

Mediations

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The Legacy of Kevin Floyd

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Editors' Note

This issue of *Mediations* is dedicated to the work and legacy of Kevin Floyd and honors his impact on and commitment to the Marxist Literary Group and the field of queer Marxism. Kevin became a member of MLG while still a graduate student in the late 1990s and remained an active and insightful member until his untimely death in November of 2019 from a brain tumor. He was the first ever Vice President of MLG, as well as the President for three years (2016 – 2018), with his term being cut short by the onset of his illness. Beyond these official roles, Kevin was, in many ways, the heart of MLG. As Neil Larsen explains in his contribution, one of the “coolest place[s] to be” at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association is the MLG/*Minnesota Review* cash bar and despite the fraught nature of the MLA itself and the impulse to “look over your shoulder for someplace else that was better for your career” there was always one person in attendance that could put even the most anxious graduate student at ease: “across the room, much to your delight and relief, the tall figure of Kevin Floyd and above the murmur of the many animated conversations underway, the sounds of his faintly Texan drawl and of his explosive laugh.”

Kevin embodied the egalitarian mission of MLG, especially its commitment to graduate students. For Kevin, everyone at the Institute for Culture and Society was not only a comrade and a colleague, but a friend – regardless of where they were in their career. As David Pritchard, one of the many graduate students Kevin met and mentored through MLG, observed: “Kevin was the real deal: a true comrade and the model of a revolutionary intellectual. He was a passionate and generous interlocutor; he took the work of graduate students seriously, treating us like peers and comrades rather than underlings.” And this generosity extended well beyond the annual ICS to his graduate students at Kent State University. Allie Brooks was one of those graduate students and remembers, “I was terrified by his intellect but amazed by his kindness and decency to everyone he encountered.” She also asked us to share that she and some of the other graduate students who now have to finish their dissertations without him have organized a reading group in his honor, which can be found on Facebook: “The Floyd Group.”

As Allie implies, Kevin’s compassion for and commitment to graduate students is all the more striking because his “terrifying” intellect and innovation shaped the entire

field of queer Marxism. Peter Drucker, for example, acknowledges a debt to Kevin's *The Reification of Desire* in his contribution to this issue noting, "All of us queer Marxists who have published since then have been in dialogue with this seminal work. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have been writing a series of glosses on it." Kevin's impact on queer Marxism extends beyond the page to inspire, entice, and incite current and future scholars. Beyond Kevin's written work, his selfless mentoring of graduate students, as well as endless collaborations and discussions with colleagues, expands this impact exponentially. Kevin's last project, the edited collection *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, is one such collaboration. Unfortunately, Kevin himself was not able to see the finished collection, but his fellow editors, Jen Hedler Phillis and Sarika Chandra, completed the project in his honor and it is now forthcoming from Fordham University Press in January 2022. Kevin's spirit, then, lives on in both his own words and those inspired by him. It is this intellectual and inspirational legacy that we have aimed to capture in this issue. Indeed, as Rosemary Hennessy recognizes in her contribution, Kevin's work even has the ability to speak directly to those grieving him: "But I think he would tell us to stop crying now and fold our grief into the aspirations that shaped so much of his writing. Re-reading his work has helped me to recognize the politics of vulnerability he championed: that to be vulnerable is to dwell amid the damage, and to find in it the queer stance that unearths from loss collective outrage and a refusal to forget."

To that end, the essays collected in this issue highlight both Kevin's own work, as well as work he has directly inspired. The first three essays present a more personal view of Kevin's legacy as a pioneer of queer Marxism. We begin with Rosemary Hennessy's "Queer Dwelling in the Damage: *In Memoriam* for Kevin Floyd," which utilizes Kevin's numerous publications as a roadmap of not only Kevin's own intellectual journey but that of queer Marxism as a field of study. She articulates the various triangulations of queer theorists and Marxist scholars, such as Adorno, Lee Edelman, and Jose Muñoz that Kevin employed to forge a dialectical understanding between queer theory and Marxism.

In "Remembering Kevin Floyd: Reflections on our Continuing Debt to his Work and Thought," Neil Larsen describes Kevin's presence in and contributions to MLG and how he so completely encapsulated the spirit of the organization. He then goes on to present a personal account of Kevin's growth as a Marxist scholar, paying particular attention to *The Reification of Desire*, as well as Kevin's discussions of "automatic subject." In a similar vein, Peter Drucker's "Kevin Floyd's Foundational Queer Marxism: A Tribute" outlines how Kevin paved a new road for queer Marxism that more actively engages with queer theory. This active engagement allows for a synthesis of queer theory and Marxism, as opposed to a struggle to choose between the two.

The next two essays are written by two people who were directly mentored by Kevin while in graduate school. The first, David Pritchard, met Kevin at MLG and, though he only saw him once or twice a year, Kevin's impact on his work cannot be

easily measured. His essay here, "Poetry, Sexuality, Totality: On Kevin Floyd and Steve Benson," uses the central claims of *The Reification of Desire* to analyze the avant garde poetics of the Language Poets, in particular Steve Benson's long poem "Blue Books." His reading of Benson's various types of improvisation shines new light on the perennial modernism versus realism debate in order to "sublate this stale binary" and instead examine recent forms of "militant poetics" and how they foreground the question of totality, as opposed to aesthetic particulars.

The second, Allie Brooks, worked with Kevin at Kent State, where he was her dissertation director until his untimely death. Similarly to Kevin's synthesis of queer theory with Marxism, Brooks' essay, "'Women's Work' and the Reproduction of Labor: Revisiting Seminal Marxist Feminist Texts to Reconstitute a Subject for Feminist Identity," advocates for a type of Marxist feminism that avoids not only class reductionism but also gender reductionism. In other words, she argues that a re-reading of second-wave Marxist feminists of the 1970s will reveal that the particular forms of exploitation seemingly reserved for women were "never about reproductive organs but about the reproduction of labor." Through this re-reading, then, a Marxist feminist understanding of labor can expand beyond the questions of sex or gender to include all identity groups that are especially exploited by capital.

The final two essays in this issue are re-printed from previous issues of *Mediations*. Jen Hedler Phillis's review of Kevin's book, *The Reification of Desire*, underscores how this text not only advocates for both queer theory and Marxism, but also reinvigorates our understanding of the central keywords and "orthodox arguments" of both theories. In other words, beyond an inter-weaving of these two theories, Kevin reinterprets and reimagines their respective tenets to show a hidden compatibility. This review also homes in on three of Kevin's particular readings: that of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and the gentrification of queer neighborhoods in New York City, in order to emphasize both the scope and impact of Kevin's intervention in queer and Marxist scholarship.

We end this issue with the words of Kevin himself. This essay, "Reading Life and Death," was featured in our Spring 2015 issue on Surface Reading and is an eerily timely discussion of the "epidemic of signification" that surrounded the rise of AIDS. Through a reading of Samuel Delany's *Plagues and Carnivals*, he shows how the construction and interpretation of "truth" can, quite literally, be a matter of life and death. The parallels of this moment and Kevin's presentation of it to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated. For example, this sentence rings just as true, if not more so, today: "Reading that proliferates meaning also produces, in this case, a truly frightening social incoherence."

Of course, we cannot hope to adequately capture the importance and growing impact of Kevin's work, nor his personal impact on the lives of his students and mentees, colleagues, friends, and family. Rather, our goal is to present a small tribute to Kevin and his work in order to further his legacy in MLG and Marxist thought

more generally.

Lastly, then, I want to say on behalf of the editorial board of *Mediations*, as well as the entire MLG: Thank you, Kevin, for all that you have given to each of us, to the MLG, and to queer Marxism. We love you and we miss you.

-Melissa Macero, for the *Mediations* editors

Queer Dwelling in the Damage: *In Memoriam* for Kevin Floyd

Rosemary Hennessy

On June 22, 2019 at the annual Marxist Institute on Culture and Society, many of Kevin Floyd's comrades gathered at the University of Illinois in Chicago to honor his work. The theme for this year's institute was Intelligent Idealisms, and it marked the 50th anniversary of the Marxist Literary Group. Kevin was a longtime active member of the MLG. He had just assumed its presidency, and for decades, he had contributed to this journal. That fall, Kevin was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Like many attending the anniversary event that week, I was still reeling with the shock of his illness and rapid decline. Unlike Kevin, I had not been a faithful attendant of the MLG summer institute, but I knew him well as a colleague, and it was a privilege to be invited to speak about his work. His family requested that we record our panel, and their virtual presence as well as Kevin's in the room that afternoon was palpable.

I began my remarks by saying that in preparing what I had to say, I was afraid, worried actually, that I would cry when I spoke. A lot. The crying, that is. I was afraid it would be the kind of weeping that once you start you can't stop, possibly for minutes, even longer. A friend advised me that rather than pretend I could handle this, I should just admit my sadness and fear. My vulnerability. I did. Even then, my voice quivered and against my will, the tears began spilling. Through them, I could see the faces of the others, bereft, mourning our loss, and Kevin's, and his family's in the face of the unfathomable.

A year later, I want our grief at Kevin's suffering from this cancer and his death in November 2019 to bear witness to his rare gifts, his brilliant intelligent idealism, and his work. I feel sure that Kevin would understand our profound sadness. But I think he would tell us to stop crying now and fold our grief into the aspirations that shaped so much of his writing. Re-reading his work has helped me to recognize the politics of vulnerability he championed: that to be vulnerable is to dwell amid the damage, and to find in it the queer stance that unearths from loss collective outrage and a refusal to forget.

Ever since 1998 when I first read Kevin Floyd's extraordinary article, "Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies," published in *Cultural Critique*, he has been my intellectual hero. This essay appeared the year Kevin received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa, the year he was appointed Assistant Professor at Kent State. In it, he offers a groundbreaking historical and materialist history of sexuality. I remember first reading it as if it were yesterday. As each paragraph unfolded, I found myself managing a visceral sense of ecstasy and panic: here was someone opening up the very path I thought I was carving out between Marxism and queer theory, and doing it so comprehensively, historically, generously. Since then, I have always known I have been working in Kevin's shadow pursuing a course he first laid out there.

History has a way of blunting the edges of debates that once sharply formed an emergent field of knowledge. The argument Kevin makes in that essay was indeed making history in ways that may be difficult to appreciate twenty years later. He was challenging a widely held idea underpinning an exciting new body of work that called itself queer theory: the notion that sexuality studies and Marxism are incompatible. In queer theory circles, which were then the cutting edge of intellectual life in the humanities and social sciences, Marxism was considered outdated and essentially useless for understanding sexuality. Yet here was a guy making the case for a queer marxism. In the next few years, prominently published interventions in queer thought would begin turning to the vocabulary of Marxism with a renewed and explicit seriousness. Among them were the works of Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, Jasbir Puar, Martin Manalansan and others. By 2012, however, Kevin was still able to assert in his characteristic quirky way, "We seem to be in a moment in which Marxism and queer studies remain separate, but on the other hand don't." A properly dialectical response to the ostensible opposition between them, he continues, "is to be found, today, in the very place where Marxist intellectuals may least expect to find it: within queer thought itself." "But," he continues, "one would have to be in the habit of following queer studies in order to know this."¹ Kevin's extraordinary intellectual contribution is precisely his formulation of that properly dialectical response through his deep engagement with both bodies of work. Based in a rigorously historical and materialist method, his way of reading is at its core dialectical. From an immanent engagement with both Marxist and queer archives, he proceeds to tease out of their phobic polarization common historical roots and shared political desires across capitalism's economic and ideological restructuring.

In his reading of that polarization, utopia is a central and recurring preoccupation. In fact, it is fair to say that the concept of utopia is the conceptual linchpin in Kevin's case for a queer Marxism. It is present in his early attention to capitalism's discontinuity and to the critical knowledges from below to whom it bears witness, a perspective he develops in his case for "The Importance of Being Childish." Here he reads the representative work of Lee Edelman² and José Muñoz³ in relation to Theodor

Adorno as a teacher of non-identity, temporality, and utopian thought. If you have never read this essay of Kevin's, read it now. And if you have, I hope you read it again. As you do, I believe you will find yourself, as I did, listening to Kevin, the exquisite teacher and reader, speaking to you about an unfathomable present and future. Here he astutely parses out from the least likely queer writers to be paired—Lee Edelman and José Muñoz—a way of understanding utopian temporality both unlike and akin to Adorno's. As Kevin follows the tracks laid down by the figure of the child in the work of each, he makes visible to his readers the complex relationship between progress and utopia, history and time.

Progress is for Adorno internally contradictory. It is both stasis and dynamism. As stasis or empty time, progress is like death. It is what Adorno recognizes as capitalism's power to continue producing more of the same, and in that sense, it is narcissistic. Even as progress for Adorno is the reproduction of capital's social relations, however, Kevin reminds us that it also "represents for Adorno a genuinely historical, dynamic, social movement forward." Moreover, progress "also represents a revolutionary break in time that interrupts the constant repetition of that which merely is."⁴ In other words, for Adorno, both narcissistic and utopian temporality are irreducible dimensions of historical progress itself that cannot be reconciled.⁵ "The devastation wrought by progress can be mended if at all only by its own resources never through a restoration of the previous conditions that were its victim."⁶ This discontinuity that progress harbors—"its violent and telling manifestations of its volatile nonidentity with itself"—constitutes the materiality of utopian aspiration.⁷ Unlike Benjamin, Adorno sees progress as neither simply catastrophic repetition nor a redeeming ideal. Rather, for him it is structured by their contradiction. Capital's triumph over the most radical collective energies indeed does recur, but its repetitive and continuous narcissistic time is interrupted continually by the historical discontinuity of its utopian destruction. Thus, for Adorno, utopia is not conceptualized as "abstract negativity, but as inseparable from damaged life."⁸

Kevin reads Edelman's critique of capitalism's reproductive futurism and his case for queer non-identity and negativity in *No Future* as deeply engaged with Adorno yet misunderstanding this concept of utopia. His reading of Edelman is perverse in that he recognizes even in Edelman's abstracted ahistorical concept of negativity traces of Adorno's utopian destruction. Edelman dismisses utopian thought as a break from the present that can only result in the end of time, in stasis, or death. But for Adorno, insofar as death signifies a break from the way things are, from the status quo, it is identical to utopian aspiration. The form such a utopian break takes for Adorno, however, is not a deathly plenitude but a non-identity with the present whose destruction we imagine through our rage.

Triangulating Edelman and Adorno with José Muñoz, Kevin celebrates Muñoz's longstanding engagement with utopian thought and his insistence to bring utopia down to earth. He sees in the practices of the racialized queer kids Muñoz represents

in *Cruising Utopia* aesthetic performances of queer world making that enact a utopia inseparable from damaged life. Here in the devastated urban spaces of New York City, a queer politics enacts counter-history to neoliberal progress. For Muñoz, these queer kids of color represent a willful insistence that echoes Ernst Bloch's utopian refusal eloquently formulated as "not yet." This is an insistence "to see an apparently neutralized political present 'laden with potentiality,' to find political hope in the face of abundant evidence of its absence, in the face of privatization, lockdown, 'security'".⁹ Such a conception of utopia rescues queer politics from Edelman's abstract deathly non-identity. It is not an abstraction nor a transcendent escape into no-time. If it is idealistic, its idealism is grounded in the historical discontinuity that conditions continuity, the "indeterminacy and irreducibly historical character of the 'not yet'" inseparable from loss, anxiety, damage and danger.¹⁰

This dialectical and material relation between stasis and change, what is and what can be, undergirds the tempered political possibilities Kevin highlights from his earliest work: of collective resistance and critical imagination, of public discourse and activism that can emerge out of a thoroughly commodified process of community and subject building.¹¹ Such possibility is historically grounded potential manifest in practices of irruptive discontinuity. These practices constitute the seedbed of the revolutionary proposition from which queer marxism's aspirational praxis springs. The implications of this conception of utopia for politics are profound. Under pressure from queer insights, Kevin nudges Marxism to confront its own "symptomatic sexual blindness" and to revise several of its central concepts, among them the subject of revolutionary political agency.¹² Clearly committed to honoring the political and intellectual contributions of gay and lesbian social movement, yet facing squarely the incorporation of homosexuality by capitalism, he articulates the insights of queer theory's critique of identity into a historical and materialist conception of dialectical change. It is an argument that places Kevin Floyd even still on the cutting edge of a new generation of scholars.

This groundbreaking work is nowhere more evident than in his first book. Kevin published *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* with the University of Minnesota Press in 2009. It is his magnum opus. It is also without question the most notable advance in twenty-first century materialist work on Marxism and sexuality. Here he confronts the polarized terrain that divided the study of sexuality from the critique of capital for over a century. Through a rigorous reading of the leading intellectual theorists of materiality, gender, and sexuality, he reveals the reification of the erotic as materially linked to the commodification of social life and the deskilling of the workforce, both overdetermined historical conditions for the emergence of incongruent forms of politics. The same forces that made anti-heterosexist politics possible also marked the defeat of certain forms of working-class struggle. From a forthrightly Marxist standpoint, he sets out to probe that uneven development and split, to foreground not the interdependence of class and sexuality nor their

intersectionality but rather their historical specificity and “the liberating capacity of contradiction.”¹³

The brilliant interventions of this book are multiple: it redirects Marxist scholars to fresh readings of classic texts and re-orientes queer theory to address the historical formation of gendered and sexual subjects as capital accumulation shifts from its Fordist to its neoliberal phases. Two concepts anchor these interventions and Kevin’s argument for queer Marxism: reification and totality. “A queer critique of the reification/totality dialectic that is also a Marxian concretizing of this dialectic is my most basic objective,” he tells us, “an objective that insists throughout on the simultaneous convergence and divergence of these open, unfinished, forms of critical knowledge.”¹⁴ “What might Marxian versions of totality thinking look like,” he asks, “if they really did incorporate a rigorous account of the complex heteronormative dimensions of the social totality they aspire to map?”¹⁵

Again, somewhat perversely—and dialectically—Kevin claims that in such a map Marxism and queer theory actually share an effort to think totality. He sees in queer theory’s scrutiny of heteronormative exclusions and its concept of performativity traces of Marxism’s aspirational conception of social totality, a shared perspective that reads critically capital’s continual imposition of new forms of social differentiation. The aspiration to totality, he reminds us, aims to comprehend capital’s simultaneous unity and differentiation. It is, in short, knowledge capable of negating reification. In wrestling with the concept of reification, Kevin returns most pointedly to Georg Lukács who understands reification as totality’s dialectical other. Reification in this sense is the “*misapprehension* of capitalist social relations” and its processes of social differentiation.¹⁶ In developing this relation, Kevin turns to another theorist of reification, Fredric Jameson. Unlike Lukács, Jameson enables us to see that the processes of reification do indeed distort, normalize, and police, but they also open up capitalist differentiations to possibilities for collective subjectivity that break reification’s spell.¹⁷ This contradictory feature of reification shapes capital’s historical formations of sexuality and desire and becomes a condition of possibility for the development of queer forms of critical knowledge.

One of the strengths of *The Reification of Desire* is that it presents these claims through a critical practice grounded in history. Kevin traces the reification of desire at the turn of the twentieth century as capital managed its crises of accumulation through the engineered rationalization of production and the ideological inducement of desiring subjects that accompanied the advance of consumer culture. He fleshes out “the relation between the dynamics of capital accumulation as they develop over a century in the United States and a reification of sexual desire that attributes to bodies certain new normalized forms of sexual and potentially critical, subjectivity.”¹⁸ The hetero-homo binary, he argues, became a way to manage anxieties about changing gender norms as Fordism eroded a Victorian patriarchal gender hierarchy centered on manhood and womanhood and replaced it with mid-century masculine and feminine

performance. In chapters on disciplined and performative bodies he turns to cultural icons of masculinity, among them Hemingway's bullfighter and the Texas cowboy, that represented heteronormative and homosexual difference and reshaped national allegories. In tracing the disarticulation of sexuality from nineteenth-century gender norms, Kevin nonetheless keeps a keen eye on the persistence of patriarchal gender hierarchies and insists that the reification of sexual desire requires a qualitatively new epistemology of gender and a politics attentive to this history.¹⁹

Kevin's case for a queer Marxism that accounts for the history of gender formation remains peerless in its rigor, range, and reach. In addition to Jameson, Lukács, and Adorno, he engages the writings of Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, but also those of Samuel Delaney and David Wojnarowicz, Judith Butler, Herbert Marcuse, and others. The chapter on Marcuse is especially important. Here Kevin's keen historical and dialectical method reads the aspirations and limits of Marcuse's concept of reification. He details its interface with a Freudian discourse saturating the mid-century U.S. state apparatus, cultural scene, and homosexual politics. And he puts Marcuse in conversation with the minoritizing versus universalizing typology of Eve Sedgwick. Most importantly, his analysis highlights the historical tensions and correlations between Marcuse's thought and the efforts of the Gay Liberation movement to translate theory into collective political subjectivity.

In addition to his interventions into cultural theory, Kevin made major contributions to literary criticism and twentieth-century American Studies. His readings of the representation of masculinity in Ernest Hemingway's work brings a fresh perspective to one of the most over-studied figures in literary and cultural history. At the same time, Kevin is an adept reader of less widely read texts—for example John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*. His analysis of the film as an allegory of three embedded historical moments—the Vietnam War, an emerging Gay Liberation movement, and the crisis in global capital—is original and cogent. The project on masculinity that he launched with Stefan Horlacher of Dresden University focuses on the comparative study of Post-45 and contemporary discourses of masculinity in the U.S. and the U.K. It was awarded a Fulbright award as well as an Alexander von Humboldt grant, initiated shared ventures between Dresden University and Kent State, provoked fruitful intellectual exchanges, and produced two co-edited volumes. All of this groundbreaking work is propelled by Kevin's relentless focus on capital's continual advance and its impossible full recuperation of cultural forms.

Not least of all, Kevin's recent work on social reproduction and the bioeconomy is a major contribution to feminist thought. I had the privilege of hearing about this project in its nascent form. Over the years, I would see Kevin from time to time at conferences, and it was always a treat to catch up. In 2015 at the American Studies Conference in Toronto, we met for drinks and Kevin was his usual effervescent self, talking a mile a minute and brimming over with his latest idea for an essay that addressed the biopolitical turn in feminist work on social reproduction. The idea became his

essay “Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life,” which was published the next year in *Historical Materialism*. Feminists had recently begun debating how to understand the bio-economy’s investment in surrogacy and the harvesting of reproductive tissue from stem cells. Several of them (most notably Kalindi Vora, Catherine Waldby, and Melinda Cooper)²⁰ were addressing these developments as relocations of the labor relation to the biological processes of life itself. In his careful reading of these arguments, Kevin makes the case that attributing value-producing agency to sheer biological substance is problematic. Doing so, he claims, assumes a capacity for autonomous value production that obscures the history and sociality of bio-reproduction. There is a danger in granting biological materiality a capacity for the autonomous production of value, he contends, because it abstracts life from capital as a social relation. Arguments that vitalize labor or that see life forms as self-valorizing, he argues, assign capital to a position external to labor and life. He counters that the biomedical mode of reproduction, facilitated by the conjuncture of finance and biotechnology, is best understood in relation to the expansion of capital relative to labor in capital’s latest phase. Here he quite incisively addresses the historical conjuncture we are living in terms of the expansion of debt on the one hand and surplus populations on the other.²¹ This approach to understanding the absorption of bio-technically abstracted life into value circuits relocates these processes in the global relations of labor that condition the export of people and the growing number of surplus populations in need of strategies for survival. In capital’s newest wave of expansion, diminishing opportunities to perform wage labor accompany the growth of the bioeconomy. As a result, increasing numbers of disposable people, many of them women, are forced to sell the living materiality of their bodies.²² Some enter the pool of reproductive labor that crosses global households; others are disposable populations unable to work. Still others are the “vital remainder” of “bio-available populations,” many of whom risk their health and even their lives in clinical trials, organ harvesting, and blood donation schemes.²³

Kevin’s analysis offers a way of thinking that is eerily prescient and attuned to the impact of the Corona virus pandemic whose effects we now struggle to comprehend. Moreover, here, as throughout his work, Kevin’s analysis invites us never to forget that capital continues to accumulate through exploitative social relations. He characterizes the bio-medical mode of social reproduction as “an emergent, gendered variation on a very old story of financial plunder”—that is, capital’s reduction of feminized bodies to a condition of value-dissociated abstract life.²⁴ In the daily reports of those bodies now exponentially impacted by COVID-19, the biomedical mode of social reproduction comes clearly into focus, as does the reduction of some essential labor to value-dissociated life. Statistics on the virus in the United States to date indicate its disproportionately lethal impact on the poor, on prisoners, and especially Black and Latino Americans.²⁵ These stark numbers throw into relief the historical pattern of persistently relegating those bodies that have been racially marked into value-

dissociated life.

As his essay on childishness reminds us, however, even in times of massive destruction, within the contradictions of capitalist devastation a persistent non-identity with the way things are endures. As he suggests there, marxist feminist analysis, as only one of many proliferating ‘knowledges from below,’ recognizes that this refusal and reflexive self-awareness points the way to a conception of political agency that cries both “Not” and “Yet.”

In these challenging times of illness and lockdown, I miss Kevin’s clear and incisive reading of contemporary developments. We sorely need his insistence that a Marxist perspective is also fundamentally a queer and a feminist one, which is to say an intelligent idealism. This is a stance committed to making evident capital’s brutal and evolving accumulation of value through the cultural marking of disposable labor and life. It is a perspective that intelligently recognizes the damage of entrepreneurial survival that externalizes death or encodes it in progress even as its down to earth idealism insists the future is not elsewhere but here.

It is significant that Kevin finds the figure for such a perspective in his reading of queer and Marxist thought where childhood appears as the emblem of possibility and discontinuity, the other story that history shelters. This is not the childhood of nostalgia or sentimentality, nor of abstract potential, innocence, or rebirth. For Kevin, the childhood he finds in Adorno and Munoz “figures a critical perspective on the lie of formal equivalence, the lie of identity, an ability to see the naked violence of capital, the sheer strangeness of it.”²⁶ One of the reasons *Minima Moralia* is a distinctive text of Adorno’s, he tells us, “is its endorsement of this standpoint and its relation to another well known, explicit, personal one signaled in its famous subtitle: ‘reflections from the damaged life.’”²⁷ To dwell amid the damage is childishly to refuse to forget, and it is indeed a queer stance. What is childhood but the simple awareness of what constitutes life and death, an awareness of the contradictions the resigned adult no longer sees? This queer childish stance seems to me to capture something essentially Kevin whose lucidity and playfulness accompanied his most incisive assessments of capital’s “historically radical unnatural character,” its violence, lies, and discontinuity.²⁸

Kevin’s work reveals that he thought deeply about death and about truth as a matter of life and death. For him, some representations of truth can be—are—aimed at extinguishing life. And certain forms of life rest upon disallowing other forms of life, queer forms of life. It is, of course, Kevin’s persistent pursuit of a life-affirming politics that makes his death so crushing. I wrote to him after the cancer had him in its grip that I hoped he was able to embrace this untimely and all too concrete and impossible disease that came into his life as he has so much else—with passion and outrage. It has been an honor for me to follow Kevin’s outrageous clarity through the twists and turns of his professional life and to learn from his writing, his critical eye guiding my thinking like a lodestar marking the path, his sassing, irreverent manner

brightening our encounters.

He has been that guide, of course, for so many others who have been animated and inspired by his discerning mind and restless spirit. In his writing, that mind and spirit propel Kevin's clear prose, which can explain and distill dense theoretical arguments and tease out historical connections without losing any of their complexity. This was one of his many gifts. It is also the mark of an effective teacher. Graduate students I have directed through their doctoral program in English at Rice University, among them Kim Macellaro and Joanna Fax, valued Kevin Floyd's writing as precisely this sort of teacher. Along with many other students and anonymous readers who Kevin mentored unknowingly from afar, they were major fans of his, and they found in his work a luminous guide. As long as there are books and journals, generations of readers will continue to find such a teacher in Kevin's work where his voice invites them to locate and multiply queer dwellings amid the damage. His expansive energy remains in the illuminating imprint he has left on entire fields of study and on the lives of so many like me who, in the fullest utopian sense he instructs us to grasp, love him and aspire to pursue the childish life-making paths he has opened.

Notes

1. Kevin Floyd, "The Importance of Being Childish," *Works and Days* 30.1-2 (2012): 323.
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3. José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
4. Floyd, "Childish" 331.
5. "Childish" 332.
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11. Kevin Floyd, "Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradictions in American Studies," *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 188.
12. Kevin Floyd, *Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 5.
13. Floyd, "Making History" 172.
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15. *Reification of Desire* 9.
16. *Reification of Desire* 17.
17. *Reification of Desire* 22.
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21. Kevin Floyd, "Automated Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life," *Historical Materialism* 24.2 (2016): 76.
22. Floyd, "Automated Subjects" 71.
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25. See "COVID-19 in Racial and Minority Groups" on the CDC's website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.
26. "Childish" 332.
27. "Childish" 332.
28. "Childish" 328.

Neil Larsen. "Remembering Kevin Floyd: Reflections on our Continuing Debt to his Work and Thought."
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Remembering Kevin Floyd: Reflections on our Continuing Debt to his Work and Thought

Neil Larsen

Prologue: who and what we have lost

The Marxist Literary Group is not an organization accustomed to the adulation of its leading members, much less to personality-cults. At the same time, at least over the twenty-five years or so of my involvement with it, it *has* built up a definite *esprit de corps*, something anyone who has ever attended an annual MLG Institute on Society and Culture over at least the last fifteen years or so has surely experienced. But it is, as I reckon it, precisely the kind of group spirit apt to grow out of a form of collectivity wary of leaders who become inaccessible to rank and file members or of elevating them into the objects of deferential obeisances.

To explain this would probably require delving into details from the organization's past about which I'm neither quite old enough nor sufficiently knowledgeable to be very informative. Indeed, it's unfortunate that the MLG lacks, so far, any genuinely comprehensive account of its history as an organization¹; and the time frame within which that lack might be redeemed is fast disappearing. After fifty or more years of its effectively continuous existence as an organization, those individuals who were present at and responsible for the MLG's founding are, in most cases, now in their seventies and eighties, while others are, by now, probably and sadly past consulting.

Nor, as the traumatic and bitterly grievous occasion for this issue of *Mediations* makes all too clear, can any of us predict very safely where or how we will find ourselves on the occasion of, say, future gatherings at ICS — on the still further assumption that the current species of failed state that is the contemporary US can ensure the minimally adequate standards of public health required for even modest, relatively downscale events such as ICS to take place.

Anecdotal accounts of the MLG's beginnings in the late 1960s and early 1970s and of its further evolution during the 1980s nevertheless make it fairly clear that any egalitarian *ethos* the MLG may now be able to claim for itself has had to be built up over

time. The MLG's openness to and encouragement of graduate student participation on all levels, for instance, and its rejection of academic or other traditional intellectual hierarchies and star-worshipping practices were evidently not always such well-established norms.

Indeed, though it may seem ironic, it is in fact probably no accident that the MLG originated and continues, formally, to function as one of numerous subset organizations within the Modern Language Association (MLA). I say 'ironic' because, for almost as long as I can remember, the MLG has tended to find its identity in, among other things, an antipathy for the hierarchical and ultra-competitive culture of the MLA, an organization in which, at the same time, many if not most of the MLG's younger members, at least, are obliged to participate as well. Anyone who has ever known what it was like to take refuge from the insidious atmosphere of an annual MLA convention at a traditional MLG/*Minnesota Review* cash bar knows all about this — even if such gatherings often were and perhaps still are, as a rule, always also the coolest place to be. At MLA, of course, you could never feel entirely free of the urgent pressure to look over your shoulder for someplace else that was better for your career. But once ensconced inside the MLG tent, at least, the capitalist ideologies responsible for legitimating academic labor markets and increasingly massive academic under- and unemployment were explicitly *non grata*, and it at least became easier to imagine a world in which, say, getting a living by teaching literature — not the worst pretext for studying and teaching Marxism — was not only something open to anyone but in fact didn't need any apology at all.

And, even better than that, and as if providing that idea with sensuous, individual human form, at an MLG cash bar you might also glimpse across the room, much to your delight and relief, the tall figure of Kevin Floyd and hear, above the murmur of the many animated conversations underway, the sounds of his faintly Texan drawl and of his explosive laugh.

In Kevin, our late and bitterly mourned comrade, had not the Marxist Literary Group found, after all, a near perfect embodiment of this *esprit de corps*--found, as one might put it, its *genius*? I do not use this latter word, as ought to be clear by now, in its more vulgar sense as, to cite an online dictionary, a "person endowed with extraordinary mental superiority" — although this is not to deny that Kevin's was an extraordinary intellect. Some will likely recall here Walter Benjamin's encomia against the Romantic cults of 'creativity' and 'genius' in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," cults that, as Benjamin observed in his most celebrated essay, the 'proletarianizing' impetus of art's technological reproducibility was poised to sweep away but which fascism, with its 'aestheticizing of politics,' was intent on preserving and re-deploying². These are ideas with which Kevin was surely in sympathy.

I do not, however, use the term 'genius' here in its Romantic but rather in its now more antique sense (plural: "genii") as the "attendant spirit of a person or place" —

or, as the case may be here, the spirit of an organization or group of people. At any rate, for me at least, the sheer irresistibility of Kevin's personality and the way in which it gave spontaneous, individual expression to the social atmosphere of summer Institutes and the MLG itself, readily invites this idea.

I perhaps needn't mention names here, but this is not for a moment to forget how fortunate the MLG has been, before Kevin's all too brief tenure, in finding other exceptional presiding officers³ among its ranks. Nor have we been strangers to the tragic, early loss of other, much admired, beloved and now likewise grievously mourned MLG members and Institute regulars: I am thinking here of the former MLG president and renowned Marxist literary scholar and critical theorist, Michael Sprinker (1950-1999), and of Michael's comrade-in-arms, the critic, novelist and MLG regular Fred Pfeil (1949-2005). Both, like Kevin, died at tragically young ages, claimed by the same illness that took Kevin from us--capitalism's every day, default-setting plague of cancer. And, although the organization has had its occasional bouts of acrimony, at least during my quarter century of more or less regular Institute attendance, the MLG's practice of consensus-based self-governance speaks to its exceptionally good institutional karma over the years—and probably helps to explain its no less exceptional institutional longevity: founded--depending on the chronologist--in 1969 or 1970, 2020 did indeed mark MLG's fiftieth year (and counting) of continuous, active organizational existence. Members of the MLG are rarely strangers to radical political practice and, as Marxists, are certainly no strangers to polemics, so might not this durable, amicable and hale *esprit* be a side benefit of the "literary" component of the MLG, the fact that its work is mainly intellectual, not to say theoretical or even, in a more ancillary fashion, academic? Not likely. Rather, in the end, this beneficent organizational culture — one that Kevin embodied so remarkably well — surely has as much if not more to do with the "M" in 'MLG,' i.e., with the emancipatory, egalitarian, radically utopian and anti-capitalist *ethos* of Marxism itself — the Marxism of both Old and New Lefts as it lives on and lives in the MLG and as it is epitomized and emblazoned in the life and work of Kevin Floyd.

The Reification of Desire, before and after

The profound shock, grief and sense of loss that overwhelmed the MLG when — sometime after many of us saw him for the last time in June, 2018 at an Institute at Albany University in New York — we learned that Kevin was gravely ill, followed by the anticipated but no less dreaded news of his death on November 7, 2019 are, as I write this in early 2021, still vivid and intense. And they seem likely to stay that way for a long time to come — one measure of how strong a bond had grown up between Kevin and many of us in the MLG over the many years during which his regular presence at Institutes and at all levels of the organization had made it hard to imagine it at all without him.

But losing Kevin is no less a general loss for the progressive development of

Marxism per se as a social, cultural and aesthetic theory—and, not least, clearly, as a theory of gender and sexuality. *The Reification of Desire*⁴, Kevin’s major work and one that rapidly elevated him to a singular and commanding stature at the convergence of Marxism and Queer Theory, was already a decade old in 2019. Reading its pages again now instantly re-confirms how and why it was to become an almost immediate classic of Marxist critical theory.

This is something driven home for me in an especially personal way, having once carried on a lengthy correspondence with Kevin about his Ph.D. dissertation, a work then still in-progress but eventually to evolve into *The Reification of Desire*. This was in the early to mid-1990s when I was teaching at Northeastern University in Boston and Kevin was still a graduate student at the University of Iowa. The principal occasion for our exchange of emails were questions he had raised concerning the work that, as much if not more than any other, still informs and foregrounds *The Reification of Desire*, Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (hereafter, *HCC*) and especially its centerpiece, *fons et origo* of the Western Marxism to which it subsequently gave rise, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” *HCC*’s central concept of reification, a still controversial extension and extrapolation of Marx’s theory of commodity-fetishism, was one with which Kevin, although by then I think convinced of its potential centrality to the project of mediating Queer Theory and Marxism, was simultaneously struggling to come to terms in those days, given the hostility of some currents of Queer Theory for its dialectically paired concept of totality. He had read and had been influenced by Jameson’s still widely cited essay on *HCC*, “History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project,⁵” But more about this in a moment.

Kevin and I had met not long before, thanks to our shared involvement in MLG and the summer Institutes of those years, and not the least of my reasons for setting aside the second half of June each year for regular pilgrimages to ICS was the prospect of long and sometimes raucous conversations with Kevin during breaks between panels, often — as I will always vividly remember — gathered with the other smokers (Kevin had yet to quit) on pavements outside the series of ICS conference halls at places like the University of Illinois in Chicago, Georgetown, George Mason, Portland State in Oregon, the University of California, Davis, Ohio State, Concordia University in Montreal and St. John’s in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. I can’t say for certain whether Kevin was there at all of those places and times, but my memories of them is inseparable from memories of him.

I wish now that I had kept copies of those emails, but re-reading *The Reification of Desire* all these years later does at least restore for me the gist of what they must have contained as I recognize throughout its pages evidence of Kevin’s occasional demurrals and, sometimes, his carefully constructed refutations of what was then my often passionate and enthusiastic advocacy of “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” and my own attempts to persuade Kevin of its correctness. Re-reading *The Reification of Desire* now also becomes an ironic register of how my own

thinking has moved on as I encounter there a critique of reification après Lukács that somewhat uncomfortably reflects back at me what I now, a generation later, recognize as the limitations and dead ends in the version of it I had been espousing to Kevin.

Although generally sympathetic to any attempt at reviving *HCC* and re-inserting it into the left theoretical debates then unfolding, especially during the poststructuralist-inflected identity politics shaping ‘cultural studies’ in its then incipient North American variant, what I most remember arguing over with Kevin after first meeting him were, again, the reasons for my dissatisfaction with Jameson’s attempted rehabilitation of *HCC* in the above mentioned essay, which had first appeared in 1988. What I objected to was, as I saw it, Jameson’s watering down of Lukács’ class-based standpoint theory in order to accommodate the non- or supra-class standpoints of what were then being referred to as ‘new social movements.’ This was in no way out of any reluctance on my part towards acknowledging the emancipatory content of struggles against sexism, racism or homophobia and heteronormativity. And my criticisms of this particular foray of Jameson’s into *HCC* and the Marxism of Lukács generally were foregrounded by the grateful acknowledgment of the fact that it had been Jameson, especially in *Marxism and Form* (1974) who had probably done more than anyone else to re-introduce Lukács and *HCC* to North American and Anglophone readers generally.

My disappointment and skepticism regarding what was, ironically, Jameson’s 1988 *defense* of *HCC* rested on the fundamentally theoretical question of whether, in fact, “An Unfinished Project” hadn’t tended to water down if not to falsify the epistemological content and the dialectical methodology of Lukács’ argument in the book. In agreement with *HCC*, and, so I thought, with Marx, I understood class, especially the class struggle pitting labor against capital, as the site of a contradiction that was in turn a deep-structural dimension of bourgeois society, whereas more loosely and ‘culturally’ based social movements lacked this essential structure and therefore could not be held to constitute anti-systemic ‘standpoints’ in the same sense⁶. Regardless, in the end, of whether and how far one credited Lukács’ theory of the ‘imputed’ revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat, in extending his concept of standpoint to the consciousness of non-class-based movements Jameson was — as I still think — coming dangerously close to incurring a basic category-mistake. By obfuscating this essential, structural difference — with the aid of convenient but, for me, basically spurious references to Adorno’s concept of ‘truth-content’ (‘Wahrheitsgehalt’) — Jameson in “Unfinished Project” would be draining *HCC* of its ‘truth-content,’ namely, its grounding in dialectical method and in the categories of Marx’s critique of political economy. Any ‘aspiration to totality’ to which a culturally based social movement might lay claim could not therefore aspire to overcome the reified consciousness generated by the material basis of a capitalist, commodity-producing and exchanging social formation. By neglecting this crucial distinction, I thought, Marxists who took Jameson’s well-intentioned

but, in the end, diffuse and liberalizing reading of *HCC* as a basis for affirming the potentially anti-reifying consciousness of certain ‘new social movements’ regardless of their structural relation to class — or, for that matter, to the social mediations of commodity- or value-form — were, at the very least, misreading *HCC*, and, at worst, providing ‘revolutionary’ alibis for cultural forms of dissidence perfectly at home in bourgeois society.

But this was in the early to mid-1990s, before I had first read and given serious consideration to Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (1993) and its critique of a labor-centered ‘traditional’ Marxism — that of Lukács and *HCC* notably included. Nor had I yet, thanks to Roberto Schwarz and a 1995 sojourn at the University of São Paulo, had my thinking transformed by a first encounter with the value-critical work of Robert Kurz (then newly translated into Portuguese) and, as my German abilities caught up, by the work of other ‘Wertkritik’ theorists, including the Nuremberg value-critical journal *Krisis*⁷ and its 1999 *Manifest gegen die Arbeit* (*Manifesto Against Labor*). Ultimately swayed by the focus, shared by both Postone and *Wertkritik*, on a critique of the value-abstraction per se and on a correspondingly revised and fully historicized situating of class and the class contradiction on a less deeply structural, more derivative and narrowly ‘sociological’ theoretical plane within Marxism, my distrust of Jameson’s well-intentioned but, to be blunt, overly ecumenical and diplomatic reading of Lukács in “An Unfinished Project” has not changed. But, meanwhile, my own reading of *HCC* definitely has.

And so it is that when reading *The Reification of Desire* now I find myself far more open to Kevin’s skeptical and critical reading of *HCC*. If reification — in its origins a theoretical term conceived so as to extend the critique of commodity fetishism beyond the “objective forms of bourgeois society” to its corresponding “subjective forms” — is understood to encompass too broad a range of more generally ‘objectifying’ forms and practices, then every ostensible fragment or fraction within bourgeois society potentially risks being considered an alienated and alienating fetish in itself. My increased openness to criticism of *HCC*, to this extent differing from that evinced in *The Reification of Desire*, does not arise out of any necessary or competing commitment to Queer or to any other ostensibly non-Marxist theory, however, but rather, in line with Postone and value critique, out of a critical rejection of Lukács’ evident conception of the social totality as a totality of *labor*⁸. Reification, accordingly, becomes equivalent to a division or fragmentation of *labor* as itself the fundamental, still to be liberated substance of the social. Postone’s reading of Marx does, in fact, make an appearance in later chapters of *The Reification of Desire* — and Postone, along with value-critique are to enter more fully into his thinking in later works [see below] — but, on balance, Kevin’s more Foucauldian-influenced critique of Lukács, with which I differ, still dominates *The Reification of Desire*.

It could, however, be argued that Kevin’s wariness of *HCC* when it comes, for instance, to the latter’s attribution of the sexual objectification of bodies to the

reifying mentality of a Kantian form of bourgeois morality — an attribution charged by *The Reification of Desire* with being, itself, too resonant of Kantian and bourgeois morality⁹ — clearly does register something else that is, ironically, common to both HCC and Kant's moral philosophy. But what if that, rather than a (for me, still dubious) heteronormative bias built into Lukács' idea of reification, is some version of the Protestant work ethic, including the belief, however inadvertent and unacknowledged among 'traditional' Marxists like the one I probably still was in the early to mid-1990s, that sees sex, for example, as entirely positive but also as a potential diversion from or even drain on productive labor? Such a work ethic was surely commonplace across the 'Arbeiterbewegungs-marxismus' ('workers' movement Marxism') of the Second and Third Internationals, if only somewhat less explicit in the Lukács who did, it is true, adamantly reject Freudian psychoanalysis as still another instance of bourgeois irrationalism. Whatever its theoretical or political source, Kevin's distrust of a work-ethical, labor-fixated Marxism was far more developed and advanced than my own during the first half of the 1990s when I was playing the professor and more seasoned intellectual to Kevin's student Marxist.

I understand this only too clearly now, making me realize how, without knowing it then, I'd have been better off at times apprenticing as Kevin's student--something I freely acknowledge myself to be now to have been many times in the past. And not the least of the many things I continue to learn from re-reading *The Reification of Desire* is just how much my once sometimes hesitant tutoring of its author twenty-five years ago and whatever it was he may have learned from me had also concealed this double edge, this ironic peripeteia. The mix of sadness, anger, regret, disbelief but equally of love and admiration that Kevin's loss evokes in those of us who knew him is something I experience in particular while imagining the conversations, whether spoken or written, that I might still have been carrying on with the author of *The Reification of Desire*--words imagined but also still present, immanently, so to speak — and in that way very much alive—on almost every one of its pages.

But however that may be, there can be no doubt at all about the book's brilliance or about its remarkable breadth and erudition, especially considering the youth of its author. Like the works of Kevin's true master-teacher in the writing of *The Reification of Desire* — without question, I think, Fredric Jameson — the book is surely destined to educate, as Jameson's books did mine, future generations of students in their own 'roads to Marx.'¹⁰

Kevin Floyd as Marxist theoretician: some intellectual-historical contexts

It bears repeating, yet again, that the tragically premature death of Kevin Floyd delivers a grievous blow to progress in mediating the most advanced critical theories of gender and sexuality with simultaneous advances in Marxism's emancipatory critique of capitalism. But Kevin's loss is equally a loss for Marxism as critical theory *tout court*. The answer to the question of what Kevin might have gone on to contribute

in either regard is, in the last analysis of course, probably an imponderable — although one that I will return to, if necessarily speculatively, below. What is clearly the task for those of us who knew, admired and loved him — and one of the best and surest ways to commemorate him — is surely, rather, to study and learn from the extant work itself and to introduce it to our students and to others still new to it.

To my regret, I didn't keep up with Kevin's work after *The Reification of Desire* as carefully as I might have. Others who were to get to know him better, probably, than I did as the years passed and who in some cases were in the process of collaborating with him on joint projects will be in the best position to inform the rest of us about his most recent work and to keep that work in active circulation.

But shortly after news of Kevin's serious illness began to circulate among his friends and fellow MLG'ers, acquaintances among the latter introduced me to one of these more contemporary works. This is an essay entitled "Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life." Published in *Historical Materialism* in 2016,¹¹ "Automatic Subjects" reflects Kevin's continuing concern for the politics of gender, specifically the impact of so-called biotechnology on human and social reproduction and how that has been studied, analyzed and critiqued by a group of radical feminist — and to some extent Marxist-feminist — social scientists, centering in particular on Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby's 2014 Study, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*¹². Here, however, in something of a departure from *The Reification of Desire* and the latter's practice of mediating between the sometimes apparently conflicting theoretical claims of Marxism and Queer theory, the standpoint of analysis and critique has, unequivocally, become that of Marxism *per se*—albeit according to an understanding of the latter that has clearly evolved from what it had been in Kevin's best-known earlier work. To be more specific, the Jamesonian Marxism that orients Kevin's thinking in much of *The Reification of Desire*, without necessarily being repudiated, has given way to a Marxism in which, for example, the value-critical influence of the journal *Endnotes* and of German *Wertkritik* theorists, particularly that of Roswitha Scholz and 'value-dissociation theory'¹³ is in much greater evidence. But this is also a Marxism in which Kevin, dropping the earlier practice — still resonating with Jamesonian 'metacommentary' — of making Marxism into a kind of broker negotiating between a set of pre-existing theoretical *partis pris*, draws more directly on Marx himself, especially the Marx of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. And here the reasoning adheres far more closely than previously to the methodological principles of immanent critique.

But some broader historical and intellectual contextualization will help to understand more precisely how "Automatic Subjects" reflects an overall critical trajectory in Kevin's work and in his contributions to Marxist theory. For, along with all that was and is so extraordinary about him and his individual contributions to Marxism, Kevin Floyd's life and work were and are also representative, on a more global level, of a historic revitalization and growth of Marxist critical theory

historically more or less congruent, not coincidentally, with the MLG's half-century of existence — and, enclosed within that time frame, congruent also with Kevin's own tragically foreshortened life span.

Absent the kind of empirical or systematic study needed to fully confirm it, the following must remain largely speculative. But after almost fifty years of intellectual labor devoted on one level or another to the study and development of Marxism, perhaps I can lay out some reasonably accurate impressions in this regard. This has been a period, after all, in which, to cite one of the more obviously exemplary cases, the expressly Marxist literary and critical theory authored over five decades by Fredric Jameson made his writings, for a considerable time, into the most cited and likely the most widely influential body of literary and cultural theory and criticism for an English-speaking academic public and probably well beyond—a status that has scarcely begun to lapse. This was also a time during which Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* — a now classical work of critical exposition whose legendary clarity, polemical verve and historical contextualization were and are surely inseparable from its explicitly Marxist standpoint — could rapidly become what is still probably the most widely read primer of its kind¹⁴. At the same time, both along with and likely also as a gradual side-effect of its rise to prominence (if not quite preeminence) in the literary academy, Marxism gained at least a relative legitimacy in most of the rest of the Humanities and in those disciplines in the Social Sciences less beholden to corporate and state bureaucratic superintending. And perhaps most dramatic of all has been the steady accumulation of what has by now become, to say the least, an imposing archive of works either about Marx and Marxism or written from an explicitly Marxist standpoint — or both. This archive is almost certainly many, many times larger and more diversified today than it would have been fifty not to say just twenty years ago.¹⁵ The interventions of the New Left and the movements of the 1960s were crucial to this outcome of course. But even so, viewed from the historical vantage point of, let us say, hypothetically, 1952 — the year I happen to have been born — and of what was then a collective critical intelligence subject to outright suppression if not already cowed into self-censorship by the *main mort* of Cold War anti-communism, this is something that, those seventy some years ago, would have been impossible even to imagine, much less predict.

One must not, of course, pass over here the ironic connection — if not implicit *quid pro quo* — between this robust intellectual growth and the simultaneous decline, at least relatively speaking, of Marxism as a viable and effective political movement in many if not all parts of the world — and especially in the metropolitan West since at least the late 1960s and early 1970s, if not earlier. (Any analogy to the formerly 'socialist' East in this respect remains a more complicated one than can be sorted out in these remarks.) This has been accompanied, notoriously, by the migration if not always the outright retreat of Marxists into the sanctuaries sometimes provided by universities, libraries and research institutes. Of course, few if any such sanctuaries

existed or in many cases exist now throughout most of the former Second World or a Third World under outright or de facto US imperial domination. Across Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa — for readers of *Mediations* this murderous history will be too familiar to require rehearsing — Marxists in their thousands if not millions have rarely found refuge in universities and have more often been jailed or killed outright by the armies and death squads of US imperialism or of its proxies, in places like (to name only a few) Indonesia, Vietnam and Central America.

Cold War anti-communism and the reactionary collaborationism of the preponderant sectors of organized labor, especially in the Western metropolis, had in any case already driven the Old Left into the margins of society long before the supposedly tripartite world gave way to the binary, North-South world of globalized neoliberalism. And, three decades after Francis Fukuyama's triumphalist decree of an 'end of history' there is scant indication that this most drastic of the official prohibitions directed at Marxism has as yet been much mitigated, much less reversed. Anti-communism's past onslaughts have, often enough, succeeded in suppressing any Marxist political much less intellectual presence to speak of in what remains of civil societies henceforth given over to religious fundamentalisms, irrational cults and the cynical quiescence demanded of daily survival. Mourning those who have, at whatever level or for whatever purpose, embraced Marxist ideas and perished as a result has rarely been an unfamiliar part of life in those majority sectors of the world where our relative privileges are largely unknown.

The rapid disappearance of the erstwhile 'Second World' of 'actually existing' socialism after 1989 must of course be acknowledged here too, but as many others have observed, the final demise of the Old, Third International Left was widely sensed by the New Left as an anti-climax and did surprisingly little--outside the former 'Second World' itself, at least initially — to deter or dampen the intellectual, critical-theoretical energies increasingly generated by the works of Marx and of Marxism more generally. And, after all, Marxists have long had the counterweight of the chronic, steadily worsening crisis of post-Fordist capitalism itself to thank for the intellectual resilience of the works of Karl Marx and their growing appeal for contemporary readers. As the late Robert Kurz, referring to this resurgent interest in *Capital* and the Marxian opus as a whole even while, after 1989, capitalist ideologues were declaring their author truly and finally dead, "Totgesagte leben länger" — 'those pronounced dead live longer.'

But there is, I think, a still additional irony to Marxism's late 20th and early 21st century intellectual and literary 'flight forward,' more literally intrinsic and, if the phrase can be allowed, 'theory-immanent' in this case to Marxism itself in its current intellectual and academic manifestations. Here again I rely mainly on personal experience and thus may be guilty of distortion or exaggeration, but, given that caveat, I will hazard the observation that even as Marxism in one form or another has grown in explicit influence in the Humanities--which no one much bothers to

police--and the less-well policed Social Sciences there seems to have developed a lag or gap, so to speak, between Marxism as the expression of an ineradicable critical opposition to capitalism's accelerating morbidities and catastrophes (no small thing in itself) and the systematic comprehension and practical subsumption of Marxism as *method*, more precisely as the method, epitomized in *Capital*, of Marx's critique of political economy¹⁶. To characterize this gap in terms first introduced in the middle of the last century by Roman Rosdolsky¹⁷, while an "exoteric," i.e., more immediately historically delimited, nineteenth century Marxism attempts, not always successfully, to adapt itself to the secular transformations of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism, the crucial question persists as to whether, in doing so, the "exoteric" proves consistent with Marxism on the "esoteric" level, Rosdolsky's term for Marx's immanent critique of capitalism in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. If, for Marxism — to echo here Lukács's influential formulation in "What is Orthodox Marxism?" — "orthodoxy refers exclusively to method,"¹⁸ then one may wonder whether this has ever been truer than it is today, as, on the one hand, the chronic and continuously compounded crisis of capitalism just as continuously foregrounds and reinforces the terms of an 'exoteric' Marxism, but, on the other, a lag between 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' nevertheless persists, possibly growing even more aggravated along with existing conditions themselves.¹⁹ In any event, a conjuncture seems to persist in which the immanent question of what constitutes a methodologically 'orthodox' Marxism consistently and repeatedly poses itself.

Albeit still speculatively, one might refine the hypothesis of such a methodological 'lag' still further in observing how, especially post-2008, left intellectual radicals, rather than claiming in once familiar 'postmodern' or 'post-marxist' fashion to have completely reinvented or even surpassed a purportedly outdated 'orthodox' Marxism, evince instead a, so to speak, 'post-orthodox' preference for a revisionism restricted to the more local, sub-doctrinal level of Marxism's individual categories.

Consider for example how common it at one point became during the last couple of decades, especially when 'globalization' had begun to replace 'postmodernity' as the momentary *Zeitgeist* of choice, to allege that Marx's otherwise valid critique of capitalism tended to neglect 'spatial' categories²⁰. This and similar cautiously 'friendly' criticisms not so long ago became almost too numerous to mention but were more recently given (to my mind, unfortunate) traction and credence by Jameson's showcasing, in his 2009 *Valences of the Dialectic* of a rather hastily argued "spatial dialectic."²¹ Suddenly we were being encouraged to revise our thinking as if it were the case that Marx's unquestionably Hegelian dialectic, with its self-evidently necessary privileging of history and temporality, might be corrected or improved by, somehow or other, patching in spatial categories — categories that were never, upon more careful consideration, absent from Marx's thinking in the first place. Never mind the initial, naive *separation* itself, mechanical and blatantly anti-dialectical, of the spatial *from* the temporal, quite as if, for Marx, history were not already assumed to

be taking place *somewhere*.

A comparable practice of theoretical and methodological cherry-picking — a kind of surgical or sub-organic approach to revisionism — takes aim at established categories themselves, especially at those of labor and value. Recall, for example, the autonomist-inspired hubbub over so-called ‘immaterial’ (as well as, in related contexts, ‘communicative’ and ‘affective’) labor, inaugurated by Maurizio Lazzarato but sent into overdrive by the publishing-event-disguised-as-book, timed to coincide with the new millennium, of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000). The ensuing boom in ‘biopolitical,’ Deleuzo-Marxist theoretical commerce that followed upon and accompanied the setting up of the Hardt/Negri franchise is likewise too outsized to receive—and too increasingly remote from actual secular developments to deserve — further attention here. But any lasting or substantive impact it might have had on twenty-first century Marxist theory can probably be measured, if in no other way, by its inability to distract more methodologically ‘orthodox’ and organic Marxists from focusing attention and analysis on the relative disappearance, as a factor of production in postFordist capitalism, of *labor-power* itself, here understood, following Marx’s concept of capital’s organic composition in its actual relative proportionality as variable to constant capital.²²

In the case of value, category revisionism can become even more blatant. Here, as in the case of labor, the number and variety of proposed unorthodox revisions to value theory far exceed the limits of analysis in the present context. A notable irony here is that, as methodologically orthodox work on Marx’s critical theory of value has blossomed since the 1990s, especially in the wake of the influence of Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination* and of work in the German tradition of the ‘Neue Marx Lektüre’ and ‘Wertkritik’, including both the contributions of Michael Heinrich as well as those critical of them²³, there has been a countertendency in the opposite (if not equal) direction. Organized and powerfully backed right-wing attacks on Marx’s value-theory begin, of course, almost simultaneously with the first publication of *Capital*, from Böhm-Bawerk to the rise of marginal utility theory to the founding of the modern discipline of economics itself. Revisionist challenges to orthodox Marxist value theory from what is ostensibly the left can be traced back to the nineteenth century as well, but for the purposes of present-day debates these begin to gain more widespread adherence thanks, for example, to the impact of Habermas’s break with Marx in the 1960s and 1970s and to that of discourse-theoretical works such as Laclau and Mouffe’s 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For instances of category-revisionism focused more exclusively on value per se, one may recall, here, Gayatri Spivak’s 1985 poststructuralist-inspired “Scattered Speculations on the Notion of Value,”²⁴ as much for its considerable influence as for its lack, finally, of any clearly discernible or concrete engagement with Marx. Or take the colorful rise of a ‘postmodern,’ Althusserian Marxism within the discipline of economics itself (at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, at any rate) as reflected in the,

for a time, dramatic career of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* and, for a time, in the massive Marxist conferences it sponsored in Amherst in the 1990s.²⁵

Those sympathetic to Marx and Marxism for whatever reason or to whatever degree have in fact always been confronted with a choice between two possibilities. One is to adopt Marx's methodical, categorial critique of capital and capitalism as itself a vector simultaneously *extrinsic*, aimed at the most fundamental and urgent questions and challenges posed by contemporary history, and yet also *intrinsic*, pointing deeper into the method of that critique itself. The second, although initially it may not appear to diverge from the first, is the aforementioned 'suborganic' practice of seizing upon one or the other of Marx's essential categories in relative isolation with the aim of revising or otherwise amending it and thereby ostensibly correcting the theory as a whole. This, rather than simply jettisoning the question of method altogether and propounding, say, a structuralist-Spinozist or deconstructionist or Deleuzian or a neo-positivist 'analytical' Marxism, seems to have become the more dominant trend in recent years, especially in the wake of the financial crash of 2008. This doubtless reveals something again about the ironic ability of overripe, crisis-afflicted capitalism itself to help Marxism outflank its would be obituarists as well as those intent on denying its legitimacy altogether. But it becomes easier, more rhetorically convenient and, in the final analysis, more credible in light of contemporary historical developments, to contest the adequacy and actuality of Marx and Marxism exclusively on the level of its individual theoretical categories. For all that this may bespeak an intellectual and ideological conjuncture in which anti- and post-marxisms are a harder sell, however, countering this kind of piece-meal approach to revisionism can present an especially complex and refractory challenge to Marxists who, even while arguing the need to take Marxism into previously less familiar territory, remain vigilant against departures or deviations from methodological orthodoxy.

"Automatic Subjects"

This then returns us to "Automatic Subjects," as theoretically grounded and conceptually rigorous an antidote to 'piece-meal,' category-revisionism as one is likely to find anywhere in the Marxist literature of recent decades. Rather than attempt to summarize it here, readers, especially those who knew Kevin, are urged to confirm this for themselves by referring to the aforementioned link²⁶. I will limit the focus of these remarks to the specific manner in which Kevin undertakes to critique the principal exhibit in "Automatic Subjects," the aforementioned *Clinical Labor*, Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby's proposal for a 'biotechnologically' revised conception of labor as theorized in Marx's critique of political economy and in most consistently Marxist elaborations on the latter. Under the heading of "clinical labor," Cooper and Waldby compile a variety of relatively novel technologically-enabled and related processes including gestational surrogacy, the work of experimental drug clinical-trial subjects, the harvesting and marketing of human tissues (e.g., oocytes, fetal

tissue, umbilical-cord blood) for stem-cell industries, the sale and surgical removal of transplantable human organs such as kidneys and even the regeneration of such tissues themselves on the “suborganismic” level of ‘laboring’ stem-cells themselves. Often in common with studies by other contemporary anthropologists and scholars²⁷ focusing on a “biomedical mode of production,” *Clinical Labor*, according to “Automatic Subjects,” proposes “that we need to rethink the very relation between life, labor and value — and that the way the latter two categories, in particular, operate in Marx’s work is inadequate to the critical scrutiny the biotechnological reproduction of life demands.”²⁸

But *are* all such forms of ‘clinical labor’ in fact labor in any sense, much less, as Cooper and Waldby argue, *value-producing* labor? While recognizing *Clinical Labor*’s value and importance as both empirical study and as exposé of the biotechnological industry’s profit-seeking incursion into human reproduction, “Automatic Subjects” unequivocally disputes this more theoretically freighted claim. And, although not explicitly referring to it this way, it argues, in what amounts to a novel and highly original instance of ideology-critique — here both of *Clinical Labor* and of other, similarly ‘bio-Marxist’ anthropological literature — that categorizing ‘biotechnological’ inputs in this way incurs, in a classically ideological inversion, a conceptual “subsumption of capital by labor.” Indeed, according to “Automatic Subjects,” the category of labor, thus revised, usurps, however unwittingly, the role, assigned by Marx to capital, of “automatic subject.”²⁹

What then could account for this ideological inversion? Exposing the quasi-archaeological presence of *operaismo* and the autonomist Marxism of Negri, Fortunati, Lazzarato, Fumagalli, et. al. in current ‘bio-Marxisms’ and the pressure the latter exerts towards inverting of the actual subsumption of labor by capital, “Automatic Subjects” speculates:

if...the autonomist projection of an expansive horizon of value-producing labor represents capital *as* value-producing labor, and if Cooper and Waldby recapitulate this representation, might we then interpret these representations as *allegories* of the real expansion of capital relative to labor?³⁰

If Kevin’s thinking here breaks in no uncertain terms with the category revisionism of Cooper and Waldby and similarly reasoning ‘bio-Marxists’ it initially does so in ways broadly shared by contemporary Marxist critiques of political economy. But in passages such as the following from “Automatic Subjects,” he clearly shows himself to be among the latter’s most advanced cohorts:

Only by occluding the systemic stagnation of accumulation in the present — only by assuming that value has been reduced to pure political command or by insisting, contradictorily, that there is no longer any

meaningful distinction between value and wealth – can contemporary autonomist Marxism sustain its religiously optimistic narrative of labor’s vitality in the present. Cooper and Waldby, meanwhile, taking their distance from a Marxian account of value production they view as stuck hopelessly in the era of welfare-state industrialization, also presuppose the persistence of relatively vigorous value-production characteristic of that era — contending, again, that ‘forms of *in vitro* labor are increasingly central to the valorization process of the post-Fordist economy’, and thereby occluding biotechnological capital’s high organic composition. To confront this analytic subsumption of capital by labor with the real subsumption of labor by capital is also to remind ourselves that this tendency, defined as it is by relative surplus-value extraction, reveals labor to be no more saliently the source of surplus value than (ultimately, tendentially) a barrier to be expelled from valorization altogether. While subsumption tends to suggest the internalization of what was previously external, it is also the case that proletarianized surplus labor is at once inside and outside, at once subsumed and externalized, at once subject to the law of value and dissociated from the valorization process.³¹

But what is both most intriguing and novel about “Automatic Subjects” here is, again, its careful detection of an allegorical relation between the flagrantly ‘suborganic,’ category-revisionism of both autonomist and ‘bio-Marxists’ like Cooper and Waldby and their evident hesitation if not outright refusal to recognize the reality and significance of existing global capitalist crisis conditions, i.e., the intensification of the internal contradictions of capitalism to the point that, even without a viral pandemic, social reproduction itself is thrown into question for hundreds of millions of ‘monetary subjects without money.’ Allegory, conveying the idea of an objective reality subject to a figurative registration and a simultaneous literal disavowal or de-registration, nicely and more precisely characterizes a tendency in which Marxism is simultaneously acknowledged as legitimate and even authoritative and yet purged of its internal, theoretical-methodological consistency (its ‘orthodoxy’ in this sense) and of its capacity as such to grasp the whole of contemporary reality. Without being able to confirm this here in any systematic way I am nevertheless willing to surmise that it is the ‘allegorization’ of capitalist crisis in just the sense given it by Kevin that will also be detectable in other instances of category-revisionism, far from restricted to the bio-Marxisms under critical examination in “Automatic Subjects.”

There is little doubt that Kevin would have gone on to make still further original and extraordinary contributions to Marxism and critical theory, not only in relation to gender and sexuality but to the furthering and developing of Marxism as critical theory *tout court*. If *The Reification of Desire* were not already basis enough for drawing such a conclusion, “Automatic Subjects,” among his last written works, makes this

exceptionally clear. The loss to Marxist thinking and to its future — our loss — is great and unmercifully real. We can only continue to study the work Kevin has left us, to emulate it — and him — and to look carefully at how it can continue to orient our current efforts now and into the future.

So thinking, I wish to close with one final occurrence of mine, again perhaps overly speculative, concerning the third and last of the predications listed in the complete title of ‘Automatic Subjects,’ namely “abstract life.” Kevin devotes relatively less to this concept than he does to those of “automatic subjects” and “gendered labor,” but it is no less suggestive and crucial to his argument as a whole in this essay. See, for example, the following, fuller extension of a passage previously cited:

But if, as I have proposed, the autonomist projection of an expansive horizon of value-producing labor represents capital as value-producing labor, and if Cooper and Waldby recapitulate this representation, might we then interpret these representations as *allegories* of the real expansion of capital relative to labor? And does the autonomist abstraction of life, like the abstraction of life in Cooper and Waldby’s account of ‘regenerative labor’, in this respect capture something salient about the present, though here again in inverted form? To the extent that surplus populations appear today to become absolutely rather than relatively surplus, proletarianization signifies *capital’s* abstraction of life, its tendential reduction of living labor to living inertia, to life at once subsumed by capital and externalized from it. Just as fictitious capital presumes to free itself from the social-labor process, value-producing labor is similarly ‘freed’ from that process in its reduction by capital to a form of proletarianized, value-dissociated surplus vitality. What is life, Marx asks, if not activity?⁷⁵ In an era of stagnant accumulation, the ‘labor’ in ‘living labor’ tends toward displacement: labor is disinterred from life, increasingly hollowed out, leaving behind what is, from the standpoint of capital, a vital remainder.³²

Here “abstract life” refers, in its most narrow sense, to what remains of abstract *labor* once it becomes virtually ‘unexploitable’ for purposes of the accumulation of capital, hence to the fact that, from the standpoint of capital, all that remains of such living labor is the marginal fact that it is—for the moment--still *alive*. Concerning just how far the ruling order’s concern for such ‘abstract life’ extends, capitalism’s propensity for destroying it in wars has left little doubt since at least 1914 if not 1492. But beyond the abstraction of value from material wealth and of labor, itself already an abstraction, from society’s self-production and reproduction on the level of human ‘species being’ itself, capital seems to have demonstrated a morbid capacity to continue abstracting from what it thereby, *via negationis*, renders “concrete.” Even when its

interests do not push the states and other coercive agents that it instrumentalizes into the organized violence of war, does not capitalism continue to abstract away from the concrete social life of humanity “by other means”? As long as it has not — so far — rendered human life abstract via its outright annihilation capital’s abstraction from what remains of life perhaps continues, as one might put it, by simply “letting die.” In situations of chronic, compounded crisis like our own-Gramsci’s much cited “interregnum” — this evidently leads to what the late Marxist and value-critical theorist Robert Kurz, extrapolating from Freud, once termed a “capitalist death-drive.”

Kevin did not live to witness the events of 2020 and early 2021 in which the combined crisis-within-a-crisis set in motion by the spread of the novel coronavirus and of the violent, pathological racism and irrationalism incited and embodied by the often openly neofascistic regime of US president Donald Trump were to lend considerable poignance to the notion of a death-driven ‘abstract life.’ But it strikes me that Kevin’s particular conception of ‘abstract life,’ even if in its immediate context it echoes the ‘bios’ of ‘biotechnology,’ turns out to have plenty of resonance left over for the contemporary history Kevin only just missed. The frequent combination of violent, gun-worshipping racism and anti-communism with the militant, nihilistic refusal to wear protective masks or to adopt other, innocuous measures to prevent contagion and mass mortality from COVID-19 bespeak a breathtaking level of abstracting contempt for life and, at the very least, an obsessive flirtation with death--the death of others as well as one’s own--that seems more than merely coincidental. When Kevin characterizes his conception of ‘abstract life’ with the phrase “vital remainder,” I find myself wondering whether the emphasis belongs less on “vital” than it does on “remainder,” as in “remains” — i.e., a living body that is nevertheless just short of becoming a corpse.

Over ten days in August, 2020, 460,000 motorcycle enthusiasts, predominantly white, male and, among them, many who were pro-Trump and violently defiant of public health policies meant to lessen the spread of COVID-19, congregated in Sturgis, South Dakota for a traditional annual bikers’ convention.³³ This was perhaps the largest but only one of numerous (and continuing) public demonstrations of what I am inclined to classify as an almost explicit form of capitalist death drive. Indeed, Trumpism’s contemporary North American neofascists remind me of the notorious Spanish fascist slogan said to have been shouted in a crowd gathered at the outset of the Civil War in 1936 at University of Salamanca. Though some claim that reports of the event lack substantiation, the slogan has lived on. Intended as a rebuke to a moderate and cautionary address by university rector Miguel de Unamuno, it is popularly attributed to one of Franco’s acolytes, General José Millán Astray: “Viva la muerte!” “Long live death!”

Although the huge street demonstrations against racist police killings during the summer of 2020 — reportedly the largest mass protests in US history — suggest

that the battle in the offing is at least, even by more pessimistic calculations, evenly matched, the worst--and in another sense perhaps also the best--are surely still to come. Though Kevin will not be there to witness all this and might not, any more than the rest of us, have predicted it, there is every reason to think it would not have surprised him--nor dismayed or frightened him into confusion or silence. He showed us in one of his final writings how theory can be as scrupulously grounded in the 'esoteric' Marx as it is unswervingly cognizant of the intricate details of contemporary empirical reality and dedicated to denouncing their evils. As shown by his life, his brilliant organizing for MLG and works like *The Reification of Desire* and "Automatic Subjects," though Kevin may be gone, we still need him — more, if possible, than ever.

Notes

1. For a good summary account of this history, however, see Sean Homer's reconstruction on the MLG website at <http://www.marxistliterary.org/a-brief-history-of-the-mlg>
2. "Since the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture. How this process has affected culture can only now be assessed, and these assessments must meet certain prognostic requirements. They do not, however, call for theses on the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power, and still less for any on the art of the classless society. They call for theses defining the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production. The dialectic of these conditions of production is evident in the superstructure, no less than in the economy. Theses defining the developmental tendencies of art can therefore contribute to the political struggle in ways that it would be a mistake to underestimate. They neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—which, used in an uncontrolled way (and controlling them is difficult today), allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism. In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art (Kunstpolitik)." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Second Version)" *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 102.
3. Having been force-fed a Cold War version of 'patriotic' American nationalism in primary and secondary schools in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, I have a strong, instinctive aversion to using the word "president" when referring to people who are not war criminals.
4. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
5. First published in *Rethinking Marxism* 1.1 (Spring 1988): 49-72; later re-published as the sixth chapter in Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009) 201-222.
6. This, to be sure, did not apply to gender difference per se on the level of the 'sexual division of labor' since, however overlaid by culture, gender-based social relations, if not 'movements,' could not be accused of being, in the final analysis, *exclusively* cultural any more than could gender and sexual

difference themselves. But the putatively epistemological dimension of any possible forms of ‘gender consciousness’ is clearly a question of immense theoretical complexity bearing not just on capitalism as a form of the social but on all social forms, pre- as well as possibly post-capitalist. Jameson in “Unfinished Project” had, as its readers will recall, cited the feminist gender-based standpoint theory of the 1980s (see, e.g., the writings of Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding and Alison Jagger) in order to make the case *against* reducing HCC’s anti-reifying and totality- ‘aspiring’ standpoint theory to its apparent theoretical dependence on class. And he had, even more cursorily, suggested that something similar could be argued on behalf of the standpoints of “the Black experience” and on that of the Jewish victims of anti-Semitism. (See Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* 215-219.) But the full, underlying theoretical questions raised by these claims were not broached in any substantive way in Jameson’s essay on HCC.

7. This was before the split within the *Krisis* editorial collective in the early 2000’s, leading to Kurz’s departure from it and the setting up, across town, of the ‘rival,’ anti- or post-*Krisis* journal *Exit*.
8. See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 73-83.
9. See Floyd, *Reification of Desire* 78-83.
10. ‘My Road to Marx’ was Lukacs’s title for a 1933 autobiographical sketch, mentioned by the author in his 1967 preface to HCC. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) ix.
11. Vol. 24, Issue 2, 61-86. In commemoration of Kevin, *Historical Materialism* has made this article freely available. See <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/kevin-floyd>
12. Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
13. ‘Wertabsplattungs-Theorie’ in the original German. Although most often associated with the feminist value-critique of Roswitha Scholz in the journal *Exit* and elsewhere, versions of this theory were initiated and are articulated by other *Wertkritik* theorists as well. See Roswitha Scholz, “Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body,” 123-142, but also Ernst Lohoff, “Off Limits, Out of Control: Commodity Society and Resistance in the Age of Deregulation and Denationalization,” 151-186, both in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, trans. & eds., Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson and Nicholas Brown (Alberta & Chicago: MCM’ Press, 2014). See also Vol. 27, Issues 1-2, Fall/Spring 2013-2014 in this journal: https://mediationsjournal.org/toc/27_1
14. First published in 1983, *Literary Theory* was, by the time of its most recent, 2008 edition, in its fifteenth printing.
15. See, as one good indication of this, the steady stream of new titles reviewed on the online “Marx and Philosophy Review of Books”: <https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/>
16. ‘Marx’s critique of political economy’ is an unfortunately cumbersome phrase, but there are nevertheless good reasons to be wary of replacing it, especially with its too often heard abbreviation as ‘Marxist political economy’ --a blatant contradiction in terms. “Political economy,’ an eighteenth-century coinage, has long since morphed into what today goes simply by the name of ‘economics,’ but to speak of the ‘Marxist critique of economics,’ even if technically precise, risks unfairly and perversely stigmatizing the already established and familiar field of ‘Marxist economics.’ There

appears to be no easy or workable way out of this semantic cul-de-sac.

17. “Der esoterische und der exoterische Marx. Zur kritischen Würdigung der Marxschen Lohntheorie I–III”, in *Arbeit und Wirtschaft* 11 (1957), Nr. 11ff. pp. 348–351, 388–391, 20–24. Rosdolsky is best known for *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Marxschen Kapital* (1968) [*The Making of Marx’s Capital* (1977)] -- perhaps the single best antidote to Althusser’s ‘structuralist’ (anti-dialectical) approach to ‘reading’ *Capital*.
18. *History and Class Consciousness* 1.
19. The example may be somewhat crude, but consider here the rush to blame the ‘greed’ of Wall Street bankers for the severe financial crisis of 2007–2008--as if bankers in earlier years had somehow been less ‘greedy’ or a newer, less ‘greedy’ Wall Street elite could avert such crises in the future. The relative ease with which a moralistic crusade against ‘greed’ could--and in some quarters likely did--converge with traditional currents of anti-Semitism has often been pointed out. The underlying truth of the matter is, of course, that the competitive dynamic of capitalism *forced* and *forces* capitalists of all kinds to maximize profits and that the increasing absence of outlets for the investment of ‘functional’ capital in productive enterprises in the ‘real’ economy left capitalists, ‘greedy’ and otherwise, little choice but to pour liquid assets into the ‘fictitious’ capital of, e.g., subprime mortgages. If the crash of 2008 helped give rise to the “Occupy” movement of 2010 and 2011, then perhaps the relative neglect of this kind of analysis—one that a methodologically ‘orthodox’ Marxism did not fail to propose—might help to explain the depressing evanescence of “Occupy” after seemingly better prospects for reform--entirely illusory of course— were conjured by the re-election of Obama in 2012.
20. A comprehensive account of this—still ongoing—trend would greatly exceed the size-limits of this essay, but its origins can be traced in part to the multiple, confused and shallow enthusiasms set off by the re-discovery and popularizations of the work of Henri Lefebvre, whose 1974 *Production de l’espace* (*The Production of Space*) first appeared in English translation in 1991. The rise and popularization of the works of Marxist and otherwise radical geographers beginning in the 1990s—especially of the works of David Harvey— appears to have been another, related and doubtless mostly inadvertent source for the rising chorus of accusations that Marx and Marxists were somehow guilty of neglecting ‘space.’ But at the heart of this anti- or neo- ‘orthodox’ crusade on behalf of the spatial was surely the notoriety surrounding the ‘postmodern’ geography of Edward Soja, whose *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* was published by Verso in 1989.
21. See *Valences*, “Towards a Spatial Dialectic,” 66–70, in which Jameson appears to justify taking the ‘dialectic’ in this direction on the grounds that ‘postmodernity’—a belief in the actual historical objectivity of which requires about as high a leap of faith as does belief in the ‘spatial dialectic’ itself—has been characterized by a ‘distrust’ of modernity’s earlier privileging of the ‘temporal.’ The *Zeitgeist* had spoken! Ergo, it’s time to “glimpse some of the advantages to be gained—for philosophical, aesthetic and economic-political levels—for a substitution of a spatial dialectic for the old temporal ones.” One awaits with bated breath the revelation of the ‘spatial’ version of, say, ‘Aufhebung,’ or of negation or, indeed, of the very category of becoming—i.e., of the process of unfolding in *time*— itself. (70) The ‘spatial’ surely deserves better.

22. Much more would have to be said about the question of ‘immaterial’ labor in any comprehensive discussion. But a moment’s reflection should suffice here to show how much of its topicality, and the controversy surrounding it, rest, arguably, on the ‘substantialist’ fallacy that, first, conflates labor per se with abstract labor and, then, misidentifies abstract labor in Marx as other than a strictly social relation--a social relation concerning which questions as to its ‘materiality’ or ‘immateriality’ are themselves soon revealed to be ‘immaterial’ in another sense, if not simply the products of a category mistake. As shall be seen below, this fallacy is in full force in Cooper and Waldby’s *Clinical Labor* as well.
23. See Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* (2001). For value-critical critiques of Heinrich see, inter alia, the works of Norbert Trenkle and Peter Samol, collected on the website for the journal *Krisis*, <https://www.krisis.org/>
24. See *The Spivak Reader*, eds. Donna Landry & Gerald Maclean (New York, London: Routledge, 1996) 107-140.
25. See, inter alia, works by Richard Wolff, Stephen Resnick, Stephen Cullenberg, Jack Amariglio, David Ruccio and J.K. Gibson-Graham
26. See note 11. An abstract preceding the full paper in *Historical Materialism* reads as follows: “Critical analysis of the biotechnological reproduction of biological life increasingly emphasises [sic; UK spelling here and throughout] the role of value-producing labor in biotechnologically reproductive processes, while also arguing that Marx’s use of the terms ‘labor’ and ‘value’ is inadequate to the critical scrutiny of these processes. Focusing especially on the reformulation of the value-labor relation in recent work in this area by Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, this paper both critiques this reformulation and questions the explanatory efficacy of the category ‘labor’ in this context. Emphasising the contemporary global expansion of capital relative to value-producing labor – specifically, the expansion of fictitious capital and debt on the one hand, and of global surplus populations on the other – it argues that this reformulation misrepresents the mediated capacities of capital as the immediate capacities of labor. This reformulation, moreover, is indicative of broader tendencies in the contemporary theorisation of labor, tendencies exemplified by autonomist Marxism.”
27. E.g., Kaushik Sunder-Rajan’s *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (2006); Kalindi Vora’s *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* (2015), Eugene Thacker’s *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture* (2005), Melinda Cooper’s *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (2008), and Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell’s *Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism* (2005).
28. “Automatic Subjects” 65
29. To be precise, in *Capital* vol. I it is value, not capital per se, that Marx describes in this way: “On the other hand, in the circulation M-C-M both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself, the money as its general mode of existence, the commodity as its particular or, so to speak, disguised mode. It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject.” (See Marx, *Capital* Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976) 255.) But this does nothing to lessen the validity and critical purchase of the argument in “Automatic Subjects.”

30. “Automatic Subjects” 80. As I think is made clear by a careful reading of the essay as a whole, by “expansion of capital relative to labor” (emphasis here on “relative”) “Automatic Subjects” refers to the phenomenon—long since and consistently observed in Marxist analyses and critiques of capitalism— of the rising organic composition of capital, i.e., the decreasing proportion of labor-power (variable capital in Marx’s terminology) to constant capital (means of production exclusive of labor-power) as a result of increases in productivity brought about in turn by competition among individual capitalists and the resulting drive towards automation. This trend of course was long ago forecast by Marx himself in the celebrated “fragment on machines” in the *Grundrisse*, but, according to the analysis of both value-critical Marxists and others, with the onset of the digital--or as it is sometimes called, the third industrial-- revolution the approaching, asymptotic disappearance of labor-power from the capitalist production process has resulted in dramatic, qualitative transformations and social upheavals, among them the creation of a--in Marx’s phrase-- global ‘reserve army of the unemployed’ (a ‘precariat’ in more contemporary parlance) for most of whom unemployment has become permanent in a world ruled by the needs of capital.
31. “Automatic Subjects” 77.
32. “Automatic Subjects” 80-81.
33. See, for example, the Center for Disease Control’s “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report” on this event at: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6947e1.htm> . Meanwhile, according to an October 17, 2020 Washington Post article, “How the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally may have spread coronavirus across the Upper Midwest”: “Within weeks of the gathering, the Dakotas, along with Wyoming, Minnesota and Montana, were leading the nation in new coronavirus infections per capita. The surge was especially pronounced in North and South Dakota, where cases and hospitalization rates continued their juggernaut rise into October. Experts say they will never be able to determine how many of those cases originated at the 10-day rally, given the failure of state and local health officials to identify and monitor attendees returning home, or to trace chains of transmission after people got sick. Some, however, believe the nearly 500,000-person gathering played a role in the outbreak now consuming the Upper Midwest. More than 330 coronavirus cases and one death were directly linked to the rally as of mid-September, according to a Washington Post survey of health departments in 23 states that provided information. But experts say that tally represents just the tip of the iceberg, since contact tracing often doesn’t capture the source of an infection, and asymptotic spread goes unnoticed.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/10/17/sturgis-rally-spread/>

Kevin Floyd's Foundational Queer Marxism: A Tribute

Peter Drucker

Marxists working in queer studies have gradually been building a body of theory during the first decades of the 21st century. We have been synthesizing core Marxist concepts, like class, totality and reification, with concepts from other paradigms, such as social construction, performativity and intersectionality. In the small boomlet of publications that has marked this queer Marxist renaissance, one moment stands out: the publication in 2009 of Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire*.¹ All of us queer Marxists who have published since then have been in dialogue with this seminal work. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have been writing a series of glosses on it.

The queer Marxism in which Floyd played a foundational role is a new turn in Marxism's more-than-century-old dialogue with same-sex activism and theorizing. The roots of Marxist queer studies go back to the first interactions between Marxist theorists linked to socialist labour movements, on the one hand, and successive waves of homosexual emancipation and lesbian/gay liberation, on the other. The story goes back to German Marxist Eduard Bernstein's critique in *Die Neue Zeit* of sexually repressive legislation in response to the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde,² and to the Russian Bolsheviks' post-revolutionary decriminalization of homosexuality and support for research in sexology.³ The near-simultaneous rise of New Left Marxism and of lesbian/gay liberation in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a new flowering of lesbian/gay Marxist theory. John D'Emilio's seminal essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983), linking "free" labour under capitalism to identity formation, was widely and lastingly influential.⁴ Floyd, too, knew this history – he called D'Emilio's article "crucial"⁵ – and drew on it.

In his deep readings of queer theory and his open-minded attitude toward it, however, Floyd broke with the dominant tone of the Marxists who came before him. As queer theory had spread and became increasingly hegemonic in lesbian/gay studies in the course of the 1990s, many Marxists had responded initially with skepticism or outright hostility. Teresa Ebert and Donald Morton exemplified Marxists' sometimes

tendentious dismissal of queer theory's contributions.⁶ In a very different key, Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure* (2000), though it can be seen in retrospect as a key early text of queer Marxism, was still characterized by a strong critique of the queer theory of the 1990s.⁷ Floyd changed the discourse. More than any other person he heralded a new wave, in which dismissal increasingly gave way to efforts to forge a new queer Marxism, engaging more deeply with queer theory while trying to avoid its idealist and postmodernist pitfalls.

Floyd's synthesis

Fully versed in queer theory, Kevin Floyd forged a synthesis in which old Marxist concepts were equally central and invented anew. The synthesis took him a long way from the Texas childhood and Midwestern life he later recalled in sketching his trajectory.⁸ In the tradition he helped found, the category of totality has been important to queer Marxists seeking a global, non-reductionist vision. The concept of reification, too, has been both key to Marxist approaches to queer studies and a fruitful source of divergences. Queer Marxist debates about these concepts today are unthinkable without Floyd's ground-breaking work on them.

The queer Marxism Floyd pioneered is strictly speaking a 21st-century phenomenon. The "Marxist renaissance" in queer studies has largely been a by-product of the continuing rapid growth of queer studies generally, particularly in North American universities.⁹ At first Marxist approaches in the field were very marginalized. As Floyd wrote, by the 1990s "what was once a healthy queer skepticism about the Marxist tradition ... congeal[ed] into something more automatic, dismissive, phobic."¹⁰ It was only after 2007 that several years of intense capitalist crisis provoked a rethinking of Marxism's possible "explanatory power."¹¹ Published in 2009, *The Reification of Desire* seized the moment – and was marked by the moment.

While the book brought a hefty dose of socioeconomic reality to a burgeoning academic field, it could not reflect an activist upsurge that did not particularly characterize the time. The academic setting of most Marxist queer studies has resulted in focuses ranging beyond core concerns of historical materialism – political economy, social struggles and transformations, and political power – to the more common concentration in queer studies on philosophy, literature, film and other arts. *The Reification of Desire*, too, focused largely on this sort of philosophical and cultural critique. Like other Marxists working in queer studies, Floyd had a strong aversion to economic reductionism, which has traditionally contributed to Marxists' neglect of sexuality.

Yet although much of Floyd's academic work dealt with literature and the Marxist Literary Group was his home ground, his knowledge and his concerns always ranged further. He forcefully rejected "depictions of my work as (merely) culturalist."¹² He participated in North American conferences of the *Historical Materialism* network, helping to bring a queer perspective to a largely new generation of hundreds of Marxist

scholars. Though his department's travel budget never stretched far enough to allow him to join the even bigger gatherings of queer Marxists at the annual Historical Materialism conferences in London, the Sexuality and Political Economy Network that was born there was in this sense his offspring as well.

Performativity and reification

Queer Marxists all (to a greater or lesser extent) acknowledge their indebtedness to feminist theorists who since the 1970s have been emphasizing the conjoined centrality of class and gender. One of Floyd's greatest contributions was to show how Judith Butler's concept of performative gender¹³ should be historicized, as a form of gender that emerged due to changes in early 20th-century capitalism. Shifting from the earlier, 19th-century emphasis on "manhood" and "womanhood," he showed, performative constructions of gender have been defined more by patterns of consumption, dress and everyday behaviour,¹⁴ linked to the "'scientific management' of anxieties about changing gender norms."¹⁵

To avoid any narrow economic determinism, Marxists in queer studies have deployed György Lukács' category of totality to explore how sexuality is embedded in broader power dynamics. Here too, Floyd made an absolutely vital contribution, showing the relevance of the category to the study of sexuality. At the same time, he warned against the dangers of a conception of totality that would relegate sexuality to the superstructure. In some of his later statements, moreover, he shrank from choosing between "characterizing global capitalism as either heterogeneous or unified,"¹⁶ thus opting for a contrast between heterogeneity and unity rather than a more dialectical formulation of unity in contradiction.

In a third, particularly brilliant contribution, Floyd strikingly developed the sexual dimensions of the concept of reification (particularly as analyzed by Lukács). Drawing on historical analyses of the late 19th-century invention of heterosexual and homosexual persons, he pointed out the particular reification of gender manifest in these supposedly scientific sexual categories. Today, Marxists note, male and female bodies are reduced to things to be obtained, like so many other fetishized commodities.

Yet different Marxists in queer studies have drawn out different implications from the concept of reification. Floyd initially dwelled on Lukács' late self-criticism for failing to distinguish adequately between (humanly inevitable) objectification and (specifically capitalist) reification.¹⁷ Yet in his desire to emphasize the political importance of "the use of the body as a pleasurable means," Floyd ended up emphasizing reification's positive role as "a condition of possibility for ... sexually non-normative discourses."¹⁸ Curiously, this emphasis moved Floyd away both from traditional Marxist criticisms of all existing sexualities under capitalism *and* from queer theorists' advocacy of fluid sexualities at a certain distance from existing lesbian/gay identities. This reflected his nuanced take on queer politics. While he was one with queer theorists for example in strongly criticizing same-sex marriage,

which he saw as “[p]art and parcel of neoliberalism,” he argued in an early article that it is not always “inherently conservative or assimilationist.”¹⁹

It is a terrible loss for queer Marxism that Floyd is no longer here to help us engage with new upsurges and new debates, notably the transformative Black Lives Matter protests and the astonishing mobilizations that have accompanied them around the themes #BlackTransLivesMatter and #BlackQueerLivesMatter. Sadly, we will never know what insights Kevin would have contributed to understanding this pivotal juncture. All we can do is carry on in his spirit of theoretical daring and radical engagement.

Notes

1. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
2. John Lauritsen and David Thorstad (*The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1934)*) (New York: Times Change, 1995).
3. Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
4. John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).
5. Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017.
6. Teresa Ebert, “The Matter of Materialism,” and Donald Morton, “Changing the Terms: (Virtual) Desire and (Actual) Reality,” in Morton (ed.), *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).
7. Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
8. Ayumu Tajiri, Asako Nakai and Shintaro Kono, “An Interview with Kevin Floyd,” *Correspondence: Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts & Literature* 3 (2018).
9. Gianmaria Colpani, *Queer Hegemonies: Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Queer Debates* (Utrecht [unpublished PhD dissertation], 2017).
10. Kevin Floyd, “Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 171.
11. Kevin Floyd, *Reification of Desire* 2.
12. Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017.
13. Notably in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
14. *Reification of Desire* 57-66.
15. Floyd, “Making History” 179.
16. Christina Crosby, Lisa Duggan, Roderick Ferguson, Kevin Floyd, Miranda Joseph, Heather Love, Robert McRuer, Fred Moten, Tavia Nyong’o, Jordana Rosenberg, Gayle Salamon, Dean Spade and Amy Villarejo 2012, “Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis,” *GLQ*, 18, 1 (2012): 127-47.
17. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

- Press, 1972 [1922]) xxiv; *Reification of Desire* 23.
18. Floyd, "Lukács and Sexual Humanism," *Rethinking Marxism* 18:3 (2006): 399-400. *Reification of Desire* 74-75.
 19. Email from Kevin Floyd to Peter Drucker, June 19, 2017. "Making History" 179.

Poetry, Sexuality, Totality: On Kevin Floyd and Steve Benson

David Pritchard

Introduction

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of Kevin Floyd's work. *The Reification of Desire* is nothing less than a foundational text. It is a touchstone for anyone who wants to make sense of the vexing debates between queer theory and Marxism in the academy, as well as a striking and original contribution to Marxist thought in its own right—one that has paved the way for countless interventions.¹ Floyd's basic claim is that queerness names a specific standpoint onto capitalism: an "immanent perspective on social relations" that is capable of grasping certain features of those relations that might not be visible or thinkable from other, differently-situated perspectives. According to Floyd, both Marxism and queer theory share a "critical disposition toward particularizing knowledges"²; this means that both Marxism and queer theory in the last analysis involve an aspiration to totality, which registers a specific imbrication within the history and structure of global capitalism—an imbrication which finally makes both Marxism and queer theory critical, indeed possibly oppositional, perspectives.³

In this essay I will attempt to bring the insights of this work to bear on the avant-garde poetics of the Language poets, a Bay Area group that flourished provocatively in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I will proceed by way of a close reading of Steve Benson's long poem "Blue Books," which was written between 1979 and 1980 and published in 1988 in the near-eponymous collection *Blue Book*. In a long note on the text—to which we'll return below—Benson describes the composition of "Blue Books" as a kind of "improvisation," undertaken in a set of fifty exam blue books given to him by a friend teaching at Yale. Drawing on the conceptual resources that Floyd furnishes in *The Reification of Desire*, I will show how this concept of "improvisation," and the aesthetic thinking that it frames in "Blue Books," register the uncertain status of the avant-garde as a counterinstitution in the midst of the transition to a post-Fordist

regime of accumulation—what we sometimes shorthand as neoliberalism.

By reading Benson's work in this light, I hope to pay tribute to the memory of Kevin Floyd, and to remember him for his intellectual rigor and comradely warmth and generosity. At the same time, I hope to make a modest contribution to recent debates about avant-garde poetics, which have ineluctably centered around the history, genealogy, and legacy of Language poetry and poetics. In these debates Benson occupies a curious position. On the one hand, he is a core member of Language poetry, as evidenced by his participation in the *Grand Piano* series—an “experiment in collective autobiography” written by the ten writers who were most involved in consolidating this poetic tendency in the Bay Area.⁴ Benson is also one of the co-authors (with Silliman, Harryman, Hejinian, Perelman, and Watten) of “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry,” which initially appeared in print in *Social Text* in 1987, bearing the subtitle “A Manifesto”⁵: a work that lays out some of the basic tenets of Language poetics, most importantly the group's focus on the materiality of the linguistic sign—a focus derived from, though by no means simply assimilable to, the teachings of structuralist linguistics about the radical non-identity of the signifier and the signified—and their consequent investment in a kind of theoretical anti-humanism. On the other hand, Benson's poetry doesn't really fit with the critical picture of Language poetry that has taken shape in the years following the group's canonization, which revolves around the ideology of the literary or linguistic fragment. By contrast, Benson's work seems much more concerned with how poetry can take up and explore epistemological questions about the relations between parts and wholes—questions, that is, about totality and totalization—than it is with fragmentation. I hasten to add that Benson is not alone among the Language poets in exploring totality, though he is certainly among the most explicit about his totalizing intentions. My wager in focusing on his work is that it makes it possible to revisit other Language poets, to see their work in new ways and perhaps reevaluate the stakes of their interventions without reference to the unfortunate shibboleth of the fragment.

But what really makes Benson a propitious touchstone for the present essay is that his totality thinking is directly articulated with a desire to address queerness in his work. Kaplan Harris has convincingly argued that this investment in questions about sexuality tendentially aligns Benson with the work of the New Narrative movement, another Bay Area avant-garde whose work emerged directly out of the revolutionary foment of the New Left—particularly Gay Liberation—and who mounted trenchant, if finally sympathetic, critiques of the Language poets for their failure to take identity and subalternity seriously. Here again, on the terrain of sexuality, we find Benson making references to the matter of improvisation. As we'll see in a moment, Benson turns to improvisation in one of his most suggestive entries in *The Grand Piano* project, as a way to define his relationship to—and difference from—New Narrative writers where queerness is concerned. This difference responds to, is a mediation of, the

defeat of the revolutionary movements of the 1970s; and it encodes Benson's sense of the perceived viability of carrying on or resuming those revolutions into the 1980s.

Ultimately, I will suggest that this contradictory deployment of improvisation in Benson's work—as a figure for poetic militancy, and a concept of non-militant (though by no means anti-militant) queerness—both responds to the transitional moment within capitalism that gives rise to post-Fordism, and speaks to debates about avant-garde and revolutionary poetics in our own crisis-ridden moment. These debates essentially recapitulate the older debates about Language poetry, hinging on a familiar false choice between formal experimentation and the direct representation of the miseries of capitalism. We recognize this choice as the basic crux of debates about modernism and realism—the Adorno/Lukács debates. In this context, reading Benson's work can help us sublimate this stale binary and reorient ourselves toward recent histories of militant poetics that unfold around the question of totality, rather than specific positions about form, content, or the correct political relation between these terms. This in turn will lead us back to the militancy in our own moment, and help us listen to the poetry that has arisen and is arising within and alongside a resurgence of communist politics.

Improvisation and Totality

Let's ease into thinking about Steve Benson's poetics in the 1980s by examining a more recent prose piece: his contribution to the sixth volume of the collaborative *Grand Piano*. In this essay, written in 2008, Benson responds to a framing question about writing and the body posed at the beginning of the book by recounting his ambivalence toward the queer aesthetics and politics of gay liberation—what he calls the “gay revolution” of the 1970s. This ambivalence stemmed from the sense that the struggle for gay liberation, which began in earnest in 1969 with the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, had been coopted by capitalism by the mid-1970s; a once-utopian vision of sexual self-determination had been replaced by a “consumer-oriented construction of sexual identity, on the presumption of an essence in fact cultivated through a concert of visual impressions and autoarousal.”⁶ Even the most militant cultural productions that developed in the wake of gay liberation seemed unable to address the nuances and contradictions of a queer everyday life lived in the wake of a global capitalist crisis. On this score, Benson singles out and praises the work of Bruce Boone and Bob Glück, the two founders of the New Narrative movement, for being “exemplary of a new gay literature: hilarious, moving, generous, and wry”; but, he continues, “I did not feel narratives of my own life and reflections could be so.”⁷ Which leads to a concern with totalization: “I didn't feel I could make being gay count to a culture I couldn't easily embrace as a whole, as I felt it demanded, and that couldn't be expected to endorse my unstable positioning.”⁸

Enter improvisation. Toward the end of his essay, Benson sketches out an alternative to the commodified movement writing of the 1970s. In a stunning

paragraph, he imagines a utopian poetics that is attuned to any fleeting glimpses of disalienated life that might flare up from within the depths of late capitalism. This poetics, Benson wagers, attempts to align the reader with disalienation, and orient them antagonistically toward the capitalist social relations that stand in the way of realizing this disalienation in a more permanent and enduring way. In short, Benson's poetics aspires to totality; in the context of describing this aspiration, he introduces the curious figure of improvisation for his compositional labors:

I think any actual sexual liberation, for me, entailed a largely private, idiosyncratic fantasy to loosen, spread, roll all over, fly—a fantasy in which being and coming were indistinguishable, apparent only as becoming. This wish for sensual, proprioceptive, bodily release from ground-bound rules of responsibility, for free encounter with the air and any matter, finds form to some degree in the open fall (a.k.a. negative capability) of reorientations within barely constrained performances of oral improvisation, in elaborated experiences like writing fifty blue books, filled out without looking back, persistently foregrounding present effort to write as assertively and well as possible without revising, and in extended serial works like “Briarcombe Paragraphs” and “Reverse Order,” for which I dissected, altered, revisioned, and fantastically transmuted each paragraph or stanza into its replacement, with no obliged sort of fidelity to it, presented subsequently in a series. Through writing I wanted to realize this wanton will to release innate, untested, and perhaps unfounded capabilities through meeting the other—language, and therefore human culture and shared knowledge—engaging the medium as something elastic, tensile, porous, mutable, everywhere resistant and yielding, immanent and ready to be overthrown.⁹

The first thing to notice about this passage is its general resonance with Floyd's account of the aspiration to totality that unites Marxism and queer theory. Benson is openly critical of any particularization that might forestall the experience of “find[ing] form” in an “open fall (a.k.a. negative capability).” For Benson, improvisation seems to be the condition of possibility for this attainment of self-consciousness. The term appears in the middle of the second long sentence—full of shudders, shocks, and dips—as a mediation of a series of classical dialectical shifts: from private to public, from individual to collective, from particular to general, and—consequentially in the present context—from subject to object (from the “self” to the “other” of language). All of which calls our attention to the fact that the paragraph itself enacts a macro-level transition from the abstract to the concrete: it moves from a putative description of “any actual sexual liberation” from Benson's singular, individual perspective, to a poetics that tries to discover the possibilities for overthrowing a given situation that

are immanent in that situation.

In this sense it would be better to grasp queerness as a point of departure for Benson's poetics, rather than as something that he attempts to represent or narrate. Which doesn't mean that we do not find local depictions of sexuality in his work. Even limiting ourselves to "Blue Books," there are dozens of beautiful moments in which Benson discusses his fantasies, desires, and pleasures. This, for instance, from the seventh blue book:

He
 was a hang glider, I met him
 in the pool. Only I didn't say
 anything and he was blind.
 Our forms moved around
 each other for a while, and
 we touched twice. I was swimming
 a breast stoke [sic] that dipped deep
 in the water to feel the slowness
 of time (no watch) and he hit
 me from behind. He was stand-
 ing next to me and another
 swimmer was coming straight for
 me so I moved over to *him*
 rather than the other way, out
 of preference, and glanced
 his cotton swimsuit with my
 hand, then he crouched, pushed
 and swished away—the sound
 of take-off. If I had talked to
 him, I'm afraid I would have
 found a being whom I could not
 imagine and would have been des-
 perately flustered.¹⁰

The anecdote related in this passage is obviously sexual: Steve Benson encounters a gorgeous swimmer at the pool, and has two instances of fleeting physical contact with him, both of which he scrutinizes from the standpoint of his nervous queer desire. But the immediacies of this anecdote are not interpreted or digested in and of themselves; they are rather possibilities embedded in the situation Benson relates, forming the basis for a broader meditation on homoeroticism as such. Thus the accidental collision ("he hit/me from behind"); Benson's move "over to *him* ... out/of preference"; and the brushing of "his cotton swimsuit with my/hand"—these don't crystallize into a thesis

about queerness or depict a queer encounter or experience directly, so much as they invite readings that would align themselves with their queer aspiration to totality. So, for example, one such reading might focus on the way the diction and arrangement of the text on the page calls our attention to all the questions and problems that constellate around these incidental erotic encounters.

In this approach, this excerpt dramatizes and estranges the social calculus of cruising and casual sex, which in practice would occur very quickly, in a matter of moments; but here is stretched out across more than twenty lines of verse, as we come to “feel the slowness/of time” with “no watch” alongside Benson’s speaker. A line break leads us to pause on “out” before moving on to “of preference” which in its turn brings to mind the ideological language, ridiculous in 1980 and ridiculous now, of “sexual preference.” Similarly, the word “straight” is imbued with additional valences, not only as a kind of oppressive norm (i.e., heterosexuality) but as a possible threat of violent retaliation in response to any overture of desire. And then there is the concluding deflation of the whole scene: Benson confesses that nothing came of this encounter because he feared he might find “a being whom I could not/imagine and would have been des-/perately flustered” — which raises questions about whether the being Benson can’t imagine would be flustered by any conversation, or if it would be Benson himself. And what does it mean that he can’t imagine the being? As someone who shares in the sexual attraction? As someone who is straight and rebuffs the advance?

This reading of a passage from “Blue Books” is not, or not yet, an interpretation of the text’s queer standpoint. Two key components are missing. First, we have to take into account a key feature of “Blue Books,” namely that it is framed by a note on how it was written. In other words, Benson presents a two-page note on the text alongside “Blue Books” in *Blue Book*. This will concern me in the next section of this essay. Second, we still need to locate “Blue Books” — to say nothing of Benson’s work more broadly — within a history of queer collectivity. In this context, the spatial practice of cruising is not just the social basis for parataxis; it is a window onto the transformations of queer life brought about by the advent of gay liberation and the economic crisis of the long 1970s. Chief among these changes is the transition away from what Jeffrey Escoffier has described as the pre-Stonewall “political economy of the closet”: a set of institutions and practices that prevailed in queer collectivities and gay ghettos in the 1950s and 1960s. In general, we can describe this “closet” as the result of the exclusion of queer people from many aspects of society, forcing them to lead an everyday life overshadowed by secrecy, indirection, and informal exchanges and encounters — or else risk homelessness and unemployment (which to my mind are more systemic and more deadly than, if not determining factors of, various discrete instances of gay-bashing).¹¹ Thus the question of revolutionary politics is immanent to the move of queer life out of the closet. I’ll take up this question by way of conclusion. But first: a note on the note on the text.

A Note on a Note on the Text

The notes on the text that Benson frequently includes alongside his poems should not be mistaken for glosses, annotations, or any other kind of extra-textual scaffolding designed to prepare us for the main event of the text itself. They are a part of the poetry, and must be considered as such. This proposition is a way of answering in advance one of the longstanding objections critics have made about the role of “theory” in Language poetry; an objection that the following pithy comment by Steve Abbott, from his introduction to an issue of *Poetry Flash* dedicated to the Language poets, exemplifies: “Usually I find it exciting to talk with [the Bay Area Language poets]. Sometimes I notice a tendency toward circuitous reasoning, for instance: ‘Look at the text, not the theory.’ ‘But the text doesn’t make any sense to me.’ ‘Then consider this theory.’ ‘Now about this theory...’ ‘Look at the text.’ And so on.”¹² There’s some truth to this joke; otherwise it wouldn’t be funny. But I think that the problem is far more general than Abbott lets on. Indeed, the question of how to conceive of the relationship between an explicitly-articulated, systematic poetics, and the poems that are so many examples or implementations of that system—this question is at least as old as bourgeois society. In English, we can date it back to the appearance of William Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth responds to criticisms of his and Coleridge’s work by offering up a worked-up theory of poetics designed to mitigate readers’ shock and anger about the poetic “experiments” (Wordsworth’s word!) they find in this book.¹³

Certainly there are Language poets who proceed in this Wordsworthian fashion, appending critical discourses about their theory of poetry, language, and consciousness to their work, asking the reader to refer back and forth to the theory and the poetry. But Benson stands this idealist gesture on its head. His notes on texts are quite literal, focusing on *poiesis*, the activity of making his texts. This can be as ornate as describing a particular live performance governed by certain rules and later transcribed from a tape recorder; or as simple as telling readers what he did or did not allow himself to write about as he filled up fifty exam blue books with improvisatory writing. In short, Benson does not try to interpret his own work, or to dictate the correct ideological position from which readers should interpret his work. Rather, he superimposes an image of his compositional labor onto the finished work, making it impossible to analytically separate out the text from the consciousness of the author—that is, the author’s aspiration to totality.

We have already discussed a few features of “Blue Books” that are included in the note on this text. First, Benson filled up fifty exam blue books given to him by a friend, between May 1979 and April 1980 with writing. This served as the raw material for his poem, which he tells us is composed of “excerpts, either whole pages or groups of whole pages or, in a few cases, whole sittings” of improvised textual notations.¹⁴ As for the writing process itself, Benson describes it in terms that recapitulate the link between the concept of improvisation and the category of totality—discussed in the

previous section of this essay. Note the tension here between a matter-of-fact report of the empirical details, the literal contours of a writing process; and, on the other hand, the vertiginous parataxis of the prose style. This contradiction tells us as much about “Blue Books” and Benson’s aspirations to totality as the content of the passage:

I set no rules or limits as to form, content, diction, or syntax. Some censorial tendencies were remarkable, though: by preference I avoided neologisms and, even though I had committed to not anticipating publication, I was too self-consciously apprehensive to essay extended fantasies of sex and violence, explicit gossip or personal vituperation. Still, I didn’t rule these out either. I would write whatever I chose to, without feeling obliged to make it count to anyone else but me, at the time.¹⁵

The first thing we notice is how difficult it is for Benson to represent how he wrote in his blue books. He tries to tell us what constraints (“censorial tendencies”) he used to guide his improvisational sessions of writing, but none of these rules actually end up ruling anything out: “I didn’t rule these out, either.” Thus, no sex, until sex shows up; no gossip, till there was that, too; no vituperation—but here, vituperation!—and so on. It is as if improvisatory composition were hostile to any attempt to particularize, even those that would make the work palatable for presentation to readers other than Benson.

Benson returns to the question of the reader, and the difficulty of representing his writing process, a few paragraphs later. This time he presents the dilemma from the perspective of a dialectic of form and content: writes Benson,

I was interested to see what would turn up, along the way, and whether any tendency, shape, or qualitative change would manifest in the writing. Most of all, I was interested in submitting my writing (as an ongoing practice, at once part of and distinguishable from writing in general) to this wandering in the desert of an ostensibly objectless search or exploration—a search in the course of which it would leave rather than pick up traces, leave them behind for some other attention to sniff at.¹⁶

Benson basically abdicates in advance any responsibility for the contents of what he’s written. The task of the poet, he seems to say, is to search and explore. The reader, meanwhile, is tasked with paying attention to this wandering, with making sense out of whatever’s been left behind. There’s a strong resonance here with the calculus of cruising discussed above. The basic dilemma that attends public sex is that of hiding in plain sight. Cruising is the informal system of signification through which possible partners find one another without alerting anyone who might be hostile toward

them—most notably because of their queerness—in the process. Thus the imaginary of cruising is shot through with plausible deniability: the elaborate indirection of the various gestures, glances, dress codes, turns of phrase, and so forth are all a necessary part of trying to pass unnoticed in front of an inhospitable audience. “Blue Books” risks much less than all this: Benson will not lose his job or his housing if a reader vociferously rejects his poetic experiments (though he could be gay-bashed). The point is that the plausible deniability Benson attributes to the project of improvising—his indifference to any eventual publication, to any kind of evaluative rubric, or even to any readerly judgment of quality—this wandering objectlessness is a window onto a specific conjuncture of queer life, even as it is not reducible to a comment or representation of that life directly. He underscores this a moment later when he distinguishes between “what the writing can be construed to be *about*” and “a totality of whatever the whole would be,” in which “the particularity and difference of each instance could stand out at once specific and dependent, concrete but without actual boundaries.”¹⁷

Earlier I said that Benson’s notes superimpose some account of a text’s composition onto the results of that writing process itself. We are now in a position to see that this means that Bensonian improvisation proceeds by way of a buried analogy to the spatial practice of cruising. That is, where before we noted that an instance of parataxis in an excerpt from “Blue Books” raised the question of cruising, now we can see how cruising governs the totality of the compositional process. It is, in a sense, the political unconscious of this text. I hasten to add that this doesn’t mean Benson convokes an identification with queerness, or that queerness is a skeleton key or secret code that can reveal some hidden meaning in the text. Indeed, it would be a gigantic mistake to reduce the question of queer standpoint, as Floyd theorizes it and as Benson exemplifies it, to one of identity, just as it would be outrageous to boil down the question of the meaning of a work to its depiction of this or that identity. Once again, we see how queerness is a point of departure for a cognitive exercise—albeit one with determinate social horizons—rather than a fixed subject-position with readymade content that can be represented (or whose story can be told). Setting out from queerness, Benson wanders, “objectless,” in the desert of an unrepresentable system of social relations, leaving clues and hints for the reader who follows him, in the hopes that this reader will discover in these some “unfounded capabilities” (to return to the language of his *Grand Piano* essay) worth sniffing at with their attention.

Queer Horizons

We are now in a position to historicize the queer motivations for Benson’s devices. That is, the question before us is: Why adopt a literary stance analogous to the practice of cruising after the Stonewall rebellion? On our way to answering this question let us briefly look at the opening lines of “Blue Books,” which contribute two things to the present inquiry. First, they dramatize the dilemma of improvisatory writing and help

us see how the note on the text frames the text itself; and, second, they introduce us to some thinking about political consciousness, which, as I will argue in this section, we have to superimpose onto any thinking of queerness in a reading of Benson's work. "Blue Books" begins with page eight of the first blue book: a joke about the convention of beginning a work in medias res. There are at least two middles here; we start out mid-sentence and mid-blue-book. There may even be a third, if this is mid-"sitting." Unlike an epic, the problem here is not narrative temporality, but the question of how a part summons up, displaces, and otherwise relates to the whole from which it has been excerpted:

have his bottle and so forth the vibrations
of a real heart with piano runs for 3
figures. Corroboration needed I like music
very much performing that night + where you
coming from? Don't mention is this is Leonine
lead on diamonds essays and going for him.
Came in French. His heart pulsed with their songs
of liberation, are you listening.¹⁸

These lines swirl disjunctively around the theme of music. This is on one level a self-reflexive commentary on the use of the word "improvisation" in the frame of this work, which brings to mind an analogy between poetry and music, between poet and musician. There is also a formal displacement of music onto the material of the language: "Leonine" sonically begets "lead on diamonds" ("lead" here rhyming with "read," on this reading), which primes us to read the sibilant word "essays" as a condensation of "is this is" in the preceding line. This Stein-inflected shift also serves to spatialize what has hitherto been presented to us in temporal terms; music, in addition to being an art whose insuperable horizon is that it happens in time, is also pinned to an event, the "that night" of its performance. But Benson continues to shift registers and perspectives, turning back to hearts and songs (an oblique allusion to, perhaps continuation of, the thinking in the second line of the poem). We can never really be sure whether we are reading primarily for language's materiality (indexing words to other words in the stanza) or for some symbolic dimension (tracing the theme of music as it is developed in the unfolding of the poem). It becomes impossible to choose between space and time in our reading.

The final sentence in this passage—"His heart pulsed with their songs/of liberation, are you listening"—indirectly brings us to some reckoning with the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Specifically, Benson's use of what he calls "arbitrary, prosoid lines" raises the question of how revolutionary culture differs from bourgeois culture more broadly. The sentence is peopled with unpredicated pronouns; we don't know who "he," "they," or "you" are. But we do know that all three are triangulated

by some relationship to “songs/of liberation”—to some potential revolutionary or oppositional cultural production. And yet to put it this way is to lose out on the delay that subtly separates out culture from politics: we pause with “songs” at the end of the line, only subsequently understanding that what was meant were “songs of liberation.” This in turn doubles the pulsing of “his” heart, which we can say pulses generally, in response to “songs” in the abstract, before pulsing in the next line to the more specific (I am tempted to say “concrete”) songs “of liberation.” Things are further complicated by the fact that the songs are “their” songs, not “his” or even utopianly “ours.” The “he” is not part of the collective who sing songs of liberation; neither are “you” nor even Benson, the presumed “I.”

These pronominal slippages are formally of a piece with the paratactic near-romance with a beautiful boy we discussed above. There, we saw how parataxis was essentially bound up with a question of agency, and indexed to the practice of cruising; here there is less clarity about who is doing what, or is capable of doing what—most notably concerning those “songs/of liberation.” Which strikes me as a canny insight into the conjuncture Benson is writing in at the end of the 1970s—on the other side, that is to say, of the revolutionary upheavals of gay liberation and other New Left movements. The defeats of these movements are a key determinant of Benson’s poetics, and of Language poetry’s itinerary more broadly. But these defeats are not simply presented melancholically; they are rather registered through a kind of scrambling, an indeterminacy that does not abandon revolutionary possibility so much as suggest that it is not clear where one might look for that possibility, or how to go about organizing it. There is a kind of plausible deniability draped around the passage about “songs/of liberation,” which ends with a question, albeit one punctuated as a declarative: are you listening to them—the songs of liberation, their singers?

This brings us to the contradiction that lies at the heart of “Blue Books.” On the one hand, Benson organizes his aesthetic thinking around cruising, in a way that presupposes a residual social basis: the political economy of the closet, which gay liberation sublated into the “territorial economy” (to return to Escoffier) of the expanding—that is, gentrifying—gay ghetto. The ideological heft of this closet, its ability to predicate an entire 80-page poem, would seem to suggest that gay liberation changed very little. The revolution came out and went away, and when the dust settled the closet was still standing. On the other hand, the “closet” is not simply a synonym for clandestinity. It names a whole set of possibilities immanent within capitalism and visible to those forced to live in the long shadow of bourgeois society.¹⁹ That this is still the case in 1980—that capitalism has not yet begun to give ground to the revolutionary movements contesting it around the world—is certainly cause for alarm. But it is also the beginning of a sober assessment of this particular period. This is why the songs of liberation, however suggestive, will always remain open-ended, no matter what perspective we approach them from. But this open-endedness is itself the determinate historical content of this image: it summons up the question of revolutionary potential

in a moment where that potential is disorganized on the other side of the long 1970s. In this context, the immanent perspective on social relations that queerness names becomes peculiarly useful, as indirection becomes the primary means of engaging in revolutionary politics, at least in the United States.

All this is to say that Benson's queer standpoint grasps the inter-revolutionary character of the late twentieth century. My phrasing is a bit awkward, but hopefully it makes up for that by being precise. For what I want to convey is not only that Benson correctly identifies the defeat of revolutionary movements in the US and elsewhere, but also that he makes this determination from the standpoint of a fidelity to some future revolution. Which explains the role played by figurations of transition across the entirety of "Blue Books." Consider for example the following passage, again from the seventh blue book:

Am I not my book? It grows
dark, outside, and different
inside: warmer, cozier, more
necessary, less restless. Coffee
is in China—what did I read
about? The white man tortured
or held by the Communist
Chinese—not that. Books to
read. I would like to embody this
knowledge too. Sometimes the
body balks—introductions are
seductions or warnings.²⁰

These lines stage a contradiction between inside and outside. They are bookended by figures of modernist totalization that correspond to the outer reaches of interiority and exteriority: respectively, Mallarmé's infamous book of the world, and William Carlos Williams's bizarre prose work *The Embodiment of Knowledge*—which imagines a utopian projection (it's more like a propulsion, honestly) of education beyond the walls of the school in a way that definitively negates the division between mental and manual labor. Between these two references, communist China appears, in what appears to be a reference to some kind of propaganda. Benson evinces a reflexive suspicion about this. But China, "communist" China, is also a cipher for historical transition and revolutionary defeat in this moment, as Deng Xiaoping's market reforms were well on their way to undoing the inroads achieved by the People's Republic of China.

Along similar lines, in the forty-second blue book Benson raises the question of a revolutionary transition before utterly undermining the seriousness of the enterprise through a bit of scatological humor. Of note is the miniaturization of the whole

question of revolution, its figurative application to the minutiae of writing, which is then juxtaposed to a friend declining (in an unprincipled manner?) to listen to the criticism he has just accepted:

Neatly arranged on the tabletop,
 people, instruments, places. Ink
 smears on my hand. I plan to
 upgrade the modes of production,
 I do so, talking to a so-called
 friend. He is a friend, “is” in
 quotation marks, I offer him
 some criticism, and he accepts
 the offer but declines the position,
 walks away into the toilet to unload
 a big shit.²¹

These are funny lines, and the basic juxtaposition—a tiny, desktop revolution; a big shit—seems almost completely divorced from any serious thinking about revolution. And yet the bit about criticism here seems to resonate with our previous discussion of plausible deniability, as if the “friend” in question were a figure for the reader. Never mind the fact that the friend is not really clearly situated with respect to Benson’s speaker. He’s a so-called friend; he emphatically is a friend; and he is finally a “friend” in scare quotes. What kind of relationship do the speaker and this man have? How intimate are they with one another? How personal or impersonal is this friendship?

This brings me to the last passage from “Blue Books” I’ll discuss before concluding. Fittingly, it’s the last run printed in the poem, an excerpt from Benson’s fiftieth exam blue book. Most of it is written in the third person and presumably addressed to Benson—the “Steve” toward the end—by himself. But at the last minute we shift from third to first person, and Benson projects himself utopianly into the audience, imagining himself among the readers who might discover and make use of this text, possibly as the basis for their own sets of improvisations:

A

penchant for distraction dogs him. He
 is a boy, a man, constituted with or
 by a best friend, another boy/man
 arranged by fantasy out of the
 elements that have been given him
 to feel responsive to. Hopelessly defeatist,
 he rows out into the middle of a lake

and refuses to holler there for fear of
 his echo being heard by others.
 He never runs out of things to
 read, he runs his life like a
 metronome poking over a metaphor.
 Never enough. Not today. The
 remainder. Holds nose and stinks.
 Sacrifices product over the falls.
 Wretched elusive project wasted
 in garret clumsiness. Looks at
 the flies buzzing while he does
 sit-ups. So many little issues,
 all really. Don't talk down to
 the lowest common denominator
 Steve unless that's the best you
 can do. To join everyone I know
 in one audience is witnessing *me*,
 not satisfactory. I had to get
 rid of the dust but shaking it
 off not only displaced it but
 seemed to generate more, from
 the air, from the road—Whitman²²

“Running” does a lot of figurative work here, referring both to the passage of time (“run out”), physical movement, and a kind of top-down organization (one “runs” one’s life with a datebook by writing down appointments and so forth). The figure for this organization—“like a/metronome poking over a metaphor”—contributes to this shifting back and forth between space and time, introducing as well a distinction between quantity and quality: metronomes organize a quantitative perception of time; metaphors compare the qualities of things to one another. Metronome also sounds like a distortion of the structuralist binary opposite of metaphor: metonymy, which is a spatial trope (having to do with touching or contiguity) and thus opposed to the metronome of which it is the sonic shadow. This kind of alternating between quantity and quality—time and space—persists throughout the passage, in a series of sentence fragments that sound like headlines or bullet-points more than complete thoughts, until the shift from third to first person mentioned above. This shift is mediated by a second-person address to “Steve,” which is followed by the emplacement of a speaking “I” in the midst of the audience (which in turn doubles the slippery, homoerotic lord and bondsman dialectic adumbrated in the first half of this passage). Here we find ourselves at the outer limit of improvisation and Benson’s totality thinking: for the subject of improvisation has hitherto been the writer, the poet, the performer, whose

work the audience encounters and sets about interpreting. This is a utopian gesture, I am tempted to say even a revolutionary one; it anticipates a situation in which Benson might once again join a collective agent, the readers, in paying a disciplined attention to certain objects. But the gesture is “not satisfactory.” We end up stuck in a first-person perspective that follows the shaken-off dust metonymically into the mysterious and abrupt invocation of Walt Whitman, that queer revolutionary poet (albeit a bourgeois revolutionary) whose “I” remains a kind of goad on the horizon of revolutionary politics, as a dispatch that still feels like it lies ahead of us in time.

Thus “Blue Books” ends by displacing its aspirations to totality onto another writer: Walt Whitman. Whitman, we may recall, is himself a cosmos; he contains multitudes; and he affirms his own internal contradictions (which is presumably a form of handling them). Whitman is also at the antipodes of Benson’s poetic practices. He published one book repeatedly over the span of forty years, revising incessantly, adding material and chipping away at what was already there, fashioning and refashioning his work as though some ideal *Leaves of Grass* might eventually be reached. So not only does Benson leap out of the driver’s seat at the end of his poem, but he encourages us to push back against some of his propositions, figures, and concepts. He solicits more and more contradictions, and, presumably, more and more poetry—the better to lay into place “unfounded capabilities” with, for a (militant, queer) reader to sniff out and make use of in the future.

Conclusion

My reading of “Blue Books” in this essay is by no means exhaustive. I have mainly set myself the task of bringing forward one aspect of this text, which I hope to have shown can be propitiously read in the light of Kevin Floyd’s account of queerness as an aspiration to totality in *The Reification of Desire*. Benson’s poetry, not incidentally like Floyd’s theory, is far too complex to pin down in a short piece like this one. They are both exemplary dialectical productions, in the sense that Lenin describes dialectics in Hegel: they both contain “living, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades of every approach and approximation to reality (with a philosophical system growing into a whole out of each shade).”²³ My invocation of Lenin here—not to mention *this* Lenin, the Lenin who studied Hegel in the leadup to the October Revolution—is no coincidence. I think that reading Benson teaches us something about how to read what I’ve called the inter-revolutionary poetics of the post-New-Left avant-gardes. These poetics are obviously anti-capitalist in some way, but they are not fortunate enough to take shape in the midst of a revolutionary movement. On the other hand, they arise alongside and out of such movements; they know, however indirectly or abstractly, what it’s like to participate in a revolutionary process, and attempt to communicate that experience aesthetically. For Benson the form this aesthetic communication takes is improvisation, which remediates the spatial practices of cruising. Other Language

poets come at this problem of being between revolutions in different ways; their work might be rewardingly reread in this light.

By the same token—and by way of conclusion—we might think of Kevin Floyd as a kind of exemplary inter-revolutionary militant. *The Reification of Desire* appeared in print in 2009, the culmination of a decade or more of careful study of Marx, Lukács, and other writers. Now, in 2020, in the midst of yet another capitalist crisis, liberal identity politics are coming increasingly under fire for their inability to solve problems like homelessness and unemployment. Revolutionary movements are springing into being, demanding an end to racist policing, guarantees of food, shelter, and employment, and the construction of a lifeworld worth inhabiting for all people. In this context, Floyd's work offers an historical account of the capitalist crisis we're faced with; an account of the limits of liberal attempts to respond to it; and, most importantly, a model for thinking that aligns itself with the wretched of the earth and will settle for nothing less than communism.

Notes

1. The most notable recent work on this score is Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody* (London: Zed Books, 2016), which links questions of queer knowledge or standpoint to political debates about sex work, transphobia, and international solidarity. Jordy Rosenberg, meanwhile, stages the confrontation between totality thinking and particularization in a different vein, offering a brilliant critique of object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms: see Rosenberg, “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present,” *Theory & Event* 17:2 (2014). More broadly, it is worth noting the way that Floyd anticipated the recent historical work by Emily Hobson and Christina Hanhardt: Emily Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Both these writers have revisited the queer politics of the 1960s and 1970s—the politics, that is, of Gay Liberation and radical lesbian feminism—with an eye toward the way these New Left configurations, often denounced for their embrace of totalizing optics, offer us a way forward beyond the seeming impasses of queer studies in the present.
2. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 6.
3. The obvious analogy is between queer consciousness and the class consciousness of the proletariat famously described in Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*.
4. Besides Benson, these writers are: Rae Armantrout, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten. In the penultimate volume of *The Grand Piano*, Alan Bernheimer, a comrade of the Language poets, contributes an essay as well.
5. On his website, Benson writes that this subtitle was added by the editors of *Social Text*, who also made a number of other changes to the text of “Aesthetic Tendency” itself. In 2013, Benson released a PDF of this essay that was more faithful to the manuscript edition of the text. I have compared the *Social Text* copy of “Aesthetic Tendency” to Benson’s 2013 reconstruction, and found it hard to pinpoint any significant differences of substances between the two texts—with the exception, of course, of the use of “A Manifesto” as a subtitle, which completely changes how you read the essay, both in its relation to the collective project of Language poetry (if this text “manifests” the group’s core concerns, then we are invited to see it as a document of their poetic intentions, and to measure their poetry with this yardstick), and as a theoretical intervention more broadly. See: Benson et al., “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto,” *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn, 1988): 261-275; and Benson et. al., “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry,” <http://www.stevebensonasis.com/?p=150>.
6. Steve Benson, et al., *The Grand Piano*, Volume 6 (Detroit: Mode A, 2008) 26.
7. Benson, *Grand Piano* 26.
8. *Grand Piano* 28.
9. *Grand Piano* 30-31.
10. Steve Benson, “Blue Books,” in *Blue Book* (Great Barrington: The Figures, 1988) 42.
11. Jeffrey Escoffier, “The Political Economy of the Closet,” *American Homo* (New York and London: Verso, 2018 [1999]).
12. Steve Abbott, “Language Poets: An Introduction,” *Poetry Flash* (May 1979).

13. William Wordsworth, "Preface," in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
14. Steve Benson, "Some Notes on the Texts," *Blue Book* (Great Barrington: The Figures, 1988) 11.
15. Benson, "Some Notes" 10.
16. "Some Notes" 10.
17. "Some Notes" 10-11.
18. Benson, *Blue Books* 35.
19. On this score see especially John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
20. Benson, "Blue Books" 43.
21. "Blue Books" 104.
22. "Blue Books" 115. Emphasis in original.
23. Vladimir Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics" (1915), trans. and pub. Marxists Internet Archive (2008).

Allie Brooks. "Women's Work' and the Reproduction of Labor: Revisiting Seminal Marxist Feminist Texts to Reconstitute a Subject for Feminist Identity." *Mediations* 34.1 (Fall 2020) 65-84. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/womens-work

"Women's Work" and the Reproduction of Labor: Revisiting Seminal Marxist Feminist Texts to Reconstitute a Subject for Feminist Identity

Allie Brooks

Natural force of social labor, I think, here merely refers to work that is naturalized and non-commodified—the idea that a woman does the work of raising children because it's "natural," because she's wired that way. The way most people would be deeply offended if you suggested that maybe mom deserves a paycheck just for being mom. It's natural and naturally occurring, like rain watering crops. -Kevin Floyd

Marxist feminists including Margaret Benston, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and their contemporaries synthesized a critique of patriarchal oppression with a critical analysis of this oppression's relationship to capital. However, despite their attempt to offer feminism a fuller critique of society under capital, the act of applying Marxist theory to feminist discourse is often greeted in Women's Studies and "mainstream" feminism as a curiosity rather than a vital step in articulating the social arrangements that traditionally posited women as the "lesser" sex. Take, for example, the introduction to Women's Studies textbook *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions* wherein editors Susan Shaw and Janet Lee describe Marxist feminism as "a perspective that uses economic explanations from traditional Marxist theory to understand women's oppression. For Marxist feminists, the socioeconomic inequities of the class system are the major issues."¹ One might infer from this short description that Marxist feminism places class struggle above the larger goal of equality for women. Yet this curtailed analysis misses Marxist feminism's singular ability to account for the "bigger picture" of capitalist society. Indeed, in our present moment as we are bombarded by messages

that we perhaps live in a “post-feminist” age, it becomes apparent that attempts to effect sex-based equity through established channels has failed—the wage gap persists and global labor trends such as Guy Standing’s notion of “feminized labor”² indicate a crisis in labor relations based on historic and societal prejudice organized around women’s laboring capacity. Moreover, the category of labor historically seen as “house work” or “women’s work” is increasingly being shunted off to portions of the populace which society *now* views as “naturally” suited for menial tasks along lines of race, history of incarceration, or ableist prejudice. In other words, the need for the sort of tasks our mothers and grandmothers were shackled with has not been erased. Instead capital has found more insidious ways to hide the role of what the *Endnotes* collective terms “abject” tasks and the manner in which said forms of devalued and degraded labor directly tie into value creation. In a groundbreaking essay, “The Logic of Gender,” which likens the sex-gender binary to the use value-exchange value abstraction, the collective seeks to explicate why capital needs to “see” both sex and gender in terms of labor relations. Speaking in our present moment, the *Endnotes* collective underscores the need for a feminism which counters the evolving markers of which individuals are compelled by their presumed in-born “nature” to reproduce labor. *The Endnotes* collective observes:

Indeed, we can say that, if many of our mothers and grandmothers were caught in the sphere of IMM activities, the problem we face today is different. It is not that we will have to “go back to the kitchen”, if only because we cannot afford it. Our fate, rather, is *having to deal with the abject*.³

While “the abject” is a nuanced and elastic term couched in a critique of the assignment of the performance of specific reproductive tasks since the 1970s suffice it to say that for here “the abject” might be understood as the thankless and ceaseless tasks which were previously termed “women’s work.” The need for this work never disappears. Capital simply shifts the burden onto different shoulders as society evolves.

The consideration posed by “The Logic of Gender” exposes a very real challenge to modern feminism, if for no other reason than the concept of “the abject” and the proposed reframing of both sex and gender the essay goes on to advocate are ontologically difficult. When wrangling with a need for a more evolved Marxist feminist—or more precisely, Queer Marxist—stance, perhaps it is time we revisit and reappraise the theoretical foundation laid by Marxist feminists in the 1970s. In reading their text with fresh eyes we might perhaps see that, in terms of capital’s special form of exploiting women beyond that of all laborers, it was never about reproductive organs but about the reproduction of labor. As a rereading of second-

wave Marxist feminist theory demonstrates, these inaugural works dared to suggest that perhaps the reason why “women’s issues” and “labor issues” were considered distinctly separate problems was because capitalist society benefited from promoting that distinction. Beyond merely finding ways to apply Marxist theory to sex-related issues, Marxist feminism during the second-wave era articulated a dialectic approach which allows for a critique of society, “natural” arrangements, and capitalist exploitation of labor.

Perhaps the most illustrative points we need to be reminded of is that theoretically these works not only reappropriate Marx for feminist theory but are insightful enough to challenge societal norms that create the impression that sex-based labor prejudice and gender-specific stereotypes are “natural” and somehow beyond the machinations of the market. In continuing to question why reproductive tasks are *still* seen as either a “natural” service of a loving relative or else should “naturally” be held in disdain and assigned to the lowest strata of society, we can begin to appreciate a more fulsome subject for feminism that transcends sex-based essentializing and promotes a sense of reification which makes action and collectivism seem impossible. In other words, perhaps in our present moment feminism needs to expand to serve not just women, but those who capital uses as the “women of the world.”

In the 1965 released *American Women: The Report of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women and Other Publications of the Commission*, evidence of societal assumptions about women, housework, and childrearing permeate the document. Ironically, the report is meant to hasten a “pro-women” and liberal process, described by Committee Chairman Eleanor Roosevelt, wherein America saw “the remaining outmoded barriers to women’s aspirations disappear.”⁴ The committee report observes:

The present homemaking style can be attained and maintained only when another woman, or a man, replaces the homemaker who leaves her home to work. Wherever this is impossible, everyone suffers: the husband’s job capacity is threatened; the children’s health and psychological needs are less well met; and the woman working away from the home is under the pressure of continual worry about what may be happening in the home she left that morning.⁵

Even in this “progressive” report, which allows for women to work outside of the home, the assumption in the last line underscores that despite her form of employment a woman’s “natural” chief concern is for the care and keeping of her family. In the early 1970s, the works of the following theorists are remarkably able to step outside of the dominant world view and challenge a history, culture, and concept of “nature” predicated on patriarchal culture, revealing how capital historically benefits from women’s servitude in the home. Moreover, they use Marx’s theory to connect the

seemingly separate sphere of the household to that of the market at a time when these physical separations appeared concrete. To do so, they focused on the crucial site of labor relations, and the properties of the unique commodity of labor power. I suggest that this emphasis on the vitality of not just labor, but unwaged and devalued reproduction of labor is a locus of continual fresh insight and must be ceaselessly evaluated. Just as a clean house begins to get dusty the very moment it has been dusted, so too must we start the theoretical chore of reconsider societal arrangements in terms of labor and reproduction of labor.

“Escaping” the Home and “Exploding” the Role of the Housewife

During second-wave feminism many activists shifted their focus from the first-wave goal of gaining political empowerment in the form of voting rights and began to link the stigma against women to women’s perceived inability to earn paychecks. It is during this era that the idea of wages for housework, and even pensions for housewives, was first suggested. These ideas were—and still are—often deemed laughably absurd. After all, how much should someone get paid for ironing or raising a child? And how in the world could employers be expected to pay for things that were done outside the office, in a place considered to be separate and private? Society perpetuated the assumption that women were simply better suited to caring for the young and caring for the home and that anything taking place within the home had nothing to do with the world of wages. In *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, Dorothy Sue Cobble reflects on women’s relationship to waged labor: “The answer to the perennial question ‘Should women work outside the home?’ has changed dramatically over time” going on to observe how “the debate was never fully resolved in the sense that, even today, in the minds of some, women’s claims to wage work is secondary to that of men’s.”⁶ Cobble offers this commentary on the state of wage relations and sex not some decades past, but in 2004. This demonstrates that within the framework of societal norms and abstractions feminism is still confronted with gender stereotypes and sex-based disparities reflected in wage relations. While this persistent problem apparently confounds more liberal feminists, early Marxist feminists were able to deduce that capital required housework to be unpaid. Moreover, they articulate how dismissing “women’s work” is necessary to maintaining the status quo and to accumulation of surplus value, thus exposing capital’s need for women’s double exploitation.

Benston, Dalla Costa, James, and the majority of second-wave feminism participants reasoned that if women could escape the confines of the home and enter the work force in massive numbers then this would rupture patriarchal culture and empower women. Marxist feminist also held out hope that this shift in labor relations could potentially rupture or “shake up” the market system entirely. Aside from not bringing about an end to the exploitation of all labor, in terms of ending women’s exploitation access to waged labor did not end sexually inequity. Historians

Hymowitz and Weissman note, “the postwar consumer economy had come to rely on a workforce of women who did not think of themselves as workers and who were not taken seriously by their employers.”⁷ Thus, many women’s wages were viewed as contributing to but not sustaining a family. While it initially stood to reason that challenging this perception of women and the workplace would cause the societal perception of women as the lesser sex to fall away with time, by the 1970s it became apparent that beyond “escaping the home” second-wave feminism sought to “explode” the psychological effects of the figure of the housewife. Hymowitz and Weissman go on to observe this became necessary since “before working women could affect any change, they would have to confront the double exploitation they faced as both workers and women.”⁸ To that end, a simultaneous goal of second-wave feminism was to facilitate a dialogue between women, shedding light on experiences of oppression and isolation, thereby explicating the notion that there was nothing “natural” about the social arrangement that dictated an adult women toil ceaselessly in the service of her family in what was considered “non-work.”

“The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation”

In the introduction to her work Benston writes, “in arguing that the roots of secondary status of women are in fact economic, it can be shown that women as a group do indeed have a definite relation to the means of production and that this is different from that of men.”⁹ From the outset of her essay, Selma Benston moves to refute the idea that women exist outside the wage-economy in a realm separate from male labor. She does so by focusing on the non-work hidden behind the dynamic between capitalist and laborer. Marx uses “the means of production” as the single divisive distinction between capitalists and laborers: those who hold the means of production hire laborers, and those who do not possess them must sell their labor if they want to buy the commodities that make it possible to live. It is this arrangement that is the root of all capitalistic oppression of the worker. In stating that women have a “different” relationship to the “means of production” than men, Benston is making a critical suggestion about sex under capital. What she suggests is that while a male laborer is oppressed because of a market system that forces him to sell his labor in order to live, women are doubly exploited through this perceived erasure from the capitalist/laborer dynamic. While the laborer may be exploited in an observable fashion, dragging himself to work each day to earn his wages, women’s “work” is hidden from the equation. So while Marx’s original theory does not speak about women’s oppression specifically—an apparent omission that prompts many feminist to reject his theory entirely— Benston makes a feminist appropriation of Marx usable by moving on to explain how women’s exploitation is insidiously hidden under the social arrangements tied to labor relations through ideas of sexual stereotypes and cultural ideas of what is “normal.”

Benston points out that the social arrangements that make the “nuclear family”

seem “normal” portrays the male worker as the only eligible laborer in the family. This creates the situation wherein his wages alone can buy the commodities necessary to maintain the family unit. For most families, the wife’s main relationship to the world of labor-exchange has historically been to perform the tasks necessary for reproduction of her husband’s labor—even if she did have a part-time job, her “real job” was to safeguard her husband’s labor power by performing housework. In most nuclear families it was assumed that after a “hard day’s work” a man should expect to return home to a hot meal and clean house. It was a given that his wife would ensure this all took place, as she was home at home “not working” all day. This societally promoted perception of the home and housework as totally separate from the world of work and wages deflects and dismisses the effort a housewife exerted in achieving these tasks as any sort of “work.” Indeed, economic analysis itself is predicated on this abstraction. Marilyn Waring notes that “economists usually use *labor* to mean only those activities that produce surplus value (that is, profit in the marketplace). Consequently, labor (work) that does not produce profits is not considering production.”¹⁰ She adds to this, “all the other reproductive work that women do is widely viewed as unproductive.”¹¹ Benston exposes for us how the assessment and perpetuation of market relations are maintained through a deliberate erasure of the critical relationship between “women’s work” and production of value.

Rather than merely accepting that it is “natural” for a woman to perform domestic tasks, Benston questions why historically women have been discouraged from working outside of the home and why “housework” or “women’s work” is dismissed as non-work. Benston directs these questions back to the exploitation of laborer by the capitalist. Much feminist theory did not see the point of discussing the oppression of “labor” given that it was presumed this group referred exclusively to men. Yet, in order to understand why capital needs women to be relegated to the role of housewife, Benston realized that the exploitative nature of labor-exchange must be emphasized. She cites the work of Ernest Mandel to remind her readers of the oppression of male laborers to which women’s oppression is tied:

The proletarian condition is, in a nutshell, the lack of access to the means of production or means of subsistence which, in a society of generalized commodity production, forces the proletarian to sell his labor power. In exchange for this labor power he receives a wage which then enables him to acquire the means of consumption necessary for satisfying his own needs and those of his family.¹²

This passage establishes a system where the male laborer must continually sell his labor if the family wishes to survive. Though Mandel glosses over the notion of “means of consumption,” Benston uses Marxism to serve a feminist agenda by consider the “means of consumptions” in reference to the activities that reproduce labor power.

Here, Benston notes that Mandel offers no critical account of how, when, and where the “means of consumption” becomes labor power but also how he fails to appreciate how these tasks are an instance of labor. In questioning the processing of the “means of consumption” that result in the production of labor power, Benston synthesizes the theoretical project of Marxism and feminism, describing the exploitation of labor and the double exploitation of women: One cannot simply purchase a slab of raw beef, eat it, and be sufficiently nourished to go back to work in the morning. Effort must be exerted, and time must be spent to transform wage-purchased commodities— “the means of consumption”— before they can be consumed and then turned into a fresh supply of labor. Yet the capitalist has been able to buy labor without paying for the work required to reproduce labor because these tasks are perceived as “non work.” In scrutinizing this gap in the reading of Marxist theory, Benston identifies the hidden location of where women enter into the equation of labor relations, value creation, and the perpetuation of capitalism itself. Commodities are not naturally and magically transmuted into labor power. This process takes work. Yet capital needs to dismiss the efforts of processing the means of consumption in order to produce fresh labor power as non-value producing so that it does not have to acknowledge these efforts by paying for them.

In revolutionary fashion, Benston builds from Marx’s basic description of the male worker’s exploitation to expose women’s vital relationship to waged labor, noting how the necessity of “women’s work” is deliberately erased from the value creation process. By erasing the significance of “women’s work” and hiding it away in the home she accounts for the “double exploitation” experienced by women. Benston articulates the need for feminist theory capable of drawing on Marxism to expose the position of women within capital:

We lack a corresponding structural definition of women. What is needed first is not a complete examination of the symptoms of the secondary status of women, but instead a statement of the material conditions in capitalist (and other) societies which define the group “women.”¹³

Here, Benston helps us understand that “women” as a category owes its definition and the subsequent oppression of women to their deliberate and perpetual exclusion from direct market relations. Women are not hidden away to toil within their homes by accident. Capital needs to hide and dismiss the “work of the housewife” in order to earn a larger profit and perpetuate exploitative labor-relations. An important aspect of the previous quote is also that Benston presents her readers with an ontological-shaking point to contemplate: “Women” and all that we perceive to be the “natural” and “normal” characteristics and roles of that group are directly related to and manipulated by capital. There is nothing natural or even biological to suggest that women are the “lesser sex.” Rather, women have been the sex whose relationship

to value-creating and capital has been historically hidden and societally justified. Having addressed this abstraction, Benston moves to further account for how women, as a group, relate to all commodity production through their relationship with the commodity of labor.

Again, citing Mandel, Benston describes the dividing of commodity production into two camps—labor and tasks which have an exchange value, earn a wage, and are therefore socially productive and a second group:

The second group of products in capitalist society which are not commodities but remain simple use-value consists of all things produced in the home. Despite the fact that considerable human labor goes into this type of household production, it still remains a production of use-values and not of commodities. Every time a soup is made or button sewn on a garment, it constitutes production, but is not production for the market.¹⁴

Benston thus exposes how there is no such thing as a mother's "natural" job, nor any form of housework that is inherently valueless. These abstractions are perpetuated by capitalist society because the converse is true. Just as trees or minerals are just "naturally" scattered about for capitalists to seize upon, the duties of wife and mother are portrayed as things that women "naturally" do. Analogously, if capitalists benefit from either mother nature or mother's little labors, it is only because they are clever enough to seize upon the usefulness of something that "naturally" occurs. In this way, capital perpetuates the notion that valorizing women's work is just as silly—and logistically impossible—as remunerating mother nature for the rain which waters crops. Benston dispels this abstraction, laying-out how "things produced in the home" are not some naturally occurring phenomenon, but activities deliberately excluded from having a direct exchange-value, perceived as not being produced for the market merely because they are performed in the domestic sphere. Yet if the laborer is meant to return to the market or public sphere with a fresh supply of labor at the start of the next work day, then these tasks *should* have an exchange value, regardless of where they are performed, or why someone feels compelled to do them, for they tie directly into the male laborer's ability to exchange labor for wages. No reproductive effort or activity is intrinsically value-less any more than a purely "natural" occurrence. Thus, Benston shows how society draws on the idea of both "natural" gender roles and home/market distinctions to delineate between commodities, or activities that are produced directly for the market and those which are not, allowing labor reproduction to occur without chipping in to surplus value.

Taking a bold step toward breaking with the traditions of the past, Benston and her contemporaries ask: Why is it that a mature and physically capable female finds herself fated for a life of "non-work" at the service of her husband or male head of household? Once more challenging our perception of "natural" roles beyond the

influence of capitalistic society, Benston states that “this assignment of household work as the function of a special category ‘women’ means that this group *does* stand in a different relation to production than the group ‘men.’”¹⁵ She allows us to define women, then, “as that group of people who are responsible for production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family.”¹⁶ In this way, we can understand women as a group who are perhaps not significantly different in their laboring capabilities than their male counterparts, but who have an historically “different” relation to production. Rather than being marked as a category because of biology, “women” emerges as a group of people whose laboring abilities are constantly channeled to activities that must occur within the home but are excluded from exchange-value production and the market. Thus, Benston concludes: “The material basis for the inferior status of women is to be found in just this definition of women. In a society in which money determines value, women are a group who work outside the money economy. Their work is valueless, is therefore not even real work.”¹⁷ This establishes women’s work as a sort of production—the “work” that is necessary to but occurs “outside of the money economy”—that must be portrayed as non-value producing. And it is this relation to the market wherein women historically were chained to the sort of work that must have its ties to the market hidden that serves as the site of women’s inferior status. Benston emphasizes that this arrangement is no mere accident: For capital to produce surplus value and in order for the laborer to be able to sell labor power to capitalists, it is necessary for this group— here understood as “women”— to exist perpetually laboring outside of the money economy. It is under this social arrangement that the commodity labor power has been reproduced in such a fashion as to allow for the creation of surplus value. In other words, women are not simply exploited in the same fashion as the average laborer. Instead, she is doubly exploited: first through her reliance to the exploited wages of her husband and then again in her status as “non-worker” outside of the monied economy despite the vital role her non-work plays in the exchange of labor and value creation process.

Women and the “Reserve Labor Army”

Benston shows us that capitalist accumulation relies upon a group of individuals needing to perform forms of labor that are considered to be “non-work” as well as capital’s need to maintain a reserve army of labor. Explicating the idea of women comprising a “reserve” of laborers, she writes, “when labor is scarce (early industrialization, the two world wars, etc.) then women form an important part of the labor force. When there is less demand for labor (as now under neocapitalism) women become a surplus labor force.”¹⁸ Benston goes on to note how women as a labor force are easily pushed in and out of the factory, since “the pervading ideology ensures that no one, man or woman, takes women’s participation in the labor force very seriously. Women’s real work, we are taught, is in the home; this holds whether or not they are married, single, or the heads of households.”¹⁹ Prior to the 1970s, it was

largely assumed that it was women who comprised this labor reserve, thus Benston makes clear for future Marxist feminists that capital needs to restrict a portion of the labor pool from selling their labor openly and equally.

Women have historically occupied the role of supporting their husband's waged labor, allowing society to draw on women in times of need while perpetuating the belief that a woman's "real job" consisted of activities that took place within the home. This creates a perception that while the woman is at home she is "not working" and if she does hold a job she is merely "pitching in" — working to produce war materials for the men who are at war, or else supplementing her husband's family-sustaining wages to provide a "better life." It is this very supposition that laid the framework for theorists from Guy Standings onward to discuss the concept of feminized labor and the resulting effects on labor relations we are presently experiencing. Moreover, the intrinsic need for a labor reserve that can be pushed in and out of employment shows that structurally capital still needs some group of people to be marked out for this group. We, as feminists, can no longer assume that it is biological sex alone that indicates which laborers "participation in the labor force" should be "taken seriously;" we need to thoroughly interrogate which groups of society are assumed to be naturally deficient or lesser laborers in our present moment.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James' "The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community"

As the title of their 1972 essay suggests, the idea that a woman's collective held the potential for political action — systemic rupture even — was increasingly embraced by feminist theory as the decade progressed. Similar to Benston, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James focus on the commodity of labor power, its role in wage relations, and how feminism can challenge this dynamic. A next step from the groundwork laid by Benston, Dalla Costa and James continue to emphasize the mystified representation of the production and reproduction of labor power and how it is portrayed and perpetuated as "women's work." In the introduction, James writes, "capital's special way of robbing labor is paying the worker a wage that is enough to live on (more or less)" going on to describe how, "he buys with the wages the right to use the only "thing" the worker has to sell, his ability or her ability to work."²⁰ From this basic Marxist formulation, she explains, "The specific social relation, which is capital, then, is the wage relation. And this wage relation can exist only when the ability to work becomes a saleable commodity, Marx calls this *labor power*. This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing."²¹ James underscores the application of this theory to her purpose:

The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works its bed must be

made, its floors swept, its lunchbox prepared. . . . This is how labor power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or at the office. *To describe its [labor power’s] basic production and reproduction is to describe women’s work.*²²

Dalla Costa and James build from Marx’s basic formulation of the value creation process: a laborer must sell their labor, the only “thing” they actually possess, if they wish to live and work another day. The wage is meant to sustain the laborer in exchange for their time working for the capitalist, yet there is a blank spot in this arrangement since labor itself must be produced. Dalla Costa and James articulate that the act of producing and reproducing labor power has traditionally been the role of “women,” thus exposing society’s role in portraying reproductive activities as naturally being “women’s work.” While Benston focuses on the domestic sphere, or the home, “The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community” is especially concerned with the way in which society perpetuated the figure of the “housewife.” Rather than concerning themselves with the physical space that serves to hide the work of women, they emphasize the societal stereotypes that keep women subservient and within the home. They write: “We place foremost in these pages the housewife as the central figure in this female role. We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives” (21). Yet we cannot assume in our present moment that all women are housewives, nor that a family is comprised of two heterosexual married adults. Likewise, we cannot assert that all “abject” tasks are performed by women in the decades since second-wave feminism. Yet the exploitation and debasement associated with these tasks is still perpetuated by society and this theory lays the source of these conceptions bare—capital’s inability to pay for and refusal to validate the reproduction of labor is why we throw around terms such as “menial” or “unskilled labor.” Yet during the recent global pandemic we have seen stark evidence that reproductive tasks are vital to the perpetuation of capital as those cleaning nursing homes were temporarily lauded as “heroes.”

Returning to the text, in the following passage Dalla Costa and James illustrate the historic relationship of the family to the market and how this relationship plays a critical role in how we understand the figure of the “housewife:”

With the advent of capitalism, the socialization of production was organized with *the factory* as its center. Those who worked in the new productive center, the factory, received a wage. Those who were excluded did not. Women, children and the aged lost the relative power that derived from the family’s dependence on their labor.²³

Because of pervasive cultural norms men became the wage laborer within the family, the individual tasked with bearing the brunt of financial responsibility for

the others: “It has put on the man’s shoulders the burden of financial responsibility for women, children, the old, the ill, in a word all those who do not receive wages.”²⁴ What becomes clear is that familial arrangements serve to perpetuate stereotypes surrounding “the housewife” by assigning relationships to waged labor along the lines of sex. Not as a result of biology or “nature,” but because of “pervasive cultural norms” capital can draw on customs, history, and notions of the family to portray women as the supplement to her husband’s laboring ability. The result is a capital-driven and carefully hidden dichotomy between those who are able to earn a wage for their labor on the open market and others which cultural norms dictate as being unfit to sell their labor directly. This places the adult male as the primary wage earner within the household, the member whose laboring capacity is such that it can reliably sustain the basic consumption needs of the unit. However, it also relies on the assumption that behind every man laboring, unseen and unpaid, is a woman whose chief concern and main “job” is the care and maintenance of the family unit.

In the previous quote women are lumped within the family-unit with “children, the old, the ill, in a word all those who do not receive a wage.” James and Dalla Costa note that capitalism and wage relations are responsible for perpetuating the “exploitation of the wage-less” and draw on their reading of Marx to build a case that demonstrates how, without equal access to equally waged labor positions, those who are exploited will continue to be exploited:

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working-class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage laborer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it. That is, the wage commanded a larger amount of labor than appeared in factory bargaining. *Where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.*²⁵

In exposing the concept of the “hidden” value and personal service, Dalla Costa and James demonstrate feminist theory’s ability to identify gaps in Marxism, as well as Marxism’s unique aptitude to allow feminism a more fulsome critique of society. This is an argument that Dr. Floyd was able to make in regard to what we now call “Queer” theory and Marxism, which owes it theoretical grounding to the work by Benston, Dalla Costa, and James.

To reiterate a tenet of Marxism initially utilized by Benston, we must remember how Marx explains that the basic underpinning of capitalism is an exploitative exchange between laborer and capitalist, with the wage serving as the site of the capitalist exploiting the workers’ labor. In *Capital*, Marx tells us directly:

The fact that half a day’s labour is necessary to keep the worker alive during 24 hours does not in any way prevent him from working a whole day. Therefore, the value of labour-power, and the value which that labor-power valorizes . . . in the labour-process are two entirely different magnitudes; and this difference was what the capitalist had in mind when he was purchasing labour-power. . . . What was really decisive for him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself.²⁶

Critically, it is because of unique nature of the commodity labor-power that surplus value can be created and gathered up by the capital. This commodity and this alone has the ability to produce not just value, but value above and beyond its own market-dictated worth. What is also unique to labor power is that the laborer needs to be able to reproduce this strange and critical commodity in the time when he is not laboring directly for the capitalist, a time and place that capitalist society wants us to believe exist separately from the world of the factory or office. There are only so many hours in the day and only so many hours the capitalist is willing to recognize as the “workday” when considering an hourly wage. Capitalist society would want us to believe that what a laborer does on their own time and the home they return to is beyond the reaches of market influence.

Again, building off of Marx’s original theory what James and Dalla Costa are suggesting is that this perception is a deliberate abstraction. Because of our perception that the “housewife” is a non-worker and that anything within the “home” is beyond the reaches of capitalist society, it then falls on the female family member to reproduce the labor power of her male laborer as a “personal service.” Because a woman is “naturally” concerned with homelife and her family, whatever she does to care and maintain them is implicitly beyond the bounds of market-relations. Yet in light of the previous excerpt from their essay, Dalla Costa and James make plain that because a laborer does not have the time or the physical stamina to reproduce their own labor these activities have to be done in a place and by a person functioning in a role that is perceived as existing outside of the realm of waged-labor and direct production—a point the *Endnotes* Collective explicates fully in “The Logic of Gender.” Hidden behind the capitalist’s pilfering of surplus value directly from the laborer is an identical process being enacted upon the non-wage laborers. However, this exploitation is compounded because it is essentially hidden by lack of a wage, creating an arrangement where, in previous generations, a woman was “trapped” and isolated within the home. They explain how even if she enters into the workplace, the role of the housewife awaits her when she gets home inducing her to complete the tasks necessary to the reproduction of labor without considering this to be value creating “work” at all—she is merely doing what any loving wife and mother ought to do. Without these obscured and deliberately unvalued efforts of the

“housewife” — given the vital role that the “peculiar” commodity labor value places in capitalist accumulation — the entire system ceases to function. As Dalla Costa and James observe, “we have to make clear that, within the wage, domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value.”²⁷

In making a case for capital’s need for and direct role in perpetuating female subjugation through not just the home/factory divide but specifically via the figure of the housewife, the authors note that it is social ideology necessary to perpetuating market relations that drives women’s secondary status and not some biologically imposed “natural” constraint. Instead, from birth until death women are indoctrinated with the cult of the housewife, meant to accept this role and this toil as their predetermined lot in life. As Dalla Costa and James observe:

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labor, women in domestic labor are not productive. In fact, precisely the opposite is true if one thinks of the enormous quantity of social services which capitalist organizations transform into privatized activity, putting them on the backs of housewives. Domestic labor is not essentially “feminine work”; a woman doesn’t fulfill herself more or get less exhausted than a man from washing and cleaning. These are social services inasmuch as they serve the reproduction of labor power. And capital, precisely by instituting its family structure has “liberated” the man from these functions so that he is completely “free” for *direct* exploitation: so that he is free to “earn” enough for a woman to reproduce him as labor power.²⁸

In this light, one can understand second-wave feminism concluding that women could become “free” from the debasement and devaluation of their labor within the domestic sphere by a mass exodus into the public sector.

It is significant to acknowledge that Dalla Costa and James were not so naïve as to suggest that simply allowing women access to factory jobs or other sectors of industry is enough to enact the “emancipation/liberation” of women. Grasping Marx’s notion of freedom, not with positive connotations in terms of liberty or free will but rather that a laborer is simply “free” from the means of production, they are careful to note that under capitalism all labor is exploited labor:

Work is still work, whether inside or outside of the home. The independence of the wage earner means only being a “free individual” for capital, no less for women than for men. Those who advocate that the liberation of the working class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are part of the problem, not the solution. Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to the kitchen sink.²⁹

They go on to add:

What we wish to make clear here is that by the non-payment of a wage when we are producing in a world capitalistically organized, the figure of the boss is concealed behind that of the husband. He appears to be the sole recipient of domestic services, and this gives an ambiguous and slave-like character to housework. The husband and children, through their loving involvement, their loving blackmail, become the first foremen, the immediate controllers of this labor.³⁰

Here, the authors expose the naivety of viewing an escape from the factory of production hidden within the home as enough to grant female empowerment. Instead, they turn their attention to challenging the structure of family and the usage of familial relations as a means of inducing women to labor in this manner without a wage. Therefore, Dalla Costa and James call for a woman-centric collectivizing that seeks to expose the double exploitation inherent in housework:

Rather we must discover forms of struggle which immediately break the whole structure of domestic work, rejecting it absolutely, rejecting our role as housewives and the home as the ghetto of our existence, since the problem is not only to stop doing this work, but to smash the entire role of housewife.³¹

Part of this project of struggle, of smashing the housewife, is to seek a new identity: “In the sociality of struggle women discover and exercise a power that effectively gives them a new identity. *The new identity is and can only be a new degree of social power.*³² Bearing in mind that it necessary for “feminine work” or “women’s work” to be seen as non-social production occurring outside of the confines of the workday and market, then “the home” *does* become a place to escape from, as Benston insisted. Given the temporal constraints of this historical moment, the language of breaking out, smashing, and escaping becomes a point of potential systemic rupture, and it is easy to see how the second-wave goal of escaping from the home would be conceived as an unequivocal victory against a system that feeds upon the oppression of women.

Dalla Costa and James further this concept by insisting that feminism also must challenge the perception of “feminine,” “domestic,” or “women’s work” as a devalued category of labor, as well as the beliefs indoctrinated in women surrounding the notion of the “housewife” which suggests that women are naturally better suited to these tasks than direct participation in the labor market. In doing so their theory exposes the value creation process-driven necessity of some quotient of potential laborers being held in a hidden basement of surplus value-producing toil, a group historically populated by women. While the ideology and collectivizing that resulted

may be antiquated given evolutions in societal norms and labor force participation, the interpretation of Marxist theory is still relevant in our present moment if we are willing to consider our definition of who the market perceives as “women” or “feminine” workers.

It is now apparent that despite earlier “waves” having made significant strides towards ending sex-based exploitation feminism must—guided by a Marxist critique of capitalist systems and society—reconsider its tactics and collectives. Moreover, capitalist society in our present age wishes us to believe that it is simply natural that groups of the population are oppressed, disparaged, and devalued for some reason determined by biology; some in-born marker. We must be rigorous in challenging this perpetual bias if we would call ourselves students of Marx, whether we go on to self-identify as feminists theorists, queer theorists or any other term meant to identify those who wish to unsnarl the totality of our present moment for the sake of collectivizing.

A rereading of works we can identify as seminal Marxist feminist theory allows us to perceive and reappraise the relationship between societal norms, the usage of “nature,” as an excuse for any groups secondary status, and capital’s need for the valueless reproduction of labor. Whatever name we might now give to what has historically been “women’s work,” regardless of who performs it, and whether it is performed in the home or in the “market” for a precarious pittance to those employed in this capacity, it is this form of devalued reproduction that perpetuates the status quo. Undoubtedly women still share a site of oppression through our shared sex. However, the historic stigma against women and “women’s work” is now deployed by capital in a way that feminizes a much wider range of laborers and posits more than just biologically marked women as the “women of the world.” Technology cannot—at least for now—ameliorate the features of tasks such as childcare, education, or other activities that cannot be mediated by the market directly, tasks that comprise the “abject.” Until we find ourselves in a society imagined only in dystopian fiction where the old are disposed of when their laboring powers wane and future laborers are gestated in robotized wombs, society will find ways to mark individuals as “other,” forcing them to carry-out the duties of the abject. Capital runs on the group historically composed of women toiling as unwaged workers to reproduce labor, and uses feminized labor and the wage gap to maintain profit—it will and it must as long as the system seeks to function, otherwise the accumulation of surplus value comes to a screeching halt.

While women may now have better access to education, training, and the highest paying traditionally “masculine” jobs we risk attaining equity at a point where global labor has been devalued and made precarious to the extent that these coveted jobs have disappeared. I argue that seeking to achieve the end of sexuality inequality—or anything other systemic inequality such as racism, xenophobia, ageism, and ablesim—will be impossible if we fail to consider the relationship between labor-relations and

the women’s movement. Not only will looking to achieve equity within an intrinsically sex-prejudice system fail to fully empower women, what gains we do achieve will occur at the expense of shunting off the forms of oppression experienced by our mothers and grandmothers onto different portions of the population.

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Jen Hedler Phillis. "Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire*." *Mediations* 34.1 (Fall 2020) 85-90. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/floyd-review

The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism

Kevin Floyd

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Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*

Jen Hedler Phillis

Two theorists lie at the heart of Kevin Floyd's powerful contribution to the debate of the future of Marxism: Judith Butler and Fredric Jameson. Floyd's project is to put these two in conversation and with them, to include Michel Foucault, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, Eve Sedgwick, Michael Warner, David Wojnarowicz, as well as reification totality, gender, and sexuality. The project of *The Reification of Desire* is, as Floyd writes, to track the "divergence and convergence" of queer and Marxist theory; what Floyd accomplishes is a lot more complex (9).

At certain moments in the book, one theoretical position is privileged over the other. For example, in his historical reading of masculinity, the rise of Taylorism and consumer culture is used to help explain how new notions of male sexuality, desire, and gender became entrenched within American culture. However, in critiques of totality and reification, queer theory reveals the ways that these terms have stagnated over time and can be revitalized. More than simply showing the reader how useful both queer theory and Marxism are, and how much more useful they are when brought together, Floyd sheds new light on some of the key terms and orthodox arguments of both.

The divergences between queer and Marxist theory are well-known, so Floyd starts with where they agree. A shared trait of Marxist and queer theory is totality thinking. In Marxism, this comes as a relentless critique of capitalism's particularizing logic; in queer theory, it comes as an insistence on the centrality of sexuality to all parts of life. While queer theory has often (and rightly) objected that Marxism's focus on the

conditions of production, consumption, and accumulation ignores the centrality of sex to human history, Floyd convincingly shows that the focus of much of queer theory's work is on the impact that heteronormativity has had on those aspects of life, thought, and politics that seem at best tangentially related to sexuality. Both share a desire to understand the social as a whole, rather than as strictly divided between public and private or normal and abnormal. In *The Reification of Desire*, however, totality begins to get slippery, as Floyd uses it also to refer to specific social formations that aim toward totalization; in the final chapter, which considers the fragmented status of queer social movements in the wake of neoliberal privatization, he considers the claims of some queer theorists towards "world-making," defined here as "historically conditioned *totalities* of social, sexual, epistemological, and critical practice" (210). His attention to the historical nature of these groups indicates a rethinking of totality as stable; it reveals a desire that pervades the text to keep all of the key terms in motion. This slipperiness is not a problem; in fact, it seems central to his project that terms like "totality" and "reification" remain in play. However, more elaboration on the term "totality" in social formations like the queer movement is needed.

Alongside totality must come reification, and it does for both Marxism and queer theory. This term occurs most forcefully in Floyd's historical account of masculinity from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Linking Lukács and Foucault, Floyd argues that the effects of the Taylorist factory on the male body were the same as the effects of psychoanalytic theory on gender and sexuality. In both cases, the process is one of reification. For the laborer, this means that labor time is so abstracted as to separate the labor from the product it makes, eventually displacing all knowledge of production into consumptive knowledge. For the psychoanalytic patient, sexuality is given a special place in the psyche and within the family unit (as opposed to within a social whole). Thus, desire – sexual desire, productive desire, and consumptive desire – become reified: objects abstracted from the site of their creation.

The developments on the shop floor and on the analyst's couch had an incredible impact on gender, an impact that has been documented by both queer and Marxist scholars. However, Floyd's combinatory reading adds a new dimension to this historical development. While masculinity has always been identified with the public world and labor (while femininity is associated with the private home and a different kind of labor entirely) the increasing abstraction of labor time – alongside sexuality's founding as a psychological event – meant that masculinity could no longer be performed by a body alone. Instead, consumption replaced activity as the defining characteristic of masculinity. Floyd traces the rise of periodicals about leisure time for the male reader, showing that activities like hunting, fishing, and eventually working on cars would suffice as proper "masculine" activities once they were evacuated from labor. As Floyd elaborates in a later chapter, this consumer culture is the basis for the early formation of the queer movement. In this moment, the tension between Marxism (which must find the rise of consumerism and commodity fetishism as

negative) and queer theory (which is founded, to some extent, on those networks made available through consumption and commodity fetishism) come out most strongly. In an orthodox queer or Marxist reading of this same period, much of this history would be lost.

This crystallizes in Floyd's reading of Hemingway, in which the author's hypermasculine characters attempt to reclaim the masculine, laboring body. Using an emblematic fishing scene from *The Sun Also Rises*, Floyd notes the way that, despite Jake Barnes's encounter with the natural during trout fishing, Hemingway's catalogue style renders the fish as so many mass-produced commodities meant for display. Floyd writes,

Though such escapes from the tedium of de-skilled labor into nature constitute supposed returns to more simple, presumably pre- or extracapitalist forms of work and life, famously sparse descriptions like this one ultimately reify nature, producing a landscape of pure immediacy, a landscape of what we might call, following Lukács, a 'second nature' that only purports to transcend the abstraction of labor capital enforces (106-107).

By tracing the norm of a skilled, masculine labor from the body into the ego and finally into a relationship with nature that has been abstracted and reified, Floyd shows the effect of capital production on traditional notions of masculinity and reveals the way that the totality of capital is, especially at this period in time, all-consuming: not even nature is safe from the process of abstraction and reification.

Having traced the shifts of the normative account of masculine behavior, Floyd moves into his reading of the queer movement of the 1960s and 1970s, one that depends on this abstracted space of masculinity. Floyd here uses Marcuse, in some part because of his centrality to the early queer movement, but also because of Marcuse's new use of reification in *Eros and Civilization*. Here, Marcuse understands the effects of capitalism to be analogous to repression – another reason that Marcuse figures so heavily in a book that attempts to find the convergences and divergences of Lukács and Foucault, among others – and reification as the way out of that repression. Here, Marcuse tracks the opposition between a body objectified for labor (positive under capitalism) and a body objectified for pleasure (bad under capitalism). Embracing this latter, erotic objectification will undo the negative objectification of labor.

Eros, figured in primarily homoerotic terms in Marcuse's early work, is the opposite of the "performance principle" that dominates capitalist life. Floyd writes, "identifying the reality principles with 'productiveness', and the pleasure principle with 'receptiveness', Marcuse asserts that Orpheus and Narcissus [the mythic figures that are central for Marcuse] represent a passive, receptive relation to the natural world" (138). Both Narcissus and Orpheus reject a heteronormative sexuality: the

first withdraws from the world into a state of self-contemplation and the latter, despite the tragic heterosexual love story that is part of his mythos, is identified by Marcuse with nature and his “love for ‘young boys’” (138). It is clear how these figures would become central in the queer movement’s early days. Rather than imagining homosexual subjects as equivalent to heterosexual subjects, much of the early queer movement attempted to replace a heteronormative state with an (imagined) homonormative state. Just as Marcuse replaced the traditional mythic figures at the heart of philosophy – Prometheus, Oedipus, and so on – the queer movement imagined that through objectifying sexual practices, they might replace heteronormativity in the world.

Floyd here deploys his second reading of fiction with a chapter devoted to 1969’s *Midnight Cowboy*. Floyd sets aside the most common readings of the text, which focus on how homosexuality is portrayed between Joe Buck and his clients or between Buck and Ratso Rizzo, to argue that the film is an allegory for the historical shift from Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism. The figure of the cowboy – which Joe Buck believes will entice hundreds of rich city women to pay to have sex with him – has, by the time he reaches New York in the late sixties, been claimed as sex symbol by the queer community. Floyd traces the queer appropriation of traditionally masculine figures, epitomized by the Village People, to “physique” magazines that became popular in the 1950s. These magazines, which feature young men wearing just enough clothing to identify them with masculine labor (the sailor, the construction worker, and, of course, the cowboy), were distributed through the mail, providing outlets for otherwise closeted or conservative gay men and providing income for the photographers, models, and publishers. In this way, the commodity as fetish (perhaps the most literal example of this in Marxist writing) serves a liberatory function at the same time as it shows the increasing reach of capitalism. While these magazines provided the groundwork for an underground gay community that would explode in 1969, they also showed the way that capitalism, at least during Taylorism, was able to commodify any market, no matter how far outside the mainstream it was. The presence of Joe Buck, as authentic a cowboy as any in New York, shows the similarity, and ultimate tension, between the mainstream and queer versions of masculinity.

This almost unnoticeable difference between the mainstream, heteronormative cowboy and the underground, queer cowboy reveals, for Floyd, the way that either way you cut it, the cowboy is now a commodity. By placing this commodity in the confusing socioeconomic climate of New York in the late sixties, where enticements to spend money are contrasted with Buck’s poverty, Floyd argues that the film stages a conflict between Fordist values of production (the American cowboy) and the global space of capital that began overcoming the United States’ supremacy during the sixties. Thus, Buck’s eventual dustbinning of the outfit is allegorically understood as the end of not only an era of uncomplicated masculinity but also an era of increasing productivity to match the country’s ever-expanding consumption.

Here, we enter into what is for me Floyd’s most insightful and thought-provoking

chapter. He begins by contrasting the Fordist strategy of ensuring social stability to shore up means of production and areas for consumption with the neoliberal strategy that emphasizes widespread social instability. While Fordism was able to bring the world together through consumerism, neoliberalism separates and privatizes consumer groups, effectively preventing the creation of any meaningful social formation. The current political issues facing the queer community, including, but certainly not limited to, the fight for marriage equality and the inclusion in the military, are arguments about equality. In contrast to the radical queer movements of the 1970s, which anticipated a queer planet to overtake the heterosexual one, the contemporary queer movement is concerned with making itself equal, or equivalent, to the straight community. As a result, sexuality, as a marker of difference between queer and straight, has gone back into hiding. This is no more apparent than in New York, the site of both Stonewall and *Midnight Cowboy*, where Giuliani's aggressive cleanup of the city has sanitized what were once openly gay neighborhoods. By closing sex shops, pornographic bookstores, bars, and clubs, while simultaneously pricing out all but the wealthiest gays from traditionally gay neighborhoods, the boisterous and open queer culture of New York has all but disappeared. This prevents any kind of social formation from getting started, as the public space has been replaced with private space. Thus, Christopher Street in New York is home to the wealthy, white queer community, while poorer queers, many of whom are people of color, are separated into other neighborhoods. This segregation stalls the formation of a unified movement. While this reading – as the rest of the book does – focuses on the queer community, the impact on other potential movements, be they feminist, race-based, class-based, or otherwise, is unmistakable. As our world is privatized, there is no more public space in which to enact change.

Floyd's *The Reification of Desire* is a valuable addition to the catalog of books that try to make sense of the place of Marxism in neoliberal capitalism. Its analyses of both modes of thought, as well as those terms central to their elaboration, offer new perspectives on terms that most of us take for granted. Women are largely absent in this text, except when their own gendered history is contrasted with that of masculinity. They are entirely absent from Floyd's reading of the AIDS epidemic, which is the only misstep in a work that is otherwise perfectly choreographed. While this is certainly a criticism of the text, and one that could be applied equally to most mainstream queer and Marxist theory, what Floyd offers here is an invitation to create a companion that understands the evolution of the "feminine" in the past one hundred and fifty-odd years of social and economic history. It is a history worth telling, and one that can only add to the work Floyd has here begun.

Reading Life and Death¹

Kevin Floyd

This brief essay is about practices of reading that converge with practices of knowledge—with epistemological imperatives that require readings of the social that stabilize meaning rather than proliferate it. But does this mean that this essay is about reductive reading? Marx reminds us that concrete social reality can never be exhausted by what he calls the concrete in thought: epistemological readings of the world are by definition abstract, incomplete, socially and historically embedded and conditioned.² Indeed, in these terms, the charge of “reductionism” tends to lose all content, insofar as it implies that there is such a thing as a knowledge of the world that doesn’t consciously or unconsciously distill the reality it endeavors to grasp.

But this essay lingers on the implications of reduction, because reading’s convergence with knowledge will in the present case be, quite literally, a matter of life and death—and, specifically, a matter of the extinguishing of life, of what we might call life’s reduction to death. Elizabeth Povinelli proposes that specific forms of truth are immanent to specific forms of life. She considers, for example, the insistent production of truth by “so-called ultraconservative Christians,” in which all possible understandings of the world will necessarily include a conflict between good and evil, the body’s resurrection, and extramarital abominations of the flesh. This form of truth is a requirement for this form of life’s continuous being. But it also, and inseparably, demands what we might call a queer form of death.³ Or, more precisely, and to paraphrase Foucault, the fostering of the form of life Povinelli describes is inseparable from the disallowance of another form of life, a queer form of life, to the point of death.⁴ Here I want to consider a specific queer form of life under imminent threat of death. And I want to do this in terms that are at once biopolitical and dialectical. The form of truth production Povinelli elaborates can also be understood as an epistemological form of reading. A form of life, I contend, precisely insofar as it insists on its own continuation, requires a reading of the world that stabilizes the world’s legibility. In putting it this way, I try to make explicit what Povinelli leaves implicit, and indeed what the discourse of biopolitics too frequently leaves implicit,

or fails to recognize altogether: that the very reading of life in biopolitical terms raises (or begs) the question of life's own capacity to read, and indeed its reductionist capacity, its capacity to produce specific, necessarily abstract readings of the world which are also insistent forms of knowledge on which life itself can depend. The reading of life and death I perform here is also about the life-and-death stakes of reading.

Jeffrey Tucker reminds us that Samuel Delany's novel *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* is "the first novel-length work of fiction on AIDS from a major publisher in the United States."⁵ Indeed the sheer dearth of scholarship on this novel is perhaps all the more striking given Delany's routine citation as an icon of queer thought. Appearing in 1984, it depicts that brief window of time between the appearance of the epidemic in New York and the official identification of the virus that catalyzes it—that brief window of time, in other words, before the situation to which names now refer was conceptually stabilized by names.

This ninth tale in Delany's *Neveryon* cycle, a highly fragmentary and experimental one even by Delany's standards, blends two parallel narratives.⁶ One of these is contemporary, consisting largely of anecdotes apparently drawn from Delany's journals and recounting his daily experience in the earliest days of the epidemic. Set largely in the environs of Times Square, the supporting characters include hustlers and homeless of Delany's acquaintance. The other narrative is set in the ancient land *Neveryon* and, like the other tales in the series, takes that "paraliterary" form known as sword-and-sorcery. The most immediate, obvious parallel, however, is widespread, disoriented shock in the face of a lethal, distinctly urban contagion with multiple transmission routes, including sexual ones.

This text that focuses, as the discourse surrounding Delany's work so often insists, on socially "marginal" life, does not simply represent it, but reflexively performs from its standpoint a struggle to stabilize reading, to produce practical knowledge, to orient a radically disoriented subjectivity to a necropolitical and potentially illegible environment. This is an environment in which multiple readings of an emergent lethality vie with each other, in which epidemiological vocabularies as formal and official as they are tentative and stumbling compete with anxious rumor and speculation. Figures and concepts collide in an effort to read, as it were "from below," the broader social situation of a specific, "promiscuous" urban network of immediately threatened life.

Late in the narrative, Delany recounts the evening he saw an announcement on the television news that researchers might finally have isolated the virus that causes AIDS.⁷ But before this late, climactic moment, experiencing the epidemic means experiencing "dis-ease before anything that might bear 'disease' as its proper designation." A hustler friend named Joey asks Delany a question he can't answer: "your body just stops healing, and even an infection from a little cut, or a cold, can kill you...?"⁸ Another acquaintance, a night-shift nurse in an emergency room, is struck

by the contrast between what the newspapers represent as a relative infrequency of cases, and what she actually witnesses at work. And a friend named Ted reports his response to the words he finds scrawled in red paint on the wall of a public men's room, "AIDS patients cruise here": "that one [. . .] just made me crazy! [. . .] It could have been someone who knew something and was trying to warn people. Or it could have been somebody who just wanted to stop the cruising. Or it could have been somebody who didn't get what he wanted there sexually and was just bitching. But any way you read it, I didn't want to be there."⁹ Everyone tries to read the signs; everyone has anecdotal evidence. But evidence of what? It's not at all clear what these anecdotes might ultimately signify.

Reading that proliferates meaning also produces, in this case, a truly frightening social incoherence. Delany reminds us of Susan Sontag's insistence that "diseases should not become social metaphors."¹⁰⁰ But he responds that, in this case, the stabilizations provided by metaphor are inevitable: "AIDS is the sparkplug in a social machine of which we are all...a part."¹¹¹ Extending the machine metaphor from the social totality to the corporeal body, he adds that the stark "malfunctioning" of the immune system is moreover a deadly opening of the body to its outside. AIDS, he reminds us, refers not a disease, but to "a mysterious and microbically unaged *failure to fight disease*": the body becomes dis-unified, ceases to be "whole."¹²² It opens itself, we might say, to an outside that is both social and epistemological; it throws into question its own relation to, its distinction from, that outside. "This is the aspect of the 'illness' that is ravenous for metaphors to stifle its unsettled shift, its insistent uneasiness, its conceptual turbulence."¹³³

On one hand, then, *Plagues and Carnivals* captures a life-and-death demand for a de-proliferation of meaning, for resolution in the face of this "epidemic of signification," for a nameable "microbic agent." But paradoxically and crucially, it insists at the same time that destabilizing these figures and concepts is most important "in the long run"¹⁴⁴—refusing to reify the condition in terms of statistical "risk factors," for instance—precisely in order to maintain at least the possibility that it can be grasped, however inadequately, within some broader set of social relations. The chaotic, immediately experienced incomprehension this text foregrounds, an illegibility which is also a multilegibility, imposes a different kind of orientation to the outside, opens up necessary questions about the broader social processes within which reading takes place. Any possibility of locating the condition's larger parameters and determinations, we are told, emerges precisely from this absence of conceptual stillness. The text performs both an insistence on the gap between the name and its referent, and a palpable anxiety about this gap.

I want now to move briefly away from this novel in order to return to it. I want to explicate further the complex epistemological practice of reading it stages, but I also want to suggest the way in which the situation it reads remains our own—as Jean Comaroff suggests in an essay that internationalizes, we might say, a similar

set of questions.¹⁵⁵ Comaroff critiques what she identifies as certain tendencies that characterize the frequent reading of the southern African AIDS sufferer in biopolitical and/or necropolitical terms—as exemplifying “bare life,” for example, or as instantiating what Foucault would understand as those contemporary populations allowed to die. Comaroff proposes that such readings often fail to recognize the reading capacities of the sufferers themselves, capacities not unlike those staged by Delany’s novel. She stresses that “life itself” is not only the “medium” in which biopower is exercised, but also “the stuff of collective action and aspiration,”¹⁶⁶ including a collective critique of “the monopoly over the essence of vitality [...], patents and intellectual property rights, [...] the bald rhetoric that equates life and profit.”¹⁷⁷ In the face of “life imbued with ordinary, future-oriented expectations,” she adds, the reading of these populations as bare life actually threatens to reinscribe what contemporary postcolonial or neocolonial regimes themselves already tend to do: reduce active, thinking, cognitive subjects to “naked biological being.”¹⁸⁸

She further identifies a southern African AIDS “counterpolitics” that remains “convinced that there is a discernible logic to power relations, one that impacts directly on [...] immediate worlds.” And as she points out, “disambiguating those relations [...] is the primary work of such counterpolitics. [...] AIDS organizers have sought to build a coherent, critical social etiology, [...] to forge a narrative of agents and effects, of calculating statesmen and captains of global industry, who personify control over the means of life and death” — “albeit at the risk,” she adds, “of strategic reductionism.”¹⁹ “Disambiguating relations,” “forging narratives,” “strategic reductionism”: like Delany, Comaroff underscores both the political indispensability and the necessary limits of efforts to analyze and stabilize—to reductively read—the global power relations that operate in relation to the pandemic.

Such an effort serves also as a defense against a rather different, more immediately necropolitical kind of reductionism. In the parallel, sword-and-sorcery narrative we find in *Plagues and Carnivals*, other kinds of reactions to the epidemic also turn on life-and-death practices of reading. On crowded urban streets, a voice rises above the din: “Get away! I don’t want your lousy diseases! I don’t want one of you gettin’ anywhere near me.”²⁰⁰ A small group of the not-yet-infected decides to confront the contagion by gathering in secret to participate in a ritual appeal to what the text identifies as the god of “edges, borders, and boundaries.”²¹¹ One of the participants in this ritual notes that he “cannot shake off this sense of contamination.”²²² To paraphrase Leo Bersani’s still-indispensable analysis of the early AIDS epidemic, those who are killed are read as killers: one form of life reads another form of life as a form of death.²³³ To read those who are killed as killers is indeed to insist on death as one of the conditions of one’s own continued existence.

But I would go further and propose that such a reading would also have to be characterized as utopian, counterintuitive as that may initially sound. I take my cue from two influential, strikingly convergent readings of Ursula Le Guin. In his

well-known essay on Le Guin's "ambiguous utopia" *The Dispossessed*, Delany suggests that homosexuality is among the constitutive exclusions of the world it depicts.²⁴⁴ Similarly, Fredric Jameson's essay "World Reduction in Le Guin"—presumably the basis of the rich, suggestive Le Guin/Delany dialectic of utopian closure he would later elaborate in *Archaeologies of the Future*—reads the landscape depicted in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in terms of an exclusion of the frenzy of sensory experience frequently associated with urban environments, environments like the one we encounter in *Plagues and Carnivals*. Le Guin's novel enacts "a fantasy realization of some virtually total disengagement of the body from its surrounding environment or eco-system," and a disengagement especially from the psychic upheavals of what he calls a "permanently scandalous" sexual desire—a disengagement, an excision which is also a kind of relief, the condition for the very utopian form of life the novel depicts. Le Guin's work generally, Jameson maintains, presents us with a utopianism not of wealth but of scarcity, in which one is "liberated" especially from the disturbing sexual opportunities and complications opened up by urban capitalism. Le Guin's utopian commitment is to the country, to the village, "to agriculture and small face to face groups."²⁵⁵

Plagues and Carnivals, meanwhile, is one of the early texts to register the way in which AIDS is read as a "metaphor for the license, corruption, and decay that is the general urban condition."²⁶⁶ And indeed, the extinguishment of a queer form of life begins in this novel to seem inseparable from the extinguishment of the urban as such: a genocidal insistence that is also the insistence of a form of life on its own continuation. *Plagues and Carnivals*, in other words, stages not one epistemological reading of the world, but two. And this second reading entails the form of reduction or elimination I would call, following Delany's and Jameson's convergent readings of Le Guin, utopian. It wants to extinguish an erotic saturation it insists is also a plague. It wants to eliminate an urban infrastructure it insists is also a sexually lethal infrastructure. Unlike, say, Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (which is explicitly and famously a response to *The Dispossessed*), *Plagues and Carnivals* offers not a "heterotopian" alternative to this particular kind of utopian closure, this fantasy of world reduction, but a critical staging of it.

I have suggested that Delany's novel grapples with questions that remain our own. So I will begin to move toward a conclusion by drawing attention to Jameson's more recent claim that the village ethos Le Guin's work exemplifies has become obsolete: village existence, he maintains, has by this point in capital's history "simply [been] destroyed, leaving rubble and ruin behind it."²⁷⁷ But isn't a desexualizing world reduction precisely what is enacted by the contemporary transformation of the city into the village—which is to say, into the mere suburbs? Perhaps the village is indeed destroyed; or perhaps it threatens to subsume its metropolitan opposite. A key example of the latter certainly remains, even now, the family-friendly, real-estate-friendly, finance-friendly cleansing of Times Square roughly a decade after Delany's

novel first appeared, a spectacular instance of world reduction that Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* has helped us understand.²⁸⁸

So a utopian form of life that necessitates a form of death, and from which *Plagues and Carnivals* recoils, proceeds apace: the village's moralizing, desexualizing dimensions are from this vantage quite comfortably aligned with the contemporary operations of capital. But the suggestion I have just made that contemporary finance is at once bio- and necro-political (recall Comaroff's reference to "calculating statesmen and captains of global industry") raises the question of another practice of destabilizing reading, of multilegibility: the dialectic. The contemporary socialization of "risk," for example, is clearly a matter of life and death. Randy Martin contrasts populations "at risk," populations involuntarily subjected to risk, with those good neoliberal subjects, those entrepreneurial citizens who are "capable of embracing risk" — "managers" (not "masters," he points out) "of their own lives." If risk has clearly become a key contemporary source of global profit — profit from ever-multiplying exacerbations of risk, and profit from ever-multiplying ways of hedging it — then these forms of risk are ultimately, in one way or another, "borne by bodies."²⁹ So the risks "borne" by the body of the southern African AIDS sufferer, for example, would include the national scale of debt repayment that eats away at funds for, say, HIV/AIDS treatment as well as health care generally. Indeed Martin proposes that the form of bio-necro-political governance that has most brutally extended the logic of older, colonial governance is precisely that form of governance we call debt.

And what, then, of those responsible, obedient subjects who embrace risk? If remaking the naked city into the family-friendly village sits nicely with that utopian wager we call real estate speculation, we can also say that the insistent elimination of practices of urban promiscuity is smoothly extended into the present by the now all-but-intractable, suburban common sense that affirms that the only thing good gay subjects, responsible "managers" of their own lives, could ever want is marriage: to behave like adults at long last, to leave behind certain immature, lethal practices that famously characterized gay urban life in the Seventies. And if gay marriage is many things, one of those things is real estate speculation: the utopia of a perfectly moral form of life on the condition that it also be a safe, secure, "gated" form of life, that it pray to the gods of "borders, edges and boundaries," that it maintain an adequate appreciation of its conditions, including gentrification and security guards.

But the multilegibility opened up by the dialectic tends to remain in motion, stereotypes notwithstanding. As soon as we can read both life and death in terms of a shared logic of financial risk, for example, disorienting inversions begin to appear:

Only when the process that begins with the metamorphosis of labor-power into a commodity has permeated men through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship, is it possible for life to reproduce itself

under the prevailing relations of production. Its consummate organization demands the coordination of people that are dead. The will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity.³⁰⁰

The good gay subject of marriage aspires to self-preservation, operating according to a temporal logic no less committed than Goldman Sachs to the future appreciation of the assets that define it. This subject secures its distance from a horizon of life it would reduce to “bare life,” life scattered as if by centrifugal force, locked out, locked up, and yes, if necessary, disallowed to the point of death. But destabilizing readings, those readings that open up the possibility of what I have called a different orientation to the outside, may well be, as Delany insists, more important “in the long run.” Should we read these entrepreneurial gay subjects, these “formally commensurate variations of the exchange relationship,” as instances of a form of life that *externalizes* death? If the subject of self-preservation can instantiate something called *life*, then what Comaroff calls “the bald rhetoric that equates life and profit” is also a reading of the world characteristic of that form of life. Though one has to be careful about suggesting that a thinker like Adorno puts an insufficiently fine point on it, to call this form of life “damaged” doesn’t quite capture what his reading of life and death comes much closer to capturing. Life that is itself already capital? Life that is itself, somehow, also dead labor? Dead labor catachrestically vitalized via “accumulated claims, legal titles, to future production”: call it fictitious life.³¹¹

Notes

1. Reprinted from *Mediations* 28.2 (Spring 2015). A longer, differently framed version of this essay appears in *Literary Materialisms*, eds. Emilio Sauri and Mathias Nilges (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993) 100-102.
3. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "On Suicide, and Other Forms of Social Extinguishment," in *Theory Aside*, eds. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke UP, 2014) 87.
4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 138.
5. Jeffrey Allan Tucker, *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2004) 233.
6. Originally published by Bantam; currently available as "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or: Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Five," in Samuel Delany, *Flight from Nevèrjôn* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994).
7. Delany, "Plagues" 345-46.
8. "Plagues" 185, 187.
9. "Plagues" 267.
10. "Plagues" 184.
11. "Plagues" 187.
12. "Plagues" 186; italics in original.
13. "Plagues" 186.
14. "Plagues" 187.
15. Jean Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neoliberal Order," *Public Culture* 19:1 (2007): 197-215.
16. Comaroff, "Beyond" 211.
17. "Beyond" 213-14.
18. "Beyond" 215.
19. "Beyond" 211.
20. "Plagues" 251.
21. "Plagues" 332.
22. "Plagues" 266.
23. Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2010) 17.
24. Samuel R. Delany, "To Read *The Dispossessed*," in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, rev. ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2009) 105-65.
25. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005) 269, 274, 159.
26. Delany, "Plagues" 188.
27. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 200) 578.
28. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York UP, 1999).
29. Randy Martin, "From the Race War to the War on Terror," in *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, eds. Patricia Clough and Craig Willse (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 258.
30. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974) 229.
31. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991) 599.

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