasis on “equality” and “diversity” even as cuts to education, the rise of for-profit colleges, the transfer of power from faculty to administration, and the various rollbacks in affirmative action demonstrate a marked lack of commitment to actual diversity or material equality. A mobile, non-oppositional orientation that is able to negotiate beauty and power simultaneously, intersectional aesthetics emerges in *On Beauty* as a kind of strategy for living in and living on under our current conditions of existence which appear so hostile to difference and material equality. Opening up the possibility for seeing different kinds of beauty, and for seeing beauty differently, it is on a smaller scale an aesthetics that can not only prompt reflection on one’s own judgments, but spark the capacity for changing one’s mind.

*II.*

*On Beauty*, steeped in the language of high theory and aesthetic philosophy, derives its satirical tone from contrasting official knowledges—their histories, hierarchies, and assumptions about subjectivity and civilization—with, as Hale noted, everyday experiences grounded in the senses. At times, this contrast even occurs within a single character. Howard Belsey’s self-serving “academic pyrotechnics” at a social gathering demonstrate this: “what I meant was that Rembrandt is part of the seventeenth-century European movement to . . . well, let’s shorthand it—essentially invent the idea of the human,” Howard drones on to a group of colleagues and non-academics. “And of course,” he continues, “the corollary to that is the fallacy that we as human beings are central, and that our aesthetic sense in some way makes us central” (Smith 117-118). What has the potential to be lost in Howard’s alienating delivery is the perceptiveness—and pithiness—of his statement. Indeed, the aesthetic tradition to which modern western philosophy is indebted concatenates Enlightenment notions of interiority and artistic judgment (or taste) with those of the public sphere and civilization, which are considered the “ethical end of humanity itself” (Lloyd 64). In other words, the modern notion of humanity, as Howard highlights, is produced out of the Enlightenment aesthetic project. In turn, as theorists of racial formation and historiography show, race, gender, and sexuality prove central to this project, and not merely as a point of departure for thinking through various circuits of identity and modalities of embodiment, but as the very grounds upon which the terms of rationality, subjecthood, and citizenship are cast to begin with. Thus, Enlightenment philosophy, centered on a self-consciousness borne from the capacity for aesthetic judgment, is the result of social and cultural shifts in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, including “the rapid expansion of capitalism, the emergence of modern individualism, the growing success of scientific method in manipulating nature for human ends . . . and the appearance . . . of ‘aesthetic autonomy’” (Bowie 2). In Kant’s writing aesthetic experience is a two-step process, involving both the individual, specific instance of sense perception provoked by the beautiful artwork or scene in nature, and the consequent rational application of artistic judgment or “taste.” Shaping the sensible experience retrospectively by routing it through the dominating logic of rationality and judgment, taste disciplines in the name of the disinterested “universal.”4

Access to *universal* beauty, then, both *grounds* and *is based on* a privileged form of subjectivity. In aesthetic philosophy, this in turn underpins the formation of the “public sphere” and its twin concept, “common sense.” Aesthetics, according to Rancière, is therefore “at the core of politics,” producing a “distribution of the sensible” that “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc” (12-13). The rules about subjectivity, citizenship, and even the very rubric of “the political” therefore have everything to do with the terms set by a particular aesthetic regime.5 For Rancière, the visible and the verbal connote cultural legibility and the ability to actively engage in systems of signification and representation, and therefore politics unfolds in moments of exclusion: “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it,” and thus “who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (Rancière 13). Ultimately, casting aesthetics as an inherently political field, Rancière implicates art in the foundational sorting process that renders certain bodies legible and others as marginal, invisible, and abject.

This political division rests on the question of embodiment that proves central to Smith’s novel: who gets to transcend the flesh and occupy the ethereal space of reason, judgment, and the universal? Elizabeth Grosz, outlining the foundational dialectic of Western metaphysics, points to the way in which the body is subordinated to the mind through its links to irrationality, passion, particularity, and individual, sensible experience (381). Thus, predictably, those subjects capable of answering the call of Kantian disinterest are the ones free from the intrusions of bodily markers that burden “women, Africans and their New World descendants, indigenous peoples, mestizos, and Asians, among other categories of ‘overembodied’ ethnic, sexual and classed identity” (Cherniavsky). Unhampered by the messy particularities of embodied existence, subjects on the winning side of aesthetic judgment are in turn rewarded with expansive privilege, including cultural intelligibility, citizenship, social inclusion, and political coherence. Finally, the division perpetuates itself, as privileged subjects able to sublimate in the first place seize political autonomy while aesthetic universality’s others are reduced to the flesh.

*III.*

Carl Thomas is one such character whose social and embodied positionality impedes his adjustment to the privileged (white) spaces of Wellington. Like his *Howards End* predecessor, Leonard Bast, Carl moves from social outsider to a tenuous position of token inclusion (or institutionalization), to being abruptly expelled from the narrative altogether. A bright young black man with little formal education, from a rough neighborhood in Boston, Carl possesses an unparalleled intellectual curiosity. His knowledge of hip-hop is extensive, and he demonstrates a real talent for spoken word poetry, as well as an interest in questions of musical genius and artistic production. However, inhabiting a body of color fundamentally limits Carl’s inclusion in the inner-circle of knowledge production and cultural authority that Wellington University represents. Throughout the text, Carl is reduced to the body in ways that shrewdly point to the idiosyncrasies of liberal racism; in particular, his beauty is remarked on constantly, to the extent that Carl’s presence has a distracting effect on many of the other characters. When Howard Belsey first meets him, he thinks Carl resembles one of the four African heads in a Rubens painting (77), but fails to recognize Carl upon their second encounter. Carl’s blackness and classic(al) good looks therefore result in fashioning him into an aesthetic object available for fetishistic consumption by the text’s race- and class-privileged subjects.

However, Carl’s desire to learn and to immerse himself in creative culture keeps him returning to events in Wellington, such as the Mozart in the Park concert where first meets the Belsey family, despite his out-of-place-ness. In this scene an awkward introduction takes place when Zora Belsey accidentally takes Carl’s discman instead of her own. The passage, an interesting revision of the *Howards End* umbrella swap that significantly transforms the mistaken object into a literal aesthetic (in this case, musical) device, is most important for what it sets up. Later in the novel, we retrospectively hear about Carl’s experience of listening to Mozart and, more specifically, what that encounter prompts him to do:

I found out about it a little more—‘cos I’ve been reading about classical music. . . it turns out that the main business of the *Lacrimosa* was by this guy Süssmayr—which is the *shit*, man, ‘cos it’s like the *best thing* in the Requiem, and it made me think, *damn* . . . all these people be trying to prove that it’s Mozart ‘cos that fits in with their idea of who can and who can’t make music like this, but the *deal* is that this amazing sound was just by this guy Süssmayr, this average Joe Shmo guy. (Smith 137)

Neither Carl’s position of relative ignorance nor his status as a cultural outsider detracts from his ability to be transported by the power of music, nor to discern, specifically, that Mozart’s Requiem “is the *shit*.” He figures out on his own that the *Lacrimosa* is one of the most famous, most “genius” sections of the piece, and hearing it prompts Carl to do his own research, after which he comes to an incredibly smart conclusion about “genius” and the politics of artistic canonization. In other words, Carl’s realization is that aesthetic sensibilities themselves are cultivated, that art itself is always already a politicized field that has to do with race, gender, and class. History is always participating in re-writing the field of aesthetics, and writing out the “Joe Shmos” who trouble narratives of greatness. This realization is a good deal more perceptive than we might imagine Monty Kipps’s would be, with his unfaltering belief in the concept of genius and sense that “Equality [is] a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatuous dream” (Smith 44). Nor does it succumb to the pitfalls of Howard’s stance, which, in its utter, blinding rejection of all art deemed “masterful,” in effect reifies the very existence of mastery and misses what might actually be beautiful, moving, or simply outside the reach of a dominant aesthetic narrative. Indeed, Carl models from the figurative and literal outside what the best version of a critic might look like: moved by genuine aesthetic experience and driven by intellectual curiosity, the critic can discern beauty while nevertheless interrogating histories of racism and colonialism, mobilizing class- and gender-based critique, and residing in the contradictions that mark intellectual labor in the neoliberal present. If Carl’s race and class cast him as an outsider—to Wellington, to events like Mozart in the park, and to aesthetic philosophy itself—it is this status that allows him to glimpse a different, intersectional version of aesthetics, both as critic and a dynamic spoken word poet.

 *On Beauty*’s Claire Malcolm also possesses a tenuous access to this aesthetic mode as a character likewise—but quite differently—marked by embodiment. In some ways, Claire’s corporeality has to do with the illicit affair she has with Howard, and therefore with her participation in the novel’s interracial love triangle. “Could you have found anybody less like me if you’d *scoured* the *earth*?” Kiki, who is black and weighs close to three hundred pounds, asks Howard when she learns of the affair between him and his tiny, white, colleague. “You married a big black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?” (206). This is a complex situation in which the intersections of race, gender, and sex/sexuality collide and shift in messy ways, and not one that is easily resolved in the novel. Claire, despite her often misguided, apolitical liberalism, and the privilege of her whiteness that gets unwittingly attached to designations of beauty by men, is undeniably reduced to an embodied object here—but by Howard more than Kiki. When Howard haltingly attempts to explain his actions to Kiki, he confirms this: “It’s true that men—they respond to beauty . . . it doesn’t end for them, this . . . this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world—and that’s clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes . . . but it’s *true* and . . . I don’t know how else to explain” (207). Claire’s subjectivity is erased in Howard’s timid academic jargon: she becomes simply a “physical actuality” through which one might pursue the privileged aesthetic realm of beauty. Furthermore, Howard’s failure to question the rubric of beauty at all here leads to a recycling of old aesthetic hierarchies that rank bodies by race.

Like Carl, who is a masterful spoken word artist, this corporeal marking of Claire is ironic. A creative writing professor and formerly famous poet of 1970s second-wave feminism, Claire is a pursuer of beauty with a powerful artistic voice and an aesthetic vision of her own. However, gender marks her creative status and complicates the way in which she inhabits the role of poet. Asked by her students what her experience was like in her heyday, Claire’s answer is informative of this complexity:

God . . . it was ’73 and it was a very strange time to be a woman poet . . . I was meeting all these amazing people—Ginsberg, and Ferlinghetti, and then finding myself in these insane situations . . . meeting, I don’t know, Mick Jagger or whoever, and I just felt very *examined*, very picked over, not just mentally but also personally and *physically* . . . and I suppose I felt somewhat . . . disembodied from myself. (Smith 218)

Immediately marking herself as a “*woman* poet,” Claire goes on to name some of the famous men—poets and otherwise—of the period, highlighting the difference and alienation she endured. These men—Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Mick Jagger—are not only poets and rockstars without a prefix (they are not *male* poets orrockstars), but they are also, interestingly enough, interchangeable. When Claire notes that she was “meeting, I don’t know, Mick Jagger or whoever,” she diminishes the Rolling Stones star’s celebrity while simultaneously undermining his singularity—he could just as easily be Steven Tyler for Claire to tell her story and prove her point. Painting a picture of herself as outsider against a sea of famous men, Claire describes the experience of creative evaluation through the lens of gender as both *hyper*embodying and *dis*embodying. Her words here sketch an aesthetic subjectivity in its relationship to the body, highlighting as a fundamental reality for non-canonical identity the ironic alienation—articulated in Claire’s paradoxical feeling of being “disembodied from myself”—produced by a constant association with physicality.

However, the result of these complex, ironic alienations is that Claire experiences flashes of aesthetic insight—often tied to her poetry but also complicated in moments of reductive and, frankly, racist thinking—which are, nevertheless, opened up by her status as hyper-embodied “woman poet.” Ultimately, her social positionality intersects with her poetics to result in a kind of generousness that fuels what the narrator calls a kind of “unassailable magic of Claire.” The beauty she is able to imagine through the creative exercise of her poetry gets spread around, as is the case with her students. On a class field trip to the Bus Stop, a Moroccan restaurant and performance space near the college, Claire gushes to someone about her students, and “[e]veryone warmed themselves in the generous communal glow”:

she made you feel that just being in *this* moment, doing *this* thing, was the most important and marvelous possibility for you. Claire spoke often in her poetry of the idea of ‘fittingness’: that is, when your chosen pursuit and your ability to achieve it—no matter how small or insignificant both might be—are matched exactly, are fitting. *This*, Claire argued, is when we become truly human, fully ourselves, beautiful. (Smith 214)

While Claire is a deeply flawed and complicated character, and this is a conflicted event in terms of the interaction that will play out later between Claire and Carl in this scene (an encounter I will return to), the radically democratic notion of beauty offered here approaches the most concise articulation of the intersectional aesthetics modestly envisioned in *On Beauty*. Fleeting, potentially small or even “insignificant,” and changeable, this beauty does not privilege any particular movements, outcomes, formations or even politics; it is not tied to the visual; it does not utilize neoliberal logic about hard work or, alternately, pure talent; it does not rest on stale tropes of achievement or capitalistic conceptions of “success”; and it embraces difference and particularity while also promoting the concept of collectivity, gesturing toward a greater formation in to which we might “fit.” Thus, while this section is framed in the hyperbolic language of an artist/poet, the idea of becoming more “fully ourselves,” examined in the context of Claire’s experience of feeling “disembodied from myself,” takes on meaning beyond the logic of authenticity or the privileges of static subjectivity. Finally, this eloquent notion of beauty-as-“fittingness,” springing forth from the explicitly corporeal experience of Claire as a female-bodied poet, is ultimately expressed as a positive affective force; Claire’s “magic,” in other words, is the power to make others feel inspired, worthy, *good*.

And yet, the novel steadfastly refuses a celebratory narrative one might be tempted to read through Claire’s character. In one scene, as she reflects on Kiki Belsey, Claire thinks to herself that Howard’s wife “radiated an essential female nature Claire had already imagined in her poetry—natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire. A goddess of the everyday” (Smith 227). If Erzulie is the object that prompts this kind of reflection “on beauty” for Carlene and Kiki, Kiki herself is such an object for Claire; it is therefore no accident that Claire imagines Kiki to be another kind of goddess, a “goddess of the everyday.” This capacity to recognize power and beauty in other women—but also in the banal moments and figures of the “everyday”—on one hand might indicate Claire’s potential to tap into the intersectional aesthetics imagined in the novel, offering up a sort of redistribution of the sensible tied to difference, the particularities of bodies and the social codes that govern them. But on the other hand, the potential of this moment is also complicated by the underlying violence in this script. Here, Claire turns Kiki into an aesthetic object and even elevates her as a kind of fetish, an art piece akin to Carl’s association with a Rubens painting in Howard’s mind. The “essential female nature” Kiki represents for Claire might be viewed by some as expansive and radical, but the gazing of a white woman on the body of a black woman invites a more cynical reading in which blackness is employed as a metonym for the “unmediated” and the natural, and “essential female” hints at the sexual essentializing of the bad 1970s white feminism that honed Claire’s art.

However, the fact that Claire’s suspect reflection on Kiki is filtered through her poetry indicates that a stubborn potential for an emergent aesthetics might endure, perhaps against Claire’s own second wave-style intentions. What do we make of the final part of Claire’s analysis, beyond “natural, honest, powerful, unmediated” descriptions of Kiki and their unmistakably racist undertones, when she notes that the woman whose husband she has been sleeping with has always struck her as being “full of something like genuine desire”? Creatively rewriting the female body—particularly Kiki’s and, by extension, Claire’s own—as desiring subject, Claire’s poetics break her out of the feminine rivalry role of home-wrecking mistress that the narrative might otherwise suggest. While this aesthetics does not free the poet from the pitfalls of racial violence and essentialism, it does, I suggest, generatively complicate Claire’s position in the narrative. Finally, in Claire’s poetry (much more than in her actions or her poetic reflections) we see a potentially intersectional aesthetics that, in one case, evokes the line of finding “shelter in each other” that sparks the friendship between Carlene and Kiki; in another, it manifests as the only full-length poem reproduced in the novel, titled “On Beauty,” which conjures a vividly conflicted image of “the beautiful” that seems to haunt the text as a whole.6

*IV.*

The complicated interplay and overlapping scales of material contexts, sketched out through the characters of Carl and Claire, results in a novel that turns on the animating, central figure of the university. Swapping the *Howards End* setting of a rapidly transforming English national landscape for the very specific scene of a prestigious American liberal arts university, *On Beauty* interrogates how the neoliberal institution and its official knowledges affect the possibility for realizing an emergent aesthetics, shape the terrain on which aesthetic subjectivity unfolds across lines of race and gender, and ultimately comes to bear on the potential for living out and thinking through the kind of difference an intersectional aesthetics demands. The novel in fact reflects the reality that the role of the university has undergone a shift in terms of social reproduction and cultural authority. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings catalogues how as an institution the university no longer serves a cultural function as an ideological state apparatus, becoming—especially in the past three decades—a bureaucratic corporation serving consumer-students and operating under a banner of meaningless “excellence” (Readings 5-6). *On Beauty* depicts this current neoliberal moment marked by deregulation and privatization, where higher education remains hotly contested on the political landscape. On the one hand, with the decrease in public funding and subsequent hikes in tuition and fees, moves championed by conservatives like Monty Kipps, the reality is that college today has become increasingly less affordable for lower- and middle-class Americans. A new generation of college graduates—from private, public, and for-profit universities and colleges alike—are entering the workforce buried under massive student loan debt that many of them will never pay off. On the other hand, debates over educational equality and who even has access to such sites in the first place continue to be waged. Consequent rollbacks in affirmative action have had significant effects on minority acceptance and graduation rates.

This all plays out in the text with the controversy over Wellington’s unofficial enrollment policy, which allows professors to admit non-college students from the community into their classes at their discretion. The result—a kind of piecemeal affirmative action in which students like Carl are able to attend classes like Claire’s creative writing course—is vehemently opposed by Monty Kipps, who argues with perfect conservative flair that such a “policy . . . is a blatant corruption of the Affirmative Action bill (which, by the way, is itself a corruption),” and that it hurts minorities who are “considered *needy cases*—as if it helps minorities to be pushed through an elite environment to which they are not yet suited” (328-29). The way Monty frames the increasingly futile attempts of the institution to promote diversity—as a “corruption” that bucks “academic standards” for the misguided benefit of “*needy*” minority students—perfectly captures the racist undertones of the supposedly race-neutral language gaining traction in various institutional settings. In other words, what Monty’s blustering speech demonstrates is how at the site of the university, an increasingly corporatized space that privileges equality of opportunity over equality of outcome, the benefit of “diversity” is being detached from the minority groups who fought in social justice movements and reattached to the interests of the institution.7 The result is that “equality”—subordinated to the ultimately bureaucratic language of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” Readings’s “excellence,” and Kipps’s “standards”—as a term has become evacuated of meaning, and as a concept has been effectively dematerialized, no longer rooted in tangible reality. As Jodi Melamed argues, “racism appears as disappearing” under the institutionalized, antiracist metanarratives of neoliberal multiculturalism such as those spouted by Monty (14). But such a disappearance is a farce, and racism—along with sexism—simply gets rerouted, expressed in new ways.8

Another of these ways, which *On Beauty* captures brilliantly, is the process of institutionalization itself (Batra 1079). After the mix-up at Mozart in the park, we encounter Carl once again at the Bus Stop, performing spoken word to an audience that includes Claire’s class. Unlike the first artist, Carl brings down the house with his flawless rhymes and thoughtful lines on growing up poor and black. “He’s like Keats with a knapsack!” one student proclaims in an effort to grasp the ineffable that Carl’s performance exudes. Afterwards, Claire stops Carl exiting the stage, asking: “Are you interested in refining what you have?” (Smith 232). This is a moment of interpellation—employing the language of a commodity to be mined and commercialized—that hails Carl’s gradual incorporation into the institutional space of Wellington University. The result of this encounter is that Carl becomes one of the unofficial students in Claire’s poetry class, where he learns about sonnets and meter and, to Carl’s chagrin, is excessively praised by his fellow classmates. Later, after the unofficial affirmative action policies that have gained Carl entry to the course have disintegrated thanks to the efforts of Monty, Carl becomes an employee of the Black Studies department. This development is a particularly illustrative example of the dangers and pitfalls of institutionalization for minoritized subjects. When Claire approaches Erskine Jegede, a professor-administrator in the Black Studies department, asking him for help regarding Carl’s situation, his response in this case and others like it is to use the “ace up his sleeve”: “in situations like this, Erskine, in his capacity as Assistant Director of the Black Studies Department, simply gave them a job. He *created* a job where before there had been only floor space.” The post he invents for Carl—“*Hip-Hop Archivist*”—has the dual benefit of quieting the affirmative action debate being waged between the Belseys (Howard has been joined by his daughter, Zora) and Monty Kipps, while benignly shuffling Carl out of the way and presumably keeping him content, intellectually stimulated, and well-paid (Smith 371-2). Erskine’s act is not the result of a misguided (or savvy) individual, but a strategic move representative of a disciplinary formation that has learned to play by the rules of the institution, defending its territory, quelling controversy, and promoting its interests. This scene creatively raises a central question for academic disciplines like Black Studies, Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, and various manifestations of Ethnic Studies—that is, the question of how to sustain effective critique in line with the activist roots of such formations, while maintaining a position inside the institution.9

The stakes of institutionalization are made clear when later, after Carl has become firmly entrenched in his role in the Black Studies Department, the sounds of a Haitian protest outside the Wellington campus fail to get through to him or any of the other characters at the college.10 The literal sounds of social struggle are unable to puncture the political vacuum of an institution so myopic about its small-scale affirmative action debate that its players are unable to make a connection between racial inequality and international geopolitics, even when such a critique is shouting at them through the window. “I’m having trouble concentrating,” Carl tells Zora when she comes to visit his office. “I keep on getting a lot of noise from outside. People hollering for an hour. You happen to know what’s going on out there?” Zora’s reply—“Some kind of Haitian protest thing . . . . Minimum wage, getting shit on by everybody all the time . . . a lot of stuff, I guess”—doesn’t faze Carl or pique his interest at all (Smith 376). This scene is a multivalent illustration of the way *On Beauty* “implicate[s] the university as one of the sites for the propagation of economic and racial disparities, thus calling into question its left-liberal academic discourse on racial and economic justice” (Batra 1086). Once Carl has become part of the institution, he demonstrates a kind of willful deafness in terms of U.S. leftist politics: he literally gets up to close the window on the Haitian chanting, symbolically also closing the window on expanding his own political scope. Carl’s transformation into respectable member of the college thereby represents the foreclosing of potential for coalition building, in addition to the end of his own unique, vibrant aesthetics, as he stops writing and performing once he takes the job. But it also highlights the complexity of ongoing “economic and racial disparities,” marking which minoritized subjects are provisionally allowed in to the institution, and which ones are to remain locked outside protesting in the streets. However, Carl’s insider position is soon revealed as precarious, and before long he completely drops out of the narrative. Caught in the middle of a dramatic confrontation between Zora Belsey and Victoria Kipps—a complicated scenario in which the daughters of two academics use him disingenuously to push their personal agendas—Carl’s departure recalls Leonard’s in *Howards End*. Leonard is killed by a falling bookcase at the Schlegel’s house, while Carl, smothered by the petty dramas sparked by the dysfunction of academic life, chooses to leave. Both men are, ultimately, crushed by the weight of an institutionalized knowledge that proves symbolically fatal to outsiders like them.11

*V.*

However, *On Beauty* is not a uniform indictment of the contemporary university; rather, it depicts spaces of higher learning as varied and complicated, rife with the bad politics of Howard and Monty, the scenes of benign racism and tokenism in Claire’s poetry class, and the insidiousness of institutionalization we see with Carl, but also unequivocally redeemed in certain moments, refuting the charges “that academic debate is itself meaningless” (Hale 824). Rather, as Hale argues, “*On Beauty* shows how the ideas formulated and the values theorized in universities become incorporated into the thoughts of other types of social subjects” (824). Hale cites Carlene’s steadfast belief in the wisdom of poetry as an example. The dying woman first recites *On Beauty*’s central poetic phrase—“There is such a shelter in each other”—in the initial conversation with Kiki that occurs in front of the Erzulie painting. While this deployment of poetry comes off more genuinely than does Kiki’s awkward use of the language of high theory, it is, as Hale points out, a similar borrowing from the discourse of the academy. Significantly, this particular line is also lifted from a poem by Nick Laird (who happens to be Zadie Smith’s husband), and, therefore, it embodies a kind of double-connection to the site of the university.12 Because Laird’s poetry consistently becomes Claire Malcolm’s throughout *On Beauty*, in the world of the novel Carlene does not simply adopt poetic language but specifically *Claire’s* language to form the bond with Kiki that works to cement their friendship and culminates in the flagrant act of defiance to neoliberal laws of property, family, and propriety. The line shows up for the last time on the back of the Erzulie painting: Carlene has written it out for Kiki, to whom she has bequeathed the priceless work. This circulation of poetic language—between women—is no accident; it represents the intersectional aesthetics they all glimpse but, ultimately, is only fleetingly realized in the shared moment between Carlene and Kiki.

Other scenes similarly draw out the quieter ways in which the discourses of the academy might be redeemed in the experience of everyday life. This shows up in the example of Levi Belsey, who is grappling with his own minoritization by embracing—at times in comically misguided ways—hip-hop culture and blackness. In one section, Levi, faced with the scene of boisterous Haitian men hawking their wares along a Boston sidewalk, is struck by “a sudden rush of beauty.” Unable to translate or make sense of this aesthetic moment, Hale notes (824, footnote), Levi co-opts the language of his professor-father’s lecture, thinking to himself: “*Situationists transform the urban landscape*” (Smith 193-4). In such moments, the terms of critical theory and the ideas, rhetoric, and discourses of the university become not impediments to recognizing beauty but valuable structures of knowledge that enable the characters to make sense of the ins and outs of their everyday lives: to articulate sensible moments of pleasure, forge intimate connections, and even resist normative modes of being under the weight of neoliberal multiculturalism. In fact, this moving aesthetic experience spurs Levi’s process of politicization, leading to him quit his job at a local record store when he tries to organize the employees against unjust management practices, and then to start associating with the Haitians, through which he becomes acquainted with their struggle. Ultimately, Levi’s involvement with this group prompts him to steal the painting of Erzulie from Monty Kipps’s office—the institutional setting to which it has been relocated after Carlene’s death—and stash it under his own bed for the purpose, he says, of “*redistribut*[ing] the funds” to the Haitian people (429). This surprising turn of events is the only way Kiki eventually finds out that the painting is legally hers, for when she finds the painting in Levi’s room, she also discovers Carlene’s note on the back: “*Kiki—please enjoy this painting. It needs to be loved by someone like you. Your friend, Carlene . . . . There is such a shelter in each other*” (430-31). Ironically, academic discourse cycling through the novel’s non-institutionalized sites opens up the hybrid space, marked by poetry and the beauty of the everyday, in which the text’s most radical friendship is realized (and endures even after death), one that in turn catalyzes an intersectional aesthetics.

Scenes like these evoke *On Beauty*’s other key intertext, a long essay written in 1999 titled “On Beauty and Being Just” by Elaine Scarry. Scarry’s piece is a strikingly optimistic treatise aimed at recuperating beauty in our contemporary lives and—significantly—our schools, and defending it from the “political complaints against it” (39). Insisting that sites of official learning can have a positive impact on aesthetic life, expanding beauty and therefore our ethical relationship to difference, Scarry is particularly critical of academic and theoretical discourses that dismiss beauty, while nevertheless remaining committed to the potential of the university itself. She argues that “[t]o misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed” (7). The quote, which serves as the epigraph for the middle section of Smith’s novel, reveals an ethical dimension to the aesthetic and often overtly political battles being waged in *On Beauty*. Stressing the connection between the university and beauty, particularly after redefining beauty in constant and positively imaginative ways that have to do with difference, individual and collective attachments, and embodiment, Smith’s deployment of Scarry does some critical work to offset the satirical image of academia prominent in much of the text—a nuance many critics miss. *On Beauty* gently insists that an intersectional aesthetics—an aesthetic potentiality built upon the structural maladjustment of minoritized subjects—*can* survive, and even flourish, in the suffocating, at times excessively doctrinaire space of the academy.

“On Beauty and Being Just” is more than a simple redemption of the aesthetics in/of the university, though, and in its defense of beauty against key political charges the essay provides another opening for the novel’s intersectional aesthetics. This “set of political complaints” Scarry identifies, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, are (1) “that when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object,” and (2) “that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements” (39-40). This disagreement hinges on the question of the gaze, locating visuality, and the issues of power and authority at stake it connotes, as central to the debate. On one hand, Scarry attempts to disprove each charge on its own, arguing that on the first count, the gaze is actually positive and life-giving (47), and, on the second count, that beholding beauty is an inclusive and democratic experience, necessarily prompting one to generously seek out beauty in other, ordinary places rather than encouraging exclusion, or “lateral disregard” (39). On the other hand, Scarry’s recuperative project points out how the two arguments “fundamentally contradict one another”: in one case the gaze is considered reifying and harmful to the object, and in the other case it is viewed as beneficial, only misdirected (40). However, *On Beauty* raises some doubt about the seemingly tidy logic of a transcendent beauty, questioning whether the gaze cannot be reifying and still simultaneously result in lateral disregard. This dilemma intersects, at times, with the complex issue of institutionalization in the novel, as when Carl’s talent, good looks, and overall legibility to the white liberal institution of Wellington combine to attain for him the mixed success of entering the college and getting a job there—in particular, over the various Haitian characters who nonetheless participate in the same sorts of aesthetic practices (spoken word and rap). However, as I have addressed, Carl’s inclusion is enormously complicated, riddled with negative multicultural affect and resulting in his curious departure from the narrative. Problematized in a different way, Scarry’s aesthetic schema similarly avoids the messiness of Howard’s sexual desire and all the unpleasant baggage that comes with it. With the affair, Howard turn his metaphorical gaze from Kiki to Claire, so while Kiki struggles with the repercussions of lateral disregard, Claire is forced to deal with the mixed consequences of feeling “examined” and “picked over” by Howard and other men. Rather than allying with “On Beauty and Being Just” against the material charges leveled at this apolitical formulation of beauty, Smith’s novel incorporates them in a kind of meta-performance of the complexities of inclusion itself. In other words, *On Beauty* uses questions of minoritization, racial and gender violence, and the pitfalls of multiculturalism to take seriously these political critiques, and then uses such critiques to—always messily, never perfectly—offer up a more realistic, less transcendent view of beauty that nevertheless maintains the emergent potential Scarry insists on.

It is perhaps in the reflective modality Scarry highlights, as a dynamic formation that “brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors” (22), that beauty most resonates with the imperfect, messy, and often unpredictable aesthetics of Smith’s novel. The final pages of *On Beauty* gesture toward something altogether optimistic, a positive prognosis for intersectional aesthetics in the particular site of the neoliberal university. This is indicated in part by the title of the novel’s closing section, “On Beauty and Being Wrong,” which is, incidentally, the title of the first section of Elaine Scarry’s essay. *On Beauty*’s final pages leave us with Howard Belsey, who has so often been “wrong” about beauty, experiencing a realization as he undergoes a moving aesthetic encounter—perhaps his first of the novel. The scene is set sometime in the near future. We see the Belsey family readjusting to Howard and Kiki’s separation, and hear of Kiki’s court case with the Kippses over the Erzulie painting. The Belsey children, who still live with Howard at the house, banter with their father and clearly still begrudge him his horrible behavior (they have learned not only about his affair with Claire, but also his sexual escapades with Victoria Kipps). However, the worst has come to pass and the family clearly maintains their closeness and affection. Howard, we are led to believe, is the only one still struggling to adjust: he is basically “already a dead man walking” professionally, “with no book coming any time soon, surely heading for a messy divorce and on a sabbatical that looked suspiciously like the first step towards retirement” (Smith 441). In the last pages, we see this picture of Howard clearly: embarrassingly late to his own public lecture on Rembrandt, he scrambles in and begins the powerpoint presentation only to realize he has left his notes behind. He freezes, simply clicking through the slideshow until it reaches the end and settles on Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje Bathing*. This closing scene is beautiful and enigmatic, devoid of annoying academic-speak, leaving the reader with a sense that Howard has been unsettled, dis-adjusted to the position of aesthetic authority that he previously occupied.

What is perhaps most striking about this passage, though, is the thematic chiasmus that occurs between the subject of Rembrandt’s painting, his beloved Hendrickje, and Kiki. As Howard glances around the auditorium in terror, his experience is fragmented and significantly sensible: “He could hear people moving in their seats. He could smell the tang of himself strongly. What did he look like to these people? He pressed the red button. The lights began to go down” (Smith 442). Amidst the smells, sounds, and visible discomfort of the audience and himself, Howard passes through a rare moment in which he is able to take on the perspective of others, to imagine how *he* looks to *them*. And for perhaps the first time in the text, he is the one forced to experience the discomfort of embodiment, of becoming for a brief moment an aesthetic object rather than a subject. It is this shift, this de-centering of Howard’s authoritative position, that literally sets the stage and dims the lights for the next moment in which he spots Kiki in the audience “looking up with interest at the image behind him” (Smith 442). Howard looks at Kiki looking at Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje Bathing* and experiences a jolting aesthetic encounter. In fact, seeing Kiki with her “bare and gleaming” shoulders and a scarlet ribbon in her hair launches Howard into an uncharacteristic engagement with the art before him. While in the past he has held to a rigidly political stance on the art he teaches, considering Rembrandt an unoriginal hired hand, at this moment he responds viscerally to the “pretty, blousy Dutch woman” who is the painting’s subject. Howard imagines that she is looking away coyly, as if “considering whether to wade deeper,” and notes that the “surface of the water was dark, reflective—a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath” (442). The narration, filtered through Howard’s focalization, recalls earlier moments in the text in which characters—those marked by their bodies as outside the institutionalized space of official knowledge—discern a kind of beauty that de-centers the dominant aesthetic regime, and that consequently sets them on a path of possibility to forging new and often unpredictable attachments, to dwell in the moments of radical particularity produced out of sensible aesthetic experience, to see beauty in new ways and to use new ways of seeing to imagine (beauty) differently. This particular complicated moment prompts Howard to (re)see the beauty of Kiki, reflected ironically in the image of the Dutch master’s love, Hendrickje, and to realize that he has not only made an error about his wife, but possibly other aspects of his life, and maybe even about beauty itself.

*On Beauty* ultimately theorizes a complicated, intersectional aesthetics not to indict the neoliberal university as a cultural hegemon that limits beauty and difference, but to reflect on how the institution itself is a space of tension, discontinuity and contradiction. As such, the university can in fact serve as the site at which intersectional aesthetics more than survives, even flourishes. From this perspective *On Beauty* is a critical (re)consideration of what in and about the institution might be salvaged in order to promote difference, equality, and beauty. Carl’s alternate history of Mozart’s *Requiem*, which departs from a genealogy of great (white, upper-class, male) geniuses to recover the regular “Joe Schmos” whose intellectual labor is often forgotten, recalls real efforts by scholars to queer the canon and highlight the subaltern voices that have been silenced through dominant historiography. Claire’s sense of “fittingness” on the other hand acts as a subtle redefinitional tactic that discursively dismantles the privilege of particular disciplines to determine what is beautiful and, therefore, good. Unlike the dominant aesthetics of Howard and Monty, Claire creatively reimagines beauty as a truly democratic project, one that is not only a kind of redistribution of the sensible but a needed intervention that extends “critical” beyond the scope of the negative. Finally, Carlene and Kiki find a mode of being through aesthetics—in proximity to the institution, and using its polyvocal discourses—that is collaborative, opposed to the divisive, culture wars politics that have come to mark the neoliberal university and obfuscate its harmful effects on difference and material equality. The various ways in which Smith’s characters inhabit this conflicted relationality to the university are therefore clues to the novel’s aesthetic politics. The modest potential glimpsed in Howard’s change of mind at the end, then, takes on deeper significance when we realize that an intersectional politics might not simply carve out a space for difference in the university—it might deeply unsettle the institution and its dominant aesthetic regime.

Notes

 *On Beauty* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and Commonwealth Writer’s prize, and winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Somerset Maugham award.

2 For a more detailed discussion of genre beyond the label of “campus novel,” see Batra and Lopez-Ropero.

3 Nunius, using the rubric of “sameness,” also touches on the ineffable connection produced out of such moments in the novel, which she argues are attempts at forming community beyond traditional identity politics. For her, these shared aesthetic experiences mark the “temporary suppression of all divisive elements in favour of one differential category or, respectively, a specific value to which the power of bridging fundamental differences is attributed” (110).

4 For a thorough description and analysis of Kantian aesthetics, see Leela Gandhi, especially chapter 6. In particular, Gandhi examines the “colonizing imperative of disinterest” at the heart of Kant’s universal aesthetic judgment (156), and makes an intervention by pointing out how taste is only the secondary response to an aesthetic object. Because sensible experience—irrational, embodied, and unpredictable—is primary, Gandhi theorizes what she calls an “interested aesthetics” at the unacknowledged center of Kantian philosophy that closely relates to the intersectional aesthetics I detect in *On Beauty*.

5 Rancière defines aesthetic regimes as organizing and conceptualizing formations that encompass modes of visibility and ways of doing and making. He identifies three basic regimes, outlining a historical sequence that is not strictly linear, as the regimes can and often do exist alongside one another. The “ethical regime” encapsulates the Platonic sense of “true art” in which art is measured in relation to its ethical value to the community. The “representative regime,” corresponding with the Aristotelian critique of Plato, frees the arts from their previous moral and political obligations and results in the bourgeois elevation of the artist. Finally the “aesthetic regime,” in which nineteenth century hierarchies of art are done away with, witnesses the expansion of artistic objects, a new interest in subject matters of everyday life, and the marked complexity of the role of the artist.

6 The poem is introduced as one of Claire’s from her first poetry collection, and she uses it in her class as an example of a pantoum. In the “author’s note,” Smith states that the poem comes from an actual collection by her husband, Irish poet Nick Laird. I will return to the implications of this literary borrowing, but it is important to note the significance of the fact that Claire’s work exists in the real world outside the novel, independently of her character.

7 See Christopher Newfield 51-56, and the conclusion, where he discusses the distinction between “equality of outcome” versus “equality of opportunity.” For more on the interplay of diversity, difference, and institutionalization, see Melamed, especially chapter 3; Ferguson chapter 7.

8 This is powerfully underscored in the narrative when we learn that Monty, as he has been advocating against Wellington’s unofficial students, has also been sleeping with one of them. The student, Chantelle, who, like Carl, has been attending Claire’s creative writing class, is clearly taken advantage of by Monty—she even gets enlisted by him to work for a church charity the Kippses are involved with—and then completely abandoned by him once the scandal breaks.

9 See Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, especially chapters 1 and 7, for a nuanced discussion of the history of the interdisciplines that also raises this question of institutionalization.

10 The question of globalization and Haiti/Haitians in particular is important for thinking through institutionalization (especially as Carl’s example demonstrates) and the broader (aesthetic) politics of *On Beauty*; it also, I might add, generatively riffs on the British colonial contexts hinted at in *Howards End*. In *On Beauty*, the Haitian nationalist movement repeatedly pops up on the periphery of the narrative, and throughout Wellington. Haitians in the college town drive cabs, man street fair booths, clean houses, serve as custodians at the university, and illegally sell merchandise on the sidewalks and in public squares. Critics clash in their readings of Smith’s mass of Haitian characters. Carbajal points to their presence as a kind of narrative breakdown, evidence of the novel’s failed social commentary. Conversely, Jackson argues that “[j]ust when readers are ready to celebrate the triumphs of diversity, Haitians reveal the layers of racialized stratification in Wellington” in addition to “enduring inequality, complex black diasporan relations, and the ironies of America’s much-celebrated post-civil rights movement/post-11 September/post-racial society” (865, 859). On the one hand, unlike Carl, whose story is culturally legible in the multicultural context of ongoing tropes of oppression and the American dream, the Haitians are cast as a kind of unified collective with no individuality, no personality, and no unique, minoritarian aesthetic potential. But, as Jackson astutely points out, on the other hand their characters appear to serve a clear, symbolic function, signaling the broader global conflicts that circulate the politics at the center of debate in and around Wellington. The pervasive presence of Haitians in the novel materializes most forcefully in explicitly political ways—as they assemble in protests, marches, and even spoken word performances at the Bus Stop. However, Carbajal’s point about “failure” (54) warrants some merit as well: the Haitian message about the violence and inequality perpetuated by the forces of globalization and the neo-imperial policies of the United States reach the ears of the novel’s other characters—and its readers—but only as indistinguishable “noise.” At the Bus Stop, the college kids in Claire’s class cannot understand the frantic French that is rapped onstage by the Haitian crew; Claire’s attempt to translate—“They seem to be angry about America’s involvement in Haiti. The rhymes are very . . . crude”—is weak, and the performance is quickly outshone by Carl’s masterful piece (Smith 228). That Carl’s message resonates so resoundingly with the educated liberals in the crowd is indicative of the continued geographical narrowness of U.S. leftist critique.

11 Carbajal reads Carl’s departure quite differently, arguing that “*On Beauty* forfeits its chance to appropriate Carl and allows him to leave the privileged streets of Wellington, his unsettled but unbroken black working-class identity allowed to veer out of Zora’s range of vision and influence” (43). This stems from Carbajal’s reading of Carl as indicative of the novel’s “celebration of multicultural societies and their fostering of cultural difference” (40), an interpretation I find does not fully square with the novel’s ambivalence over neoliberal multiculturalism.

12 The poem, titled “Pedigree,” comes from Nick Laird’s collection *To a Fault* (New York: Norton, 2007).

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