

On Beauty and the Politics of Academic Institutionalality

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Abstract: Zadie Smith's 2005 novel, *On Beauty*, is a work that remains timely as it explores aesthetics in the context of the neo-liberal American university. Art and beauty, removed from the hermetic sites of philosophy and official knowledge, become expansive categories in Smith's text, spilling over into the social world to mark the intimate, everyday, embodied, and sensate experiences of a multicultural cast of characters orbiting the institution and navigating its politics. Tracking the various ways *On Beauty*'s minoritized characters are forced to negotiate the spaces in and around the university, this essay highlights how those routinely excluded from the sites of institutional power deploy aesthetic strategies as resistance. This "intersectional aesthetics" prompts a reconsideration of the foundations of an aesthetic judgment rooted in Enlightenment notions of disinterest and universality, which ultimately prove to be thinly veiled racist and patriarchal requirements for subjectivity and citizenship. Finally, such tactics are the means by which *On Beauty*'s critique becomes not an indictment of the contemporary university but a glimpse at its potential for fostering new ways of engaging beauty that embrace difference and spark vital, often unpredictable attachments.

Keywords: aesthetics, *On Beauty*, the university, multiculturalism, intersectionality

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 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 for discussing *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 and 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 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 signifies in multiple and often contradictory ways through-

out the novel, this scene actually gestures toward a more nuanced aesthetics. 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 the narrative reveals 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, this move is 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 bears on a specific material context: the site of the academic institution 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 “[s]he’s *fabulous*” (174; emphasis in original), 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 timidly remarks 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” (175). Despite this scene occurring outside the sites of official knowledge that permeate the text, taking place not between the art history scholars but between 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. *On Beauty* firmly locates aesthetics—defined by Jacques Rancière as “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts” (10) that broadly “defines what is visible or not in a common space” (13)—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. 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 says, “I like her parrots” (Smith 175). 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 *On Beauty*'s invitation to reconsider the grounds of aesthetic judgment. Beyond Carlene's statement, the scene recalls that there are as many aesthetic judgments as individuals and that reactions to art are neither prescriptive nor predictable. Prompting readers 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 “prettiness is the mask

that power wears" (155). 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. She is an insecure college freshman at Wellington, and her 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 long-time 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 intensifies when the Kipps family moves to Wellington, where Monty takes a job as distinguished professor of art history and continues his tenure as neoconservative public intellectual.

This feuding families plotline, based loosely on E. M. Forster's 1910 novel, *Howards End*, serves as scaffolding for *On Beauty'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 to 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 played out. Hale's comment highlights 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 that is not necessarily bound up in the purely sensible or 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 The scene between the two women exemplifies an intersectional aesthetics, tied to the material particularities (and often the burden) of social embodiment and indicating access to a 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 university continues to emphasize "equality" and "diversity" even as cuts to education, the rise of for-profit colleges, the transfer of power from faculty to administration, and various rollbacks in affirmative action demonstrate a marked lack of commitment to actual diversity or material equality. As a mobile, non-oppositional orientation that can negotiate beauty and power simultaneously, intersectional aesthetics emerges in *On Beauty* as a strategy for living under current conditions that remain hostile to difference and material equality. Opening up the possibility for seeing different kinds of beauty and for seeing beauty differently, intersectional aesthetics can, on a smaller scale, not only prompt reflection on one's own judgments but spark a change of mind.

II.

Steeped in the language of high theory and aesthetic philosophy, Smith's novel derives its satirical tone from contrasting official knowledges—their histories, hierarchies, and assumptions about subjectivity and civilization—with, as Hale notes, everyday experiences grounded in the senses. At times, this contrast even occurs within a single character, as when Howard Belsey demonstrates his self-serving "academic pyrotechnics" at a social gathering: "[W]hat 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 (Smith 117). “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” (117–18). 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 centuries, 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 Immanuel Kant’s writing, aesthetic experience is a two-step process, involving both the specific instance of sense perception provoked by the beautiful artwork or scene in nature and the consequent rational application of artistic judgment or “taste.” By 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: “[P]olitics 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” (13). 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 is central to Smith’s novel: Who gets to transcend the flesh and occupy the ethereal space of reason, judgment, and the universal? Outlining the foundational dialectic of Western metaphysics, Elizabeth Grosz 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 from a rough neighborhood in

Boston and with little formal education, 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, other characters constantly remark on his beauty, to the extent that Carl's presence has a distracting effect on them. When Howard Belsey first meets him, he thinks Carl resembles one of the four African heads in a Rubens painting (Smith 77) but fails to recognize him upon their second encounter. Carl's blackness and classic(al) good looks fashion 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 immerse himself in creative culture keeps him returning to events in Wellington, such as the Mozart in the Park concert where he first meets the Belsey family, despite his out-of-place-ness. In this scene he and Zora Belsey converge awkwardly when Zora 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. . . . [I]t 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* . . . and 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; emphasis in original)

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 realizes that aesthetic sensibilities are cultivated, that art itself is always already a politicized field that has to do with race, gender, and class. History participates in rewriting the field of aesthetics and writing out the "Joe Shmos" who trouble narratives of greatness. This realization is more perceptive than we might imagine Monty Kipps' would be, with his unflinching belief in the concept of genius and sense that "Equality [is] a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatuous dream" (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 existence of mastery and misses what might actually be beautiful, moving, or simply out of reach for 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—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 relates to her illicit affair with Howard and therefore to 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, sex/sexuality, and body size 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, which gets unwittingly attached to designations of beauty by men, is undeniably reduced to an embodied object—but by Howard more than Kiki. Howard confirms this when he haltingly attempts to explain his actions to Kiki: “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; emphasis in original). 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 leads to a recycling of old aesthetic hierarchies that rank bodies by race.

As with 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 artist status and complicates how she inhabits the role of poet. When Claire’s students ask about her experience in her heyday, her answer illustrates 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. (218; emphasis in original)

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 experienced. Not only are

these men—Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Mick Jagger—poets and rock stars without a prefix (they are not *male* poets or rock stars), 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 have been Steven Tyler for Claire to tell her story and prove her point. Painting a picture of herself as an outsider against a sea of famous men, Claire describes the experience of creative evaluation through the lens of gender as both hyper-embodiment and disembodying. Her words 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, as a result of these complex, ironic alienations, 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 generosity that fuels what the narrator calls the “unassailable magic of Claire” (214). The beauty she imagines through the creative exercise of her poetry becomes a kindness that spreads to those around her, often her students. On a class field trip to the Bus Stop, a Moroccan restaurant and performance space near the college, Claire gushes about her students, and “[e]veryone warmed themselves in the generous communal glow”:

[S]he 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. (214; emphasis in original)

While Claire is a deeply flawed and complicated character, and this is a conflicted scene in terms of the interaction that plays out between Claire and Carl (an encounter I will return to), the radically democratic notion of beauty Claire offers approaches the most concise articulation of the intersectional aesthetics *On Beauty* modestly envisions. 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, an aristocratic logic of pure talent; it does not rest on stale tropes of achievement or capitalistic conceptions of success; and it embraces difference and particularity while promoting the concept of collectivity, gesturing toward a greater formation into which we might “fit.” Thus, while this passage is framed in the hyperbolic language of an artist/poet, the idea of becoming more “fully ourselves,” 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, the novel expresses the eloquent notion of beauty-as-“fittingness,” springing forth from the explicitly corporeal experience of Claire as a female-bodied poet, as a positive affective force; Claire’s “magic,” in other words, is the power to make others feel inspired, worthy, and good.

And yet, the novel steadfastly refuses the celebratory narrative one might be tempted to read through Claire’s character. In one scene, Claire thinks to herself that Kiki Belsey “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” (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 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 Claire's thoughts is complicated by the underlying violence in this script. She turns Kiki into an aesthetic object and even elevates her as a kind of fetish, an art piece akin to Carl as a Rubens painting in Howard's mind. The "essential female nature" Kiki represents for Claire might be viewed as expansive and radical, but a white woman gazing 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, because Claire's suspect reflection on Kiki is filtered through her poetry, 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 her descriptions of Kiki with their unmistakably racist undertones as "natural, honest, powerful, [and] unmediated," 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" (227)? 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, Claire's poetry (much more than her actions or her poetic reflections) displays a potentially intersectional aesthetics that, in one case, evokes finding "shelter in each other"—a recurring line in the novel 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 haunts 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, result in a novel that revolves around the animating, central location of the university. Swapping *Howards End's* setting of a rapidly transforming English na-

tional landscape for the specific site 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 bears on the potential for living out and thinking through the kind of difference an intersectional aesthetics demands. The novel in fact reflects the university's shifting role in terms of social reproduction and cultural authority. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings catalogues how as an institution the university no longer performs a cultural function as an ideological state apparatus but has become—especially in the past three decades—a bureaucratic corporation serving consumer-students and operating under a banner of meaningless “excellence” (5–6). *On Beauty* depicts this current neoliberal moment marked by deregulation and privatization in which 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, college today has become 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, which many of them will never pay off. On the other hand, debates continue over educational equality and who even has access to such sites in the first place. Consequent rollbacks in affirmative action have had significant effects on minority acceptance and graduation rates.⁷

This all plays out in the novel in 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”

(Smith 328–29; emphasis in original). The way Monty frames the institution’s increasingly futile attempts 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, Monty’s blustering speech demonstrates how the university, an increasingly corporatized space that privileges equality of opportunity over equality of outcome, is detaching the benefit of “diversity” from the minority groups who fought in social justice movements and reattaching it to the interests of the institution.⁸ The result is that “equality”—subordinated to the ultimately bureaucratic language of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” Readings’ “excellence,” and Kipps’ “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 Monty spouts (14). But such a disappearance is a farce, and racism—along with sexism—simply gets rerouted and expressed in new ways.⁹

One new expression of racism, which *On Beauty* captures brilliantly, is the process of institutionalization itself (Batra 1079). After the mix-up at Mozart in the park, Carl performs spoken word to an audience that includes Claire’s class at the Bus Stop. Unlike the first artist, Carl captivates the crowd 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 as he exits the stage, asking: “Are you interested in refining what you have?” (Smith 232). This moment of interpellation, which employs the language of a commodity to be mined and commercialized, hails Carl’s gradual incorporation into the institutional space of Wellington University. As a result of this encounter, 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 dis-

integrate thanks to Monty's efforts, Carl becomes an employee of the Black Studies department. This development illustrates 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 is to use the "ace up his sleeve": "[I]n 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" (371–72; emphasis in original). The post he invents for Carl—"Hip-Hop Archivist" (372; emphasis in original)—has the dual benefit of quieting the affirmative action debate being waged between the Belseys (Zora has joined her father, Howard) and Monty Kipps, while benignly shuffling Carl out of the way and presumably keeping him content, intellectually stimulated, and well-paid. Erskine's act is not misguided (or savvy) 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, how to sustain effective critique in line with the activist roots of such formations while maintaining a position inside the institution.¹⁰

The narrative makes the stakes of institutionalization clear when, 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 move him or any of the other characters at the college.¹¹ 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”—does not 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 the willful deafness of American liberal politics: he gets up to close his office window on the Haitian chanting and symbolically closes the window on expanding his political scope. Carl’s transformation into a 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. It also highlights the complexity of ongoing “economic and racial disparities”; some minoritized subjects are provisionally allowed into the institution, while others remain locked outside, protesting in the streets. However, the narrative soon reveals that Carl’s insider position is precarious, and before long he completely drops out of the plot. 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 Schlegels’ 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.¹²

V.

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 in Carl’s story 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 incor-

porated 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” (Smith 93)—in her 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 Smith’s husband), and, therefore, it embodies a double connection to the site of the university.¹³ 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 cements their friendship and culminates in the flagrant act of defiance against 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, Carlene and Kiki only fleetingly realize in their shared moment.

Other scenes similarly draw out the quieter ways in which the discourses of the academy might be redeemed in the experience of everyday life. For example, Levi Belsey grapples with his own minoritization by embracing—at times in comically misguided ways—hip-hop culture and blackness. In one section, Levi, faced with boisterous Haitian men hawking their wares along a Boston sidewalk, is struck by “a sudden rush of beauty” (Hale 824, footnote). Unable to translate or make sense of this aesthetic moment, Hale notes, Levi co-opts the language of his professor-father’s lecture, thinking to himself: “*Situationists transform the urban landscape*” (Smith 194; emphasis in original). 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 him to quit his job at a local record store after he tries to organize the employees against unjust management practices and then to start associating with the Haitians to become acquainted with their struggle. Ultimately, Levi's involvement with this group prompts him to steal the painting of Erzulie from Monty Kipps' office—where 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; emphasis in original). This surprising turn of events is how Kiki eventually figures 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 emerges (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 by 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). This passage, 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 *On Beauty* wages. Stressing the con-

nection between the university and beauty, particularly after redefining beauty in positive, imaginative ways that relate to difference, individual and collective attachments, and embodiment, Smith's deployment of Scarry critically offsets 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. Scarry identifies a “set of political complaints,” emerging in the 1970s and 1980s: (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 gaze, locating visibility, and the issues of power and authority 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, 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 highlights 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, especially compared to

the various Haitian characters who nonetheless participate in the same sorts of aesthetic practices (spoken word and rap). Problematized in a different way, Scarry's aesthetic schema similarly avoids the messiness of Howard's sexual desire and the unpleasant baggage that comes with it. With the affair, Howard turns 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. In other words, the novel addresses minoritization, racial and gender violence, and the pitfalls of multiculturalism to seriously examine 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 site of the neoliberal university. The novel's closing section, "On Beauty and Being Wrong," is, incidentally, also the title of the first section of Scarry's essay. *On Beauty's* final pages show 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 adjusting to Howard and Kiki's separation and hear of Kiki's court case with the Kippes over the Erzulie painting. The Belsey children, who still live with Howard in the house, banter with their father and clearly still begrudge him his horrible behavior (they have learned about not only his affair with Claire but also his sexual escapades with Victoria Kippes). 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 “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). A picture of Howard emerges at the end of the novel: 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.

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” (442). Amidst the smells, sounds, and his and the audience’s visible discomfort, Howard passes through a rare moment in which he is able to take on the perspective of others and imagine how he looks to them. And for perhaps the first time in the text, he is 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” (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, in this moment he responds viscerally to the “pretty, blousy Dutch woman” in the painting. 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 like Kiki, Carlene, Carl, and Claire—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 consequently sets them on a path of possibility to forge 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 complicated moment prompts Howard to (re)see Kiki’s beauty, reflected ironically in the image of the Dutch master’s love, Hendrickje, and to realize that he has made an error not only 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 is a space of tension, discontinuity, and contradiction. As such, the university can in fact serve as the site in which intersectional aesthetics survives and 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 Shmos” 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 in Howard’s and Monty’s dominant aesthetics, Claire creatively reimagines beauty as a truly democratic project, one that not only redistributes the sensible but is 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 polyvalent discourses—that is collaborative and opposed to the divisive culture wars 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 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

- 1 *On Beauty* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and Commonwealth Writers' Prize and won 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-Roper.
- 3 Nunius, using the rubric of "sameness," also touches on the ineffable connection produced in 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 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" (21), 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," which disposes with nineteenth-century

hierarchies of art, 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 one of Claire's from her first poetry collection, and she uses it in her class as an example of a pantoum. In the novel's "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 Newfield, especially Chapter 7, Fessenden and Keller, Jaschik, and Munguia for a general sense of these debates as well as statistics and information about legislation and legal cases regarding affirmative action in higher education.
- 8 See Newfield 51–56, and the conclusion, where he discusses the distinction between "equality of outcome" (272) versus "equality of opportunity" (64). For more on the interplay of diversity, difference, and institutionalization, see Melamed, especially Chapter 3, and Ferguson, Chapter 7.
- 9 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. Monty clearly takes advantage of the student, Chantelle, who, like Carl, has been attending Claire's creative writing class—he even enlists her to work for a church charity the Kippes are involved with. He then completely abandons her once the scandal breaks.
- 10 See Ferguson, especially Chapters 1 and 7, for a nuanced discussion of the history of interdisciplines, which also raises this question of institutionalization.
- 11 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" (865) 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" (859). On 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 on the other hand, as Jackson astutely points out, 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) has 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” (Smith 378). At the Bus Stop, the college kids in Claire’s class cannot understand the frantic French that the Haitian crew raps onstage; Claire’s attempt to translate—“They seem to be angry about America’s involvement in Haiti. The rhymes are very . . . crude” (Smith 228)—is weak, and the performance is outshone by Carl’s masterful piece. That Carl’s message resonates so resoundingly with the educated liberals in the crowd is indicative of the continued geographical narrowness of US leftist critique.

12 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.

13 The poem, titled “Pedigree,” comes from Laird’s collection *To a Fault*.

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