

Straight Innocence

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On a sunny Monday afternoon I met with P. to visit the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for the first time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.[1] A month prior, the overview exhibition of Bruce Nauman, produced in collaboration with the Tate Modern, had opened, and we were curious to visit it. Nauman's work, in particular *Seven Figures* (1985), which is in the Stedelijk's collection, had been formative in my youth as I discovered my own queerness. I kept a postcard – most likely purloined from the museum shop – hidden in a stack of erotic materials at the bottom of a drawer. *Seven Figures* is also the main work featured on the exhibition catalog[2] and the museum website: “[Nauman's] interest in ambiguity and shades of meaning relates to everyday human experience, where certainty is not always guaranteed.”[3]

The exhibition opened with a work on the threshold, *Washing Hands Abnormal* (1996) (fig. 1), a two-channel video of Bruce Nauman washing his hands. Acquired in 2001, back then “one of the most expensive acquisitions of contemporary art by the Stedelijk in recent years,”[4] the work is now given a prominent position outside the entrance to the exhibition. Included by means of its exclusion, the two-channel video work spatially enacts the “ambiguity” the curators promised us. The accompanying text, by contrast, was explicit about their framing of the exhibition:

The World Health Organization's advice on handwashing is that it should go on for as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. [...] Although the act of handwashing has acquired new meaning during the coronavirus pandemic, the thoroughness bordering on obsession with which Nauman goes about the ritual lends the work a psychological dimension.[5]

This situating of Nauman's work in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic invoked that *other* health crisis during which much of Nauman's work was created, namely the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which since the 1980s has affected and extinguished millions of lives. Yet, curiously, the relations between both health crises, which appeared to be so obvious considering both the subject matter and temporality of Nauman's work, remained, to our great surprise and increasing bewilderment as we walked through the exhibition rooms, fully unexplored. It seemed as if the curatorial drive behind the exhibition was to tease a suggestion of a deeper relation between pandemic times and Nauman's work, but then to withhold any further



Fig. 1. Bruce Nauman, *Washing Hands Abnormal*, 1996. © 2021 Bruce Nauman / Stedelijk Museum

elaboration, to deemphasize the queer nature of many of Nauman's works – in fact, to actively *un queer* them by means of a specific curatorial discourse.

The first work with a clearly queer subtext already appeared in room 2, *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968), filmed in Nauman's studio in the Mission District in San Francisco,[6] the epicenter of US gay culture and ground zero for the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The video showed Nauman walking along a square taped onto the floor, excessively swinging his hips as he flowed in and out of the *contrapposto* pose well known from classical sculpture. Yet his movements could just as easily be read as a reference to ballroom culture, as already noticed by Julia Bryan-Wilson, whose reading of Nauman's work I will return to below.[7] Considering the ubiquity and popularity of shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, this second reading is actually in our present cultural context much more obvious than the first.

From Nauman on his own formalist catwalk we moved to the next room in which *Going Around the Corner Piece with Live and Taped Monitors* (1970), two monitors and a camera mounted on a dividing wall, invited the visitors to take the stage themselves, many of whom indeed "started their engines." After a dark passage through the *Clown Torture* videos (1987), we ran into the neon work *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* (1972), which, again, inside the framing of the exhibition within the context of a pandemic, openly invited a reading relating to the modes of viral transmission and the moral panics often accompanying health crises (against gays in the case of HIV/AIDS, against Asians in the case of COVID-19). Yet the wall text merely referred to the "both ominous and raunchy play of words." How is "run from fear" "ominous"? How is "fun from rear" "raunchy"?

P. and I were beckoned by the multicolored neon piece in the next room, situated more or less at the midpoint of the exhibition, *Seven Figures* (fig. 2). I looked intently at the work, which hung at a lower level than when I had seen it for the first time right after its acquisition in 1995.[8] I read the wall text:

The alternating flicker of colored neon and the provocative movements of the seven figures make it difficult for the viewer to avert their eyes. In endless repetition, sexual acts are performed so mechanically and free of eroticism that the effect is at once ridiculous and oppressive. Nauman's neon installations [...] often feature some form of basic interaction, such as shaking hands, fighting, or copulating.[9]

What the wall text attempted here was again the moralizing gesture encountered in the previous room: here the work was not "raunchy" but rather "ridiculous" and "oppressive." This was a description that ensured that the cis-het viewer could look upon the work with enough critical distance, "free of eroticism," the machinations of curatorial textual production turning the white cube into a safe space for the "everyday human experience," i.e. white male heteronormativity.

As we walked out of the room, we continued to wonder about that medical and most sterile of words, *copulating*. On the threshold, I turned around for a last time, looking at the



Fig. 2. Bruce Nauman, *Seven Figures*, 1985. © 2021 Bruce Nauman / Pictoright Amsterdam / Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

work from an angle as the neon figures incessantly switched on and off. "Did you notice that?" I asked P. "What?" "That there are actually two women in that neon work. Both the figure on the far left, and the second figure from the right appear to have breasts."^[10] For more than twenty years I thought they were all men. For twenty years I *imagined* they were all men. I wondered how many other visitors saw only men.

Trying to recalibrate myself after this disorienting realization,^[11] I continued with P. through the exhibition. In the video work *Pursuit (Truth)* (1975), taking up the thematics from *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear*, we noticed the close-up shots on crotches and asses, with a man's ass crack subtly fading into a woman's crotch. In the wall text of the large neon work *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984), we again read a reference to pandemics: "Although the title's work can be read as a literal description of the hundred phrases, it also suggests a statistic of individual reduced to a round number and reported to audiences who have become anaesthetized to the scale of wars, famines, or global pandemics, and number by the deluge of unrelenting news coverage."^[12] For the remainder of the exhibition, my over-reading went into high gear. I silently called upon the curators and their framing to *Get out of My Mind, Get out of This Room* (1968); in my head I screamed "pay attention motherfuckers" (*Pay Attention*, 1973). I was paying attention. Was I paying *too much* attention?

And then, the *Hanged Man* (1985), a neon stick-figure with a noose around his neck and a giant hard-on. This was a work, produced when already more than 400,000 people in the US had contracted HIV/AIDS and thousands had died, whose reference to the pandemic – *we thought* – could not be more explicit. Yet the wall text dryly told us that "by adding genitalia" to a neon representing a children's game, Nauman "entwines sex and death."^[13] Again that medical register: *genitalia*. The closing work, the sculpture *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974), somehow encapsulated our entire experience of the exhibition. Our queer, colored bodies, moving in the tight space between the double cage of interpretation, between the outward pressure of the work and the inward pressure of curatorial practice with barely any breathing room in between. But in one of its corners, on one of the metal ledges of the frame, I noticed a little black bolt (fig. 3). There was no obvious place it could have fallen from, all other bolts in its vicinity being fixed. Maybe it was missing from somewhere else, weakening the integrity of the cage. Something was screwed up.

The wall texts are not the only textual elements doing the heavy curatorial lifting. The descriptions in the Tate/Stedelijk exhibition catalog often exceed the wall texts in terms of their discursive violence. With *Hanged Man*, the wall text "entwines sex and death," while the exhibition catalog elaborates that the "presence [of genitalia] in this neon sign adds an erotic dimension in which sex and death are *unavoidably* intertwined."^[14] While the wall text of *Seven Figures* refers to the figures as "free of eroticism," "ridiculous," and "oppressive," the catalog describes the work as a "*distinctly unromantic* union, their repetitive and



Fig. 3. A loose bolt in Bruce Nauman's, *Double Steel Cage Piece*, 1974, Collectie Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo: by the author.

mechanical motions are presented as a flashing sequence [...]. The alternative titles *Porno Chain* and *Neon Porno Chain* confirm the *loveless* nature of this *orgiastic* gathering.”[15] Note here the internal contradiction: *Hanged Man* has an "erotic dimension" while *Seven Figures* is "free of eroticism," presumably for precisely the same reasons. And whereas the wall text for *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* merely refers to the "both ominous and raunchy play of words," the exhibition catalog goes a step further: "Though Nauman has not revealed the work's exact meaning, the implication of the pleasures of anal sex and its juxtaposition here with terror is *troubling* and, within the satisfying composition of this artwork, at the same time *visually pleasing*.”[16] What is more troubling, however, is the ease with which the authors slide from the "troubling juxtaposition" of "anal sex" and "terror" to its estheticized, "satisfying," and "visually pleasing" representation, in a rhetorical move that could be read as a metonym for the entire exhibition, which glosses over an initially bold juxtaposition of a global health crisis with a queer artistic oeuvre by analgesic forms of textuality.

A cursory review of the extant literature on Nauman's work,[17] in particular his neons from the mid-1980s, shows that much of the descriptive language found in the texts surrounding the Stedelijk exhibition is actually germane to the critical tradition through which his work is generally analyzed. In his biographical sketch of Nauman, Calvin Tomkins refers to the "scatological nastiness"[18] of the works featuring "group sex, masturbation, aggressive insults, and death by hanging.”[19] In her MPhil thesis on Nauman's neons, Laurie Bell describes *Seven Figures* as a work "filled with anger and degradation. Eroticism is frustrated and frozen [...]. Love and lust are smothered.”[20] According to Gregory Volk, *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear*'s "fun from rear" "has an air of creepy derangement,”[21] while Johanna Drucker describes it as "perversely suggestive”[22] and Kristina Davis as "sexually aggressive.”[23] And whereas Joseph D. Ketner II considers the same work to be a "humorous observation, with sexual overtones, on the instinct to flee rather than fight,”[24] he becomes more explicit later: "Sex has always been the dominant subject of the figurative neon [...]. These neons are far removed from a sensual display of sexuality. Rather, the artist presents sex as a self-indulgent activity bordering on the absurd by rapidly repeating actions like masturbation ad nauseam. Nauman links sex with cruelty and the abuse of power [...].”[25] Yet in all this descriptive violence, a crucial aspect of these neons remains unseen, namely that none of Nauman's neon male figures wear a condom and thus are depicted as engaged in unprotected sex.

Juxtaposition with queer artists is another way to approach Nauman's neons, albeit again without explicitly addressing the queerness of the works themselves. Jean-Charles Masséra refers to Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* in his discussion of *Seven Figures*, stating "The sadist relation is nothing but the commercialization of the body, its reduction to a thing.”[26] Annalisa Rimmaudo, placing Nauman alongside Francis Bacon, speaks of how "sex and death are often connected in the works of both artists,”[27] a connection

echoed by the exhibition catalog: “unavoidably intertwined.” Nevertheless, such bold statements and parallels are hardly ever theoretically buttressed. One of the few counterexamples is Melanie Franke, who writes that “in the 1980s several neon works were realized, which represented sexuality in a destructive, rather than in an erotic manner,”^[28] relating these works directly to Freud’s death drive and “narcissistic traits of sexuality” without, however, much further elaboration.^[29] Philip Larratt-Smith justifiably wonders “how is it that critical discourse surrounding a body of work whose central themes are human nature, the mind-body split, language, sex, death, and aggression, has repressed its obvious psychoanalytic and psychological implications?”^[30] but then basically fails to come up with an answer.

Within this bleak landscape of contemporary mainstream Nauman scholarship, the beginning of such an answer is only found in Julia Bryan-Wilson’s 2019 article “Bruce Nauman: Queer Homophobia.” In this article, she first teases out the inherent queerness of Nauman’s neons, observing about *Seven Figures* that “it is difficult in places to distinguish which organ belongs to which outline, rendering the bodies unstable as sexually fixed or discrete units.”^[31] Bryan-Wilson continues: “In these neons Nauman’s indeterminacy, even destabilisation, around genitalia, body parts and their assigned social meaning regarding sex, gender and sexuality, suggests a certain queerness.”^[32] Based on these observations, Bryan-Wilson draws the necessary conclusion that his work ought to be situated squarely within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, a relation which “in the canon of literature on Nauman” is otherwise “rarely made”^[33]:

It matters, profoundly, that the artist’s neon-based delve into the human shape – overwhelmingly marked as male, in which sex is irrevocably associated with morbidity – occurred in 1985. 1985 was a watershed moment for both HIV/AIDS awareness and fear of the disease – it was the year that the American President Ronald Reagan first publicly uttered the word ‘AIDS’, the year that Rock Hudson died of AIDS-related causes and the year that the haemophiliac teenager Ryan White was denied entrance to his middle school based on the ignorant belief that his presence would be a threat to other students.^[34]

This matters “profoundly” not only because Nauman scholarship has repressed this all-important context,^[35] but also because Nauman’s work itself appears to have an incongruous relation with this context. She thus interprets *Run from Fear/Fun from Rear* as paradigmatic for what she calls Nauman’s “queer homophobia,” “an unsettled oscillation between possibly sympathetic embodiment and mocking disavowal that cannot be resolved.”^[36]

One may justifiably wonder whether Bryan-Wilson doesn’t let Nauman off the hook too easily with this diagnosis of unresolvable disavowal. The fundamental ambiguity that she finds to be operational in Nauman’s work by qualifying it as “queer homophobia” allows her to take Nauman’s own sexual orientation out of the equation: “Just as biography is not relevant to arguments about Nauman’s queerness (he is not gay, but the work can be read queerly), the artist’s

personal feelings about homosexuality are not the point."^[37] Well, maybe they are. Because how should we look upon an artist whose work extensively features unprotected homosexual intercourse produced at the height of global health crisis that linked "sex" and "death" in profound and traumatizing ways? Should we not be profoundly disappointed, if not enraged, by an artist who has the following to say about *Hanged Man*: "With my version of the hanged man, first of all, I took away the part about being allowed to participate. [...] Then I added the bit about having an erection or ejaculation when you're hanged. I really don't know if it's a myth or not?"^[38] From which artist touching on such grave subjects would we nowadays accept such ironic, non-committal, tongue-in-cheek distancing? Indeed, one looks in vain for a repudiation of the more excessive interpretations of his work, which renders him actively complicit in the way his work is framed by mainstream art criticism.

If Nauman's position is, to say the least, questionable, the curators' and museum's approach of explicitly situating the exhibition within the context of the pandemic opens the floodgates to an interpretation that can hardly lay claim to an unresolvable "queer homophobia,"^[39] but should be qualified for what it is: simply homophobic. The supposed "ambiguity" of the work on display does not extend to the curatorial vocabulary with which Nauman's work is described, which harkens back directly to the way in which queers were (and still are) sexualized and pathologized during the HIV/AIDS pandemic and which therefore cannot be claimed as neutral or objective qualifications. We should perhaps here speak of a certain "straight innocence," a term I propose to calque from Gloria Wekker,^[40] which describes a paradox similar to "white innocence": the aggression that queerness elicits, as signaled by qualifications such as "ridiculous," "oppressive," "raunchy," "ominous," while it is at the same time denied and disavowed, not only by downplaying the more affective dimensions of queer sexuality – "free of eroticism," "loveless," "distinctly unromantic" – but also by ignoring the question of queerness altogether. This is an innocence of *not seeing*, of not seeing the way in which Nauman's work in fact *appropriates* queerness for its own artistic ends, ambiguous as they may be, and of not seeing that the curatorial contextualization within a global health crisis thoroughly disorients this appropriative gesture. It is also a *not seeing* that unfortunately still seems to be endemic to present-day museum practices, which continue to tailor to a viewer assumed to be a white cis-het male.

That another curatorial language is possible is shown on the same floor in *Tomorrow Is a Different Day: Collection 1980–Now*, the first part of the revamped basic collection exhibition of the Stedelijk. Suspended in a corner, in the final room of the exhibition, we find "Untitled" (A Love Meal)" (1992) (fig . 4), a string of light bulbs. Unlike Nauman's gaslit neons, they emit a constant, soothing, white-yellow light; they orient rather than disorient: "For this work, Felix Gonzalez-Torres used the vernacular of seaside bars and lantern-lit summer parties to commemorate his partner, who died from AIDS."



Fig. 4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957 - 1996)
"Untitled" (A Love Meal)

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- [1] The author would like to thank Michel Pierre Laffite for the conversations that gave birth to and nourished this text, Charl Landvreugd for welcoming it on the *Stedelijk Studies* platform, and Jonas Staal and Elvis Hoxhaj for their thoughtful input on an early draft.
 - [2] Andrea Lissoni and Nicholas Serota, eds., *Bruce Nauman* (London: Tate, 2020).
 - [3] “Bruce Nauman,” *Stedelijk Museum*, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/bruce-nauman-2>.
 - [4] Stedelijk Museum, press release, July 30, 2001.
 - [5] Wall text accompanying *Washing Hands Abnormal* (1996).
 - [6] Nauman moved there with his wife Judy Govan in 1966. See Calvin Tomkins, “Western Disturbances: Bruce Nauman,” in *The Lives of Artists: Collected Profiles*, vol. 5 (London: Phaidon, 2019), 185–202, at 189.
 - [7] “[T]he artist ambulates down a narrow hallway in a fashion that can be described as ‘mincing’, ‘swishing’ or ‘sashaying’.” Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman: Queer Homophobia,” *Burlington Contemporary*, May 2019, <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/bruce-nauman-queer-homophobia>.
 - [8] The acquisition caused an uproar in the media because of its perceived obscenity and the exorbitant price of 680,000 guilders. I saw the work for the first time in the “Zomeropstelling” that year.
 - [9] Wall text accompanying *Seven Figures* (1985).
 - [10] There are actually three women. I was not alone in my delusion: “Their sex cannot be fixed, yet because penises dominate this series, the overall impression is that Nauman’s 1985 neon series [including *Seven Figures*] is overwhelmingly about masculinity. Some viewers barely even detect the ‘women’, such as one critic who writes that the series consists of ‘sexually explicit figurative neons of naked men’.” Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
 - [11] I use “disorienting” here in the way that Sarah Ahmed discusses the term in the concluding chapter of *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): “Disorientation could be described here as the ‘becoming oblique’ of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle. [...] It seems first that it is the narrator who is disoriented, that ‘things’ have ‘slipped away’ because he is slipping away or ‘losing his mind’” (162).
 - [12] Wall text accompanying *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984). See also Lissoni and Nicholas (eds.), *Bruce Nauman*, 112.
 - [13] Wall text accompanying *Hanged Man* (1985).

- [14] Lissoni and Nicholas (eds.), *Bruce Nauman*, 112. Emphasis added.
- [15] Lissoni and Nicholas (eds.), *Bruce Nauman*, 112. Emphases added.
- [16] Lissoni and Nicholas (eds.), *Bruce Nauman*, 88. Emphases added.
- [17] The author thanks the library staff of the Stedelijk Museum, in particular Michiel Nijhoff, for their kind assistance in this research.
- [18] Tomkins, “Western Disturbances,” 196.
- [19] Tomkins, “Western Disturbances,” 195.
- [20] Laurie Bell, “Neonsense: Ways of Seeing Bruce Nauman’s Neon Artworks,” MPhil thesis, University of Glasgow, 2006, 57.
- [21] Gregory Volk, “Miles of Stare: The Bruce Nauman Carnival,” in *Elusive Signs: Bruce Nauman Works with Light*, ed. Joseph D. Ketner II (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2006), 59–77, at 67.
- [22] Johanna Drucker, “Procedures Performed and Executed,” in *Bruce Nauman: Make Me Think*, ed. Laurence Sillars (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2006), 32–42, at 39.
- [23] Kristina Davis, “Neon Light Fetish: Neon Art and Signification of Sex Work,” *Visual Culture & Gender* 12 (2016): 17–28, at 23.
- [24] Joseph D. Ketner II, “Elusive Signs,” in *Elusive Signs: Bruce Nauman Works with Light*, ed. Joseph D. Ketner II (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2006), 15–37, at 25.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 33.
- [26] “Le rapport sadique n’est autre que la mercantilisation du corps, se réduction à une chose.” Jean-Charles Masséra, “Danse avec la loi,” in *Bruce Nauman: Image/Texte 1966–1996* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), 20–33, at 21.
- [27] “Le sexe et la mort sont souvent liés dans les oeuvres des deux artistes.” Annalisa Rimmaudo, “La Condition humaine,” in *Francis Bacon face à face Bruce Nauman*, ed. Cécile Debray (Suresnes: Bernard Chauveau, 2017), 175–96, at 186.
- [28] “In den 1980er Jahren entstanden verschiedene Neonarbeiten, die Sexualität weniger auf erotische, sondern here auf destruktive Weise verbildlichen.” Melanie Franke, “Sex und Tod,” in *Bruce Nauman. Ein Lesebuch*, eds. Eugen Blume, Gabriele Knapstein, Catherine Nichols, and Sonja Claser (Berlin: DuMont, 2010), 259–61, at 259.
- [29] Franke, “Sex und Tod,” 260. The work of Lee Edelman would be indispensable for such an elaboration: “The ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order’s pulse, but *queerness*, by contrast, figures [...] the place of the social order’s death drive: a place [...] of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally, and hence a place from which liberal politics strives [...] to dissociate the queer.” Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3. With the advent of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in recent years the intimate relation between (unprotected) queer sex and death

forged during the first decades of the HIV/AIDS is unraveling in complex ways. See Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and more recently João Florêncio, *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures: The Ethics of Becoming-Pig* (London: Routledge, 2020).

- [30] Philip Larratt-Smith, *Bruce Nauman: Mindfuck* (London: Hauser & Wirth, 2013), 13.
- [31] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
- [32] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
- [33] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.” For example, Pamela Lee only establishes an indirect relation between “Nauman’s persona as ‘impotent father,’” “the artistic engagement with issues of the failed or abject body [...] directed toward questions of gender, sexuality, and AIDS.” Questions which again remain unresolved. Pamela M. Lee, “Pater Nauman,” *October* 74 (1995): 129–32, at 132.
- [34] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
- [35] Bell’s thesis is one of the few other works mentioning a direct link, without, however, providing a thorough elaboration: “The timing of the creation of these pieces by Nauman, the fact that all the sex neons were produced in 1985, coincides almost exactly with the real beginning of the AIDS crisis. That this general period of Nauman’s work is more highly politically charged than at any other time would also suggest a possible connection with this subject.” “Neonsense,” 85.
- [36] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
- [37] Bryan-Wilson, “Bruce Nauman.”
- [38] Joan Simon, “Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1988 (January 1987),” in Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention: Bruce Nauman’s Words. Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 315–38, at 328.
- [39] A footnote to the exhibition catalog description of *Run from Fear/Fun from Rear* indeed makes reference to the article, suggesting the curators were aware of it. Their reference is nonetheless somewhat misleading: “A perceived ambivalence towards homosexuality in Nauman’s practice is discussed in greater detail in...” Lissoni and Nicholas (eds.), *Bruce Nauman*, 88n5.
- [40] See Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).