The Post-Postmodern Concept: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Metaphysics

Introduction

In the following essay, I theorize post-postmodernism, particularly as a literary development, from the convergent theoretical stances of Ramón Saldívar’s postrace aesthetics and Frederick Luis Aldama’s postethnic concept of literature. I define post-postmodernism at three levels: the metaphysical, the ethical, and the aesthetic. At the metaphysical level, post-postmodernism is neo-realist; it assumes, in rejection of the constructivist and antirealist hegemony of postmodern thought, that an objective domain exists. At the ethical level, post-postmodernism is objectivist; it rejects postmodernism’s relativist paradigm, which it sees as an inadequate ethical response to ethical crises and social injustice. At the aesthetic level, post-postmodernism is postethnic; it rejects postmodernism’s constructivist conflation of the representation and what it represents such that a representation of culture is not culture and that, in general, a representation of truth is not truth.

To advance this theory, I consider Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, two works of, what Saldívar calls, “a new ‘postrace’ ‘post-postmodern’ generation of writers,” by which he means writers who move beyond postmodernism (519). While both *A Little Life* and *Erasure* are post-postmodern in each of the three senses that I sketch above, I use *A Little Life* to consider post-postmodern metaphysics and ethics and *Erasure* to consider post-postmodern aesthetics. By demonstrating the inadequacy of postmodern ethics and by theorizing, in response, a post-postmodern metaphysics upon which to base ethical claims, *A Little Life* reveals the fundamental assumption of post-postmodernism—that, though it cannot be known, an objective domain nonetheless exists—and its guiding principle: belief. *Erasure* translates this theory of metaphysics and ethics into a theory of aesthetics: A post-postmodern theory of representation is “postethnic” in the style of Aldama, which is to say that it rejects the
conflation of representation and culture and, more broadly, of representation and truth. After considering the ethical implications of a postethnic concept of literature, I conclude by suggesting that literature, in its post-postmodern conception, is a useful tool for ethical intervention because literature itself constitutes an expression of belief.

**Post-Postmodern Ethics and Metaphysics**

We can approach a theory of post-postmodern ethics and metaphysics through the prism of postrace literature. In “Speculative Realism and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary American Fiction,” Saldívar suggests that postmodernism has failed to provide writers of color with the conceptual tools necessary to arbitrate matters of racial justice; he writes, “For many writers of color… postmodernism has proven to be simply too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice… to make it the basis for an attractive form of imaginary creativity” (519). In so writing, Saldívar attributes postmodernism’s failure for writers of color to its distance from “justice” and “injustice,” posing the question: What makes postmodernism so unamenable to justice?

Postmodernism’s distance from justice can be traced to its antirealist metaphysics. In *Realism and Anti-Realism*, Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares define antirealism as the philosophical position that nothing external to thought exists. They write, “A realist about a domain of Fs typically claims that the Fs exist ‘outside our minds’, and that… the realm of Fs exists mind-independently. An anti-realist, of course, rejects this characterization” (34). The mind-dependent premise of antirealism is by and large the premise of postmodern thought, which holds that reality is not objective but rather the product of cognitive, discursive, and social constructs. Because it assumes that reality only exists insofar as it is constructed by the mind, postmodern thought is antirealist.
Because it rejects the existence of an objective reality, postmodern thought also entails a turn to ethical relativism. In *Postmodern Ethics*, Zygmunt Bauman writes, “The novelty of the postmodern approach to ethics consists… in… the rejection of the… philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations [or objectivity] in theory” (3-4). If an objective reality does not exist, neither do objective ethical values. Relativism, then, is the ethical paradigm that follows from postmodernism’s antirealism. By relocating all claims of truth to the domain of the subject, postmodern thought privileges the “truth” of the subject’s ethics, rejecting the possibility of ethical objectivism and necessitating relativism.

It is in relativism that we find the reason behind postmodernism’s distance from justice: Antirealism provides no ethical framework on which to sustain the concepts of justice and injustice, for the concepts of justice and injustice depend on the existence of objective ethical values with which to determine what is just. One could object to the conflation of ethics and justice, where the former describes a system of right while the latter describes a system of law. However, if etymology is any indication, “justice” concerns what is “just,” a word that itself derives from the Latin *jus*, meaning both “law” and “right.” This moral aspect of justice is preserved in contemporary definitions of “just,” which define “just” as “consonant with principles of moral right or of equity” (*Oxford English Dictionary* def. I.5.b). One can see that the moral aspect of justice has permeated its contemporary definition: Justice implies rightness to the effect that the two are of a pair. It is impossible to make claims about justice, which are claims about ethics, when ethical values are relative to the subject. Thus, when he claims that postmodernism is “too distantly removed from the real world of justice and injustice” to make it an attractive form for writers of color, Saldívar also critiques relativism and the antirealism that undergirds it. Writers of color have shied from postmodernism because its relativist paradigm does not, in its rejection of objective ethical values, sustain claims about justice. The
dissatisfaction of writers of color with postmodernism for its distance from justice is fundamentally a dissatisfaction with postmodernism’s ethical and metaphysical paradigm.

As a work of post-postmodern literature, *A Little Life* challenges these paradigms. The novel theorizes a new realist, or neo-realist, metaphysics in place of antirealism and, in the context of its concern with ethics, articulates a break with relativism by evoking its inadequacy as a response to unethical acts.¹ *A Little Life*’s ethically-motivated rejection of antirealism in favor of neo-realism entails a return to belief, the principle of post-postmodern thought.

I speak of a return to belief because postmodern thought, in its rejection of an objective reality, annihilated the concept of truth and, thus, belief. In *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Stanley Fish notes that belief requires a concept of truth. He writes, “If one believes what one believes, then one believes that what one believes is true, and conversely, one believes that what one doesn’t believe is not true” (361). As Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp suggest in “Against Theory,” such a definition of belief presupposes that truth is objective:

> To imagine that we can see the beliefs we hold as no better than but “merely different” from opposing beliefs held by others is to imagine a position from which we can see our beliefs without really believing them. To be in this position would be to see the truth about beliefs without actually having any—to know without believing. (739)

By revealing the contradiction inherent in not believing that our beliefs are true and that beliefs that controvert our own are false, Benn Michaels and Knapp suggest that belief assumes that its truth is objective, for an understanding of truth as relative contradicts the presupposition of belief to truth above other falsehoods. By rejecting the existence of an objective reality and, therefore,

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¹ By “neo-realist,” I intend the definition that Maurizio Ferraris provides in *Introduction to New Realism*: “New realism… is a reoccurring function: the reaction to a previous antirealist hegemony” (11).
truth, postmodernism rejects the possibility of belief. Thus, in its turn to a post-postmodern, neo-realist metaphysics and ethics, *A Little Life* returns to belief.

*A Little Life* theorizes neo-realism by suggesting that the antirealist premise that the subject cannot know an objective domain does not mean that an objective domain does not exist. Indeed, though it departs from its postmodern premises, *A Little Life* begins with this antirealist assumption, affirming the necessarily subjective nature of a subject’s truth:

“[Pure logic] proves…the almost infinite elasticity of mathematics itself, within the accepted set of assumptions by which we define it…[it proves] the impossible yet consistent internal logic of math itself.

“So for example, I might say to you ‘All positive numbers are real. Two is a positive number. Therefore, two must be real.’ But this isn’t actually true, right? It’s a derivation, a supposition of truth. I haven’t actually proven that two is a real number, but it must logically be true. So you’d write a proof to, in essence, prove that the logic of those two statements is in fact real.” (141-2)

The distinction that the passage draws between the “actually true” and the “logically…true” points to the distinction between objective truth and subjective truth. Pure logic is premised on the idea that mathematical truth only pertains within the limits of, or is “internal” to, the “accepted set of assumptions” of the mathematical logic that produces it, such that the statements “All positive numbers are real. Two is a positive number” represent logical “assumptions” from which the final statement “Therefore, two must be real” derives a truth. Yet, as the passage suggests, this “derivation…of truth” is only “logically…true”; it cannot be known to be true outside of the logic of mathematics. Logic limits pure logic, qualifying truth (“logically be true”)

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2 Here postmodern antirealism demonstrates its theoretical untenability. In *The Last Word*, Thomas Nagel writes, “The claim ‘Everything is subjective’ must be nonsense, for it would itself have to be either subjective or objective. But it can’t be objective, since in that case it would be false if true. And it can’t be subjective, because then it would not rule out any objective claim, including the claim that it is objectively false” (53). If an objective domain does not exist, the antirealist claim that the objective does not exist cannot claim to represent an objective truth without contradicting itself; for, even if an objective domain did not exist, the fact that it did not exist would nonetheless admit of an objective truth (that an objective domain does not exist). In other words, if we accept it as true, the proposition contradicts its own premise; and if we accept it as false, the proposition invalidates its claim to truth as no more justified than the claims to truth of contradictory claims. Because it cannot be true under either circumstance, the proposition demonstrates its implausibility.
and replacing truth as the object of mathematical inquiry (“to, in essence, prove that the logic [not the truth] of those two statements is in fact real”). The delimitation of mathematical truth to the “accepted set of assumptions by which we define” mathematics reveals the subjective nature of mathematical truth. Because “we [subjects] define” mathematics and because mathematical truth pertains only to the “internal logic of math itself,” truth becomes subjective, applying only within the subjective mathematics that “we” define.

This confinement of mathematical truth to its subjective logic is suggested in the following passage: “A beautiful proof… combines just a handful of different concepts, albeit from across the mathematical universe, and… leads to a grand and new generalized truth in mathematics: that is, a wholly provable, unshakable absolute in a constructed world with very few unshakable absolutes” (144). By qualifying the “truth” and the “absolute” that they modify, the phrases “from across the mathematical universe,” “in mathematics,” and “in a constructed world,” situate and emphasize, in their repetition, the situated-ness of mathematical truth in its constructed mathematics. Because a “constructed world” requires a subject to construct it, the mathematical truth of a “constructed world” represents not an objective truth, or a truth that exists apart from thought, but rather the subjective truth of a subjectively constructed logic.

The thesis that mathematical truth is the subjective truth of a subjectively constructed logic suggests in antirealist fashion that subjects, given their inability to think an objective domain, are limited to the subjective truths of their constructed logics. In *The Quadruple Object*, Graham Harman explains this paradox; he writes, “If we try to think a world outside human thought, then we are *thinking* it, and hence it is no longer outside thought” (emphasis original; 60). If the subject can only prove the existence of the objective world by thinking it, then any attempt to prove that an objective domain exists will fail, for to know the existence of an objective domain is to know that which by definition cannot be known. Because the subject
cannot know an objective domain, the truth of any constructed system, such as mathematics, must always be subjective insofar as it is known; and objective truth must always be inaccessible to the subject, for if objective truth were known, it would, by being known, be subjective.

Yet, while it accepts the antirealist premise that an objective domain cannot be known, the novel departs from postmodern thought by suggesting that the fact that an objective domain cannot be known does not mean that such a domain does not exist:

Life… is the axiom of the empty set. It begins in zero and ends in zero. We know that both states exist, but we will not be conscious of either experience: they are states that are necessary parts of life, even as they cannot be experienced as life. We assume the concept of nothingness, but we cannot prove it. But it must exist.

(emphases original; 326)

The axiom of the empty set posits a principle of unknowable existence that also describes the relationship between the subject and an objective domain. Interpreted in terms of life and death, the axiom of the empty set states that, insofar as knowing is fundamental to the subject, only life can be known. By precluding life and, thus, knowledge, death cannot be known. Though we assume that zero or death exists, we cannot prove it, for death, by precluding life, also precludes knowledge and its proof. This relation between life and death, and between non-zero and zero, is analogous to the relation between subject and object because both relations depend on an opposition between a knowing subject and an unknowable object whose existence, by depending on its independence from the subject, cannot be proven. Like zero, an objective domain cannot be proven to exist, for its proof would require it, as a concept whose objectivity depends on its not being known, to be known. By invoking the axiom of the empty set, the novel suggests through analogy that, though one cannot prove that an objective domain exists, one need not, per postmodern antirealism, reject its existence, for one can assume that such a domain exists. Thus, despite the fact that an objective domain is unknowable, the novel maintains that it, like zero and death, exists, thereby constructing a neo-realist metaphysics with the following assumptions: (1)
an objective domain is unknowable; yet, (2) an objective domain exists. In so doing, the novel departs from its postmodern antirealist premise, suggesting that, though we cannot prove that an objective domain exists, we can assume that it does.³

The novel calls this act of knowing without knowing belief: “The hardest thing is not finding the knowledge, Brother Luke once said to [Jude] after he’d confessed he was having difficulty believing in God. The hardest thing is believing it” (emphases original; 226). The syntactically ambiguous first sentence, which reads as both “Finding the knowledge is not the hardest thing” and “Not finding the knowledge is the hardest thing,” presents complementary theses about the relation between subject and object (or, in this case, God). The first reading suggests that knowing is not the hardest thing, for, insofar as humans think, they also know and cannot not know what they think. The second reading suggests that not knowing is the hardest thing. Because an object, to be an object, must not be known and because the subject cannot prove that an objective domain exists without knowing it and contradicting its objectivity, the inability of the subject to know that an objective domain exists without knowing is the hardest thing. The ambiguous syntax of the first sentence, then, reflects the metaphysical paradox of the novel: The subject cannot know an objective domain because the subject cannot know without knowing. The final sentence “The hardest thing is believing” names this paradox. If knowing is not the hardest thing (for the subject knows), and if not knowing is the hardest thing (for the subject cannot not know), and if believing is the hardest thing, then the hardest thing, which is

³ Indeed, one cannot conclude that an objective domain does not exist from the fact that such a domain cannot be known, for to do so would be to conclude a certainty from a possibility. That is, the idea that one must disbelieve a proposition (an objective domain exists) if there are no grounds on which to believe it (one cannot prove it) is fallacious insofar as it assumes that the corollary of an unsubstantiated belief (ignorance) is disbelief. Just as it is illogical to conclude from the proposition “There is no evidence upon which to believe the existence of God” that “There is evidence upon which to disbelieve the existence of God”—for the inability of the reader to prove the existence of God does not equal the non-existence of God—it is fallacious to disbelieve the existence of an objective domain from the lack of evidence supporting it. The existence of an objective domain, even if not proven, is possible and, following this logic alone, cannot be deemed implausible.
believing, is knowing that an objective domain exists without knowing it or contradicting its objectivity. When taken together, the passage’s theses represent the total metaphysical thesis of the novel: Belief is knowing without knowing, or assuming without proving, that an objective domain exists.4

The neo-realist metaphysical basis of *A Little Life* can be read as a reaction to, what the novel suggests, is the inadequate response of relativism to unethical acts. The novel establishes its thematic concern with ethics by suggesting the need for an ethical interpretation of Jude’s abuse: “Fairness is for happy people… Right and wrong, however, are for—well, not unhappy people, maybe, but scarred people; scared people” (190). By synecdochically referring to Jude, who is physically scarred by his abuse and self-abuse, the phrase “right and wrong… are for… scarred people” frames Jude’s experiences in terms of “right and wrong,” suggesting, in so doing, the need for an ethical interpretation of Jude’s abuse.

Yet, the nature of such an ethics depends on the metaphysics that underlies it. The novel identifies two types of ethics that result from the two metaphysics that it juxtaposes—an objective (neo-realist) and a subjective (antirealist) ethics:

> You have to tell yourself every day: I am doing the right thing. To let [Jude] do what he wants to do [commit suicide] is abhorrent to the *laws* of nature… You think, what is a child for? Is he to give me comfort? Is he for me to give comfort to? And if a child can no longer be comforted, is it my job to give him permission to leave? (802-3)

The first part of the excerpt appeals to an objective ethics by invoking the “laws of nature,” or physical laws, such as the law of gravity, that both precede and exceed all subjects’ conceptual schemes. By appealing to laws anterior to thought and, so un-thought, objective, the

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4 The importance of belief to the novel is further suggested in the passage, “The world has two kinds of people… Those who are inclined to believe, and those who aren’t. In my courtroom, we value belief. Belief in *all* things,” which, when read as a meta-textual comment, discloses the metaphysical investment of the novel in belief (123). See also: 418, 419, 784, 813, and 814. The word “believe” or a form thereof occurs 59 times in the novel.
passage bases its ethical position on an objective law; it appeals to an objective ethics.\footnote{In the context of its ethical question, Harold’s appeal to the “laws of nature” also allusively appeals to the “natural law,” or the “universal and invariable” law that “prescribes our most fundamental duties,” further suggesting an appeal to an objective ethics (Maritain 97, 95).} By contrast, the second part of the excerpt appeals to a relativist ethics by implying that the ethical assessment of Jude’s suicide depends on the subjective set of assumptions, or the constructed logic, that precedes it. The series of questions that precede the ethical question “Is it my job to give him permission to leave?” suggests that the answer to the ethical question depends on the answers that the subject provides to the preliminary questions. Because the questions appeal to the subject, or depend on subjective answers, the ethical question is predicated on the constructed, or relativist, logic of that subject. By juxtaposing these metaphysically opposed appeals, the novel suggests that the ethics through which the reader reads Jude’s experience must be either objective or subjective.

While the novel’s admission that the subject cannot know the object suggests, according to antirealist logic, that an objective ethics, being unknowable, does not exist, the novel suggests that ethical relativism, and the antirealism that underpins it, is an inadequate response to unethical acts because it assumes that any action is defensible from the position of the subject. Reviewers’ responses to A Little Life’s “exaggerated” depiction of abuse index this inadequacy.\footnote{I use Yanagihara’s word: “I don’t regret… the amount of abuse Jude endures… while you’re [editor Gerry Howard] right that his level of suffering is extraordinary, it’s not… implausible… Everything in this book is a little exaggerated…” (emphasis original).}

As Daniel Mendelsohn catalogs in “A Striptease Among Pals,” Jude is abused by:

- a sadistic doctor, [who] deliberately runs him over… by the pedophile priests in the orphanage where he grew up, by the truckers and drifters to whom he is pimped out by the priest he runs away with, by the counselors and the young inmates at the youth facility where he ends up after the wicked priest is apprehended, by the evil doctor in whose torture chamber he ends up after escaping from the unhappy youth facility…. [and by] a sadistic male lover who beats him repeatedly and throws him and his wheelchair down a flight of stairs.
Though Mendelsohn uses this catalog to critique Yanagihara’s exaggeration, the language that he adopts indexes the unethical nature of Jude’s abuse. The words “sadistic,” “wicked,” and “evil” illustrate the reader’s impulse to view Jude’s abusers’ actions as unethical. By defying the reader to think about Jude’s abuse in anything but objective ethical terms, the novel demonstrates the inadequacy of relativism as a response to abuse and to ethical crises in general. Thus, at the same time that it admits the unknowability of an objective domain, *A Little Life* also marks the need for an objective ethics, or at least the need to believe in objective ethical values.

*A Little Life*’s aesthetic exaggeration conscripts violence into the service of theory to demonstrate the shortcomings of ethical relativism as a response to unethical acts. The inadequacy of relativism reflects both the inadequacy of the antirealism that produces such an ethics and the need for an objective ethics and metaphysics with which to condemn and assert the existence of unethical acts. Insofar as relativism is rooted in antirealism, the novel’s turn to neo-realism represents a turn to an objective ethics—and, insofar as justice is predicated on ethics, a return to the possibility of justice. Because antirealism fails to provide an objective ethics with which to condemn Jude’s abusers’ actions, the novel theorizes in its place a neo-realist metaphysics predicated on a belief in the existence of an objective domain and of objective ethical values. Belief, then, the novel suggests, is the principle of post-postmodernism.

**Post-Postmodern Aesthetics**

At the same time that it shifts to ethical objectivism and neo-realism, post-postmodern thought also shifts to a postethnic theory of representation. In this section I consider *Erasure* and, briefly, Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt*, two novels predicated on the same post-postmodern metaphysics as *A Little Life*, and the postethnic concept of literature that they advance: A representation of culture is not culture and, more generally, a representation of truth is not truth.
This turn to a postethnic concept of literature reacts, in stride with Aldama, against the postmodern constructivist conflation of “narrative and ontology,” or the representation and what it represents (2). A post-postmodern theory of representation, then, is postethnic. The postethnic theory of representation answers ethical questions concerning the author’s obligation to represent her identity, cross-cultural representation, and postmodernism’s problematic aesthetic praxis.

The postethnic theory of representation reacts against the twentieth-century critical tendency to treat ethnic literature as “ethnographic artifact” (Aldama 2). Scholars point to this phenomenon across ethnic literatures and their criticisms:

Particularly in the past two decades, amidst the powerful influences of new historicism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and the growing trend toward interdisciplinarity, Asian American literary criticism has become almost indistinguishable from the reading of “culture.” (Davis and Lee 2)

Since the mid-twentieth-century writings of Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Asturias, there has been a conflation of the literary form with ethnographic content: a confusion of narrative with ontology. (Aldama 2)

My goal is to give readers a sense of how these foundational texts work as aesthetic objects (rather than sociological documents) crafted in dialogue with the canonical tradition of so-called ‘American Literature,’ as it existed in the late twentieth century [‘1968-2001’]. (Patell 3)

[Postmodern critics] read [Asian American] texts as forms of non-fictional documents, representational mirrors reflecting particular social inequalities experienced by Asian Americans and perhaps even the lives of the writers themselves, occasionally over and above the qualities of such writings as aesthetic creations. (Sohn 17)

It is against this paradigm that Aldama’s postethnic concept of ethnic literature works. In _Postethnic Narrative Criticism_, Aldama notes that to read ethnic literature as if it were an ethnographic artifact is to confuse “narrative with ontology,” or to mistake a representation of culture for culture itself. In other words, it is to assume that a necessarily subjective representation instantiates objective truths about a culture; he writes, “Language is a social tool and as such is part of reality, but the writer has to turn language into a personally customized tool
to represent what he or she wants to say. I want to maintain a clear distinction between language… and ontological fact” (20-1). Because literature is not culture as “ontological fact” but rather a “personally customized” representation of “what [the writer] wants to say,” representations of reality cannot be treated as if they were the culture that they represent: A representation of culture is not that culture as “ontological fact.” The crux of Aldama’s postethnic theory, then, is also that of post-postmodern philosophy: A subjective representation, such as a work of ethnic literature, is not an object.

Though Aldama does not note it, the ethnographic approach to ethnic literature is consistent with the postmodern, constructivist presupposition that a representation is what it represents. Because postmodern antirealism rejected the existence of an objective domain, it also rejected the possibility that culture exists objectively. To postmodernists, culture was not an “ontological fact” but rather, like everything in the antirealist paradigm, constructed. Insofar as their ethnographic praxis grew out of postmodern thought, literary critics could justify reading ethnic literature ethnographically, as if it were what it represented, because they accepted that what is—including culture—is a representation and inextricable from the fact that it is represented. Thus, when he argues against an ethnographic concept of ethnic literature, Aldama rejects the constructivist conflation of culture and representation and suggests that a representation is not what it represents. Aldama’s postethnic theory is post-postmodern in its rejection of the authenticity paradigm and its postmodern and constructivist assumptions.

We find this postethnic theory of representation in Apex Hides the Hurt. The title—taken from the slogan of a bandage company—suggests that, though the bandage Apex “hides the hurt,” the hurt nonetheless remains: Apex does not get rid of “the hurt.” In the same way, the novel suggests that names do not change what they name: “You can change the name but you can’t change the place. It stays the same” (26). The idea that changing a name does not change
the object that it purports to represent presupposes that what it purports to represent exists apart from the name, or representation, and thus that the represented “object” is not constructed by the representation. By suggesting that an objective domain—or a domain apart from representation—exists but that that domain cannot be represented, *Apex Hides the Hurt* demonstrates both its post-postmodern metaphysical assumptions and its postethnic theory of representation: The representation is not what it represents.

*Apex Hides the Hurt*’s invocation of Alfred Korzybski’s map-territory disjunction further indexes its postethnic theory of representation. The novel reads, “Tantalasia… A literal territory, some patch of unnamed broken gravel between places on a map” (115). The use of both “territory” and “map” in a sentence that suggests that a map fails to represent the “territory” Tantalasia (Tantalasia is “between places on a map”) lexically and conceptually invokes Korzybski’s map-territory disjunction. In *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski writes:

> Let us take some actual territory in which cities appear in the following order: Paris, Dresden, Warsaw, when taken from the West to the East. If we were to build a map of this territory and place Paris between Dresden and Warsaw… we should say that the map was wrong, or that it was an incorrect map, or that the map has a different structure from the territory. A map is not the territory it represents. (58)

By noting that the map that places Paris between Dresden and Warsaw is “incorrect” but nonetheless a “map” (it is “an incorrect map”), Korzybski suggests that the map is distinct from the territory that it represents. The ability of a map to represent a territory incorrectly means that the map and the territory must be distinct, for the map could not be both incorrect and the territory (insofar as a territory cannot be incorrect). The novel allies itself with this theory: The map referred to in the text is incorrect in that it fails to represent Tantalasia, which falls “between places on the map”; the fact that it is incorrect means that it is not the territory. Of course, a map can only not be the territory that it represents if the territory exists apart from the map. As such,
the map-territory disjunction is unamenable to postmodernism’s constructivist metaphysics because the map does not construct the territory from which it is disjoint. By invoking the map-territory disjunction, the novel reveals its neo-realist metaphysics and, further, articulates its own postethnic theory of representation, which assumes that a representation is not what it represents and that a representation cannot represent anything other than itself.

*Erasure* evinces its own postethnic theory of representation in the form of the typographical conceit *sous rature* (represented by the strikethrough), which, though a postmodern concept, is recast in the context of the novel’s neo-realist metaphysics to illustrate a post-postmodern point. The reader finds this conceit throughout the novel, on the cover and on the odd-numbered pages. As Madam Sarup notes, to mark a word *sous rature* is to indicate that that word is an “inadequate yet necessary” representation of what it represents (33). Thus, one might write the word “erasure” *sous rature* “erasure” to indicate that the word “erasure,” though the nearest approximation of what it represents, nonetheless inadequately represents it. The post-postmodern assumptions of this theory are inscribed by the word “inadequate,” which suggests that, if a representation is inadequate, insofar as a representation is only adequate as a representation of itself, it is an inadequate representation of something that it is not, or that it does not itself construct. If something is *sous rature*, there must exist some other thing that it inadequately represents. The novel’s adoption of *sous rature* as typographical conceit reveals its post-postmodern metaphysics and its postethnic theory of representation.

*Erasure* links its postethnic theory of representation to the literary critical practice from which it emerges by situating an anti-ethnographic argument against Juanita Marie Jenkins’s ethnographic paradigm *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*. The novel frames *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* as an ethnographic paradigm by suggesting that the work can be read for what it represents. A fictional review of Jenkins’s work reads, “One can actually hear the voices of her people as they
make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” (39). The use of the word “actually” in the phrase “One can actually hear the voices of her people” is key for it implies that the reviewer, in reading Jenkins’s novel, hears voices “existing in fact” and not in fiction; the word “actually” implies that the reviewer hears the “voices” themselves and not We’s Lives in Da Ghetto’s representation of the “voices” (Oxford English Dictionary “actually, adv.”). By framing Jenkins’s work not as a representation of black voices but as black voices themselves, the novel, through the review, frames We’s Lives in Da Ghetto as an ontological, rather than aesthetic, object and, thus, as the paradigm of the postmodern, ethnographic concept of ethnic literature.

However, Erasure critiques this ethnographic praxis by deconstructing the idea that literature can represent anything other than itself and, thus, that We’s Lives in Da Ghetto can be read as if it were what it represents. The novel begins to construct its critique in the following passage: “I knew that for all my mother’s seeming incoherence… she was trying to tell me something… But since I didn’t know the rules… I could only know that she was trying to say something, not what that something was” (32). The meaning behind this passage can be summarized for clarity: The language in which Monk’s mother speaks only makes sense according to the “rules” (the grammar, syntax, and semantics) on which it is structured. Because Monk does not know the rules governing his mother’s language, he cannot know what she is saying but only that she is saying something. By stating that the intelligibility of Monk’s mother’s language depends on a set of “rules” not known by Monk, the passage suggests that language means not with reference to a universal, or objective, set of rules but rather with reference to its own set of rules. Language, then, the passage suggests, is contingent on a self-contained logic, or on a logic particular to the subject and, because it is contingent, it is also subjective. By suggesting that language is subjective and, thus, not objective, the passage points
to the disjunction between a representation and the object that it represents, suggesting that—like *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*—language, as a representation, is not what it represents.\(^7\)

The novel nuances this theory of representation by suggesting that language only “becomes” what it represents when a subject detaches the semantic content of the representation from the fact (or form) of the representation, thereby suggesting that the assumption that a representation is what it represents fails to recognize the fact that what it represents is represented.\(^8\) The novel reads, “It’s incredible that a sentence is ever understood… There is no such thing as propositional content. Language never really effaces its own presence, but creates the illusion that it does in cases where meaning assumes a first priority” (44). The term “propositional content” evokes John Searle’s distinction between the proposition of a statement and the fact of its illocution. In *Speech Acts*, Searle writes, “Stating and asserting are acts, but propositions are not acts. A proposition is what is asserted in the act of asserting, what is stated in the act of stating” (29). Take, for instance, the following two sentences:

1. Cows moo.
2. I assert that cows moo.

The propositional content of each statement is the same: Cows moo. However, where the first sentence is nothing more than its propositional content, the second sentence embeds its

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\(^7\) It is worth bearing on this theory for a moment to explicate the logic behind it. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Alfred Jules Ayer explains that all representation is subjective because it can only demonstrate its own logical consistency; he writes: We see now that the axioms of a geometry are simply definitions, and that the theorems of a geometry are simply the logical consequences of these definitions… All that the geometry itself tells us is that if anything can be brought under the definitions, it will also satisfy the theorems. (82-3) According to Ayer, representations of reality, such as geometry, only demonstrate their ability to represent reality according to their rules of representation. We can demonstrate Ayer’s claim by considering, in his lead, a geometric example. For instance, the Cartesian coordinate plane can locate any point at the intersection of an x- and a y- value, provided the point lies on a two-dimensional plane. However, the fact that it can do so only demonstrates the consistency of its representational logic, which is to say its ability to plot points under the given conditions; it does not demonstrate any truth about reality. Insofar as representations of reality, such as language, only demonstrate their logical consistency, representation is tautological and cannot be said to represent objective truth.

\(^8\) For instance, the assumption that a picture of an apple is an apple fails to recognize the fact that a picture of an apple is a *picture* of an apple.
propositional content in an illocutionary statement such that the propositional content of the
statement is subordinated to the “I,” or the speaker of the statement. Thus, while the
acknowledgment of the speaker in the second sentence foregrounds the represented nature of the
propositional content, the lack of an acknowledged speaker in the first sentence, by divorcing the
proposition from its issuer, implies that the proposition is not contingent on a subject. It is not
represented and, thus, by definition, objective.

Of course, the passage rejects this implication by contending that even a proposition
whose contingency is not designated by an illocutionary statement is nonetheless represented by
the fact of its linguistic form. The novel reads, “There is no such thing as propositional content”
because “Language never really effaces its own presence.” We can understand this refutation
given its proximity to the previous passage, in which the novel establishes that language, in its
contingency on a self-contained set of rules, is a representation. The idea that language is a
representation explains the suggestion that “There is no such thing as propositional content”
because “Language never really effaces its own presence”: If language is represented, even a
purely propositional statement in syntax (such as “Cows moo”) is not purely propositional, for,
as an expression of language, it is a representation. That is, as a representation, language
functions as its own illocutionary mechanism such that any unqualified propositional statement
such as “Cows moo” is itself qualified by the fact that it is an expression of language. With this
understanding, we can rephrase the passage for clarity: There is no such thing as propositional
content because all propositions are, as linguistic propositions, represented. Propositional content
only seems to exist when the semantic content of the proposition (“Cows moo”) overshadows the
fact that the proposition is in form, if not in content, contingent on a subjective logic and, thus, a representation. A proposition is only a proposition in content and not in form.

The novel makes the literary critical consequences of this theory apparent when it states that “Art… is never a mere manifestation of life” (33). If we take “art” to refer to a specific type of representation, we can rewrite the passage to be more in keeping with the theoretical vocabulary that this essay has employed: “Representation… is never a mere manifestation of life.” By stating that a representation of life, particularly in the form of “art,” is not a “manifestation of life,” the novel rejects the conflation of We’s Lives in Da Ghetto’s representation of “the voices of [Jenkins’s] people” with the “voices” themselves, suggesting that We’s Lives in Da Ghetto is not “the voices” but rather a representation thereof and that to read We’s Lives in Da Ghetto as the “voices” is untenable. By advancing a theory of representation that states that a representation is not what it represents, Erasure demonstrates the error of conflating a representation with what it represents and, thus, establishes both its neo-realist metaphysics and its postethnic theory. A post-postmodern theory of representation, or a theory of representation predicated on the existence yet un-representability of an objective domain, is postethnic.

[Section omitted.]

I have strayed rather far from where I began and, thus, have not yet considered the utility of a post-postmodern concept of aesthetics for the fundamental issues of ethics and justice from

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9 Take, for instance, the following examples: C and I handwrite identical notes to a mutual friend T. C has legible handwriting, so when T reads C’s note, she does not think twice about the fact that it is written; the content of the note takes the priority. By contrast, I have illegible handwriting, so when T reads my note, she is struck by the illegibility of the writing, which is to say by the writing itself and not by the content of the writing. In the first case, T focuses on the content of the message; in the second, she focuses on the materiality of the writing. Meaning assumes a first priority when meaning is not obscured, for instance, by poor handwriting.
which it arises. It is with a discussion of the purposefulness of a post-postmodern, postethic concept of aesthetics for the ethical projects of writers of color that I will end.

**Conclusion: Aesthetics as Ethical Intervention**

The need for the post-postmodern concept reflects the need, more urgent than ever, for justice. The idea that post-postmodern thought could serve a progressive purpose seems counterintuitive: Does not the post-postmodern emphasis on belief, truth, and objectivism enable a return to colonialist politics? The objection makes sense; as Paul Boghossian notes, “Constructivist views of knowledge [such as relativism were] closely linked to such progressive movements as post-colonialism and multiculturalism because they suppl[ied] the philosophical resources with which to protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views” (130). However, while it is right to assert that postmodern thought has enabled social progress, the objection fails to recognize that post-postmodernism’s tenets are the foundation not for regressive politics, but rather for political practice in general and that, insofar as politics has never not been practiced, politics has always been post-postmodern.

The post-postmodern character of politics can be attributed to the inability of relativism to justify the institutional practice of anything, or political practice at a level that affects more than the individual subject. Indeed, to implement any policy within a relativist paradigm that not only affirms the “equal validity” of all subjective beliefs but also condemns the colonial practice of “subjugating a sovereign people in the name of spreading knowledge” is to contradict the “equal validity” premise of relativism (2). A political practice that “subjugat[es] a sovereign people” to policies and laws aimed at creating and maintaining social order violates postmodernism’s relativist theory and adopts the colonialist aspect that such a theory rejects.
Thus, insofar as it institutes laws that affect multiple subjects, politics is neo-realist in its rejection of relativism and in its recourse to objective values on which to justify practice.

Further, because realism is the precondition for political practice in general and not only for regressive politics, a neo-realist metaphysics can serve a progressive end. While any institutional practice entails a degree of colonialism, a political practice that promotes progressive values is more progressive than a practice that, because of its antirealist metaphysics, cannot be justifiably implemented. For instance, a postmodern multiculturalism, which can only be a multiculturalism in theory, is less progressive than a post-postmodern multiculturalism, or the institutional practice of multiculturalism, for, although it evades colonialist practice, it does not effect social progress. Thus, despite necessarily excluding certain subjective “truths,” the practice of multiculturalism, by virtue of its practice, is more progressive than the theory, or non-practice, of multiculturalism. If postmodernism laid the ground for a progressive social theory but failed to implement it, post-postmodernism provides the means to put this theory into practice, demonstrating its value as a metaphysics for progressive politics.

Indeed, the need for a post-postmodern concept has never been more apparent. Contemporary scholars point to the failure of postmodernism’s relativist and multiculturalist paradigm. In *The Trouble with Diversity*, Benn Michaels reveals the ways in which a multiculturalist conception of economic inequality legitimizes said inequality:

> We have also started to treat economic difference as if it were cultural difference… And if we can stop thinking of the poor as people who have too little money and start thinking of them instead as people who have too little respect, then it’s our attitude toward the poor, not their poverty, that becomes the problem to be solved, and we can focus our efforts of reform not on getting rid of classes but on getting rid of what we like to call classism. (19-20)

As Benn Michaels notes, to adopt a discourse of multiculturalism around the problem of economic inequality is to conceive of economic inequality as a “cultural difference” to be
respected rather than a problem to be solved and, thereby, to turn a systemic problem of economic inequality into a problem of attitude. The emphasis of postmodern thought on relativism, the ethical manifestation of multiculturalism, legitimates even unjust differences, such as differences in class, diverting attention away from the sources of problems and addressing instead the symptoms thereof.

Postmodern thought can also be coopted to malicious effect. In *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race*, Kim writes of the neoconservative “claim for ‘equal representation’ of creationism or ‘intelligent design’ in the United States” (153):

Stanley Fish writes about the appropriation of the rhetoric of postmodernism, multiculturalism… by intelligent design proponents. The Right’s appropriation of this discourse is effective because it ‘takes the focus away from the scientific credibility of intelligent design… and puts it instead on the more abstract issues of freedom and open inquiry’ (70)—and, it may be added, pluralism and diversity. But… the Right’s tactical use of postmodern and multicultural logic does not mean they believe them. (153; Kim quotes from Fish “Academic Cross-Dressing.”)

As Kim, drawing on Fish, argues, postmodernism’s multiculturalist logic can be—and has been—used to legitimize the incorporation of ideologies such as “intelligent design” into American cultural discourse on the basis of ideological diversity rather than truth; that is, postmodernism’s multiculturalist discourse allows one to argue that “intelligent design” should be represented, for instance, in school curricula not because it is true but rather because to fail to do so would be to contradict multiculturalism’s premise that all perspectives are equally valid. Though the representation of “intelligent design” in American cultural discourse is not one of the more pressing issues facing people today, Kim’s and Fish’s example nonetheless demonstrates the dangers of postmodern thought, for, if “intelligent design” can be legitimized on the basis of multiculturalism alone, it follows that other, more dangerous ideologies, including ideologies of white supremacy and neo-Nazism, can also be legitimized in the name of ideological diversity.
As powerful as it is for progressive politics, postmodernism’s multiculturalist thought is as powerful an ideological tool for oppression.

As Benn Michaels and Kim demonstrate, the postmodern concept of ethics and its attendant multiculturalism present serious ethical problems. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that, because it cultivates a culture of compulsory indifference to injustice, postmodernism’s multiculturalist logic also fails to provide the theoretical platform necessary to respond to these problems. Cyrus Patell makes this point in *Emergent U.S. Literatures*:

> The logic of contemporary multiculturalism goes something like this: I like my culture…, but I respect yours. I really can’t comment on your culture, because I don’t belong to it… If I happen to find some of your long-standing practices and values distasteful or even repugnant—well, we’ll just agree to disagree. Even if, for example one, one of those practices is slavery. (16-7)

The “logic of contemporary multiculturalism” is, of course, a logic underpinned by a postmodern concept of ethics, as relativist, and of metaphysics, as antirealist. In its emphasis on the particularity of “long-standing practices and values,” multiculturalism, the social ideological manifestation of relativism, cultivates a climate in which individuals, accepting the premises of multiculturalism on the grounds that they want their own practices and values to be respected, must also respect the practices and values of others and, to this end, cannot critique a hypothetical culture’s “long-standing practice” of “slavery.” What multiculturalism and, by extension, relativism creates is a social contract of mutual insularity that precludes dialogue. Insofar as critiquing a culture’s practice of slavery contradicts the fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism, postmodernism’s social theory, though progressive, is fundamentally opposed to justice and ethics. It is to this need for justice that post-postmodernism responds.

The need for a post-postmodern concept of ethics, evinced by the failure of the postmodern concept, animates the post-postmodern literary project, a coalescence of the postrace and postethnic projects of Saldívar and Aldama. Post-postmodern writers revise the postmodern
concept of ethics, metaphysics, and aesthetics in favor of a belief in the existence yet unknowability of an objective domain and, thus, in objective ethical values. By using literature as the means to define and dispute ethical values, post-postmodern writers turn to the aesthetic for ethical purposes: Literature becomes the vehicle for ethics, which in turn becomes the vehicle for justice. This collocation of post-postmodern ethics and aesthetics seems self-defeating: As the post-postmodern theory of representation suggests, if all representations are misrepresentations and therefore make no claim to truth, literature, as a representation, cannot convey ethical truths. This contradiction poses the following question for the post-postmodern literary project: How can literature, as a representation, provide a means for ethical intervention when its aesthetic theory admits of the un-representability of an objective domain?

The question does not admit of an answer but rather brings us back to the importance of belief for post-postmodern thought. Belief is the uniquely post-postmodern epistemological expression that allows writers of color to pursue justice where postmodernism proscribes such engagement. Whereas postmodern thought does not sustain a concept of truth and, thus, only supports an epistemology of “interpretations,” post-postmodern thought presupposes the existence, if unknowability, of truth and, thus, supports an epistemology of beliefs. Unlike interpretations, all of which are equally untrue as the epistemological byproducts of antirealism, beliefs are vectors of contention: Though unprovable, they advance competing claims about truth and, in so doing, challenge each other. Post-postmodernism’s epistemological calibration to belief, then, bespeaks its emphasis on the productive potential of contention.

Literature is one of the vehicles for this contention. As the post-postmodern, postethnic theory of representation indicates, literature, as a representation of truth, is not the truth that it represents. However, the fact that it does not convey truth does not mean that literature cannot express what it believes to be true. To the extent that it does, literature constitutes an expression
of belief. Thus, we return to the contradiction previously posited. While it is true that the post-postmodern theory of representation provides no way to convey truth, to make such a claim is to miss the fact that at the heart of post-postmodern thought is not truth but rather belief. The post-postmodern theory of representation, as a theory of belief, is consistent with the ethical projects of post-postmodern writers insofar as those projects hinge on the contestation of beliefs. We can conclude, then, that post-postmodern writers remain committed to literature as a means for ethical intervention because literature itself remains an effective conduit for belief.

Works Cited


