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Reading Tehran in Lolita: Seizing Literary Value for Neoliberal Multiculturalism

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Reading Tehran in *Lolita*:
Making Racialized and Gendered Difference Work for Neoliberal Multiculturalism

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“Especially because those subjects who produce knowledge along the specific axes of their own social difference ... are seen to derive their institutional and epistemic authority from merely being who they are, there needs to be a sustained critique of the many redeployments of knowledges that emerge in the name of women.”ⁱ

-- Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: En/figuring Asian/American Women*

In their Introduction to this volume, the editors assert that the comparative methods of women of color feminism and queer of color critique develop in reaction against and in difference with the typical comparative methods of bourgeois and minority nationalisms, as these inform mainstream politics as well as scholarship in American and Ethnic Studies. Of particular importance is the fact that although minority nationalisms were critical of bourgeois nationalism when it came to its methods for valuing and devaluing along the axis of race, they nonetheless reproduced its hegemonic comparative methods when it came to ascribing value and difference along axes of gender, class, nation and culture. In other words, minority nationalisms rejected racism and its differential schemas without challenging patriarchy, nationalism, or capitalism as normative systems.

Women of color feminism and queer of color critique, in contrast, develop comparative methods to debunk and to jam these interlocking and necessarily reductive normative systems. According to the editors, these comparative analytics “are not intended to erase differentials of power, value, and social death within and amongst groups, but to highlight such differentials.”ⁱⁱ

The primary comparative mode is not to think in terms of parallels and within conventional categories, but rather to think relationally, in a manner that estranges normal categorical terms. Intersectional analysis, for example, is a methodology that recognizes how procedures of race, gender, class, sexuality and other modes of constituting identity-categories-as-differential interlock in-action with one another. These aggregate in exploitative and discriminatory processes targeting women of color, which cannot be grasped or redressed by theories or laws committed to a model of the individual as autonomous or abstract, yet can be grasped readily by epistemological analyses of women of color's varied experiences, what Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa call, "theory in the flesh."ⁱⁱⁱ Thus in contrast to how "difference" structures normative systems (and in contrast to how hegemonic comparative methods understand it), women of color feminism and queer of color critique use and define "difference" as "a clear-eyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued."^{iv}

The quote above from Lara Kang reminds us that "knowledges that emerge in the name of women" are deployed just as readily within normative systems and by hegemonic comparative analysis as they are deployed for oppositional purposes or by critical comparative analysis. One of the central dilemmas this volume addresses is the degree to which women of color feminism and queer of color critique have been misapprehended and misconstrued, often in an antithetical manner (which has led scholars to overlook their innovative comparative models). Specifically, their objects of concern – women of color, sexuality, lived experiences of subject formation – have been reinscribed within scholarship that shares the ideals (or metanarratives) of the big normative systems, such as the primacy of the individual, esteem for capitalist democracies, the unity of culture, and the framing concept of the nation. Kang's quote hints at the most common result of such disfiguring reinscriptions: the reducing of women of color feminism's theory of

embodied knowledge to a notion of knowledge in bodies, which allows a mode of analysis to be mistaken for a method of identity consolidation. Ironically, this misreading leads to the frequent mischaracterization of women of color feminism as “identity politics” when, as Roderick Ferguson demonstrates, the main thrust of women of color analysis is not only to repudiate identitarianisms but also to repudiate the very concept of a fixed identity.^v

My scholarship identifies successive formations of multiculturalism as influential normative systems for ascribing value and valuelessness in the period after World War II. I argue that the permanent crisis of white supremacy did not end racialization as a procedure that privileges some and stigmatizes others, but instead inaugurated a revision of the terms of these procedures under the sign of anti-racism. In particular, I am interested in the establishment of “official” or state-sanctioned anti-racisms. In a larger manuscript project, I examine how “official” U.S. anti-racisms ratify specific articulations of the U.S. state, international political order, and global economy, consistently resolving conflicts involving race on liberal political terrains that conceal the economic inequality that global capitalism generates.^{vi} In addition, I center literary studies as a primary cultural technology for assembling and disseminating the normative regimens of successive “official” anti-racisms.

Here my focus is on “neoliberal multiculturalism,” which I identify as a recent form of “official” U.S. anti-racism. I examine how neoliberal multiculturalism redeploys “knowledges in the name of women” in a manner antithetical to yet often mistaken for women of color feminism. I also argue that neoliberal multiculturalism has used literary studies to promulgate its discourse of racialized and gendered difference in ways that further obscure and (mis)appropriate the intellectual space carved out by women of color feminism and queer of color critique.

I will define neoliberal multiculturalism presently. (Briefly, neoliberal multiculturalism

portrays an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism and posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a post-racist world of freedom and opportunity.) First, I want to emphasize how neoliberal multiculturalism contains the radical potential of specifically gendered ways of knowing expressed in literature and instead teaches us the political use value of female bodies of knowledge. To do so, I look at two quotations from works which contemporary U.S. university teaching sometimes treat as transposable examples of “women of color” writing and which might be taught together under rubrics such as “Critical Perspectives in Women’s Studies” or “Studies in Race and Ethnic Literatures.” The first is from June Jordan’s “Moving Towards Home” (1985) and the second is from Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), which I will subsequently study in depth, taking it as my example of a neoliberal multicultural literary project.^{vii}

What is at stake in both quotes is the politics of literary identification, or more precisely, the political allegory that we may interpret from the troping of literary identification. The first quote comes from June Jordan’s “Moving Towards Home” (1985). The occasion for Jordan’s poem is the 1982 Phalangist/Israeli massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and the Shantila camps of Lebanon. The poem begins with an epigraph taken from a *New York Times* article on the massacre, which cites a speaker who is identified only by gender: “Where is Abu Fadi,” she wailed. / “Who will bring me my loved one?” Jordan’s poem then narrates multiple scenes from the massacre (a bulldozer covering bodies, the rape of a nurse), each framed by the assertion of the poem’s “I” narrator that she “does not wish to speak about” each incident. After reviewing the language of “extermination,” used by the perpetrators to speak the atrocity, the “I” narrator states a “need to speak about living room,” where such events do not happen and where Abu Fadi is not missed “because he will be there beside me.” The quotation I want to examine is the

poem's final stanza group:

I was born a Black woman
And now
I am become a Palestinian
against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones?

It is time to make our way home.

Typical of women of color feminism's analytical project, the poem is anti-identitarian; it performs an act of excessive identification on the part of the narrator that defies the protocols which make identitarianisms coherent (a first person singular "I" having been "born a Black woman/...am become a Palestinian"). The passage exemplifies the conjoined epistemological-political project of women of color feminism: it works as "politics" in the first place by innovating ways of knowing that abrogate normal politics. Arjun Appaduria has described a similar process as the use of "the imagination as a social practice."^{viii} As the impossible appears in literature (a Black woman is made over as a Palestinian), a thinking of justice opens up that necessarily flouts the ordinary mandates of national borders and fixed identities.

The excessive identification that the passage declares is, in the context of the poem, in the first instance a *political* (not psychological) identification that emerges out of *intersectional analysis*, a core epistemological project of women of color feminism, which analyzes race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, location, and other factors as intersecting (not discreet) processes crossing domains of practical consciousness and macrosocial institutions. The two positions

“Black woman” and “Palestinian” are bridged by analytical and experiential juxtapositions, including a practical consciousness of the history and present of divergent but interlocking state racisms (in Israel and the United States) within (neo)colonial capitalism. We are made to see how racialized, classed, and militarized forms of occupation connect the national occupation of Israel/Palestine to the economic, urban, and cultural circumstances that crowd and confine many African American women (i.e., urban segregation, trapping poverty, confining cultural images).

Importantly, the poem does not privilege gender as a sort of universal transfer point for identification among women; the narrator is made over, or made also, a “Palestinian” unmarked by gender. Because the poetic performance is called into being in response to the wail in its epigraph identified, only semi-anonymously, as female, Palestinian, refugee, “woman” as a category of difference is preserved. The poem’s troping of the politics of literary identification, “a Black Woman...am become Palestinian” thus remains answerable to the trace of the female Palestinian subaltern.

We can interpret the passage as an expression of an oppositional politics that grounds transnational solidarity in a shared vulnerability to violence, by attending to the passage’s play on the idea of “living room.” “Lebensraum” was the watchword for German imperialism. “Living room” in Jordan’s poem, in contrast, is a watchword for a “homely” politics based on the minimal demand that the people you love cannot be removed violently from your home. Along these lines, in the poem’s concluding call for the reader to participate in “making our way home,” “home” is an open figure for a secure life, in contrast to the violences that link Sabra/Shantila and black urban poverty. Literary identification thus allegorizes a process of building “strange affinities” beyond identitarianism, using the framework for nourishing life envisioned by subjugated classes for whom “the world is a ghetto.”^{ix}

The second quote comes from Azar Nafisi and *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (hereafter *RLT*). A transnational migrant between Iran and the U.S. (the U.S.-educated daughter of a former Mayor of Tehran under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi), Azar Nafisi was a junior professor of English Literature at the University of Tehran during the Islamic Revolution, and she continued to teach in Iran after the Revolution. As will be discussed further, since leaving Iran for the U.S. in 1997, Nafisi has been integrated as a New Immigrant intellectual into centrist and neoconservative policy and academic circles. *RLT* tells the story of Nafisi's experience as an upper-class woman, mother, wife, and professor of English literature from the beginning of the Islamic Revolution to her return to the U.S. . At the heart of the memoir is a secret class, something like a book group, which she organizes in her home for her most dedicated female students. According to the book's narrative protocol, the idea is that great literature can help women achieve self-actualization within the confines of severe gender oppression in the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter IRI). The passage I want to look at describes her students' reaction to Henry James's *Daisy Miller*:

Daisy was the character my female students most identified with. Some of them became obsessed. Later in my workshop, they would come to her time and time again, speaking of her courage, something they felt they had lacked. Mahshid and Mitra spoke of her with regret in their writings; like Winterbourne, they felt they were bound to make a mistake about her.^x

In contrast to Jordan's excessive act of identification that shakes up the foundations of identitarianism, Nafisi's passage values literature as a means of shoring up a psychologically coherent female identity modeled on James's "American Girl." In further contrast to Jordan's poem, a feminist cultural universalist idea of "woman" has everything to do with identification in

the passage above. The only heterogeneity the category of ‘woman’ maintains in the passage is assimilationist: Iranian woman seeking to become (like) Woman in the West. Represented as marginal subjects to U.S-European women, “Nafisi” (the textual figure) and her “female students” – elite postcolonials and once and future migrants to the metropole – efface for readers in the U.S. those marginalized or cut off from social mobility in Iran, especially rural women and the urban poor.

Where Jordan’s poem crafts the literary text as something that lets us re-read the social text (letting intersectional analysis ride on the literary imagination), the passage above relies on a literary formalism to evacuate the material histories which join Europe and the U.S. to the Middle East. Finally, in contrast to Jordan’s “living room,” a desired domain of security for people made chronically insecure, Nafisi’s “living room,” the location of her book group, is an unspoken and unspeakably bourgeois space, where Western cultural and political supremacy are taken for granted, and “home” is part of a moral and affective code that legitimates a politics of privatization.

While both may appear superficially as multicultural women of color writing, I argue that *RLT* appropriates the cultural authority of women of color feminism while hollowing out its epistemological and political project. Where Jordan’s poem exposes racialized, militarized social and epistemological orders that confine African American women and Palestinians in ways that resonate, *RLT* depicts Iranian/muslim women desiring to become more like James’s “American Girl” in a way that manufactures a will for U.S.-sponsored “liberation” of women in Iran. In place of women of color feminism’s anti-identitarianism and intersectional analysis, we get the molding of women as self-possessed, possessive individuals and native informants who validate ideological “truths” about the desires of Iranian women to be more like American women. Thus

we can distinguish the critical comparative analysis enacted in Jordan's poem, which lets us think the unevenness of the biopolitics of global capitalism, from the hegemonic comparative method Nafisi's memoir performs, where codes for racialized and gendered difference compose an assimilative multicultural order that makes U.S. global hegemony appear just and fair.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism's Deployment of Racialized and Gendered Difference: Producing the Global Multicultural Citizen as a Privileged Racial Subject

Let us begin by considering neoliberal multiculturalism as a signifying practice in which a language of multiculturalism dissimulates the racialized social and economic structure of neoliberalism. Race continues to permeate capitalism's economic and social processes in neoliberalism. It organizes the hyper-extraction of surplus value from racialized bodies and naturalizes a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South. Yet a kind of multicultural rhetoric portrays neoliberal policy as the key to a post-racist world of freedom and opportunity. Neoliberal policy engenders new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities. Yet a kind of multiculturalism codes the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism's beneficiaries to be the just desserts of "multicultural world citizens." A language of multiculturalism consistently portrays acts of force required for neoliberal restructuring to be humanitarian: a benevolent multicultural invader (the United States, multinational troops, a multinational corporation) intervenes to save life, "give" basic goods or jobs, and promote limited political freedoms. In all these expressions, an idea of the ethic of multiculturalism appears as the spirit of neoliberalism.^{xi}

In a previous essay, I tracked the development of "official" anti-racism in the U.S. from

racial liberalism to neoliberal multiculturalism and examined neoliberal multiculturalism in depth as a global racial formation.^{xii} My argument here follows from the larger argument of that previous essay. To understand the significance I accord Nafisi's memoir, I focus on how neoliberal multiculturalism constructs 'the global multicultural citizen' as a privileged racial subject using specifically racialized representations of women ("women of color," third world women," "muslim women") and by fashioning for its own ends the knowledge-making and subject-forming powers of U.S. universities and literary studies.

(Since the previous article and today, the global recession has led to a mainstream re-assessment of neoliberalism for the first time in 30 years. The crisis has cast doubt on the drive to deregulate, the superiority of free markets over governments, the increasing emphasis on speculative capitalism, and the capacities of global regulatory institutions. It is not clear how the crisis will be managed and whether or not such management will deepen, displace, or revise neoliberalism. In any case, neoliberal multiculturalism as a racial formation, as I discuss it below, will not soon disappear from the scene. This is because it is written on the ground, as it were, in the processes of valuation/devaluation and internalization/externalization that drive social reproduction and in the subject formation of persons.)

Let me give a brief genealogy of neoliberal multiculturalism and discuss some of the key modes of valuation and devaluation it operates as a racial formation. Neoliberal multiculturalism represents the latest configuration of a new articulation of racial ideology and capitalism that arises with U.S. hegemony in the post-World War II period and with what Howard Winant calls "the racial break."^{xiii} Previous articulations of race, geopolitics, and capitalism relied upon white supremacy to ideologically unify colonialism and its corresponding capitalist relations. After World War II, however, white supremacy entered a phase of permanent crisis spurred initially by

the casting of the war as a fight against racism and fascism and by the numerous and overlapping post-war anticolonial and anti-racist movements. As the United States rose to global prominence after World War II and became the agent of transnational capitalist expansion, it had both to manage the racial contradictions and antagonisms that gave rise to anti-colonial and anti-racist movements and to counter Soviet propaganda, decrying racial violence in the U.S. as proof that U.S. style democracy and capitalism were hopelessly compromised by white supremacy.

In doing so, the U.S. re-articulated relations between racial ideology and capitalism: Whereas before World War II, white supremacy justified the nongeneralizability of colonial capitalist wealth, after World War II, with global decolonization and the Cold War, the U.S. comes to deploy an “official” or state anti-racism to legitimate its geopolitical ascendancy and the transnational capitalism it leads. Articulated within a liberal symbolic framework of abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism, “official” U.S. anti-racism, initially articulated in the Cold War as racial liberalism, maintained that that integration of African Americans as equal citizens of the United States would morally legitimate U.S. global leadership, especially in the eyes of formerly colonial nation-states in Asia and Africa.

Official or state anti-racism in the U.S., as it emerged first in the form of racial liberalism, recognized racial equality as a national social and political goal. However, it also narrowed the scope of anti-racist thinking and goals to those that were compatible with or privileged the nation-state, national security, and other goals compatible with “Americanism.” While expanding some liberal freedoms and inventing a racially inclusive nationalism, “official” liberal anti-racism also modernized racialized privilege and discipline and adapted these to postcolonial conditions and the demise of legal segregation. By binding anti-racism to U.S. nationalism, as this bears the agency of transnationalism capitalism, it also depoliticizes the links between race

and economy (a relationship critical to 1930s and 1940s anti-racist thinking in the African American public sphere and movements from Pan-Africanism to the Popular Front).^{xiv} Because the scope of the political in the postwar U.S. precisely shields matters of economy from robust democratic review, official forms of anti-racism *depoliticize* capitalism by collapsing it with Americanism. This results in a situation where “official” anti-racist discourse and politics actually limit awareness of global capitalism.

When subsequent civil rights movement revealed the limitations of the racial liberal framework, liberal multiculturalism emerged as an ascendant form of “official” anti-racism that seemed to provide greater (cultural) recognition and (representative) equality, yet continued to function as a nationalist anti-racism that associated Americanism with the benefits of capitalism. It depoliticized economic arrangements by decisively integrating individualism, property rights, and market economies into what racial equality may signify or what may signify as racial equality (for example, equal opportunity to compete, abstract equality before the law, and the right to own and dispense of property without covenants or other restrictions). Liberal multiculturalism’s framework for racial equality, which focused on cultural integration and full recognition of multiracial/multicultural identities, cohered well with post-Keynesian times in the 1980s and 90s. Its pluralist framework took for granted the primacy of individual and property rights at the cost of collective and substantive social rights. This made it possible not to recognize as race matters the downsizing of state responsibility for social welfare and the growing power of concentrated wealth and capital to diminish human life and to escape accountability from the diminishing regulatory powers of government.

Like racial liberalism and liberal multiculturalism, neoliberalism multiculturalism provides a restricted sense of anti-racist equality and codes U.S.-led global capitalist

developments to be beneficial. Yet in contrast to the earlier “official” anti-racisms, which are in the weave of nationalist discourses that dissimulate capitalist development as part of racial equality *for people*, here a multicultural formalism is abstracted from anything but an ideal relation to concrete human groups and instead directly codes an economic order of things. It represents a certain set of economic policies as multicultural rights and portrays the equality of the free market as the most fundamental expression of equality. In addition, it remakes categories of racialized privilege and stigma beyond color lines, representing the advantages enjoyed by neoliberalism’s winners to be the just desserts of global multicultural citizens. Since the Civil Rights era, liberal individualism has limited the ability of dominant anti-racist thinking to grasp the economic, legal, political, and epistemic structures that anonymously produce racially unequal outcomes. With the apotheosis of the individual in neoliberal rationality, it has become even easier for seemingly anti-racist or multicultural thinking to misrecognize systemic failures in social and economic relations to be the result of individual characteristics, choices, and personalities.

After the racial break, liberal race procedures are unevenly detached from a wholesale white supremacist logic of race as phenotype, yet they remain deeply embedded in a logic of race as a set of “historic repertoires and cultural, spatial and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purpose’s of another’s health, development, safety, profit or pleasure.”^{xv} Privileged and stigmatized racial formations no longer mesh perfectly with a color line. Instead, new categories of privilege and stigma determined by ideological, economic, and cultural criteria overlay older, conventional racial categories such that traditionally recognized racial identities – black, Asian, white or Arab/muslim – can now occupy both sides of the privilege/stigma opposition.

I see neoliberal multicultural racialization to operate along with what Aihwa Ong calls “differentiated citizenship.”^{1xvi} According to Ong, the dictates of global capitalism have entered state administration so that, in order to maximize profitability and to minimize doing what is unprofitable, governments subject populations to different treatments according to their worth within (or their connection to or isolation from) neoliberal circuits of value. This leads to the dis- and rearticulation of citizenship rights, entitlements, and benefits into different elements whose exercise is then associated with neoliberal criteria. Mobile individuals with human capital exercise citizenship-like claims in diverse locations, while other citizens are devalued and vulnerable, in practice unable to exercise many rights and subject to the state’s disciplining and civilizing/disqualifying regimes rather than the pastoral care bestowed on the state’s more “worthy” citizens.^{xvii} Neoliberal multiculturalism as a racial formation helps to make the internalization/externalization procedures Ong describes appear fair by innovating new systems for ascribing privilege and stigma and laying these over previous racial logics. Neoliberalism scripts its beneficiaries as worthy multicultural global citizens and its losers as doomed by their own monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other attributes.

Importantly, the unevenness of neoliberal racialization is often what gives it its power to racialize without seeming racist. As neoliberal calculations in governance produce differential citizenship, with subjects of value for neoliberal circuits able to exercise citizenship-like entitlements beyond national borders and unvalued subjects losing elements of citizenship in situ or as migrants, a certain moral calculus normalizes these everyday relations of difference and inequality. These neoliberal codes, which fix human potentials and justify different social fates, interact with pre-existing ethnoracial schemes which “can be reinforced and crosscut out by new ways of governing that differentially values populations according to market calculations.”^{xviii} In

the U.S., this means a new flexibility in racial procedures, such that racism constantly appears to be disappearing according to conventional race categories, even as neoliberal racialization continues to justify inequality using codes that can signify as nonracial or even anti-racist.

I take the definition of race as a set of “historic repertoires and cultural, spatial and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purpose’s of another’s health, development, safety, profit or pleasure” from Nikhil Singh. Singh reminds us in *Black is a Country* that color lines became meaningful in Western capitalist modernity as they overlapped with other criteria used to represent those who are cut off from capitalist wealth (or exploited for its accumulation) as outsiders to liberal subjectivity from whom life can be disallowed to the point of death. We must now ask how in an era of economic globalization, historic repertoires and cultural, spatial, and signifying systems have shifted to include and exclude on the basis of being an insider or outsider to “neoliberal subjectivity” and its moral calculus. As neoliberalism’s social relations of production interpellate and order subjects within managerial and professional regimes or regimes of labor and incarceration, terms of privilege accrue to individuals and groups—attributes such as multicultural, reasonable, feminist, and law-abiding—making them appear fit for neoliberal subjectivity, while others are stigmatized as monocultural, irrational, regressive, patriarchal, or criminal and ruled out. Such individualization disappears structural and material relations positioning persons within modes of production and structures of governance.

Importantly, “multicultural” signifies as anti-racist even as it becomes a way of ascribing racialized privilege to some forms of humanity. As economic citizenship becomes more central to racial procedures, I suggest that while the idea of whiteness as property still holds, globalization also creates “multicultural” as a new form of whiteness, or rather, the category of

whiteness and its privileges are displaced into the category of “multiculturalism.” Traditional white privilege still comes into play in the U.S. even as some white people are left behind or left unprotected as government shifts from service to (its historically-favored white) citizens to capital maximization within globalization, which requires and produces a multiracial, multilingual, multicultural elite. At the same time, neoliberal racialization can intensify technologies for disqualifying, civilizing, and disciplining people of color without class privilege, renewing older racial schemas.

U.S. universities have become a key site for racializing individuals of value to neoliberalism as “multicultural” and for teaching them the codes of privilege and stigma that naturalize contemporary biopolitics and its uneven distributions. Aihwa Ong notes, “American universities have attracted a multicultural, multinational and mobile population, the very kind of educated, multilingual and self-reflexive subjects now considered to be the most worthy individuals.”^{xix} According to Ong, under the aegis of self-care, university training inculcates individuals with attributes that fit them to bear the agency of neoliberal capitalism, egoistic individualism, self-enterprise, and calculative practices, that are then taken as qualities distinguishing “multicultural” global citizens. Students most often learn the racializing codes for vulnerable or exploited groups through so-called leadership training and discourses of mission, benevolence, and reform. As students learn that to do good, to feed the poor, to uplift women, and to presume responsibility for near and distant others, they learn to play their parts in the civilizing and disqualifying regimes that target populations disconnected from circuits of neoliberal wealth and value.

Conversely, one of the key elements of citizenship being lost by those who do not win under neoliberalism is access to higher education. Those without college educations are

racialized as lacking, monocultural, backward, inept, unambitious, and incapable, with these codes overlapping conventional phenotypical racial categories and meanings, adding flexibility to white, African American, Asian American, Latino, and American Indian racialization. Such racialization prepares one socially to be governed by technologies of labor and incarceration, rather than the pastoral technologies that nurture multicultural citizens. While whites continue to receive preference based on skin color alone, the lack of access to higher education for poor and working class students has intensified to become the most pressing civil rights issue in higher education. Class remains racialized, and the racialized fixing of human potential by class keeps large pools of temporary and vulnerable workers available. One striking example of how neoliberal multicultural racialization intensifies conventional racialized exclusion by denying access to higher education is the passing and enforcement of the Immigration Reform Act of 2006. In contradiction to the equal protection clause and reversing long-standing denizen rights, the Act states that illegal aliens cannot be considered residents of a state for purposes of assessing tuition at public universities. Denying undocumented students mobility through higher education is just one strategy that racializes immigrants as fugitive populations, contributing to a matrix of laws, informal social customs, economic systems, and symbolic systems that keep abandoned and unvalued populations—immigrant and citizen—more vulnerable to isolation and exploitation. Recognizing a fundamental coherence between such strategies and those that maintained slavery and a Jim Crow social order, Rachel Buff has coined the term “Undergraduate Railroad” to refer to the covert and often illegal work of administrators, faculty and communities to provide in-state tuition to undocumented students.^{xx}

Literature also enters into the training of transnational professional-managerial classes as an element of the technologies of subjectivity, which influence the self-making of elites, and

technologies of subjugation, which elites learn to exercise in order to manage less profitable populations. On the one hand, the idea that literature has something to do with anti-racism and being a good person enters into the self-care of elites, who learn to see themselves as part of a multinational group of enlightened multicultural global citizens and to uphold certain standards as (neoliberal) multicultural universals. On the other hand, the idea that engagement with literature helps one to come to terms with difference ethically prepares elites to administer differentiated citizenship across the globe. In other words, literary training prepares them for the part they will play within disciplinary and civilizing/disqualifying regimes that manage populations cut off from (or exploited within) circuits of global capitalism.

In the last ten years, much excellent scholarship has examined the retooling of American universities to produce a transnational managerial-professional class for global capitalism and how this has impacted the teaching of literature. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote presciently in the early 1990s of a “new orientalism” of third world literatures.^{xxi} David Palumbo-Liu in *The Ethnic Canon*, Inderpal Grewal in *Transnational America*, and others have analyzed the recruitment of U.S. ethnic literatures to represent marginality according to the requirements for constructing globalizing metropolitans as the new center.^{xxii} The recent emergence of the rubric “Global Literature”—a category so broad that it seems to call for theme-based (i.e., ideologically-driven) teaching rather than rigorous transnational literacy—would seem to prove the accuracy of their analysis.

How does neoliberal multiculturalism seek to fashion literary culture, practices of reading, and literary value? In line with literature’s centrality for 19th and early 20th century European liberalisms, which helped to provide the social organization and ideological legitimation for European colonialism, literature after the “racial break” has been integrated into

the forms of U.S. liberal race hegemony that organize post-World War II U.S. society and U.S. global ascendancy. I argue in other work that the functions literature fulfilled within colonial knowledge-power processes now have been displaced into and revised within the post-“racial break” era.^{xxiii} High cultural ideas of literature continue to assert the excellence and universalism of the West (now led by the U.S.) and to distinguish between superior/inferior forms of human life. Post-war liberal anti-racism and the need for anti-racist social transformation also continue to cathect to an idea of literature as a tool for information retrieval and for entering into a sympathetic relation with a culturally distant other. First with the 1950s “race novel,” now with “multicultural literature,” literature by writers of color or about race is defined as a medium uniquely able to express the intimate truths of racial conditions and consciousness and to powerfully communicate these across race lines to arouse sympathy in white audiences. Within a paradigm that understands race chiefly as “prejudice” or a matter of white attitude, the idea of literature as a uniquely powerful tool for arousing white sympathies assigns to literature a leading role in ending racial inequality.

Neoliberal multiculturalism continues to pose literature as a solution to problems of knowledge and relation. Where racial liberals in the 1950s once read African American literature as native informant texts to bolster the idea of a racially inclusive liberal nationalism that could morally legitimate U.S. Cold War hegemony, today a managerial professional class for global capitalism reads “multicultural,” “ethnic,” and “postcolonial” novels as native informant texts to learn good global citizenship. We can see this in the new relevance of world literatures, often the work of Anglophone postcolonial diasporics, justified as an effective tool to help Americans get to know diversity. As mentioned previously, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted the importance of literary culture to socialize and legitimate a professional-managerial class in the

U.S. as multicultural-savvy agents for global capitalism. Spivak warns that the institutionalization of world and multicultural literatures through a diversity-requirement approach has been made necessary by the financialization of the globe and the corresponding imperative for U.S. based readers to (think that they) know the world.^{xxiv} For Inderpal Grewal, this translates to U.S. readers of “world” or “postcolonial literature” being trained to extract preconceived “information” about “female oppression in the Global South” from literature as diverse as Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*, a move that reinforces the hegemonic rendering of female empowerment as the mission of the Global North and that helps to ideologically consolidate the economic restructuring required by capitalism as the duties of good global citizenship.

As Grewal suggests, the cultural politics of literary culture often intersects with the global symbolic politics coalescing around the figure of “Woman in the South.” Supplementing Grewal, I suggest that literature written by or about “Woman in the South” (or “Woman in the Middle East”) gets recruited not only for discourses of legitimation, but, importantly, also for discourses of information and rationalism that have become key to sublating problems of knowledge and relation, which U.S. global interventions might otherwise evoke. Given the need to produce and disseminate information about the Middle East to U.S. audiences to make U.S. interventions in the region legible, woman's writing, cast as transparent and easily accessible “evidence,” functions in place of or alongside scholarship.

While dominant reading practices in the U.S. post -1945 subject *all* racialized women's writing to presumptions of authenticity and truth-telling, women's autobiography and memoir are particularly so construed. The international controversy over the facticity of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* is a case in point.^{xxv} First, it demonstrates the degree

to which women of/in the Global South are set up to be native informants for U.S. audiences. As Mary Pratt notes, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was a key text for multiculturalism in U.S. universities in the 1980s and 1990s.^{xxvi} In line with multiculturalism's agenda to decenter a Eurocentric curriculum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was positioned as a "representative" and "authentic" text about contemporary Mayan life and culture, about the recent political history of Guatemala, and much more. Although sometimes taught as *testimonio*, a genre that implies representational complexity - a hybridization of oral interview, mediated transcriptions, situational transmission, and composite accounts - the fact that its prestige could be undermined by "factual errors" demonstrates the degree to which its value lay in its treatment as truth-telling autobiography.

We can evaluate David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) to be an early neoliberal multicultural attack on Menchú's status.^{xxvii} In contrast to U.S. liberal multiculturalists, Stoll recognizes and would subvert Menchú's *testimonio* as a political document (not transparent truth) meant to focus attention on the "scorched earth warfare" of military governments in Guatemala against leftist movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s.^{xxviii} Although his interest is mostly in the Culture Wars, Stoll's text, in fact, in the contemporary geopolitical context appropriates indigeneity to support a neoliberal agenda. Claiming that the more "authentic" (i.e., less educated, less traveled, less left politicized) tribal members of Menchú's village just wanted to be "left alone" by the leftist movements, Stoll construes indigeneity as nonengaged, desiring privacy and self-sufficiency; this cultural values language is key to the code that construes neoliberalism as a moral good. The politics of representing "what Indians want" takes on increased urgency in light of the extraordinary movement, since the publication of Menchú's *testimonio*, of pan-indigenous movements in Central and South America into national politics, especially the election of Evo Morales in

Bolivia, and their often trenchant critique of neoliberal goals and agendas.

If *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a political text woven in the fabric of left resistance to Cold War military oligarchy in Guatemala, which liberal multiculturalism appropriates as the authentic cultural expression of an indigenous Mayan woman, then Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, however much it touches upon the fabric of political resistance to gender oppression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, has been appropriated by multicultural neoliberalism as a cultural text that provides the truth of 'Woman in Iran' for the War on Terror and that helps to ideologically consolidate an assimilationist multicultural neoliberal universalism.

Reading Tehran in Lolita: Seizing Literary Value for Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Why would a major foreign policy institute appoint a professor of literature to direct one of its key projects? At first glance, Azar Nafisi might seem an unlikely choice to head the "Dialogue Project" at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University. But when we grasp neoliberal multiculturalism and how it links geopolitics, literary value, and racialized gender Nafisi's appointment as director makes sense, especially following her rise to prominence with the success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

The Dialogue Project's web-site initially describes its goal as being "to promote – in a primarily cultural context – the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim World."^{xxix} But it soon becomes apparent that the real target is not "them," but "us": "the Dialogue Project seeks to educate those in non-Muslim communities – whether they be policy makers, scholars, development professionals, members of the media or ordinary citizens – in the complexities and contradictions that govern both Western relations with and life in many predominantly Muslim societies." In other words, the Dialogue Project seeks broad-based influence over the political conversation in the U.S. about the relationship between the West and

‘the Muslim World.’

In *Twilight of Equality?* (2003), Lisa Duggan persuasively argues that the rhetorical strategy of forging a “Third Way” is central to neoliberal cultural politics.^{xxx} We find such a strategy at work in the Dialogue Project, which positions itself as an alternative to both Huntington-style “Clash of Civilizations” thinking and “Islamism.” It then associates left-progressive U.S. scholarship with the last term, and goes on to make its central point:

Unfortunately, whether consciously or unconsciously, many in the West have become complicit in imposing the Islamist discourse on international relations. Among the expert and policy communities, people have adopted a language and a mindset that encompass concepts such as "Western cultural imperialism" and "cultural relativism"-- deploring the former as they applaud the latter. In this way, the worst claims of Islamist rhetoric are accepted as fact, and this apologist thinking imposes on the peoples of the Muslim-majority countries a repressive form of cultural determinism.^{xxxi}

How does left/progressive thinking - dehistoricized, abstracted, and caricatured as “cultural relativism” and “Western cultural imperialism” - get allied with “Islamism”? Apparently what unites these two positions is a “cultural relativism” which “encourage[s] a conception of culture and ethnic heritage as essentially static and closed, and which see the change that results from cultural interaction as a culturally corrosive and unwelcome development.”

Distinguishing itself from such a closed and unified conception of culture, the Dialogue Project defines its putatively commonsensical position as one that grasps the multiplicity of all cultures, yet rather than a robustly integrative sense of the heterogeneity and dynamic nature of every culture, the Dialogue Project emphasizes that “muslim-Majority” countries/cultures are open to transformation. Its distinctly assimilationist view assumes that “muslim-Majority”

countries/cultures would change and adapt to resemble the U.S. but for the influence of local Islamists and their progressive-left U.S. academic-collaborators. These mislead muslims with their ideology of “Western cultural imperialism,” the idea that “the growing influence of Western – primarily American – culture throughout the world as a damaging, callous, and morally reprehensible imposition on other societies and traditions.” In contrast, the Dialogue Project’s vision is “multicultural” in the sense that it insists that all the world’s multiple cultures are or should be free to become America.

The Dialogue Project’s depiction of a U.S. academy unknowingly permeated by “Islamism” functions in the first place to delegitimize postcolonial studies and any scholarship that situates U.S. geopolitics in the history of colonialism and neocolonialism. More broadly, it works to undermine the authority of the U.S. academy as a whole.^{xxxii} Importantly, it constructs an idea of a virtual (neoliberal) public in support of its own putatively commonsensical position, a strategy to seize terms of public debate that resembles Nixon’s “Silent Majority” strategy.

Azar Nafisi herself, in her capacity as the Dialogue Project’s female and Iranian director, stands as evidence for the inclusive nature of the neoliberal multicultural “consensus” the Dialogue Project envisions. Yet Nafisi’s own *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I argue, is an infinitely more successful example of multicultural neoliberal cultural politics, one that refashions seemingly progressive (i.e. anti-racist) and conservative (i.e. family values) ideologemes into a presumed consensus position, which appears nonpolitical, neutral, and universal as it secures consent for neoliberal processes and agendas. With *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, we see that the politics of literature and race have moved into a distinctly post-Culture Wars phase: “multiculturalism” is no longer opposed to a “vital center” or “common culture” (imagined as global and Eurocentric simultaneously), rather the former serves as proof of the latter’s

inclusiveness.

Importantly, I do not analyze *RLT* in terms of authorial intentions or interpretations. In contrast to Hamid Dabishi, who has denounced Nafisi as “the Fox News anchorperson of Western Literature” and accused her of “seeking to recycle a kaffeeklatsch version of English literature as the ideological foregrounding of American empire,” I disclaim all ad hominem attacks.^{xxxiii} Rather, I consider how the particular system of signs at work in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shores up axiomatics of neoliberal multiculturalism, even as neoliberal multiculturalism “produces unquestioned ideological correlatives for the narrative structuring of the book.”^{xxxiv}

My reading throughout is attentive to the special purchase that comes with the weaving together of the genres of “memoir” and “Great Books literary criticism,” signaled in the *RLT*’s subtitle “*A Memoir in Books*.” On the one hand, the authority of memoir rests on the *particular* identity and experience of the author, who, according to convention, is collapsed with the memoir’s narrator. Authenticity, which is how literary value is construed for memoir, relies on particularity. In the context of U.S. literary history, this is associated with the role of literature in liberal race reform, with race novels and memoirs by authors of color, conceived as vehicles for the transmission of racial consciousness and conditions. The authority of Great Books literary criticism, on the other hand, relies on the presumed *universality* of great literature and on the critic’s ability to communicate and, indeed, to wield the power of the universal. In the context of U.S. literary history, Great Books literary criticism accompanies canon-building projects that use literary value to secure the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of elites as the norm, or what is to be desired or esteemed.

Reading Lolita in Tehran (RLT) merges these two traditions of literary value in a

narrative that we can reduce to the following equation: an Iranian woman tells her personal emotional and “true” story of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its aftermath as the story of how she harnessed the power of Great Literature as an instrument for the self-liberation of “Women in Iran.” *RLT*’s hybrid genre, memoir-literary criticism, enables a powerful and intertwined politics of identity and politics of knowledge. It guarantees its representation of women’s oppression by the Islamic Republic of Iran through the narrator’s (“Nafisi’s”) expertise in harnessing the universal and transhistorical standpoint of great literature. At the same time, it uses the lens of “Great Books for women” to redact the total complexity, contradictions, and historicity of “Iran” to bits of moralistic knowledge that align easily with neoliberal ideological codes for what counts as “free/unfree,” “fair/unfair,” and “good Muslim/bad Muslim.”

Many critics have commented on the cover of *RLT*: a sepia-toned photograph of two young women in dark hijab looking down with modest expressions at something cropped out of the image. In keeping with the work’s title, perhaps we are to imagine that they are reading a volume of Nabokov together. It turns out, as Hamid Dabashi has scandalously uncovered, that the image is actually an extreme alteration of part of a photograph, which presents two very modern, young Iranian women reading a newspaper article about the election to the Presidency of reform candidate Mohammed Khatami in 1997. According to Dabashi, the transformed photograph symbolizes *RLT*’s neo-orientalizing tendencies: it transforms an image of women involved in and absorbed by internal politics in Iran into a titillating representation of two young, Iranian Lolitas for U.S. audiences.^{xxxv} My reading of the text as one that offers Nafisi and her female students to U.S. readers as candidates for assimilation to a global multicultural public leads me to offer another take on the photo. When we blur our eyes, their hijabs seem to become the head scarves of that archetype of U.S. citizenship, the Ellis Island immigrant, and their eager

expressions and glowing pale skin, seem to come not from their excitement over *Lolita* but from eager anticipation of joining the American project. Just as “whiteness” embodied the ideological coordinates for conferring U.S. citizenship during the Ellis Island era, the global citizenship neoliberal multiculturalism confers has its own ideological requirements. These are now embodied not only as white, but also as “multicultural,” and overlap with cultural and economic criteria to ascribe privilege and stigma, internalizing some into the neoliberal project, while externalizing others as unfit for (neo)liberal subjectivity.

RLT's narrative arc tells the story of the self-making of Nafisi and the students she refers to as “my girls” into first world approximate versions of “empowered women” through the agency of Western literature and against the gender apartheid of Khomeini’s regime. At the center of the story is a woman’s consciousness-raising book group. Nafisi gathers together her most dedicated students from the University of Tehran and Allameh Tabatabai University in her living room on Thursday mornings. She approaches the “Great Books” on her reading list as tools for the self-development of her “girls” and their emotional survival of gender apartheid; her goal is to see “how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women...to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to.”^{xxxvi}

The text appears to endorse a feminist cultural universalism even referring to the book club as a “communal room of our own.”^{xxxvii} But as the individual stories of Nafisi and her students demonstrate, what is most important in the text's construction of woman’s self-actualization is that the terms of female emancipation are absolutely bound up with codes for cultural values that dissimulate neoliberal measures as good, natural, and right. In other words, feminist cultural universalism serves as the form of appearance of a neoliberal multicultural cultural politics; it

naturalizes a necessary relationship between "women's freedom," "freedom of the imagination," and "free markets." *RLT* reworks conventional narratives of female entrance into individualism such that the individualism Nafisi's students achieve is a distinctly neoliberal brand. Nafisi, for example, teaches her girls that Austen's heroines are "rebels," who "risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship and to embrace the elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose."^{xxxviii} This "right to choose," in line with neoliberal discourse, collapses the language of economic and individual freedom and is equal parts consumerist and liberal.

We also see the acquisition of a distinctly neoliberal individualism in the arc of development of one of Nafisi's students, 'Nassrin', a young woman from a religious family. Gradually, through the agency of literary reflection, Nassrin evolves from a taciturn young girl who keeps her hijab on during the living room sessions, to an outspoken young woman in jeans and revealing t-shirts, who chooses to move to London. Nassrin explains her decision to the book group right before her departure: "I don't want to be secret and hidden forever. I want to know, to know who this Nassrin is. You'd call it the ordeal of freedom, I guess."^{xxxix} The "ordeal of freedom," reminiscent of Cold War rhetoric, in fact, serves as a shibboleth for capitalism coded as freedom of the individual, narrated here as the success of feminist consciousness-raising. (Because the memoir does communicate, with some power, the terrorizing of women in the IRI and their experience of the regime's relentless political manipulations of the female body, the language of individualism as neoliberal "freedom" and "choice" often sounds hollow.)

Luxury items and Western-identified consumer goods provide the mise en scene for *RLT*'s narrative of female self-emancipation through books. The reader is provided with affect laden descriptions of the flowers on Nafisi's living room coffee table, the beautifully wrapped

sweets her “girls” bring to the sessions, and how the women dress and groom themselves. Superficially, this mimics the 19th century bourgeoisie realism of Jane Austen and Henry James, whose novels the women read. But in the contemporary context of global economic citizenship, where the ability to consume defines membership in a transnational elite and counts as a form of political power, it is significant that women’s ascension into individualism is played out through their manipulation of and affinity with consumer goods. It creates a symbolic relation where consumption indexes female liberation, which attaches “emancipatory” and affect laden value to consumer goods themselves. This, in turn, reinforces the presumed legitimacy of a transnational, “multicultural” consuming class to presume its own universality.

In a further example of the resonance between *RLT*’s protocol and the axiomatics of neoliberal multiculturalism, *RLT* deploys the trope of “love” to consolidate an ideologeme that appears contradictory outside the framework of a neoliberal cultural politics: the linking of women’s power and agency with conservative gender roles and “family values.” The narrator ‘Nafisi’ is repeatedly teased by her students and family for her obsession with love. Furthermore, the memoir invests heavily in “love” as an expression of female agency. For example, Nafisi teaches her students that the heroines of Jane Austen’s novels were, in the social context of the time, “rebels” who “refused to marry men they did not love.”^{x1} The narrative repeatedly contrasts such freedom-in-loving to the IRI’s “outlawing of love,” the repressive, Post-Revolution laws governing intercourse between men and women, which, according to the memoir, have fostered a political obsession with sex, and, correspondingly, diminished personal capacities for love. In line with the memoir’s theme of Iranian women achieving self-actualization through reading Great Books, Austen’s novels putatively teach Nafisi’s female students that “love” is a form of resistance to gender oppression in the IRI and an effective

expression of women's social power.

Making “love” a sign for female agency makes acceptable the conservative gendering the protocol of *RLT* takes for granted as normal. The character of “Nafisi” herself is the best example of this gendering. Although sometimes shown in the classroom as a professional educator, “Nafisi” is mostly staged in a happy domestic sphere, as a wife and mother, somewhat subservient to her architect/engineer husband, who comes across as the true professional in the family. More disconcertingly, the character ‘Nafisi’ comes across as distinctly girlish, in her obsession with love, in a certain whimsicalness of character, and especially in her relations with “her magician,” a close male friend and advisor, who regularly chides her for her child-like sensibilities, calling her his Alice in Wonderland.

The heterosexist gendering and romanticization of family life we find in *RLT* is a foremost motif of the cultural politics of privatization. From 1970s neoconservatism through contemporary neoliberalism, policies of upward redistribution that rely on the privatization of public resources and the shifting of social maintenance costs from the government to individuals, have ideologically cast the heteronormative “family” as the locus of responsibility, desire, and relationality.^{xli} What at first appears to be a paradox in *RLT*'s narrative structure – the combination of seemingly incompatible themes of female self-actualization and individualization with heterosexist gendering and a sentimentalization of family life – makes sense according to neoliberal multicultural axiomatics that have recourse, on the one hand, to the “family values” talk that casts privatization as a moral good, and, on the other hand, to a neoliberal multiculturalism that would legitimate itself on the basis of the freedom it secures for muslim/Arab women.

Let us now consider *RLT* as literary criticism and the politics of knowledge encoded in its construal of literary value. Although there is no explicit discussion of literary critical methodology in *RLT*, we can identify it as an innovative work of Great Books literary criticism: modern Western classics provide its principle of organization; it models a formalist reading practice; and throughout, it accepts as necessary and true, the methodological and ideological precepts of Great Books literary criticism such as the separation between aesthetics and politics, the idea of the special moral purpose of literature, and the positing of a general reader as the addressee of the text. In terms of U.S. literary history, Great Books literary criticism, and its accompanying canon-building projects, have secured epistemes of dominance and consent for hegemony as the expression of “the best” values and traditions of the past and present.^{xlii}

What is unique in *RLT* is that its aspect as multicultural memoir to some degree disguises it as a new formation of Great Books literary criticism. Moreover, the dissonant combination of multicultural memoir and Great Books literary criticism allows for a new project of literary canon-making, in line with a multicultural neoliberal universalism to be mistaken for a new formation of “embodied knowledge” in the tradition of critical multiculturalism or women of color feminism. In other words, by casting the “Great Books” as encompassing the “truth” of Iranian woman and an instrument for their best development, *RLT* fortifies the presumed inclusiveness, universality and excellence of great literature and thus Western high culture, as this is being remade into “global” high culture.

In line with Great Books literary criticism, *RLT* thematically secures a separation of spheres between aesthetics and politics, first, by deriding the Khomeini regime’s politicization of literature (its fierce censorship of books and authors), and second, by construing the literary to be a refuge from politics, a private space of personal self-cultivation (a binary that coheres well

with neoliberal castings of the moral value of privatization). This allows *RLT* to cast its discussion of Great Books as politically neutral, even as its literary formalism yields highly politicized ‘truths’ about the Islamic Republic of Iran. For example, in the passage below, Nafisi’s book group reads Nabokov’s *Lolita* in order to reflect on their personal conditions of unfreedom. In terms of knowledge production, reading *Lolita* for *RLT* allows the total social text of ‘life in Iran’ to be absorbed into the literary text of *Lolita*, in order to produce from the event of reading a political formalism that categorically condemns the IRI: “I [Nafisi] added that in fact Nabokov had taken revenge against our own solipsizers; he had taken revenge on Ayatollah Khomeini... They had tried to shape others according to their own dreams and desires, but Nabokov, though his portrayal of Humbert, had exposed all solipsists who take over other people’s lives.”^{xliii}

In another example, summary judgment is passed on the Iranian Revolution through the lens of *Great Gatsby*: “[Our] fate [was] similar to Gatsby’s.. He wanted to fulfill a dream by repeating the past... Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of a collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream?”^{xliv} Through literary formalism, which construes Great Books as neutral vehicles of higher truths, U.S. readers are presented with a moralism that occupies the place of – and is to taken to be “as good as” – informed analysis of the varieties, purposes and stages of the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini’s rule. The strategical use of literary refraction to make highly politicized knowledge appear objective can be labeled “Reading Tehran in *Lolita*.”

Importantly, as part of its politics of knowledge, *RLT* renews the old colonial trope of “literary sensibility” as a means of distinguishing between those fit or unfit for (neo)liberal subjectivity. In this way, it recruits literature for racializing processes that work beyond the

color-line, separating “good” from “bad” muslim according to presumably cultural criteria. This comes through distinctly in the Fitzgerald section. Here Nafisi describes how she turned the epidemic of public prosecutions in postrevolutionary Iran into a teaching moment by putting Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* on trial for immorality. She assigns the role of prosecutor to a young man called ‘Mr. Nyazi’, a soldier in the Revolutionary Guard and a working-class student leader of the Islamic Student Association, who is an outspoken critic of the text as an “immoral” influence “our revolutionary youth.”^{xlv} Although *Gatsby* is presumably on trial, *RLT*, in fact, constructs a show trial against Mr. Nyazi and the political, theological and class fractions he represents, indicting these for dogmatism and insensitivity to the pain of others. In doing so, it constructs the pro-Revolution poor in Iran as unfit for membership in the neoliberal multicultural global community the text conjures.

The key evidence *RLT* offers is Nyazi’s dogmatic practice of reading. He prosecutes *Gatsby* as a bad book that “preaches illicit relations between a man and a woman” with a hero who is “an adulterer, a charlatan, and a liar.”^{xlvi} (Indeed, the text captures something of the Khomeini regime’s own project of instrumentalizing culture in order to separate good muslims from bad muslims in Nyazi’s closing statement that “As a muslim, [he] cannot accept *Gatsby*.”^{xlvii}) To be *The Great Gatsby*’s “defense attorney,” ‘Nafisi’ appoints ‘Zarrin’, a stylish, upper-class female student. Her defense makes it clear that Mr. Nyazi’s failure as a reader in fact indicts him on the level of identity: “ Mr. Nyazi has demonstrated his own weakness: an inability to read a novel on its own terms. All he knows is judgment, crude and simplistic exaltation of right and wrong.”^{xlviii} Continuing to apply a highly racialized language of moral value to distinguish bad from good muslims, Zarrin declares that the “carelessness” of the rich in *Gatsby* “is a reminder of another brand of careless people. Those [typified in Mr. Nyazi] who see

in black and white, drunk on the righteousness of their own fictions.”^{xlix} *RLT* constructs Mr. Nyazi and Zarrin as oppositional personas, not only in terms of literary sensibility, but also in terms of class (poor/wealthy), location (rural/urban), and religion (devout/pragmatic). In this way, racializing codes overlap, so that literary sensibility forms a chain of associations that humanize and privilege rich, cosmopolitan, nominally religious muslims and, in turn, dehumanize and stigmatize those who are working class, rural, and devout.

‘Nafisi’ appears in the role of defendant, that is, as *The Great Gatsby* itself. Her testimony makes the comprehension of “Great Literature” a sign for the morality of the reader. As she explains to the jury (her literature class), “A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil.”¹ The motif of “Great Books” here serves Nafisi as a kind of social litmus test. Those who say “yes” to them are candidates for the neoliberal multicultural global community the text imagines on the basis of their capacity for feeling and moral comprehension. Those who say “no” rule themselves out as inferior, less universal, less fully humane/human persons.

The memoir’s narrative arc – its story of female empowerment – converges with its exegesis on the Great Books at the end of *RLT*, where ‘Nafisi’ all at once becomes a writer, a liberated woman, and a migrant to the U.S. On the cusp of departure from Tehran to the U.S., Nafisi sits outside in the glow of the late afternoon sunshine to pen the thoughts below “for [the] new book” she will write in the U.S.:

I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: the right to free access to the imagination. I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to

use imaginative works without restrictions....To me it seemed as if we had not really existed, or only half existed, because we could not imaginatively realize ourselves and communicate to the world ... I went about my way rejoicing, thinking how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century.^{li}

In keeping with the neoliberal multicultural tenet that not only is America the whole world (“a nation of immigrants”), but that the whole world is America, the “Bill of Rights” need no longer be identified specifically with the U.S.; it expresses the ideal moral center of the entire world. Collapsing Nafisi’s textual moment of self-authoring with the moment she is about to become a diasporic in the U.S., *RLT* equates going to the U.S. with becoming a participant in the co-creation of the world. As for “the right to free access to the imagination” that sets off the passage’s reverie, the very vocabulary and syntax of the phrase mirror neoliberal linguistic codes that use a language of moral and values to make its logic of privatization, commodification, and market rule appear just. “Free access,” with its connotation of open markets is taken as a “right,” while the imagination is treated as a commodity that helps to idealize commodities in general. Between the lines of the passage’s fuzzy universalism, a notion of great literature (the highest expression of the “imagination” to which “access” is demanded) serves to naturalize economic freedom as “the same as” human freedoms of thought and speech. *RLT*’s story of female achievement culminates with assimilation into the “world,” Nafisi and her students are cast as an elite multicultural female leadership class for a neoliberal global order that legitimates neoliberalism in the name of the emancipation of women.

Obscured Opposition: Foreclosing Postcolonial Studies and Muslim Feminisms

RLT centers some forms of gender/race/class politics, even as it marginalizes others. Through the decontextualizing machine of literary formalism, *RLT* equates feminism with feminist cultural universalism, anti-racism with assimilation into a nonredistributive multiculturalism, and erases class politics altogether, implicitly situating fully-realized humanity only in the propertied class subject. Significantly, in order to have its version of gender/race/class politics appear inevitable, *RLT* must negate or obscure a myriad of post-1960s literary critical movements that potentially activate textual analysis for gender/race/class analysis not compatible with multicultural neoliberalism.

While it does so mostly by assuming the givenness of its own Great Books approach, *RLT* goes out of its way to undermine Postcolonial Studies. Consider the following straw-man attack on Edward Said in the “Jane Austen” section:

One day after class, Mr. Nahvi [a student and member of the Revolutionary Army] followed me to my office. He tried to tell me that Austen was not only anti-Islamic but that she was guilty of another sin: she was a colonial writer...He told me that *Mansfield Park* was a book that condoned slavery, that even in the West they had now seen the error of their ways... It was only later, on a trip to the States, that I found where Mr. Nahvi was getting his ideas from when I bought a copy of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*.^{lii}

The cartoonish misrepresentation of Edward Said’s work from the mouth of an infantile ideologue, treated as more or less accurate by the narrator, demonizes postcolonial studies, through Said, depicting it to be a politically dogmatic pseudo-scholarship in order to make Nafisi’s own ‘Great Books’ reading practice appear nonpolitical and scholarly in comparison. In seeming alliance with neoconservative attacks on the influence of postcolonial studies on area

studies, *RLT* attacks postcolonialism's influence in English departments, where in the last 20 years, it has effectively trained students to recognize the join between the symbolic and epistemological functions of literature and colonial and neocolonial rule, to read literary texts within social texts, and to recognize how the subjectivizing functions of literature work in tandem with (neo)colonial systems of racialization, gendering, and sexualizing.

The attack on Said, in fact, appears to be a red herring to draw attention away from the texts and projects of postcolonial feminisms. In particular, I argue that "Said" functions in the text to efface the scholarship of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Here I can only indicate the formidable contradictions that Spivak work, if acknowledged, might make visible in the text of *RLT* by summarizing two of Spivak's major interventions in very broad strokes. First, Spivak remains attentive, in a deconstructionist vein, to representations of "woman in the margins." In particular, she probes the effacement of the gendered subaltern in and through representations that appear to disclose the figure as a transparent object in the documents and rational systems of the hegemonic (in the past, the colonial archive, in the present, the knowledge systems organizing the financialization of the globe).^{liii} Complementary to this, Spivak analyzes the tendency for the upwardly mobile postcolonial female migrant to appear in the global North in the clothes of her "home country" class subordinate and to be recruited as a native informant to produce information that allows managers for global capitalism to believe that they are doing right by oppressed women.

Second is Spivak's theory of literary training under the rubric of a "humanities to come." Defining humanities teaching as "the noncoercive rearrangement of desire," Spivak theorizes a role for literary training that would interrupt the reflexes and habits of knowing that the global dominant instills through university education – habits of self-centering, sanctioned ignorance,

and strategic exclusion – that enable the reproduction of global class apartheid.^{liv} Against “the demand not for clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average” that “destroys the force of literature as a cultural good,” Spivak theorizes literary training as learning to suspend oneself in the text of the other through the built-in virtualizing powers of the imagination.^{lv} She construes a reading practice attentive to the singular and unverifiable in literature as a concept-metaphor for an engagement between the first world knowledge producer and those below class lines of mobility in the global South, where the former undertakes the impossible task of trying to grasp a cultural inscription that is not her own, with the intention of eliciting an (unverifiable) response from the other.

Shirin Ebadi’s memoir, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (2006) brings into high relief what *Reading in Lolita* conceals when it is read as a disclosure of the “Iranian/muslim” woman on the margin.^{lvi} Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, Ebadi is a lawyer who fights for the rights of women and children in Iran and is committed to postcolonial principles of self-determination as well as the idea that a positive interpretation of Islam, democracy and gender equality can be aligned. Although Ebadi became well-known in the U.S. after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, and her memoir was published by a major press (and prominently endorsed by Azar Nafisi), *Iran Awakening* never achieved bestselling status and is seldom taught at U.S. universities.

In contrast to *RLT*’s story of Great Books as the nurturing medium for female self-development in private life, Ebadi’s memoir chronicles her political consciousness raising as a muslim feminist and her entrance into public political struggle in Iran. The history of feminist activism in Iran after the Revolution that the memoir recounts makes visible the complete absence of both an organized woman’s movement and a positive vision of muslim feminism in

RLT. Furthermore, while Nafisi depicts women to be either violated by the Revolution or cynically complicit with it (for example, becoming members of the Morality Police), Ebadi posits a dialectical relationship between the Iranian revolution and Iranian feminism: “[I]n the end, the Iranian Revolution has produced its own opposition, not least in a nation of educated, conscious woman, who are agitating for their rights.”^{lvii} She cites figures that place women, as of 2006, at 65% of all university students and 43% of the work force, noting that after the Revolution, traditional parents had no excuse to keep their girls out of schools, now officially Islamic institutions.

Ebadi’s life appears representative not through homogenizing the category “Iranian woman,” but because others grant her the right to represent them by claiming her political work as their own. In contrast to the end of *RLT*, which narrates Nafisi’s departure from Iran as her entrance into freedom as “a woman and a writer” in the U.S., Ebadi’s memoir ends with her return to the IRI after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. A spontaneous mass demonstration of thousands of women greet her at the Tehran Airport bearing signs such as “This is Iran” and “We are United for Peace and Humanity.” Disrupting neoliberalism’s supposedly feminist geopolitics, Ebadi asserts that “women in Iran must be given the chance to fight their own fights, to transform their country uninterrupted” and underscores throughout her memoir that oppression of women comes from patriarchy, not Islam.^{lviii} In contrast to Nafisi’s idealization of women’s freedom in the West, which renders the U.S. domestic scene utopic, Ebadi’s arguments – as she casts patriarchy as a global phenomenon and poverty as a human rights violation - have a potential political force in the U.S. and in local contests over justice and distributions of socially produced wealth.

Finally, Ebadi’s epilogue, which deals with her fight to get the memoir published in the

U.S., strikingly disaggregates “freedom of expression” from neoliberal platitudes, revealing the narrow scope of “free access to the imagination” in *RLT* and of “open exchange” in SAIS’s Dialogue Project. It recounts Ebadi’s legal battle against a little-known but disconcertingly powerful Treasury Department provision that forbade the importation of intellectual or informational material from embargoed countries and thus barred the publication of *Iran Awakening* in the U.S. Although offered an exemption by the Treasury, Ebadi joined forces with a number of other embargoed authors and their publishers and filed a lawsuit declaring the measure to violate the rights of Americans under the First Amendment of the *U.S. Constitution*. Faced with the prospect of a federal court striking down its policy as unconstitutional (and exposing the issue more broadly to the American public), the Treasury Department voluntarily revised its regulations on December 16, 2004. Against the idealization of “free access to the imagination” as the spirit of U.S.-led neoliberalism, Ebadi makes visible the insidious pre-political censorship exercised routinely through the bureaucratic powers of the U.S. government. In contrast to the tepid call for conversation in the Dialogue Project, Ebadi worked in an activist way from Iran to secure an infrastructure to make possible broader knowledge and education about Iran in the U.S., thus freeing U.S. citizens from a rights-violating constriction to which most had been unconscious.

So what does the prominence of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* indicate about the stakes of literary practice in neoliberal times and the deployment of multicultural signification to make neoliberal arrangements appear just? As the foregoing indicates, the answer to the question must be broached by considering the literary and literary critical work that *RLT* pushes aside when it is taught alongside June Jordan’s poetry as a comparable expression of women of color feminism, when it replaces *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a foremost example of

multicultural autobiography, or when it elbows out Shirin Ebadi's account of muslim feminist activism. We see that despite the idea, inherited from the role of literature in liberal race reform, that the purpose of Nafisi's memoir is to tell U.S. readers the truth of what goes on *over there*, the real target of the memoir, as it functions within the weave of neoliberal multicultural discourse, is what we comprehend *here*.

Neoliberal multiculturalism does not (or not yet) dominate reading practice nor the norms of literary culture. In fact, the scope of the projects that *RLT* would either appropriate or displace – the work of Jordan, Menchú, Spivak, and Ebadi – instead suggest that literary forms of knowledge and reading practices continue effectively to expose the absolutisms, alibis and ellipses which allow neoliberal arrangements to appear in the disguise of global multicultural justice.

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ⁱ Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 19.

ⁱⁱ Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson, *Strange Affinities* – Publication and Page numbers to be inserted.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983): 23.

^{iv} Hong and Ferguson, tk.

^v See Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 110-138.

^{vi} Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Antiracism, Global Capitalism, and the Political Cultures of American Literature 1945-2008*, forthcoming.

^{vii} June Jordan, "Moving Towards Home" in *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Thunders' Moth Press, 1989), 142-143. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

^{viii} Arjun Appaduria, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.

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- ^{ix} See Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
- ^x Nafisi, 333.
- ^{xi} “Neoliberalism” now most commonly refers to a set of economic regulatory policies including the privatization of public resources, financial liberalization (deregulation of interest rates), market liberalization (opening of domestic markets), and global economic management. (See Philip McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective* Second Edition (Thousand Oaks, California, London, and New Delhi: Sage Press, 2000). In defining neoliberal multiculturalism, however, I work with a more expansive understanding of neoliberalism as a term for a world historic organization of economy, governance and biological and social life. It involves a paradigm-shift in governance in its demand that nation-states act in the first place as subsidiary managers of the global economy and rationalizes biological and social life often on the basis of the violence that individuals and communities have had to absorb with social and economic restructuring for neoliberalism. Multiculturalism, too, has a long usage history, beginning in the 1970s when it named grass roots movements in education for community based racial reconstruction to its current deployment as a policy rubric for business, government, and education. Neoliberal multiculturalism, as a racial project and ideology, represents an effort to secure consent for neoliberal policy and agendas within the United States and around the globe.
- ^{xii} Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 24.4 (2006): 1-24.
- ^{xiii} Winant, 31-33.
- ^{xiv} See Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- ^{xv} Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004): 223.
- ^{xvi} Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 89-92.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 14-21.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 79.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 155.
- ^{xx} See Rachel Ida Buff’s “The Undergraduate Railroad: Undocumented Immigrant Students and Public Universities” in *Immigrant Rights in the Shadows of Citizenship* (Rachel Buff, ed.).
- ^{xxi} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 56.
- ^{xxii} David Palumbo-Liu, *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions and Interventions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, Duke University Press 2005).
- ^{xxiii} See Jodi Melamed, “The Killing Joke of Sympathy: Chester Himes’s *End of a Primitive* Sounds the Limits of Mid-Century Racial Liberalism,” *American Literature* 2008 (80)4: 769-797.
- ^{xxiv} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 277.
- ^{xxv} Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1998).
- ^{xxvi} Mary Louise Pratt, “I, Rigoberta Menchú and the ‘Culture Wars,’” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 29-57.

^{xxvii} Davis Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999).

^{xxviii} The original, Spanish-language edition Menchú's book makes its status as a political document clear, first with the marxist connotations of the title, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú Y Asi Me Nacio La Conciencia*, or My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Consciousness was Born, and second, by including a pamphlet in an appendix from the leftist Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Peasant Unity).

^{xxix} School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, "Dialogue Project," <http://dialogueproject.sais-jhu.edu/aboutDP.php> (accessed October 31, 2007).

^{xxx} Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 48-50.

^{xxxi} School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, "Dialogue Project," <http://dialogueproject.sais-jhu.edu/aboutDP.php> (accessed October 31, 2007).

^{xxxii} On the tendency of neoconservative politics to side-step academic knowledge production through the activity of dedicated think-tanks and non-peer reviewed publications, see Lewis J. Lapham, "Tentacles of Rage: The Republican propaganda mill, a brief history," *Harper's Magazine* 309 (Sep 2004): 31-41.

^{xxxiii} Hamid Dabishi, "Native Informers and the making of the American empire," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm> (accessed August 15, 2006).

^{xxxiv} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 133.

^{xxxv} Fatemeh Keshavarz picks up on Dabashi's critique by choosing an image of two smiling Iranian women in sunglasses and hijab holding protest signs for the cover of her own memoir, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*.

^{xxxvi} Nafisi, 19.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, 12.

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, 307.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, 323.

^{xl} Nafisi, 194.

^{xli} See Chandan Reddy, "Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights," *Social Text* 23 (2005): 101-119.

^{xlii} For example, we can map the relationship between the American Renaissance's ambition to forge a national literature in the 1850s and U.S. imperial ambitions in the U.S.-Mexican War. We can also correlate the institution of a Western Civilization curriculum in U.S. in the early and mid-twentieth century to the imperative to consolidate a new modern whiteness on the eve of U.S. global ascendancy. On the social history of U.S. literature within U.S. hegemonic process, see Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture" in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1-22.

^{xliii} Nafisi, 33.

^{xliv} *Ibid.*, 144.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, 120.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, 126.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, 125.

^{xlviii} *Ibid.*, 128.

^{xlix} *Ibid.*, 131.

^l *Ibid.*, 133.

^{li} *Ibid.*, 338-339.

^{lii} *Ibid.*, 289-290.

^{liii} See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 306-311, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world" *Textual Practice* 10(2) (1996): 245-269.

^{liv} See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Literature" in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 112-197, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 523-581, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

^{lv} Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 71.

^{lvi} Shirin Ebadi with Azadeh Moaveni, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006).

^{lvii} Ebadi, 215.

^{lviii} *Ibid.*, 205.