

*the
promise of
beauty*

*Mimi Thi
Nguyen*

The Promise of Beauty



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Mimi Thi Nguyen

the promise of beauty

DUKE

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London

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2024

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Michael Trudeau

Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher

Typeset in Minion Pro and Poetica

by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nguyen, Mimi Thi, [date] author.

Title: The promise of beauty / Mimi Thi Nguyen.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024003240 (print)

LCCN 2024003241 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478030973 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478026761 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060000 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Aesthetics—Political aspects. | Aesthetics—

Philosophy. Classification: LCC BH301.P64 N48 2024 (print) |

LCC BH301.P64 (ebook) | DDC 111/.85—DC23/ENG/20240604

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024003240>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024003241>

Cover art: Illustration by Nicole Gomez.

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PREFACE

The presence or absence of beauty might trace, among other things, the relationship between a structure and a subject, a history and a biography. And so I admit that throughout the course of writing, I have at times felt unmoored emotionally from a sense of ongoingness, let alone the ongoingness of this scholarly inquiry, because all I could perceive about the world was not beauty, but ruin. The attenuation of a livable life, and the accelerating destruction of what remains, found in an intensifying detention and deportation regime funneling humans into an archipelago of private prisons and concentration camps; the normalization of endless war through the specter of terror; anti-Muslim travel bans and anti-immigrant rancor heightening our security theater at all points of crossing; the criminalization of refugee aid at land or sea; the immense accumulation of wealth for private equity built on others' impoverishment and indebtedness; moral crusades masquerading as "pro-life" or antitrafficking or "pro-children" legislation, while creating new categories of crime and criminality; a global pandemic that demonstrated the complete and utter negligence of governments toward mass death; and an ongoing genocide of an occupied people unfolding on our phones. Even though I have been with this book for over a decade, I still have wondered if beauty could only be a distraction from the horrors promised as bulwark and revenge against others—the refugees, queers, feminists, freaks, outcasts, criminals, sex workers, and asylum seekers among us. I knew this to be a banality, yet I felt it to be true.

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But we are also inundated with calls to create and nurture beauty in dark times. Even as state violence and its sanctioned counterparts proliferate deathliness, and climate science locates the extinction horizon closer and closer (fifty years to twelve years to ten years to next year when the permafrost is thawed and the coral reefs are dead and . . .), we cling to BTS's back catalog, young adult fantasy novels, ten-step skin-care routines, the guidance of tarot and celestial bodies, a well-formed sourdough loaf, and other sources of what we call *beauty* to help us endure another day. We are encouraged to combat political ugliness with art as affective contagion, and to organize mutual aid, but also to rest in times of uncertainty, because *resilience is beautiful*. This is also a familiar story. These pleasures and reminders to find them in the midst of crisis and cruelty insist that our moment requires a promise to bring about another way of life, one that is not yet known in all its dimensions but is nonetheless accessible through aesthetic possibility. In this case, beauty promises its presence as a necessary mnemonic for the lives we must imagine living, if we are to go on at all.

The historical present sees still other gestures to the beautiful marshaled to call for harmony, equilibrium, or a return to the status quo against the disruptions that threaten law and order. Even as the administration of Donald Trump cobbled together policies that contravened constitutional and international conventions, and embraced the virulent racisms that animalize populations, Democratic congresswoman and House minority leader Nancy Pelosi scolded her colleague Maxine Waters for the latter's calls to confront publicly, openly, the architects of family separation that caged migrants at the US-Mexico border. Drawing on centuries-old correspondences (going back to Pythagoras and Plato) to lend structure to a feeling, Pelosi called on a collectivity to "make America beautiful again" through a "return" to a more genteel civility. While Waters identified complicity with law and order as a moral and political crisis, Pelosi sought to secure social cohesion against another crisis, named as the absence of harmony—for her, shared by Trump as well as Waters in a zero-sum equivocation—which is also the absence of beauty, jeopardizing "America." Beauty is recruited here as a psychological-affective imperative to support a governing order against the chaos of its principled refusal.

Beauty as distraction, as balm, as harmony—the promise in each of these alignments toward our historical present is about what forces are considered responsible for the presence, or absence, of something that could be called a life worth living.

On whose side is beauty, anyway?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For almost twenty years, the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has been my scholarly home, and I have learned important lessons from my departmental colleagues about how to build and sustain community and collaboration. I owe extra thanks to the staff, Jacque Khan, Tasha Robles, Virginia Swisher, and Erin Smith, who kept me going during my stints in (too much) administration. The Department of Asian American Studies also provided much-needed support, and I would not be who I am today without it. I received generous support from Antoinette Burton at the Humanities Research Institute as a faculty fellow and collaborator, while Cynthia Oliver and Maria Gillombardo supplied invaluable encouragement at the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation. As faculty affiliated with the OVCRI, Craig M. Koslowsky, Shelley E. Weinberg, and Carol Symes read multiple drafts of grant proposals and gave enthusiastic feedback and guidance.

I have benefited tremendously from opportunities to share this project throughout its conception and completion at multiple forums, including the University of Texas at Austin; Brown University; Colorado College; Dartmouth College; Harvard University; the University of North Carolina at Asheville; the University of Hartford; Davidson College; Tufts University; George Washington University; the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan University; the annual symposium of the IUB Asian American Studies

Program at Indiana University; Miami University; the biennial meeting of the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies in 2014; the LCSL Graduate Student Conference in Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago; for the *Journal of Narrative Theory* at Eastern Michigan University; Johns Hopkins University; the Colloquium for Critical Asian Studies and Critical Ethnic Studies, Northwestern University; the Ray Warren Symposium on Race and Ethnic Studies at Lewis and Clark College; the Biopolitical Afterlives Symposium at California State University, Los Angeles; Vassar College; Purdue University; the University of Arizona; the University of Michigan; the Graduate Center at the City University of New York; and the University of Cambridge. My thanks to those who organized these events and those who engaged so generously with the work in progress.

Earlier and substantially different portions of *The Promise of Beauty* appeared elsewhere. From “The Beautiful, Finding Itself in Danger, Desires Its Copy,” the section on the *Ao Trang* calendar appears in a longer essay called “Diasporic Erotic,” published in *Camera Obscura* (2013). “An Education in Beauty (and the Necessity of Lawlessness)” draws on the first seed of this work, “The Biopower of Beauty,” published in *Signs* (2011).

For everything from conversation to support (scholarly and otherwise), I am grateful to friends and colleagues, including Tonya Abernathy, Patty Ahn, Aren Aizura, Jennifer Allen, Grace Ambrose, Inez Anderson, Paul Michael Atienza, Osa Atoe, Aimee Bahng, Vivek Bald, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Terri Barnes, Shuli Branson, Ruth Nicole Brown, Keva X. Bui, Long Bui, Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, Cristy Road Carrera, Sarah Cervenak, Karma Chavez, Christina Chin, Michelle Cho, Kandice Chuh, Brian Chung, Genevieve Clutario, Arwen Curry, Jenny Davis, David Eng, Tommy Falk, Jonathan Beecher Field, Stephanie Foote, Tanisha Ford, Jenna Freedman, Elizabeth Freeman, Emi Frerichs, Zach Furness, Tait Graves, Eva Hageman, Cookie Hagendorf, Christina Hanhardt, Kathleen Hanna, Jillian Hernandez, Nels Highberg, Hua Hsu, Ming-Wei Huang, Zalika Ibaorimi, Doug Ishi, Helen Jo, Simi Kang, Maryam Kashani, Sawyer Kemp, Mahruq and Sonia Khan, Mimi Khuc, Farah Kidwai, Ava Kim, Yvette Koch, Rachel Kuo, Leopold Lambert, Beck Levy, Mireya Loza, Dana Luciano, Erica Dawn Lyle, Vicki Mahaffey, Bruce Manning, Blake Manning Wong, Anita Mannur, Sarah McCarry, Nick Mitchell, Isabel Molina-Guzman, Nadine Naber, Lisa Nakamura, Rani Neutill, Trung Nguyen, Erin O’Brien, David Palumbo-Liu, Christopher Patterson, Kimberly Rose Pendleton, Curtis Perry, Janice Radway, Junaid Rana, Sarah Roberts, Gilberto Rosas, Anna Rosenwong, Sasha Sabherwal, Ellen Samuels, Ahalya Satkunaratnam, Emi Sawada, Preeti

Sharma, Elena Shih, Chad Shomura, Arabelle Sicardi, Siobhan Somerville, Christian Sorace, James Spooner, Jon Strange, Thea Quiray Tagle, Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Karen Tongson, Angharad Valdivia, Ma Vang, Emma Velez, Damian Vergara Bracamontes, Anuradha Vikram, and Deke Weaver.

Former and current undergraduate and graduate students have buoyed me through the years with their brilliant company, especially Silas Cassinelli, Meg Cornell, Eman Ghanayem, Max Grogan, Catalina Hernandez, Kyli Kleven, Sabrina Lee, Jody Stokes-Casey, and Liz Verklan. Eman in particular is my refugee-for-refugee ride-or-die through grief, love, and life-living.

For their continued mentorship, I am forever grateful for Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal, and Minoo Moallem, who taught me that being a feminist in the imperial university means building and transforming the infrastructure within these institutions that will never love you—and nor should you expect it to, for that way lies danger—to carve out other possibilities for being within it, around it.

Ever a patient interlocutor and catalyst, Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press has believed in my work since I was a graduate student with an “online journal.” I model some key parts of my own engagement with others’ intellectual labors after his example. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers for their insights, and to Shuli Branson and Sabrina Lee, whose efforts on behalf on this manuscript (as developmental editor and research assistant, respectively) helped me to let it go. At Duke, Kate Mullen, Michael Trudeau, and Mattson Gallagher stewarded this book to its completion, while Diana Witt indexed this behemoth like a beast. Finally, Nicole Gomez promised a prophetic dream of roses for the cover, and I am grateful for the art she makes in a world on fire.

To punk, but also Kim Namjoon, Kim Seokjin, Min Yoongi, Jung Hoseok, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon Jung Kook, I owe immeasurable joy in the midst of ongoing catastrophe. As Kim Taehyung put it, when asked what his favorite lyrics are, *All fire, bow wow wow*.

Yumi Lee, Golnar Nikpour, and Thera Webb make up the greatest group text chain of all time; old punks FTW. Toby Beauchamp, Cyn Degnan, and A. Naomi Paik are my Illinois family, sharing love, rage, and much-needed sustenance in equal measure. Toby especially is my accomplice and anchor; together, we are every hilarious meme about a dear friend who is also a co-worker. Vernadette Vicuna Gonzalez has been an indispensable presence in my life since graduate school, providing even-keeled insight and impromptu haiku. Yutian Wong is the truest friend and most stalwart heart whose generosity and myriad hobbies have led me to try *a lot of things*. Toby, Dette,

and Yutian all share with me the same orientation to scheming and getting shit done, which has led to so many fruitful (and fun) collaborations both in and outside the academy.

My brother, George, is my first best friend, supporting every unhinged and off-the-wall idea I have ever had, while my nibblings, Maggie and Sally, remind me of when we were dragons. Thomas Falk kept all our emails and messages from decades ago to remind me that I should have dumped all those zeros to get with a hero already.

At last, this book is for my mother and father. My mother showed me how to be stubborn, loving, and proud, especially in the face of terror and hardship, which means it is her fault I am punk. My father taught me to be curious, broad-minded, and playful, which means it is his fault I am a scholar. On weekends, when I still in high school, he would bring me to the downtown San Diego public library, where we would pursue our separate research—his on the latest discoveries in pharmaceuticals, colonialism, and the war that forced us to leave home, mine on histories of feminism, protest, and the war that forced us to leave home—before visiting thrift shops, surplus warehouses, and hole-in-the-wall record stores. He passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic, months before the vaccine was available, which meant that I could not be there with him. I keep an altar to him in my living room, stocked with flowers, chocolates, and incense, because his presence reminds me that I am well-loved and that I too must love well—I hope very much that this book is that evidence.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

introduction

Small Art and Love and Beauty

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew—
Yes, it is Bread we fight for—but we fight for Roses, too.

James Oppenheim, “Bread and Roses”

Anybody who thinks that they can understand how terrible the terror has been,
without understanding how beautiful the beauty has been against the grain of
that terror, is wrong.

Fred Moten, “The Black Outdoors”

In June 2016, “Emily Doe” read a twelve-page victim impact statement at the sentencing hearing of Brock Turner. The college athlete had been convicted of sexually assaulting her after a party while she was unconscious, slumped on the ground next to a dumpster, on the campus of Stanford University. Standing before the court, Doe began her statement, “You don’t know me, but you’ve been inside me, and that’s why we are here today,” before recounting the harrowing violence of the assault, the investigation, and the trial.¹ In response, the judge spoke sympathetically of Turner’s unrealized potential (*for what, though—more violence?*) and sentenced him to just six months in county jail and probation. So, Emily published her statement, a clear-eyed

account of self-shattering violence—by rape, by law. Three years later in the memoir *Know My Name*, Emily, or Chanel Miller, reflects on these compound traumas and the unbending apparatuses that doubted her, and others like her and unlike her—the gymnasts, the actresses, Andrea Constand, Philando Castile, Christine Blasey Ford, all the ordinary people who are forcibly unhomed from spirit, flesh, or future. As she claws back some trick for living, she absorbs a lesson from her Chinese immigrant mother: “You have to hold out to see how your life unfolds because it is most likely beyond what you imagine. It is not a question of if you will survive this, but what beautiful things await you when you do.”²

I start with a simple proposition: beauty is often a habit, instance, property, or force through which we engage narratives of crisis in our time. Crisis is one name for an ongoing condition that coheres or collapses into an intensified situation in which the threat to survival dominates the preservation of life. Such life is often the life of the beautiful, whether children, birds, coral reefs, art, communion, or human rights, and the discrepancy between the world and what ought to be, fundamental to an idea of historical consciousness, so often unfolds through their recitation. On these grounds, the meeting with beauty in a bad situation lends itself to thoroughly political observations. Beauty is often assigned a sanctified power to name a feeling of life being furthered, and for life-living itself, where beauty withers under such conditions we too fight to survive or overcome; or, where beauty endures and, in our attachment to it, fosters our own perseverance; or, where beauty eases a truth or opens a rift in a moment of danger. But beauty might also sustain the social order through its long-held consonances with symmetry, proportion, and harmony (none of which are neutral properties) at the expense of all that lies outside of it. Or beauty might assist a deception or lie, a covering-over as obstacle to living on, the floodlit grove that aims to disguise a terrible violence that lingers still. In the midst of an ongoing negotiation with Stanford and its poor attempts at resolution (installing a contemplation garden at the site of the dumpster), Miller asks, “What do you do when you’re invited to your own rape garden ceremony, that’s been scheduled to last twenty minutes?”³ Just like that, beauty might lay bare a contradiction, untruth, or failure at the heart of an enterprise that fails to sustain or nurture it, or beauty might precipitate a crisis, rendering some understatedly awful condition recognizably, finally unbearable. When this occurs, crisis and beauty activate each other as capacity and concept. Turning to beauty’s promise tells us quite a lot about just how messy this historical project of being or becoming alive truly is, because even if we do survive

(which *is* still a question), what can beauty do? How can it put the world to right after all that has gone wrong?

At the center of this book is an inquiry into the promise of beauty. Hoping to capture something of the dimensions of our historical situation, I turn to aesthetic responses to scarcity, precarity, and uncertainty, during and “after” (an uneasy temporality) crises of war, capital, and colony, in order to understand the promise of beauty as a world-building engagement. Promise establishes beauty as an object, a scene, a reason, or a ritual for living on and through such crises, as the sometime name through which our attachments unfold into futures that crises threaten to foreclose. In “small art and love and beauty,” such a promise might be a balm, a habitus, or a critique—perhaps an ordinary pleasure, or an ontological flourishing. It might be found in an instance, a movement, or an opening toward what one desires as beautiful and wishes to make present or proximate, or it might be perceived as an enclosure, a limit, a boundary, an allegiance, or a horizon. But the promise is not necessarily optimistic; a promise could be made because of appreciation, devotion, or love but also fear, calculation, or greed. The promise might be broken, or altogether illusory, and that is also part of its animating power. Seeking out those objects, habits, properties, and forces that pledge themselves to the transformation of that which cannot sustain life otherwise—a structure, a way of being, a world order—this book asks, how and why is the promise of beauty so portable across a spectrum of political claims, imperial or insurgent? What is promised by beauty, to beauty, in a given historical situation? How are competing principles, causal relations, or criteria for beauty assembled such that we might perceive the presence of beauty and also the threat *to* it—and sometimes the threat *of* it? My hope is to raise these and other questions about the promise of beauty to order social arrangements and political structures and render them intelligible, perceptible, and sensible as scenes of dispute or comparison about the *beauty we deserve*.

Because it often accompanies narratives of redemption, justice, or hope that attenuate disaster, injury, and grief, and that are the consequence and also the compensation for capital or colony, beauty inhabits this book as a multisensory history of the present. In this I follow scholars and artists who have long observed the political mattering of aesthetics as infrastructure, consciousness, or a feeling for life. Jacques Rancière defines political subjectivity as “an enunciated and demonstrative capacity to reconfigure the relation between the visible and the sayable, the relation between words and bodies: namely ‘the partition of the sensible,’” and Kandice Chuh observes that “aesthetics may be recognized as simultaneously political (that

is, conditioned by relations of power and their material manifestations) and the grounds upon which the political is constituted and perceived.”⁴ Sylvia Wynter argues for the aesthetic as a Foucauldian “dense transfer point . . . of power” where the senses meet those “‘discourses’ whose codings in our ‘nervous system’ regulate our response and sentiments”; she continues, “Each mode of the aesthetic is isomorphic with a specific mode of human being or ‘form of life.’”⁵ More, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins insists, it is through the aesthetic as a “processual doing in time, in space, in a field of sensory possibility” that “the human is a life ‘form’ in the sense that to be human is to be made.”⁶ And as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart note together, “It was as if whatever there was to notice was already scored onto matter.”⁷ From Rancière, Chuh, Wynter, Tompkins, and Berlant and Stewart, among others, this series of propositions articulate aesthetics as a politics of meaning-making that includes the historical partition of sense and matter. Beauty is one such partition, not just as the form its promise takes through which expression and experience is felt, but also the manner in which its promise cuts into time to manifest life-living.

The Promise of Beauty gathers genres that mark a conceptual history of beauty as a proposition and a politics, or, in the words of modernist poet Mina Loy, how the “flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears.”⁸ As a *processual doing in time*, beauty is a living form for the schooling of the senses as a historical project, a flux and a frame through which we might understand the *human*, *history*, and *life*. When beauty is promised at the threshold where the desire for the good and the true (love, hope, kinship, freedom, and care, among others) collides with mechanisms of interference and control in the name of improving life chances, or altering the quality of existence, the promise of beauty is a proposition and a politics of intervening in history (or the conditions under which beauty endures) and life itself (or what meaning beauty lends to it). For us right now, these thresholds are the inheritance of capital and colony, otherwise known as our engines of emergency. Beauty enters as response to and respite from these engines—sometimes a chance encounter, sometimes a transformational habit, weighed against the scale and feel of the violence. Considering that which might hold out to us clusters of real or ideal formations such as romantic love, spiritual transcendence, economic mobility, or political renewal, this book is a historiography of a concept of beauty as an imperative discourse, one that determines what conditions are necessary to live; what forms of life are worth living; and what actions must follow to preserve, secure, or replicate such life that the beautiful promises to us.

In other words, beauty is an empty space overfull with those things that we conceive as necessary for a historical sense, or a consciousness of life, and this is its crucial conceptual power to manage or resolve or survive it. This introduction (and this book) is an incomplete (though fit-to-burst) list of those things, whether as events of knowing or intuitions or feelings, as pressures of form or releases from them, that interrupt or intrude on the labor of being in a sometimes drowning, sometimes burning world. In short, beauty is a practical concern about an imprecise formation—life, and how to live it. This animating power, with its adaptations, correspondences, and schemata for absorption and comparison, can reorder our spaces, times, desires, and sensations toward whatever is to come. *Between promise and presence, beauty makes history appear.* To this end, beauty is also a method, a method that invites us to trace its ebb and flow through visions of life-living and projects of power, archives of memory and resources for possibility. And it is in those instances where beauty is ameliorative—either as process or outcome—to a life that is not quite good and even very awful that I follow how *small art and love and beauty* suggest something vital about beauty as a method for asking why, and what now.

Genres of Beauty

Beauty is all around us (it is said), but there is no unity or truth to beauty. It is not an essence, property, or given, and yet there are those who nevertheless wish to collect, to own, or to hoard it. Beauty does not exist in an object, person, or scene until another perceives it, or it is wholly autonomous, independent of our observation or judgment.⁹ We apprehend beauty through such things that fill its form, whether a lovely face, a painting, a harmony, or a shout (“Palestine will be free”), and which are not identical to it (beauty) or each other; or “we agree that beauty exists but disagree about its examples.”¹⁰ In *Symposium*, Plato argues that beauty is a principle of the eternal that follows from a body to the soul to a law and onward, “mounting the heavenly ladder” to “the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself.”¹¹ For Immanuel Kant, beauty is not a property of objects but a relation between those who might share pleasure (derived in part from judgment) in a *sensus communis*.¹² Iris Murdoch takes issue with those who say there is nothing moral about beauty; instead, “goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure.”¹³ Toni Morrison insists beauty is not a privilege, an indulgence, or a quest, but a necessity: “I think it’s almost like knowledge, which is to

say, it's what we were born for."¹⁴ Still others argue, as Vanita Reddy does, that beauty occupies "a regime of value with material effects" encompassing labor, care, pleasure, and capital.¹⁵ And Michael Taussig supposes in his ethnography of body modification, "Surely beauty is as much infrastructure as are highways and bridges, storytelling and the Internet, rainfall and global warming."¹⁶ Beauty resists utility, or follows from function; induces an aptitude for living, or supplies the illusion of solace. Some presume the truth of beauty's nature, the content of which might bind us to a situation of plentitude or profound scarcity; some accuse it of failure, circumscribing the grounds of a given universal to a narrow understanding of the life worth living, or even the species category of the human. Beauty is a dense palimpsest, a premature closure, and an anarchic faculty; its promise is a knife that cuts through the liveliness of the world, or is the hand that binds the wound.

It is as an unruly multitude that the promise of beauty permeates as a habit, object, property, instance, concentration, or force, unfolding through space and time as a transmission from beheld to beholder. *The Promise of Beauty* starts here in the reflection about beauty as a case of *x*, where *x* is whatever is made known as beautiful in the meeting of judgment with a perceptual order, and a study of *y*, where *y* is whatever follows the promise to secure beauty's presence. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, awkwardly, beauty might be nothing more or less than the relation between the beholder and the world and how it might be made sensible or perceptible, which is already quite a lot.¹⁷ With attention to beauty as an axiological problem for the epistemological or ethical grounds of certain domains of life and knowledge, I am trying to do something unfaithful yet true in tracing the promise of beauty as an argument for freedom and also an archive of violence, as a multisensory history of how we experience continuity or rupture. Through beauty as method, we can make sense of the fungibility of beauty and its claims, and our claims, which will not be the same. This book dwells here in the productive unease between claims about ontological being, forces of history, and habits for living, through which the promise of beauty poses questions *and* answers for how we survive or thrive—or not. I am less interested in what beauty *is*, and more in what beauty *does*.

Many genres of beauty appear throughout the book, whether as an emergent authenticity, a false idol, or a fascist country.¹⁸ What the genres of truth and possibility have in common is beauty as an elaboration of a good life. There are echoes of Plato, who surmised that whether there is an immortal realm or no, the brush with beauty leads "to a more capacious regard for the world," found in Elaine Scarry, who posits that beauty calls forth in

a beholder a wish to preserve and even to provide to others the benefit of beauty, soliciting an ethic of care for life itself.¹⁹ The art critic Arthur Danto argues beauty as a “necessary condition for life as we would want to live it,” while Denise Gigante observes that the “sense of beauty defined scientifically as life—and life defined aesthetically as beauty” informs all rationalist arguments about its necessary functionality.²⁰ But while beauty might be “a feeling of life being furthered,” per Kant, determinations must be made about the status of beauty, the qualification of life, and the grounds of their fastening together. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes Aristotle’s account of the three ways of life that men might choose in freedom. All labor and “ways of life chiefly devoted to keeping one’s self alive” are inimical to such a life, “exclud[ing] everybody who involuntarily or voluntarily, for his whole life or temporarily, had lost the free disposition of his movements and activities.” The life that can be lived, in other words, can neither be circumscribed by the needs of survival nor exist alongside the cruelties of dominion or dispossession. Only in freedom might one commune with the beautiful, threefold: “the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed; the life devoted to the matters of the *polis*, in which excellence produces beautiful deeds; and the life of the philosopher devoted to inquiry into, and contemplation of, things eternal, whose everlasting beauty can neither be brought about through the producing interference of man nor be changed through his consumption of them.”²¹

Beauty’s judgment, as we can see, concerns much more than the truth or being of an object, scene, person, or lifeworld. It is also a judgment about the grounds for beauty’s flourishing or fading, which is a judgment about a historical situation. After all, as Kandice Chuh argues, the conditions of history “are also themselves fundamentally aesthetic in that they are brought forward to be sensed by (historiographic, archival, methodological) practices that (re)shape the sensibilities held in common.”²² So, for Eve Sedgwick, writing about “comfort” and “nourishment,” beauty is one of “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”²³ The artist behind *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, the richly illustrated graphic novel about a young Latina werewolf in 1970s Chicago whose upstairs neighbor, a beautiful Jewish woman with a mysterious past in wartime Nazi Germany, is murdered (which is not enough to even begin to capture the experience of this dark, luminous tale), Emil Ferris (citing painter Susanna Coffey) said, “Beauty is the thing that allows us to wrap our minds around even the worst.”²⁴ Fred Moten credits beauty as a bulwark “against

the grain of the terror,” while Ocean Vuong observes, “How valuable beauty is for a world on fire.”²⁵ Even the iconic denim retailer Levi’s agrees. In 2021, the company’s “Beauty of Becoming: Fashion a New World Forward” campaign for Women’s History Month launched with a series of short videos featuring Naomi Osaka, Willow Smith, Jaden Smith, Leyna Bloom, Dolores Huerta, and others. In the inaugural short, each athlete, artist, or celebrity delivers variants on a promise: “Become something we’ve never seen before, fashion a new world, forward, better than how we found it.”²⁶ And where liberal empire imposes the gift of freedom as sanctioned violence or indebtedness, beauty slips in as an endurable form for aliveness in a wrecked world. Indeed, the promise of beauty seems at times inseparable from such a gift, whether in the scene of a parade float riotously blooming with carnations and refugee thanksgiving to “America,” or in the fervently whispered wishes of a napalm victim for her scars to disappear, and for beauty to rescue her from loneliness and communism.²⁷ Here the ideal presence of beauty is found in pursuit of an arrangement for its flourishing, or at least as some relief from the pressure of a terrible form bent toward its (or our) annihilation.

But we are also intimate with the violence and terror deemed necessary to make beauty present in a given historical situation, like civilization; and we know beauty as violence and terror in itself. Critiques of beauty as a judgment that secures a racial divide animate those accusations not just that beauty is inadequate for a historical sense of the present, or an ethical alignment toward others, but that the whole enterprise is faulty. These critiques establish claims to the beautiful, in both its singularity and its universality, as damaging, decrying its abuses on behalf of imperialism and colonialism, white supremacy, racial capitalism, and compulsory normalization of a body. Such harms are not in dispute (for me, at least). A brute and terrible history of violence operates, insidiously and insistently, through colonial cartographies and racial classifications that sort and grade stages of human and other existence. The body that is proportionate, symmetrical, or fair (in all senses) is just one threshold of such a determinate concept. The faculty for judgment as a property, which is also a faculty *for* property (including self-possession as the foundation for action), in communion with others, is another; the Arab, the African, and the “Oriental” have all been deemed historically deficient in this faculty. Consider Kant’s atlas of Chinese grotesqueries and African foolishness (“still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality”), or the Islamophobe’s accusation that hijab disturbs or diminishes feminine beauty.²⁸ Such cartographies of aesthetic philosophies have too often cohered through what

Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”; as so many observe, such as Anne Anlin Cheng in her study of ornamentalism (what she calls orientalism’s cousin), or Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, or Kara Walker in her monumental installation *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, racial schema are aesthetic schema.²⁹ Tressie McMillan Cottom avows, “For beauty to function as it should, it must exclude me,” while Monique Roelofs puts it simply. “Whiteness . . . presents aesthetic promise that blackness withholds; blackness constitutes an aesthetic threat.”³⁰ Any forensic investigation of beauty thus contains a record of injury.

Such grievous harm is not cosmetic, incidental, or of second-order consequence. The charge of beauty’s deception has everything to do with an onto-epistemological failure to know truth about the world. Its ornamental nature, we are warned, distracts from faithless monstrosity. As Shakespeare’s Juliet cries, *O serpent heart, hid with a flow’ring face? Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?*³¹ The mortifications of beauty, she laments, are disguised by the sweetness of its visage and easy pleasure. It could be a lover, a flower, or a state that wears a pretty face to hide an ignoble heart. Disability activist and writer Mia Mingus, in her keynote address at the 2011 Femmes of Color symposium, declares, “There is only the illusion of solace in beauty. If age and disability teach us anything, it is that investing in beauty will never set us free. Beauty has always been hurled as a weapon. It has always taken the form of an exclusive club; and supposed protection against violence, isolation and pain, but this is a myth.”³² Chasing *Orwell’s Roses*, Rebecca Solnit notes that the laborers in the Colombian flower industry, who raise 80 percent of the roses sold in the United States, cannot dwell in their crops’ beauty—that occurs elsewhere, for others: “The idea of an immense plane whose sole freight was roses burning its carbon and rushing high over the Caribbean to deliver its burden to people who would never know of all that lay behind the roses they picked up in the supermarket was maybe as perfect an emblem of alienation as you could find.”³³ *O, that deceit should dwell in such a gorgeous palace.*³⁴

The crisis of beauty is also a problem of scale or balance. Even as beauty is censured as deceptive, it is just as often disowned as cheap, weak, irresolute, superfluous, and even pornographic. Beauty is shelved as placid or plainly inadequate against the sublime and its emphatic monumentalism (the latter more appropriate to terror or justice, per Mark Canuel).³⁵ Theodor Adorno famously stated, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”³⁶ Decades later, Hamid Dabashi asks, “Is writing poetry after Gaza also barbaric?”³⁷ Likewise, beauty might appear inappropriate for the affectively weak aestheticization

of everyday life that Sianne Ngai observes at the dead-end of capitalism; or it is made too banal, diffuse, or indistinct from the clutter of aesthetic categories.³⁸ No longer novel, singular, or untouchable, beauty becomes a monotonous gesture soliciting a shrug or an eye roll.³⁹ The meme that exhorts you to post a beautiful piece of art to affectively shift our social media feeds, or to remind you to gaze at your own reflection and say to yourself, “You are beautiful,” might be received as poor defense against depression, loss, or grief. To what extent can beauty respond to the manifold terrors of being alive?

At the same time, it is a commonplace that even the briefest meeting with beauty renders a dire state of being more bearable. We see this in narratives about wars or camps, in the smuggled plant carried from a lost homeland, the love found in time’s suspension, or a child’s compact rescued from the rubble after an airstrike, each of which assures us that life can still be beautiful.⁴⁰ In these situations, “beauty is something we can control, love, and celebrate. It is, at some of the worst times, all we have left.”⁴¹ In a Reuters photograph of a present-day Syrian refugee encampment, a bride-to-be in a rhinestone-encrusted dress sits in a plastic lawn chair, her eyes closed as another woman in T-shirt and jeans carefully applies frosty blue eye shadow. What frames this photograph is the promise of what is not yet present: a loving marriage, or a prosperous life after catastrophe, whatever nourishes a feeling of life being furthered. Particularly meaningful in these accounts is an economy of impossible equivalence. What beauty might give is too often eclipsed by what threatens the survival of it, and us, and yet—. Artist and activist David Wojnarowicz said to Zoe Leonard, when she worried about making beautiful images during the AIDS crisis, “Zoe, these are so beautiful, and that’s what we’re fighting for. We’re being angry and complaining because we have to, but where we want to go is back to beauty. If you let go of that, we don’t have anywhere to go.”⁴² Martin Manalansan formulates *biyuti* as a queer analytic of the life that can be lived for queer Filipino men; it is a fluctuating quality and also its measure. “*Biyuti*, which is a loose transliteration of the word ‘beauty,’ is used not only to talk about the aesthetic qualities of things, people, and objects, but is also used to talk about the flow of daily life, countenance, feelings, and self (e.g., *Kumusta ang biyuti mo?* How is your beauty today? *May sakit ang biyuti ko.* My beauty is sick.)”⁴³ *Biyuti* is thus found in the drama of survival against those “routine oppressions and violence” that queer brown persons endure every day.⁴⁴ And as Robert Diaz asks, “What does it mean to commit to articulations of *biyuti* even when such a commitment seems frivolous and

risky to do so?”⁴⁵ Despite this incommensurability, can we call it living if a life is without beauty? Is there a future without it?

Beauty coexists alongside destruction, horror, and despair, even unlife; its promise is experienced as arrestingly transcendent *and* as woefully inadequate within the sensual registers that impact our historical sense of the world as it is, and as it could be. In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, “Here, then, is beauty and ugliness, a wide vision of world-sacrifice, a fierce gleam of world-hate. What is life and what is death and how shall we face so tantalizing a contradiction?”⁴⁶ Beauty secures but also disturbs life’s description, evaluation, argument, and historicity. *The Promise of Beauty* embraces this contradiction not as contradiction but as a method for tracing the unities, tensions, and pressures of its forms—between what is promised and what is present, between the order and the reorder of things, between life and how we live it.

To ask how beauty is political is to presume to know in advance what the sphere of the political is, whereas we might instead consider how the political is circumscribed and at what cost. This book argues that, in the broadest sense, beauty is a politics because there is no agreement on what beauty means, and because it requires a calculation of presence—this might be a capacity, a law, a habit, a scene, an instance, a ritual, or a crime, for example—and this is always political. That is, if politics constitutes a disagreement about whose representation of an object or event will secure value for some claims and grievances over others, as Rancière has it, then beauty is long one such disagreement.⁴⁷ For some, beauty might evoke the prepolitical premise of a foundational truth or universality beyond contestation, or a new, postpolitical consensual space emptied of debate. For others, the promise of beauty might describe the limits of a structure or practice, because such a structure or practice cannot (or will not) sustain life; or such a promise might ease our distress in our cognizance of those endings. It is a disaster, or it is not. In a best-selling memoir (later, an immensely popular prestige-television series), a heart-shaped cosmetic compact passed from one prisoner to another is borne as a talisman of humanity in a place of its suspension.⁴⁸ Such fugitive beauty serves as a measure of sovereignty against the experience of its foreclosure, tied to historical material circumstances (the drug war or mass incarceration) that produce captivity as “justice.” Or, as Arabelle Sicardi observes so well, “Beauty is a tool that tends to serve those in power . . . and, at the same time, it fundamentally involves acts of witnessing the body, helping it to endure its conditions.”⁴⁹ To argue that beauty makes *no* difference because it is trivial or ornamental, as some do, precludes the possibility of politics, since *any* difference requires the undecidability of politics as the condition

for history itself. The promise of beauty is always a partisan one, but there is no predicting on whose side it might be found.

Instead of conceiving of beauty as a scene or surface of study, as an object or a theory (one that seeks its law in a social structure, or a collective unconscious), I turn to beauty as a method to think and also act with—as a life force, a world-making vision, a record of history, or a habit of being in the world. The task ahead for tracing the difference that beauty makes is, after Kandice Chuh, “to think/work aesthetically, which is to say, of and through perception and persistently attuned to the conditions that prioritize and legitimate certain modes of knowing by the subjugation of others; and by acknowledging how questions of artistry and artistic value are also always questions of politics and history.”⁵⁰ In this way, beauty as method illuminates certain epistemological and ontological claims about the history and the human, where beauty’s promise diagnoses a situation in order to act in time, and beauty’s presence exists not as itself but as a question mark, a constellation of contingencies, that might guide us closer to a life we deserve. Rather than a predictable expression of social infrastructure or transcendental universal, a banal countenance or a deceptive detail, the promise of beauty is more expansively an accessible concept to make claims about our *ideal* relations to objects, persons, scenes, habits, or concepts (such as freedom, or proportion, or democracy) in the world.

To this end, beauty is no more or less than a feeling about life-living, through which its promise and presence foster wonder—or collapse.

Beauty’s Promise

In tribute to the love between a teenage human and a centuries-old vampire, someone sings, “Time stands still / Beauty in all she is.”⁵¹ Elsewhere the camera slows to capture the sensation of time’s dilation as we perceive for the first time—or again—someone or something beautiful (sunlit horses galloping across a mountain stream, a young woman amid a fall of petals, Keanu Reeves). Beauty here is an intensity, an irruptive event that stretches out, out of sync with continuous normative time. Sarah Nuttall observes that its apprehension propels “a politics of hope and anticipation, a surge of feeling beyond the merely given present moment,” while Mila Zuo writes that as a consequence of “its breathtaking effect perforating our mundane rhythms,” “beauty throws us into small crisis.”⁵² It is as a concept of threshold time that beauty is poised between continuity and rupture, whether fostering a sense of aliveness or jarring a viewer to regard the world anew, or isolating a mo-

ment as eventful, after which we are returned to an established timeline, albeit with an altered consciousness that might be the origin of something else.

This sensorium of beauty and its multidimensional apprehension of time (or in time) cannot be reduced to positive forms (it is *this*, or *that*) even though it has a necessary relationship to them. The nineteenth-century French author Stendahl writes simply about its infinite expansiveness, “Beauty is only the promise of happiness.”⁵³ And Adorno notes that “the unstillable longing in the face of beauty” fosters “the longing for the fulfillment of what was promised,” whatever this might be.⁵⁴ In another iteration, beauty is a genre that promises to us another world is possible; as the poet June Jordan put it, “To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that’s political, in its most profound way.”⁵⁵ Similarly, and against the argument that our regard acts on beauty to trap or capture it (simplified as “objectification”), Elaine Scarry proposes that beauty acts on the beholder, arousing the desire for and the creation of new things in the world, such as “infants, epics, sonnets, drawings, dances, laws, philosophic dialogues, theological tracts.”⁵⁶ But such infinitude is necessarily delimited by our desires and historical circumstances. Not everyone wishes an infant or a law; one might want instead other beautiful things, perhaps unthinkable or unsayable under such a regime that loves infants or laws. (And, of course, to disagree about what *is* a beautiful thing is no small matter.) In this way, beauty might fashion a philosophical and experiential awareness of a historical formation, even as our knowledge of beauty disavows its own historicity at times in order to claim for itself a universal applicability. Where beauty might open us to a moment of truth, or give notice that something is lost, stolen, or gone missing, attachments to beauty arrange the grounds for conjuring a being, a substance, or a subject to come.

It is as a promise that beauty moves from a descriptive category (not a simple thing as is) to a diagnostic criterion, inasmuch as it gestures toward those conditions that render beauty possible and perceptible, at the same time it is directed toward a future tense, in which an object, project, person, habit, or world imparts a sense of life being furthered. And where the promise promises the survival of someone or something such as a painting, or a poet, or a political project, it becomes a specifically interventionist concept for life. We can see this in the refugee camp, where makeshift beauty parlors might be described as interrupting an ongoing state of despair, holding out as lifesaving those conventions of an ordinary good life. On a designated Beauty Day at the women and children’s center at the now-destroyed Calais, France, encampment, volunteers offered massages and nail treatments to

refugees, “to keep them feeling human” against the deprivations of statelessness.⁵⁷ If beauty designates that which is required to live (“feeling human”) through a historical conjuncture, beauty also solicits a commitment to *act*. Or, as Toni Morrison put so well, with all necessary ambivalence, “Beauty was not simply something to behold, it was something one could do.”⁵⁸

As such the promise *of* beauty is also about the promise *to* beauty, or *about* it, which *we* make. As Rita Barnard observes, we do not just look at beautiful objects, persons, or scenes, but “we judge them, we sell them, we wear them, we display them, we court them, we collect them, we smuggle them, we forge them, and so on.”⁵⁹ We also replicate them, preserve them, perfect them, and recommend them to others to ensure their longevity *as* beautiful (consider the canon or the museum). This is the second sense of promise I consider here—the promises we make on beauty’s behalf so that it can continue to move us.

A promise is at the heart of most any concept of politics, ethics, law, economy, language, friendship, and love. It underscores such capacities as gift, hospitality, apology, forgiveness, secrecy, order, and amnesty; without promise, these are signs without substance. The forms for promise are not singular; it might be made as a prophecy, for instance, or a prescription. What these forms hold in common is the promise as their foundation for subjectivity and sociality, also known at times as a contract. For instance, the origin of liberalism is premised in part on the capacity and right to make promises for “buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic,” and to submit these to the rule of law; in the enforcement of contractual agreements, legislation and forms of police arose to regulate the obligations between creditor and debtor, owner and laborer.⁶⁰ It is toward such determinate forms as credit, debt, marriage, and inheritance that the promise, as Sara Ahmed notes, is often an imperative to orient oneself toward certain outcomes and not others.⁶¹ But the promise might also conjure those more hazy or ideal forms, such as care, mutual aid, and reparation, that are hard or even impossible under conditions or attachments that might instead favor credit, debt, marriage, and inheritance. The promise is the scene and the consequence of a social or political order; some structures must be in place for the promise to be met, or proposed to replace those that cannot guarantee it, which is to say that the promise relies on preceding promises (some of which are ossified into institutions, arrangements, or, as Ahmed puts it, orientations) for its power—whether to shore up an existing order or to pull it apart.

The promise is a cut into time, encompassing risk, speculation, and capture; it is a narrativization that orders and arranges our sense of history and

our capacity to act on it. To bring to fruition that promise, one must be able to conceive of the future in terms of its difference from the past, by way of a normative or teleological concept of progress, perfectibility, or redemption. It is through this conception of time and narrative that *crisis* is a founding term for the elaboration of history through the promise of beauty. Here I build on the work of Janet Roitman, who observes that crisis (as a narrative) incites forms of critique that entail suppositions about how categories should function, evaluations of the conditions for their decay or disintegration, and conjectures about the world as it could be otherwise.⁶² Naming a situation a *crisis* requires reference to a comparative state of judgment based on knowledge claims, and to a norm or an ideal that requires certain arrangements be in place for whatever is in peril—democracy, beauty, hope—to flourish, or to persist in time. Likewise, as a response to crisis (or its narrativization as such), the promise also promises the capacities for prognosticating or producing history anew, which might include the promise of another social or political order. Such capacities are the historical forms with which sovereign acts negotiate the sensual experience of consciousness and distinguish between past and future. The promise thus necessarily solicits judgment or critique about latencies, absences, and errors that must be overcome, and in doing so provides meaning or a sense of possibility at or beyond the limit of the present. And, while sometimes abstract and speculative in nature, the promise further requires a consciousness that posits that we can act on history itself, or what Foucault called “the entry of life into history.”⁶³

The promise as such is multiply binding. First, the promise binds historical consciousness to knowledge. It gathers together multiple tenses, in which a philosophical and experiential awareness of a historical formation (such as a formation of possibility, or one of failure) and the historical quality of our knowledge about a situation or a structure (even where such knowledge disavows its own history) are brought to bear on the calculative reason of a collective faculty. Second, the promise binds that knowledge to the commitment to act. The one who promises proceeds through such self-referential enclosure—aware of their own historicity—as a precondition for bold action. For Nietzsche, this capacity to think causally about the future is the origin of humanity (“To breed an animal *with the right to make promises*—is this not the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?”).⁶⁴ Such responsibility requires “this emancipated individual, with the actual *right* to make promises, this master of a *free* will, this sovereign man,” who is regularized and desires to regularize what is and what is *not yet* under their control.⁶⁵ To put it bluntly, the promise makes a person out of you.⁶⁶

To become a person, conventionally, is to possess the capacity to reason and to act on that reason to change the course of history. Furthermore, per Arendt, the promise creates certainty, and conviviality, from chaos. “Binding oneself through promises . . . serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.”⁶⁷ The one who promises claims, *I can make this happen*, but these capacities for sovereignty, appointed unevenly, haunt the promise binding oneself to another, as islands in an ocean. (We know, of course, that not all genres of the human can become persons and that not all persons—especially those who carry a debt, including debt as a remainder of gender or race—can promise and be believed.)⁶⁸ Third, the promise binds the one who promises to the obligation to remember to what, and to whom, they are bound. In its aesthetic dimension, the promise is grounded in forms of address and those arrangements that make it recognizable, or credible, between us. Such an address and arrangement must be shared in order to be perceived as binding between persons or parties, whether as an utterance (“I do”), a signature, or a gesture (a spit-handshake). As Jacques Derrida argues (though I depart from his discussion of its messianic nature), “a promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain ‘spiritual’ or ‘abstract,’ but to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth.”⁶⁹

That the experience of promise necessarily includes the interval during which the promise is not yet met, and might still never be, is crucial. Such a *meanwhile* consists not only of the lengthening moments that must be endured with the hope for another ending, but also the continual iteration of the promise. To sustain critique or power, a promise must repeat the distance between what is and what could be, between history and its representation, between life and its maximalization. In this way the promise is made in relation to an as yet uncertain fate; Derrida defines “the structure of the promise” as “the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.”⁷⁰ The cosmetics industry, in what might be construed as the promise’s most banal invocation, cannot guarantee rescue from critical or compulsory conditions of historical being—aging, for instance—but promises to prolong the interval between youth and inevitable decline. *Maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s Maybelline*. Another such interval might be the occasion for the intensification of powers, as in liberal war and its promise to usher in a more beautiful country. Opening a school amid the US occupation to teach Afghan women “the art and commerce of beauty” as a precursor for self-sovereignty is, for example, one such capture. In this

way, the interval bears its own temporal power, delaying, drawing out, or forestalling an outcome.

Likewise, a promise can be broken, suspended, empty, or deferred; a promise might beget a cruel optimism, per Berlant, as promises maintain our attachments to forms of life that might be utterly impossible, especially during crises without foreseeable endings.⁷¹ We might argue that this structure is the object of critical inquiry for so much feminist scholarship about beauty in the last few decades; such cruelty is part of the injurious properties of beauty, and its promise that is not kept might be condemned as a lie, or a trap. This accusation is also at the heart of the sinister “trans panic” defense; a beautiful woman is “revealed” to be trans, and her “deception” becomes the source of violence for which she is disappeared, or made to die.⁷² Derida continues, “A promise must *be able not to* be kept, it must risk not being kept or becoming a threat to be a promise.” Thus, “the possibility of failure must continue to mark the event, even when it succeeds, as the trace of an impossibility, at times its memory and always its haunting.”⁷³ Indeed, where the content of the promise is presence, its achievement is continually deferred because full presence is impossible. (But also because, as Adorno and others argue, the promise cannot be carried out in the world *as it is*—a point to which I return.) This interval is critical as the precondition or condition of possible crisis; it holds open the contingency that might lead on the one hand to a broken promise or worse and further devastation, and on the other, a demand for more than these known forms or claims on us (laws, contracts, covenants) for being together. Finally, it might be that the broken promise is a relief, unburdening you of becoming human in a historical project that is itself a curse, or a debt. As the graffiti says, *Be gay, do crime*.

Throughout this book, the promise of beauty is addressed to multiple times and temporal politics—from continuity, rupture, threshold, deferral, crisis, endurance, progress, and metamorphosis. Promises serve as distinctions that carve out an inviolate transcendental realm (the promise of beauty being “nothing more than happiness,” for instance) in order to make historically contingent claims about relations between objects, scenes, persons, and worlds. In doing so, the promise blurs the distinction between ethics and politics, wherein the subject who must consider their relations to others specifically, and to alterity generally, is caught up in the constitution of a presence and, by necessity, a polity. Furthermore, the aesthetic lives within and even politicizes the political in the genre of promise itself, rendering observable the distinctions between categories (aesthetics and politics, politics and ethics) and in doing so undermining these distinctions. The promise

of beauty establishes among these elements a contingent relation of a *feeling of life being furthered* in a historical formation, which can be changed or undone. But just as much as it might restore you to something that you sense is otherwise fraudulent, missing, or in parts, the promise of beauty might radically misrecognize that which you need. What else is promised by the presence of whatever claims to sustain us?

Beauty's Presence

In T Fleishmann's *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*, a personal essay and unfinished meditation on Felix Gonzalez-Torres's artworks, they recount a meeting with a young child in their neighborhood. Fleishmann is asked, as bold children will do, whether they are a boy or a girl; they answer that a person does not have to be either. In response, the child gaily shouts, "Hey! I live in a house with a door!" Later, Fleishmann reflects on this encounter with friends over blunts and tropes. "She says to me that she actually thinks what the kid said is more beautiful if it isn't metaphor, anyway. I had shared some information about the world and then the kid wanted to share some information about the world, and if I get all loopidy-loo about what the kid said, I'm probably missing the whole message, which is just, 'Hey, I live in a house with a door.' And really, she reminds me, isn't some information about being alive beautiful enough? That we dry forks and touch hair and throw away a sock?"⁷⁴

There is a house with a door, a fork, a touch, a sock, a person who is not a boy or a girl, a heap of cellophane-wrapped sugar candy in the corner; here beauty is *some information* that moves between us, whatever shapes or sharpens our sense of being alive. But its presence is confounding, elusive. In the most commonly understood sense, presence denotes a thereness, the affirmation of an existence "here now." More complexly, it is as an index of a historical circumstance or substance (Charles Sanders Peirce names a footprint, a weather vane, thunder, the word *this*, a pointing finger, and a photograph as indices) that presence traces, an emptiness that can only be filled in specific dependent situations. Presence does not come from nowhere; it requires certain grounds for its own possibility (and impossibility). Presence might take the form of an object, a habit, a structure, a feeling, or a force—and each of these forms is always an arrangement of tense and locality, bound pragmatically to its circumstances to make the eventfulness of it possible. *I perceive this _____ here and now.* Or as Steven Shaviro writes, in *Without Criteria*, "The orchid is not beautiful in itself: but something

happens to the wasp, or to the gardener, who encounters the orchid and feels it to be beautiful.”⁷⁵ For this reason, presence is at once material and worldly, transcendent and fleeting. It is the compact that makes one more day of crushing boredom or deep despair seem livable; it is the house with a door that promises safety, for a while.

But presence is an undecidable concept. It is not so much a property of an object, person, scene, or world (“She has such presence!”) but a set of conditions as both circumstance and stipulation. Some constellation of variables in space and time must be in place for its recognition, for our sense-making, but beyond this is inconstancy. Derrida knew that full presence is an aporia, and yet presence permeates the spaces between you and me and others as an intensity, a mood, a body, a principle, or its index (“this is it”). Under the law, a percipient witness is able to share direct knowledge obtained through the senses; but hearsay, or testimony under oath about an out-of-court statement, is inadmissible as evidence. Affect theory locates presence as a phenomenological substance in gestures, sounds, tensions, and other atmospherics; the electric charge those in a room might share when someone, someone terrifying or beatific, for instance, enters. But while *a body occupying space* seemingly secures presence, and thereby truthfulness, her avatar’s evidentiary status is more complexly wrought.⁷⁶ Photography, film, and the MP3 are among those technological forms that claim to deliver presence—bearing the imprint of a singular moment, person, object, or history—even as that presence is immediately divided from itself (*it has been there*). And when we encounter or even collect the representation of a thing (such as the love song), as a conduit to access a relation to the thing (love of another), does the representation also become lovely? What about the recording or the photograph of a beloved body? Can information be beautiful without becoming a metaphor? The duplication of presence “as” something else—the photograph, the love song, the metaphor—is presence of another order; something is there through reference to what is not. This puzzle can be put to all sensible forms that claim to produce presence, including states, laws, education, rights, or houses with doors. These forms are divided from the beautiful thing itself—democracy or safety, for example—but muster attachment anyway. We might hang on to romance, though disappointing, or rights, though imperfect, as palimpsests for what might be possible or yet to come.

If presence is undecidable at the best of times (whenever this might have been or will be), how much more so in crisis, when beauty might be the one resonant note in a tuneless or noisy thrum? The difficulty is not in observing that this might be true, but in observing how or what the promise of presence

looks like, feels like. The promise proposes to manufacture beauty, to arouse it, and protect it, where presence is the sensation of movement and opening toward what one deems beautiful and wishes to be closer, and a measure of greater or lesser gradations of intensity, duration, or quantity. In other words, promise is both a historical narrativization and the determination of what is necessary for life-living, and presence, constituted through forms of circumscription (this *not* that) or opening (this *and* that) that establish criteria and produce the conditions of its own possibility, is its actualization. But while the promise attempts to make operational such criteria and conditions, presence might yet evade capture. It is undecidable because immediate presence, unmediated presence, is an impossibility; because absence haunts it; and because there is no agreement about its disposition. (Is presence an immersion, an awareness, an abundance, or the sensation of their lack?) This is why the promise of presence is political because what causes being, and gives it time to be, is never not a partisan argument about the flux of life and its living.

To observe presence at the meeting of aesthetics and politics is thus to observe an economy of form, not just content. Though the capacity to perceive beauty is so often imagined as an intuition, a phenomenological alignment, or a gut feeling, we can understand each of these as a “trained thing,” to follow from Berlant, “where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention.”⁷⁷ Or, after Foucault, presence, “like every event, . . . is unique, yet subject to repetition, transformation, and reactivation.”⁷⁸ It is as such that where the promise vows to sustain or manufacture beauty’s presence, it must also *organize* it, and ceaselessly subject it to review and regulation *as* presence. Mina Loy argued for the recognition of beauty in lowly, contemporary objects away from *the picture gallery, the museum, the library, the frame, the glass case, the tradition*. All of these are static forms that police presence, barricaded against what she calls the flux of life. “Would not life be lovelier if you were constantly overjoyed from the sublimely pure concavity of your wash bowls?”⁷⁹ Indeed, our attention oftentimes yields the reorder of such things. Other repeatable forms are the heart of Judith Butler’s performativity for creating presence on a physical body in space and time, and in Arabelle Sicardi’s observation, “When we learn beauty rituals, share them, and celebrate them with each other, we’re recognizing the work it takes to be OK with being alive.”⁸⁰ When Elaine Scarry states, “Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver,” she argues that presence is sensible in the form of the contract, as a structure for evoking it.⁸¹

But though she heralds beauty as a highly particular experience (a specific owl in a tree, for instance), Scarry also names the museum and the assembly as ideal forms for its presence and what she considers its corollary, justice. Yet none of these are natural or obvious forms; our recognition of them follows from an intelligible historical relation *to* them. (Gender is a historical sediment, and makeup routines are a bodily discipline; the museum and the assembly—in the United States, at least—are built on a philanthropic foundation and the three-fifths compromise. None of these are aesthetically or politically neutral.) So, what beauty is, how it is known, and what it does are all implicated in contingent arrangements of variables, including space, time, material, and sensation. We (or some and not others) become attached to certain rituals, contracts, museums, or assemblies, among other things, as historical situations that refer to or foster the presence of beauty and its erstwhile companions—justice, freedom, security, or life.

These structures and situations sometimes assure presence consistently, or continuously. It could be a skin-care routine, or the founding of a new regime. Underwriting the gift of freedom, for instance, imperial formations “grant” to those racial, colonial others certain political or institutional norms (constitutions, assemblies, trials by jury, among them) that are promised to manufacture freedom. Likewise, certain historical arrangements that claim to foster beauty might be taken up in order to regularize presence, which might include interference and control. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as one example, designates sites of “world heritage” considered to be valuable to all humanity (nonetheless a preferential proposition) to protect them from threats such as environmental degradation or asymmetrical warfare. At the same time, its promise might be comfortably subsumed into an instrumentalist calculus, seized as a divine or timeless form to secure capital or colony (such as a lovely young woman in a beautiful dress), or its presence usably lauded in what lies between a worker, a machine, and their movements. Andrew Ure, in his 1835 treatise *The Philosophy of Manufacturers; or, an Exposition of the Scientific, Moral, and Commercial Economy of the Factory System of Great Britain*, praised industrialism’s beautifying effects for those who found themselves the grist in its mills: “Their light labour and erect posture in tending the looms, and the habit which many of them have of exercising their arms and shoulders, as if with dumb-bells . . . opens their chest[s], and gives them generally a graceful carriage . . . and . . . not a little of the Grecian style of beauty.”⁸² The work ethic as a moral good in turn becomes a promise of beauty, even as its manufacture breaks you, or at the least wears you out.

The presence of beauty might therefore be secured through biopower, bringing together the disciplinary power operating on bodies with the exercise of power over populations, especially in their shared capacity to “make live.” Recruited as physical fitness, emotional well-being, or cultural competency, beauty might be directed at purposes as specific as eliminating welfare dependency and as comprehensive as nurturing whole personhood, whether providing business-appropriate attire for low-income jobseekers; wigs and beauty supplies to chemotherapy patients; or job training for women in prisons, camps, and war zones. A promise of beauty as the American Dream informs the apocryphal story about Hollywood actress Tippi Hedren, who flew her personal manicurist Dusty to a refugee camp in Sacramento, California, to train Vietnamese refugee women in nail technology.⁸³ At the same time, a concession to beauty might be presented as a boon from its administrators to mediate state violence; after scandals of deprivation and abuse, US commanders built a basketball court and a salon for Haitian detainees with HIV/AIDS held at a so-called humanitarian camp at Guantánamo.⁸⁴ These promises have in common the schooling of the senses to address, if not social harms and structural violence, then at least our conduct and capacities for their endurance. Since the 1980s, in another example, nonprofit initiatives have enlisted beauty salons as partners for Black women’s health advocacy. Campaigns such as Stay Beautiful / Stay Alive and Beauty and the Breast staged salons as scenes for breast and cervical cancer screening and health education.⁸⁵ The trial North Carolina BEAUTY (“Bringing Education and Understanding to You”) and Health Project trained cosmetologists as peer educators for “behavioral health outcome interventions” aimed at Black women, who are among those most at risk for preventable cancer deaths.⁸⁶ BEAUTY’s interventions included “strategies on eating at least five servings of fruits/vegetables per day, reducing calories from fat, and increasing moderate physical activity among customers,” their achievement becoming an object of self-discipline.⁸⁷ Through beauty and all it stands for (“education and understanding,” among other things), the future is conceived here through the calculative capacity to summon its presence through practice.

Just as beauty’s promise inaugurates a certain coming together, so too does presence require such forms, or such forms that those who come together consign to themselves, from within a time and place in the world. Citing Derrida, Miranda Joseph argues the romance of community is a supplement that “intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*,” filling a void at the core of capital.⁸⁸ Sitting in a hotel room, I flip through channels and land on a brief CNN report about a Filipino hairstylist who walks the streets of

New York City to give haircuts to the unhoused every Sunday afternoon.⁸⁹ Certainly, this is the scripted circulation of a human-interest story (one of thousands like it) that tells us nothing about capitalism's violence. Why not seize homes from the banks and the municipalities (or simply seize the banks and municipalities) that leave them empty, lifeless? I know I would find this beautiful. But watching this stylist gently touch an elder's paper-thin scalp (just *there* at the temple to brush away cut stray hairs), we may not be able to (or want to) deny roses, a sock, or a soft caress—those things that avow presence, aliveness, right here and now, between you and me. This is a difficulty at the threshold of sensory aesthetics and biopolitical governance where a longing for beauty—as touch, for instance, or feeling—collides with the forces that render material the vitality of a body, a people, or a planet. The promise is addressed to a specific situation or site for intervention, where the desire for presence is opened up to the inscription of the conditional—for instance, a historical consciousness of loss or catastrophe, the political economy of extractivism, or the longing for intimacy under the shadow of capital—as its guarantee. In documenting health advocacy campaigns at Black salons, Tiffany M. Gill notes, “Beauty salons, where touch and care of the body are high priorities, provide a place for black women’s bodies to be dignified and find a safe place for care and exploration.”⁹⁰ Such a place (despite whatever discipline it requires) might make a claim on you by sharing freely (or less miserly) what is scant or otherwise withheld.

Here beauty also promises the pleasures and risks of being present inside a relation with another. Kant distinguishes the agreeable from the beautiful, inasmuch as the beautiful is an invitation (which might shade and slip into a demand) to others to participate in a collectivity, a *sensus communis*.⁹¹ After Kant, and others who follow, Alexander Nehamas suggests, “Far from being selfish or solipsistic, the desire beauty provokes is essentially social: it literally does create a new society, for it needs to be communicated to others and pursued in company.”⁹² Beauty desires society; its judgment tests our aliveness with and against others. But who belongs to the company we might keep? Who is included by nature of the form of the *we*; who is able to give form to itself; and what molds or mandates such a form, which might be an act, a structure, or a dream? What presence is possible with those with whom we might not share a common experience of beauty, but nonetheless share a biome, a world, a cosmos? What is the “*we*” given the schemes that sanction a “*we*”—one that can speak a promise, to make present or absent beauty and its cousins, including ugliness? Though Kant argues that the judgment of beauty makes no recourse to the law or proceduralism, it is

through such an invitation—that others find as you do a thing beautiful—that beauty and also “correct” communion with it might become a norm, or a rule. In Lauren Berlant’s words, “The concept of the ‘we’ is itself aesthetic evidence of the process in which affective response becomes form.”⁹³ On the one hand, James Thompson, writing about participatory theater as one avenue for reconciling victims and perpetrators after wartime, suggests that the urge to share beauty with others across divides acts as a “universal claim to some form of good.”⁹⁴ On the other, the “we” invoked by First Lady Barbara Bush when she appeared on the talk show *Good Morning America*, on the eve of the war on Iraq, is a “we” who both wages war and will not “waste” a moment on its devastation. “Why should we hear about body bags and deaths? . . . It’s not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?”⁹⁵ She solicits those *like her* with beautiful minds, while blithely assuming that those who die are radically separate from “us.” The bodies of the dead (“ours” or “theirs”) are not relevant to her politics of life—even though the dead sanctify and otherwise ordain this empire.

This “we” is a lethal fault line, when and where beauty depends on resemblance to solicit sympathy, harmony, or order.⁹⁶ It brings up iterations of beauty in a moralistic tenor that renders it apolitical, prepolitical, or antipolitical, whether in glossing “America” or a whole humanity. Through beauty such coercive collectivities established through aesthetic and other norms become obligatory forms that permit little or no dissent, and assume social unities that are false, if not outright violent. Or as the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes:

The world is a beautiful
place

to be born into
if you don’t mind some
people dying

all the time
or maybe only
starving

some of the time
which isn’t half so bad
if it

isn’t you⁹⁷

In circumscribing the forms through which “we” come together, the promise of beauty might bind a universal history of the human—and also occasion a sectarian history of its other. “O beautiful for spacious skies” (from the hymn “America the Beautiful”) is the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples; so too is the museum, the national park, and the land-grant university, each heralded as a preserve of the beautiful that depends on its insidious enclosure. Rebecca Solnit observes, rightly, that “the contemporary world is full of things that look beautiful and are produced through hideous means.”⁹⁸ The presence of beauty, then, might also feel like a heaviness displacing the air, an enveloping darkness, or a ghostly matter.⁹⁹ It might determine that plentitude for some is poverty for others; it might even demand it, as an Israeli minister crowed during a bombing campaign that maimed and murdered tens of thousands of Palestinians, “North Gaza, more beautiful than ever. Blowing up and flattening everything is a delight for the eyes.”¹⁰⁰ Or as the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes, “You are beautiful like a liberated homeland / And I am exhausted like an occupied one.”¹⁰¹

The belief that beauty arouses in us a wish to share knowledge of its presence with others is also a human-unhuman divide. The we, the not-us. As Richard Wilk notes, “Judging beauty is an exercise that simultaneously divides people and brings them together.”¹⁰² It is not simply that the promise of beauty is concerned that another who might be a lover, a stranger, or a generation that follows after ours finds happiness or solace in the same flowers or faces that we do. It is that some promises claim to set right deviations or “errors” in judgment, with implications for the sensory perception of its arrangement. Beauty, like society, must be defended. In released videos, ISIS militants filmed themselves smashing ancient statues that many horrified observers argued represented a gift to humanity, which was now deprived of their presence for all time hereafter. Titled “The Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice #1—Nineveh Province” (2015), the video depicts men toppling limestone sculptures and modern replicas (identified remotely by archaeologists and historians scrutinizing the footage) from ancient Hatra, the capital of the first Arab kingdom in Iraq, pummeling them with sledgehammers and electric drills. These acts are presented on a continuum with videos of the same or fellow militants beheading hostages. *National Geographic* quoted an Iraqi archaeologist, now living in London, on the depth of loss through this destruction: “These things are part of the history of humanity. If you destroy them, you’re destroying the history of everyone.”¹⁰³ But this humanity, this “everyone,” is not universal; a former US undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs stated that

the “civilized peoples” value art, whereas “violent extremists” do not.¹⁰⁴ It is not just to be unbeautiful that presents an obstacle to aliveness. When Mary Mothersill asserts “that a description of a person who lacked that capacity [to foster beauty] would find its natural place, if anywhere, in the literature of psychopathology,” we see unfolding knowledges about peoples with unsimilar capacities for beauty or aesthetic appreciation that are often epiphenomena of politics—temporal distance, moral distinction, or civilizational lapse.¹⁰⁵ In the mid-twentieth-century beauty manual *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, nutritionist Gayelord Hauser writes that his visit to Cold War Moscow inspired this tome: “You never realize the great importance of beauty until you are in a place where it does not exist.” He continues, addressing himself in particular to “women of the Free World” who do not suffer so under communist regimes, “The thought that struck me so forcefully there was: ‘Beauty is duty.’”¹⁰⁶ In this manner a demagogue’s call for a *big beautiful wall* at the US-Mexico border molds a rigid aesthetic form whose presence (or promise of presence) commands the frenzied fortification of a paranoid order against an existential enemy.¹⁰⁷ To be unable to appreciate such beauty as a statue or a wall—to be insensible to it or, even worse, to want to destroy it—can become a racial divide, in the Foucauldian sense, between humanity (“the history of everyone”) and those subraces that threaten beauty and thus life itself.

Here crisis as a historiographical concept announces the limits of a structure or a practice because such a structure or practice cannot or will not sustain a beautiful presence, which might also be democracy, art, harmony, love, or justice. Crisis as such might name the structures or practices necessary to secure that presence, but it might also predict its collapse. How have we lived in order to fail beauty in this way? How can we repair our broken promises to it, if at all? The title for a book review for Elizabeth Rush’s *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore* asks, “Why Write Beautifully about Climate Crisis?” Martyn Smith argues that writing beautifully, rather than instrumentally, about a phenomenon we can do nothing to stop—the sea *will* rise, the shore *will* disappear—is not “about convincing people, but rather about preparing ourselves, emotionally and spiritually, for what is happening.”¹⁰⁸ Beauty’s presence is in being with others as we await an inevitability.

Here, or more specifically, not here—beauty might have no presence except as promise, or science fiction. Its otherwise achievement requires, as Asma Abbas observes about love (which is, after all, a sense or a feeling beauty often arouses), “shedding the aesthetic and sensual pathologies that are the gift of colonialism, liberalism, and capitalism.”¹⁰⁹ Such pathologies are how a lethal weapon might be called beautiful (by some) because it is

sensed as a totality (the circle of life, a beginning and an ending). As dozens of US Tomahawk cruise missiles destroyed a Syrian military airfield, illuminating the night sky above the Mediterranean Sea, a national news anchor praised “the beauty of our weapons” (misapplying Leonard Cohen’s lyric about their terror while corroborating Walter Benjamin’s warning about Fascism).¹¹⁰ Here the knowledge of human-made destruction is marshalled as evidence of “our” capacity for human feeling, a genocidal aesthetic that “affirms” the humanity of the perpetrator in his melancholy. This swallowing shadow over beauty is not an exception, but the condition of the wretched of the earth, after Frantz Fanon. For them, for us, beauty is terribly vulnerable because it can be distorted or turned against itself—and against life. And yet Arundhati Roy insists, “There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense.” She continues, “We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn’t matter whether or not we use them. They will destroy us either way.”¹¹¹

Such brutal or alienating forms through which we experience presence might be upended yet. Here the promise of beauty puts a sharper point on the critique of whatever caused it to go missing, become ruinous, fraudulent, or fallow; of whatever narrows or hardens against beauty, or otherwise thrusts it into unpleasant or sickening purpose. The promise of beauty might name the longing for something other than capital or colony to organize our bonds to each other, or nurture a dream of self-presence, bringing forth the *I* or the *we* who would be free. After this manner, some call beautiful the infinite continuity between ourselves and the world, a harmony of unsimilar parts. The artist-activist Favianna Rodriguez manifests *migration is beautiful* in her much-reproduced print of a monarch butterfly, a transmutating form for “the right of all living beings to move freely.”¹¹² A stray and secret beauty might slyly conjure what Saidiya Hartman calls “wayward,” “experiment,” through which a young Black woman might come to stand for herself, outside of sociological or criminological scrutiny—ungovernable.¹¹³ In this way, beauty could promise what Derrida names *ipseity*, a “being properly oneself.”¹¹⁴ So might beauty gesture toward both what is to come, and how we bring that future into being—the repair of such wrongs that have withheld its presence from us, thus far. Invoking Black feminist theory as a commitment to beauty, marked by an ethics of risk and disclosure (rather than law and order), Jennifer Nash cites Ivone Gebara, who muses, “If justice is fundamentally about creating right relationships, beauty is in many ways the incarnation and measure of the integrity of those relationships. It is a kind of aesthetic love, an invitation to nurture the creativity and integrity of every

created thing. It is an invitation to salvation.”¹¹⁵ When so much is missing or destroyed, this particular invitation to the *we* calls on beauty to speak to, and hear from, all those who are divided from it, and to grieve for those who are gone from it.

To think beauty as promise is to appraise how we have lived, and how we might build lives that make more sense, more beauty, than the ones we are living; but to think beauty as method is to appraise those arrangements that secure its presence (or claim to do so) for what these tell us about the human, history, and life. What is promised by a house with a door, or a wall, or a skin-care routine, or a crown, or a hand touching your hair, or an elegy for the sea and the air we breathe? It is possibility, or its foreclosure; it is a world held in common, or a species divided; it is the casualties of capital and colony, or their remedy. All are present, all are missing.

Promising Objects

If presence allows us to discover a principle, then the example is its means of transmission. This book’s capacious collection is therefore part of the study. In this I follow the example of others, where treatises *on* beauty necessarily include lists of seemingly noninterchangeable objects *of* beauty, what Umberto Eco might call a *poetic list*. The poetic list is different from a practical one, such as a grocery list, or an inventory; what distinguishes one from another is its criterion of assembly. A poetic list, Eco argues, is made “because we cannot manage to enumerate something that eludes our capacity for control and denomination.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, it is the dizzying impossibility to name each beautiful thing in a comprehensive list that imparts to others a glimpse of beauty’s significance. In *Speaking of Beauty*, Denis Donoghue offers these examples as each entirely singular but also universally recognizable, which suggests that some quality must nonetheless be replicable across them, though it is impossible to say what that might be: “And yet we continue to say without much hesitation that such-and-such and so-and-so are beautiful: tulips, roses, certain women, certain men, most children, a page of Chinese written characters, an African mask, a mathematical process, a piece of music, the view from Portofino, a certain sunset, a full moon, some animals (but not rhinoceroses), kingfishers, dragonflies, the air at Brighton, Alexander Kipnis’s voice, the weather when noon’s a purple glow.”¹¹⁷ In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry names “Augustine’s water, sky, cakes, and roses,” and Umberto Eco’s *History of Beauty* includes a series of art images organized loosely in well-established categories (including “nude

Venus” and “clothed Adonis,” queens and kings), arranged in a chronological timeline.¹¹⁸ Ivone Gebara starts her list with a list, “It is a place, a tree, a shore, a forest, a person that we love,” while Henri Lefebvre’s *The Missing Pieces* names the artworks, films, screenplays, photo negatives, poems, symphonies, buildings, letters, concepts, and lives that cannot be seen, heard, or known because they are missing, destroyed, buried, or otherwise left no trace.¹¹⁹ In her 1963 documentary *The House Is Black*, filmed at an isolated leper colony, Iranian feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad presents a lyrical rumination on how we might care for one another and slow the progression of disease and inevitable darkness. In a classroom, the adult teacher points to a child and demands, “You, name a few beautiful things.” The young boy answers, solemnly, “The moon, the sun, flowers, playtime.” Ocean Vuong submits “a fresco, a peach-red mountain range, a boy, the mole on his jaw” among those things that please the soul, and Chloé Cooper Jones ends her memoir of disability, *Easy Beauty*, with a list that recalls her to her senses: “a morning song, a simple tune, the spatial rhythmic shuffle of Andrew in the kitchen in socks, the faucet singing, the tinkling melody of water running over the pots and dishes before striking the sink’s metal basin, then a rinsing whisper, soap sloshing in the dirty coffeepot.”¹²⁰

Each list infers that beauty has no definitive form, and yet adopts certain structures and formalities of discourse to establish a logic or kinship among its collocation of things. In other words, a list is a scene setter. As it gathers those objects, persons, habits, and scenes that secure (even just for a moment) a principle, each list is particular and also propositional. If an example is the event of a statement, its entry in a list defines its enunciability. Both cohere at times into a formation or an institution—something like a case study, canon, or archive—that absorbs variations or adjustments while promising an encounter that can be foreseen, at least in part. And while a list does not wholly define the things that are included (whether roses, the mole on his jaw, or an African mask), it does designate an affective or interpretive range for any one thing bound through it to another. A list, then, is a dynamic arrangement of things that creates an event of knowledge in their closeness, and a politics of whatever underwrites it.

This book is a list that includes many things that appear to lash promise to beauty against the grain of terror, of what Berlant calls *crisis ordinariness*, which it turns out is quite a lot.¹²¹ Each chapter describes how beauty operates as a reference for writing our sense of the human, of collectivity, of politics, ethics, and other forms of life; and each animates a concept of aesthetics in what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, as a historical situation.

From Plato to Adorno, Elaine Scarry to Saidiya Hartman, among others, I draw (sometimes unfaithfully) from these and other philosophical and aesthetic theories in order to observe them as objects of inquiry in and of themselves, as historical artifacts that do not precede but produce the infrastructure that renders beauty intelligible, perceptible, and sensible, conceived through concerns about how one ought to live and what conditions enable such a life. Circulating as abstractions as well as *things*, such theories organize events of knowledge and also induce ways of being and ordering the world. In among these theory-things I have a hundred memes saved onto my camera roll; a hundred songs or poems scattered across laptops; a hundred film or television plots noted in workbooks; a hundred stories collected from magazines, newspapers, and books, in which beauty smooths a passage to the other side of calamity. These might bring together realms of aesthetic experience once understood (if never truly so) as distinct, as in the slide made for circulation on an image-dependent digital platform that pull-quotes poet Rita Dove, “In the midst of horror we fed on beauty—and that, my love, is what sustained us.” These sit alongside the philosophers and theorists in a history of ideas, a jumble of genres that are also *spaces of dissension*, throughout *The Promise of Beauty*.¹²²

Specifically, where it is a response to the scarcities, acquittals, and crises of our time, the promise of beauty is a schema for conferring meaning and structure to events and phenomena, some of which are inaccessible, or transient, or unsettling, precisely because we are not yet sure what it would take to live, finally. (We know, but we don’t know.) In the following, I do not uncover certain or sure knowledge of beauty through its copy (also known sometimes as heritage), or an education in it, or as an index of rights, ruin, or resilience, but the promises made on beauty’s behalf can help us comprehend the arrangement of forms of life that cohere energies or administer capacities for living. Indeed, though beauty is undecidable, its promise demands that we engage in calculation even as transformation of a historical situation makes its plea beyond this moment—a *feeling of life being furthered*. In doing so, beauty carries multiple felt possibilities, whether an antagonism toward disorder and a push toward normalization, but also a capacity for alterity and becoming other. Toward this end, this book follows some beauty around, as it binds to or loosens forms and fantasies about sovereignty, freedom, and historical time, even as these forms and fantasies are stuttering, fragmenting, and congealing.

The distinct concern of this book are those things that are brought into being to replace, or repair, or ruin, or _____ through the aesthetic form of

beauty's promise. First and foremost among these things is the copy. Elaine Scarry's opening salvo in *On Beauty and Being Just* is that "beauty brings copies of itself into being," as "a phenomenon of unceasing begetting."¹²³ Where the encounter with beauty arouses the desire for its longevity, how much more so where or when whatever is beautiful is also at risk? Crisis turns to copy to ensure that that which is loved but also vulnerable is not vanished, whether a book or a baby, a forest or a feeling. In other words, the promise of beauty solicits another such that a singular presence can be sensed or felt again. In taking up this consonance between crisis and copy, the first chapter posits beauty as a method for thinking about an *aesthetics of historicity* that saturates (or splinters) our perception of history "itself." And this is especially vital when we are made cognizant that, as Ocean Vuong put it in his novel about trauma and intimacy after wartime, *On earth we're briefly gorgeous*. This chapter turns to the most common figuration of beauty for a polity—the comely young woman in a beautiful dress. Edmund Burke declared, "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely," and almost two centuries later, Nguyen Cat Tuong, a Hanoi artist and intellectual who "modernized" the ao dai, opined, "We can determine if a country is civilized and holds a concept of beauty by looking at the citizens' clothing."¹²⁴ In other words, sometimes between woman and nation is beauty. *The comely young woman in a beautiful dress* is the promise of that beauty in a serial form, so much so that at times she might seem to have exhausted our critical attention. In order to reanimate her aesthetic register, this chapter takes *the comely young woman in a beautiful dress* not as a study of the principle it stands for—whether country, "heritage," or resilience—but as a study of the forms for normativity and narrativity that occasion and structure her presence. Through both crisis and beauty as genres of historical narrativization, the dress and the beloved body who wears it secures the promise of beauty against the ravages of time via her replica, or copy.

If aesthetic judgments are about social arrangements, as Sianne Ngai observes, they are also about interference in those arrangements.¹²⁵ The first chapter and the next consider seriously questions of those social arrangements presumed to be beautiful and life-affirming. In the first chapter, this is captured in the temporal understanding, *On earth we're briefly gorgeous*. In the second, the concern is posed in the familiar chant, *What does democracy look like?* How is democracy made aesthetically perceptible, including through acts of becoming one—or near enough, or not enough at all? That is, if one of the key dimensions of the concept of beauty is its radical singularity, another is its desirable replication in all directions, which pre-

sumably only certain ideological and institutional forms can secure. These chapters study beauty as a social form for the rescue of a besieged subject or subject-in-process, and of those other properties of liberal personhood that so often attach to beauty, like interiority, or dignity.

The second chapter turns to the transition to self-sovereignty promised by US empire to consider the aesthetic education that cultivates the identification with a liberal vision of humanity, including the interval before its accomplishment. Such an education raises the status of beauty as a promise for the elaboration and the judgment of history, including its postulates, crisis and continuity. In this iteration, the promise of beauty is a habitus that prepares one for democracy. The aesthetic forms for perceiving and recognizing the presence of democracy—the literary convention of the constitution that references a collectivity (“We the People”); the analogue of balance, proportion, and equality (one member, one vote) found in a representative body or popular assembly; and the lawful habits that conjure the desire and the discipline of beauty—are heralded as right arrangements. But right arrangements also imply the presence of wrong ones, and in the US war on terror, the wrong ones are at times condensed in hijab in general, and the burqa in particular, described as a premodern remnant, a metonym for barbaric Islam, or a crime against humanity. Established in 2003 by a small coterie of nongovernmental workers and industry professionals, the Kabul Beauty School operated under the name Beauty without Borders to instruct Afghan women in the art and commerce of beauty—a premise founded on beauty’s erstwhile absence until liberal war bestowed its presence. Here I argue that beauty is not just an index of some other force but is itself an instrument and an objective for calculating and arranging the life of others; an education in beauty sustains a philosophical statement about a world-historical consciousness, which also comprises a political imperative for regime change. However, the inducement to copy a presumably perfectible form (democracy, beauty) announces the divide from itself that follows in the poor copy, the partial or failed presence, which then requires further repetitions through evaluation, regularization, and discipline.

Like the beauty school, the beauty pageant reminds us that being seen as human is not a condition of the flesh but its fabrication. My concern in the third chapter is with the aesthetics of liberal democratic forms of sovereignty, located in parliaments or congresses, constitutions, courts of law, including international ones, and the rule of rights and reason. To do so I examine the formulation of rights from which “the right to be beautiful” emerges and which it in turn secures. Staged just twice, first in Angola and

later in Cambodia, the Miss Landmine pageant follows from a not uncommon faith that beauty is both a humanitarian problem and also its resolution. A short-lived pageant for women who had lost limbs from unexploded ordnance and who suffer the losses that follow, the spectacle sought to raise “awareness” and confer dignity. And what a spectacle it was! The photographs of the Cambodian contestants lounging at luxury hotels and among the temple friezes of *apsara* dancers, together comprise the aesthetic currency of Cambodia, still grappling with the compounding violences of US bombing campaigns, the Khmer Rouge, and the Hun Sen regime.

How to repair the humanity that has been severed from flesh? In this third chapter, I hold together the sprawling international complex that funds and conducts prosthetic manufacturing, rehabilitation and vocational training, infrastructural development, and cultural programming, with the aesthetic and moral discourses of rights, capacities, humanitarianism, and humanity at the postwar scene of this pageant heralding, “Everyone has the right to be beautiful.” This slogan attests to the degree to which rights almost exclusively model claims to universality and the subject of freedom. The pageant copied democratic forms—rights, assemblies—to “uplift” the outcast, embrace the disenfranchised, and redress grievances. In the context of “show” trials and state abuses, it might be easy to dismiss the pageant as a poor (juridically adjacent) substitute for liberal government. But we need not dismiss *or* praise the spectacle to observe that the pageant might betray rights themselves as a poor presence. With a custom-fit prosthetic as prize, the pageant unwittingly corroborates the synthetic grounds for a “whole” humanity. What if the pageant being “unlike” the assembly, or the right to be beautiful being “unlike” the right to have rights, is not about the failure of the pageant, but about the failure of democratic forms to meaningfully secure what the pageant and beauty must summon through their semblance? Not as symptom but assessment, the right to be beautiful can tell us much about the collapse of normative horizons of justice.

But—the school disintegrates, the pageant cancels, and beauty fails us (we are told) because beauty can do nothing to stop catastrophe, or because it diverts us from what horrors lie outside its frame. The fourth chapter begins with the genre of ruin porn—what some commentators call the now-familiar art photographs and documentary images of decline in postindustrial cities in the Rust Belt, such as Detroit—to examine the accusation of aesthetic failure to accommodate political or ethical crisis. Here crisis is doubled; the ruin is the terrible consequence of a historical situation, and its representation is the unnerving collapse of the event of knowledge. The promise to

diagnose what is missing or gone wrong, necessary for the naming and narration of crisis, is betrayed by a “purely” aesthetic beauty. I turn to a specific accusation of failure—the incapacity of these photographs to represent the violence of capital that wrecks the fortunes or peoples of the Motor City—in order to get at a broader proposition about the disturbance of the intelligibility of the world. Here, and in its other iterations as a complaint (poverty porn, humanitarian porn, etc.), the pornographic is a judgment in error, a deviation from truth, and the estrangement of the human from others, from history. But the complaint itself can help us to be more attentive to how we become attached to certain perceptual practices in the appraisal of beauty and its failures. Indeed, how the pornographic as a metaphor marks the alienation of the promise from the human might undo our presumptive prerequisites for knowledge and the entry of life into history. Inasmuch as these are hinged on those same properties underwriting what Annie McClanahan calls the dead pledge of capital that wrought a postapocalyptic world now, can we instead make the ruins we wish to see?¹²⁶

If the fourth chapter concerns itself with the methodological impasse of a hermeneutics of suspicion that informs critique, and the accusation that what is aesthetic is pornographic, the fifth chapter lingers at the wreckage of vulnerability given a lovely form. I center a concept of *living beautifully* as an aesthetic style attenuating scenes of radical contingency to model how best to live on in catastrophic times. Living beautifully in this instance names the deliberate leaning toward freedom despite social or structural collapse, shaping our historical consciousness of time over (and sometimes against) an awareness of eventfulness. Weathering continuity and rupture, its promise serializes dispersed events (even if those events are interior ones) and scripts a biography of strength after brokenness, a desirable history of doggedness despite misfortune. With the disintegration of modernity’s temporal order of progress and perfectibility, living beautifully is one response to irresolvable aporias in our experience of time. Here I follow the call to beauty to figure out what is collective and what is not about its promise toward and beyond survival, or our ending.

The Promise of Beauty is not the disclosure of beauty’s scandal as philosophically messy, historically contingent, or empirically false. Nor is it a claim that without beauty, the humanities, or art, or justice has no usable future. Instead, the book names beauty as a method that attends to questions of aesthetics and politics from within a history (or histories) of the world. And where the promise of beauty precipitates crisis through critique of the conditions of existing possibility for a life that can be lived, what politics

might follow? Here we see the promise of beauty take up politics in multiple senses. Ranci re argues that what is called politics is actually the police, and that politics breaks from the police and its organization of powers and their legitimation through the aggregation of rules and populations. In doing so, “politics is aesthetic in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible.”¹²⁷ We know beauty as the police, as the aesthetic arrangement of “right” forms for the achievement of norms or an order. But beauty is also a politics for reworlding the perceptual field and the theories we bring to it, for undoing the pressure of forms and the regularities of time and narrativity deployed through, as Kandice Chuh puts it, “the difference aesthetics makes.”¹²⁸ In this spirit, beauty as method unfolds epistemologies, ontologies, and genealogies of the human and our activity—what Lisa Lowe calls the intimacies of four continents, and what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan name scattered hegemonies—and engages tensions and nonunities that erupt in narratives of crisis.¹²⁹ Beauty as method observes not just how beauty appears in arguments for certain arrangements or forms for and about its presence, but also how we *craft* those arguments for or against an arrangement or form; beauty as method underscores theory’s relation to the practical, and the philosophical and political necessity of historical thought being *felt*. After all, where it implicates (and incriminates) certain structures for living on and not others, the promise of beauty plumbs the correspondences and contradictions between rule of law, private property, resource extraction, the antipersonnel landmine, the tribunal, and wealth consolidation, with and against small art, love, roses, prayer, a house with a door, a prosthetic limb, a broken vessel, or a police precinct on fire.

We live, or try to, in the ebb and flow of calamity. I at times struggled with the oblique engagement of this book with the urgencies of aspirational fascism, climate catastrophe, and fatal dispossession—all those things that suspend or end the life of so many. I remind myself that to dismiss beauty as trivial or superfluous is too often to sequester beauty (against all evidence of its powers) as an enthralling vision or numbing distraction that impedes our perception of the real, thus disallowing that the form of theory *does* matter. I turn again to Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, who assure me, “It matters that something was yellow, not red, that it passed in a blur, or something moaned. A bit of social debris, a scattering of material-aesthetic forms taken up or left to languish like litter are an archive of objects of attention.”¹³⁰ And much might be lost in dispensing with (what is dismissed as) mere ornament, or second-order signification, because beauty might

indeed weigh the gravity of a life, or provide a historical sensorium to focus our attention on those structures that call some persons and worlds into being, and not others. No wonder we often derive a method and a form for the narrativity of crisis from the promise of beauty. How else could we reckon with the heartbreaking TikTok videos of sixteen-year-old, round-faced Ma'Khia Bryant, demonstrating how she fashioned her voluminous black hair, circulated against the grim footage of her murder at the hands of Columbus, Ohio, police? Where politics obtains in forms for presence and absence, in the sensing of life being furthered or brutally cut short, beauty mediates the materiality of life and death found in these forms. And so a collectivity of *we* insists on beauty as a social form, a temporal loop, a psychic investment, an interpretive hermeneutic, and a relational presence, in order to demand the life she deserved. We take beauty's side, because we want it on ours.

Promise is an imperative cut like an invitation. This book is an invitation too, but I do not know quite what I want to promise you, because I do not know what is to come or if it is enough. Who would *not* want beauty to save us? Who would not wish a radical beauty that would free us from the failures of “actually existing” beauty, and provide redress, reparation, and redemption for all its erstwhile wrongs? Yet this study of beauty refuses to settle the issue for now, instead lingering on the contingencies and consequences of its claims for the reproduction of life, or the disruption of life as we know it. And before I turn to those things the promise of beauty pledges to make present in a given historical situation—what forms for a life that can be lived—I want to say, what does it mean for beauty to be an object or an ideal on which we hang our hopes? What do we really want from beauty?

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NOTES

Introduction

- 1 Miller, *Know My Name*, 133.
- 2 Miller, *Know My Name*, 138.
- 3 Miller, *Know My Name*, 308.
- 4 Rancière and Panagia, “Dissenting Words,” 115; Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 22.
- 5 Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics,’” 245.
- 6 Tompkins, “Sweetness, Capacity, Energy,” 852.
- 7 Berlant and Stewart, *Hundreds*, 63.
- 8 Loy, “Gertrude Stein (Continued),” 429–30.
- 9 For instance, David Hume writes, “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.” “Essay XXIII: Of the Standard of Taste,” 136. George Santayana echoes him: “In less technical language, Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing.” *Sense of Beauty*, 49.
- 10 Panagia, *Poetics of Political Thinking*, 72.
- 11 Plato, *Symposium*, 210a–12b, in Plato, *Dialogues of Plato*, quoted in Russo, *Problem of God*, 138–39.
- 12 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 296.

- 13 Murdoch, "Idea of Perfection," 40.
- 14 "Before the Light."
- 15 Vanita Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora*, 6, 17.
- 16 Taussig, *Beauty and the Beast*, 5.
- 17 Foucault defines freedom as "never anything other . . . than an actual relation between governors and governed." See my book *The Gift of Freedom*, 6, 9.
- 18 Soofiya Andry writes: "Beauty is a country, a fascist state with violent borders, in which I can, at best, only ever be a tourist. I visit that country for fleeting moments, during which it doesn't feel so malicious. It's a country in which I cannot and will not live." Andry, "Deviant Bodies," 228.
- 19 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*.
- 20 Arthur C. Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 160; Gigante, *Life*, 36.
- 21 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 12–13.
- 22 Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 22.
- 23 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 128, 150–51.
- 24 Quoted in Hillary Brown, "Holocaust, Art, Chicago, and Sickness."
- 25 Moten and Hartman, "The Black Outdoors," 35:39 min. Personal communication with scholar and curator Thea Quiray Tagle, after she attended a reading by Ocean Vuong, 2019.
- 26 Egbuonu, "Beauty of Becoming."
- 27 See my book *The Gift of Freedom*.
- 28 Kant, *Observations*, 111.
- 29 See Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; Morrison, *Bluest Eye*; Walker, *A Subtlety*.
- 30 Cottom, *Thick, and Other Essays*, 65; Roelofs, *Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, 30.
- 31 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.5.73–74. Reference is to act, scene, and lines.
- 32 Mingus, "Moving toward the Ugly."
- 33 Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*, 202–3.
- 34 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.5.83–84.
- 35 Canuel, *Justice, Dissent, and the Sublime*.
- 36 Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," 34.
- 37 Dabashi, "Gaza."
- 38 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
- 39 Adorno writes that "beauty establishes a sphere of untouchability." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 51.

- 40 I am referring to two different films that take place in camps—*Green Dragon* and *Schindler's List*. I have written about the former in my book *The Gift of Freedom*.
- 41 Semaan, "What Self-Care Looks Like in a Refugee Camp."
- 42 Quoted in Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*, 192.
- 43 Manalansan, "Biyuti in Everyday Life," 155.
- 44 Manalansan, "Biyuti in Everyday Life," 168.
- 45 Diaz, "Biyuti from Below," 417.
- 46 Du Bois, "Of Beauty and Death," 132.
- 47 See Rancière, *Dissensus*.
- 48 Piper Kerman writes: "By the time I left prison, this stubborn practice of feminine arts seemed like a natural resistance to a system that worked hard to reduce you to a sexless number. Those rituals were not just for visitors or vanity, but a way to say, 'I am not just a prisoner; I am many more things. And I am going to get out of here one day and never forget who I am when I look in the mirror.'" Kerman, "Beauty behind Bars."
- 49 Quoted in Tolentino, "The Year That Skin Care Became a Coping Mechanism."
- 50 Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 74–75.
- 51 Perri, "A Thousand Years."
- 52 Nuttall, "Introduction: Rethinking Beauty," 28; Zuo, *Vulgar Beauty*, 11.
- 53 Stendahl, *On Love*, 55.
- 54 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 82.
- 55 DeVeaux, "Conversation with June Jordan," 102.
- 56 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 46.
- 57 Bedi, "Beauty Day."
- 58 Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, xi.
- 59 Barnard, "Place of Beauty," 106.
- 60 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 63.
- 61 Sara Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.
- 62 Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, 49.
- 63 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 141.
- 64 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 57, my italics.
- 65 The full quotation from Nietzsche: "The man who has his own independent, protracted will and the *right to make promises*—and in him a proud consciousness, quivering in every muscle, of *what* has at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom, a sensation of mankind come to completion.

This emancipated individual, with the actual *right* to make promises, this master of a *free* will, this sovereign man—how should he not be aware of his superiority over all those who lack the right to make promises and stand as their own guarantors, of how much trust, how much fear, how much reverence he arouses—he ‘*deserves*’ all three—and of how this mastery over himself also necessarily gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all more short-willed and unreliable creatures? The ‘free’ man, the possessor of a protracted and unbreakable will, also possesses his *measure of value*: looking out upon others from himself, he honors or he despises; and just as he is bound to honor his peers, the strong and reliable (those with the *right* to make promises)—that is, all those who promise like sovereigns, reluctantly, rarely, slowly, who are chary of trusting.” Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 59–60.

- 66 Or, as Lauren Berlant puts it: “It is often said therefore that the desiring subject is well served by the formalism of desire: although desire is anarchic and restless, the objects to which desire becomes attached stabilize the subject and enable her to assume a stable-enough identity.” Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 76.
- 67 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.
- 68 See Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.
- 69 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 89–90.
- 70 Derrida, *Other Heading*, 78
- 71 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
- 72 See Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*; Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers”; Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*.
- 73 Derrida, *Negotiations*, 362.
- 74 Fleishmann, *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*, 25.
- 75 Shaviri, *Without Criteria*, 3.
- 76 This phrasing for presence, a “body occupying space,” is attributed to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht by Mechtild Widrich in their introductory remarks. Berthold, Urspring, and Widrich, *Presence*, 11.
- 77 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 52.
- 78 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 28.
- 79 Loy, “Gertrude Stein (Continued),” 429–30.
- 80 Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Sicardi, “Queer Person’s Guide to Feeling Beautiful.”
- 81 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 90.
- 82 Quoted in Gagnier, *Insatiability of Human Wants*, 64.
- 83 Tippi Hedren received the 2013 Legacy of Style Award from the nonprofit foundation Beauty Changes Lives, established by the American Associa-

tion of Cosmetology Schools to provide scholarships for hopeful students in the beauty and wellness industries. Tam Nguyen, president of the Los Angeles-based Advance Beauty College, which graduates thousands of Vietnamese nail technicians from its bilingual and in-language courses, readily acknowledges, “She’s the Godmother of the nail industry.” Morris, “How Tippi Hedren Made Vietnamese Refugees into Nail Salon Magnates.”

- 84 Paik, *Rightlessness*, 129.
- 85 See Tiffany M. Gill’s chapter “‘Among the Things That Used to Be’: Beauticians, Health Activism, and the Politics of Dignity in the Post-Civil Rights Era,” in *Beauty Shop Politics*, 121–36.
- 86 This project ran from 2002 to 2006. See John Mallory Rose, “Process Evaluation of the North Carolina BEAUTY and Health Project.”
- 87 About risk-reduction initiatives, Vincanne Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg mark that such scientific object-making establishes biopolitical forms of governance with a moral divide between deviance and norms. See Pigg and Adams, “Introduction: The Moral Object of Sex.”
- 88 Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, 2.
- 89 See also Diola, “In Photos.”
- 90 Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 129.
- 91 “He then judges not just for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. That is why he says: The *thing* is beautiful, and does not count on other people to agree with him in his judgment of liking on the ground that he has repeatedly found them agreeing with him; rather he *demand*s that they agree. He reproaches them if they judge differently, and denies that they have taste, which he nevertheless demands of them as something they ought to have. In view of this [*sofern*], we cannot say that everyone has his own particular taste.” Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 56.
- 92 Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 76–77.
- 93 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 54.
- 94 James Thompson, *Performance Affects*, 154.
- 95 Quoted in Rich, “Spoils of War Coverage.”
- 96 See Canuel, *Justice, Dissent, and the Sublime*.
- 97 Ferlinghetti, *Coney Island of the Mind*, 88.
- 98 Solnit, *Orwell’s Roses*, 209.
- 99 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.
- 100 Bruno Maçães (@MacaesBruno), 2023, “Another Israeli Minister calling for the complete destruction of Gaza, replacing it with beach condos. A current minister, Amichai Eliyahu.” Twitter, November 2, 2023, 4:53 a.m. <https://twitter.com/MacaesBruno/status/1720016201672278401>.

A screenshot is attached of a Facebook post by Eliyahu with the translated text: “North of the Strip, beautiful as ever. Blow up and flatten everything. Simply a delight for the eyes. (A soldier in Gaza) We need to talk about the day after. In my spirit’s eyes we give out plots to all those who have fought for Gaza over the years and to the evicted from Gush Katif—Inc. (Without dimension).” These words appear above a photograph of a bombed-out structure in occupied Gaza under a hazy blue sky.

- 101 Barghouti, “You and I.” Thank you to Eman Ghanayem for introducing me to this poet.
- 102 Wilk, “Connections and Contradictions,” 217.
- 103 Quoted in A. R. Williams, “ISIS Smashes Priceless, Ancient Statues.”
- 104 US Department of State, “State Department Launches Global Cultural Initiative.”
- 105 Mothersill, *Beauty Restored*, 277.
- 106 Hauser, *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, xii.
- 107 See Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
- 108 Martyn Smith, “Why Write Beautifully about Climate Crisis?”
- 109 Abbas, “In Terror, in Love,” 504.
- 110 Hawkins, “Brian Williams Is ‘Guided by the Beauty of Our Weapons’ in Syria Strikes.” Walter Benjamin warns that Fascism renders a politics of self-alienation aesthetic, such that we might find pleasure in our own destruction. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 252.
- 111 Arundhati Roy, *End of Imagination*, 63.
- 112 Rodriguez, “Migration Is Beautiful Artist’s Statement.”
- 113 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.
- 114 Derrida, *Rogues*, 11.
- 115 Quoted in Nash, “Writing Black Beauty,” 111; the original is Gebara, “Yearning for Beauty.”
- 116 Eco, *Infinity of Lists*, 117.
- 117 Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty*, 25.
- 118 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 103; Eco, *History of Beauty*.
- 119 Gebara, “Yearning for Beauty,” 24–25; Lefebvre, *Missing Pieces*.
- 120 Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 137–38; Cooper Jones, *Easy Beauty*, 270.
- 121 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.
- 122 “Spaces of dissension” is from Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 152.
- 123 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 3, 5.

- 124 Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 172; Nguyen Cat Tuong quoted in Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận, *Un siècle d'histoire de la robe des Vietnamiennes*, 52–53 (my translation and italics).
- 125 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
- 126 McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*.
- 127 Rancière, *Philosopher and His Poor*, 226.
- 128 Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.
- 129 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*; Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*.
- 130 Berlant and Stewart, *Hundreds*, 15.

Chapter 1. The Beautiful, Finding Itself in Danger, Desires Its Copy

- 1 Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 138.
- 2 Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 138–39.
- 3 Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty*, 4.
- 4 Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” 130.
- 5 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 127.
- 6 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 3.
- 7 Nguyen’s introduction of the darted bodice to the once-loose ao dai (his most significant contribution to its silhouette, alongside flared trousers) required a particular body to go with the modern invention of a national dress (notably, he also suggested exercises for young Vietnamese women to become taller and bustier). These changes also required a brassiere or corset and were paired with high heels. This Vietnamese New Woman also sported some of the more iconic visual elements of this figuration across the globe, such as bobbed hair, painted lips, and an elongated body.
- 8 Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Văn Luận, *Un siècle d'histoire de la robe des Vietnamiennes*, 52–53 (my translation and italics). His defense was also subject to critique at the time, as some found his aesthetic sensibilities too French to be properly nationalist.
- 9 Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, “Wearing Modernity,” 76. Nguyen’s article provides a thorough English-language discussion of Lemur’s designs.
- 10 Lieu, *American Dream in Vietnamese*, 61. Lieu cites the cohost of the Hoa Hau Ao Dai pageant in Long Beach, California, whose comments at the start of the 1996 pageant, on the occasion of the twenty-year anniversary of the war’s ending, are a direct address to fellow refugees: “Much has changed as a result of the Vietnamese migration overseas, but the ao dai forever remains the same, like our love for freedom and democracy and our love for the homeland of Vietnam.” Lieu, “Remembering ‘The