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Capital Embodiment: White Beauty and Bodies in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*

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**Capital Embodiment: White Beauty
and Bodies in Sally Rooney's
*Conversations with Friends***



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: David J. Fine, Ph.D.

April 2023

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Abstract

Beauty standards that have long been understood by feminist theorists as sexist also have a history of being rooted in racism. By reproducing the white, slender representations of beauty uncritically, authors potentially perpetuate the racist, classist, and sexist hierarchies in which our cultural norms are rooted. Popular, contemporary author Sally Rooney consciously writes about the privileges of wealth but fails to write in the same way about the capital of beauty and slender bodies. My literary analysis focuses on the political power and implications of the white beauty and embodiment of Frances in her debut novel from 2017. Rooney's representation of white women is detrimental, I argue, only insofar as the power of whiteness and thinness that is written into their bodies is unclaimed and uncriticized. The thin beauty ideals which oppress and empower women within what bell hooks calls 'capitalist white supremacist patriarchy' make embodiment political especially for women at the top like Rooney and her characters. Frances experiences white beauty and embodiment as inhumane perfection and punishment that prevents connection despite exciting desire.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Fine, for redirecting me from shadows on the wall to the real world outside from my first day of classes to my last. He, Dr. Rahman, and Dr. Winn have shaped me into the scholar and educator I am today. I wrote this thesis for my mom.



University of
Dayton

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Introduction:

Skinny White Girls

“Doesn’t Sally Rooney just write about skinny white girls?” Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom, MacArthur Fellow and influential Black feminist, asked this question in a tweet which has since been deleted. Cottom’s retracted tweet made me wonder how her essay “In the Name of Beauty” could illuminate Rooney’s novels. I soon discovered that analyzing beauty and slender bodies as racialized capital presented a compelling lens through which to read Rooney’s fiction. After all, her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), illustrates cultural and personal gaps in critical consciousness toward white beauty despite the omnipresent political analysis of its protagonist. While Rooney’s female characters decry capitalism, they leave their own embodied privilege uninterrogated. Her representation of white women is detrimental, I argue, only insofar as the power of whiteness and thinness that is written into their bodies is unclaimed and uncriticized. The thin beauty ideals which oppress and empower women within ‘capitalist white supremacist patriarchy’¹ make embodiment political *especially* for women at the top like Rooney and her characters.

Irish author and Trinity College graduate, Sally Rooney writes popular fiction in the form of political romance novels. While the books published after *Conversations—Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021)—are also mainstream, her politics and those of her flawed Marxist characters are decidedly left-wing, which contributes to her volatile popularity and persistent criticism. For example, *Conversations*

¹ I will refer to this term invented and used by bell hooks throughout my analysis. Her theory of interlocking oppression and its connection to colonization is foundational to my feminist perspective and approach.

follows communist Frances and Bobbi, former girlfriends and presently best friends at Trinity, as they become entangled with writer Melissa and her actor husband Nick. The disparity in age and status between the couples generates tension and attraction in the emerging “love square.” Nick and Frances commence an affair that exhibits cracks in his marriage and her troubled relationship with her body and emotions. From a detached distance, Frances ruminates on power and control in her relationships. She pines for Bobbi’s beauty and ideological perfection and fixates on her emotional control over Nick whom she considers equally invulnerable. The tension between her desire for connection and preference for control brings her relationships and body to crisis. After alienating Bobbi and Nick, she experiences revelations when fainting in a church. Her revelations reframe the tensions in her life toward attachment which prompts reconciliation with Bobbi and Nick.

I will analyze the tension between detachment and attachment in the following paper, beginning by adding nuance to the critical conversation about Rooney as a popular Marxist author. I will transition to textual analysis of *Conversations* after articulating the cultural studies and feminist influences on my reading of the novel. I analyze beauty as a racialized capital in Frances’ representation of embodiment given the racial history of fatphobia, the sociocultural and interpersonal hatred of fatness. In the following sections, I write about Frances’ troubled embodiment and sense of control as well as the tension between her tendency toward dominance and longing for connection. My conclusion explores love as antithetical to the exclusionary and domineering value system of beauty and embodiment white women have inherited from Western culture given its inextricable ties to colonialism and capitalism.

(White) Beauty as Capital

Critics, professional and otherwise, consider Rooney's novels too white and rich despite their discursive contents, especially in reaction to her wild popularity. In the words of journalist Caleb Crain in "Sally Rooney Addresses Her Critics," her bestselling novels "won her praise as a portraitist of her Millennial generation—and also left her vulnerable to political critique" (87). Malavika Kannan, published in *Washington Post*, *HuffPost*, and more, writes back to critics like Crain in a blog post, explaining, "Rooney writes exclusively about white, pointedly thin, elite-educated women with miraculously attractive lovers; I'm not like them." Her criticism is not of the text itself, but the "universality" Rooney and her characters are granted as "the voice of a generation." White characters and writers come from a particular positionality just like writers of color like Kannan. Therefore, she argues against falsely universalizing Rooney's characters at the expense of more marginalized women's work. Her characters' slender, white bodies, too, construct their social position, as Kannan has identified.

Feminist critique of the body and beauty analyzes them as social constructions and cultural norms with the power to oppress women. Naomi Wolf establishes in *The Beauty Myth* that beauty still constricts modern women to perform patriarchal standards of femininity for social status post second wave feminism. Beauty and body standards are tools of oppression with different iterations based on their cultural context, and "the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance" (Wolf 14). Susan Bordo echoes these sentiments in *Unbearable Weight* where she theorizes that feminine embodiment manifests the cultural value of thinness, control, and subservience in women. Bordo reiterates "that the social manipulation of the female body emerged as

an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between sexes over the past hundred years” (143). Women who experience disordered eating, excessive exercise, and body dysmorphia need not be pathologized but understood as victims who suffer for access to what the culture values. Their troubled embodiment indicts the ideological underpinnings of Western culture, not individual women.

Frances’s internal conflation of her body, emotions, and personal power begin with her fixation on the beauty of others and the inadequacy of her own. She idolizes beauty, creating dissonance between her politics and personal values. As a self-proclaimed communist, Frances finds her “disinterest in wealth... ideologically healthy” (22). She may not pursue capital in her career, but she is aware of the wealth hierarchy and where people fall, including herself. When discussing their ideological positions, Frances notes that it sounds like Nick’s “family was very wealthy, but I was wary of probing the issue, since I already felt self-conscious about never paying for anything” (73). When it comes to material wealth, Frances is self-aware of her privilege, living in Dublin in her uncle’s rental apartment for free. At the same time, Frances recognizes how Nick’s generational wealth positions him above her. She perceives her interpersonal relationships with Bobbi and Nick as politically unequal based on gender, wealth, and beauty, but not her own proximity to social capital.

Her supposed disinterest in material wealth contradicts her infatuation with beauty which Cottom defines as “the only legitimate capital allowed women without legal, political, and economic challenge” (56). Cottom explains that beauty concentrates power among upper class whites and excludes Blackness as its base function. Its cultural norms police more than gender, which Wolf and Bordo foreground, but class and racial

divisions too. That is to say nothing of disability and fatness which are often considered antithetical to beauty. Inherently the beauty of the white slender ideal cannot be equitable. In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings explains how concurrent rises in the transatlantic slave trade and Protestantism resulted in white, thin, moral standards and Black, fat, immoral stereotypes (6).² It was never neutral or accessible, but always political. Beauty is not a matter of personal preference, and Frances' attraction to cultural dominant beauty is indivisible from whiteness. She may find herself ugly, yet 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' indelibly endows her with beauty capital.

Interconnected with her blind spot for her own access to capital, Frances struggles to acknowledge and interrogate her own whiteness and its consequences. One of the few times Rooney explicitly references race, Frances enters the conversation about racist police brutality in America saying, "I sometimes felt drawn to disclaiming my ethnicity, as if, though I was obviously white, I wasn't 'really' white, like other white people" (232). Her instinct to distance herself from her whiteness dysmorphically distorts her perception. As she is unable to see her malnourished yet privileged body for its true appearance, so too does the whiteness that saturates it with social capital escape her critical eye. Her white body makes her "beautiful: normal, normative, taken for granted as desirable" (Cottom 53). As Audre Lorde explains in *Sister Outsider*, "white women ignore the built-in privilege of whiteness" (117). White beauty is one such privilege. Frances excludes herself from oppressive power, for she cannot possess and act upon "the preferences that reproduce the existing social order" (Cottom 44), if she believes that this

² Strings notes "Racial Others" have included Irish women portrayed with inferior genes, diets, and conduct for colonial gain (130). Rooney's Irish identity was once the target of colonial racialization and has been assimilated into whiteness to maintain global dominance throughout history.

order ought to be overthrown. Her discomfort locating herself as privileged in race and body size reflects the normalization and idolization of her experience. Unconscious of her body and its beauty, Frances is deeply, physically, and socioculturally white.

While Frances' inconsistency with pursuing traditional capital creates a blind spot for the character ultimately challenged by the author, the blind spot for social capital via beauty and slender bodies seems to exist for both character and author in *Conversations*. Frances narrates, "I often found myself believing that if I looked like Bobbi, nothing bad would happen to me" (64). Frances attempts to control her body as a path to happiness because there is genuine social capital in being conventionally beautiful. Women who hopelessly devote themselves to beauty and slenderness "are neither dupes nor critics of sexist culture; rather, their overriding concern is their right to be desired, loved, and successful on its terms" (Bordo 20). Beauty, as a violent system, assimilates and subsumes variants for the promise of happiness. Frances' obsession with beauty responds to an inhuman system, but that response is "to become what the dominant culture admires" rather than resist it (Bordo xxi).

During their trip to France, Frances clarifies her interconnected perception of perfection to the racial and religious slender ideal. On the beach, "Bobbi came up from the water, shivering and looking very white. She wrapped herself in a huge beach towel, with another light blue towel draped over her head like the Virgin Mary" (99). Frances later watches her dive into the ocean naked and asserts, "she appeared whole and completely perfect" (104). Renaissance artists elevated the whiteness of skin, and these aesthetics became culturally dominant as "white women were idealized as pure, chaste, and stately" (Strings 42). Frances' devotion to Bobbi correlates with beauty norms which

were used to dehumanize “colonial racial Other women” (Strings 113). Frances finds Bobbi’s body, mind, and heart beautiful for their ideological and physical purity. Internal purity and perfection amalgamate with her appearance. She visualizes Bobbi as the pinnacle of religiously and racially pure femininity, the Western Virgin Mary.³

The subtext of white Christianity is undercut by the discordance between the traditional ideal and Bobbi. Rooney complicates ideal Western femininity to a limited extent. Far from a virgin, Bobbi is a lesbian to whom Frances is physically and emotionally attracted despite their sorted past together. Later in the novel, Frances reads the Bible and can only suspend her disbelief when she imagines Bobbi as Jesus. Rooney presents Bobbi’s divinity as physical through Western Virgin Mary imagery and spiritual through Jesus’ sermons and actions. Although Rooney complicates the religious allusions that depict Bobbi, the queering cannot overcome the racial origins of our contemporary beauty standards. Her gender bent, queer reclamation of Western Christian images still carry the weighty privileges of whiteness. No amount of lesbianism erases the white supremacist legacy of the Western Virgin Mary or the capital of a slender white body.

Frances articulates her adoration for traditional beauty in her description of Nick, a B-list movie star with the looks to confirm it. She recalls that Nick “only looked handsome because he was handsome, though Bobbi wasn’t sensitive to the effects of beauty like I was” (65). Her sensitivity transfixes her to obsess over her own body and attempt to control the more beautiful bodies of her lovers, Bobbi and Nick. Bobbi and her mother push back on Frances’ dalliances and indulgences among the upper class as

³ In the Hulu series adaptation Bobbi is portrayed as a light skinned American woman of color who is thinner than the actress who plays Frances. Bobbi’s appearance and race are relevant to Rooney’s audience.

uncharacteristic and hypocritical as she vacations in France and writes about Bobbi for a prestigious magazine without her consent. No equitable criticism checks her preoccupation with beauty. She troublingly endorses beauty as sanctifying instead of critical theory that recognizes how beauty garners intrigue, employment, and esteem for artistic expressions, implicitly reflecting the beliefs of their author. Rooney represents a particular genre of whiteness in her art, and bell hooks writes that white artists “must consider the role whiteness plays in the construction of their identity and aesthetic visions, as well as the way it determines the reception of their work” (*Yearning* 171). Rooney eventually acknowledges Frances’ whiteness, but no passages rectify how white beauty is glorified in the text as a whole.

The sanctifying power of beauty recurs in Frances’ interpersonal relationships, enabling her to distance herself from her own social power. Reflecting on his beauty, “I thought if I was as good-looking as Nick I would probably have fun all of the time” (25). She compares herself to the superior desirability and attractiveness of a movie star apolitically, accepting that his “flattering” attention and appearance is meaningfully capable of determining personal satisfaction and happiness. She conflates goodness with conventional beauty standards and believes her unhappiness is related to her body rather than the norms. She finds that his beauty “makes his misery seem more authentic” (28). Continuing the logic of her cultural value system, Frances believes Nick and Bobbi are transfigured by beauty into art without reflecting on ramifications. As beauty is a sanctifying capital, it creates a hierarchy, especially for women, of valuable people on pedestals and expendable people below, neither fully human.

Troubled Embodiment and Control

Frances, like many women under ‘capitalist white supremacist patriarchy,’ experiences her body as an unruly counterpart in need of constant discipline to be beautiful and valuable. Socially her thin white body may be considered capital, but subjectively her embodiment feels like prison. Her natural urges and desires must be controlled and punished to the point of disappearance. The Western standard of embodiment, normalized through preoccupation with slenderness, insures “the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining ‘docile bodies’ sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of these norms” (Foucault as cited in Bordo 186). The concept of the docile body contextualizes her constant bodily maintenance. The tension between her affective reality and the ideal docile body necessitates habitual transformation and discipline to conform her embodiment to Western epistemology.

To prepare for her performance with Bobbi, Frances capitalizes on her beauty for social gain through self-selected slenderness. Her appearance becomes part of the performance because “my face was plain, but I was so extremely thin as to look interesting, and I chose my clothing to emphasise this effect” (34). Through thinness Frances accesses the desirability her whiteness alone does not grant naturally. Based on Bobbi’s assessment of her resemblance to her alcoholic father, her bodily maintenance attempts to compensate for their shared facial plainness (49). Her extreme thinness is a byproduct of her controlling relationship to her body and emotions and part of the performance. Thinness is a form of social capital to seem “interesting” as an artist performing poetry and potential partner to Bobbi and Nick. She fixates on her appearance

until she nears an “anxiety attack” and must be told to stop. Her self-monitoring and self-improvement toward social capital carries her closer to control of her body but away from connection with her father and herself.

Isolated and more vulnerable than ever after falling out with Bobbi, Nick, and her body from endometriosis, she obsesses over the latter. She stares at her naked body in the mirror, musing that “periodically I found myself doing this out of a kind of compulsion, though nothing about me ever seemed to change. My hips bones still jutted out unattractively on either side of my pelvis, and my abdomen was still hard and round to the touch” (174). She inspects her body, and it is unclear whether the compulsive behavior is meant to change her body or find and evaluate a potential change. It is about monitoring, maintenance, and control either way. She suffers from being trapped in the body, but she suffers to try to control it as well, maintaining its weight for a still thin, inadequately beautiful appearance. It gives her a sense of control as it leaves her unsatisfied. Bordo’s association between the body as a burden and consistent maintenance of that problematic body is the socially constructed nature of female embodiment.

Frances frames her intellectualism in contrast to her physical needs, dichotomizing mind and body. While writing madly for her undergraduate courses, Frances admits she “mostly forgot to eat on days like this and emerged in the evening with a fine, shrill headache” (33). Disembodied and dissociated, she delights in the intellectual work to sanctify and elevate herself with “fine” physical pain to accompany it. Neglect of her body shows her transcendent academic capabilities. She implies she is a special person for her ability to do this and forget her body. While she understands that it

is “morally neutral,” Frances relishes her description of dissociation and self-denial like any Western philosopher she has studied who endorses mind-body dualism. In order to become the moral and physical ideal, Frances wants to experience embodiment as what an anorexic patient described to Bordo as “absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh,” which Bordo terms the “nonbody” represented by thinness (147). She pursues the Enlightenment-era ideal of privileging the reasoning of the mind over the feelings of her body throughout the novel. The nonbody is her standard for normal.

Forced back into the vulnerable reality of her body, Frances waits in the hospital in immense pain that doctors never resolve with treatment or a definitive diagnosis. At the thought that she could be having a miscarriage, Frances falls down a familiar existential spiral that shows her attempt to control her emotions by manipulating her body.

A searing anxiety developed inside me at this thought, in the same form it always took no matter what external stimulus triggered it: first the realization that I would die, then that everyone else would die, and then that the universe would eventually experience heat death, a kind of thought sequence that expanded outward endlessly in forms too huge to be contained inside my body. I trembled, my hands were clammy, and I felt sure I would be sick again. I punched my leg meaninglessly as if that would prevent the death of the universe. (161-2)

She describes her existential dread of inevitable death as “searing,” as if it is manifested in the physical pain of her suspected endometriosis. It is relentless, with no periods to pause her overwhelming “thought sequence.” Mirroring imagery of the “endlessly” expanding, infinitely heavy universe itself, her thoughts defy bodily containment and

produce unbearable weight. Her thoughts present totalizing death in rapid succession matter-of-factly; the only evidence of emotion, of “anxiety,” is her body’s reaction. As she nears vomiting, Frances punishes her body for exceeding control. Despite attributing her punching to preventing universe collapse, she is, equally “meaninglessly,” attempting to curb her anxiety about it. Her behavior exhibits her self-perception of her body as the materialization of her unwieldy emotions and as the mechanism through which she tries and fails to control them.

Her reaction to the first symptoms of her unconfirmed endometriosis exemplifies the self-denial and discipline which troubles her embodiment. She at first attempts to control and wish away her bodily pain and shedded clots of tissue. In a shocking and unreal amount of pain, “I let my hands tremble and waited to start feeling normal again, until I realized that it wasn’t just a feeling, something I could dismiss to myself. It was an outside reality that I couldn’t change” (159). She has made a habit of dismissing her feelings as changeable and controllable barriers to normality. Her feelings do not represent a way of knowing or connecting, but merely an obstacle she is capable of removing from her path. She, similarly to the dominant white patriarchal culture, constructs her sensations as extraneous information that makes her more vulnerable physically and emotionally. Self-imposed and culturally conditioned docility circumscribes her response to pain and trauma to her own body,⁴ meaning her suffering is unable to escape or be expressed.

When Frances arrives home from the hospital where the doctor doubts and probes her without any empathy for her physical and emotional pain, she hurts herself to regain

⁴ This is a throughline for many of Rooney’s female protagonists who experience abuse and turmoil only to self-harm, self-isolate, and restrict themselves in every sense to cope.

control. During low points, her body represents a safety from emotions rather than evidence of them because it can be disciplined. She then, in her own form of coping, “reached for the soft part on the inside of my left elbow and pinched it so tightly between my thumbnail and forefinger that I tore the skin open. That was it. It was over then. It was all going to be okay” (165). She fails to seek comfort in the presence of others but finds it by disciplining her body. Instead of allowing herself to cry or telling her mother how much pain she is in, control comforts her. Controlling her body eases her pain because self-mastery is the culturally legitimate way to respond to vulnerability. The docile body that tightly contains emotions characterizes her concept of normal, having been normalized.

Melissa makes the connection between control and her relationship to Nick explicit in her hostile email addressing Nick’s affair with Frances. She implies Frances is a replacement for herself, casually stating “I wonder if we gravitate toward Nick because he gives us a sense of control that was lacking in childhood” (225). As the plot advances, her father’s spiral out of control *does* trigger and intensify her self-harm to compensate for what her father lacks. While Melissa refers to Nick as “pathologically submissive,” her description of Nick fits Frances’ experience of their relationship wherein she makes every first move, initiates every fight, and often prompts their reconciliations (224). The control Frances has over Nick attracts her, to be sure, and his emotional vulnerability to her is made all the more attractive by his superior social status as male, beautiful, wealthy, and famous. If she appears invulnerable, she cannot be hurt by his potential apathy toward her. Her appearance performs the nonbody ideal to keep the control in their relationship rather than be the vulnerable one.

Dominance Versus Connection

When Frances ignores and attempts to exterminate her needs and dependence on others, she buys into the dominant culture that she adamantly critiques. Dominant independence is culturally rewarded under the guise of what Willie James Jennings calls “white self-sufficient masculinity” in *After Whiteness*. Jennings explains that it “is not first a person or a people; it is a way of organizing life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of dense life together” (8).

Interdependent life together requires expressing needs and relinquishing absolute control. When Frances ignores and attempts to exterminate her needs and interdependence on others, she buys into the dominant culture that she adamantly critiques. Without showing her vulnerability, Frances’ tendency to control herself and desire to control others forecloses opportunity for connection and interdependence.

Frances’ feelings for Bobbi overwhelm and trigger her desire for control. When she is distracted by the thought of tasting Bobbi’s mouth, “I seemed to have no power any longer over what was happening, or what was going to happen” (148). Her emotional vulnerability to love, which means being out of control of Bobbi and herself, threatens her impenetrable performance. A culture of domination has conditioned her to want love with complete control but without vulnerability, which is no love at all. As hooks writes in *All About Love*, “love will not prevail in any situation where one party... wants to maintain control” (152). Though Frances believes that Bobbi has chosen not to be with her due to personal defect, Bobbi later explains Frances has actually alienated Bobbi through her self-righteous detachment that made her miserable (287). Her dominance prevents connection rather than her self-perceived vulnerability.

During their online messages, Frances asks if a life guided by love can contradict capitalism, and Bobbi is hesitant to endorse it as a solution because even love can be co-opted by the capitalist regime. Frances' puritanical control of her feelings inhibits their love from blossoming. Their love has been touched, although not tainted, by the very structural and cultural forces of domination Bobbi and Frances disavow. Her clamor for emotional control may be protective against people she considers more powerful, but she fails to recognize that the control she wants is inherently tied to white male identity. As Jennings articulates, under colonial systems, "everyone must aim toward the finished man, towards a self-sufficiency that overcomes their inadequacies," inadequacies invented to justify colonial domination (117). In the same vein, colonial notions of affective embodiment as feminine and out of control idolized the docile body and inscribed it with cultural weight.

Briefly, Melissa points out Frances' embodied power and social capital, but this intervention does not prompt further reflection on her privilege. After the affair became physical but before it became public, Frances deflects references to the chemistry between her and Nick with self-deprecation. Simultaneously oblivious and acutely aware, "Melissa grinned. Don't underestimate the effect of your youth and beauty, she said" (196). Melissa, who has become well acquainted with social and material capital during her rise to fame and fortune on Valerie's unaccommodating coattails as a writer, recognizes the power Frances possesses that could rival hers. This critique of Frances' powerless self-perception rises from petty competition, not the genuine knowing of her loved ones: her mom and Bobbi. It is fault finding. It does not question Frances' dubious attraction to beauty. According to feminist theories of embodiment, "one could

reasonably answer that the female body is both a construction *and* resource” (Bordo 36). Her body may be constricted to docile ideals by patriarchal notions of beauty, but her conformity to that ideal provides power. Frances’ body grants her access to social capital that manifests into material wealth.

Frances’ published short story exemplifies her struggle to embrace a love ethic toward herself and others despite her tendency toward dominance and victimhood. She initially justifies her for-profit writing by emphasizing her own working-class identity, which is debatable like many previously concrete class signifiers in late-stage capitalism. Once it had been submitted and accepted, she eventually “thought of the story... a story that I now remembered was explicitly about Bobbi, a story that characterized Bobbi as a mystery so total I couldn’t endure her, a force I couldn’t subjugate with my will, and the love of my life” (215). Frances characterizes the power dynamic of their romantic friendship as competitive and domineering. Frances struggles for control, and Bobbi refuses to relinquish it by being unusable and incorruptible. Her justification that she needs the money falls flat when Bobbi, Nick, or even her mother could tide her over until she starts her job. Frances’ pursuit of dominance, like her instinctive disavowal of whiteness, alters her perception of relationships. Bobbi reminds Frances that she tells herself stories because, “you underestimate your own power so you don’t have to blame yourself... Bobbi’s rich, Nick’s a man, I can’t hurt these people. If anything they’re out to hurt me and I’m defending myself” (288). She does not see Bobbi’s family trauma because she is wealthy or her unrequited love for her because she is beautiful. She does not recognize Bobbi’s humanity when she is preoccupied with their disparity in capital.

She avoids blame and guilt by misanalyzing her power and position as perpetual victimhood.

After wandering weakly into a church, cut off from her loved ones, Frances accidentally starts to pray. Her body finds the posture, and her mind follows, penitently pondering her commitment to love. Her bodily knowledge triggers her connection to spiritual knowledge, skipping over her typical intellectualizing. She reflects on the people who have created her and everything she uses and can conceive of. She understands that she is not them, but she is so connected to them that it is difficult to tell. Her human-centered grounding exercise focuses on who created everything that matters to and surrounds her (281).

Do I sometimes hurt and harm myself, do I abuse the unearned cultural privilege of whiteness, do I take the labor of others for granted, have I sometimes exploited a reductive iteration of gender theory to avoid moral engagement, do I have a troubled relationship with my body, yes. Do I want to be free of pain and therefore demand that others also live free of pain, the pain that is mine and therefore also theirs, yes, yes.

All of her thoughts are connected in these sentences because the experiences are connected, structurally similar to her existential spiral about universal collapse. Her taking privilege for granted relates to how she interacts with her body and labor and race and gender and pain. Her analytical implementation of theory casts a dark shadow. Her answer to each question requires one yes because of how interconnected they now seem to her. The confluence of her privilege and pain, made manifest in her underfed body, comes to a head here before she collapses in the church, making meaning more difficult

to parse. Her feelings, thoughts, and actions as well as their position among every person conflate into her understanding of embodiment. Her sense of connection shifts perception of her body and emotions to connective and informative instead of burdensome. Her enlightenment drives her to finally feed her body with an indulgent cake, call and subsequently apologize to Melissa, and write earnestly and remorsefully to Bobbi.

Wrestling with her universal interconnectedness and unresolved feelings leads Frances to consume an entire chocolate cake as her first meal since her breakups. In her message to Bobbi, she mentions, “Now I think I just want to sleep with you, without metaphors. That doesn’t mean I don’t have other desires. Right now for example, I’m eating chocolate cake out of the box with a teaspoon” (285). Her desire for intimacy with Bobbi is implicitly connected to her desire for chocolate cake. For women in Western culture, “eating—in the form of private, *self*-feeding—is represented as a *substitute* for human love” (Bordo 126). While Rooney acknowledges this connection between eating and love, Frances contradicts the representations of women despairing over cake. She feeds herself not as a substitute for love, but in tandem with her desires for love as her first loving act toward her body. When she finishes the cake, she is more compassionate to Melissa, Bobbi, and herself. Indulging her emotional and bodily desires instead of control and domination allows connection to blossom and grow back into love.

As affective and bodily control and interpersonal dominance express white patriarchal cultural values, so too does love and connection practice what bell hooks calls a countercultural “love ethic” that values humanity over profits and power. Frances’ revelation and Rooney’s intervention prompts readers such as myself to evaluate personal expressions of political values. Colonial value systems prize status, control, self-

sufficiency, and wealth, and Frances begins to understand there is another way. My reading encourages analysis beyond the traditional forms of capital to understand that there is another way to frame beauty and embodiment work that is countercultural to capitalist and colonial systems. My hope is that it leads to deeper understanding and connection much like Frances' revelations about her body and self bring her closer to the countercultural love outlined by hooks in *All About Love*.

Frances finally reconciles with Bobbi after reconciling with the needs and knowledge of her body. This combats her internalized whiteness, or her "way of being in the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habituation and its meaning making" (Jennings 9). Contradictory to the logic of white male self-sufficiency, when she collapses at school and in the church, she reconnects with them. Her embodied knowledge manifests in her message to Bobbi after hurting her with her essay about domination. While "not trying to be intelligent," Frances writes in the line following her cake reference, "To love someone under capitalism you have to love everyone...I wanted things for myself because I thought I existed...Is it possible we could develop an alternative model of loving each other?" (286). Emphasizing her romantic, platonic, and ideological love for Bobbi, she asserts that Bobbi is "more than an idea" to her, which was easy to overlook beforehand. According to hooks, "generous sharing of all resources is one concrete way to express love" (*All About Love* 163). Following through on their communist musing, Frances invites Bobbi to embody their theory that contradicts hyper individuality and scarcity mentality in dominant culture.

In love with their partners and each other, Nick and Frances end the novel on the way to each other emotionally and physically for their reunion. After Frances

acknowledges how everything around her takes a position in obscure hierarchies, first person transitions into second for two final sentences: “You live through certain things before you understand them. You can’t always take the analytical position” (307). To Rooney’s audience and main character, this is an inescapable truth being reflected back at them. Intellectual knowledge derived through reasoning is prestigious, but it can also become a shield for embodied participation, given that Frances “exploited a reductive iteration of gender theory to avoid moral engagement” (281). As Frances takes the white feminist position of personal and perpetual victimhood to distance herself from her own power and culpability, that choice also drives her away from vulnerability and attachment. Frances and academics have to acknowledge their position and divest from the power of detached intellectualism. Locating yourself within hierarchy while embracing authentic affective embodiment becomes an alternative to detached analysis.

Conclusion:

Toward Countercultural Embodiment

In the spirit of maintaining embodied, thick analysis, I do not recommend puritanical anti-beauty feminism as the way forward. Many writers and artists have been breaking ground on decolonial feminist theories of beauty. One such artist, Alok Vaid-Menon, redefines beauty from exclusionary to potentially revolutionary. As a transfeminine and gender non-conforming writer and performer, Alok disseminates messages to degender fashion, destigmatize body hair, and live beyond the gender binary with captions like “blondes have more funding.” Alok tells Glennon Doyle on her podcast, “I’m fighting for beauty, and a lot of people get confused by that because the

only definition of beauty, like love, that they've inherited is so basic and flat that they just associate beauty with that commodity that we're told if you access then you get power." Beauty that sprouts from the margins, that blooms beyond binaries, is a different kind of beauty that also holds political power. It just reveals that our current system of beauty is a racist lie, a misogynistic myth, a capitalist venture. Feminists like Alok are reclaiming a countercultural beauty and love that remains conscious, critical, and contradictory to domination and commodification. Decolonial perspectives on beauty and love provide a path forward away from the regime of whiteness and capital embodiment.

When I first read *Conversations with Friends*, I was appalled and entranced by Frances' relationship with her body and the world because nothing had ever felt so close to me. I tore through the book, and I knew it was not necessarily good to see myself in Frances. In writing about her, I am writing about what I know from my embodied experience paired with the language of feminist theory. Even as I wrote about the nefarious nature of control, I struggled to express myself without being paralyzed by perfectionism. My position is not purely analytical, but personally and politically invested in the themes and events of the novel. My hope is to be a conscious reader, writer, and teacher capable of holding room for nuanced political and literary study while unlearning and deconstructing the white instinct to control and dominate.

One of the reasons I chose this text is because I personally enjoy Sally Rooney's work. As Cottom tweeted "I, am uncultured swine, didn't know I wasn't supposed to enjoy a Sally Rooney book. I read it and enjoyed it. Then a lot of people told me I was wrong. But I asked myself if people have any sense. They don't. So I forgot about it."⁵

⁵ @tressiemcphd, *Twitter*, May 5, 2022, 12:18 a.m., https://twitter.com/nairyasmin/status/1522067075971399680?s=21&t=5_c6Bx-X5W0n8FY5tOMa3w

Rather than generate thin criticism of Rooney's novels as inadequate Marxist manifestos, I approach her work with similar admiration and critical thinking which requires considering the social position of Rooney, her characters, and myself to avoid universalizing them. As a straight-sized, college-educated white woman, Rooney and her characters represent an adjacent position to mine within white femininity. With such status, dominant, detached, and disembodied analysis grants access and universality to academics and artists alike. Despite the social rewards, such analysis contradicts the embodied knowledge necessary for connection and community.

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