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Humanizing Narratives: A Marxist Reading of Arundhati Roy's  
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**The Possibilities and Limits of Recognizing the Other in Humanizing Narratives:  
A Marxist Reading of Arundhati Roy's *Walking With The Comrades* and Óscar Martínez's  
*The Beast***

by

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## Abstract

This project aims at problematizing the apparent recognition of a particular relation between subject and spectator imbricated in the reading act of Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* and Óscar Martínez's *The Beast*, each an intellectual project with a humanizing impulse in their respective narrations of particular conditions of systemic injustice. By developing a critique of Judith Butler's *Frames of War*, which initially appears a generative framework from which to query the apparent encounter between subject and spectator, I argue that, while Roy and Martínez's humanizing narrations *initially* seem to facilitate authentic moments of recognition and consequential proximity to the subject, *actually* commodify, isolate and distance the spectator from subject, suggesting the extent to which each of these texts is ensnared in the process of reification and cannot ultimately transcend the inherent mystification of the political economy in which they operate.

In a revision to his 1993 Reith Lectures on the contemporary intellectual project, Edward Said writes that the intellectual is someone “testifying to a country’s or region’s experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda.”<sup>1</sup> I begin my consideration of the searing journalistic collections *Walking with the Comrades* (Penguin Books, 2012) by Arundhati Roy and *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (Verso, 2014) by Óscar Martínez with this characterization from Said because it rather productively opens up Roy and Martínez’s respective projects.<sup>2</sup> Roy, while perhaps most widely known for her 1997 debut novel *The God of Small Things* (a Booker Prize recipient and international bestseller), is an assiduous political, anti-capitalist activist within her native India; *Walking with the Comrades*, in particular, is a collection of three essays that indict the Indian government’s unfettered and gross commitment to creating a “good business climate,” which, in part, entails the mining and pillaging of the land that has been home to the country’s Adivasi populations for centuries.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Roy also carefully attends to making visible these tribal communities—the “shadow people” (153); those the Indian state argues are a “threat” to the country’s progress and development and should, therefore, be encountered and hunted as such; those displaced from and dispossessed of their land, and left “wondering which corner of this huge country was meant for them” (ix). Martínez, a Salvadoran journalist working on the other side of the globe, is, most certainly, less internationally recognized than Roy; his work *The Beast*, however, appears a similar project—a collection that includes fourteen articles, each an investigative meditation exploring particular individuals and places along the dangerous, violent routes migrants traverse from Central America, through Mexico, and up to and just beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. While his investigation is an expansive inquiry into the various actors along these routes, his writing is particularly interested in the Central American migrants

on their journeys to *El Norte*, bringing into acute focus their poverty and vulnerability—simultaneously exploited and neglected just as much by Mexican authorities as they are by drug cartels and petty bandits.

Both Roy and Martínez seem to very clearly perform this “testifying” work Said describes as emblematic of the intellectual. Each are rooted in specific geographical space and time where their projects bear witness to a particular condition of injustice and violence, narrating—giving voice to—that condition beyond the region so as to provide it that “public identity” on the “global discursive agenda.” Said further explains the intellectual’s task as that which “uncover[s] and elucidate[s] the contest ... [and] challenge[s] and defeat[s] both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power” (24). Both Roy and Martínez’s journalistic method took them, respectively, into the Dandakaranya forest and onto the routes throughout Mexico, traveling with the Adivasis and migrants—sharing meals and stories—embedding themselves in their worlds. The particular economic, social, and political positioning of Roy and Martínez, as journalist-activists and intellectuals, makes possible a disruptive project of *articulation* and *intervention*, aimed at making both visible and heard those hegemonic power has invisibilized and silenced.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a 2019 interview with the *Boston Review*, Roy framed her political essays—such as those in *Walking*—as “always urgent interventions in a situation that is closing down on people,” and as “arguments, pleas, to look at something differently.”<sup>5</sup> Martínez, in a 2013 interview with the *Texas Observer*, specified his journalistic endeavor that would become *The Beast* as an effort to visit “those places that ... society as a whole had forgotten about.”<sup>6</sup> The intellectual task of Martínez and Roy’s projects—tied to the material realm of politics and political struggle—appears almost herculean: In the face of systemic injustices and violence orchestrated against the poorest and most vulnerable communities, how

do you say “stop”? How do you not only make these communities *visible* but also make them *matter in that visibility*?

One method, employed by both Martínez and Roy in their respective projects, is the construction of particularly felt and palpable narrations that humanize the people they encounter, bringing into focus the complexities of their histories, their socio-political positionings, their desires, their needs. Humanizing narratives often allow space for—or even necessitate—the inclusion of a subject’s mundane habits and other quotidian details, and the daily rhythm of life can lend verisimilitude and credence to the project; as Martínez provocatively emphasizes “Who the hell flees, kills, dies all the time? People need to shit, get tired, play cards, eat, discuss, fall in love, and think. If they don’t, they don’t exist.”<sup>7</sup> At the level of representation, to humanize a subject is to provide depth and complexity to people cast as static, one-dimensional, or less than a life. A humanizing narrative brings systemic injustice to bear at the level of the individual person, and, thus, the intimate perspective of these narratives are often opposed to aerial views, positions from which the oppositional dehumanizing project occurs wherein generalization and abstraction can render, for example, all those who resist the corporate takeover of the Indian state as “internal security challenges” or the protection of vulnerable migrants as unnecessary, their murders unworthy of investigation. Martínez and Roy’s projects are particularly compelling and, in fact, disquieting, in moments when content and form spark dissonance—that is, when a passage details a gruesome instance of violence with aesthetic richness and precision; reading such passages often elicit moments wherein one might register a range of affective responses—rage, grief, compassion—yet also experience pleasure and enchantment in the writer’s attention to language.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, such enrapturing narrations can be construed as part of the larger—and indeed, laudable—Saidian intellectual project of demanding that the spectator’s “conscience

[not] look away or fall asleep” (29). Humanizing narrations, in short, might be said to be a potent method by which the intellectual can facilitate moments of recognition—that is, those moments in which the spectator is compelled to recognize the subject who has hitherto been invisibilized and, as such, is thus positioned to hear and respond to the claims of that subject.

It is this apparent recognition of a particular relation between securely situated subject and precarious, vulnerable spectator—specifically imbricated in the act of reading humanizing narrations—that forms the field of concern and impetus for this project.<sup>9</sup> Both Roy and Martínez’s narrations seem quite seductive in their capacity to facilitate this recognition and connection; indeed, reading them seems to suggest for the spectator a political opportunity from which to both build solidarity with the Other and enact resistance to hegemonic narratives of them. In this project, however, I aim to demonstrate the inherently fraught nature of such supposed recognition; focusing on specific instances in Roy and Martínez’s respective texts, I argue that, while these humanizing narrations *initially* seem to facilitate authentic moments of recognition and consequential proximity to the subject, *actually* commodify, isolate and distance the spectator from subject, suggesting the extent to which each of these texts is ensnared in the process of reification and cannot ultimately transcend the inherent mystification of the political economy in which they operate. To illustrate the seductive performance of Roy and Martínez’s texts, where we as spectators think we participate in a process of intimately coming to know the vulnerable, exploited other, I aim to think alongside Judith Butler’s recent project as elaborated in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*.<sup>10</sup> In my engagement with Butler—whose expansive theoretical endeavor advances an argument for, in part, the generative political capacity of these textually mediated relations—I aim to demonstrate why our critical work on texts such as Roy and Martínez’s must account for and attend to the logic of capital, arguing that Butler’s

theoretical project, when queried alongside Martínez and Roy's texts, emerges as too abstract and dehistoricized to perform the political work she argues it makes possible.

While my present endeavor focuses specifically on Martínez and Roy's projects, this intervention has broader implications, I argue, for our understanding of the Saidian, public intellectual's project and our situated reading practices of all activist texts, aiming to suggest the extent to which representations—even as they attempt to narrate that which makes us intimately and deeply human, and even as we grasp at recognizing and communing with the human through them—are ensnared within the capitalist system and as such, are always at risk of being co-opted and reified by the logic of capital—even despite, that is, some of the most impeccable, anti-capitalist politics and intentions of their writers. In other words, I want to challenge the very possibility of properly recognizing the human and attending to the accompanying social relations through cultural texts—produced, reproduced and circulated, as they are, within this grossly inequitable, global capitalist epoch.

### **The limits of Butler's "frame"**

As suggested in the introduction, in my effort to illustrate the seductive and mystifying nature of the mediated social relations that appear to emerge from Martínez and Roy's humanizing narrations, I first want to develop a critique of Butler's *Frames of War*. Doing so is instructive, I argue, because of what Butler's project initially seems to suggest for our reading practices—that is, a compelling argument for our reading as both a practice of resistance to state violence and an initial site from which coalition building can proceed. Central to Butler's theoretical endeavor is her concept of the "frame," which attempts to bring into focus the ways in which a cultural text does not simply organize an aesthetic experience; the "frame" as a concept also facilitates a position from which to grasp not only the ontological and epistemological issues

at stake in all cultural products—namely the creation and definition of particular normative ontologies of the subject, and the delimitation of reality—but also how these products (or “frames”) move through space and time and come to mean as they do so. Butler argues that the frame is that by which the spectator of that frame apprehends or fails to apprehend the representation’s contents; these frames “are politically saturated ... operations of power” (1). The frame is not an apolitical, exhibitiv construction but an active participant in “a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (xiii). The content within the frame, Butler argues, relies on particular normative categories that function in structuring what she refers to throughout her project as the “field of recognizability”; attending to the frame, then, positions the spectator to ask which lives the frame allows to be seen and heard. No frame, however, can contain all that it attempts to; something is always “already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable” (9), that which is left out fundamentally constituting the frame itself (73). Facilitated, moreover, by technical and digital capabilities of reproduction and circulation, frames move in space and time, across national borders; in an adaption of Walter Benjamin’s seminal argument regarding the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Butler suggests the extent to which this movement produces “a critical shifting, if not a full deterioration of context” (9). Representations not only move into and arrive at new contexts from the original site of production but also create “new contexts by virtue of that landing” (9). For Butler, this process of contextual creation, this movement and circulation across and through space and time, performs, for the frame, a *breakage*—that is, the frame “must break from itself in order to move across space and time” (10). Thus, “the ‘frame’ does not quite contain what it conveys ... does not hold anything together in one place, but itself becomes a kind of perpetual breakage, subject to a temporal logic

by which it moves from place to place” (10). As such, the “very reproducibility [of the frame] introduces a structural risk for the identity of the frame itself” (24), and thus, this “structural risk,” the perpetual rupture of the frame—and, consequently, the rupture of its “renditions of reality”—poses the conditions, Butler argues, for politically meaningful *affective responses*, making possible, via representational regimes and texts, both apprehension of something that has not been previously recognized as a life and material conditions for responding to the ethical obligations the Self has to the Other (12).

To be sure, Butler is specifically concerned with developing a critical reading practice of those frames that are produced either by or in support of the state and its war waging and recruitment efforts. Although Martínez and Roy’s frames are of a different sort than those to which she attends, Butler does suggest both that these organizing features are not exclusive to those frames produced by or in support of the state and that there are particular frames through and from which an authentic social relation can be forged. Indeed, Martínez and Roy’s frame could easily and rightly be categorized as projects of alternative framing or alternative media—projects that Butler explicitly acknowledges as necessary and productive for critiquing state violence. In fact, it seems Butler might applaud Martínez and Roy’s texts as bringing into focus—as not only making visible but also recognizable in that visibility—those whom she would call an “ungrievable” community, a group of people beyond the state-defined normative categories of the human and, thus, not a life worthy of, or even in need of, protection.

However, as theoretically exciting as the “frame” appears, it does not—and cannot in its current form, I argue—properly account for the materiality and historical nature of these social relations mediated between spectator-of-frame and subject-in-frame because it acknowledges neither the totalizing nature of capitalism as a system nor the centrality of social relations within

it. Thus, while attending to the frame as Butler suggests might appear to bring into focus an ethical obligation between spectator and subject, such a project, dehistoricized as it is, actually risks performing a further mystification of these social relations. For, we need to remember that critical insight from Marx: that is, fundamental to capitalism as a totalizing system is its self-mystification, the persistence of appearance—wherein what *appears* as free labor is actually the gross exploitation and enslavement of wage labor; what *appears* as free association between people is actually organized by and rooted in the economic modes of production; and what *appear*, moreover, as freely circulating commodities—products, that is, of exchange value—are actually, in their fetishization, “congealed social relations of production, dead labor.”<sup>11</sup> Such a conformation positions us, Wendy Brown argues, not as “accidentally [but doomed to be] fetishists,” doomed, as well, to “the subsequent mystification of capitalist powers and the [unjust, ensnaring] world they generate,” including the social relations they structure (8)—unless our critiques properly attend to or work toward accounting for capitalism’s logic. So, Butler’s argument necessarily—for all her efforts to build coalitions beyond the framework of the nation-state so as to make “broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing” (2)—remains dehistoricized and abstract.

I next want to draw more focused attention to a few specific problems with Butler’s project. First, for all Butler’s emphasis on the ways in which representations have specific recourse to the materiality of war, her theorizations of the frame as a product remain necessarily abstract. Butler’s theoretical apprehension of the frame itself, for example, fails to attend to the nature and implications of commodification. It appears necessary to situate the frame as a commodity, even as it operates on the level of the visual and discursive. The critique is produced, reproduced, circulated—so that what appears as a discrete product exchanged for on

the market is actually a tumultuous and violent marker of congealed, exploitative social relations. While to say, as Butler does, that the frame is an operation of power might appear to suggest commodification, Butler's efforts toward materiality (i.e., the ways in which representations contribute to "the materiality of war and efficacy of its violence" [xiii]) remain abstract, removed from the economic modes of production and exchange. The space and time, moreover, through and by which Butler theorizes the frame to participate in the cycle of movement, breakage, and landing—that is, contextual creation and destruction—appears as empty and without signifying value and, still too, the frame seems autonomous in its seemingly free and untethered movement. Rooting the frame back in its material conditions, however, reveals that the "temporal logic by which [the frame] moves from place to place" is not its own but that of capital and the market, and the space and time through which it moves is, too, just as tethered to this logic.

I am, moreover, specifically interested here in the consequences of not properly attending to the logic of capital in the theorization of social relations mediated by the frame. That is, as the introduction attempted to illustrate, reading representations with a humanizing impulse tends to cultivate within a reader or spectator a particular recognition of and feelings for the Other, thus imbricating a social relation. Butler's extensive theoretical work on this relation, however, considers neither how the demands of capital give rise to particular constellations of social and political organizations and relations nor the site from which social changes and political revolutions of the sort she envisions necessarily emerge—that is, not in changing material conditions broadly conceived but, rather, more specifically, the modes of production and exchange.<sup>12</sup> That is, without more historicized attention to the nature and emergence of social relations under capitalism, such a reading practice as Butler's project suggests necessarily further mystifies and occludes one's relation to others, as opposed to clarifying an ethical obligation.

The frame, in short, becomes a tool only for further mystification if it does not attend to this economic logic. Now, as I turn more specific attention to Roy and Martínez's texts, I aim to bring further specification to the significant limits of a reader's capacity to properly apprehend and attend to the other and the subsequent textually mediated relation.

### **The reification of apparent connection and recognition in *Walking* and *The Beast***

In the following close attention to Roy and Martínez's projects, I want to demonstrate the emergence of a fraught, contradictory tension wherein their respective representations appear to facilitate the spectator's proximity to the subject but actually, in their construction, isolate and reify the distant subject into object, necessarily precluding the opportunity for forging solidarity in the way Butler's project proposes. The passages that most explicitly seem to facilitate among readers a sense of closeness or connection to the subject are those in which a person's suffering is narrated in detail. The third chapter of Martínez's collection is particularly vivid in its encounters with specific characters: Erika, Keny, and Connie—three women (Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan—respectively) working at a cantina on the Mexican side of the Mexico-Guatemala border, the area known for prostitution and referred to as the “zone of tolerance” (68). The chapter features narrative notes from Martínez's face-to-face conversations with each of these women, not only sketching origin stories of abuse, neglect, rape, and poverty but also noting specific mannerisms each present in their conversations with Martínez. These narrations sketch characters with a specificity that appears to produce the conditions for the spectator to recognize these women—feeling for their condition, seeing and hearing their claim. This recognition, however, cannot emerge outside of or beyond a tokenizing, patronizing impulse. Take note, for example, of the closing passages of this chapter:

In Calipso [Martínez's pseudonym for the cantina where these women work], Erika, Keny, and Connie have taken their positions and are making money however they have to, which is what they've been doing since they first crossed the border, when, their lives already falling to pieces, they were barely teenagers.

After midnight, Keny, the Salvadoran gyrates naked on a bar top and, in spite of the twenty-three beers she's downed, tries to control her movements. For Erika, the Honduran, the thirty beers she's drunk have loosened her up and she bends over a table, pushing her bare butt into the face of a mustachioed man knocking off his hat. He's bought her five beers and it's time to pay him back. Connie, the Guatemalan, dances in a miniskirt and six-inch heels with a pot-bellied man she'll later have sex with.

Tomorrow, with other names, with other men, the scene will start over in Calipso and dozens of other clubs around the border. The Central American women will shake and dance again as they do every night, as they have done since they were only girls. (87)

It is an unflinching passage. Reading it, one feels shuttled into the cantina with Martínez, the women, and cantina patrons. Although Martínez has shared compelling histories of these women in the previous pages of the chapter, in these final passages, the three women are those occupying the subject positions: they are the ones drunkenly gyrating, bending over tables, dancing with old men, performing the same scene over and over, night after night. The first and third paragraphs, moreover, end on similar notes—"since ... they were barely teenagers" and "since they were only girls"—wherein nights such as these seem persistent and, by now, inevitable, and it becomes rather easy to elicit from the reader a pitying gaze. That is, these ending passages usher the reader into intimate proximity with these subjects, but from this

proximity, nothing about this relation seems to emerge other than affective responses that, in fact, keeps them ‘there’ and the reader ‘here.’

Martínez facilitates this proximity much more directly in his narrations of *The Beast*, *La Bestia*—the moniker by which the cargo trains are known, on top of which migrants travel across Mexico. In several instances, Martínez will switch from the third-person ‘migrants’ to the second-person ‘you.’ In the opening essay, referring to the dangers of riding atop these trains, Martínez writes, “sometimes it’s simply the exhaustion that kills *you*. Sometimes it’s just one slow moment of slipping into sleep, and *your* head is gone from *your* body” (4, emphasis added). This same technique emerges a few chapters later, this time referring to the strategy of the boarding process: at some places, “*you* can get on before the train starts moving,” whereas at other stops, “rail workers and guards won’t let anyone board near the station, and *you* have to jump on the train farther down the line, once it’s already speeding ahead” (51-2, emphasis added). The most disorientating example is perhaps when Martínez describes the experience of those migrants mutilated by faulty boarding attempts or falls from the trains, describing the moment when a limb is torn from the—your—body: “At first it doesn’t hurt. Later, though, the pain nearly tears apart the muscles in *your* face and a sudden and intense heat shudders into *your* body so fast *you* think *your* head’s going to explode” (56, emphasis added). In the larger context of the text, these switches to second-person—these direct evocations of the spectator—appear subtle and almost a slippage. They perform, however, critical work, facilitating the sense of “there-ness,” of presence—even embodiment of the migrant experience. It is a common aesthetic tool of imaginative writing to call upon the spectator, facilitating a metaphorical transportation into the scene. However, in the context of a humanizing narrative detailing very material and real conditions of exploitation and violence, this illusion of proximity

risks becoming a perversion of the relation between spectator and subject, so that the securely situated reader is allowed, even encouraged, to apprehend the representation as a method of knowing the subject's experience.

This relation between subject and spectator facilitated by the frame becomes even more ambiguous and challenging when encountering the descriptive passages of human suffering present in both Martínez and Roy's texts. The former includes unflinching accounts of the migrant body mutilated by The Beast as well as the violent rape and murder of migrant women.<sup>13</sup> Martínez has reflected on what he calls the "logic to the narration of violence"; that is—"don't embellish or elaborate what is already a very heavy subject."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, his representations of the horrifying violence done to the migrant body and mind on the trails through Mexico are scant and punching. This passage, recounting the rape of a woman from Honduras, is particularly wrenching:

She said it was the people she traveled with who raped her. They'd told her they were migrants and convinced her to walk with them. Then all three of them raped her. When her son aborted between her legs, the bandits killed him with blows. Then they beat the woman until she lost consciousness. When she came to, she was completely alone. As well as she could, still bleeding, she managed to walk to the highway for help. (47)

The logic to narrating violence Martínez identifies seems to appear here—simple subjects, direct verbs, active sentence construction. It is almost as if Martínez—as writer—is attempting to "get out of the way," to bring the reader as close as possible to this woman's experience. Such a stark narration brings into intimate focus this woman's sufferings. Elena Ana Puga, however, complicates the way in which we read and think about these representations of migrant sufferings.<sup>15</sup> While they might appear to facilitate a communion with spectator and subject or a

sense of empathy and bearing witness, Puga argues that these representations are, in fact, commodified and subsequently traded within a political economy of suffering in which suffering is “redemptive sign of moral virtue” (73) and, moreover, figures as a “precondition for belonging” (77) and bid for inclusion into the ‘host’ country. These performances of suffering are then circulated—via the myriad of representations, such as Martínez’s—in this political economy of suffering “in attempts to promote empathy with migrants and tolerance of their mobility” (76). These affective responses, such as empathy and tolerance, however, only naturalize the migrant’s movement as inevitable or strictly an expression of free choice—a movement that is, however, a result of the volatile antagonisms of global capital. Puga’s argument, I think, productively troubles how these intimate and harrowing representations of human suffering circulate and consequently work within a global political economy of suffering, and, more broadly, the fraught location of representation in the capital-labor relation—wherein, on the one hand, suffering is real and material, but, on the other hand, it is easily commodified and traded, as even the basics of protection and care must be earned and bought.

While such jarring, violent passages are not as common in Roy’s text, I would like to turn attention to one instance to further illustrate the contradiction such passages become wrapped within. The titular essay of the collection, which documents Roy’s travels with the adivasis and resistance fighters within the Dandakaranya forest, Roy describes, in varying detail, many of the specific, individual comrades with whom she spoke. One of these individuals was Chamri, whose story Roy describes as such:

I met Chamri, mother of Comrade Dilip who was shot on 6 July 2009. She says that, after they killed him, the police tied her son’s body to a pole, like an animal, and carried it with them. ... Chamri ran behind them all the way to the police station. By the time they

reached their destination, the body did not have a scrap of clothing on it. On the way, Chamri says, they left the body by the roadside while they stopped at a dhaba to have tea and biscuit. (Which they did not pay for.) Picture this mother for a moment, following her son's corpse through the forest, stopping at a distance to wait for his murderers to finish their tea. They did not let her have her son's body back so she could give him a proper funeral. They only let her throw a fistful of earth in the pit in which they buried the others they had killed that day. (135-6)

In a similar move as Martínez, Roy, here, directly addresses the reader ("Picture this mother for a moment"), in which the imaginative call and work of reading is made explicit by the writer, demanding that you, the reader, commune with this subject and enter into proximity with this experience. In this passage, Roy seems to illuminate the motivations of Adivasis such as Chamri as a disruption of the hegemonic narratives that cast them as terrorists. In all of these examples—in both Martínez and Roy's texts—I am interested in the ways that these deeply compelling, humanizing passages (which offer detail and specificity), in their implicit (and sometimes explicit) call for closeness with the subject—for seeing and feeling with them—actually, given their mediated and active nature, necessarily facilitate false perceptions. That is, these passages seem to function as a way to make a condition outside of the experience of the spectator known to them. Companion to this form of knowing is a sense of intimacy with the narrated subject. However, I want to emphasize that this is a mystification, which, in its faulty appearance, is precarious—always already at risk of reifying and fetishizing the subject the representation intended to make known.

In the afterword of *The Beast*, Martínez makes the distance between the migrants and the readers of the text explicitly demarcated, describing the former as "men and women who have

done something for their families that many of us could hardly find the strength to do” (274). Initially, this statement appears as morally just and apropos: these individuals have traversed harrowing circumstances—through persistence, bravery—to support and provide for their families, the ultimate heteronormative sacrifice. However, it is worth inquiring into the ways in which such a statement both fails to interrogate the logic of why they have been forced to do this “something” (fleeing home, across dangerous terrains, exploited at every turn, to find *work*, to become wage-laborers) and places them as somehow beyond the reader. I do not intend this argument to be dismissive of the terrifying experiences such individuals have survived—experiences that are, in fact, severely unimaginable by me, in my particular situatedness; rather, I am interested in the ways such *representations* of these experiences are always in the tenuous, fraught position of becoming ossified as they are applauded as individual moments of bravery and melodramatic narratives of a tragic-hero, thus occluding systemic attention to the subjects’ particular conditions and locations in the global capital-labor relation of exploitation.

This slippage seems to me even more apparent in Roy’s work than in Martínez’s text, happening both at the level of the individual, the collective, and nature. Comrade Kamla seems the one closest to Roy during her time in the forest, wherein Kamla becomes for both the reader and Roy a sort of individual touchpoint for the Adivasis as a collective. Recollections of Kamla litter the essays; for example, note the following a paragraph-length parenthetical:

(Even now I think of Comrade Kamla all the time, every day. She’s seventeen. She wears a homemade pistol on her hip. And boy, what a smile. But if the police come across her, they will kill her. They might rape her first. No questions will be asked. Because she’s an Internal Security Challenge.) (64)

And Kamla will be who Roy thinks of when she considers, while back home, the militarization of the state against the poor: “Maybe that’s how Comrade Kamla will die—while she’s trying to bring down a helicopter gunship or a military training jet with her pistol” (186). While still in the forest, however, Roy notes the following of Kamla:

She is carrying ten times more weight than I am. Her backpack, a rifle, a huge bag of provisions on her head, one of the large cooking pots and two shoulder bags full of vegetables. The bag on her head is perfectly balanced, and she can scramble down slopes and slippery rock pathways without so much as touching it. She is a miracle. (94-5)

Indeed, the acrobatics and balance of this—the grace and stamina—is astounding. And to struggle as Roy notes how she did—the immense amount of walking, the physical fatigue of traversing the forest landscape—witnessing a woman move with ease and buoyancy in this environment seems, indeed, that it would evoke the sort of awe and captivation Roy details herself feeling toward Kamla in this scene. To *read* this description—across continents and nations, across a plethora of political borders—begins, however, to illustrate the slippery movement from such individuating, humanizing detail into reification of this community. It is with memory of Comrade Kamla that Roy ends the collection’s titular essay: “Every night I think of this journey. ... I see Comrade Kamla’s heels in her scuffed chappals ... I know she must be on the move. Marching, not just for herself, but to keep hope alive for us all” (145-6). Comrade Kamla appears to become—in the context of this text—more than an individual but, indeed, a miracle, a redeemer, the only possible hope for... Roy? India? The world? The representation of Kamla becomes a packaged placeholder, a singular, distant Other made to stand-in for the condition of millions of people.

Elsewhere in the essays, when Roy narrates the Adivasis as a collective, her tendency to mythologize and infantilize emerges. She writes how she is “surrounded by these strange, beautiful children with their curious arsenal” (57) and how they “don’t pay much attention to things like state boundaries. They have different maps in their heads and, like other creatures of the forest, they have their own paths” (68). Here, the Adivasis are framed as both children and creatures—not quite adult, not quite human, with a sort of untouched purity. This undertone of something other-than-human is palpable, too, in the following description of the Bhumkal celebration,<sup>16</sup> where Roy observes: “There is a sea of people, the most wild, beautiful people, dressed in the most wild, beautiful ways” (114); indicated in this statement is a sort of pleasure in watching this community, but within this pleasure is something detectably “other,” “beyond”—that is, wild—as well. At the same time, however, Roy indicates the extent to which these people—India’s tribal populations—are in fact the only source from which an alternative to capitalism’s hegemony and destruction might emerge. She ends the collection’s last essay with the following paragraph:

The first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination—an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as Communism. An imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfillment. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past but who may really be the guides to our future. (214)

Here and in the preceding last pages of the collection, Roy suggests the extent to which the Adivasis hold or are otherwise in possession of “secrets” unknown to anyone else (“They are the ones who still know the secrets of sustainable living. If they disappear, they will take those

secrets with them” [214]), elevating them to a mythic or divine plane wherein they are at risk, again, of being reified—driving the wedge between “them” and “us.” The last line of the above passage is particularly provocative; while I want to hold the possibility that Roy, in these lines, might be struggling to disrupt modernity’s notions of a continuum of linear progress, suggesting that India’s tribal communities are not artifacts of a time long passed but vital to our common survival, I am, however, wary of the implications of Roy’s construction, as there remains the suggestion that the Adivasis are otherworldly deities wherein the *only* claim they make on us is that of the use they might have in managing our own survival.

The Dandakaranya forest and its landscape is also subject to this essentializing impulse in Roy’s representations. While detailing her time “walking with the [Maoist] comrades,” she takes care to note the beauty of the forest in and through which they walk. Upon first entering, she writes how “It was a beautiful day. The forest floor was a carpet of gold” (51). She writes of the growth, the richness, the sensory experience that she has and finds in this place: “The mahua has just begun to flower and is dropping its pale-green blossoms like jewels on the forest floor. The air is suffused with its slightly heady smell” (131). In each instance, aspects of the forest are likened to valuable commodities—“gold” and “jewels.” She reflects how, as she prepares to leave, “the forest has changed even since I first entered it. The chironjee, silk cotton and mango trees have begun to flower” (143). In these descriptions, Roy frames the forest as sort of teeming with resistance; even as its been subject to a plethora of memorandums of understand (MOUs)—and mined and decimated in the name of ‘progress’ and ‘development’—it continues to flower and bloom, to persist. There appears, however, another set of descriptions of the forest, suggesting the extent to which Roy is particularly smitten with the enchantment that seems to envelope the landscape in the darkness of night. She writes, as she settles in one evening: “It’s

the most beautiful room I have slept in in a long time. My private suit in a thousand-star hotel” (57); a few pages later, Roy notes the fluidity and precarious freedom that the forest cover seems to inspire: “I’m surprised at how much I love being here. There is nowhere else in the world that I would rather be. Who should I be tonight? Kaamraid Rahel, under the stars?” (60); again, the forest brings pleasure, enjoyment: “It’s the most wonderful thing, walking in the forest at night” (95). On the one hand, passages such as these seem to construct an alternative narrative of the Dandakaranya forest as more than just plunderable fodder for corporate development; it offers an opportunity—a mediated, vexed, and framed opportunity, to be sure, but a possibility nonetheless—to encounter an alternative narrative of this land that the state is currently decimating. What are the implications, the costs, however, of this account? Despite her physical proximity with this community, her language seems to suggest the bewilderment of a voyeur, at best, and the infantilizing impulse of a well-intentioned, cosmopolitan liberal, at worst. At other times, moreover, Roy’s language appears to lean into impulses that, indeed, appear as admiration, but the slippage to reifying reverence is threatening; consider the following, longer passage:

There is a spare beauty about the place. Everything is clean and necessary. No clutter. A black hen parades up and down the low mud wall. A bamboo grid stabilizes the rafters of the thatched roof and doubles as a storage rack. There’s a grass broom, two drums, a woven reed basket, a broken umbrella and a whole stack of flattened, empty corrugated cardboard boxes. Something catches my eye. I need my spectacles. Here’s what’s printed on the cardboard: Ideal Power 90 High Energy Emulsion Explosive (Class-2) SD CAT ZZ. (54)

The startling juxtaposition at the end of this phrase—that is, the discovery that the empty cardboard boxes originally held and transported explosives (We seemed to be called to ask, Who ‘received’ or ‘encountered’ those explosives?)—is, perhaps, the most startling of the sequence, denoting the infiltration and ensnaring penetration of the state. However, I am most interested in what happens prior. Note the present-tense verbs which situate the reader as a companion of Roy, an outsider among the comrades. In the bulk of the passage, Roy notes the conservationist habits of this group and this place (as she emphasizes elsewhere in the text, it is a community “more Gandhian than any Gandhian, ... [with] a lighter carbon footprint than any climate change evangelist” [94]). The objects they do have, as Roy describes them, appear to be either handmade or reused and recycled: a “grass broom ... woven reed basket, a broken umbrella.” There is an image being carefully constructed, here, in this frame—one of a people righteously committed to living with and in respect to the earth. It must be a startling encounter, indeed, to leave the “modern,” “developed” capitalist city for the forest—a place not “untouched” by capitalism, but certainly not entirely concrete—to share space and time with a community who have all-together different rhythms and relations to goods and land. Roy’s account of the encounter, however, throws into relief the possibility that such encounters, even as they perform the imaginative work of making visible alternative ways of being, can never wholly escape the reifying impulse which, further distances and separates not only Roy but also her readers—us—from exploited and hunted communities such as the adivasi. That is, even as the humanizing impulse attempts to facilitate and make possible an encounter and recognition of another, it is always tethered to the mystifying logic wherein such a relation is either reified or made altogether impossible.

### **The recalcitrant potential of humanizing narrations**

Considering these limitations, *Walking* and *The Beast* as humanizing narratives do take care to bring into focus the subjectivity of the respective communities they cover, and it does seem necessary to attend to this subjectivity, querying the extent to which it might be positioned as resistant to the demands of capital. That is, despite the risks and limitations of Roy and Martínez's humanizing narrations, I want to acknowledge the possibility they suggest of productively intervening in the capital-labor relation, a relation always antagonistic, contradictory, and interdependent. For it must be remembered that labor-power is extracted not from abstract specters but from material, flesh-and-blood humans—people with the needs, desires, and imaginations that humanizing narratives hold at least the potential to bring into focus. So, attending to the relation between capital and labor, the very aspect of labor that capital aims to subsume, as part of its imperative toward endless accumulation, is labor's subjectivity. Conversely, the subjectivity of labor is that which is in continuous struggle against capital's interpellation. This point is nicely articulated by Nicholas De Genova when he writes how the “subordination of labour is, above all, the subordination of precisely the *subjectivity* of the labourer”—so that, labor is always simultaneously both for and against capital.<sup>17</sup> While never untouched by capital's logic—given the totalizing nature of capitalism as a global system—labor, from this perspective, seems to have an emergent quality, always holding and presenting to capital both the site of potential value and the site of resistant subjectivity, wherein labor is “a volatile and always at least potentially insubordinate force” (De Genova, 4). So, it seems necessary, in this present project, to at least consider Roy and Martínez's narratives as, at least in part, doing the critical work of elucidating and articulating the very subjectivity of the communities that capital and accompanying hegemonic powers aim to render surplus and disposable.

These questions of labor's subjectivity seem to be also bound up in the ontological issues that Butler argues are at stake in the act of framing. The ontological problem of defining what and who counts as a life is itself an operation or method of power (Butler 1), and normative categories of what counts as human are rooted in social and political force, organization and interpellation (2-3). Butler, even despite the work of abstraction at the foundation of her argument, does prompt for us an important question: What sorts of lives does the frame allow to be apprehended by particular communities of spectators? To help think alongside and in response to this question, Butler introduces an ontological category of "grievability," wherein one can be either grievable or ungrievable. To be grievable is to be recognized as a life that can, in fact, be lost and, thus, mourned—which conversely facilitates that life's protection. "Ungrievable lives," Butler writes, "are those that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a list and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed" (xix). Butler argues that implicit to the discourse of humanization is this marker of grievability, wherein an argument is made in the context of whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace" (75). While this framework of grievability again appears generative, Butler doesn't seem to be able to inquire deeply into how this category of grievability is differentially dispersed beyond the imperatives of the nation-state—for the rigid sedimentation of this global organizing framework cannot, either, be understood outside the capital-labor relation.<sup>18</sup> That is, it doesn't seem possible—if we are to acknowledge the totalizing nature of capitalism—to think this categorization of grievability outside the category of labor. Therefore, I want to argue that if humanizing representations, such as Roy and Martínez's, are to be

productively read as resistant to capital—if they are to work beyond abstract and mystifying affective responses—subjectivity of the communities of focus must be articulated with recourse to labor. In fact, Sandro Mezzadra argues that it is of vital importance to attend to the subjectivity of the exploited just as much as it is important to uncover the contours and depths of their suffering, vis-à-vis the catastrophes that result from the imperatives of accumulation.<sup>19</sup> If our controlling images of these populations only attend to the latter, they necessarily render them to “an inferior position, denying them all chance of becoming subjects” (268), wherein the exploited can only be apprehended as “hollowed by hunger and misery and needing above all care and help” (267).

Indeed, Roy’s text includes moments wherein the Adivasis’ very subjectivity is framed distinctly as resistance, attending to labor as a category that is central to grasping the exploitation of these communities. Roy provides rigorous history of tribal resistance in India, wherein she seems to demand that these communities’ resistance be seen as distinct from the trajectory and dominant narrative of the Maoist communist rebellion: “It’s worth keeping in mind that the adivasi people have a long and courageous ... To look upon them as brainless puppets ... is to do them something of a disservice” (32); “It’s convenient to forget that tribal people in central India have a history of resistance that predates Mao by centuries” (42). In this textual framing, Roy seems to be arguing for the agency of the ordinary tribal person, which in itself is an act of individualizing and differentiating but in a way that doesn’t aim to reify or essentialize. Toward the end of the collection, in its final essay, Roy writes,

Implicit in a lot of the debate around Maoists is the old, patronizing tendency to cast ‘the masses,’ the adivasi people in this case, in the role of the dimwitted horde, completely controlled by a handful of wicked ‘outsiders’. ... There is something very disturbing

about this inability of credit ordinary people with being capable of weighing the odds and making their own decisions. (204)

This ability to choose from the options before you, Roy seems to argue, is a very foundational task that contributes to a dignified life. She demands that the adivasis be accorded that; choice, though, can contribute to dangerous narratives that thwart activism and systemic justice, and Roy complicates the link between agency, available and accessible choices, and circumstance:

People who live in situations like this do not have easy choices. They certainly do not simply take instructions from a handful of ideologues who appear out of nowhere waving guns. Their decisions on what strategies to employ take into account a whole host of considerations. ... The decision whether to be a Gandhian or a Maoist, militant or peaceful, ... is not always a moral or ideological one. Quite often is a tactical one. (207)

Roy, moreover, is able to bring into focus different layers and dimensions of this collective—not just violent, not just murdered, not just displaced, but joyous, too, and celebratory; as she witnesses the celebrations of Bhumkal, Roy writes, “this is what they’ve come for. For this. Happiness is taken very seriously here, in the Dandakayranya forest. ... No one sings or dances alone. This, more than anything else, signals their defiance towards a civilization that seeks to annihilate them” (116-7). In this passage, the Adivasis’ celebration can productively be read as a sustained, collective performance of subjectivity that is both attentive and resistant to the capitalist imperative that they be stripped of their land and interpellated as wage-laborers. This representation seems to insist on the Adivasis’ incorrigibility, their refusal to this interpellation, calling the propagandic bluff of the state which proclaims they have the opportunity to become “modern Indian citizens of progress,” capable of partaking in the “fruits of modern development” (43). In this regard, the Adivasis’ subjectivity is brought into focus specifically with recourse to

their emergent position as laborers and, more broadly, labor as a pertinent analytical and political category.

The humanizing narrative of Martínez is, too, replete with passages that position the migrants in their subjectivity and complexity; however, the sort of complexity Martínez narrates—what migrants are wearing, their leisure time spent joking, chatting, smoking—is more removed, less tethered to subjectivity that is actively resistant to the coercion of capital. Indeed, what is silent in Martínez's text is the fact that almost all migrants are being forced to leave their homes and head to *El Norte*, the U.S., in order to find work, to become wage-laborers, so that they can earn money.<sup>20</sup> This, of course, is not a decision to be ridiculed or critiqued. To earn a wage, to earn money, are capitalism's very requirements for the survival of the laborer, after they have been dispossessed of their own methods by which to sustain their material life. However, when mediated and narrated in this transnational representation, the subjectivity of the migrants is much more easily co-opted by capitalism's logic, resulting in a reading of the migrant's journey as that of individual hard work and persistence. This lack of attention is puzzling, for Martínez does, throughout the text, provide analysis of the ways in which the logic of capital structures the economies of the migrant routes: the migrant's body (specifically the female migrant's body) is commodified; the coyotes—the *polleros*—are laborers exploited by management; Los Zetas are the shrewd capitalists of the region, wherein the exploitation of migrants are only their third business (behind arms and drug trafficking); and migrants sustain whole economies.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, then, the immediate exploitation of Central American migrants along the routes through Mexico become visible (specifically in regard to their violent commodification), but their subjectivity—their movement, strategies, habits, etc.—don't register

beyond that of a vulnerable, precarious body, leaving the larger system of exploitation that initially necessitates their journeys invisible and opaque.

### **Thinking, apprehending humanizing narrations within the boundaries of global capitalism**

This project has been a labor driven by a nagging, persistent disquiet that first emerged from my initial encounter with Martínez's collection a half decade ago, which has only become more troubling and entrenched since, so that upon each reading of *Waking* and *The Beast*, their attentive and ardent representations of their subjects simultaneously and contradictorily seem to clarify yet obfuscate my recognition of and relation to them. Such is why Butler's work on the frame appears as initially enticing as it does, for it seems to offer a framework for a critical reading practice that aims at facilitating a recognition of the other that is politically potent. At the edges of this project, however, has been an argument that pushes back against the dehistoricization and abstraction of projects such as Butler's—an argument for seeing and grasping capitalism not only as an economic system that can be stepped into and out of per individual choice and will, but rather a totalizing schematic that fundamentally and necessarily structures our social and political relations and imaginations. As such, our representational practices—both those of production and reading—need to be attendant to capitalism's demands and logics. Otherwise, as I have aimed my engagement with the “frame” to demonstrate, methods for and attempts at new ways of apprehending, while suggesting clarification, can only usher further mystification—wherein appearances of recognition are, in fact, moments of *mis*recognition.

So, while humanizing narrations appear to be so persuasive and such profound acts of resistance to hegemonic narratives of invisibilizing, demonizing, or otherwise othering, we cannot assume that they can get us as spectators somehow beyond or liberated from the ideological

mystifications of capital. They—fraught and contradictory as they are—simply cannot transcend its fundamental logic. So, while discursive representations that, for example, detail the violent brutality waged against a Guatemalan woman might appear to facilitate a possible recognition of and connection with her necessarily get stuck and caught up in affective responses that naturalize an inevitable “them, over there” condition, making a political recognition of that relation within the framework of the capital-labor relation impossible. Even, moreover, the most impeccable, anti-capitalist intentions cannot prevent representations that reify their subjects, as the infantilizing and mythologizing impulses in Roy’s narrative reveal. At stake in this project, however, are not just Roy and Martínez’s individual narratives but the capacity of the entire Saidian intellectual project; that is, this argument necessarily implicates the very function and capability of humanizing narrations and our reading practices of this entire genre of texts—activist endeavors of the intellectual aimed at social justice, radical visibility, and revolutionary change. In attempting to move beyond the obvious conclusion that representational texts do not have the capacity, on their own, to change material conditions, I have aimed at complicating the status of intellectual projects such as Roy and Martínez’s, suggesting that no representation, no matter how attendant to the humanity of the subject it aims to be, can wholly resist or escape capitalism’s impulses at reification and occlusion. This need not be a hopeless conclusion, however; rather, I hope it responds to Marx call for “a ruthless criticism of everything existing,” keeping us in that necessary dialectical tension between knowing and not knowing, always attendant, afraid neither of “its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.”<sup>22</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>2</sup> The publication and circulation of Roy and Martínez’s respective works have similar trajectories that are worth noting, given each of the text’s transnational character and the Western ‘situatedness’ of this essay. Roy initially wrote the three essays featured in *Walking in English*, and they were published as individual articles on *Outlook*—an online Indian magazine—in October 2009, March 2010, and September 2010. Hamish Hamilton, a member of Penguin Books India, published the essays as a book in India in 2011; the following year, Penguin Books released the text on the U.S. market. It is this latter version that serves as the reference for this analysis.

Martínez originally wrote the fourteen essays that comprise his collection in Spanish and published them separately as dispatches over two years for *ElFaro.net*—the first online newspaper native to Latin America. The essays were first collected and published in book-form in Spanish as *Los migrantes que no importan: en el camino con los centroamericanos indocumentados en México* (“The migrants who do not matter: on the road with undocumented Central Americans in Mexico”) by Icaria Editorial—a Barcelona-based press—in 2010. Translated by Daniela Maria Ugaz and John Washington, with a forward by Francisco Goldman, Verso then published an English-language version—with an alternative title *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*—in 2013, with the paperback edition to follow in 2014. It is this paperback version to which this essay refers.

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<sup>3</sup> “Adivasis” is a collective name for the heterogeneous tribal communities living across India. I follow Roy’s example of using this term in reference to these communities. However, it must be emphasized that these are not a homogenous people; the rather small term “adivasis” refers to disparate groups with distinct ethnicities, cultures, and languages.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the very need for an intellectual to speak on behalf another—to provide the condition of exploitation with a voice in the public sphere—is indicative of a fundamental injustice within the political and economic system. In the introduction to the collection *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, editor Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that “true justice is creating a world of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities that would allow all these voiceless [the poor, the displaced, the exploited] to tell their stories and be heard, rather than be dependent on a writer or a representative of some kind” (20). Although Nguyen does not appear directly in the body of this essay, his introduction to *The Displaced* has proved to be a helpful thinking partner in this project.

<sup>5</sup> Arundhati Roy, “How to Think About Empire,” interview by Avni Sejpal, *Boston Review*, January 3, 2019, [www.bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism](http://www.bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism).

<sup>6</sup> Óscar Martínez, “Q&A with Oscar Martinez,” interview by Melissa Del Bosque, *Texas Observer*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.texasobserver.org/oscar-martinez-new-book-beast-plight-migrants-exploited-organized-crime/>.

<sup>7</sup> Óscar Martínez, “An Interview with Óscar Martínez,” interview by Michael Noll, *Read to Write Stories*, May 1, 2014, <https://readtowritestories.com/2014/05/01/an-interview-with-oscar-martinez/>.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, this sort of care and attendance to language—its grace, its rhythm, and its capacity to arrest its audience—is considered by Martínez to be one of the ethical obligations of journalism. In his interview with the *Texas Observer*, Martínez explains, “For journalism to be effective, it has to be well written. And overall under an ethical principle: If there are people like migrants who took the time to tell you their story aboard the train, who delayed their journey one day to stay at this shelter and talk to you, if there are women who had the courage to tell how a few hours ago they’d been raped along the path, you as a journalist don’t have the right to just spit that back out onto a page. You have to take the time, dedicate energy and put in a lot of work to write this the best way you can so that that person’s story can generate the feeling of impotence, the rage, the compassion and the hate that it should generate.”

<sup>9</sup> The beginning stages of this project attempted to grapple with the nature and potential of affective responses to Roy and Martínez’s texts. While such endeavors proved beyond my current scope, the following critics have been productive to think alongside: Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Laura Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2016). Butler conceives of this project as a loose continuation of her endeavor *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004). While I do not specifically cite the latter in this essay, it did provide a fuller perspective on Butler’s present project in *Frames of War*.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Brown, “Power Visible and Invisible: Neoliberalism in Marxist and Foucauldian Frames,” *School of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study* (2016): 7.

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<sup>12</sup> See Frederick Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume Three* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Part III: Historical Materialism, Marx/Engels Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the stories of Jaime, who lost a leg when trying to board one of the trains (56), the 19-year-old Honduran girl who fell from the roof of a train and was, presumably, decapitated (59-60), and the story of a pregnant woman from Guatemalan raped and strangled to death (29).

<sup>14</sup> Martínez, interview by Noll.

<sup>15</sup> Elena Ana Puga, “Migrant Melodrama and the Political Economy of Suffering,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26, no. 1 (2016): 72-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2016.1183982>.

<sup>16</sup> This occasion was in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1910 Bhumkal rebellion, in which the Koyas, an Indian tribal community, rebelled against British colonial rule in the Bastar district, located in the state of Chhattisgarh in central India.

<sup>17</sup> De Genova, “The Incurable Subject,” 4.

<sup>18</sup> See John Holloway, “Global capital and the national state,” *Capital & Class* 18, no. 1 (1994): 23-49.

<sup>19</sup> Sandro Mezzadra, “The right to escape,” *Ephemera* 4, no. 3 (2004): 267-75.

<sup>20</sup> The first essay in Martínez’s collection—one that introduces the three Alfaro brothers fleeing their home in El Salvador after their mother was murdered outside her shop—is especially vexed in this regard. While providing some specificity to the gang violence these brothers had been subject to, Martínez employs metaphor to illustrate the increasingly quotidian

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violence and terror engulfing this family and other Salvadorans. For example, “Death isn’t simple in El Salvador. It’s like a sea: you’re subject to its depths, its creatures, its darkness. Was it the cold that did it, the waves, a shark? A drunk, a gangster, a witch? They didn’t have a clue” (19). While such an aesthetic move is engrossing, it does perform an abstraction that seems to occlude and, thus, naturalize these relations.

<sup>21</sup> Such analysis occurs throughout the individual essays. Chapter four—the essay introducing Erika, Keny, and Connie—illustrates the ways in which the female body is a good with particular varying exchange value (depending on size, color, age, etc.): “The body becomes a credit card, a new platinum-edition ‘bodymatic’ [*cuerpomatic*] which buys you a little safety, a little bit of cash and the assurance that your travel buddies won’t get killed. Your bodymatic, except for what you get charged, buys a more comfortable ride on the train” (73). Chapter seven details the plight of coyote labor under the amassing economic control of Los Zetas, the latter detailed most explicitly and intently in chapter six. Martínez, moreover, is very attentive throughout the collection to the myriad ways in which the migrant is economically exploited, specifically via bribes and taxes demanded from narcos, coyotes, land owners, and Mexican authorities (see chapter nine, for example). Chapter twelve illustrates, too, the ways in which the consistent flow of migrants had come to sustain entire local economies of some of the U.S.-Mexico border towns.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 8.