Introduction

This book is concerned with the relations of subjects to governments that have been historically organized—inculcated, institutionalized, practiced, imagined—as the condition of citizenship. Like other studies of political culture on the Left, Neocitizenship is animated by the perception that we are living in the midst of a momentous reconfiguration of political order, which seems increasingly to represent either a new stage of capitalism or, perhaps, the beginning of its end—a moment marked, in Slavoj Žižek’s words, by the dissolution of that historic “marriage between capitalism and democracy” (quoted in Shin 2011). “Democracy” is, of course, a deeply fraught formation, and both the determination of a “demos,” or people, and the form of its rule, or sovereignty, have been the object of critique since the emergence in the late eighteenth century, of the modern nation-state. As Wahneema Lubiano acidly notes, “At the sound of the word ‘democracy’ . . . some people in different parts of the world, including parts of the United States and its sphere of influence, either reach for their wallets or their guns or duck and cover while they grab their loved ones” (1996, 70). But as Lubiano goes on to observe, it is also under the sign of “democracy” that we have opposed the conflation of the word with laissez-faire capitalism, imperialism, and other practices of economic and political domination. Democracy has been at once the object and the ground of left critique, in other words, as it has sought to indicate the gap, to foreground the undemocratic character of institutionalized democracy as scandal. From this vantage, the divorce of capitalism and democracy strips the scandalized citizen-subject of her defining political resource.

The policies and practices that have set the conditions of this divorce are generally studied under the heading of “neoliberalism,” and following Foucault, studies of neoliberalism have tended to dwell on the relation of economics to the micro-political—to the institutions
of the state and civil society as they produce and reproduce a new kind of self-optimizing, “entrepreneurial citizen-subject,” accommodated to life in the world of deregulated market freedoms. It is only more recently that critical thought on neoliberalism has addressed the macro-political, the gravitation of capitalist states to fundamentally oligarchical and autocratic forms of government, a gravitation that I describe in this book as the dismantling of the modern political field.

This is by no means to suggest that oligarchy and autocracy are not endemic to political modernity, but rather to note a shift in the direction of political life, marked by the erosion of democratic governance in the regions where it was, historically, most “developed” and secure. So it comes to pass that the political situations and crises we assigned, not so long ago, to the “backward” arenas of the neocolonial client state—electoral fraud, the buying of political office, routine violations of due process, invasive state surveillance and the suspension of civil rights—are now, increasingly, descriptive of life in the “West” and Western-style democracies of the world, and perhaps no place more consistently than in the United States.

On the one hand, the figure of the citizen has been a touchstone of much of the work on neoliberalism, as a name for the subject of a new governmental pedagogy, oriented away from the state as the provider of social security and social good, a “citizen” designed to look after herself through responsible self-management and optimization of life prospects, an “entrepreneurial citizen,” in other words, who forges her own conditions of self-realization. No doubt this concept of personhood is predominant in the institutions of the extended U.S. state and indexes the contours of the person that schools and universities, civic organizations, professional associations, and even social justice-oriented non-profits are increasingly designed to serve and to (re)produce. But why we denominate this subject a “citizen” remains unclear, since, after all, the aim of this neoliberal pedagogy is to dissolve the relation of subjects to governments, which has historically gone by this name. The institutions of modern democratic governance have always represented the interests of proprietors, to be sure, upholding equality of opportunity over equality of condition. But historically, the dedication to private property lives in tension with the structures of representative democracy and the requirement to serve—or at least appear to serve—the general
interest of the popular sovereign. Neoliberal pedagogy, however, operates to *disabuse* a people of the notion that the institutions of government maintain any obligation to their collective welfare, which is now asserted as a fully private, disaggregated good. What the concept of the “entrepreneurial citizen-subject” thus elides is the central preoccupation of my study: the question of whether and how subject populations might yet understand and express themselves as *citizens* to the non-representing bodies of government that have effectively cut themselves loose from any commitment to a general interest. To pose the question in this fashion necessarily shifts the conversation to the terrain of the macro-political and considerations of how de-democratization has de-commissioned, or at any rate reconfigured, those civic entities wrought by the democratizing impulses of political modernity: in particular, the national people and the rights-bearing citizen.

Yet in the scholarship that attends to such large-scale reconfigurations of political order, the citizen is generally presumed to persevere, doggedly adhering to her modern incarnation, even as the institutions of representative democracy spiral into crisis and dysfunction all around her. In the U.S. context, in particular, we continue to assign to the agency of “citizens” political actions *no longer directed* toward government institutions grown unresponsive and indifferent to popular political mandates and demands. Such popular mobilizations are increasingly structured on the model of self-organizing groups and coalitions addressing corporations and other private entities, so that the very form of the action indexes the retreat of governmental agencies (legislative, executive, or juridical) once meant to mediate the relation of elements within the polity, and thus signals the erosion of the terrain on which we have historically understood the “citizen” to operate. At the same time, it has become routine to chastise the “American people” for its supposed passivity in the face of autocratic U.S. government practices by attributing the (relative) absence of organized opposition to the prevalence of the “low information” voter and (or) the explicitly antidemocratic sensibilities of the electorate. By this logic, the electorate is culpable for its abandonment by the state, which is attributed to the people’s failure to assert its prerogatives. This line of argument similarly assigns an essential, transhistorical reality to the national body politic, as though it could and should survive the demise of the institutions
that gave it life. While this study builds on the scholarship as well as, in some measure, the journalism that has sought to lay out and assess the seismic shifts in both the institutional forms and the practices of the U.S. state, I approach “the citizen” and “the people” as historical forms of political being, so as to press a set of questions about the contemporary possibilities and prospects of political agency that have gone largely unexamined. If the state no longer operates on a claim to represent the general interest of a national people, how is the relation of governing institutions to a governed population transformed? Inasmuch as the consent of the governed seems no longer required, and indeed, no longer worth cultivating, where and in what fashion do we perform dissent? To what extent does opposition enacted on these terms repeat or recycle the practices of democratic citizenship and to what effects? Can we imagine forms of popular political mobilization that are not routed through the idea of a “people” asserting its sovereignty against the repressive agency of the state?

In exploring the afterlives of citizenship, this study turns to the arena of vernacular culture, in particular a selection of materials culled from recent print fiction and television, which confront the implications of de-democratization for citizenship and popular political agency in what I take to be richer, at once less coherent and more insightful, ways than most of the political theory of the historical present. By this turn to works of popular culture as a resource for critical thought, I do not mean to insinuate that theory gets it “wrong,” or that we can dispense with the frameworks it provides in engaging these alternate sites of reflection on the changing shape of political life. But theory is perhaps at a disadvantage in the difficult labor of thinking about the changing present, since it operates through a set of analytical categories wrought in the very historical contexts whose disappearance we now seek to comprehend. The analytical resources we have to hand, in other words, were designed to consider the possibilities and limits of modern political institutions and so are bound to that historical formation that we might figure, following Žižek, as the marriage of capitalism to democracy. When we use these resources for thinking about their divorce, it is difficult to read the present as anything but a degraded version of the past, and we tend to miss the difference of the contemporary moment, even as we also assert its novelty, often in increasingly anxious and overwrought terms.
Theory—even theory committed to the prospect of transformative social and political change—is generally reluctant to admit that it must *unthink* itself in the process of thinking about a changing world. Theory rarely concedes—and then only under duress—that to inhabit historical change as it unfolds is precisely to encounter a situation that stands in an (as-yet) indeterminate and necessarily differential relation to the abstractions by which we aspire to take its measure. *Neocitizenship* moves to address the limitations of political theory, not by effecting a turn away from the terrain of theoretical analysis, but rather by pursuing a *return* to theory through the byways of selected print and visual narratives that, as I have sought to argue, render the difference of the present in flickering prospects that neither quite emerge into narrative view, but also never cease to exert their centrifugal force on the grammar of modern political subjectivity. As such, I suggest, these narratives provide not so much an analysis of as a heuristic for political life in transformation, as well as a supplement to a theoretical body of work that can never quite resist the lure of knowing.

My interest in this book lies in the changing contexts, practices, and imaginaries of citizenship at the turn of the twenty-first century, and it focuses—perhaps narrowly—on the contemporary United States, where the modern political field—predicated on popular sovereignty, rule of law, separation of powers, and the secular character of the state—is by now largely dismantled. No doubt, this dismantling is hardly confined to the United States, and certainly much of what impels it, such as the amplified role of finance in the practice of capital accumulation, has had dire, transformative implications for nation-states across the global North and the global South. But the mobility of capital, and the deep global interconnections of financial markets and institutions, do not mean that the articulations of politics and economics are therefore everywhere commensurate. We might expect that the divorce of capitalism and democracy will play out differently in the United States than in nations where popular sovereignty is institutionalized in a multi-party system and the formation of coalitional governments. And it will play out differently, again, in postcolonial democracies, where, as Partha Chatterjee argues, the institutions of bourgeois civil society have only ever encompassed a fraction of the national population; or in postcolonial nations marked by the “failure” or precariousness of modern...
political institutions, which have perennially ceded to other, overtly oligarchical or authoritarian practices of governance (2004, 36–38). So my study focuses on the United States not to deny that many of the phenomena that concern me are transnational in character, but simply to recognize that transnational phenomena develop in particular and uneven ways within the governmental and social architectures and histories of specific places. Above all, I am leery of proceeding as though the transnational operations of capital somehow resolve the abidingly national or regional nature of our academic expertise—as though we are now equipped to think on a global scale because we can identify a set of economic forces that exert themselves globally. But the circumstance, for example, that mortgaged governments across the globe are driven to institute austerity measures that provoke popular protest does not mean that those protests can therefore be apprehended within the terms of a single “transnational” analytic that would encompass, say, Egypt and Greece and the United States. The fact that the adjective “transnational” now modifies virtually all forms of capital accumulation as well as many rubrics of academic specialization (transnational American studies, transnational cultural studies, transnational feminism, and so forth) does not impart capital’s mobility to the scholar—and there is no end run around the painstaking labor of comparative analysis, however dusty and outmoded that term may seem. I imagine Neocitizenship as a contribution to the comparative study of contemporary political cultures, a study conceived, in turn, as a collaborative intellectual project that builds on, rather than precludes, the kind of single-sited focus offered here.

The opening chapter, “Neocitizenship and Critique,” reads across Michel Foucault on biopolitics and governmentality, Michael Hardt on civil society, Partha Chatterjee on political society, and Cindy Patton on identity politics in order to parse the relations of citizenship, sovereignty, and discipline both historically and within contemporary configurations of state power. I argue that the complex of phenomena we generally describe as “neoliberalism” (state-subsidized market “freedoms” supporting an ever more comprehensive enclosure of the commons; the massive reorganization of public and private domains, including the outsourcing of state functions to private corporations and proliferating, non-state agencies of governance) proceeds in tandem with the eclipse of a dis-
ciplinary society, oriented toward the internalization of common sensibilities and foundational beliefs as the condition of civic belonging. Neoliberalism abandons the historical project of the bourgeois nation-state, in other words, that entailed norming mass political sentiment and cultivating broad identification with the aims of the ruling faction(s). Instead, neoliberal governance develops strategies of population management through surveillance and securitization, uncoupled from the production of consent. Along the way, the chapter explores an alternate genealogy of neoliberalism in totalitarian state formation, which, in Hannah Arendt’s suggestive if elliptical account, similarly dismantles rather than installs a normative political culture and erodes rather than disciplines the political faith of the citizen-subject. I consider, too, how the very practice of critique has been forged in historical relation to disciplinary society, and I ask after the implications of its eclipse for critical thought as it animates oppositional politics.

While the first chapter sets out an organizing line of inquiry in which to situate my preoccupations in the chapters that follow, it was by attending to the material of these subsequent chapters that I came to the questions that animate my opening. Thus the relation between chapters is best understood as rhizomatic, as a network of reverberations, rather than a linear unfolding. Chapter 2, “Post-Soviet American Studies,” puzzles over the proliferation of American studies programs in the regions of the former Soviet bloc, a post–Cold-War expansion under the auspices of both the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and private donor organizations, working in partnership with local governments. Unlike its Cold War antecedent, however, the contemporary, State Department–sponsored export of American studies is not designed and does not serve to disseminate a set of normative “American” political values. Rather, I contend, this post-Soviet iteration of American studies indicates the contemporary delinking of state and nation, such that the exercise of governmental power relies less and less on the ideological interpellation either of a national citizenry or of a global comprador class. On the one hand, this chapter considers how the political sensibilities informing transnational American studies turn out to be quite parochially American, linked to the specific political urgencies of life in the contemporary United States. On the other hand, my review of American studies in the former Soviet bloc shows that
these sensibilities do not travel, even as the curriculum does, and that American studies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia ends up (re)oriented to the heterogeneous political imaginaries of scholars and intellectuals in these regions. But significantly, for the programs’ state and private funders, these imaginaries are not the object of intervention, and it hardly matters that the materials of transnational American studies proffer a largely dystopian reading of U.S. history. Today the aim of American studies abroad, etched into the mission statements of donor organizations and of the programs themselves, is not keyed to political content, but to preparing a global managerial class for insertion in the networks of neoliberal governance via training in the application of administrative measures such as “efficiency,” “compliance,” “accountability,” and “sustainability.” The chapter reflects on how the version of neocitizenship these programs disseminate is enacted at the level of managerial functionality, rather than ideological identification, and on the implications of this functional interpellation for opposition to neoliberal governance.

In chapter 3, “Uncivil Society in The White Boy Shuffle,” I read Paul Beatty’s 1996 novel as it traces how the incorporative political project of the modern nation-state comes undone in the late twentieth-century United States, thereby retracting the very ground on which disqualified subjects stake their demand for civic inclusion. The novel limns the operation of what Achille Mbembe terms “necropower” in the simultaneous abandonment and hyper-policing of the racial ghetto and, crucially, the failure of a modern freedom politics, staked in the assertion of the sovereignty of the subjugated, to counter or to mitigate this violence. The protagonists of The White Boy Shuffle inhabit the crisis of political agency this situation entails: What does opposition mean, where is it enacted, what organizational, rhetorical, and affective forms might it assume, in a state whose instrumentalization of black life sits on the surface, not under ideological concealment, but as an overt and banal reality—a state therefore immune to the revelation of its necropolitical character as scandal? In particular, I am interested in how the novel reimagines the very form of political agency, especially the relation between publicity (the variously mediated forms of discourse, performance, and spectacle that constitute publics) and the command-and-control tactics of militarized policing. This relation is thematized in the trope of an
LAPD helicopter that hovers over the novel’s final scenes, its penetrating white spotlight invading and monitoring ghetto life, but also providing free illumination for the community’s “miseryfests,” where the politically abandoned gather in a brilliant, collective performance of their fury and contempt. I read the novel for what it suggests about the possibilities and limits of such forms of subaltern publicity, particularly when the avenues of communal self-mediation are also, transparently, the means for tracking, compiling, and profiling the heterogeneous political (dis) investments of a dis-incorporated citizenry.

Chapter 4, “Beginnings without End: Derealizing the Political in Battlestar Galactica” discerns in the four-season run of the Sci Fi channel’s cult television series a narrative locus to think further about the connection, just barely apprehended in chapter 1, between the decline of a normative political culture and the contemporary derealization of political life. A generic space opera, the series turns on the antagonisms between human society, characterized by its bad faith adherence to the forms of modern democratic politics, and a society of “cylons,” human-appearing cyborgs, which are replicated rather than reproduced (all cylons are cloned from one of twelve basic “models”) and whose forms of social and political being I read as a kind defamiliarized, hyperbolic projection of the governmental practices and social relations we associate with neoliberalism. The humans and the cylons are both iterations of “us,” in other words, in our twinned guises as disintegrating national people and the as-yet largely unknowable condition into which we are emerging. My reading dwells in particular on the organization of cylon society by serial differentiation, rather than normative identification; by the cultivation of intensities, rather than convictions; and by the proliferation of virtual environments, rather than the production of a common, seemingly objective reality, anchored in fixed ideological reference points. I am especially compelled by the affective life of cylon subjects, as it collates around mania and depression, rather than the signature guilt and attendant neurotic symptomology of the disciplined modern subject.

In chapter 4, I read Battlestar Galactica as an allegory, in Walter Benjamin’s sense of the term, a practice of representation that renders the world in pieces, a ruined thing in which we can (just) discern the possibilities of existing otherwise. In that spirit, I let my reading of the series
sit to one side—slightly askew—of the present moment, rather than flattening the correspondences by attempting to say, for example, that the cylons are a representation of neoliberal order. As allegorical figures, I suggest, they limn the possible contours—social, political, aesthetic, and affective—of what takes shape amid the wreckage of political modernity, and their interest lies precisely in the way that they remain irreducible to the already-available rubrics by which we narrate contemporary life.

In chapter 5, entitled simply “Unreal,” I take what I would call the critical sensibility towards derealization developed through my reading of Battlestar Galactica, and set it to work, so to speak, on the terrain of political culture in the post-9/11 United States. This leads me to linger on and give weight to the sense of sheer incredulity with which I, and so many others, bear witness to the political transformations of the past two decades—a sense of disorientation in relation to what we took, not so long ago, as norming our perception of the given and the possible. Along these lines, I come to explore how the elements of contemporary life that have engaged me throughout this study—the divorce of capitalism and democracy; the demise of disciplinary society; the apparent disinterest of the state in the cultivation of a national people—have the effect of eroding the sense of a common reality, in which a national or even a local (not to mention a planetary) “we” live in simultaneous time and convergent social and material worlds. More precisely, in “Unreal,” I discern in phenomena such as the 2008 financial crisis, congressional gridlock, Obama’s “grassroots” presidential campaign, and the stupefaction of the U.S. electorate (as many commentators now lament) the signs of a novel situation, wherein political power (both elite and oppositional) increasingly takes the form of declaring autonomy, of conjuring the reality that answers to one’s own proclivities, rather than intervening in the shape of a shared continuum. I move to apprehend (to find a language for apprehending) what strikes me as the simulacral quality of contemporary political life, which is to say, the increasing dispersal of the population into so many nonintersecting planes of social existence and political imagining. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to Bruce Sterling’s 1998 science fiction novel Distraction for its effort to imagine, without nostalgia for the institutions of modern democratic governance, alternate forms of political self-elaboration in a world of proliferating autonomous collectives.
The final chapter, “Refugees from This Native Dreamland,” explores the Occupy Wall Street movement, often framed as the reawakening of the slumbering popular sovereign. I argue to the contrary that the world of OWS is more fundamentally related to Sterling’s fictional world than to the social movements of the 1960s, from which, undoubtedly, it borrows some of its political aesthetics. But despite the invocation of a 99%, the aspiration and practices of OWS are not those of a mass social movement that seeks to recalibrate public feeling to new social and political norms. To read the archive of OWS—its manifestos, testimonials, and self-analyses—is to witness the construction of networked singularities, whose attention is directed inward, to the prospects of their self-elaboration. In this way, OWS participates in the broader derealization of contemporary political life, even as it strives to generate resources for an oppositional (anti-capitalist) politics.

Much like the texts it privileges, this book does not aspire to settle the questions it engages, but simply to touch down on those questions in productive ways. Throughout, I remain committed to the impossibility of thinking the changing present. In part, of course, the present remains (still) unthinkable because to engage transformation is always and necessarily to lose the reference points by which we are accustomed to take our critical bearings. But Neocitizenship also suggests that the nature of the political changes we confront involves a willful and strategic rescinding of the referents, not as a move along the way toward instituting and naturalizing a new political reality, but rather as an end in itself, bound to a different way of conceptualizing power and governance. The dismantling of the reference points and turning out of the population to explore whatever vistas of political rage, melancholia, and mania are paradoxically, the symptoms of a new and burgeoning apparatus of governmental control, a conundrum that dwells at the center of this inquiry. Yet the crisis of critique today, in this moment when the retreat from ideological imposition appears to serve the very aims of domination, is a provocation to improvise alternate analytical habits and gestures. Improvisation is, of course, not normally a practice we associate with scholarly production, however much critical work in the humanities may claim to abjure the aspiration to mastery. But in the shape of our arguments—mapping an inquiry, proposing an analytic, producing a claim—we nonetheless value and cultivate the intellectual ownership of our cultural objects.
In thinking and writing this book, I have been keenly aware that the inquiry I have mapped is fragmentary, my analytic an eclectic repertoire of moves that may or may not sustain that inquiry, and my claims tentative—a resting place, rather than a terminus. Yet *Neocitizenship* is also an argument that the conditions of the present demand precisely such partial and improvised reckonings. In this, ironically, lies its most authoritative claim.