Prelude and Set-up to My Essay:

Poverty is strangely something like pornography. People are tempted to know it when they see it. Or to see it when others say they know it. It’s a global issue, global in scale, but hard to pick up as one lump sum, despite the blocky nature of the concept Poverty. Unlike porn, however, poverty-as-concept hangs between being a statistical measure (moneyed amount on shifting sands) and a bio-limit of human existence. For is it a number, variably adjusted for different world currencies and unequal contexts? Or is poverty a state of human “need” that puts people, wherever they are, short of the elements required for brute survival? Opinions abound. Even the history of the notion, poverty, seems diffuse. Talk about the poor suffuses the Gospels; poverty-as-word goes back to Anglo-Norman and also Middle French; and the concept, poverty, really takes flight in Victorian times, especially with Thomas Malthus’ treatise *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published from 1798 to 1826. But despite this haze, once again children, in this current moment, as we think we know them, as we concoct them, hover at the center of our talk of harm. Children are the face of poverty’s race, place, and ravage, even when poverty devastates adults.

This is a project on globalized poverty and sexuality—and the queer intercourse that connects them, often via children and their sexuality. In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, my most recent book, I simultaneously praised Lee Edelman’s rage against the Child and stepped to the side of it. As you’ll recall, in *No Future*, Edelman criticized the figure of the Child (capitalized to underscore its force and singularity) as a pleasure-killing conception of frightful, brutish normativity. I took a different path to critique. That is, I opened up the queerness of children into complication, unseen possibility, radical darkness (not normativity), and queer innocence of all things. Moreover, I did so via fiction, as the only dense conceptual archive I could draw upon, given the strictures on research on children and the dearth of histories of sexual childhood. Now I want to get at the monolith of Poverty, put it on the table and open it up, by using the blade of the sexual child. Three specific aims distinguish this project and make it the first queer theory treatise to address poverty as its central topic:

1) I want to enter the eye of the storm, the constant cliché, of the child-in-peril-in-the-third-world—the “Western” icon of globalized poverty—to see what funky logics linger there, logics surrounding the sexual child, believe it or not. This way in, through the sexual child, will immediately distinguish my new project from sociological treatises such as *Childhood in Global Perspective* (by Karen Wells), which for all its breadth, even for its focus on race, class, and gender, nowhere addresses non-normativity in childhood sexuality, never mind how the latter links to poverty.

2) I will make the target of my book the “worried well,” the reader not-in-need. The “you”/“we”/“me” I’ll be critiquing is largely white-collar, maybe academic,
securely professional (at least for the moment), petit bourgeois or bourgeois, perhaps likely to “write about” poverty, and quite likely to be the sort of person Save the Children is addressed to, not surprisingly. In this respect, I’m looking at *something like* Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism” (the name she gives to the state of disappointment felt by anyone when their hope goes sour) but I’m stressing the divide that is seen on the knife-edge of poverty between those in need and those who watch need. I agree with Lauren that anyone can know the sadism of optimism, but I want to view affective complications surrounding poverty from different ends of the economic telescope: from the point of view of the one not suffering (in a group much larger than the one percent) and the one “in poverty” by the shifting measures of psychic and economic distress.

3) Bringing together the realms of queer theory and subaltern studies, among many others, I’ll make my focus not just fairness or redistribution, or economic justice, but also luxury as a crucial need, thinking social justice *with* and *through* the death drive, alongside bliss, *as a way* to call for structural change and to craft a model for a queer ethics as we wait for change we can’t be sure will come. With this focus on what I’ll call a politics, an ethics, of luxury-meets-opacity, which I confess is riddled with landmines, my book parts from a book I quite admire, Beth Povinelli’s *Economies of Abandonment*.

Here, then, in miniature, are the main arguments grounding the first two installments of my book. In my first piece (which, perversely, you’ll hear second), “Kid Orientalism: How a Global Future for Child Sexuality is Now Surfacing,” it will look like poverty only obliquely enters the fray. In fact, it visibly hides inside “peril,” alongside, in and around, the issue of HIV among children of color. At heart, I speculate on a strange dynamic just now emerging in Anglo-American public culture. A future that the public fears is coming—child sexuality—evidenced by sexting, “gay” kids in middle school, and sexual bullying—is causing or accompanying exportation, of an odd sort, of a fading child (*the figure* of the “innocent” child) to foreign lands, where it can soothingly be rediscovered. Staking down the center of my speculations is the HIV child: a sexualized child in a globalized world. Indeed, I proffer two paradoxes. First, I show how the HIV child, in the U.S., becomes the face of the threatening more than the threatened child, messing with the narrative of childhood innocence that the U.S. general public has long favored but is increasingly starting to question. Second, I demonstrate how, in an almost opposite dynamic, world documentaries on the-child-in-peril-in-the-third-world (a genre enjoying conspicuous success on the art-film circuit) are working to restore the “Western”-style innocent child through, of all things, the sexualized, racialized, HIV child. What can explain these dueling dynamics? How are African-American fictions an antidote to these world documentaries, even though the latter are medically, historically, politically astute? How does the answer rest with depictions of children’s passion for signification, children’s libidinal relationship to signifiers? These are the questions I attempt to answer as I pit this passion against what I theorize, in my words, as Kid Orientalism, showing that documentaries conceptually capture far less of children than do fictions of fictionalized children.
So, on the one hand, the act of exporting the innocent child (who appears innocent, in a foreign context, because s/he’s sexualized!) helps the general public in the U. S. with its child sexuality problem, or so it seems, if one ignores the paradox that allows the pivot (from sexual childhood to childhood innocence produced through sexual peril and poverty). On the other hand, the-child-in-peril-in-the-third-world becomes a threat in a different direction, even as it soothes our sexual fears. It becomes the icon of globalized poverty that rather easily makes us run from it, due to the demands it makes for our response. Feeling thus threatened, we would flee from children whom, we imagine, are desiring us. This is where my next installment enters in, a true work in progress, tentatively titled: “Somewhere a Child is Desiring You: A Thought Experiment for Those Not in Need.” One part of this experiment—a large part, really—involves my writing in and out of several registers: direct address to reader, confession, theory, journalism, literature, film, and ethics tied to politics. Thanks in advance for entering my delirium. It’s a crazed piece.

“Somewhere a Child is Desiring You: A Thought Experiment for Those Not in Need”

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“Why should I write about a young girl whose poverty is so evident?”

“She has clung to my skin like viscous glue. . . . [She] doesn’t want to get off my back.”

--The Hour of the Star, Clarice Lispector

Do you ever feel it? A child on your back. Some kind of image—gauzy or sharp, fully arresting, faintly intent—drops down on you; presses on you; floats momentarily, sticking to you; coming from nowhere, or close by. Maybe from a movie; someone you’ve seen; the flash-force of dreams: of children, in need.

It’s a fat platitude. You know that. A stereotype, sunk in the sediment of sentiment built up over the years. And yet; still. Behind the image there is need—a range of lives in poverty—we do not refute. And so, perversely, this need haunts by dint of its well-worn life as an image, of a child no less, we feel we must resist. Is there a way
to grasp the embroilments of our push-back, our recoil from platitude? We see poverty; we resist its image. But what do we see?

Do we see need? Do we really see children-in-need? Or in a sort of Lacanian joke lying in wait for what we perceive, does need never appear as itself? Does it always feel like demand, emerge as demand, seeking a pound of our flesh from us? Is a child’s need a pressing request for a response: proof of our love (or so we think)? Does this sense of request make us feel we’re desired by a child, even by children who don’t know us? One might wonder what kind of queer, reverse-pedophilic dynamic this is.¹

To be frank, I’ve felt it—this desire (desire by a child). I’ve felt it while I’ve fought it, while I’ve been fighting the cult of the Child, believing with others the Child is a fiction.² Now I want to explore this desire where need hides: touch this wall, its dank surrounds. Perhaps you, too, want to feel this barrier, penetrate the meaning of the images you carry of children in need, however they find themselves inside you. (What are your images? How are they there?) And though I know in advance that I’ll cover compassion as a farce, subaltern (non-)speaking, chronic lethality, and my brand of hope in failure—a cheery line-up—I will get at poverty and children’s needs by new means. Not by a politics of suffering or trauma (however reasonable the latter might seem) but, instead, by a politics of luxury, linking social justice to bliss and the death drive.

Central to my efforts is a radical fiction written by Latin America’s premier woman writer of the last century, Brazil’s Clarice Lispector, who has penned the novel *The Hour of the Star* (1977). Finished while Lispector was dying of cancer, this novella—lyrical, humorous, annoying, and spiritual—tells of the narrator’s attempts to write a story about a poor girl (a typist and virgin who loves Coca Cola), whom he
concocts from a girl he’s glimpsed in the streets of Rio, a girl who reminds him
(nostalgically, no less) of children he knew in the racialized, impoverished part of Brazil
where he grew up. What can such a fiction possibly tell us about our relation to children
in need and our ironic thoughts of them, those desires we feel from them, that we may
carry? Can this fiction address my rather depressing line-up rendered above? Can it be a
new conceptual means of scouting need? Yes, and more. Think of my moves, then, as
an experiment, my concerted effort to make queer theory meet subaltern studies, and to
make both rethink materialities, really to consider a materialized, materializing ethics of
luxury-wed-to-opacity—something I hope sounds opaque to you now, since it’s the task
of this piece to think it and explain it. This is an experiment I will conduct by using key
texts from both domains (the worlds of queer theory and subaltern studies), staying inside
their familiar territories—before I bridge them via ideas from feminist theory that have
nearly passed from view.\(^3\)

But, first, a confession of idiocy. Mine, of course.

Across Divides? Vignettes and Stupid Thoughts

“I am doing all this to put myself on the same footing as the girl from the North-east.”
—*The Hour of the Star*

It started up with the start of my job. Not any longer a semi-invisible graduate
student—now a professor with an office and a door—I sat daily writing my book. (In a
moment, there will be janitors and gunmen. Things will get exciting.) It was 1990, when
queer theory was emerging from the energies of feminist theory, and post-structuralist
work was invested (as is too familiar) in critiquing metaphysics. To be more specific, I
was exploring (what I then called) spiritual materialism in the novels of Victorian women and the folds of post-structuralist thought. That is, I was showing how the-body-as-matter-on-its-own-terms (*not reducible* to cultural constructions) was for post-structuralists something inaccessible, since we think and know through constructions, but, even so, a matter of belief. (I found this phenomenon in thinkers as diverse as Roland Barthes, Donna Haraway, Jane Gallop, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and others.) It (this body, resistant, persistent) echoed in this way the quagmire of ‘God’—something inaccessible, a matter of belief—for many Victorians.

Further, I claimed that post-structuralists get mystical exactly when they seek to be materialist, giving rise to what I called “real-bodies mysticism.” (Witness Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray in their moves toward St. Theresa right when they most want to grasp *jouissance.*) And, as a corollary, I was demonstrating how the Victorians, in reverse, found their increasingly elusive sense of ‘God’ (indexed by Carlyle and so many others) inside Labour: that which “bodies forth the form of Things Unseen” (Carlyle’s phrase), if one can train oneself to see labor. Here were homologous, mutually reversing, spiritual materialisms shared by Victorians and post-structuralists. More to the point, as an instance of these problems, I was scouting the labor of servants in its ghostly, material forms in novels such as *Middlemarch*. Here what mattered was how the novel demonstrates certain moneyed tendencies not to see the bodies or labors of servants even when they cross before one’s very eyes. Characters, for instance, proclaim their glee over seeing a beautiful bounty before them (“here comes my grilled bone!”) without a tethered sense of the body that’s made it or carried it to them (as if the grilled bone has arrived on air, as the sentence suggests). *Middlemarch*, that is, reveals or implies labor-
as-hidden in its servants’ surfacing, barely but visibly, inside even sexual scenes at the
“family hymen,” I suggested.\textsuperscript{5a} Thus, one can see, if one knows how to look, the visibly
hidden bodies of servants inside scenes of greatest desire. Desire becomes a place to find
what’s implied (here about labor), however (un)seen.\textsuperscript{5b}

Back to my door. Now that you know how to picture my thoughts, you can
imagine—or maybe you can’t—what took place each day when the janitor entered my
office to empty my trash (as I wrote on servants…. and their ghostly labors….). How
should I acknowledge him? How indicate that I saw his work, performed on my behalf?
I became a pretzel, twisting into shapes. I could not ignore him: I chatted him up. I
could not pretend that our labors were symmetrical: I asked about his job (how he liked
it, how he thought about its structure and its pay—god, I did). I couldn’t make him
reducible to structures—nor could I falsely imagine us “friends,” though every day we
conversed as he stood and held my trash.

Amid these absurdities, daily, perplexing, there occurred another. I had gone over
to Federal Express to send a piece of my book-in-progress to \textit{boundary} 2 (a journal aptly
named for my next dilemma)—on strict deadline. I was in the process of collecting my
materials, actually leaning inside my car from my place in the street, when a voice behind
me said, “Yeah, that’s right, I’m hijacking you,” and I felt a gun grazing my back.
Slowly, I swiveled to face my attacker, a man who looked both shaky and ill, a “Native
American” man, I thought, cloaking his gun beneath a jacket, dirty and worn, draped on
his arm. Surprising even myself I said: “What do you need? How can I help?” He
replied bitterly, almost sarcastically: “Yeah, I need money.” Then I explained I had
something to mail, something important, had to retain enough money to do so, but I’d
hand over everything else; everything else being twenty dollars. He looked disgusted, but took the money and staggered back. (He was not well; it was more obvious with each minute.) But in the process of slinking away, toward Fed Ex, I found a twenty deep in my pocket. I called him back and cheerily presented a better take. At which point, our dynamic changed. He brightened and started praising God, praising me: “God bless you. Thank you. I thank you so much.” I was now the good guy, worthy of praise. My heart sank. More so when I saw his armsleeve slide. What I had thought was the gun he held was the end of a splint on his broken arm. I had been hijacked—been held up—by an injured limb, belonging to someone, needing something.

And though these people are not impoverished children, the impasse here—risible compassion, which turned me on myself—is one we’ll see again, when we try to see a child. So, in preparation, we need to ask: what’s going wrong in our scenes of compassion?

Compassion Traps

“(The girl worries me so much that I feel drained. She has drained me empty. . . . )”
--The Hour of the Star

True, compassion is emotionally tiring. My partner’s work in cancer (social work oncology) has taught me about compassion fatigue, a pressing issue in cancer care. After years of easing death, one feels drained. You’ve “taken it on,” suffered “with” both patients and families. Talk about feeling need as demand. No wonder specialists are now addressing and seeking to lessen compassion fatigue, so that compassion can breathe, be restored.
Who, however, would attack compassion—as itself toxic? Can one criticize this form of caring? As you may know, queer theorists do. At least two voices, different from each other, raise profound issues surrounding compassion—“compassion’s compulsion,” as one of them puts it. Indeed, my Federal Express vignette hints at these dilemmas, ones which relations with children only magnify. Fittingly, in fact, the cover of the volume I will now address—entitled *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*—features a rather iconic image: a large white hand, clearly an adult’s, reaches down to grasp the brown-black hand of a very small child, the book’s back cover crediting the photo to IndexStock.com, as if to underscore the picture’s ubiquitous, generic force. Moreover, the place of the child in these relations may be so expected, the volume doesn’t cover it.

Be that as it may, Lauren Berlant, the volume’s editor, in her “Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding),” brings her incisive, analytical eye to the heart of the matter, right from the start. In a statement crucial for the haunting-by-image I’ve been invoking, and even for my moment with my injured man, Berlant points out that compassion is, in some respects, now “a peculiarly modern topic, because . . . documentary realness about the pain of strangers is increasingly at the center of both fictional and nonfictional events.”7 (How many images have I seen, for instance, on PBS of American Indian substance abuse and down-and-out postures of underemployed Native people?) And from the start, one might sense why queer theorists and other kinds of thinkers care to deem compassion a questionable good.8 As Berlant puts it along the way: “social optimism” as practiced through compassion “involves enforcing normative projects of orderliness” (5). Think about the bookjacket or my troubled hijacker: let me
help you up to where I’m standing; here’s another twenty, now just go away. The homeostatic thrust of compassion, one might say—hand in glove with normativity—irks queer theorists.

Intriguingly, in fact, Berlant begins with “compassionate conservatives” (so they styled themselves not long ago), presumably because one sees a dramatized version of compassion’s problems in their midst. Directly, boldly, these interlocutors ask “individuals . . . to take up the obligation to ameliorate the suffering that used to be addressed by the state” (3). Therefore, their compassion commits them to “smaller-scale, face-to-face publics” (3), often mistaking “the local” for community and, in any case, preferring individual response to larger, structural changes that are (importantly, ineluctably) “impersonal.” Indeed, Berlant reminds us that “Great Society ideology” had correctly “presumed that the social realities of privilege did not require individual intentions and practices to contribute directly to inequality”; rather, leaders like LBJ “argued [that] unjust inequalities were objective and enabled by state sanction” (2).

So-called bleeding hearts, then, may themselves lose sight of how an embrace of “feeling with” can lead to feeling replacing action and a stress on persons occluding structures—both of which are dangers in my vignettes. Did my feelings result in any actions that helped to change structures? Or did my focus on my wish to be compassionate suck up all the oxygen in both of my scenes? And did my “feeling with,” in all actuality, emphasize distance in numerous ways (between bemused janitor and chatty scholar; needy man and “beneficent” withholder)? Was I snagged by compassion’s “desire for the good to feel simple”—even though at every turn, and surely by the end, my pretzel relations belied all simplicity? (More on simplicity’s failures,
later.) And, of course, the matter of scale always threatens to break up the party: “when we want to rescue X, are we thinking of rescuing everyone like X, or is it a singular case that we see?” (6); how, then, can we “keep from being overwhelmed by the necessary scale that an ethical response would take” in these scenes? (I felt overwhelmed by just one man. His arm exhausted me.) Not surprisingly, Berlant persists: “What if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality?” (10).

Hold that thought. Let’s even amp it, as we shift registers. In his polemic entitled No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman comes at compassion—“compassion’s compulsion”—from a piercing Lacanian angle. Bound and determined to uphold Lacan’s aggressive critique of compassion’s aggressions, Edelman cites the relevant passages: “My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism,” so Lacan declares; “altruism that is situated on the level of the useful.” For here’s the kicker, “What I want is the good of others provided that it remain in the image of my own” (83). It’s this structure—narcissistic, full of fantasy, totalizing, normalizing—that Lacan, you probably know, calls the Imaginary (the domain of images, real or imagined).9 Compassion is a picture we have of ourselves. Strictly speaking, no one else enters in. Hence, compassion’s “intrinsic callousness” (72), as Edelman puts it.

And this hollow earnestness is twinned for Edelman via Lacan by “the fantasy of heterosexual love and the reproductive Couple it elevates” (82), since all of these—compassion, (hetero)sexual romance, and baby-making in their standard renderings—are totalizing dreams of self-completion: dreams of becoming whole as a person by joining “with” others and of one’s Oneness, one’s Two-Becoming-One (courtesy of romance),
producing a child who “reproduces” “me.” Over and against this three-sided fantasy of my lover, my child, and me, and its vision of vanquishing loss, Edelman sets jouissance and the death drive. They together register, as Edelman states it, “the unmasterable contingency at the core of every subject as such,” “the force that insists on the void,” “the gap or wound of the Real” (73). This gap or wound is not just the sense delivered by Freud that we are driven to return to death—our most homeostatic state, since we were “dead” before we were born, to put it imprecisely, and will die again. It’s also the sense, stressed by Lacan, that Symbolic systems—language supremely, but might we add money?—cannot fill this hole, since these systems are contingent, arbitrary, incomplete displacements of human contingency. Or as Barbara Johnson has defined it, the death drive is “a kind of unthought remainder,” even inside linguistic structures. Edelman builds on this point by saying that “one name for this unnameable remainder . . . is jouissance,” which has been translated as “enjoyment” (and I would say “bliss”). Crucially, however, despite our usual associations with “enjoying,” this “enjoyment” is “a movement beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (25). All of which amounts, he says, to “the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the drive” (106-107). Here’s “a negativity that dismantles every substance” (109).

Believe it or not, Clarice Lispector’s The Hour of the Star will make sense of these positions—and take us back to children, like it or not, as the door to need. I find myself tempted to say, furthermore, had the volume Compassion never surfaced, Lispector could have mounted this critique by herself and in the most entertaining way
imaginable. Plus, she brings other matters to the table. Before we discover exactly what they are, let’s press on with a few more voices that further delineate what poverty begs, or keeps to itself.

Compassion fatigue? Perhaps there’s a place for compassion yet, in a way we don’t foresee. For the moment only note: it’s remarkable how we can feel fatigued by children we have never met. Whom we may know only from images. Only as image.

Subaltern Children: At the Clinic, in the Closet

“She had no idea what he was talking about but felt that the doctor expected her to smile. So she smiled.”—The Hour of the Star

Fatigue by image is where we began, wondering if fiction can challenge our exhaustion and our inaction. So, in short order, we’ll find ourselves in a fetid broom closet, then at the doctor’s, seeing more of the task that awaits The Hour of the Star. But, first, let me say I’ve been struck by how many people—academics and non-academics, in equal measure—have told me they chose not to see Precious (a film I’ll address in my public lecture). Not that they didn’t get around to seeing it, though some didn’t. But that they didn’t “feel up” to seeing Precious: “too depressing,” “too negative,” “too stereotypical,” even “too campy” in its melodramas, have been the senses conveyed to me.

Those responses make me think that a certain scene of need, of children in need, is all too apparent: the need-as-already-appearing-as-demand. In this respect, we can contrast the child in need with the “ghostly ‘gay’ child” that I made central to The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century. There, in that book, I made it
clear that even if we meet the latter kind of children in our lives and reading, they are not in History in this important sense: they are not a matter of historians’ writings or of the general public’s belief. The silences surrounding the queerness of these children happen to be broken—broken almost only—by fictional forms. Fictions literally offer the forms that certain broodings on these children might take. Thus, as I suggest, History, in practice, as historiography, like a queer child, grows itself sideways and outside itself. There are now ideas (for instance, in fictions) that sit beside histories, but in all likelihood will be “in History” sometime in the future. The “gay” child is History’s future act of looking back (even if the concept of this child doesn’t last). In this way, History grows itself from the side, from what is to the side of it—often in fictions—before it takes this sideways growth in some form to itself.

Distinct from the “gay” child, children in need are all too apparent, or so it seems. So much so, we’ve become expert at blocking their need. We don’t “go see” it. Or we see versions (Born into Brothels, War Dance, etc.) that provide uplift—at a remove. Thus, as I’ll say, no wonder they give us resilience narratives to soothe our encounter with these children’s pain. It’s not just the wish to make children something other than victims, which of course is laudable. It’s a concession to “Western” heartbreak—the filmmakers’ fear of breaking our hearts—which we might feel threatened with and so might cause us to turn ourselves away (the filmmakers’ nightmare).

Someone else has thought about our turning away, our need to block what we really do know. And she’s thought about it through her fiction writing. Ursula LeGuin, in her short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” imagines a circumstance in which a city’s “happiness and well-being of its inhabitants depend on a small child
being constrained to and humiliated in a small putrid broom closet.”

So anthropologist and critical theorist Beth Povinelli summarizes the tale, making fiction, at least in her essay, the clearest rendering of Povinelli’s sense of what must be confronted.

What must be confronted is something hard to see, even if we see that a child is in a closet. What’s hard to see is a co-constituting materiality—of suffering and “our” place in it—that an urge to empathy won’t be apt to spy. That is, this problem is one of visibility, along with the matter of the suffering it concerns. Here, therefore, are three crucial points Povinelli encounters in the short story. She sees LeGuin as illustrating what Povinelli calls “socially cosubstantial corporeality”; or, as Povinelli so aptly describes it: “My happiness is substantially within her unhappiness; my corporeal well-being is part of a larger mode of embodiment in which her corporeal misery is a vital organ” (171). Or think of this corporeality as belying the usual assumption of “I am not in you; you are not in me” (179). “As a result,” Povinelli continues, “the ethical imperative is not to put oneself in the child’s place, nor is it to experience the anxiety of potentially being put in her place.” Shades of Berlant and Edelman, that is, Povinelli reads a rejection of “empathy” in LeGuin’s ethics: “Instead, the ethical imperative is to know that your own good life is already in her broom closet, and as a result, either you must compromise on the goods to which you have grown accustomed . . . or admit that these goods are more important to you than her suffering” (171). And, finally, Povinelli wants to underscore that “the nature of the suffering that interests LeGuin is ordinary, chronic, acute, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, eventful, and sublime”; “every so often the child in the broom closet is given a kick, but for the most part her misery is a quieter form of abjection, despair, and impoverishment.” It’s this last point that gets
Povinelli to her essay’s focus on “chronic lethality”—what for Veena Das are “slow rhythms of death,” echoed by Berlant in her shortened formulation “slow death”—as a form of “state killing” (here’s what many people will want to block). “Chronic lethality” is one’s slow, drawn out death by state execution, of a certain sort: the state’s withdrawal from, neglect of, your need (my wording here).

What, then, is Povinelli saying about the image of need? By implication, since neither “image” nor “children” are her focus, she’s saying two things that speak to my thoughts. On the one hand, she talks in terms of “open broom closets”: that is, “no less than the citizens of Omelas, members of [our] societies are fully aware of the existence of such situations in their polis and make decisions about the relation between them and their own well-being” (173). Intriguingly, then, though Povinelli isn’t making this comparison, this “open closet” structure (as queer theory early referred to it) is the kind of knowing that sees (for example, adult gay people) but keeps quiet or turns this seeing in some new direction—toward personal “blame,” “behavioral” practices, “risky” choices. (At least, this structure used to be endemic in the U.S., during the time when so many gay and lesbian people were in the closet.)13 On the other hand, Povinelli admits to “dispersed” “visibilities” that are hard to see (if you don’t know how to look?): “the statistics are dramatic but the diseases are not”; “it can be hard to see these illnesses in their normal physical state”; “their effects on mortality are usually slow and corrosive, with one thing leading to another” (175). As Povinelli, then, ends up concluding: “As I am sure [Veena] Das and [Lauren] Berlant are well aware, however, the deployment of a statistical imaginary to awaken a slumbering critical public and reason faces a central paradox. By transforming the invisible, dispersed, and uneventful into the visible,
compact, and eventful, statistics obliterate the very nature of this kind of death. . . . As a result, nothing new happens. No alternative ethical formations are initiated” (190-91). In other words, is Povinelli urging that we see this materiality as visibly hidden (an urge I discovered, in a different register, in the aims of Middlemarch)? Moreover, does this seeing constitute a materializing ethics? It seems hard, confessedly hard, to visibly render, along the way, long-term, temporally-unfolding pathways of a creeping death. What is her solution to this dead end? Tautology, intriguingly: “The cruddy, cumulative, and corrosive aspects of life have spread so deep into the everyday that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein says, nothing more I can say other than that is what is. . . . Life is defined not by some redemptive future but by the understanding that this is what is” (emphasis in original, 191).

Who would have guessed? Who would have thought that things tautological—what I will complain of in the documentaries I will discuss in my public lecture—might present differently or lead to an ethics? For Povinelli the ethical is this: “Everyone must decide if his or her happiness is worth the suffering of those within the fetid broom closet. In this world where we live, there is no exit. We can change only the distribution of life and death so that some have more and some have less” (191).

No surprise, the New Yorker doesn’t go there. It doesn’t make radical redistribution its focus or solution when it sees suffering. In a recent article, “The Poverty Clinic” (March 21, 2011), the magazine, however, does deem it “time to reassess the relationship between poverty, child development, and health.” Povinelli had reasonably said at the point of her essay’s publication in 2008 that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, to take one bureaucracy, didn’t recognize “socioeconomic status”
as “a risk factor for ill health”—so that “the sentence ‘poverty is a risk to your health’ is not sensible within its language game”—because “risks” refer to “the potentially harmful behaviors that a person chooses” (176). The New Yorker tracks a radical change in this regard. Or the promise of one. (Witness the subtitle to their article: “Can a stressful childhood make you a sick adult?”) Indeed, statistics here are not necessarily a dodge of chronic cruddiness, though they seem to telescope time at the start: in San Francisco (the site of reporting) the poverty rate for black families, most of whom live in industrial areas, is five times higher than it is for white families; congestive heart failure rates are also five times higher; and before the clinic in question opened, one private-practice pediatrician worked in an area housing over ten thousand children.

But that’s not where they start. Beneath a color photograph—of a black infant all dressed up (pink skirt, pink bow, a pair of silver shoes), to all eyes healthy, though with blank expression, warmly attended by her black doctor (a caring-looking woman)—we meet a patient who sounds like Precious from the novel PUSH: “Sixteen years old, [Monisha] was an African-American teen-age mother who had grown up in the poorest and most violent neighborhood in San Francisco. . . . [She] had arrived at the clinic with ailments that the staff routinely observed in patients: strep throat, asthma, scabies, and a weight problem” (25). But her “problems appeared to transcend mere physical symptoms”; “she was depressed and listless”; “she hated school, didn’t like her foster mother, and seemed not to care one way or the other about her two-month-old daugher” (25). Accompanying a rather eventful childhood (abandonment by mother; father a drug addict; placed in foster care, in nine different placements)—maybe event is on the scene, in some respects? 14th—these are the signs of the “ordinary, chronic, acute” suffering that
concern LeGuin in her short story (according to Povinelli) and that concern Sapphire in her novel *PUSH* (according to me). Also eerily echoic of Precious: “for a teen-ager, [Monisha] is unusually articulate about her emotional state—when she feels sad or depressed, she writes poems—and she evoked her symptoms with precision. . . . More than anything she felt anxious. . . . ‘I think about the weirdest things. . . . I think about the world ending. If a plane flies over me, I think they’re going to drop a bomb. . . .’ She was even anxious about her anxiety. ‘When I get scared . . . my heart starts beating. I start sweating. You know how people say “I was scared to death?” I get scared that that’s really going to happen to me one day’” (26). Death by anxiety.

And then there’s her doctor, whose very different childhood is spelled out, making the signifier they both share their similar color—“it helps that she is dark-skinned, like most of her patients” (25). But “feeling with” is not the central focus here. In fact, insofar as the doctor’s feelings enter this story, they are ones of queasiness: Dr. Nadine Burke, “who founded the [Bayview Child Health Center] in 2007, was having a crisis of confidence regarding her practice, and [Monisha] was the kind of patient who made her feel particularly uneasy” (25). Yet it’s what Burke believes not feels that starts to shift. She goes from thinking that a set of problems her patients face—“homelessness, gang violence, physical abuse, and sexual abuse” as well as “uncles sent to prison”—are “none of her business” to deeming them the crux of the matter (28). In other words, she enters into thoughts that are changing “the entire field of pediatric medicine” (26), embracing, recognizing “the long-term health effects of childhood trauma” via work emerging in stress physiology and neuro-endocrinology, suggesting that “long-lasting
chemical changes”—“neurochemical dysregulation”—occurs in brains and bodies of traumatized children (26).

Particularly influential have been articles such as “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Health: Turning Gold into Lead,” indicating “correlations between adverse childhood experiences [ACE’s] and negative adult outcomes” that some have deemed stunning. The New Yorker puts it this way: “Some of the results made intuitive sense. Sigmund Freud had argued that traumatic events in childhood could produce negative feelings in adulthood, and it was reasonable to assume that those feelings could lead to addiction, depression, and even suicide. But what about cancer and heart disease?” (28). More significantly, individual blame is diminished by these studies, since “somehow, the traumatic experiences of their childhoods were having a deleterious effect on their later health, through a pathway that had nothing to do with bad behavior” (28-29). Why do they say so? “The researchers looked at patients with ACE scores of 7 or higher who didn’t smoke, didn’t drink to excess, and weren’t overweight, and found that their risk of ischemic heart disease (the most common cause of death in the United States) was three hundred and sixty per cent higher than it was for patients with a score of 0” (29). All of which leads these scholars to conclude that “repeated, full-scale activation of [one’s] stress system, especially in early childhood, can lead to deep physical changes” (30). More than that, they suggest these effects move (back?) to social domains, so that Dr. Burke explains: “You can trace the pathology as it moves from the molecular level to the social level” (30). (Hence, the essay “From Neurons to Neighborhoods,” authored by a group led by Jack Shonkoff, a professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.)
Now you’re prepared to hear me state the obvious. At least two issues stick to these studies and slide onto me. How does the thing “adverse childhood experience” relate to “poverty” in the article’s title or to my use of the word “need”? Are not all of these terms elastic and subject to cultural and temporally-changing interpretations? My reliance on the Lacanian understanding of need as the elements required for raw survival is itself open to radical question (is it universalizing? is that bad?) and not synonymous (or could it be?) with the changeable, various definitions of poverty around the world. And though the title “The Poverty Clinic” leads one to believe that poverty is the stress, the cause of anxious need that constitutes the core of childhood trauma under discussion, poverty is strikingly, inexplicably absent from the list of ACE’s (Adverse Childhood Experiences) the New Yorker lists from research questionnaires: “parental divorce, physical abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse, as well as growing up with family members who suffered from mental illness, alcoholism, or drug problems” (28). Povinelli herself uses many terms alongside “impoverishment.” Are these sliding senses of adversity a problem for what I’m terming “need”?

You may wonder, secondarily, whether scientists’ knowledge (that specific links childhood trauma to corrosive health) changes anything in the world of treatment. What does someone like Dr. Burke do in the face of her beliefs? That is the golden question. Indeed, we’re told “Shonkoff and Burke are still struggling to figure out how to put this new theory into clinical practice” (31). Rat research suggests that chemical, physical stress effects are reversible into one’s teens; and maybe one’s adulthood. But how to address the stress itself? Drugs? Intervening in parental behavior or foster care to foster emotional responsiveness to children? Nothing is clear. Strikingly, however, for
the moment cancer care is the model for Burke and what she is calling “multidisciplinary rounds”: meetings designed to be “the kind of dialogues between specialists that almost never occur in primary-care facilities but that do take place in the best cancer centers” (31), though “it will take a lot of work to get her field to the level of practical coherence where . . . oncology is today” (32). And where, in the meantime, is Monisha? Better off than she was, according to the article (asthma being treated; current with shots; in another foster home; receiving therapy; bonding with her daughter; taking classes at an art school). But as with (the fictional) Precious, at the end of the article her story tips sideways. Writes the reporter: “Last fall, as I visited [Monisha] every month or so, it seemed that each time we spoke there was a . . . setback. School was a challenge. There was never enough money. She was assaulted, she said, by an ex-boyfriend she had invited over one night, to stave off loneliness. Then the city told her she had to move out of her sunny apartment . . . to a small, dark place back in Hunters Point” (32). Back to a broom closet of sorts? Maybe, maybe not. The last line we hear her speak just hangs, suspended in the air: “‘Sometimes the stress is just too much for me to bear. . . . I don’t see how people deal with it’” (32).

As you might expect, Monisha never becomes the voice of latency we so dramatically find in PUSH (more buried, though faintly evident, in Precious). Monisha is both rendered transparent—reported on and quoted—and left rather mute; though perhaps no more or less than many people are in articles that launch from them to larger issues. Still, is the faintly-voiced-but-treated-as-transparent character of someone like Monisha more disturbing than those of other types of people and their topics? Importantly, we may not be done with the matters raised in an essay that asked a famous
question of subaltern studies: “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: the Gayatri Spivak query that proved enormously formative for post-colonial theoretical studies, but could seem a bit exhausted by this point. Spivak’s well-known work holds clues for what I think Lispector so cannily accomplishes with the experiments, formal and linguistic, she commits to undertake in her novella.

Odd as it may seem, if you don’t remember it, Spivak located harm in those who heard the voices—or thought they heard the voices—of people like Monisha. If hearing can be violent, along with easy seeing, Spivak felt she found it. Her aim, you’ll recall, was to underscore (“foreground,” as she put it) the “precariousness” of her own position as a critic of the role of intellectuals vis-à-vis subalterns (“persons socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure”). Surely, she deemed her acknowledgement necessary, given that her essay’s key assertion—no small indictment—is that “Western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western international economic interests” (271). In three ways, as it turns out: 1) Western intellectuals such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault (her essay’s major targets) “systematically ignore the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history” (272); 2) they render subalterns—and so-called Third-World locations, such as “Asia”—“transparent”; 3) and they “ignore” “the international division of labor” (272). Another way of putting it, as Spivak also does, is to say their “much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject . . . inaugurates a Subject”: namely, themselves. And though they bring theories of desire and “libidinal economies” to bear upon their proceedings, they ignore “the specificity of the desiring subject . . . that attaches to specific instances of desire” (273). It becomes Spivak’s goal, therefore, to see
occlusions in the intellectual perspectives of these scholars and delineate their “epistemic violence.” Strikingly, their violence shows up inside their claims to hear subaltern voices, the ‘object being,’ as Deleuze admiringly remarks, ‘to establish conditions where . . . prisoners themselves [for example] would be able to speak’”; to which Foucault adds, Spivak quotes, “the masses know perfectly well, clearly . . . they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well” (274). To put it baldly, as Spivak later does: Deleuze and Foucault believe “the oppressed if given the chance . . . can speak and know their conditions” (283).

What’s the problem with such progressive views? Shouldn’t we harken to these neglected voices that intellectuals are telling us are there? Listen to Spivak (in lines you may recall exceedingly well): “This foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production has not been salutary. It has helped positivist empiricism—the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism—to define its own arena as ‘concrete experience’, ‘what actually happens’. Indeed, the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political appeal of prisoners, soldiers, and schoolchildren is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme” (275). All of which brings Spivak back to intellectuals’ (Deleuze and Foucault’s) “uncritical” roles, “maintained,” she says, by “a verbal slippage” she spots in Deleuze: “Thus [he] makes this remarkable pronouncement: ‘A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier’” (275).

Spivak cannot abide this dismissal. The signifier is, and must be seen as, central. This commitment to signification is why Derrida’s theories, more than anyone’s, get her approval. She likes it when he says “thought is . . . the blank part of the text,” for Spivak
asserts: “that inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text is what a postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as the place of the production of theory” (294). And more than that: “Derrida does not invoke ‘letting the other(s) speak for himself’ but rather invokes an ‘appeal’ to or ‘call’ to the ‘quite-other’ (tout-autre as opposed to a self-consolidating other), or ‘rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us’” (294).

Might we see something of this delirium going forward? Just on the lip of it, we can first rehearse where we won’t see it: in the fetid closets of millionaire slumdogs.

**Slumdog Interlude: Talking Subalterns**

“She rarely spoke (having little or nothing to say). . . . The night’s silence made her feel nervous.”—*The Hour of the Star*

It won’t surprise you that Oscar’s darling, *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2008), goes against the wishes of the several theorists, queer and post-colonial, we’ve been encountering. Forget Berlant and Edelman. Can we be compassionate toward subaltern children? Yes, when we sense from the title of the fiction that presents them, *Slumdog Millionaire*, they will develop right past need to oxymoronic heights of millionairhood that demand nothing but our satisfaction. Besides that, slumdogs talk and talk, making us think we “really” know them.

Before you rightly accuse me of shooting fish in a barrel for choosing to address a “pleasing fairy-tale,” as it’s been deemed (though “so realistic,” according to critics, “shot on location,” others point out), let me state my reasons. Here, I believe, we see crystallized the counter-Lispector: the counter-Edelman-Berlant-Povinelli-Spivak matrix of subalterns. And we see the pinnacle of what I’ll be calling Kid Orientalism in this
most popular representation of children in need. Here are some irritating slices of my claims.

A sour, unpleasant, Indian man, bathed in amber light (threatening, glowing) blows his smoke in the face of an earnest, nervous young man. Onscreen, a set of words informs us: “Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20 million rupees. How did he do it? A) He cheated; B) He’s lucky; C) He’s a genius; D) It is written.” Obviously, the answer is D, despite the moment of suspense that greets us. And even though the words refer to the gameshow, “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?,” we’re somewhere else, where violence hovers. Are we in a LeGuin-style closet? Our young man is surely being tortured: hit across the face, hung from the ceiling, head pushed into toilet, shocked on his toes (though no rod is inserted in his anus, as it was in the novel, Q & A, that birthed this film; his toes not his testicles are menaced by electrodes). We are slowly learning we’re with the police (in the closet with the law). But the squalor of this scene is broken by the fantasy of a girl’s face: gorgeous, healthy, not seductive, only radiant, waiting, expectant. “What can a slumdog possibly know?” press the police. “ I knew the answers” … is the answer.

We meet tautology right from the start. Is this tautology in line with Povinelli’s: the sign of a trauma that punctures our fantasies of futures for the poor? (Think of her tautology: “this is what is.”) Quite the opposite is the case in Slumdog: tautology is “destiny” (“it is written”) in the brightest sense: the point on the horizon where nostalgia (for a face of someone beloved—a visage both exquisite and arresting) becomes suddenly present to itself and to us, we who are rewarded for ignoring charges against nostalgia in the first place. No corrosive, chronic health effects from years of poverty? Barely a scar
(you’ll see what I mean). No anxiety, no sense of one’s being scared to death? Only suspense, and barely that. And what about belief in subaltern speech, the conviction Spivak warns us against: the sense that subalterns are free of ideology and speak their truth directly, if the conditions are right for their signifying power that supersedes the latency of signifiers? *Slumdog* has an answer: a veritable catechism, a real Q & A, to make you believe in the guaranteed authority of slumdog experience, nested in the childhood trauma that unfolds (but also dissipates) as you ask it questions.

If you’ve seen the film, you will remember how every question put to the “slumdog” (now a chai wallah, a carrier of tea), Jamal Malik, is answered by him, as he tells police how he knew the answers to the show’s questions. In fact, every question (first on the gameshow, later with police) sprouts a little tale, a slumdog memory, that perfectly conforms to the dictates of the question, or makes it seem experience has made the privileged questioner (the game-show host) conform to it. In almost every instance, Q becomes A in a tautological, foregone conclusion that collapses the usual distance between the signifiers “question” and “answer,” making the latency of signification equal only the time it takes for the subaltern to tell his mini-tale to the police—to show he knew the answer by knowing his own life. Thuggish, torturing, state power (the kind that Povinelli says kills slowly) even gives way before his knowledge (what a pretty dream of subaltern power) by bowing down to the legal and sexual innocence it beholds in the slumdog.

Here, you will have guessed, is my notion of Kid Orientalism writ large—as if this film is the culmination of the many documentary versions I’ll discuss (*Born into Brothels, War Dance, Madonna’s film, I Am Because We Are*). U.S. viewers of
*Slumdog Millionaire*, through a U.S. brand of disavowal, can oddly find their lost child, their disappearing child, their “Western”-style innocent child—the child who needs protection, as made obvious through these children’s peril—in the little child Jamal once was. And so intriguingly, the chaste teen romance Jamal begins in childhood—with his little friend, the orphan Latika—forming the film’s relentless love plot (Latika, of course, is that beautiful face I described earlier) seems to fulfill the U.S. parental nostalgia for children who abstain from sex into young adulthood. Mumbai, as it happens, its impoverished slums, is the perfect place for one’s rediscovering the lost “Western” child.

Yet, from the novel entitled *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup, an Indian diplomat to South Africa, you wouldn’t glean such chastity. There, the narrator’s voice is ironic, piercing, shifting and in touch with sexual intrigues. The first four stories, in fact, in answer to the first four questions, involve in turn: a moviestar as pedophile; a murderous, homosexual Catholic priest who kills a priest’s son, with whom he sleeps; an incestuous father; the buggering head of a juvenile home. You see what I mean. The novel’s material was scrubbed and rewritten as it birthed *Slumdog* so as to offer us Kid Orientalism. In the first vignette, the moviestar as pedophile is changed to a focus on an outhouse scene. Young Jamal—exceedingly gorgeous as a child (though he becomes just a pleasant-looking teen), making us attach to adorableness to prepare us for filthiness—longs to see his hero, a Mumbai moviestar, who’s coming to the airport. Since his brother, Salim, has locked him in a fetid outhouse (there’s your putrid closet), the only way the child can escape and see his hero is through his own shit. As if the film has turned a scene from *Schindler’s List* (boy escapes through sewage, bespeaking forced debasement) to comic effect (a junior-high-school yuck-it-up visual), Jamal emerges slimed in excrement, head
to toe, as a cute, triumphant, feces-covered slumdog. (He, not his brother, gets the star’s autograph. And so he knows the answer to the first question: “Who was the star in the hit film Zanjeer?”)

More to the point, one of the film’s most central scenes gives us the paradigm for Kid Orientalism. A seemingly saintly man and a group of his friends take the kids, all orphans now at the age of six or seven, to a location where they’re fed, clothed, and housed—offered the trappings of protection, that is—with the promise of training them to sing and perform. It’s all a ruse, however, to maim them and use them. If the kids are injured—missing eyes, missing limbs, and otherwise weakened—they will appear both needy and innocent on the streets, able to say with conviction to would-be compassionate givers to children in need: “Blessings be unto those who do good for others” (what my injured man said to me, more or less). The Saint, then, is someone—Kid Orientalist?—who can make an innocent child by finding a child who is experienced in trauma or peril; by heightening that peril, the Saint can make the innocence that comes from that experience useful to himself; and this usefulness can be paraded to stimulate something that mirrors his mask: namely, compassion.

Resilience, moreover—child resilience—results from these atrocities, according to Slumdog. Mini-action-figures, Jamal, Salim, and Latika escape the threatening Saint, though Latika is recaptured by him. Of course, she is strikingly renamed “Cherry” and—shades of the recent documentary The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan—made to perform for lecherous men. They might as well tie her virginity to train tracks. For even if by chance you haven’t seen the film, you’re likely to predict that the two plots—Jamal’s precarious fortunes on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” and his reunion with the
trafficked Latika—join together in doubled success at solving loss. Never mind the
details, suffice it to say that, at the moment at which Jamal is given the final question for
winning his millions—with the nation watching (and even beggars becoming well-
wishers)—it becomes certain that he has found Latika. The film even doubles down on
tautology. Jamal does not know the answer to the question that will win the money. He
just guesses. “Because?” he is asked about his selection. “Just because,” he answers.
This self-reinforcing conclusion is mirrored by the words appearing below the freeze-
frame kiss that ends the film: “It is written,” we read. Indeed, it is.

A final montage of childhood images—many traumatic—run onscreen as Latika
appears before Jamal, with the camera shooting her as if she were a model (the actress
playing her actually is). The only sign of her troubled life is a slender scar on one of her
cheeks, which in no way mars her beauty. If we are to seek the effects of slumdog
living—its possibilities for cruddy, anxious, chemical, physical changes in molecular
structures—they lie there in the scar Jamal is kissing, as he embraces her gently, chastely.

**Compassion’s Hopeful Crash: How to Kiss a Wall**

“Embracing the wall was like embracing herself.”

“Her vagina was the only vehement sign of her existence.”

“I am aware of the existence of many things I have never seen.”

--*The Hour of the Star*

Vaginal vehemence, whatever that is, is surely an unexpected destination at which
to arrive surrounding a child. That a vagina would beckon existentially, especially if it’s
imagined (not seen), and that it would drive someone who imagines it into a wall—or be
a wall—is simply strange. But that’s not where we start. We start with the thought of compassion crashing.

Compassion’s visible failures may be valuable. The ludicrous, lugubrious tones of compassion’s boomerang optics, making intellectuals see themselves failing and perceive someone they can’t see, can’t make out, may prove critical to our sense of structures as we’re grasping persons. Opacity of persons may make structures much more evident, while not erasing the presence of people who inhabit structures. This is not a plea for impersonality but opaque personhood. I’m not mixing metaphors, moreover, when I emphasize the sound or tone of optics. One of Lispector’s most impressive moves at the level of form in *The Hour of the Star* is to have an image of a child in need haunt an intellectual who explores that image through tonal explosion. It’s as if *The Hour of the Star* is responding, via experimental literary form, to Spivak’s complaint; as if the novella is confirming her charge of theorists’ implication in what they critique. The novella does so by having the narrator talk his head off. He talks about an image of a subaltern that he then ventriloquizes, as he writes his story about a real girl. But the novella has its cake and eats it, too. It critiques the narrator who depicts the girl, all the while making her (this subaltern) less susceptible to her being reduced to his compassion. The more he talks, the more she escapes. The more she escapes, the more we see—through the opacity that becomes her. Embracing a wall, we thus sense her, sense ourselves called out of ourselves, though she never speaks for herself. And amidst it all, a trace of luxury is the thread we follow to (her stubborn) poverty.

We should begin with compassion’s farce. On a much grander, more perverse scale than what I showed in my vignettes, *The Hour of the Star* gets at what Berlant calls
our engagement with the “documentary realness” of “the pain of strangers.” But, so crucially, this brand of realness, this documentarian drama of depiction, confessedly hangs on the thread of a glimpse, one that immediately snaps back in the direction of “him,” he who is speaking directly to the reader: “How do I know all that is about to follow if it is unfamiliar and something I have never experienced? In a street in Rio de Janeiro I caught a glimpse of perdition on the face of a girl from the North-east. Without mentioning that I myself was raised as a child in the North-east.”

Here’s the kind of image I’ve been discussing throughout this essay: the face of need on a child in need that you’ve seen somewhere, locatable or not, always somehow already filtered through something you find inside yourself (maybe nostalgia, maybe recollection). This is not the “face-to-face public” Berlant says forms the focus for compassionate conservatives. Cannily, Lispector does not have her narrator interact with some girl-child, face to face; she (Lispector) makes things far more intricate than that. (Says her narrator: “Let no one be mistaken. I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort . . . . How does one start at the beginning, if things happen before they actually happen?”) So much for “desire for the good to feel simple” (Berlant). This interaction happens, rather, with a representative image, or, more precisely, an image that immediately binds itself to others (is lost inside others? others that are already linking to structures?) but breaks slightly toward particularity due to virginity, of all the (other) god-forsaken things:

What I am writing is something more than mere invention; it is my duty to relate everything about this girl among thousands of others like her. It is my duty, however unrewarding, to confront her with her own existence. For one has a right to shout. So, I am shouting. . . . I know that there are girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession, in exchange for a good dinner. . . . But the person whom I am about to describe scarcely has a body to sell; nobody desires her, she is a harmless virgin. . . . There are thousands of girls like this from the North-east to be found in
the slums of Rio de Janeiro, living in bedsitters or toiling behind counters for all they are worth. They aren’t even aware of the fact that they are superfluous and that nobody cares a damn about their existence. Few of them ever complain and as far as I know they never protest, for there is no one to listen. I am warming up before making a start, rubbing my hands together to summon up my courage. (13-14)

“Confront her with her own existence”: “girls . . . sell their bodies . . . for a good dinner,” but “nobody desires her.” Anger tuned to irony is starting to ooze around the image, to leak some mental bile around the effort it will take to render its (almost-)representative status. Feeling overwhelmed? Have a sense of scale? This emotion of exhaustion, really from the beginning, is the point. The point is to exhaust our feeling of exhaustion over the course and length of this novella—so as to get somewhere beyond our fatigue. In fact, one gets a tonal stack—what else can I call this “vertical din” that Lispector’s narrator’s voice becomes?—through sheer accumulation of effort to grasp (the image of) this girl who reminds the narrator of children he knew.17b

Lispector, moreover, puts herself in this act, in this stack, even if we don’t know she herself grew up in the North-east, where the conditions for children caused so many to immigrate to the slums of Rio, at various points in their “development.” Why do I say she’s in this act? Because the book begins with “The Author’s Dedication (alias Clarice Lispector).” Weird that the author appears as an alias that is her name, the very same name under which she publishes. Weirder still are these first lines: “I dedicate this narrative to dear old Schumann and his beloved Clara who are now, alas, nothing but dust and ashes. I dedicate it to the deep crimson of my blood as someone in his prime. I dedicate it, above all, to those gnomes, dwarfs, sylphs, and nymphs who inhabit my life. I dedicate it to the memory of my years of hardship when everything was more austere
and honourable, and I had never eaten lobster” (7). One finds here a series of themes that repeat themselves, all in different keys and in different formal ways: love plot gone to dust (as if the death drive caught it, vaporized it); narrating voice gendered male and privileged (as the way the author implicates herself?); some kind of haunting by some kind of something (gnomes? nymphs?); and a touch of luxury in the “eaten lobster.” Is it luxury or haunting, however, when the dedication goes on to state: “Most of all, I dedicate it to . . . those musicians who have touched within me the most alarming and unsuspected regions; to all those prophets of our age who have revealed me to myself and made me explode into: me. This me that is you, for I cannot bear to be simply me” (7-8). The tonal spread implied here bends back to her (rendered as a him, speaking as a “me”) before it turns to “you.” Is there any shade of Povinelli’s “socially cosubstantial corporeality” emerging here? I will prefer to regard it in my own terms from the early ‘90’s: “material opacity” and Luce Irigaray’s corporeal, spiritual materialist “nearness”—especially since this voice proceeds to assert: “And we must never forget that if the atom’s structure is invisible, it is none the less real. I am aware of the existence of many things I have never seen” (8). We’ll see what “never seen” turns out to mark and how it surprisingly makes a girl’s vagina a protest of poverty in ways both delirious and near to “us.”

Meanwhile, a fully unique title page follows this squirrely authorial start. And, once again, the entire novella lies curled up inside its coils, dense with shifting, looping references to a subject, a “her,” a “she,” who appears not to be Lispector, the narrator, or readers (or a slumdog telling tales of destiny):
THE HOUR
OF THE STAR

The Blame is Mine
or
The Hour of the Star
or
Let Her Fend for Herself
or
The Right to Protest
[the author signs her name]

...As for the Future.
or
Singing the Blues
or
She Doesn’t Know How to Protest
or
A Sense of Loss
or
Whistling in the Dark
or
I Can Do Nothing
or
A Record of Preceding Events
or
A Tearful Tale
or
A Discreet Exit by the Back Door

This bizarre, humorous, somehow familiar list of sentiments (familiar to anyone who’s worked in social justice) prophesies the fragments of what we’re going to hear.

Launching from guilt, ending with some kind of slinking away, and moving through the senses of giving up, encouragement, lack of optimism, sorrow, loss, documentation, and sentimentality, the title page indicates what we might be in for. However, there’s no way, no succinct, stylish possibility of conveying what I’m calling the story’s tonal stack (perhaps its twelve-toned composition) of the most layered narratorial voice one can imagine. Good intent weds urgency, boomerangs to narcissism, breaks out into a rash of
frustration, topples into anger, bursts into unmitigated distaste, until it doubles back into mitigated sympathy. Hear a few lines:

I am holding her destiny in my hands and yet I am powerless to invent with any freedom: I follow a secret, fatal line. (20)

(There are those who have. And there are those who have not. It’s very simple: the girl had not. Hadn’t what? Simply this: she had not. If you get my meaning it’s fine. If you don’t, it’s still fine. But why am I bothering about this girl when what I really want is wheat that turns ripe and golden in summer?) (25)

Sometimes before falling asleep she felt the pangs of hunger and became giddy as she visualized a side of beef. The solution was to chew paper into pulp and swallow it. Honestly! I’m getting used to her but I still feel uneasy. Dear God! I feel happier with animals than with people.

The action of this story will result in my transfiguration. . . . Perhaps I might even acquire the sweet tones of the flute and become entwined in a creeper vine. (20)

What I am about to write cannot be assimilated by minds that expect much and crave sophistication. . . . Do not, therefore, expect stars in what follows for nothing will scintillate. This is opaque material and by its very nature it is despised by everyone. (16)

The typist doesn’t want to get off my back. I now realize that poverty is both ugly and promiscuous. (21) I’ve also had to give up sex and football. (22)

Who has not asked himself at some time or other: am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person? (15)

The narrator’s name, by the way? Rodrigo S-M: an open closet name, whose hidden surname only announces compassion’s cruel edges. (“I want my story to be cold and impartial. Unlike the reader, I reserve the right to be devastatingly cold. . . . Let my readers take a punch in the stomach to see how they like it,” 13, ?) And these passages build—they coagulate—in the most astonishing manner. As I’ll mention again in my lecture, Lispector through Rodrigo gives us the formula for our feeling need only as demand, and thus feeling desired by a child: “(The girl worries me so much that I feel drained. She has drained me empty. And the less she demands, the more she worries me.
I feel frustrated and annoyed. A raging desire to smash dishes and break windows. How can I avenge myself? Or rather, how can I get satisfaction? I’ve found the answer: by loving my dog that consumes more food than she does. Why does she not fight back? Has she no pluck?”) (25-26). It’s worth noting that just a glimpse of need makes him feel demand, even when the girl (whom he imagines through that glimpse) has demanded nothing—which turns up the worry that becomes quickly diverted to the question of his “satisfaction.” Dog and food rapidly follow as a pair, one breaking off to a substitute version of satisfaction and a lesser material puzzle, believe it or not that would be his dog, the other dangling as unsettled need (the question of food).¹⁸

What do these rolling, unfolding logics of compassion’s failures make so keenly visible? The prongs of Spivak’s aim: to show the implication of the intellectual (Mr. S-M) in “epistemic violence”; and the troubled nature of subaltern speech. But that’s to state it blandly, in theoretical terms that may seem a bit long in the tooth. The latter issue—subaltern speech—fascinates in the form it takes. The child inside the mind of Rodrigo S-M is visibly hidden in the girl he glimpses—the nineteen-year-old Rio resident from whom he devises “his” Macabea¹⁹a: “She points an accusing finger and I can only defend myself by writing about her. . . . I am scared of starting. I do not even know the girl’s name. . . . With stiff, contaminated fingers I must touch the invisible in its own squalor. . . . Meantime, I want to walk naked or in rags. . . . In order to speak about the girl I mustn’t shave for days” (19). This is a doubled structure of obliquity. The figure of the child--someone who’s disappeared, as it were, into an older, laboring self—points to the visibly disappearing youngsters-who-become-subalterns, with their hard to see temporalities of lethality that may be accruing. Almost obsessively, Rodrigo S-M turns
us back to Macabea’s (his character’s) childhood, so that Macabea (as his invented girl-from-a-glimpse) carries the trace of material relations he has known from his own youth. As you might expect—reminiscent of the *New Yorker*’s Monisha and Sapphire’s Precious—Macabea’s girlhood collapses the difference between eventful and chronic forms of suffering\(^{19b}\):

Lost in thought, she examined the blotches on her face in the mirror. In Alagoas they had a special name for this condition—it was commonly believed to be caused by the liver. . . . [W]ith a few rapid strokes I shall delineate the girl’s previous history up to the moment when she stood before the mirror in the lavatory. . . . When she was two years old, her parents died of typhoid fever in the backwoods of Alagoas. . . . Much later she went to live in Maceio with her maiden aunt, a sanctimonious spinster, and the girl’s only surviving relative in the whole wide world. . . . She would thrash the girl not only because she derived some sensuous pleasure from thrashing her—the old girl found the idea of sexual intercourse so disgusting that she had never married—but also because she considered it her duty to see that the girl did not finish up like many another girl in Maceio standing on street corners with a lit cigarette waiting to pick up a man. . . . The girl soon forgot those thrashings. If you wait patiently, the pain soon passes. But what pained her more was to be denied her favourite dessert: guava preserve with cheese, the only real passion in her life. . . . She could speak, of course, but had little to say. No sooner do I succeed in persuading her to speak, than she slips through my fingers.  (26-29)

More on her passion in just a moment. More on Macabea as a non-Mini-Me to her aunt’s virginity, even though her suffering, of the chronic sort, has in part issued from her aunt’s relation to both of their vaginas, in Rodrigo’s odd imagination. Before that, however, two more effects of this narrative structure—the back and forth between narrator and character and the dialing back of this character to childhood—are quite telling. One effect is a hint that Macabea (and this girl as child) can’t be reduced to the narrator’s feelings because Macabea and herself-as-child don’t show up precisely in the mirror; they are more akin to the mirror’s dark, non-reflective back: “The dark, tarnished mirror scarcely reflected any image. . . . When she was a little girl, her aunt, in order to
frighten her, insisted that the vampire . . . cast no reflection in the mirror. She reckoned that it might not be such a bad thing being a vampire, for the blood would add a touch of pink to her sallow complexion” (24-25). In a different vein, the narrator (who feels the force of Macabea sucking his blood) skirts around, deflects, and thus calls attention to what he’s not discussing: the international division of labor (exactly what Spivak accused Deleuze and Foucault of ignoring). For example, Rodrigo laughably tells us: “The record that is about to begin is written under the sponsorship of the most popular soft drink in the world. . . . It is the same soft drink that sponsored the recent earthquake in Guatemala. Despite the fact that it tastes of nail polish, toilet soap, and chewed plastic. None of this prevents people from loving it with servility and subservience. Also because . . . this drink which contains coca is today. It allows people to be modern and to move with the times” (23). Macabea, who’s a “typist and virgin and loves Coca Cola,” is both today and yesterday by virtue of leaving her backwoods life to lead the existence of a machine-cog (the pink proletariat) in the slums of Rio, a circumstance S-M measures by comparing it to Macabea’s childhood. Thus he makes a loop where measure’s always lost, since today and yesterday are incommensurable, interlocking poverties that defy comparison as they slide into liquid effects.

There’s another measure constantly tried. The narrator, as we’ve just seen above, indirectly measures Macabea’s “passion”—for luxury, for sex—by tugging on the signs of her food. Yet, this is no naïve rendering (by which I mean invention). Her daily malnutrition, her acute and chronic hunger, becomes an (imagined) infrastructure—a kind of Symbolic formed by food not words—of her desire. She, according to Rodrigo S-M, “translates” everything into its terms, which allows the reader to follow desire to where
need hides, to see it as hidden in the fold of signifiers that bespeak it and obscure it. For instance, we are told: “The advertisement [Macabea] treasured most of all . . . advertised a face cream for women with complexions so very different from her own. . . . [S]he imagined the pleasure of possessing such luxuries. The cream looked so appetizing that, were she to find enough money to buy it, she wouldn’t be foolish. Never mind her skin! She would eat the cream, she would, in large spoonfuls straight from the jar” (38).

Here’s a catachrestic relation to food, not to terms; or to food as terms. Catachresis (from the Greek for “abuse”): “using a word [here a food] in a sense radically different from its normal sense”; “using a word [here a food] to denote something [this specific girl’s need] for which, without the catachresis, there is no actual name.” And the substitution of one food signifier for another—which is connected to Macabea’s hunger (via her childhood, as we’ve seen relentlessly)—appears as a tragicomic comment on her need: “I forgot to mention that sometimes this typist is nauseated by the thought of food. This dates from her childhood when she discovered that she had eaten a fried cat. . . . She lost her appetite and felt the great hunger thereafter. She was convinced that she had committed a crime; that she had eaten a fried angel, its wings snapping between her teeth” (39). Hung as we are in the crazy space between fried angel and fried cat—where we are asked to contemplate hunger—we may find this a fitting figure for the slippery ethics of approaching need (of a girl one’s invented from an image one’s seen). Even sexuality runs along these rails, reminding us of the Lacanian assertion that desire marks the spot of buried need. That is to say, as Rodrigo invents her, eating is the highway of her every wish and appears inside her “hunger for love” (44). So, when she meets a potential
boyfriend, “the girl only had to see the youth in order to transform him immediately into her guava preserve with cheese” (42).

At this juncture, something quite extraordinary happens in the text. A formal shift. Giving her a love plot—Macabea meets a boy named Olimpico—Mr. S-M has Macabea speak. But the break-out into dialogue, as if we have relationship, is the sure sign that the man/woman coupling the narrator invents is simply illustrating (here at least) some profound impasse to interaction. More profoundly, and beyond Lacan, in the realm of poverty, dialogue here captures the vagaries of sexual impasse so as to dramatize (in a broader register) the splitting of need from demand: need’s disappearance into its soup, which makes it oddly visible. For love’s hunger (two needs trying to wed each other: love and hunger) falls back in the direction of food, on the one hand, and hits the wall of the signifier’s snares, on the other: “On the rare occasion when the couple actually held a conversation, they invariably discussed food: flour, salted beef, dried meat, brown sugar and molasses. These commodities symbolized their past and made them forget their unhappy childhood. . . . Olimpico and Macabea could have been mistaken for brother and sister, a factor—I’ve only now realized—that would appear to rule out any possibility of their marrying” (47). Bang (as the narrator might say, as he often says). Moreover, these conversations are absurd, demonstrating lack of Symbolic prowess (there’s no effective slumdog loquaciousness to be found here):

He—Well.

She—Well what?

He—I only said well!

She—But well what?
He—Let’s change the subject. You’ll never understand.

She—Understand what?

He—Mother of God! Macabea, let’s change the subject at once!

....

--Did I tell you that they said on the radio that a man who was also a mathematician wrote a book called *Alice in Wonderland*? They also discussed *elgebra*. What does *elgebra* mean?

--Only queers are interested in things like that, men who’ve turned into pansies. Excuse the word queer. That’s something no decent girl should know about.

Leave it to a queer little virgin to question a book about what lies through and past a looking glass. At this point, and as these dialogues continue to build in comic effect, we might sense that just as Rodrigo is a figure for Lispector, Olimpico is a figure for Rodrigo, who can’t grasp, is repulsed by, Macabea, whom he says he loves (given their common childhoods, all): “Macabea, you’re like a hair in one’s soup. It’s enough to make anyone lose their appetite” (60).

The narrator, slyly, seems to be seeing how far he can play this game of food with us, punning on alimentary terms while making his plot lines obey a lack of nourishment (ours and the characters’). Olimpico loses “appetite” for Macabea in favor of someone who’s well fed: namely, Gloria (whose grand name better matches his, making a better analytic comedy of “he” and “she”). She who has “rich Portuguese wine in her blood” is “carioca”: “To be *carioca* identified Gloria with the privileged class who inhabited
Southern Brazil. Looking closely at her, Olimpico perceived at once that, although she was ugly, Gloria was well nourished” (59).

But, as I’ve suggested, there’s reason to believe that (Lispector’s invention of) Rodrigo’s inventions of Olimpico indicate his own loss of appetite for a girl’s need. Indeed, two further formal correlatives of his fatigue put the plot to rest: one is a doctor, the other a clairvoyant. Both (be)speak S-M. The doctor is the anti-Nadine Burke (from the New Yorker): no curiosity about effects of poverty, since he’s overwhelmed by lack of ambition—his—to admit what he really knows: “The doctor took a good look at [Macabea] and felt sure that she didn’t diet to lose weight. Nevertheless, he found it easier to go on insisting that she shouldn’t diet to lose weight. He knew how things stood and that he was the poor man’s doctor. . . . ‘This tale about a diet of hot dogs is pure neurosis. What you need is a psychiatrist!’ She had no idea what he was talking about but felt that the doctor expected her to smile. So she smiled” (67). She even smiles when the doctor tells her she has early-stage tuberculosis.

More intriguing, then, is S-M’s move to speed up the destiny of Macabea’s end: to make it “visible, compact, and eventful” (in Povinelli’s terms) because he’s lost his taste to see its slowness through: “I have grown weary of literature: silence alone comforts me. . . . I think about Macabea’s vagina, minute, yet unexpectedly covered with a thick growth of black hairs—her vagina was the only vehement sign of her existence. She herself asked for nothing, but her sex made its demands like a sunflower germinating in a tomb” (70). Now there’s a truly twisted transition to an ending. His imagination of the girl’s vagina is a calling out—a plea, a demand on her behalf, becoming the voice of delirium in him. There are no paeans to virginity here. The narrator deliriously, almost
out of nowhere, in a non sequitur, suddenly but not without reason after all, pictures a vagina as the sign of germination that grows around need. This girl’s genitals are a kind of readiness tipping into loneliness that begs visitation. And do her pubic hairs, around her only “vehemence,” find an echo in the grass blades (tiny germinations) that Rodrigo has Macabea note as she rings the bell at Madame Carlota’s? (“On the pavement tiny blades of grass sprouted between the flagstones—Macabea noticed them because she always noticed things that were tiny and insignificant,” 71). No matter growing grass. It’s overshadowed by the figure of the Madame. And the Madame’s fancy: “I’m a fan of Jesus. I’m just mad about Him. . . . Jesus lost no time in helping me to set up a brothel with a friend” (72). Here Rodrigo is up to old tricks: tonal breakouts that are hysterical, hilarious and—mean? Or is this the fate of Macabea-as-statistic? Is this Macabea’s state execution (in the words of Povinelli) disguised as bad luck, as the way it will be seen in the form of disavowal? Whatever the case, the fortune that Rodrigo cooks up for the Madame to deliver is a rug to be pulled from Macabea: she will supposedly meet a foreign gentleman, by the name of Hans, with lots of money, who will fall in love with her. (“I’m always frank with my clients,” says the Madame. “For example I’ve just told that girl you saw leaving that she’s going to be knocked down on that road,” 77).

Macabea leaves ecstatic. Back to S-M: “The moment she stepped off the pavement, Destiny (bang) swift and greedy, whispered: now, quickly, for my hour has come! And a yellow Mercedes, as huge as an ocean liner, knocked her down. . . . (I could turn the clock back and happily start again at the point when Macabea was standing on the pavement—but it isn’t for me to say whether the fair-haired foreigner looked at her)” (79). Blades of grass stand up in the gutter where she lies; people gather round; Macabea
feels like vomiting a star; and the narrator talks (“where the void makes a curve. . . . now it only remains for me to light a cigarette and go home. Dear God, only now am I remembering that people die. Does that include me? Don’t forget, in the meantime, that this is the season for strawberries. Yes” 86). As if he’s had sex with his story of the girl—hence, his comic post-coital cigarette—Rodrigo is done. On the note of strawberries.

The many-sided failures of compassion demonstrate more than privileged narcissism. They reveal structures: language, material economies, the fantasy of romance and romantic futures, and the pathways of neurons to neighborhoods (and back again). And something else appears due to compassion’s all-important crash. Tautology returns. One sees it in Olimpico’s many ridiculous, exasperated answers to Macabea’s questions:

--What does culture mean?
--Culture is culture, he replied grudgingly. Why don’t you get off my back?
--What’s a Count? Is that the same as a prince?
--A Count is a Count, for God’s sake!

These pathetic dodges of his own ineptitude beautifully echo Rodrigo’s inability to capture Macabea (though he’s inventing her!) or her child self. Hence, his extensive use of tautology, especially at the end: “One must always ask. Why? Reply: it is so because it is so. Was it always so? It will always be so. And if it were not so? But I am saying that it is so. Very well” (82).

Here, it would seem, we have hit a wall. Yet this wall as a figure of failure is something we should kiss, as Macabea did (as a child, of course): “As a little girl, because she had no one to kiss, she often used to kiss the wall. Embracing the wall was
like embracing herself” (78). Why should we kiss it? Because on the other side of this tautology—contra *Slumdog*, pace Povinelli—is material opacity and a *jouissance* that helps us envision a politics of luxury.

**The Gash of Bliss: Desiring the Child**

“I need to distinguish euphoria, fulfillment . . . from shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss.”
--Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

“It is the same as for Saint Theresa. . . . And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming*, from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.”
--Jacques Lacan, “God and the *Jouissance* of the Woman”

*Jouissance* is the strangest kind of glistening, a dark glamour of rapture and disruption. It shines and cuts and leaves its bearer not knowing what to make of herself—or her pleasure. She is left beside herself, severed from herself, seized by subtleties, strange to say, even though bliss is an overwhelming force. Bliss is a word for impossibilities, *felt* and *grasped* as such. Something (im)possible coursing through the body, bending the mind. Then, on a dime: rapid, luminous deteriorations.

If per chance it didn’t exist, queers would invent it. Along with irony, bliss is a quintessential queer accoutrement: it’s hedonistic and wedded to pain; it’s clearly buoyant, yet it is dark; it’s provocatively sexy, intimate, scandalous, and bodily, while it’s evasive of capture and speech; beyond the reach of words, it’s both spiritual and material—spiritual materialist—a materiality that is ineffable and escapes norms. It’s the perversion everyone shares, no one “knows,” and, with its shadows and ties to loss, societies deny in favor of “pleasure.”
The psychoanalysis, then, that jibes with queer theory’s thought and brio sees *jouissance* as a means of naming explosive but infinite, unsolvable *desire* (not the imagined serenity of plenitude), which requires us to reconceive relationships around such oddities as caressing lack, embracing shame, and flirting with the cutting force of beauty (Bernini’s St. Theresa). Here, nonetheless, is a materialized, materializing ethics of opacity—one making use of opacity for its ethical vision—that takes the unexpected path of luxury to need’s door. One could say Rodrigo makes us follow the path of the strawberry (back) to a vehement kiss against a wall. But, first, the strawberry, as a fertile thought.

Much of my recent work explores queer, unexamined forms of growth, even fertility, that spring from negativity. In a piece on Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, specifically ("Lost, or ‘Exit, Pursued by a Bear’: Causing Queer Children on Shakespeare’s TV’’), I argued that children do not issue solely from parental intercourse or parental love.²⁰ Children bodily, shockingly, profoundly, just as forcefully are the result of parents’ lost and cast-away attractions: all of the people one has *not* had sex with, or has slept with but not bred with, or has stopped pursuing. (My ex-girlfriend wouldn’t have had her specific children without our relationship breaking up.) Thus, I proposed, your child is the fertility of your negativity. Your specific child, whoever she may be, is caused by each of your lost attachments, all of your prior failed attractions, and your other unpursued pursuits. At least in part. In my talk you’ll hear how the ghostly “gay” child (who grows sideways, given it is unavailable to itself in the present tense) has spawned my attempts to hear the *voice* of latency in figures such as Precious. Clearly you’re prepared, then, to see me try to argue an ethical move not from the
position of duty or norm but from bliss—which may sound cold, on the one hand, and too buoyant, on the other (“this is the season for strawberries. Yes.”). Yet, this bliss is no easy happiness, as we’ve just seen. It contains shock, disturbance, and loss and it may feed on a wall, at a wall. In the knotted “Author’s Dedication (Alias Clarice Lispector)” that heads the novella, we’re told that “this story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity” and that “it is an unfinished book because it offers no answer” (8). Then the task is sloughed off on us: “An answer I hope someone in the world may be able to provide. You perhaps?” And, then, luxury takes a quick bow: “It is a story in technicolour to add a touch of luxury, for heaven knows, I need that too” (8). Luxury literally runs us into need, sits in place of need, poses as need.

It’s as if the voice of the “Author’s Dedication” channels Georges Bataille, meditating on the power to lose. Might the reader be asked to identify with (the haunting image of Rodrigo’s) Macabea on the point of luxury, not on need? Might our “eaten lobster,” our “season for strawberries,” take us to her “guava preserve with cheese”: “the only real passion in her life”? Does a certain power—a power to lose, as described by Bataille—make a practice (and I would say an ethics) of loss that is a passion (and maybe a compassion, a “passion with” the other) where we interact with an image that we carry?

Recall Bataille on these tricky points. In his essay, “The Notion of Expenditure,” he speaks to what he calls “the insufficiency of the principle of classical utility.” By “utility,” Bataille means the goal, which he doesn’t like at all, of taking one’s “pleasure” in “moderate form,” while one aims at the “acquisition,” “conservation,” and “reproduction” of goods and life. And though this moderation forms the basis of the
“struggle against [human] pain” (116), Bataille proceeds to say that “personal experience” proves the falseness of this view. “Human society,” Bataille goes on to claim, has “an interest in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, while conforming to well-defined needs, provoke tumultuous depressions, cries of dread, and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state” (his emphasis; 117). Loss and orgasm are companion states. And perhaps thinking once again of Icarus (as he often does), Bataille produces a father/son example: “the father may provide the son with lodging, clothes, food, and, when absolutely necessary, a little harmless recreation”; “but the son does not even have the right to speak about what really gives him a fever”; “humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure” (his emphasis; 117).

What, exactly, is this nonproductivity, this kind of “spending,” that Bataille embraces? Any outlay (Bataille in no way minds the word “wasting”) of money or energy or even life itself; outlays that don’t serve the ends of production. These would be wastings such as “luxury,” “mourning,” “competitive games,” “artistic productions,” and “perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality).” For Bataille, the ultimate question thus becomes: who has this power to lose and destroy, ecstatically, defiantly? With undeniable Marxist strains running through his thoughts, Bataille scorns forms of “conspicuous consumption.” As his translator, Allan Stoekl, tells us: “‘Conspicuous consumption’ for Bataille is not a pernicious remnant of feudalism that must be replaced by total utility; instead, it is the perversion of man’s ‘need to destroy’. The noble, and even more hypocritically the bourgeois, use this ‘destruction’ not to destroy completely, but simply to reaffirm their place in the hierarchy” (xvi). What Bataille affirms as the
blast of bliss is the wish to create so as to destroy, so as to spend, so as to lose – and to lose anyone who would lose loss.

There might be an ethics that proceeds from luxury; that is not a duty. The challenge would be this: to craft a queer, hedonistic ethic—and to craft lives, or forms of living, that display it, explore it, image it. Surely one could say that collective and individual images of queer lifestyles and queer ethics—say, especially, around the AIDS crisis (but not only)—affected public politics. And the remains of Bataille-style images from that time—principled promiscuities, to name just one—seeped into politics that helped change the landscape of all sexualities since the 1990’s. Why not, then, craft queer ethics, live queer ethics of ecstatic losing in the face of poverty: ethics that fly against (the pablum of) compassion? The ethics I imagine, to keep with Bataille, would be simultaneously (here’s the real challenge) decidedly pro-luxury, anti-conspicuous consumption, and pro-structural-change that addresses, rearranges economic inequalities. Put aside for now the rather daunting task of distinguishing luxury (guava preserve with cheese?) from the matter of conspicuous consumption (yellow Mercedes, ocean-liner-size?). (Is this distinction a matter of scale or a difference in kind? What would it look like in daily living to embrace one and eschew the other? Is it even possible?) Let’s explore the axis most germane to linking my ethics of bliss to structural inequality. Unlike so-called acts of compassion that stress my generosity (in my eyes and the eyes of others), giving-out-of-bliss actually dramatizes the structures of power that underwrite it. Not duty driven, but bliss-enacting, my “giving” to someone—my giving of my energy, my money, my life—precisely proceeds from my power to lose. Giving is an exercise of my power and bliss, linking my pleasure to visibly hidden large-scale structures of power.
that enable it. If my ethic is bliss-pursuit, this specific link (pleasure to power) is what I see of myself when I give. In fact, I might be seeing—and, of course, showing—that small-scale giving (my power, my bliss) is frequently tied to prior temporalities of institutional taking or neglect on a structural level, which have led to poverties.

Compassion—where I give from (aggressive sense of) goodness—covers my self-interest and structural power, since I’m giving from the goodness of my heart (where I think that I step out of power).

There’s another side to the ethics of bliss. It should keep me focused on creative forms of losing, since my bliss is to lose. Thus, as I imply in putting stress on luxury, giving out of my love for luxury is a practice of it. If I give to someone, I practice loss (as my power and my bliss) and I extend to them the passion of their luxury: perhaps their “guava preserve with cheese.” But here’s another move that this latter move implies: I turn my loss toward . . . loss. Mine toward theirs, asymmetric though these losses surely are (extremely asymmetrical, in many situations). My spending is directed toward someone seeking something: toward, I’ve suggested, a child desiring me (as I’ve posed the problem).

Now let’s imagine that I desire back. I desire the child. Am I simply playing at ball without a ball, as Rodrigo puts it? Hold that question for just a moment. Let me remind us that loss turned toward loss constitutes the specialty of a certain strain of feminist theory. And it might give energy, again, to queer theory, as the latter thinks with subaltern studies about impoverished people. In fact, attentive readers in what they read below might think about the queer displacement I’m proposing of something like Levinas’ ethics-towards-the-other-as-focused-on-the-face (which for reasons involving
children as the face of poverty, I find ineffective) to the different figure of female genitalia, with its stress on lacking, loss, and touch-through-separation, approach-through-lacking, as we’re going to see. Thus I return to where I left Irigaray in 1993, when I finished God Between Their Lips. What struck me then was how Luce Irigaray made us focus on (genital) lips—her own delirious vaginal vehemence—as a place for speaking about the unseen: forms of loss that needed seeing; that weren’t nothing; that defied the reading of women’s genitals as a “hole-envelope” waiting to be filled. One might expect that Irigaray would offer to women their own plenitude—spectacular, pregnant perhaps, in its fullness. The lips have surely been read this way, as part of a plurality of sexual organs Irigaray wants to make apparent. There is, however, another way to interpret her lips, this materialized metaphor, a figure she finds in human flesh. By concentrating there, on the lips, Irigaray attempts to gain a more empowered conduction both to materiality and to lack at the same time. For what one needs to see is spacing: the slit between the lips: what Irigaray calls “unformable apartness” (lack, separation), this nothing-as-something. We can read women’s genital lips, then, in the vein of material opacity, visible concealment, as she makes them opaque enough to see for those who care to look. And it’s the lack of closure between them that allows lips to open and close in (erotic) bliss, which makes spacing a blissful wall, since it blocks fusion.

Here, moreover, is a model of desire. A model of approach that caresses loss. Irigarary’s trick is to steal Lacan’s desire and put a new face on it; also turn it in a new direction. The new face she puts on desire is bliss; desire is jouissance, in her rendering. Yet for her, too, as it is for Edelman (who ties jouissance to the death drive), it is “the
force that insists on the void” (Edelman, 73). At the lips, that is, Irigaray discovers a figure for desire that encounters a void—lip touching lip at spacing’s wall. The effect is this: an identification (lip to lip) that “enjoys” its own splitting, a failure to fuse that “enjoys” impossibility. Irigaray’s desire, in this respect, is not a wholly other desire than Lacan’s, but a different orientation to lack. This is desire with a different valence, a different tension, a different set of tones. But they are tonal stacks that connect a sense of hedonism to a sense pain; frustration to buoyancy; intimacy to provocation, blockage, and scandal. Perhaps, most importantly, Irigaray imagines this enjoyment, around the crack and distance of desire, as a lacking shared between desiring bodies, between those people who turn their desire toward each other, forming their attempt to keep closing the gap while nurturing their lack, keeping the gash of bliss thus open. But it is a gash.

Is Lacan so distant from these moves? His thoughts on actual mystics aside, even Lacan’s explanations of desire, his attempts to indicate how desire differs from human need, return us to lack’s significant relation to material opacity. Something of human needs, he says, is alienated by needs’ detour through language. “What is thus alienated in needs . . . cannot, by definition,” says Lacan, “be articulated in demand.”23 This something-of-needs, “obliterated” by articulation, by demand, can only “reappear” as a “residue, which then presents itself . . . as desire” (my emphasis; 80). Desire for Lacan, then, is a “residue” and a “relic” of some material “obliteration” that cannot be spoken but does reemerge as perceivable concealment, “reappear[ing]” “beyond demand” (81). Consonant with something like real-bodies mysticism, lack marks the spot.24

Desiring the child, I will hit this wall. The point is to kiss it and thus to feel it, in and around all that I know, all I think I know, all I strive to know. Let an opacity gather
here, for here lies a distance I can’t do without. It is crucial to my practice of material loss—which is my bliss.

But that’s such a luxury, you’ll say to me. To which I’ll say “yes.”

Notes

1 What I’m particularly after is how this dynamic “feels” to “us”; we whom I’m calling “not in need,” especially those suspicious of platitudes, stereotypes, sentiment, and feelings sticking to them. Something about Jacques Lacan’s tripartite divisions and entanglements among need/demand/desire gets at this feeling. Elizabeth Grosz glosses “need” as “the experiential counterpart to nature.” “Needs,” she writes, “are more or less universal or constant in human life, they are the requirements of brute survival: nourishment, shelter, warmth, freedom of movement, a minimal community, and so on”; “need,” that is, “requires real, tangible objects for its satisfaction” (Jacques Lacan [New York: Routledge, 1990], 59-60). However, Lacan points to the “deviation of man’s needs by the fact that he speaks, in the sense that as long as his needs are subjected to demand they return to him alienated.” Demand, since it is addressed to the (m)other, is really asking for something other than particularities: it is asking for a proof of “love” and, thus, for an absolute, a plenitude that the (m)other does not have to give. Writes Lacan: “Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions which it calls for. It is demand for a presence or an absence. This is manifest in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant as it is with that Other to be situated some way short of any needs which it might gratify, . . . Hence it is that demand cancels out (aufhebt) the particularity of anything which might be granted by transmuting it into a proof of love.” He then goes on to say that desire should be viewed as the gap between need and demand, “the very phenomenon of their splitting” (Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose [New York: Norton, 1985], 80-81).


3 Feel free in our discussions to ask me to rehearse how queer theory differs from gay and lesbian studies.


5a For an example of such a scene, see Stockton, 232-37; 242-46.

5b Surely one could argue that the great success of the television series Upstairs, Downstairs, and now Downton Abbey, is the undoing of this unseeing: a much more elaborate, explicit revelation of servant labor at the family hymen.


7 Lauren Berlant, “Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding),” in Compassion, 5. All further references appear in the text.
From the standpoint of evolutionary biology, *Pathological Altruism*, ed. Barbara Oakley, Ariel Knafo, Gururuprasad Madhavan, and David Sloan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), which is just about to appear, promises to address these issues from a different angle.

Lacan’s translator, Alan Sheridan, famously defines the Imaginary in *Ecrits* as “the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined” (New York: Norton, 1977), ix.

It might be wise to ask whether these dreams of self-completion are true of compassionate conservatives but not so true of compassionate liberals at this point.

As you will hear in my public lecture, I believe the former (“they are not a matter of historians’ writings”) is still true, whereas the latter (“or of the general public’s belief”) has shifted, is shifting.


The entire notion of a voice of latency lies at the heart of my public lecture, as you’ll see.


We find out, of course, that the host himself has come up the class ladder to where he now sits.

I’m afraid you’ll have to be patient here—the explanation of Kid Orientalism will be supplied in my public lecture, though I think you’ll start to grasp it in this section.

My comments here and in what follows build upon my thoughts, in the early 1990’s, about post-structuralist “hope in failure”: a pattern I perceived in post-structuralist feminist and psychoanalytic writing from that time. (*See God Between Their Lips*, the section entitled “Hope in Failure” in Chapter One.) From a rather different but related set of angles, Judith Jack Halberstam has confirmed these views, in my opinion, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).


The fabulous phrase “vertical din” is Roland Barthes’ from *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 12. “Tonal stack” is my own version, my translation of sorts of this phrase. It will play a crucial role in my lecture, in addition to this essay.

The name “Macabea,” of course, is a reference to the Maccabees: a Jewish rebel army who took control of Judea and founded the Hasmonean dynasty, which reigned from 164 to 63 BCE.

Now that Lauren Berlant’s much anticipated Cruel Optimism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) has appeared, we can see how she treats the collapse of this difference in her own persuasive terms.


The ideas that follow are worked out at length in Stockton, God Between Their Lips, 26-60.


To give these matters of material opacity one last pass, and yet another index in a different realm, consider Thomas Carlyle’s encounters with history, in his book Past and Present (especially his chapter “The Ancient Monk”). Crucially, for him, a past presents itself as a beckoning enigma, a puzzle that promises a material presence to be approached and embraced. Yet for Carlyle, as much as for post-structuralists, history has gotten difficult, as Carlyle discovers when he reads the notebooks of a twelfth-century monk: “How remote is it from us; exotic, extraneous; in all ways, coming far from abroad! The language of it is not foreign only but dead: Monk-Latin lies across not the British Channel, but the ninefold Stygian Marshes, Stream of Lethe, and one knows not where! . . . And then the ideas, life-furniture, whole workings and ways of this worthy [monk]; covered deeper than Pompeii with the lava-ashes and inarticulate wreck of seven hundred years!” The references here to the “Stygian Marshes,” “Stream of Lethe,” and “Elysian Fields” suggest that material access to the past (far from signaling a linear unfolding) bears analogies to (im)possible spiritual journeys. Precisely because history resists us when we read it (at least to some extent), because it’s not transparent when we touch it, it reveals a materiality (and a temporality) that exceeds our cultural constructions and thus proves its existence apart from us. It feels real through its inviting foreignness. How fitting for Carlyle’s sense of history, then, that he ends his journey to this medieval past with a monk’s report of a bodily enigma: Abbot Samson’s wish to grasp, comprehend, reverence the dead body of the martyr St. Edmund. Carlyle writes: “Stupid blockheads to reverence their St. Edmund’s dead Body in this manner? Yes, brother;--and yet, on the whole, who knows how to reverence the Body of a Man? . . . For the Highest God dwells visible in that mystic unfathomable Visibility, which calls itself ‘I’ on the Earth.” Here we graze post-structuralist formulations, except that it is spiritual discourse that renders the bodily ineffability that post-structuralists stress as material. Does this seeming historical difference between the “spiritual” and the “material” critically matter? You may feel it does. Or does this difference at times collapse in surprising ways? After all, Jane Gallop writes in her Thinking through the Body: “By ‘body’ I mean . . . perceivable givens [Visibility, sensuality] that the human being knows as ‘hers’ without knowing their significance to her [mystic, unfathomable].” Or, as Lacan says: “The essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing [bodily jouissance] but know nothing about it.”