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The Implicated Poetics of Social Reproduction and Neoliberal Diversity: Natasha Brown's *Assembly*

ABSTRACT By reading *Assembly* alongside Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject* as well as Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism*, this chapter explores how Natasha Brown's debut novel negotiates the implication of social reproduction and neoliberal diversity against the backdrop of precarious care in ongoing racial capitalism. If the complex subject position of the novel's female Black British protagonist—who has worked herself into the one per cent and serves as an avatar for diversity management while at the same time continually experiencing sexualised and racialised discrimination—foregoes the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators and instead fosters "long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 12), the text's juxtaposition of its different vignettes underlines the complex interplay between diachronic and synchronic forms of implication in the highly condensed form of just 100 pages. *Assembly* not only illustrates the complex structural relationship between social reproduction, diversity management, and individualising storytelling but also invites reflections on metaphorical readings of cancer while at the same time raising awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice.

KEYWORDS *Assembly*, cancer as metaphor, health disparities, implication, social reproduction

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A death in the tram,
a death in the doctor's office,
a death with the prostitutes,
a death on the job site,
a death at the movies,
a multiple death in the newspapers,
a death in the fear of all decent folk of going out after midnight.
A death,
yes a DEATH
Fanon 1980, 13; emphasis in original

While there is hardly any secondary literature on Natasha Brown's debut novel yet, *Assembly* (2021) has received great acclaim from literary critics and fellow writers alike. It is particularly the novel's highly condensed depiction of how its protagonist, a Black British woman from a poor family, suffers from intersectional discrimination which has been applauded (Collins 2021; Gyarkye 2021). Nonetheless, the novel's conclusion—that is, its protagonist's decision not to undergo treatment when she is diagnosed with breast cancer—has also prompted criticism (Williams 2021; Schröder 2022). Given that the novel not only foreshadows death from its beginning but also continuously portrays health disparities as well as the daily social deaths which the protagonist endures, the unease caused by her decision against treatment needs to be considered as part of the wider narrative tension which *Assembly* creates. In addition to mirroring the constant pressure which the protagonist is under, this tension stems from the young woman's complex subject position as an implicated subject who suffers terribly from racial capitalist discrimination while at the same time successfully working in London high finance (Rothberg 2019).

As this chapter argues, it is through this unresolved tension of implication—created both by means of its implicated protagonist-narrator and through the use of an implicated poetics—that *Assembly* negotiates the complex structural relationship between differential life chances, social reproduction, and diversity management. According to Michael Rothberg, implication describes the subject positions of those who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (2019, 1). Implicated subjects are thus neither victims nor perpetrators, but, through their involvement in structures of injustice and oppression, they contribute to producing and reproducing these subject positions (Rothberg 2019, 1). As the following analysis will show, *Assembly* foregoes dichotomies of victims and perpetrators. Narrativising the tensions of implication without

defusing them, the novel defies disambiguation and narrative closure. In the highly condensed form of just 100 pages, the text instead raises awareness of the potential implication of narrative and language in upholding systemic injustice. As *Assembly* consequently resists teleologies which suggest that individual empowerment might be the solution to desolidarising and fragmenting neoliberal tendencies, the novel provides interesting insights for the study of contested solidarities. Refracted through the complexly implicated position of its unnamed narrator and through her daily "social deaths" (Patterson 1982), the novel demonstrates both how the manifold tendencies of neoliberal desolidarisation exacerbate existing social dividing lines and how they contribute to creating new ones. In addition, the novel's narrative exploration of diversity management shows how solidarity is undermined when understandings of solidarity are limited to shared experiences of discrimination and are not "based on shared commitment to a cause" (Scholz 2008, 34), that is, the shared aim of overcoming injustice and oppression (Bargetz, Scheele, and Schneider 2019, 11–2).

In order to analyse the politics of form which *Assembly* adopts so as to negotiate the narrator's individual experiences of discrimination against the backdrop of neoliberal desolidarisation, this chapter will first analyse how the novel's narrative choices regarding juxtaposition and fragmentation, narration, focalisation, and deixis as well as metafictionality and layout refract narrative as well as linguistic implication. Then, the chapter will focus on the implicated plots of diversity management and social reproduction as well as on how the novel resists the strategies of neoliberal storytelling so frequently employed to emplot diversity management and social reproduction. In a last step, the chapter will discuss possible metaphorical readings of the protagonist's cancer diagnosis.

Narration and Implication

As the following section will show, *Assembly* tightly interweaves the mediation of its narrator's complex implication with its own politics of form. By assembling different vignettes into a fractured picture of implicated narration, the novel mirrors the desolidarising and fragmenting tendencies of neoliberal transformation, rendering visible many of Rothberg's findings. Rothberg observes that, when people participate in or benefit from the perpetuation of systems of oppression in an indirect or belated way without being identifiable as direct victims or perpetrators, the resulting modes of implication are often "complex, multifaceted, and sometimes

contradictory" (2019, 2). In order to negotiate such complex modes of implication, *Assembly* relies on the juxtaposition of numerous vignettes. By thus defying linear representation, the novel creates an associative and fragmentary structure which interweaves the narrator's individual experiences with historical and systemic background information.

Evoking comparisons to, amongst others, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (Collins 2021; Pittel 2021, 90–1), *Assembly* narrates one day in the life of its unnamed protagonist—the day preceding a garden party at her privileged white boyfriend's family estate in the English countryside. During this day, the protagonist delivers a talk at a school, which forms part of her firm's diversity management, receives a shared promotion, decides against having her breast cancer treated, takes the train to the countryside, and receives a marriage proposal from her boyfriend. Organised into three parts, all of these events are told in vignettes by the protagonist herself. Merging the narrator's perception of the action in the narrative present with her associations of political and personal events, these vignettes mirror the narrator's thought processes. Through the insertion of flashbacks, they moreover provide information on the autodiegetic narrator's past struggles, especially her experiences of discrimination and her attempts at assembling herself into her current—successful but still highly vulnerable—self (Brown 2021, 17).[1]

Preceding the novel's three main parts and the autodiegetic narration therein, three brief chapters featuring a different narrative situation reify the intricate relationship between narration and implication in the novel from its beginning. In one of them, the protagonist is addressed in the second person—presumably by a Black man seeking her solidarity in his experiences of discrimination in Britain. The other two chapters are told by a heterodiegetic narrator who first introduces the protagonist by relating her detached but intense suffering from different forms of discrimination and sexual harassment in the third person. Later on in the novel, it transpires that this narrative choice might also be of the protagonist's own making, as she tries

> to consider events as if they're happening to someone else. Some other entity. There's the thinking, rationalizing I (me). And the doing, the

1 In combination with the text's criticism of stratified social reproduction in times of progressive neoliberalism, *Assembly*'s temporal setup as well as its condensation and subversion of some generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman* would make for an interesting case study when it comes to contemporary postcolonial one-day *Bildungsromane*.

> experiencing, her. I look at her kindly. From a distance. To protect myself, I detach. (Brown 2021, 41)

While the heterodiegetic narration at the beginning of the novel can be read as such an act of protective narrative detachment, at the moment of the protagonist's first appearance in *Assembly*, this narrative perspective fulfils two further functions. Firstly, this perspective demonstrates how her boss harasses and objectifies her: "He could see her at her desk from his office and regularly dialled her extension to comment on what he saw (and what he made of it): her hair (wild), her skin (exotic), her blouse (barely containing those breasts)" (Brown 2021, 1). Secondly, and although the protagonist still serves as the focaliser in these sections, her gendered designation as "she/her" in the heterodiegetic narration also indicates what role narrative perspective can play in creating a potential implication in this harassing and objectifying gaze.

Complex Implication between Neoliberal Storytelling, Structural Discrimination, and Subjectivation

Throughout the text, this nexus between narration and implication is further explicated; it becomes particularly explicit in the text's exploration of neoliberal storytelling. According to Sujatha Fernandes, neoliberal storytelling is often based on reductionist and relatable portrayals of individuals and their stories of empowerment. While models of entrepreneurial self-making are thus fostered in neoliberal storytelling (Fernandes 2017, 3), historical and systemic contexts are mostly neglected. Because of this individualising take (Fernandes 2017, 6), neoliberal storytelling can be said to promote the upward social mobility of the few at the expense of solidarity and collective claims among the many. By co-opting individual narratives of people from diverse backgrounds, neoliberal storytelling moreover weaves these narratives into "a polyvocal fabric that insulates the master narrative from critique" (Fernandes 2017, 6). In short, neoliberal storytelling furthers meritocratic myths while neglecting structural inequality, and it refracts claims for redistribution into claims for recognition.

In Brown's text, the reductionist tendencies of neoliberal storytelling are addressed from the beginning. Not only does the novel's first part open with an act of neoliberal storytelling, but the text further underlines this storytelling by a change from hetero- to autodiegetic narration. The new narrative "I" of the autodiegetic narrator thus tellingly makes her first appearance when the protagonist gives a talk at a school as part of the diversity management of her firm:

> It's a story. There are challenges. There's hard work, pulling up laces, rolling up shirtsleeves, and forcing yourself. Up. Overcoming, transcending, et cetera. You've heard it before. It's not my life, but it's illuminated two metres tall behind me and I'm speaking it into the soft, malleable faces tilted forwards on uniformed shoulders. (Brown 2021, 9)

As the last sentence in this quotation illustrates, the autodiegetic narrator is fully aware of the structural implications of diversity management and social reproduction, and she critically reflects on what delivering such talks on a regular basis means for her own implicated position: "It's an expectation of the job. The diversity must be seen. How many women and girls have I lied to?" (Brown 2021, 10; see also 30, 55). Throughout the novel, the narrator further explicates this connection between neoliberal storytelling and implication, and she criticises and defies it. In particular, the narrator directly reiterates the individualising tendencies which her boyfriend prefers when writing political speeches, and explicitly addresses issues of implication (called "complicity" here; see also 23) which arise in the context of narrativising events in a way that de-emphasises systemic problems:

> Sugarcoat the rhetoric, embed the politics within a story; make it relatable, personal. Honest, he says. Shape my truth into a narrative arc—
>
> Alright, I try it. I tell a story. But he demands more. He wants to know who did what, specifically, and to whom. How did it feel? (Give him visceral physicality.) Who is to blame? (A single, flawed individual. Not a system or society or the complicity of an undistinguished majority in maintaining the status quo …) And what does it teach us? How will our heroine transcend her victimhood? (Brown 2021, 88)

As the following section will show, *Assembly* further differentiates the portrayal of narrative implication and storytelling by also including the narrator's metafictional reflections on her own implication. Thus, the narrator's consideration of how—now that she has amassed enough social capital—she could also use her voice to counter instead of engage in implicated storytelling (Brown 2021, 87) is complemented by her metafictional reflections on the impossibility of defying narrative implication. While she, for instance, concedes that her "only tool of expression is the language of this place. Its bias and assumptions permeate all reason I could construct from it" (Brown 2021, 89), she still engages in another reflection on the use of language which partly deconstructs the very language used. To this end, the novel employs "Fig 5," one of its insertions offset in a different

layout, to juxtapose "white" and "black" (Brown 2021, 90–1). By graphically interlocking the connotations and associations of these two words instead of presenting them in two completely separate columns, the text highlights their dichotomous use while at the same time questioning and blurring their seemingly unambiguous positions.

Although the narrator's pessimistic metafictional appraisal and its programmatic tone call into question the possibility of reducing narrative implication, on the diegetic level the narrator still tries to create a story which challenges its own implication. In contrast to the talks which the narrator delivers at schools, the story she tells in *Assembly* is not reductionist, as it does not take for granted that "our heroine [will] transcend her victimhood" (Brown 2021, 88). Instead of an easily relatable story, the narrator—an unnamed as well as complexly implicated subject—emplots a more complicated narrative. This narrative partially defies the teleology of neoliberal storytelling while at the same time acknowledging the implication of a "[w]rong life [which] cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 2005 [1951], § 18). The narrator thus states that "to carry on, now that I have a choice, is to choose complicity. Surviving makes me a participant in their narrative. Succeed or fail, my existence only reinforces this construct. I reject it. I reject these options. I reject this life" (Brown 2021, 96). By highlighting the structural discrimination which has contributed to the narrator's decision to "reject this life," *Assembly* undermines reductionist portrayals of empowerment which end in the success of the individual against all systemic odds; at the same time, the novel depicts the extreme violence which underlies the narrator's complex processes of subjectivation not to justify the protagonist's decision, but to foreground the tragic nature of a racialised individual's decision to reject survival.

In order to negotiate this combination of discrimination and subjectivation, *Assembly* features a complexly implicated protagonist who defies easy categorisation. While empathy and identification with this complexly implicated protagonist highlight chances of solidarity which cross dividing lines, the novel at the same time portrays the protagonist as an individual with a complex subject position and as someone who, in the critical situation in which she finds herself, makes decisions which might not easily invite empathy or identification (for instance, despite being in a relationship with him, the narrator tells her boyfriend her biopsy came back clear when it did not; Brown 2021, 16). This differentiated way of portraying the protagonist can evoke feelings which are more complex than pity, idiopathic identification or idiopathic empathy in a wide range of readers. In fact, if idiopathic forms of identification or empathy are "essentially self-referential, grounded on shared reality" (Bennett 2003, 134), *Assembly*'s way of portraying the protagonist potentially transcends the "logic of

identification" (Rothberg 2019, 3) of many differently positioned readers; instead, the novel invites "long-distance solidarity—that is, solidarity premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification" (Rothberg 2019, 12). By thus de-emphasising the logics of identification, the novel can be read as re-centring both the risks and potentials of storytelling for creating solidarity under conditions of linguistic and narrative implication and their histories and systems of forceful attribution.

In addition to raising questions about how different conceptions of solidarity interact with linguistic and narrative implication, *Assembly* further expands the grammars of "victimhood," "complicity," and "beneficiaries" (Brown 2021, 86) by unclosing not just their synchronic manifestation but their diachronic dimension as well. In this way, the novel further complicates its negotiation of implication, showing that "[f]orms of violence and inequality premised on racial hierarchy take shape in small-scale encounters and large-scale structures [and that they are] instantiated repetitively in the present yet burdened with active historical resonances" (Rothberg 2019, 2). As the example below illustrates, the text does so by assembling different vignettes into juxtapositions which underline the interrelationships between contemporary forms of injustice and inequality and their long histories. Although the narrator indicates that she feels at a loss as to how to "examine the legacy of colonization when the basic facts of its construction are disputed in the minds of its beneficiaries" (Brown 2021, 86), the following scene demonstrates the great effectiveness of presenting complex forms of implication by means of literary juxtaposition:

> Fig 6.
>
> @hmtreasury:
>
> Here's today's surprising #FridayFact. Millions of you helped end the slave trade through your taxes.
>
> (Her Majesty's Treasury's Twitter account accompanies this cutesy misrepresentation of history with an illustration depicting people, enslaved—including a mother, baby strapped to her back and chain heavy around her neck. The caption boasts of Britain's generosity in *buying freedom for all slaves in the empire.* Compensating slave-owners for property lost. Did you know?)
>
> It is true that his [her boyfriend's] family's wealth today was funded in part by that bought freedom; the loan my taxes paid off? Yes. And he is an individual and I am an individual and neither of us were there, were responsible for the actions of our historical selves? Yes. Yet, he lives off the capital returns, while I work to pay off the interest? (Brown 2021, 92–3; emphasis in original)

Raising the historical issue of slavery in the frame of the protagonist's own confrontation with death, this juxtaposition serves as a reminder of the repercussions of slavery in "the ongoing production of lives lived in intimate relation to premature death (whether civil, social, or literal)" (Best and Hartman 2005, 13; see also Rothberg 2019, 65). By illustrating the tenuous but pertinent connections between slavery, misrepresentation, and contemporary inequality in this way, the text moreover manages to convey a complex image of racial capitalism which counters the misrepresentation of the Treasury's tweet in a similarly condensed form, while also negotiating a further example of the nexus between narration and implication.

Contested Solidarities and the Question of the "We"

This nexus between narration and implication—as well as its role in assembling selfhood or creating solidarity—is further highlighted through the protagonist's use of the collective "we" in her narration. Whereas she compares the speech act of saying "we" in the relationship with her boyfriend to "necessary aspect[s] of life," such as "work" or "exercise" (Brown 2021, 20), the narrator uses the first-person plural to refer to racialised people with less hesitance. Tellingly, the text frames the "we" which the protagonist uses for her privileged boyfriend and herself with—albeit illusive—images of social production. In contrast, the collective pronoun used to refer to those who are racialised is first presented within a frame of death: the narrator introduces this "we" during one of her mother's phone calls, in which her mother would habitually tell her about people who died recently. The "punchline structure" which her mother employs to report these deaths bothers her daughter (Brown 2021, 15) and makes her reflect on the relation of narration and implication again. Nonetheless, the narrator still sees these reports as "[a]n exhaustive proof that we, whatever it was that bound us all together within the first-person plural, were not surviving" (Brown 2021, 15). Although the text thus modifies this collective "we," the use of personal deictics again directs attention to different forms of linguistic and narrative implication both on and beyond the diegetic level.

At the same time, by invoking this tentative "we," the text also explores the complex implication of historical fault lines and new forms of social fragmentation under racial capitalism and progressive neoliberalism. According to Nancy Fraser, progressive neoliberalism "celebrates 'diversity,' meritocracy, and 'emancipation' while dismantling social protections and

re-externalizing social reproduction. The effect is not only to abandon defenceless populations to capital's predations, but also to redefine emancipation in market terms" (Fraser 2022, 69). In this situation, in which "centuries of racialized stigma and violation meet capital's voracious need for subjects to exploit and expropriate, the result is intense insecurity and paranoia—hence, a desperate scramble for safety—and exacerbated racism" (Fraser 2022, 50). *Assembly* illustrates these complex connections between racial capitalism and progressive neoliberalism by juxtaposing vignettes which depict the anti-capitalist protests of presumably white protestors ("blonde dreadlocks," Brown 2021, 46) with allusions to Jeremy Corbyn's political stance and his privileged upbringing as well as with the narrator's own experiences of racism uttered by a panhandler and her concluding remark:

> I am what we've always been to the empire: pure, fucking profit. A natural resource to exploit and exploit, denigrate, and exploit. […] After the war, the empire sent again for her colonial subjects. Not soldiers, this time, but nurses to carry a wavering NHS on their backs. Enoch Powell himself sailed upon Barbados and implored us, come. And so we came and built and mended and nursed; cooked and cleaned. We paid taxes, paid extortionate rent to the few landlords who would take us. […] We were hated. […] Enoch, the once-intrepid recruiter, now warned of bloodied rivers if we didn't leave. (Brown 2021, 47–8)

Thus also historicising what is currently discursivised as the crisis of care, which underlies progressive neoliberalism and which is one of the reasons of widespread insecurity, this quotation illustrates how Britain, like other countries in the Global North, has attempted to fill the care gap with the help of not only workers from Eastern European countries but also racialised workers from the Global South (Fraser 2022, 70). Thereby, Britain has exploited and denigrated those migrant workers who came, and it has displaced the care gap "from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South" (Fraser 2022, 70). So, although the narrator does try to find a sense of belonging in the historical and contemporary "we," she presents this "we" as ruptured by exploitation (note the repetition of the word "exploit" in the quotation above), and she continually questions both the category itself and her place in it. In fact, by conceding that she knows Jamaica from stories only and that, to her cousins, she is the "English cousin" (Brown 2021, 49), she again indicates the complexity of narrative implication in a story in which she herself does not only show her struggles to assemble herself into a fractured self in line with the neoliberal demands of social reproduction in times of diversity management, but in which the novel itself assembles its different vignettes into a fractured picture of implicated narration.

The Implicated Plots of Neoliberal Diversity and Social Reproduction

From its beginning, *Assembly* reifies the implication(s) of narrative voice; the text does so in order to negotiate the narrator's individual experiences of discrimination in neoliberal structures of diversity management and social reproduction. Both on the level of content and structure, the novel explores how the entangled logics of diversity management and social reproduction pre-structure the protagonist's entire professional and personal life. While the novel strikingly illustrates how the narrator suffers because her professional and social ascent are continually belittled as tokens of diversity (see, for instance, Brown 2021, 30, 55, 84–5), the way in which the protagonist understands her relationship with her boyfriend even more drastically represents this intersection of social reproduction and a neoliberal notion of diversity:

> With him, I have become more tolerable to the Lous and Merricks of this world. His acceptance of me encourages theirs. His presence vouches for mine, assures them that I'm the right sort of diversity. In turn, I offer him a certain liberal credibility. Negate some of his old-money baggage. Assure his position left of centre. (Brown 2021, 67)

Structurally, the novel further emphasises this intersection by the fact that the protagonist's boyfriend proposes to her on the day of his parents' anniversary celebration—a wedding proposal which illustrates how the stratified and repetitive logics of social reproduction adapt themselves to the demands for neoliberal diversity. Although the protagonist has already met her boyfriend's parents several times, this is the first time that she is invited to their estate. As the narrator's friend Rach indicates, "'This weekend means big things […] Things she abstracted to diamond-ring emojis" (Brown 2021, 23). Challenging her friend's commodified way of framing social reproduction, the narrator questions these "things" and their link to social ascent: "I wasn't sure that I was ready for any things. I knew these were the things to want, the right things to reach for. But I felt sick of reaching, enduring. Of ascent" (Brown 2021, 23). When her boyfriend—who, like the other characters, remains unnamed and is only referred to by means of his social reproductive functions—quite literally proposes to get married ("Fuck it […] Let's get married" [Brown 2021, 99]), the narrator dents her boyfriend's belief in stratified social reproduction. Although she observes how, outwardly, "[e]verything's coming together" (Brown 2021, 100), she shakes both her boyfriend's and the readers' certainty by presenting an ending which is more open to death than to any form of

(re)production. Instead of giving her boyfriend "the assumed yes" (Brown 2021, 100) which would emblematise the marriage of neoliberal promises of diversity and social reproduction under progressive neoliberalism, the narrator just observes that he is "[s]uddenly, so uncertain" (Brown 2021, 100). Structurally, the novel mirrors this suspension by steering towards—although never fully reaching—the garden party organised to celebrate the anniversary of the narrator's boyfriend's parents.

At the same time, *Assembly* uses the telos and the setting of the garden party as a celebration of a highly stratified form of social reproduction to further explore the clashes in progressive neoliberalism alluded to earlier. While both the narrator's boyfriend and his father regard the social marriage of neoliberal diversity and social reproduction as progressive (""Meghan Markle? Now that's progress, that's modernization. Inspiring stuff."" Brown 2021, 64), the narrator attributes her boyfriend's mother's latently hostile behaviour towards her to the fact that the mother herself married into the family. Stating that "I was unsurprised to learn the titles and heritage properties were all on the father's side. There was an uncertainty beneath the mother's hostility that I almost identified with" (Brown 2021, 25), the narrator again alludes to how precarity and identity politics can be played off against each other in progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2002, 69). Thus, the narrator revisits how this may lead to clashes between the interests of "progressive 'new social movements,' opposed to hierarchies of gender, sex, 'race,' ethnicity, and religion" and the interests of "populations seeking to defend established lifeworlds and (modest) privileges" (Fraser 2002, 69). In addition, she indicates how this situation erodes forms of solidarity which are not based on identification by stating how she "almost identified with" (Brown 2021, 25) the mother's animosity. Some of the fault lines are spelled out even more explicitly when the narrator meets her boyfriend's "political friends from across the spectrum. Conservatives who oo and ah and nod, telling me I'm just what this country is about. And so articulate! Frowning liberals who put it simply: my immoral career is counterproductive to my own community. Can I see that? My primary issue is *poverty*, not race" (Brown 2021, 86; emphasis in original). As it turns out, however, the many intersecting issues which the protagonist has to face cannot be reduced to one "primary issue" but are presented as intricately connected with the so-called crisis of care. In the novel, this finds expression in the fact that the narrator suffers from chronic stress and that she limits her social contacts mostly to her colleagues, her partner, and his family. By moreover interweaving its exploration of the implication of neoliberal diversity and social reproduction with the protagonist's cancer diagnosis, *Assembly* ultimately negotiates the crisis of care as a question of narrative implication.

(Not) Treating Cancer as a Metaphor

Given that *Assembly* entangles its criticism of racial capitalism and the crisis of care with references to its narrator's illness, the protagonist's breast cancer might be interpreted as a metaphor of the crisis of care in what Nancy Fraser calls "cannibal capitalism" (Fraser 2022). As the use of cancer as a metaphor for social, political, and economic ills remains common in public discourse (Potts and Semino 2019), such a metaphorical reading of cancer would not be an exception. In such a reading, the protagonist's breast cancer would gain an additional layer of meaning as a metaphor of how "capitalism's drive to unlimited accumulation leads it to cannibalize the very social-reproductive activities on which it relies" (Fraser 2022, 54). Interpreting the protagonist's disease in this way would tie in with those two characteristics of cancer which most prominently inform uses of cancer as a common metaphor for unrestrained capitalist growth (Potts and Semino 2019, 90; see also McMurtry 2013; Kilgore 2016). Firstly, cancer cells "are cells that have shed the mechanism which 'restrains' growth" (Sontag 1991, 64). The resulting unregulated proliferation of cancer cells, secondly, damages the very organism in which this proliferation takes place. In their linguistic study on the uses of cancer as a metaphor, Potts and Semino consequently state that this "is perhaps the best-known characteristic of cancer—that it involves an abnormal growth of cells in the body that damages the body itself" (2019, 88). In *Assembly*, the narrator's cancer is found in her breast, that is, in a body part which is mainly gendered female and associated with care. In view of how tightly the novel interweaves its criticism of capitalism, systemic racism, and the crisis of care with the protagonist's diagnosis, her breast cancer could be interpreted as raising awareness of the fact that in contemporary neoliberal orders, racialised populations continue to be exploited, not least as care-givers, and could moreover be read as a metaphorical warning not to neglect issues of social reproduction in analyses of capitalism (Fraser 2022, 53–4).

As the following quotation demonstrates, *Assembly* features individual scenes which—by highlighting the interconnections between systemic racism and cancer—seem to invite metaphorical interpretations of cancer. In fact, in order to depict these interconnections in this quotation, the novel no longer relies on mere juxtaposition. Instead, in what can be read as an illustration of the complex implication of contemporary racialised violence and cancer, the text actually blends the narrator's diagnosis with a scene in which Lou, the narrator's colleague, simultaneously consumes his lunch and the video of Philando Castile's death:

> The doctor said I didn't understand—
>
> I recall Lou, eating lunch at his desk while Philando Castile's death played out between paragraphs on this screen. […] The doctor said I didn't understand, that I didn't know the pain of it; of cancer left untreated. I'd wish I'd acted sooner, she said. Pain, I repeat. Malignant intent. Assimilation—radiation, rays. Flesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalizing eyes. Video and burrito, finished. Lou's sticky hand cupped the mouse and clicked away. (Brown 2021, 83)

In this dense and elliptical quotation, several elements, and most notably the "[f]lesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalizing eyes," simultaneously refer to the narrator's assessment of cancer treatment, to her colleague's consumption of his burrito, to the news item, and to the ravaging gaze and violence of racialisation. While the text thus conjoins these issues, it additionally furthers metaphorical readings of implication by also featuring images such as the "sticky hand" of an implicated subject who has just consumed racial violence. As the novel moreover has the protagonist self-characterise as someone who has never had the privilege to learn to listen to her needs (Brown 2021, 40) and has instead assimilated to the utmost degree (Brown 2021, 46, 95), such a metaphorical reading of her cancer seems to gain even more traction. In analogy to how "[i]n cancer, […] cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the nonyou" (Sontag 1991, 68), the young woman's cancer might consequently be read as the complete capitalist cannibalising of the protagonist.

In the logic of such a metaphorical reading, the protagonist's decision not to undergo treatment might be interpreted as an act of anti-capitalist and anti-racist resistance. However, it is at this moment that the novel also strongly highlights very material concerns which counter the potentially metaphorical readings outlined this far. For instance, by insisting that "*Nothing* is a choice. … Nothing *is* a choice. … Nothing is a *choice*" (Brown 2021, 44–5; emphasis in original), the narrator not only confronts neoliberal grammars of choice with the stratified social reality of the many, but—now that she has access to private health care—also decides against continuing to serve as profit, this time as a cancer patient in a neoliberal health care system.[2] Moreover, by deciding against a treatment which might sustain her as a resource for cannibal capitalism, she also decides to no longer serve as an avatar of diversity, not to become the potential future wife of her boyfriend, and to thereby no longer engage in socially reproducing the system in which she feels reduced to dehumanised objecthood:

2 For an important intertext of *Assembly*'s exploration of breast cancer in racial capitalism, see Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980).

> I'm not sure I understood that I could stop, before this. That there was any alternative to survivable. But in my metastasis, I find possibility. I must engage the question seriously: why live? Why subject myself further to their reductive gaze? To this *crushing objecthood*. Why endure my own dehumanization? (Brown 2021, 95; emphasis in original)

Even if the narrator's being diagnosed with breast cancer—a disease which might reduce her ability to have biological children herself—might thus, at first glance, be read as metaphorically representing the crisis of care in cannibal capitalism (Fraser 2022), the novel as a whole still embeds the representation of the diagnosis in the very material conditions of the protagonist's life, especially regarding the stratification of life chances. In particular, *Assembly* negotiates the dimension of death in the protagonist's life with an immediacy which belies metaphorical readings. If the protagonist still has to endure the daily social deaths of discrimination despite having worked herself into the "one per cent" (Brown 2021, 43), the dimension of death in *Assembly* assumes a more literal meaning not only because of the protagonist's diagnosis but also because the novel alludes to the connection between unequal life chances and encounters with premature death from the beginning. While the autodiegetic narrator ponders how her boyfriend grew up privileged and in a safe and encouraging environment in the countryside (Brown 2021, 77), the rare mentions of the narrator's own past are often framed by death: "For much of my own childhood, I lived next to a cemetery. Through the front windows, I'd watch funeral processions snake along the road: black horses followed by black hearses followed by regular cars in different colours" (Brown 2021, 11). The narrator moreover underscores the complex historical implication of death and stratified social reproduction by stating that despite "[g]enerations of sacrifice; hard work and harder living. So much suffered, so much forfeited, so much—for this opportunity. For my life," she is "ready to slow [her] arms. Stop kicking. Breathe the water in" (Brown 2021, 13). In this instance, the narrator thus uses a metaphor which, reminiscent of the all too literal "I can't breathe" uttered by victims of contemporary racialised police violence, illustrates how the long histories of racial capitalism, in which great numbers of enslaved people drowned at sea during the transatlantic trade, folds into the racialised presence of differential life chances.

It is thus against a wider backdrop of death and differential life chances that the narrator explores contemporary health disparities. In order to illustrate these disparities, the narrator alludes to the differential treatment of cancer patients according to their health insurance. For instance, the narrator mentions how her friendship with her privileged white colleague Rach began when her colleague's "father recovered from cancer

and my grandmother died of it" (Brown 2021, 20). While this mention of Rach's father surviving and the protagonist's grandmother dying of cancer cannot, of course, be interpreted as monocausal, the narrator still contextualises it in a way which casts doubt on her friend Rach's statement that "[v]ictimhood is a choice" (Brown 2021, 21). Using close juxtaposition, the narrator not only showcases her friend's unawareness of privilege but further underlines health disparities by contrasting the bad memories of public hospitals where she must have visited her grandmother with her own experiences at the oncologist: "But now, for me, it's private rooms. Fresh-cut flowers and espresso" (Brown 2021, 39).

In general, then, the novel's joint negotiation of cancer and the crisis of care in cannibal capitalism might seem to invite a metaphorical reading of cancer. This reading would imply that, as an individual, the narrator cannot overcome the systemic cancer of racial capitalism and that—in analogy to her actual metastases—she as an implicated subject cannot prevent it from metastasising within her: "Metastasis: it spreads through the blood to other organs, growing uncontrollably, overwhelming the body" (Brown 2021, 77). Especially because the novel ends after the protagonist's diagnosis, so that it does not depict her suffering from her literal cancer while it shows her suffering from intersectional discrimination under racial capitalism, such a metaphorical reading of cancer might stand to reason.

Be that as it may, the text eventually defies a unified metaphorical reading in which the story of an individual is used to illustrate societal wrongs, not least because *Assembly* challenges the individualising tendencies of neoliberal storytelling from the beginning. Although the novel highlights the socially stratified differences in life chances, it also depicts the narrator's boyfriend as suffering from depression and fears of failure (Brown 2021, 18–9, 25, 65), so that *Assembly* would have to be read as questioning more generally whether, under cannibal capitalism, anyone can thrive. Most importantly, however, the protagonist's cancer cannot be reduced to a metaphor because the autodiegetic narrator herself does not consider her cancer as a capitalist infiltration. In fact, she sees the cancer as a part of herself which—after all that she has already left behind in the process of assimilation—would be next to be removed, this time surgically. Even if the narrator's assessment of her disease could still be attributed to her internalised self-depreciation (Brown 2021, 46), her own scepticism towards such metaphorical readings is still prominently spelled out: the narrator continually challenges the use of "as-yet-metaphoric planes" in reductionist storytelling, and she admits that she is "lost both literally and in the larger, abstract sense of this narrative" (Brown 2021, 84). As the text continually directs attention to the relationship between narration and

implication in this way, the question of how to read the novel's implicated plots of social reproduction, neoliberal diversity, the crisis of care, and the protagonist's cancer might thus not consist of mapping a metaphorical reading onto the disease. Instead, the text's ongoing reflection on the impossibility of transcending narrative implication might serve as an invitation to contextualise the implications of metaphorical readings of disease in times of limitless self-optimisation. In this regard, it is particularly worth noting that it is not only the protagonist's subjectivation of racism but also the imperative of self-optimisation and able-bodiedness which exclude her again from the neoliberal promises of diversity at the very moment she is diagnosed with cancer.

In general, then, although the criticism of financial capitalism which *Assembly* expresses might seem to invite metaphorical readings of cancer, the novel's ongoing negotiation of, and meta-reflections on, narrative implication still call for a more differentiated reading which does not fold the illness of an individual into a metaphor of societal wrongs. Not least because—as Potts and Semino show—contemporary language use still reflects cancer in a "slightly outdated" way which does not consider medical advances (2019, 93), Susan Sontag's warning against using cancer as a metaphor should consequently be heeded. If Sontag argues that the metaphorical use of cancer is insensitive to people suffering from cancer and that it could also serve as a means to legitimise extraordinary measures such as violence and war due to its historic deployment in political and military discourse (1991, 84–5), *Assembly* complements such critiques. It does so by highlighting the impossibility of altogether foregoing the individualising tendencies of neoliberal storytelling while at the same time defying its logics of narrative unity and closure. Instead, through its fragmented politics of form, the novel directs attention to how differential life chances, health disparities, and their very real consequences have become an even more stratified social reality, and not a mere metaphor, in times of progressive neoliberalism.

Conclusion

What makes Natasha Brown's debut novel such an interesting text when it comes to analysing contested solidarities in anglophone literatures is that it negotiates the neoliberal implication of social reproduction and diversity management not just by means of the figuration of its complexly implicated protagonist, but by a poetics which constantly questions its own implication. If the complex subject position of the novel's protagonist—who has

worked herself into the one per cent and serves as an avatar for diversity management while at the same time continually experiencing sexualised and racialised discrimination—foregoes the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators and instead fosters "long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 12), the text's juxtaposition of its different vignettes underlines the complex interplay between diachronic and synchronic forms of implication. In sum, *Assembly* not only decries progressive neoliberalism on the level of content but intensifies this critique by adopting a fragmented form which defies simplifying promises of narrative unity and closure in times of decreasing solidarity. On the level of content, the text consequently depicts the ongoing racial discrimination in a progressive neoliberalism which embraces diversity as long as it serves as a—healthy—resource which can be assimilated into socially reproducing the dominant social order (Fraser 2022). On the level of form, the text complements this critique by challenging the implicated poetics of neoliberal storytelling, diversity management, and social reproduction by means of a narrative tension which—in steering towards death and in resisting easy defusing—is not only reminiscent of the indissoluble tension of Fanon's famous imperfect internal rhyme "yes a DEATH" but also illustrates that, for the complexly implicated protagonist, it becomes even more impossible to live wrong life rightly.

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