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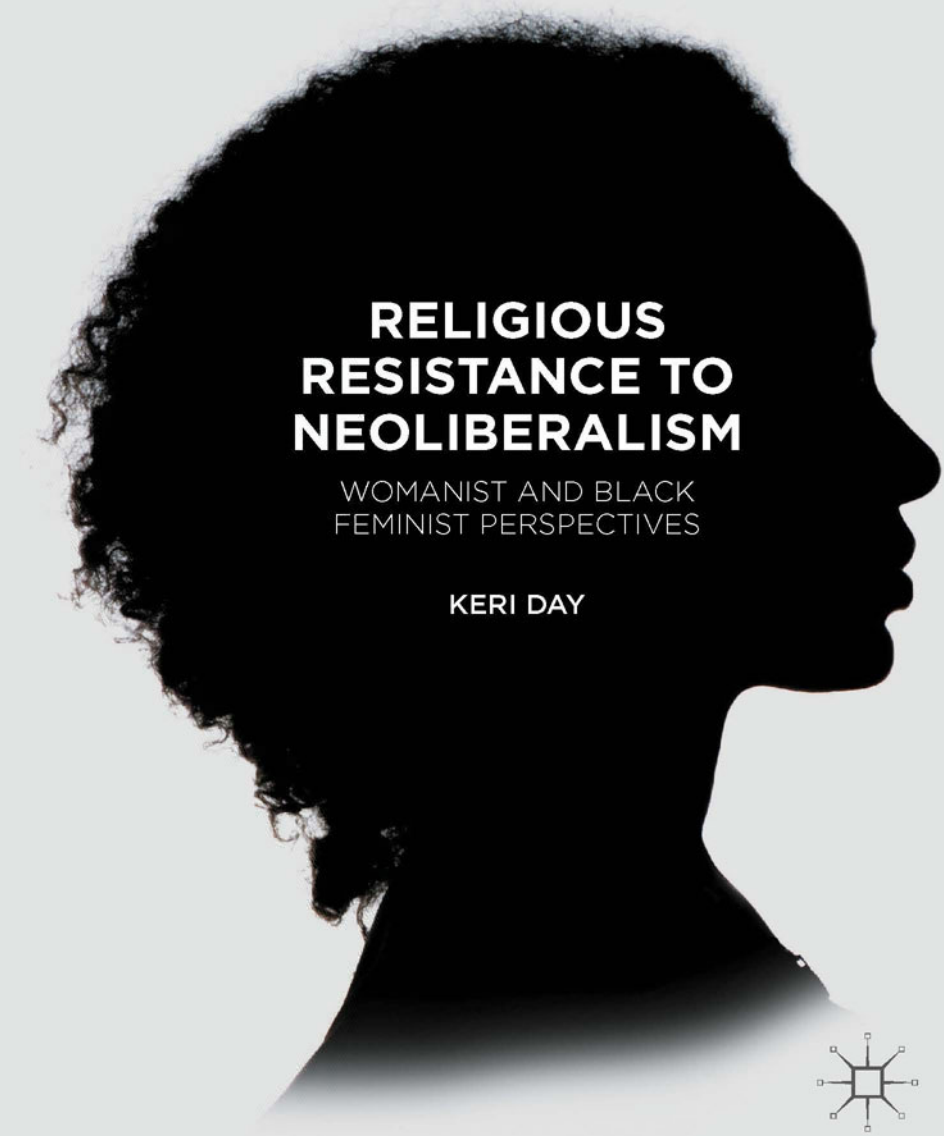

RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE TO NEOLIBERALISM

WOMANIST AND BLACK FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

KERI DAY

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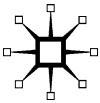

RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE TO NEOLIBERALISM

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-56942-4

First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN: 978-1-349-57110-9
E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-56943-1
DOI: 10.1007/978-1-137-56943-1

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Day, Keri.
Religious resistance to neoliberalism : womanist and black feminist perspectives / Keri Day.
pages cm.—(Black religion/womanist thought/social justice)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Womanist theology. 2. Black theology. 3. Feminist theology.
4. Neoliberalism—Religious aspects. 5. Christianity. 6. Judaism.
I. Title.

BT83.9.D39 2015
230.082—dc23 2015021050

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library.

To my mother, Connie,
who has never been afraid to practice religious defiance
And to my Godmother, Mildred Haygood,
who continues to teach me the power of hope.

Contents

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without a number of important people, conversations, and experiences. I want to first note three critical conversations I had with three scholar/activists after I published and lectured from my first academic text, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, The Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*. Dr. Stephanie Crumpton, Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, and Dr. Marla Frederick raised important questions about the *gap* in my first text surrounding neoliberal cultural forms of alienation and women of color's agency in resisting such dehumanizing cultural forms. While I did well in investigating the structural-material modes of inequity and inequality poor black women experience within a neoliberal capitalist context, Stephanie and Sekou wondered whether I might extend my argument to render visible the various ways in which poor women of color challenge and protest neoliberal values and practices. I understood their question to be about detailing how poor women of color operate as *agents and subjects* within neoliberal matrices even though they endure the brunt of market exploitation. Sekou made it a point to lift up the importance of describing social movements among women of color within neoliberal patterns of globalization and the difference these movements make for how we think about the social transformation of neoliberal cultures. Similarly, Marla encouraged me to attend to the inequitable gendered circumstances poor women of color suffer within globalizing processes such as human trafficking in order to clarify how they experience and resist economic and cultural exploitation. These three scholar/activists helped water the initial seed of this text. For this "holy trinity," I am grateful.

While writing this text, I also benefited from specific womanist scholars who helped me think about other important aspects of neoliberalism. Dr. Melanie Harris challenged me to rewrite the text in light of ecological concerns, as ecological justice is not peripheral but

central to neoliberal capitalist exploitation. I appreciate her taking serious time out of her schedule to read parts of my manuscript in order to help me think and write more clearly with this in mind. I also want to thank Dr. Andrea White who had long conversations with me about realized eschatologies in light of my project and how I might articulate my commitment to this point of view.

Similar to Andrea, I want to thank Dr. Christophe Ringer for our many conversations about neoliberal capitalism and eschatology as well as his critical feedback on parts of my manuscript surrounding the myth of progress in chapter 1. While we had points of disagreement, I was stretched by his generous reading of apocalyptic eschatology, which compelled me to consider a more complex relationship between realized and apocalyptic eschatolgies. Thanks, my brother. I also am extremely appreciative of black religious scholar Dr. Preston Williams who I personally met while delivering a set of lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in the summer of 2013. After my final lecture on King's notion of beloved community, Preston approached me and told me that while he thought my lectures were excellent (I certainly felt honored!), I was totally wrong about seeing Royce and King as similar in their deployment of this term. This began a long Socratic conversation between me and him about how King's project of beloved community radically differs from Josiah Royce's articulation of this concept. This helped me tremendously as I theorized my own idea of beloved communities in the final chapter.

I also want to thank my institution, Brite Divinity School, who offered both funding and a pre-tenure sabbatical to begin thinking about the ideas and arguments that show up in this text. Some of these ideas were discussed and debated in two advanced graduate seminars I taught during the 2014–2015 academic year ("African American Political Theologies" and "Christian Ethics and Economy"). Graduate students in these two classes pushed me to critically re-think some of my intellectual questions surrounding neoliberalism and its relationship to race, gender, and late capitalism. I want to offer a special word of gratitiude to David Gouwens, my colleague at Brite who recently retired. David has been a top Kierkegaardian scholar in the fields of theology and religion and I appreciate his nuanced critique of my second chapter in which I employ Kierkegaard's social writings. I am grateful to be at an institution that empowers scholars to delve deeper into their research and teaching.

I also want to extend an important note of gratitude to Afro-Caribbean scholar and art activist Alanna Lockward and Cameroonian intellectual and art activist Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, two amazing minds I met while in Berlin in July 2014. I was moved by their intellectual work surrounding the arts and African diasporic liberation. Both of them employ the arts (as form-ideas) in articulating rich visions of justice and flourishing for two-thirds world subjects. I enjoyed engaging Bonaventure, Founder and Director of SAVVY Contemporary Center in Berlin, in order to learn and write about the important transcultural artistic work the center is doing in contesting neoliberal cultural life. Their intellectual/artistic endeavors influenced me deeply and shaped how I wrote about beloved communities in the final chapter.

This manuscript was written in different parts of the world over a three-year period in various coffee shops. From Dallas to New York, from Paris to Berlin, I labored over these ideas with a vanilla latte in hand. However, I must say that Avoca Coffee House in Fort Worth, Texas, was my writing sanctuary. I would walk in and immediately be greeted by the baristas. They knew my name. They asked me what I was working on. It was like coming home and their great coffee gave me the energy to write during the afternoons. Thanks so much to my Avoca friends.

I remain grateful for Rev. Dr. Frederick Haynes III, who is my pastor and friend. His support is steadfast. He beautifully models the importance of religious leaders challenging forms of capitalist oppression through radical activism. It is wonderful to worship with a church community that is dreaming about new possible worlds where racist, capitalist domination does not have the "last say." I also appreciate my "community of pastor friends" who have listened to me and taught me much about religious leadership in relation to activism: Rev. Dr. Irie Session, Rev. Dr. Ralph Douglas West, Sr., and Rev. Alex Byrd. You three are wonderful gifts to my vocational life.

Most importantly, I want to thank my family and friends. My parents remain critical to my success as a researcher and writer, and I appreciate that they understand that my love still remains despite my few calls during intense seasons of writing! My mother, Connie Woods, would often ask me what I was writing about only to forget and ask me the next day (this went on for three years). But thanks Mom, as it forced me to become more clear each day as I recited my ideas to you! My close friends have been invaluable, as they offered

meals, conversation, and sometimes a listening ear through the frustration and joy associated with completing this project. Dr. Tamura Lomax, Rev. Cece Jones-Davis, and Dr. Shively Jackson Smith, your friendships enable me to thrive. I am indeed blessed to have a supportive and loving community.

Introduction

Neoliberalism and the Religious Imagination

The Kenyan Afro-futuristic film *Pumzi* provides a vivid, compelling account of how unregulated global markets might devastate all forms of life on Earth. Written and directed by Wanuri Kahiu, this film opens on an apocalyptic note, specifying a new era known as "post-Earth" in which there are no visible signs of life. It is 35 years after World War III, what countries once referred to as "The Water War." Various old newspaper clippings move across the screen, which give us some indication that most life forms are now extinct. One newspaper clipping reads, "People Journeying a Whole Day in Search of Water." Newspaper images show devastation created by nuclear radioactive waste as well as the Greenhouse Effect. There is no living human, animal, or plant left within the natural environment of the Earth. One can infer in this film that World War III was caused by the increased scarcity of water (among other things that depend upon water, such as food crops) due to humanity's competitive, destructive environmental and economic practices, destroying most of the world's population. At this point, the viewer encounters the only known small community surviving within a technological bubble in East Africa. They are known as the Maitu community ("Maitu" means mother in Kikuyu language). The rest of the world is pure desert, showing no signs of life. As the movie unfolds, even the rationing of water among members in the Maitu community is indicative of the catastrophe that was engendered due to economically competitive and ecologically unfriendly practices among humans. Global economic institutions and their objectifying practices toward human bodies and nonhuman bodies are certainly rendered culpable in this movie.

It is against this backdrop that we are taken into the Maitu community. We encounter the protagonist and heroine, an African girl

named Asha, who is a community member and works at the Virtual Natural History Museum within this community. We first view Asha having a dream about a large, lush green tree. She is reaching out toward this green tree with anticipation and hope. As we watch the film, one begins to see that the green tree is a metaphor that represents potential life as well as a new possible future for humanity and all of Creation. Asha does not get to enjoy her dream for long. She awakens to an alarm on her computer (programmed by the "Council of Authorities"), instructing her to take her "dream suppressant." The Council of Authorities is able to detect dreams (visions of new futures) and orders members to take pills that will suppress their visions, longings, and yearnings for a potential future or new world. One senses that the Council of Authorities does not allow community members to creatively imagine possibilities beyond the status quo.

One afternoon, Asha is sent a package containing a soil sample from an anonymous source, which generates a new set of possibilities in her mind about a future world. She looks up this soil sample to catalogue it in the Virtual Natural History Museum when she realizes that this soil sample is fertile with high water content. The soil shows signs of life. She initially contacts the authorities about this fertile soil sample, but the authorities command her to dispose of the soil and take her suppressants. Disobeying this order, Asha places a seed in this new soil and waters it. Immediately, the seed begins to blossom and grow. She informs the authorities of this new exciting discovery and asks for an "exit visa" to search for life outside their community. Her visa is denied. She is also immediately arrested for disobeying the earlier orders to throw away the new soil. They decide that Asha will no longer work for the Virtual Natural History Museum but will be confined to cleaning bathrooms. However, Asha courageously resists. With the aid of another friend in the community, she escapes through a garbage outlet in order to find life on the outside. She also takes the seed that began to grow in the small fertile soil sample.

Asha journeys through vast spaces of desert. Each step she takes expresses hope in a possible new future that Western economic practices of greed and profit destroyed 35 years ago in World War III. It seems as if Asha is journeying toward nothing but more vast areas of lifeless desert until she finally spots the luscious green tree that she saw in her dream. However, when she walks closer to the tree, she realizes that the tree is barren, without leaves of any color. Instead of giving in to despair, Asha decides she has only one option left. She takes the growing seed she has carried with her in the fertile

soil sample and plants it in the soil surrounding the barren tree. She pours the rest of the water she has on this seed and even wipes the sweat from her body to use as additional liquid to water the seed. She then uses her body to provide shade for the seed as the intense heat of the sun beats down upon the earth. Lying there in the desert, she waits for the seed to grow. She hopes for a possible future filled with new life. The movie ends with the camera zooming further and further away from Asha's body until she is only a speck in the world. Suddenly, a green tree is seen sprouting, which multiplies into green trees all around the world, representing new life and new possible futures. New life begins again because of Asha's courage and resistance. This new world will be oriented toward loving and sharing with and for each other (and all of Creation) instead of hyper-competitive, fear-based, and profit-driven modes of being that characterize global markets of a bygone era.

Contrasted to Western heroism, the film *Pumzi* highlights the heroic efforts of a young African woman named Asha, the Mother of a new civilization, which would be marked by compassion, care, and peace. One might infer that this film is asserting the importance of a trans-African feminist epistemology. Unfortunately, women of color bear the brunt of economic, social, and cultural injustices around the world. Women of color disproportionately endure material and symbolic oppressions that make it difficult for them to survive and thrive. However, in this film, it is an African woman who restores humanity. An African woman becomes the savior of the world. She offers a new view of what is possible. *Pumzi* provides a profound black feminist/womanist metaphor of transformation and change in response to neoliberal danger and violence.

It is Asha who provides the mother seed of life from which all life begins again. It is her truth and knowledge that create a new future built on radical love and self-giving. It is this African girl's courage that generates a politics of hope. This movie is deeply subversive as it privileges an African girl as the key to new futures. Although impoverished African women are objectified and treated as dispensable within current global economic processes to meet profit goals, these women's epistemologies and practices of courage, trust, love, and hope are articulated as central to how we might think about new worlds oriented toward love and flourishing. It is also important to remember that Asha did not challenge the Council of Authorities by herself as people helped her (the anonymous person who sent the fertile soil sample to her and the young woman who helped her escape

from the Maitu community). Transformation of our world is a collective, communal endeavor rather than simply an individual pursuit.

Asha's sense of hope invites us to dream dangerously within our present neoliberal global economic context about preferable futures. A politics of hope is necessary to address the destructive consequences associated with contemporary forms of market economies. In this text, I am interested in interrogating how neoliberal economies and their contradictions distort human meaning and inhibit human flourishing. Neoliberal global economy is riddled with contradictions. These contradictions include how neoliberal economies promote "progress" through contending that markets have produced unprecedented wealth around the globe while simultaneously eclipsing hope itself through untold forms of disparities and inequities; how the neoliberal economy seems to connect people across time, space, and place from many different continents while simultaneously generating chronic forms of alienation and social disintegration that weaken what it means to be human; how neoliberal capitalism argues that blind trust in markets will help form virtuous individuals while simultaneously producing individual subjects who are trained to get ahead through duplicitous socio-economic practices that sponsor social distrust. Neoliberalism is not only an economic program in the sense that it promotes the proliferation of unregulated (or under-regulated) free markets but also a cultural project in that it distorts what it means to be responsible moral agents in our globalizing world today.

The deleterious effects of neoliberal economy are as much a theological and religious question concerning how we speak about love of neighbor, care of environment, social trust among human beings as it is a material question about transforming structures and systems to reflect economic parity and justice. This book then offers religious critiques of neoliberalism. As I will discuss, neoliberalism is the driving rationality of contemporary global capitalism. Neoliberalism is a market rationale that orders people to live by the generalized principle of competition in *all* social spheres of life, making the individual herself or himself an enterprise (and reducing social relations to monetary relations). Neoliberalism raises religious questions about human meaning and flourishing.

This text argues that engaging U.S. black feminist and womanist religio-cultural perspectives with Jewish and Christian discourses exposes and deconstructs alienating modes generated and exacerbated by neoliberal economy (alienating modes such as social distrust, absence of care and compassion, and rabid individualism). For

this text, black feminist and womanist discourses interrogate how poor women of the African and Carribean diasporas are disenfranchised within the matrices of global markets. I take my cue from Joy James and Tracey Sharpley-Whiting's *The Black Feminist Reader* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* that poor women of the African and Caribbean diasporas share unique and interconnecting experiences and circumstances within the nexus of white racist hetero-patriarchal capitalism. I am interested in exploring these interconnections, as global markets are ravaging poor women of color around the world.

On a methodological level, black feminist and womanist religious perspectives function as an "ideology critique," which explores the roots and possibilities of crises associated with modern neoliberal capitalism and its cultural forms of alienation. Black feminist and womanist religious perspectives also foreground the importance of literature, history, critical social theory, and feminist political philosophy in articulating religious critiques and responses to neoliberalism and its forms of fragmentation within society. Black feminist and womanist religious perspectives offer a politics of hope that defiantly resists and protests neoliberal values (profit maximization to exclusion of social care, endless acquisition of things, and the objectification of the environment), as these values impede the fashioning of compassionate and just communities. These perspectives demonstrate that a politics of hope can also creatively imagine a future of care and love in response to the demonic circuits of neoliberal economy.

Critiquing Neoliberalism: The Art of the Possible

There is a dearth of religious and theological literature that challenges the existential forms of alienation neoliberalism produces. Over the last several decades, most theological and religious scholarship has focused on critiques of free-market economy rather than neoliberalism. These critiques of free-market economy have focused on both the absence of the state in regulating "free markets" as well as social pathologies (competition, lack of care, etc.) that result from market individualism.[1] However, neoliberalism is a much broader rubric than market economy as this rabidly individualistic, *state-regulating* ideology operates not only within capitalist societies but also within totalitarian and socialist arrangements. Capitalist *and* socialist societies (and even mixed economies) are employing global markets in ways that foster alienation and commodification among human beings,

producing neoliberal policies and forms of ideological regulation (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Within neoliberalism (unlike present religious critiques of free-market societies), the argument is not that the state needs to regulate markets more but that the state must cease to be complicit in the (re)production of alienating, individualistic, and hyper-competitive modes of being associated with neoliberalism. One cannot simply equate neoliberalism with "free-market societies," as contemporary capitalist logic is integrated into diverse socio-economic arrangements. This text addresses this complexity by exploring neoliberalism from a religious perspective. But what exactly is neoliberalism?

The historical emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s is tied to a revival of classical economic liberalism, which emphasized the virtues of a "self-regulating" free-market economy (virtues such as economic freedom, unfettered market enterprise, and international free trade). For classical economic liberalism (i.e., Adam Smith and David Ricardo), "big government" or state regulation of markets always results in market failures. Because free markets contain their own self-correcting mechanisms whenever economic crisis emerges, classical liberals argue that markets should be left alone to naturally return the economy to equilibrium in employment, prices, and so forth during a recession.

However, with the Great Depression in the 1930s within the United States and around the world, these assumptions of classical liberalism fell apart.[2] Economists such as John Maynard Keynes contended that governments should play a policy role during times of economic recession and crisis through government spending on jobs and welfare programs. This Keynesian economic rationality undergirded Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal social programs as well as Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society social policies. From 1930 to 1970, "regulated capitalism" generated a number of safety nets (Medicare, Medicaid, food programs, etc.) for vulnerable groups affected by market shifts.[3]

However, severe global economic crisis in the 1970s such as unprecedented price increases in oil as well as unemployment and inflation led a new group of economists to reject Keynesian economic logic in favor of a revival of old classical economic liberalism.[4] They were termed "neoliberal" economists. In the 1980s, these new neoliberal economists (i.e., Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman) succeeded in shifting the tide of economic logic and policy toward *laissez-faire* economics, which included free trade and commerce with

limited government regulation and oversight. A central part of neoliberal economic thinking was the dismantling of welfare states around the globe in order to sponsor unregulated free-market activity and economic growth.

The "Washington Consensus" associated with Washington, DC-based economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank established policy prescriptions based on free-market approaches (government deregulation, relaxed taxation, a reduction of public expenditure on welfare programs, free trade, etc.) for crisis-ridden countries in the Global South such as Chile, Argentina, and post-apartheid South Africa.[5] Also known as "structural adjustment programs," these policy prescriptions were mandatory if these crisis-ridden countries desired to obtain loans from the IMF or World Bank. However, these structural adjustment policies often had disastrous effects within these countries' economies. For instance, the gap between the rich and poor in "developing" countries widened with the dismantling of welfare provisions. Poor women were also disproportionately impacted by exploitative processes associated with neoliberal market practices around the world (i.e., sweatshops). As a result, neoliberalism came under an increasing backlash as a set of failed economic policies oriented toward "economic growth." This brief history of neoliberalism demonstrates the precarious situation that vulnerable populations experienced around the globe.

While this brief history provides a general picture of how and why neoliberal economics emerged (or was "revived"), there is no single definition of neoliberalism among thinkers who critique neoliberalism. To the neo-Marxist, neoliberalism has meant a free-market system that has privileged economic redistribution to the wealthy, a social policy system characterized by structural adjustment policies created by the IMF and World Bank that have disproportionately hurt poor women and their children in Two-Thirds World countries. For Foucaultian scholars, this term is understood as a *cultural* project, premised on the shift toward "governmentalities that merge market and state imperatives in order to produce self-regulating 'good subjects' who embody ideals of individual responsibility."[6] For political theorists, neoliberalism has created a new model of statecraft in which the privatization of goods and services, the destruction of the welfare state, and the increasing shift toward a prison industrial complex and militarism (national security) have shaped economic policy and cultural practices around the world.[7] While views of neoliberalism are somewhat different across disciplines, I find it helpful to acknowledge

that neoliberalism may be seen as an economic, political, and cultural project that has gained currency within our global order, (re)producing and exacerbating the impoverished position of the poor around the world.

It is also important to acknowledge that neoliberalism is a contested analytic category. Some maintain that the category is not useful at all. Black cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes that intellectual critics tend to contest the term, arguing that this term attempts to describe and explain too many processes under a single category.[8] Some contend that the term neoliberalism ends up being reductive, "sacrificing attention to internal complexities and geo-historical specificity."[9] Because neoliberalism has many variants within different nations and economies, one might properly refer to this contemporary capitalist logic as "neoliberalisms" (or something else altogether). How neoliberal logic articulates itself in American and British market economies is different from how neoliberalism forms and functions in China's state capitalism or Latin America's "monetarist" experiments.[10] However, I would argue that there are enough similarities among nations to give this ideology a *provisional* conceptual identity, being neoliberalism.[11] Moreover, giving neoliberalism a conceptual identity allows one to articulate strategies of resistance to the content and practices of this term. Neoliberalism is not just an intellectual question but is a political question of profound importance. "Developing" nations around the world remain captives of structural adjustment programs that force them to set up market forces in their countries to promote free trade and foreign investment, rules that only further contribute to the impoverishment of a wide majority of "Third-World" citizens.[12] In light of critiques of neoliberalism, I employ it as a term that has multiple variations and articulations around the world, as neoliberalism reveals diverse, complex, and messy cultural and economic processes.

While neoliberalism may have diverse articulations and manifestations, it nevertheless ideologically functions as a form of rationality. I draw primarily on a Foucaultian understanding of neoliberalism as a type of rationality and governmentality that reshapes and transforms the human subject within our modern global context. Neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies or a partisan political or cultural ideology but a *rationality* that structures and governs human conduct and behavior within societies that employ markets. Neoliberalism is a market rationale that orders people to live by the generalized principle of competition in *all* social spheres of life, making the individual