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Cover image: Jia Zhangke, Still from *A Touch of Sin*.

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Editors' Note

Comparing realism to a zombie that just won't die, Carolyn Lesjak positions her new book, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford UP 2021), within the numerous attempts to keep it alive. Unlike others who revisit realism for its representational "complexities," Lesjak asks how revisiting this seemingly undead mode of representation can illuminate our current moment, and so she proposes a "rereading [of] realism with a more overtly political aim in mind: to consider how realist novels help us think about our own present and future with the tools realism offers to hand."¹ This issue of *Mediations* follows Lesjak's lead and subsequently asks how cultural works, especially the realist novel, attempt to represent what Corbin Hiday and Anna Kornbluh describe in their contribution as the "unrepresentable totality of social relations imposed by capital," as well as how we, as cultural critics, understand these attempts. The two opening essays offer different but complementary ways of approaching these questions, with the first taking a more theoretical approach and the second providing close readings of two novels. The issue then takes a deep dive into Lesjak's new book through a forum edited by Hiday and Kornbluh.

We begin, then, with Racheal Fest's "Culture and Neoliberalism: Raymond Williams, Friedrich Hayek, and the New Legacy of the Cultural Turn," which juxtaposes the work of conservative economist Friedrich Hayek and socialist cultural critic Raymond Williams in order to reevaluate how humanities scholars engage with the question of culture. She especially urges us to "foreground our differences from other fields and address ourselves to antagonistic extra-disciplinary formations." Her engagement with economic primary sources here serves as a model of the type of criticism for which she advocates.

The second essay, Devin William Daniels' "Kill the Body and the Head Will Die: Realism, Capitalism, and the Financier," examines a common background character of realist fiction, the financier, and how this character "mirrors the unseen movements of capital." To do so, he reads Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in conjunction with Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* to show how nineteenth-century realism and twenty-first-century realism complement and complicate one another.

The second part of this issue, the forum on Lesjak's recent book, is introduced by Hiday and Kornbluh in their essay, "Reading Realism Dialectically: A Forum on Carolyn

Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons*." They provide an overview of the force of Lesjak's argument to set the stage for the following nine reflections on the book. In particular, they highlight her use of dialectical reading and how this form of criticism allows her to offer a "dissent on realism," as well as underscore how literature of the past can illuminate the issues of the present.

The forum begins with Paul Stasi's "The One as The Many," which examines one of Lesjak's key terms, the "common," through her focus on "type" as opposed to individualized characters, as the former relies on the existence of others in order to make sense—as Lesjak notes, a type has "no meaning in isolation." These types, then, are both common figures and represent a sort of commons themselves. Stasi argues that, by focusing on types, Lesjak undercuts the traditional narrative that the centerpiece of the novel form is the liberal individual.

Moving from one iteration of the "common," we turn to Lesjak's other key term: enclosure. In "Reading Enclosure and the Global Commons with Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013)," Amy R. Wong expands the implications of Lesjak's arguments about British realism to contemporary China. Wong argues that Jia Zhangke's film *A Touch of Sin* asks us to think "with as well as against more optimistic possibilities for global solidarity against enclosure's capitalist logic."

Zach Fruit highlights the "contradictory dialectic" at work in Lesjak's reading of realism in his contribution, "Realism as Walmart." Realism, he notes, "was a mechanism for capitalist ideology" while also, according to Lesjak, "sustaining and reinventing collective life." This dialectic, then, could, following Jameson's controversial conception of the utopian potential of Walmart, highlight realism's own utopian potential.

Continuing with the question of Lesjak's employment of dialectical reading, "Figural Reading, or, a 'Weak Messianic' Undercurrent in Literary Criticism" by Thomas A. Laughlin argues that her dialectical reading is in fact closer to an Auerbachian "figural reading": in which "something real and historical...announces something else real and historical." Through this reimagined framing, Laughlin questions some of Lesjak's readings of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy.

Emily Steinlight's "Realism's Unenclosed Spots of Commonness" focuses on what she sees as Lesjak's most meaningful contribution: her ability to link realism's "valorization of what is 'common'... to the commons," which "reactivates the promise of collective life in the present." She does caution, however, against too strong an emphasis on "type," which could become essentialized rather quickly and thereby create more distance than unity.

In "Figure / Ground," Ronjaunee Chatterjee examines Lesjak's focus on "the language of figuration," which underscores the difference between a realism that prioritizes the visible and one that prioritizes an "underlying or unseen reality." Through this focus, according to Chatterjee, Lesjak is able to "uncover a history of enclosures of the commons that is riddled with figurative trouble." One such "trouble"

is the legacy and reality of racial capitalism, which Chatterjee argues, must be taken into account even if the result is “incommensurate & potentially unsettling.”

Nancy Armstrong's essay, “Fagin's Last Words,” teases out how Charles Dickens's “character systems” are linked to the older types of character books, as Lesjak claims, by arguing, “the relation to the older vocabulary of types only increases in value... if we also understand that it is a principle of rupture that gives meaning to characters once the old social taxonomy is gone.” Armstrong is especially interested in the character of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* and how his development in the novel underscores Lesjak's explanation of how “the commons” is transformed into “the common” in nineteenth-century realism.

In “Get It Together,” Rithika Ramamurthy homes in on the contemporary political implications of Lesjak's study of nineteenth-century realism, and in particular how she attempts to bridge the “yawning chasm between idealizations of collective being and the materialization of political collectivity.” Ramamurthy is especially interested in how we can mobilize such bridges in terms of collective action within higher education.

The forum concludes with “Sameness” by Bruce Robbins, who, similarly to Chatterjee, seeks to illuminate further the role of racial capitalism in the history Lesjak mobilizes in her readings of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, as well as her calls for present collectivity through the commons. He especially stresses the need to see beyond “difference” — often formulated in terms of identity — to be able to unite in collective action, to “feel that coalitional energy as our own.”

The issue ends with “Surrogacy, Value, and Social Reproduction: A Review of *Full Surrogacy Now*,” in which Natalie Suzelis reviews Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (Verso 2019). Suzelis outlines Lewis's call for the abolishment of the private family as well as for “full surrogacy,” a “‘gestational commons,” in which babies “belong” to no one person or family but are instead a communal responsibility, thus eliminating the profits currently associated with commercial surrogacy.

—Melissa Macero, for the *Mediations* editors

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 2.

Culture and Neoliberalism: Raymond Williams, Friedrich Hayek, and the New Legacy of the Cultural Turn

Racheal Fest

By the 1950s, radical discourses were making the so-called "cultural turn" many critics continue to hold responsible for the left's apparent lack of unifying vision today.¹ New Left intellectuals and activists, working both within and outside of the academy, emphasized the revolutionary potential of critical, historical, and imaginative activity, constructing culture as a domain in which to carry out privileged projects for liberty and equality. Recent scholarship has started to excavate anew a parallel turn to culture within right intellectual circles, tracking what Quinn Slobodian has called "a symmetry" between one strain of conservative thinking and "the post-Marxist Left": "Rather than resisting the cultural turn that emerged from the 1960s," Slobodian writes, "an important faction of the neoliberal movement absorbed it."² Around the same time, left and right thinkers advanced critiques of the simple economism other free market fundamentalists embraced (among them, Milton Friedman), and advocated instead views of human life, in Slobodian's words, "rooted primarily in culture, adaptable over time through social learning and selective evolution."³

A closer look at the ways in which reactionary neoliberal discourses absorbed, and transformed for their own strategic purposes, the category of "culture" brings out one of the basic antagonisms that still structures political struggle today. If the New Left's project was to prove that culture is political, and, in so doing, to render its activities available as grounds and means to fight against modes of oppression broadly conceived, reactionary neoliberals theorized culture anew in order to delegitimize it altogether as a potential site of purposeful collective transformation, mobilizing it instead toward conservative attempts to shore up inequality under late capitalism.⁴

In this essay, I elaborate these positions and their consequences by putting in conversation two representative mid-century theories of culture, one by Nobel-Prize-winning conservative economist Friedrich Hayek and the other by socialist cultural critic Raymond Williams. Considered together, Hayek and Williams yield a robust picture of their shared Cold War moment and clarify the significance of the discourses

of culture their work exemplifies from our present perspective. Influential figures for two disciplines that gained institutional power in the university after the Second World War—economics and cultural studies—Hayek and Williams, whether or not they explicitly engaged with each other's writing, each targeted positions the other exemplified.⁵ Reading their projects in tandem, however, also reveals some striking similarities. Both formulate modernity's problems in parallel ways, challenging valorizations of reason and its deployment for authoritarian ends. Both turn to the domain of culture, understood, in Williams's words, as "a whole way of life," in order to respond to them, taking as common objects of study "creative activity" (Williams) or "creative power" (Hayek) in general, a category of human endeavor each sees operating, not only through practices historically associated with culture (arts, letters, faith), but also through all of the forms of organization and order that humans generate.⁶

Within this domain, so conceived, Williams and Hayek alike oppose the older, elitist theories of culture that emerged with industrialization on both the right and the left, the history of which Williams traces in *Culture and Society*, and each tries instead to give meaning to the cultural activities of common people, generating what we might call post-Romantic accounts of creativity that do not locate it in the individual artist or intellectual, whose genius purports to transcend economic and political constraint.⁷ Both likewise depart from popular characterizations of culture, dominant by the 1990s, which define it as a site of war or battle.⁸ Toward these analogous projects, Williams disseminates a mode of cultural criticism alive to economic conditions, while Hayek urges economists to take up an evolutionary history of culture, and both openly direct the field-defining methods they respectively develop toward ideological ends.

These commonalities, of course, give way to the irremediable antagonisms that grow out of the opposing political, economic, and human objectives Williams, a socialist, and Hayek, a neoliberal libertarian, pursue. They construct culture's nature and function differently and invent different methods for investigating, and, ultimately, transforming it. Although Hayek might share Williams's sense that culture changes over time and shapes human life as it does, he does not endorse the left's constituting view, a related one, that by engaging in deliberate collective activity across domains we can improve our common life. Instead, Hayek's understanding of culture serves his conservative conviction that humans cannot, and therefore should not attempt to, organize collective life using intelligence and imagination, whether we try to do so through state building, economic planning, or cultural mediation.⁹ Hayek rather argues in his late work that a process of "cultural evolution," the *telos* of which is mass belief in Christian traditions intellectuals such as Hayek know to be specious, is necessary to help generate and maintain capitalist order. This properly neoliberal theory of culture withholds from those it pretends to empower the possibility of purposeful participation in the expansive creative narrative it projects. It also unites contemporary rightwing interests (the religious right, free-market fundamentalists)

apparently at odds and sets them against a left it casts as out of touch and self-aggrandizing.

Williams, by contrast, extends creative power to everyone and refuses to conceptualize it as weapon. He famously develops his theory of culture as a site of “tending” growth, emphasizing both the limits and the possibilities of creativity practiced in common for irreducibly diverse collective ends.¹⁰ If Hayek empties out culture as a site of needed reflection for the mass of “anonymous persons” he purports to champion, Williams casts it as a site of perpetual labor, in which all participants exercise creative faculties with and in relation to each other.¹¹ Culture is, for Williams, a sphere of permanent difference; it is neither a domain for “tinkering” with traditions that accidentally emerge to ensure they facilitate economic growth, as we will see it is for Hayek, nor is it an arena in which opponents fight to “impact” or control each other.¹² This democratic vision admits that culture emerges unbidden even as it recommends a commitment to purposeful cultivation.

Pairing Williams and Hayek, a method Williams’s early work inspires, helps us look back at Williams’s theory of culture from our contemporary vantage, a moment at which the brand of neoliberal thinking with roots in Hayek’s legacy has become common sense, and value in new ways these resources for strategically constructing culture from the left.¹³ Different elements of conservative discourse have become more powerful than the exclusionary, elitist screeds Williams initially targeted. We can thus emphasize different elements of the vision of culture Williams was promoting—specifically, his investment in democratic creativity—even as we continue to recognize and remedy, as he himself did across a long and self-reflective career, some of his theory’s shortcomings (I have in mind, in particular, its failure to address identitarian barriers to establishing a culture in common¹⁴). Against forces that at once try to monopolize and conceal imagination, Williams urges us to continue to desire and extend to all a post-Romantic understanding of creative power, at the same time as he encourages us to keep before us our limitations.

In a recent review essay, Slobodian and Leigh Claire La Berge claim that literary and cultural studies seem still to be searching for ways to properly engage the problems associated with neoliberalism from a disciplinary vantage.¹⁵ To do so, and to avoid along the way some of the missteps they argue critics make when we rely exclusively upon secondary accounts of neoliberal discourses (Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown, and David Harvey are standard), Slobodian and La Berge urge us to read neoliberalism’s primary texts.¹⁶ I turn to Hayek with this provocation in mind. Cultural studies scholars are uniquely equipped to trace and evaluate neoliberal theories of our field’s defining terrain. While theoretical texts, as Hayek himself emphasized, do not determine state or corporate action in direct or facile ways, they deserve our attention because they consolidate broader logics and help us bring out for resistance their contradictions.

This attention might also sharpen and update some professional practices within

cultural studies. First, oppositional critics might recognize that conservatives now share with radicals the sense that culture is deeply imbricated in political and economic projects. We might therefore engage, not only the outmoded conservative critics of previous generations who too often continue to serve as primary antagonists, but also important interlocutors elsewhere within and outside of academia.¹⁷ Economic discourses of culture devoted to destroying the historical vision of life humanistic study sanctions require consideration. In addition, we might take from Williams the insight that we need not see culture as a battleground. Rather than trying to revive culture as a site of war, a tactic some critics recommend, what might change if we were to reinvigorate our sense of it as a site of democratic tending?¹⁸

Friedrich Hayek's Cultural Evolution

While an earlier New Right's appropriation of certain left tactics by the 1970s is well-documented (the Powell Memo of 1971 is often paired with the Port Huron statement as an exemplary counterpart text; it calls free market champions to borrow from radicals and win the hearts and minds of acolytes through the university and other institutions of education and culture), the explicit theories of culture conservative neoliberal intellectuals developed just after the New Left advanced its influential revitalization of terms such as "culture and society" have yet to bear deep scrutiny.¹⁹ These theories continue to inform some of the ways that the contemporary right in general tactically constructs "culture" to serve its defenses of existing wealth and power distributions. They also give a sense of how the right came to revise in response to New Left tactics the older theories of culture that conservatives such as T. S. Eliot advocated.²⁰

One such updated theory the right owes to Austrian School economist Friedrich Hayek. Oppositional critics have already exhaustively excavated and condemned many of the claims for which Hayek is best known. Philip Mirowski offers the most sustained challenge to Hayek's fundamental premise, an epistemological one Hayek enlists to naturalize capitalism from his most celebrated work, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), to his posthumously published (and controversially attributed) final treatise, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (1988).²¹ In brief, Hayek argues that markets organize human life better than can any human individual or group. Because our knowledge of the broad-scale consequences of our actions is far more limited than Enlightenment celebrations of reason hold, Hayek cautions, we should not expect to accomplish with intelligence what radical traditions dream we might through the state. Instead, we must follow our own material self-interests, and thereby allow the logic of market competition to generate for us a beneficent global order. As Mirowski glosses it, Hayek insists that the market, an omniscient "information processor," "really does know better than any one of us what is good for ourselves and for society," and neoliberalism comes to leverage this "core conviction" not only against socialism, but also against some of the key tenets of liberalism economists like Hayek claim to

inherit and advance.²² Neoliberal policies inspired by this representative commitment to ignorance undercut democracy, outmode notions of citizenship, defund public institutions dedicated to education, and attack intellectuals who claim authority from sources other than markets.

While critiques of Hayek's (and, by extension, neoliberalism's) assault on intelligence proliferate, critics have not for the most part devoted the same attention to the supplementary view of culture, and the creative human faculty associated with it, imagination, that is as essential to Hayek's theory of human life.²³ Not only does Hayek configure in novel ways the relationship between politics and economics as he celebrates what he calls the "spontaneous" order capitalism generates; he just as significantly modifies the understandings of culture and human "creative powers" that conservative, and classically liberal, traditions previously endorsed.²⁴ In work he presented and published in the 1970s and '80s, Hayek elaborated a concept of "cultural evolution" that supplemented his claim that free-market capitalism was not only the best form of human order, but also the form that biology guaranteed the human species was destined to fulfill and defend.²⁵ "Culture," as Hayek conceives it, is the process by which collectives unconsciously generate and uphold "the morals and institutions that capitalism requires."²⁶ It is a domain in which we imagine irrational and unverifiable metaphysical fictions (such as Christianity) in order to guarantee outcomes favorable for the market order, itself a transcendental system of organization we do not understand and should not try to resist. Through myth and magical thinking, Hayek argues, evolution transmits from generation to generation only those "cultural properties" useful to members of a market economy.²⁷

I return to this vision in a moment, but it is first worth marking its difference from those associated with an earlier conservatism. When Raymond Williams wrote *Culture and Society*, he had in mind as an opposing vision T. S. Eliot's global Christian utopia and its complementary defense of class hierarchy. Reactionary men of letters such as Eliot once battled to maintain a canon of sacred literary, historical, and religious texts, and to keep questions of wealth and power out of elite conversations about the arts. From Burke to Carlyle and Arnold, traditionalists defended in the face of radical change established mores and manners, claiming settled ways of life, by virtue of their long background of emergence, were truer, righter, better, and, therefore, worthy of protection from the uneducated throngs whose uncultivated—or, by the twentieth century, mass-produced—needs and desires threatened them.²⁸ The old right controlled creative and imaginative activity by insisting on religious truth and elite values and attacking those who opposed these. Conservatives pitted culture against democracy and reduced nonelites to masses.

As Hayek's theory of culture indicates, devotees of the market order have changed tactics over the last few decades, in some ways breaking with and in others bringing up to date traditionalist discourses of this kind. In general, the struggles over the content of high culture conservative intellectuals such as Eliot once waged with left

counterparts in privileged institutions have been outmoded. If, as one historian of culture recently put it, “right and left agreed on the value of the humanities, however narrowly or broadly they defined the curriculum” during the culture wars of the 1980s and ‘90s, conservatives on the whole do not now present intellectual, imaginative, and humanistic activity as a critical site of engagement at all.²⁹ They work instead to defund institutions devoted to these practices, revising the project of the university, privatizing intellectual resources, and attacking state funding for arts and education.³⁰ This approach strategically erodes liberalism’s cultural institutions so that elites can exploit the very forms of critical thinking and organizing they deny exist. It also jettisons older conservative narratives of cultural progress—the Great Man theories of history Thomas Carlyle favored, for example—because these stories purport that some ideas and forms are essentially superior to others. The neoliberal right controls creative and imaginative activity by dismissing it as a ground for battle altogether, even as it deploys imagination in the service of its own anti-democratic projects.

At the same time, however—and paradoxically—as “culture war” combatants will recognize, the right continues to construct culture as a significant sphere for conflict. Powerful contemporary right factions double down on Christian ideologies and practices and set these against a range of secular claims upon public life. Religious conservatives insist that Christian values are fundamentally superior to all others and therefore require protection and evangelism. Evangelicals have remained crucial to all three so-called “New Right” coalitions that emerged in the US after the Second World War, and they continue to conceive of culture as a vital and final frontline for adjudicating morality and tradition according to their metaphysical belief system.

The contemporary right, then, at once fabricates culture as an illegitimate domain for collective transformation and as a site of war. Hayek’s theory of culture brokers a compelling and ingenious rapprochement between these two apparently contradictory counterrevolutionary strains. He decouples the religious right’s need to defend one way of life as more correct than any other from the neoliberal right’s need to empty out culture as a field for engagement. His theory simultaneously refuses that culture can be a sphere of purposeful human activity and claims that traditional and conservative cultural forms are superior because they are necessary for the survival of the species. This is not because Hayek is a Christian—he tells us he is not—but rather because he believes Christian values of discipline, family, and individual responsibility support “the extended order,” another one of Hayek’s pet terms for capitalism.³¹ For Hayek, then, the content of culture can still matter, but not because any particular way of life has a claim to verity, to faith, or to representing human achievement at its highest. Culture does not function as a free, open, democratically constructed sphere of activity. Rather, it becomes a play of smoke and mirrors, holding masses in thrall, for their own good, to a tradition valuable only for its meta-effects.

Hayek develops the scaffolding for this view at mid-career. At the end of *The Constitution of Liberty*, in a concluding essay entitled “Why I Am Not a Conservative,” he

outlines one of the dominant means by which right discourses replaced an allegiance to “things as they are” under the *ancien regime* with a revised counterrevolutionary program under liberal capitalist democracy.³² Capital’s reactionaries are, of course, monarchy’s liberals, and Hayek’s exemplary essay demonstrates how one powerful faction within the twentieth-century right, one we’d associate today with libertarianism (although Hayek himself says he finds the term “libertarian” too modish), traded conventional defenses of inequality under aristocracy and the Church for new defenses of inequality under capitalism. Instead of trying to preserve Christian traditions or the nobility’s God-given right to rule, neoliberal conservatives who gained influence after WWII promoted worshipful approaches to a new metaphysical force, capitalism itself. Hayek’s so-called “liberals,” he explains, aim “to free the process of spontaneous growth from the obstacles and encumbrances that human folly has erected.”³³

To do so, Hayek encourages adherents to stake out a position between “the crude rationalism of the socialist, who wants to reconstruct all social institutions according to a pattern prescribed by his individual reason” and “the mysticism to which the conservative so frequently has to resort.”³⁴ Hayek’s neoliberal does not believe that human intelligence orders life, but neither does he believe that God does. Although he does not believe humans know, or ever can know, how best to organize the activities of large collectives, he does not seek to redeem this ignorance by turning to “the authority of supernatural sources of knowledge where his reason fails him.”³⁵ Instead of organizing with reason or turning to the supernatural, Hayek, relying on a familiar version of Adam Smith, encourages individuals to pursue their own economic interests as a way to participate in the market’s spontaneous processes and thereby to ensure the collective good.

At the same time, however, Hayek also opens space in his ontology for the practices associated with the religions he has just dismissed. Although Hayek’s “liberal” is not himself a believer, he “does not disdain to seek assistance from whatever nonrational institutions or habits have proved their worth.”³⁶ It is this early move—the neoliberal values faith’s ideologies and practices even as he denies their claim to truth—to which Hayek will return in his late work, expanding it into a fuller theory of “cultural evolution.” This theory casts culture as the primary site of activity that protects capitalism’s logic from purposeful and foolish human intervention. Morals and traditions, practiced without reflection by common people, function as a bulwark against the vain and mistaken attempts of socialists and intellectuals to change our ways of life. From “the countless number of humble steps taken by anonymous persons in the course of doing familiar things in changed circumstances,” Hayek argues as early as *The Constitution of Liberty*, “spring the examples [of traditions] that prevail. They are as important as the major intellectual innovations which are explicitly recognized and communicated as such.”³⁷

In Hayek’s 1970s trilogy, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, in addresses he delivered in

the early 1980s, and in his final book, *The Fatal Conceit*, he invests this commonplace culture with its own supplementary metaphysical power; it becomes more explicitly the transcendental process by which we produce and transmit rules for life favorable to the market economy.³⁸ As Hayek explains in the Q&A after a lecture on socialism's specious devotion to reason, "Our Moral Heritage" (1983),

It was not man's intelligence that created society, but cultural evolution that created man's intelligence. Our brain does not manufacture intelligence; our brain is merely an apparatus for absorbing and learning a traditional way of thinking, a tradition both of interpretations of the world, and of rules of conduct that we have learned to follow. Thus the social order depends on a system of views and opinions which we imbibe, inherit, and learn from a tradition we cannot modify.³⁹

Whatever "intelligence" we have, Hayek suggests, we owe not to the rational faculties Enlightenment traditions revere, but rather to what emerges from the unknowable inheritance of rules and values we enliven anew in the present. We do not produce knowledge in order to conceive and implement plans, as intellectuals and socialists claim we can and should. On the contrary, the fact that we believe ourselves to be entities capable of such activities we owe to the ongoing progression (or "tradition") we are barely aware determines our thinking, our behaviors, and our experiences. Culture is an unknowable and unalterable system of received actions, rules, and values we unconsciously take on, and these opinions and interpretations, through us, help maintain the market order. Culture works directly upon the brain and produces what we mistake for our own intelligence, and, subsequently, for our own creative powers.

U.S. academics interested in radical discourses will hear some resonances between Hayek and poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, contemporaries of whom Hayek might or might not have been aware.⁴⁰ Hayek shares with these figures the sense that discursive forces outside of our control, and often beyond our conscious apprehension, shape us and our worlds. He breaks with poststructuralism, however, when he installs "spontaneous growth" as the new sublime signifier that explains and gives value to all human action. As Hayek puts it, a bit uneasily:

There is no ready English or even German word that precisely characterizes an extended order, or how its way of functioning contrasts with the rationalists' requirements. The only appropriate word, "transcendent," has been so misused that I hesitate to use it. In its literal meaning, however, it does concern that which *far surpasses the reach of our understanding, wishes and purposes, and our sense perceptions*, and that

which incorporates and generates knowledge which no individual brain, or any single organization, could possess or invent.⁴¹

When figures such as Foucault and Derrida recognize in tandem the powers and limits of human discourse, they attack transcendentalisms of all stripes. Hayek, by contrast, and despite his misgivings (might not “emergent” better serve?), abandons both positivism and religion in favor of a new capitalist theology, which depends at its center upon the troubled dialectical synthesis of traditionalism and a kind of rightwing materialism.

A passage from *The Fatal Conceit* lays out this theory simply, synthesizing some of the claims Hayek makes in earlier texts:

We owe it partly to mystical and religious beliefs, and, I believe, particularly to the main monotheistic ones, that beneficial traditions have been preserved and transmitted at least long enough to enable those groups following them to grow, and to have the opportunity to spread by natural or cultural selection. This means that, like it or not, we owe the persistence of certain practices, and the civilization that resulted from them, in part to support from beliefs which are not true—or verifiable or testable—in the same sense as are scientific statements, and which are certainly not the result of rational argumentation [...] [E]ven an agnostic ought to concede that we owe our morals, and the tradition that has provided not only our civilization but our very lives, to the acceptance of such scientifically unacceptable factual claims.⁴²

Worth noting first is the way this theory bears the distinctive mark of Hayek’s Cold War milieu. The threat of extinction and nuclear holocaust haunts these sentences. Hayek establishes the superiority of his extended order based solely on population, on the modest persistence of “our very lives.” Instead of claiming Western greatness is based in achievement, imagination, or intelligence, as did the Christian (and humanist) civilizing project Europe invoked to justify its practices of colonial extraction and violence—a brutal project any post-Romantic account of human creative power must remember and expiate—Hayek defines species or group progress solely in terms of population increase and basic survival. If Hayek claimed in *The Road to Serfdom* that socialism would impoverish all of us, by the 1980s, as the title of his final book indicates, he was claiming that it threatened the very existence of the species. In a world defined by climate crisis, this argument, which rests on the assumption that such increases are uncomplicatedly benign, has become indefensible.

For Hayek, in any case, culture’s job properly conceived is to furnish most people with a false belief system (monotheism), one in which intellectuals insist they should continue to believe despite its erroneousness, because doing so serves a different,

and in fact real, form of transcendental ordering (capitalism). Cultural evolution neither increases self-knowledge nor spreads sweetness and light. It is not the grand narrative of species advancement through intelligence and imagination that liberal and Enlightenment thinkers celebrated, that epic parade of monumental heroes and geniuses. Hayek does away with conservative staples such as heroes and the truth. Instead, he sanctions mass belief in a tradition he himself regards as superstition, refiguring the hollow faith of the masses, propped up by elites who know better, as proof of human progress. His apparent celebration of “anonymous persons...doing familiar things” amounts to a good faith version of false consciousness.

This theory also, it is clear, transforms conventional progressive and reactionary understandings of the nature and function of intellectuals attentive to culture’s histories and forms. Mirowski has outlined the paradox at the heart of the task Hayek sets for his model economist, who does not produce knowledge, but works rather to convince others that they, too, can know very little.⁴³ Corey Robin has elaborated the elitist element fundamental to Hayek’s mid-career writings on giants of culture and industry, those in whose names Hayek argues we must guarantee liberty so that they can shape the tastes and desires of laboring simpletons incapable of imagining and making.⁴⁴ We can add to these versions of Hayek’s intellectual the economist as cultural evolutionist, who presumably supersedes critics and scholars engaged in established modes of humanistic inquiry. Through “historical—even natural-historical—investigation,” the economist “tries to make intelligible why some rules rather than others have prevailed.”⁴⁵ Such a “conjectural history, or evolutionary account of the emergence of cultural institutions,” would aim to determine how these evolved to support the “extended order,” and it would do so, neither for the purpose of disinterested inquiry nor revolutionary transformation, but rather in order to finally suggest ways we might “tinker” with our traditions in order to better shore up existing capitalist structures.⁴⁶ (Hayek offers as an example studies in economics “devoted to ascertaining how the traditional institution of property can be improved to make the market function better.”⁴⁷)

With characteristic diffidence, Hayek explains why economists—rather than, say, literary critics, philologists, historians, writers, artists, or, within the social sciences, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists—would be best suited to this vocation:

At this point I find myself in the embarrassing position of wanting to claim that it must be the members of my own profession, the economists, specialists who understand the process of formation of extended orders, who are most likely to be able to provide explanations of those moral traditions that made the growth of civilization possible. Only someone who can account for the effects such as those connected with several property can explain why this type of practice enabled those groups

following it to outstrip others whose morals were better suited to the achievement of different aims.⁴⁸

A sort of rightwing answer to the vulgar Marxists he loathes, Hayek insists that economists are best equipped to explain how and why cultural traditions emerge and endure—and, consequently, to make recommendations for cultural transformation and development—because they alone can understand how these formations serve material interests. And indeed, although Hayek insists that the “reconstruction” of history he advocates as a precursor to any cultural tinkering is very different from “constructivism,” which he reviles in both its Marxist and postmodernist forms, this vision too has its analogue on the left. If Walter Benjamin’s revolutionary historian turns to the past at a moment of danger to wrench free from ruling class interests even the dead, Hayek’s evolutionary economist turns to the past to secure into the future precisely those interests. Instead of seizing fragments for revolution, the evolutionary economist seizes what will prop up and support capitalism’s hierarchies.⁴⁹ He does not claim to be an antiquarian, reconstructing the past to see things as they really were. He labors to understand and strengthen the ways values and practices that might not seem at first blush devoted to shoring up the market economy can nonetheless serve its logics.⁵⁰

In place of judgment or creativity, Hayek offers intellectuals devoted to such a project a limited set of managerial capabilities. We cannot assess, know, make, or decide. We can “bring about an ordering of the unknown only by causing it to order itself.”⁵¹ We can “initiate processes that will coordinate individual actions transcending our observation.” We cannot build “abstract structures of inter-personal relations...All we can do is to induce their formation” by securing “the assistance of some very general conditions, and then allow[ing] each individual element to find its own place within the larger order. The most we can do to assist the process is to admit only such elements as obey the required rules.”⁵² As a description of the study, evaluation, and perpetuation of cultural practices, this paints a devastating picture. The tinkerer’s aim is to accommodate others to the hierarchies that produce us, to suit us to the rules, to maintain things as they are, to homogenize any errant elements, to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of processes, to exclude the recalcitrant or delinquent. Hayek celebrates the one who is blessed with “the skill to fit oneself into, or align oneself with, a pattern of whose very existence one may barely be aware and of whose ramifications one has scarcely any knowledge;” he castigates any who believe they act with purpose and vision for identifiable ends irreducible to individual financial interests.⁵³

By grounding his theory of human life in “cultural evolution,” Hayek appears to sanction an historical view of human life similar to the one humanists and leftists have developed.⁵⁴ He also appears to share with radicals a desire to value the creative efforts of common people. In fact, Hayek deploys the category of culture to prop up a

competing, managerial historicism that at once denies and cartelizes creative power. His theory of culture is hostile to historical materialist understandings of the human; it dismisses, not only reason and intelligence, but also imagination and the sensuous, as faculties by which humans, whether identified as elite coteries or as workers and consumers, might try to influence life for the better. It renders reflection, vision, pleasure, and judgment as unavailable for purposeful collective action as it renders reason. Neoliberal scripts of this kind invest abstract processes with authority and ambition while insisting the diverse human actors who participate in them across classes do not exercise either, or can do so only falsely, for obscure purposes beyond our ken. In so doing, this discourse forecloses conversations about value, which, supposedly, only unknowable forces can arbitrate.

Within right circles, as we have seen, such a theory of culture also harmonizes opposing commitments. The neoliberal right, in its efforts to mobilize a diverse coalition with competing needs, can now have it both ways: it can preserve Christian traditions by putting them in the service of capital, but it need not grant their central claims. It is thereby free to defund cultural institutions and pursue projects at odds with Christian values, along the way dismissing the left's attempts to center culture as a ground for negotiation, a ground upon which the left has proven itself more likely to triumph. The conceptual synthesis Hayek delivers does not map directly onto contemporary public life, of course, but it does mirror the uneasy fusion we see in a figure such as Donald J. Trump, the divorced, wealthy atheist who manifested the popular will of globalists, evangelicals, and white nationalists alike.

Raymond Williams Tending Culture

Raymond Williams's theory of culture digs in exactly where Hayek encourages intellectuals, artists, and workers to give up. One reason to return to and value Williams anew is that different threads within his body of work now seem important, given the reigning neoliberal status quo. As the previous section demonstrates, a transformed reactionary construction of culture has gained influence in recent decades, and so contemporary conditions, the early manifestations of which Williams himself began to consider late in his career, call for a shift in emphasis when we return to his project for resources.⁵⁵ We must no longer persuade those who admit that culture is valuable and so argue over what should count as culture. We must rather address, impossibly, alongside those who view culture as the struggle of good versus evil, those who pretend to have given up culture entirely as a basis for struggle.

Williams outlined his radical understanding first in *Culture and Society: 1780 – 1950*, and later, more fully and more controversially, in *The Long Revolution*. Williams himself came to feel the earlier book was hopelessly marked by its moment of composition—he reports despairing over the possibility for direct political action in the U.K.—and, indeed, since its publication, critics have rehearsed, sometimes in conversation with Williams, a familiar set of challenges.⁵⁶ Williams's interlocutors have questioned the

partial and exclusionary UK canon of texts Williams engages, the adjacent fields, such as sociology, he overlooks, and his supposedly forgiving attitude toward the reactionary politics of some of the writers whose critiques of industrialization he admired. Above all, critics have attacked the book's purported idealization of culture as a venerated category of activity by which radicals might produce transformations with meaningful political and economic valences.⁵⁷ Williams valued these critiques and addressed them variously over the course of his long career, and yet, he remained committed to the category of culture as a worthwhile site of activity and theory. Despite its professed deficiencies, many of which have sparked colleagues and inheritors to further inquiry, *Culture and Society* nonetheless exemplifies two of the enduring contributions Williams made to twentieth-century discourses on culture, politics, and economics.⁵⁸

First, Williams develops in it a democratic theory of "culture in common" that opposes the mainstream liberal idea that culture is a protected, apolitical sphere of human achievement autonomous from material relationships.⁵⁹ He identifies and valorizes a strain of Anglophone writing that constellates culture, not as the refined object of civilizing practices, and not merely as vanguard arts and letters (although this definition, he shows, persists and is not unrelated to the broader conception he ultimately advocates), but rather as "a whole way of life," material, intellectual, and spiritual.⁶⁰ In Williams's hands (rather than, say, Eliot's), this strain democratizes the creative imagination associated by conservatives and Romantics alike with high culture, opening up to larger collectives the capacity for envisioning and making. It challenges intellectuals across the political spectrum who would treat working class and impoverished consumers of mass culture as deceived fools. Williams's theory, above all, refuses to wield culture to dominate and homogenize, fabricating instead an uncontainable common field that will always be composed in and with difference.

Second, Williams, in conversation with other Birmingham School interlocutors, elaborated a method for the study of culture that takes language and its history as its object. Part Leavis-ite close reader, part philologist, Williams devotes to words and images an excruciating attention that emerges from his sense of language's dual character—it is potentially liberatory on one hand, and on the other, a potentially enclosing expression of communal history. Individuals can deploy language for particular purposes at particular moments even as language bears with it the burden of the past, the events and relationships, epic and ordinary, which produce the semiotic systems we take up for our different reasons in the present. Williams's method in this way lays the groundwork for the nuanced understanding of the limitations and powers of creative human activity fundamental both to his theory of his object and to his critical practice.

Against the backdrop of the nuclear arms race and its apocalyptic horizon, Williams is as attuned as Hayek purports to be to the dangers of over-determination. Like Hayek, Williams recognizes how threatening is the prevailing coercive attitude toward others

and toward life he too at times roots in rationalist Enlightenment discourses. Whereas Hayek defines the problem solely in terms of reason, however, Williams also defines it in terms of images, and of their correlating faculty, imagination, and he recognizes that right and left alike struggle this way for control:

It is as if, in fear or vision, we are now all determined to lay our hands on life and force it into our own image, and it is then no good to dispute on the merits of rival images. This is a real barrier in the mind, which at times it seems almost impossible to break down: a refusal to accept the creative capacities of life; a determination to limit and restrict the channels of growth; a habit of thinking indeed, that the future has now to be determined by some ordinance of our own minds. We project our old images into the future, and take hold of ourselves and others to force energy toward that substantiation. We do this as conservatives, trying to prolong old forms; we do this as socialists, trying to prescribe the new man.⁶¹

Williams, searching, as Hayek does, for a language to describe the immaterial but objective forces we associate with imaginative human activity, here figures “the creative capacities of life”—directed, he insists throughout, not only toward the arts, but toward ordering and generating in general—as energies that flow and grow along channels that cannot be predicted or restricted without violence. These capacities we exercise in the domain of culture, and they are at some level certain to erupt and roil, to change and move, despite our efforts to contain or direct them. Although Hayek positions himself on the side of liberty, Williams’s account reveals that thinkers of Hayek’s stripe still write in the dominative mode, trying as they do to stay inevitable (if indeterminate) changes. Conservatives get “creative power” wrong because they simultaneously overestimate our capacity to arrest culture and underestimate our capacity to make purposeful changes to a supposedly static tradition through collaboration and will.

The organic metaphor of channels and energies Williams prefers in this passage is similar to Hayek’s picture of “spontaneous growth,” but the comparison breaks down, once again, at the *telos* each projects into the future. Against market fundamentalist and certain Marxian discourses alike, Williams refuses to see in the movement of the uncontrollable forces of human organization a definitive aim, determined in advance. And yet, he does not therefore conclude that this basic indeterminacy relieves humans of the need to value and judge and decide. Even as Williams accepts that it is impossible to fully legislate culture or to direct it toward political ends determined in advance, he does not, like Hayek, despair that because humans cannot consciously control everything, we cannot consciously influence anything. (This move Hayek repeats across his oeuvre; it is the foundation, for instance, of his dismissive review of John

Kenneth Galbraith's *Affluent Society*⁶²).

Drawing upon and extending the complex etymology of the word "culture," Williams sketches the strength and limits of our creative faculties through the metaphor of the "tending of natural growth":

The idea of culture brings together, in a particular form of social relationship, at once the idea of natural growth and that of its tending. The former alone is a type of romantic individualism; the latter alone a type of authoritarian training. Yet each, within a whole view, marks a necessary emphasis. The struggle for democracy is a struggle for the recognition of equality of being, or it is nothing. Yet only in the acknowledgement of human individuality and variation can the reality of common government be comprised. We stress natural growth to indicate the whole potential energy, rather than the selected energies which the dominative mode finds it convenient to enlist. At the same time, however, we stress the social reality, the tending. Any culture, in its whole process, is a selection, an emphasis, a particular tending. The distinction of a culture in common is that the selection is freely and commonly made and remade.⁶³

As this passage indicates, Hayek and Williams agree that culture is a mighty and irrepressible province we cannot control and direct for predetermined ends. Williams brings us up to the same precipice as Hayek brings the new conservative; we have God or the romantic on one hand, and our will to impose order on the other. Williams and Hayek differ, however, on what we should do once we recognize our liminal position. For Williams, it is precisely culture's intractability and its emergent properties that call for increased attention, care, and commitment. Rather than turning unthinkingly to existing, stabilizing fictions, and rather than investing faith in metaphysical logics operating beyond our knowledge or influence, Williams incites students of culture to take up, alongside and in concert with others, the ceaseless work of tending an immeasurably large and permanently unknowable field. More, he extends this work of tending to all members of a collective, while Hayek reserves the task of tinkering for the enlightened economist intellectual.

As contemporary movements to end state-sanctioned violence against people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized groups signal, barriers to taking up a "common" project persist. Williams repudiated with similar concerns in mind his early use of the potentially nationalist or ethnic term "community." Given precisely these conditions, however, the desire to trade metaphors of war for metaphors of shared labor in difference seem as vital as ever. As Stuart Hall, the New Left figure most attuned to the complexities of what he preferred not to call "multiculturalism," put it in 2007, "[p]eople find themselves obliged to make a common life or at least find some common ground of negotiation...The multicultural question,

then, is: how can we do that without giving up the investments which people have made in what makes them who they are, which is what I call difference.”⁶⁴ Toward an answer, we can find in Williams an incitement to strategically re-conceptualize culture itself.

As we do, Williams urges us to affirm our inability to foretell or determine the future without allowing this to alleviate the imperative to think and decide. On the contrary, he suggests that our very limitations require total attentiveness, careful consideration, unflagging devotion. “We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention,” Williams writes, “for we do not know the future, we can never be certain of what may enrich it; we can only, now, listen to and consider whatever may be offered and take up what we can.”⁶⁵ Williams asks us to act precisely because we understand that we cannot arrive at an everlasting system of value, precisely because we cannot rely in every domain upon our limited ability to reason, precisely because we cannot know everything. Perpetual is the work of making, as well as the work of taking responsibility for what we have made. We must also admit to ourselves that we can never know exactly what we are making, confirm whether or not we are making what we think we are, or see that we have made what we intended or wanted to make. This is the labor and the encumbrance of creative power and collective life in a democratic society of equal but distinct beings.⁶⁶

Williams returns to this theme again in “Culture Is Ordinary,” where he differentiates the approach to cultural criticism he practices from the prescriptive one he associates both with the right and with a naive Marxism. Cultural studies can and should aim to influence thinking—the critic asks which texts and structures and styles we should value, and considers their complicated connections to the historical conditions out of which they emerge—but it should not attempt to do so in ways that limit, exclude, and police from the top down.⁶⁷ This mode of thinking about culture can find its way, as Williams puts it in *The Country and the City*, by keeping always before it the question: “where do we stand, with whom do we identify”?⁶⁸ Hayek and Williams answer this question differently, and those allegiances, above all, help us distinguish tinkering from tending. Hayek, of course, casts his lot with elites, whose prosperity, he believes, guarantees bare survival for the rest of us. Williams, on the other hand, kept always before him his working-class background, which he did not see as at odds with his Cambridge pedigree.

While Hayek’s methodology for evolutionary economics relieves the intellectual and the mass alike of the burden of judgment, Williams’s methodology for cultural studies centers the critical faculties across class hierarchies. Out of our positions of interest and allegiance, Williams encourages everyone to investigate, persuade, and decide. At the same time, Williams gives us reason to remember that, while culture is inextricable from political and economic conditions, some of its activities are often pursued aimlessly, accidentally, emergently. Recognizing this, and, perhaps, valuing it, is not the same as insisting on a sphere of creative autonomy, nor as returning to

an ethic of art for art's sake. Williams's theory of culture reminds us that we need a better dialectical sense of the ways in which art can be both bound up in complex ways with political and economic domains of activity (neither determining nor strictly determined) at the same time as culture need not always have a didactic or obvious ideological aim. This is not to say that critics should not continue to read for and bring out these interrelationships and effects through the historical study of language; it is only to emphasize the value of constructing culture as to some extent indeterminate and chaotic, impervious to absolute tending or control, and distinct from the art of war.

Conclusion

Liberal thinkers conceived of culture as a free realm of creative pursuit at once separate from and guaranteed by economic and political activity, a domain in which individuals could make sense of life and in which species progress, not always possible under industrialism in the public and commercial spheres, could continue. The US state promoted this vision during the Cold War, deploying it as evidence that liberal capitalist democracy guaranteed freedom. A major project of oppositional or radical academic criticism over the course of the twentieth century—and Williams looms large in this tradition—has been to deconstruct liberalism's understanding of culture, to demonstrate that the idea of a sphere of creativity, protected from economic and political exigencies, has itself significant economic and political consequences, in part because it emerges from and shores up a bourgeois worldview. Edward Said, extending Antonio Gramsci's view of culture as the "elaboration" of power, puts it this way: culture "is what gives the State something to govern [...]. The real depth and strength of the modern Western State is the strength and depth of its culture."⁶⁹ Culture is at once produced by and helps to produce material relationships, and critics continue to deploy this insight to repudiate earlier generations of conservative academics in literary and cultural studies.

Hayek's theory of culture, however, indicates that the right now constructs and evaluates culture in precisely this way. Neoliberal thinkers need no longer view culture as a protected, autonomous sphere. On the contrary, Hayek shares with his socialist adversaries the conviction that cultural activity is indissolubly connected to economic and political conditions. He agrees that cultural activity ultimately serves the production and maintenance of particular social orders. He holds that the market order he celebrates could not have emerged without the cultural traditions and values, bolstered by myth, faith, art, and law, that guarantee its functioning.

Might oppositional critics therefore consider a change—or at least, an expansion—of tactics? Instead of framing the work of cultural studies as the ongoing attempt to reveal the supposedly hidden economic and political dimensions of imaginative works, as does one critical tradition with roots in Fredric Jameson, confronting Hayek's theory encourages us to bring out and reconsider with renewed effort the different

constructions of imagination and culture that inform and sanction our cultural and political commitments.⁷⁰ Unlike his left counterparts, Hayek endorses a vision of culture that forecloses imaginative human activity altogether and celebrates instead unthinking service to tradition. He also suggests that economists are culture's best historians. Critics might oppose visions of this kind by turning, with the eyes of the present, to the creative and critical archive of post-Romantic theories of imagination and culture.

Theoretical interest in "imagination" has long been out of vogue in cultural studies. The word carries with it the taint of an outmoded Romanticism, as if any writer interested in its nature and function affirms the quasi-religious aura that comes down to us from Coleridge's idealism.⁷¹ If we accept that one major difference between left and right theories of culture, as Williams and Hayek help us see, is that the left insists we can exercise our imaginative faculties in order to work purposefully and openly (although, within limits) to influence culture, we might reinvigorate interest in imagination itself as a faculty of value. By the premature end of his career, Williams was calling for similar attention as he confronted the ways Thatcherism strategically eviscerated institutions of public life.⁷² Jameson famously described the left's failure to unite against the immiserations of capital in the post-war period as a failure of imagination. Perhaps we might take this a step further and return to the question of what it means to imagine at all, recovering this term in the face of a right that denies its very possibility. Among other emphases (Williams was aware that theory is not everything, but at least, he comforted us, it couldn't hurt), this might mean excavating or privileging past and present secular theories of creativity, such as those we find in W.E.B. Du Bois, Wallace Stevens, and Claudia Rankine.⁷³

We might also take on economists' influential engagements with culture and creativity, our objects of study, more directly, as I try to, here. Doing so would allow us to sharpen our allegiances and our methods against those hostile accounts that inform the ongoing defunding of widely accessible humanities programming. Hayek's vision of the economist as a cultural historian who tinkers with tradition in order to better serve market interests is still ascendant inside and outside of the academy. Articles that take an evolutionary approach to economics—one typical example, "Evolution and the Growth Process: Natural Selection of Entrepreneurial Traits," claims to prove that "risk-tolerant" actors drive species progress—have long been published in the field's top journals.⁷⁴ Research of this kind in turn informs, or at least gives a veneer of legitimacy to, policy decisions, which, in recent decades, have systematically dismantled disciplines offering competing views of what culture is and does. (Although, as Slobodian has recently noted, economic theory that justifies the profit motive is not necessarily more influential than the motive itself simply operating in finance and industry.⁷⁵)

Rather than continuing to focus mostly on methodological disputes internal to the humanities, in other words, scholars and critics might foreground our differences from

other fields and address ourselves to antagonistic extra-disciplinary formations.⁷⁶ We can target in publication and in the classroom those rival methods of cultural study that economists support, methods the many students enrolled in private and public institutions of higher learning in the U.S. and abroad are as likely to encounter as humanistic outlooks. Such an approach could provide a counter-model to dominant interdisciplinary formations that, as Stefan Collini has suggested, primarily serve management and corporate interests working within and through the university.⁷⁷ Instead of absorbing the methods of other disciplines—taking on their language and aims as we attempt to shore up budgets and win dwindling majors—cultural studies might foreground how and why it deviates from the most powerful modes of knowledge production. Williams models this work, which takes as its basis the study of language and images, and he reminds us why it matters that our field's historical vision of the human is at stake. He urges us to keep alive that vision's present and possible strategic resources, not in the spirit of war, but in the spirit of expanded democratic access to the ordinary.

Notes

1. In "Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History* 31.4 (Autumn 2000) 627-648, Grant Farred traces the ways the New Left both inspired and excluded the identitarian movements that emerged in the late twentieth century. Stuart Hall looks back on the achievements and failures of mid-century radical movements in "Life and Times of the First New Left," *New Left Review* 61 (January-February 2010): 177-196.
2. See Andrew Hartman, "Culture Wars and the Humanities in the Age of Neoliberalism," *Raritan* 36.4 (2017) 128-140 and "The Culture Wars Are Dead, Long Live the Culture Wars!," *The Baffler* 39 (May 2018), and Quinn Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right," *Cultural Politics* 15.3 (2019) 372-386, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-7725521>. Much earlier, Michel Foucault compares neoliberal conservative views of culture to socialist intellectual visions in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008). In a footnote to a lecture, Foucault suggests the former elaborate more complex theories of culture's economic function than do the latter. The left, limited by relatively simple base-superstructure models, often conceives of culture either as a means for the "reproduction of relations of production" or as "social solidification of economic differences." By contrast, in "the neoliberal analysis," culture is "directly integrated in the economy and its growth of a formation of productive capital" (233). Neoliberals deploy this more sophisticated and totalizing construction of culture's relation to other domains to consolidate their worldview and to influence policy. Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 3, 13.
3. Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers" 3-4.
4. I follow Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 4, who defines conservatism since the French revolution as "a meditation on — and theoretical rendition of — the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back."
5. Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) comes up for censure as a representative radical text in *The Fatal Conceit*. Williams critiques evolutionary theories of culture and society in "Social Darwinism," *Culture and Materialism* (New York: Verso, 1980) 86-102.
6. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780 - 1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) viii. F. A. Hayek, "The Creative Powers of a Free Civilization," *The Constitution of Liberty*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 22. Although critics have rightly emphasized the ways Williams and Hayek alike were antagonistic to poststructuralist discourses, both endorse basically "constructivist" views of human life. On Williams's complex relationship to postmodernism, see John Higgins, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism, and Cultural Materialism* (New York: Routledge, 1999), and Tony Pinkney, "Raymond Williams and Post-Modernism," *The British Critical Tradition: A Re-Evaluation*, ed. Gary Day (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1993) 213-229. On Hayek's constructivism, see Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Edgework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 37-59. See Williams's posthumously published *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 1989) for his own fraught engagement with postmodernism.
7. For another reassessment of Williams's approach to culture with contemporary neoliberal discourses

in mind, see Jason M. Baskin, "Romanticism, Culture, Collaboration: Raymond Williams beyond the Avant-Garde," *Cultural Critique* 83 (2013) 108-136. Baskin most values collectivist elements of Williams's view of creative activity and distinguishes them from naïve Romantic celebrations of imagination.

8. James Davison Hunter consolidated the concept in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic, 1992).
9. Critics emphasize how neoliberal intellectuals often advocate building strong states that serve market interests at the same time as many ostensibly disavow state power. See Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2013).
10. Williams, *Culture and Society* 295-338.
11. Hayek, *Constitution* 28.
12. F.A Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 69. Williams abhors the popularity of "impact" as a term for influencing or capturing the attention of others in "Advertising: The Magic System," *Culture and Materialism* 190.
13. Williams's *Culture and Society* pairs opposing figures on the right and left and brings out their commonalities along with their disagreements. Doing so allows him to emphasize shared interests usually concealed and to model the stance he takes against what he calls the "dominative mode" (337).
14. Williams has been challenged in important ways by left discourses coming from two positions, the first, so-called identity politics, demanding attention to the roles categories of race, sexuality, gender, ability, and more play in producing and maintaining inequality, and the second, poststructuralism, calling into question grand narratives of class transformation, which Williams himself, a careful and qualifying thinker, never really endorsed. See Farred and Pinkney for accounts of these controversies.
15. Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian, "Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading like Neoliberals," *American Literary History* 29.3 (Fall 2017): 602-614.
16. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone, 2015); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Foucault.
17. Harold Bloom might have been the last prominent figure defending conservative values in literary studies, although his early theoretical work seemed radical to an old guard trained in New Criticism. On the occasion of Bloom's death in 2019, academics on social media condemned his exclusionary practices. Figures such as Bloom have come to function as straw men in contemporary literary and cultural studies. For an overview of his controversial career, see Dinitia Smith, "Harold Bloom, Critics Who Championed the Western Canon, Dies at 89," *New York Times* October 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/books/harold-bloom-dead.html>
18. "By rekindling the culture wars," Hartman argues, "the humanities could once again become relevant to broader arenas of public debate" ("Culture Wars and the Humanities" 140).
19. Lewis F. Powell, Jr. "Confidential Memorandum: Attack on the Free Enterprise System," 23 August 1971; Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (New York: Student Department of the League for International Democracy, 1962).
20. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harvest, 1949) was a primary antagonist

for Williams's *Culture and Society*.

21. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis*. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944). As Hayek's health failed in his final year, scholars believe the editor of his final book, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), William Warren Bartley III, likely authored some of its content.
22. Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis* 79.
23. For exemplary critical engagements with Hayek's epistemological and ontological claims, see, in addition to Mirowski and Robin, Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). In *Hayek and the Evolution of Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Naomi Beck challenges Hayek's view of cultural evolution from the perspective of contemporary evolutionary theory.
24. Hayek initially elaborates the idea of "spontaneous" order, which he first introduced in lectures in the 1950s, in *Constitution* 33. Hayek, *Constitution* 22.
25. For a history of the emergence of evolutionary economics in general, see Philip Mirowski, "On the Origins (at Chicago) of Some Species of Neoliberal Evolutionary Economics," *Building Chicago Economics: New Perspectives on the History of America's Most Powerful Economics Program*, eds. Robert Van Horn, Philip Mirowski, and Thomas A. Stapleford (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Beck also situates Hayek's evolutionary theory within the social sciences more broadly.
26. Hayek, *Fatal Conceit* 9.
27. *Fatal Conceit* 136.
28. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1993); Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014); Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
29. Hartman, "Culture Wars" 23.
30. Stefan Collini describes and evaluates the emergence of the corporate university in *What Are Universities For?* (New York: Penguin, 2012) and *Speaking of Universities* (New York: Verso, 2017).
31. *Fatal Conceit*, 6 and passim.
32. F. A. Hayek, "Why I Am Not a Conservative," *Constitution*, 397-411.
33. Hayek, "Why I Am Not" 410.
34. "Why I Am Not" 406.
35. "Why I Am Not" 406.
36. "Why I Am Not" 406.
37. *Constitution* 28.
38. F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (New York: Routledge, 2012); "Our Moral Heritage," The Heritage Lectures 24, 29 November 1982, Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., Lecture; "The Rules of Morality Are Not the Conclusions of Our Reason," Twelfth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, 25 November 1983, Chicago Marriott, Chicago, Plenary. Because these earlier texts and late lectures elaborate many of *The Fatal Conceit*'s central premises, I follow Beck, who suggests that Hayek's final book "can be consulted in combination with" the reliable texts that introduce its claims (*Hayek and Evolution of Capitalism* 82).
39. Hayek, "Our Moral Heritage," 11-12.

40. Critics have questioned whether or not Hayek or Bartley, his editor, cited Foucault in *The Fatal Conceit* (64). The book criticizes Foucault, mistakenly, as a typical leftist intellectual preoccupied by alienation.
41. *Fatal Conceit* 72, emphasis in original.
42. *Fatal Conceit* 136-7.
43. *Never Let a Serious Crisis* 78-79. As Hayek puts it: "The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design" (*Fatal Conceit* 76).
44. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind* 159-160.
45. *Fatal Conceit* 69.
46. *Fatal Conceit* 69-70.
47. *Fatal Conceit* 69.
48. *Fatal Conceit* 70. See also Hayek's lecture, "The Rules of Morality," for a condensed account of an economist's function.
49. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, [1950] 1968) 253-64.
50. Hayek champions the field of economics here, but at least one edited collection produced by US literary critics takes up some of the work he recommends. In *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture* (Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010), Paul Cantor and Stephen Cox, avowed students of Austrian school economics, set out to apply Hayek's vision of "spontaneous order" to literary works from Cervantes to the present. They and their contributors bring out market-friendly themes across literary history.
51. *Fatal Conceit* 83.
52. *Fatal Conceit* 83.
53. *Fatal Conceit* 78.
54. Hans Robert Jauss's 1970 essay, "Modernity and Literary Tradition" (trans. Christian Thorne, *Critical Inquiry* 31.2 [Winter 2005] 329-64) gives one important genealogical account of the development of this mode of historical consciousness.
55. Williams, *Politics of Modernism*.
56. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with 'New Left Review'* (New York: Verso 1979) 106.
57. Perry Anderson, Anthony Barnett, and Francis Mulhern most famously discuss these challenges with Williams in a series of interviews published in Williams, *Politics and Letters*. Posthumous assessments of Williams's career and contribution to socialist thought and cultural studies return to similar problems. Stanley Aronowitz summarizes and responds to formalist criticism of Williams in "On Catherine Gallagher's Critique of Raymond Williams," *Social Text* 30 (1992) 90-97. Elizabeth Eldridge and John Eldridge offer an overview of early and late critical engagements with Williams's theory of culture in *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
58. Williams, *Politics and Letters* 97. Stuart Hall's work on multiculturalism, race, and nation confronts many of the problems Williams did not theorize himself. See, for instance, Stuart Hall, "When Was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit," *The Postcolonial Question*, eds. I. Chambers and L. Curti, (New York: Routledge, 1996).
59. *Culture and Society* 333.

60. *Culture and Society* viii. Williams comes back to and consolidates his vision of culture first, and briefly, in the 1958 essay, "Culture is Ordinary," *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (New York: Verso 1989) 3-14, and then, at length, forging new interdisciplinary methodologies, in *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan: Parthian, 1961).
61. *Culture and Society* 336.
62. F. A. Hayek, "The Non-Sequitur of the Dependence Effect," *Southern Economic Journal* 27.4 (April 1961) 346-348.
63. *Culture and Society* 337. The etymology of culture Williams sketches in *Keywords* 49-54.
64. Stuart Hall, "Living with Difference: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Bill Schwartz," *Soundings* (2007) 151.
65. *Culture and Society* 334-335.
66. In this way, Williams has more in common with the late work of poststructuralism's key figures, chief among them Jacques Derrida, than Williams's critique of what we might call trickle-down poststructuralism emphasizes.
67. "Culture Is Ordinary" 7.
68. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 38.
69. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 171.
70. See Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982).
71. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
72. Raymond Williams, "When Was Modernism?," *Politics of Modernism* (New York: Verso, 1989) 31-35.
73. See my article, Racheal Fest, "What Will Modernism Be?," *b2o: an online journal* (May 2017), <https://www.boundary2.org/2017/05/racheal-fest-what-will-modernism-be/>, for a revaluation of Stevens in the context of neoliberalism.
74. Odad Galor and Stelios Michalopoulos, "Evolution and the Growth Process: Natural Selection of Entrepreneurial Traits," *Journal of Economic Theory* 147.2 (March 2012): 759-780, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4116112/>. See also Mirowski, "On the Origins."
75. Quinn Slobodian, "Colossus Wears Tweed," *Dissent* (Winter 2020) <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/colossus-wears-tweed>.
76. Developing an extra-disciplinary sense of antagonistic interlocutors might offer cultural critics an alternative to perpetuating decadent method wars, such as those conversations about post-critique that produce discourse today. For one recent provocation on internecine fighting and post-critique, see Anna Kornbluh, "It's Complicated," in "Responses to Rita Felski's *Hooked: Art and Attachment*," *nonsite.org* (35) <https://nonsite.org/responses-to-hooked-art-and-attachment/>.
77. Collini, *Speaking of Universities* 29.

Kill the Body and the Head Will Die: Realism, Capitalism, and the Financier

Devin William Daniels

In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but everyone hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbor, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in secure hands.

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I

And you may ask yourself: well, how did I get here?

—Talking Heads, "Once in a Lifetime"

The realist novel has been quite successful in rendering the bodily effects of capitalism into literary language, often vividly and meticulously.¹ From the protracted deaths of Emma Bovary and Père Goriot, which close their eponymous volumes, to Mr. Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, whose jointly financial and physical downfall forms the novel's narrative hinge point, the body struck down by financial ruin is a strikingly common feature of works which have been designated "realist." If Ian Watt is correct that for formal realism the novel serves as "a full and authentic report of human experience... presented through a more largely referential use of language," it makes sense that this "full and authentic report" of a world so fundamentally structured by capitalism would necessarily include its effects.² However, as palpably as its effects are registered, capitalism itself remains an elusive and mysterious force for realism, which (following Watt) has largely been understood as the mode of the empirical and the sensuous.³ Within this mode, the realist novel is able to depict the persons (workers, buyers, sellers), things (commodities), and even the media of exchange (money) that constitute capitalism's visually empirical reality (or, we might say, its body). In other terms, realism can show us the majority of Marx's "general formula

for capital,” M-C-M’ (or M’), in which the capitalist uses money (M) to purchase a commodity (C) which is then resold for a larger sum.⁴ The commodity and even the units of exchange fall easily within the realist purview; what remains elusive, however, is the appearance of the “prime,” that mysterious process through which two equivalent exchanges have somehow yielded a surplus. Marx himself resorts to the language of fantasy to describe this exponentiation (or at least how it appears to the capitalist), writing that value “is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement... By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself.”⁵ While realist novels render an abundance of such forms to the reader, their compilation does not in itself provide us with an understanding of the social relations through which capital is generated. As Marx puts it, “one cannot tell by the taste of wheat whether it has been raised by a Russian serf, a French peasant, or an English capitalist... use-values do not bear any marks of the relations of social production.”⁶

Thus, while the body of the financially ruined protagonist in particular offers an effective substrate on which the realist novel can inscribe, and thus substantiate, capital (whether through prosperity or, more likely, protracted violence), such a substantiation is always after the fact. Capital comes to collect what is due, revealing a story that has been lurking in the shadows of the main narrative, one whose details are largely withheld (the point is the final sum, or rather that it is very large and very negative). Realism here finds itself in a double-bind: it cannot depict capital, but it also can’t *not* depict it. The physically/financially ruined body provides realism with one compromised response to this problem, but outside of this empirical (and often brutal) register, where is capitalism’s *head*? While the realist novel is in no way ignorant of capital, its attempts to ascertain capital-in-itself might appear as so many acts of poetic resignation.⁷ Given its dependence on “largely referential” language, how is the realist novel to render capital’s laws of motion, which take place largely outside the realm of visual observation, empirical experience, and even psychological categories like intention and desire?⁸

We find a potential answer in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, perhaps the quintessential realist novel—or, at least, the novel with and through which nearly any attempt to define realism must grapple.⁹ Scholarship on *Madame Bovary* has, for obvious reasons, privileged its protagonist Emma, as well as Flaubert’s descriptive technique. Such readings of Flaubert, as in the influential work of Erich Auerbach, see the novel’s importance to realism in its representation of “an existence in its totality” through “simple everyday activity.”¹⁰ In establishing this uneventful (or, more precisely, non-evental) everyday as the purview of the realist novel, Auerbach suggests that *Bovary* is ultimately about *nothing*, though “this nothing has become a heavy, dull, threatening something.”¹¹ Further identification of this nothing’s precise qualities risks undermining the novel’s project, which for Fredric Jameson “takes affect, and the unnamable, as its fundamental subject.” The point of the novel (in

Jameson's deployment of Auerbach) is thus less the plot, or even Emma's individual psychology, so much as a "flight from classification" towards singular episodes of the readerly present Jameson terms affect.¹² Emma's financial downfall, however, suggests a great deal happens in *Bovary*, though perhaps not within the purview of Flaubert's realist description. Consider, for instance, the figure around whom so many of the novel's identifiable events turn, the moneylender Lheureux. His first appearance offers us an intriguing glimpse of capital's conjectured head:

Gascon by birth but Norman by adoption, he united southern loquacity with Cauchois cunning... No one knew what his previous occupation had been: a pedlar, some said, while others claimed he had been a banker in Routot. What was indisputable, however, was his ability to carry out, in his head, calculations so complex that even Binet himself found them daunting.¹³

In locating such calculations—a numerical, non-visual narrative of capital accumulation—within the otherwise opaque confines of Lheureux's skull, Flaubert seems to present us with an absolute limit for the realist novel. Lheureux, as minor and flat a character as we might imagine, safely contains capital's movements within himself, allowing the realist novel to focus on the threatening nothing of the non-evental everyday, in which capital might be everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. As demonstrated by Alex Woloch, however, minorness need not be equated with unimportance.¹⁴ I propose that, in taking seriously the importance and specificity of Lheureux and figures like him, we gain a new perspective on the genealogy of the realist novel and how it has dealt with the problem of representing capital and, specifically, finance. Loansharks, bankers, salesmen, and generally men of ill repute, these financiers—such as Balzac's Gobseck, Flaubert's Lheureux, and Dickens's Merdle—lurk in the background of realist narratives, their unseen movements mirroring the unseen movements of capital. They possess an almost singular comprehension of the same financial system that proves incomprehensible and deadly for the realist protagonist, and our initial reaction as readers might be to see them as pure malevolence personified and thus best avoided. However, to do so, and to search for a place "outside" of capitalism untouched by their specter, itself feeds into capitalist logics. What might we find if we instead venture inwards to the unsavory world of the financier? Rather than as an opaque, unknowable limit point of realist depiction, how might these texts access these logics, aestheticize them, and provide readers with conceptual tools to think across the material/abstract divide of which realism would seem to favor the former?

The realist novel cannot ultimately contain the forces of capitalism within the financier's bodily trappings. Rather than view this as a failure of realism, however, I will argue that realism's ambivalent relationship with the financier attests to its

engagement with the profoundly *real* abstractions of capitalism in ways that are not necessarily naturalizing. First, I give further attention to the paradigmatically realist *Madame Bovary*, considering the way the financier enables and frustrates classical realism's capacity to depict capitalism's movement. In *Bovary*, finance capital is both highly noticeable and highly confounding, yet it remains more legible to the protagonist than the emergent social relations of capitalism, which risk becoming conflated with the "real" itself. I then turn to a contemporary novel, more readily classified as science-fiction, which I argue continues this project of engaging with real abstraction through the financier: Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*. Written in the years following the 2008 financial crisis, this novel captures a moment when finance is so dominant that it becomes practically a metonym for the economy itself, its all-too-public fakeness only enhancing the neoliberal insistence that "there is no alternative." To the extent that actual value is generated in these novels, which feature bourgeois protagonists and settings far from the centers of production, it is at their furthest margins. Yet, in considering their distinct views of finance from different moments in the history of capitalism, I hope we might gain some insight into the "shadowy zone" that Fernand Braudel sees "hovering above the sunlit world of the market economy... the favored domain of capitalism" (qtd. in Arrighi 25).¹⁵ In particular, I will argue that Robinson's contemporary deployment of the financier allows us to more readily identify what 21st century realism actually looks like: that is, a realism that continues the project of representing "the essential dynamic forces" of a capitalist world, rather than merely importing the diegetic and stylistic properties of 19th century realism into the present-day.¹⁶

That said, while the financier's activities—trading, loaning, speculating, calculating, accumulating—are ones we associate with the capitalist, these activities are not in themselves constitutive of capitalism. An analysis of the financier as figure might thus risk confusing finance capital and commerce, which in fact predate capitalism as its necessary but insufficient preconditions, with the capitalist mode of production itself.¹⁷ Despite this earliness, however, the confused relationship of finance capital and capitalism *tout court* has also presented a problem for historical and cultural accounts of so-called "late capitalism" in the United States since the 1970s, notably including Jameson's.¹⁸ Such accounts tend to emphasize the way in which, after the end of the gold standard, rampant financial deregulation, and the advent of increasingly complex and automated financial technologies, "capital itself becomes free-floating. It separates from the concrete context of its productive geography. Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract."¹⁹ Postmodernism's fragmented, abstractive narratives are seen as a cultural response to this new phenomenon, suggesting an historical tendency within capitalism towards ever greater abstraction and alienation, in which the real conditions of one's existence are increasingly difficult to ascertain (or "cognitively map"). While finance capital surely does enter a distinct period of dominance via the U.S. financial system

through the late 20th century, the sense of “late capitalism” as an era of increased, unprecedented abstraction risks obscuring finance’s historical role throughout the history of capitalism or even producing the impression that the events of the late 20th century begot a distinct mode of production (“late capitalism,” “financialization,” or “neoliberalism”).²⁰

In light of finance capital’s strange quality of being both too early and too late for capitalism-in-itself, the financier—as the figure most indexical of finance capital in the realist novel—would seem to serve a primary function of ideological obfuscation. Via the same sort of bait-and-switch wherein commerce is confused for capitalism, the financier is confused for the capitalist, and capitalism becomes less a set of social relations and more an object or force brought by the financier into the novel’s world from without.²¹ Even with full access to the financier’s interior life, we would not expect to find the operative logics of capitalism there so much as the ideological arithmetic whereby capital seems to beget itself.²² The innovations of finance (from interest-bearing capital and credit to contemporary algorithmic instruments) do not actually generate value, but rather create a flurried sensation that “all capital seems to be duplicated, and at some points triplicated, by the various ways in which the same capital... appears in various hands in different guises.” The “greatest part” of this capital is, in fact, “purely fictitious.”²³

While this capital is fictitious, it is based on a true story. To reconstruct that story, the work of Giovanni Arrighi helps us understand the dynamic and integral role of finance and its abstractions in the mode of production. Financialization, for Arrighi, is not a new or extraneous process, producing superfluous obfuscation of an otherwise solid and material economic base. It is a recurring response of capitalism to inevitable crises of accumulation, given the tendency of the rate of profit to decline. In Arrighi’s two-part schema, which imagines Marx’s circuit of capital investment (M-C-M’) at the scale of the entire capitalist world-system, phases of material expansion (M-C) alternate with those of “financial rebirth and expansion” (C-M’).²⁴ Arrighi writes that “financial expansions are taken to be symptomatic of a situation in which the investment of money in the expansion of trade and production no longer serves the purpose of increasing the cash flow to the capitalist stratum as effectively as pure financial deals can.”²⁵ That is, in response to declining profit rates from commodity production, the economy of a given world-economic power shifts towards finance, and the locus of commodity production (and thus the accumulation of actual value) inevitably moves elsewhere.²⁶ Finance is thus a consistent and structural part of the capitalist process, whereby sustained crises of accumulation are concealed and delayed. When a sustained crisis erupts from this guise (as in 1987 or 2008), finance further allows these eruptions to be indexed as discreet, cataclysmic events: as purely “financial” crises, rather than crises of capitalism *tout court*. It is with this understanding of finance’s role that we must undertake our analysis of the financier, especially if we wish to uncover a realist project that is not merely reifying.

This richer understanding of finance's connection to capitalism reveals the limitations of fictions which seem to expose that, given its abstract qualities, finance simply *isn't real*. Such a flat critique is seen even in works that are nominally *about* finance, such as Martin Scorsese's 2013 satire *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Early in the film, shortly after Jordan Belford (Leonardo DiCaprio) begins his career as a stockbroker, he is disabused of any notion that he is generating real value by the firm's partner, Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey): "Nobody knows if a stock is going to go up, down, sideways, or in fucking circles, least of all stockbrokers... You know what a fugazi is?... It's a whazy. It's a woozie. It's... fairy dust. It doesn't exist. It's never landed. It is no matter. It's not on the elemental chart. *It's not fucking real*" (my emphasis). This scene demonstrates why the outright dismissal of finance as completely made-up is ultimately an ineffective critique. Finance is fake, but the fakeness of finance is real.²⁷ To dismiss finance as "fairy dust" implies that it is an aberration from a previous, "harder" (and thus more real) capitalism of tangible things and risks reifying "less" abstract capitalist logics (such as the commodity fetish) that, while more directly tied to physical objects, are nonetheless still abstractions. A character like Hanna embraces this implication because it lends his capital all the greater capacity to manipulate and liquefy itself. Rejecting capitalism through a focus on the "real" does not render this power any less potent; in fact, it precludes any particularized critical analysis, hence *Wolf of Wall Street's* limitations. Having determined the world of finance is one of pure un-reality, the film can only depict (and keep depicting, with greater and greater intensity) what a bacchanalian farce it all is. The financier's primary function, in such works, is to let us in on the joke—revealing, all the while, that he doesn't understand finance any more than we do. To the extent there is a critique here, it is largely ethical. Such depictions expose the greed and villainy of a set individual actors (bankers, stockbrokers, even politicians) but cannot account for the larger forces structuring individual choices.²⁸ Such bad individuals have perverted an economic system otherwise rooted in the "real." As such, the ethical critique not only obviates material relations but tends to naturalize and legitimize them. Despite their comic vacuity, the targets of this critique remain unscathed, besides the occasional jail sentence.

Beyond these individual fates, the system of finance and capital itself remains untouched, its fundamental fictionality the source of its untraceable power. An array of biographies of every extant stockbroker—or a theoretically ideal actor-network that factored in non-human agencies—would still be lacking the qualities of capitalism that go beyond any locatable agent. This lack of locatable agency leads Mark Fisher to determine that capital "is at every level an eerie entity; conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial reality."²⁹ Capitalism forces us to ask questions that are difficult for realism to answer: "What kind of agent is acting here? Is there any agent at all?"³⁰ This is not to say capitalism is fantastical, or not a human creation, but that the abstractions of

capitalism (and the affects they produce) are real forces with tangible, often bodily effects. David Cunningham notes the imperative, for the later Marx, not merely to “render material” abstract Hegelian concepts, but to elaborate “the social forms of what he called *real* abstraction: that is, those forms of abstraction which, in the specific set of circumstances of capitalist modernity, come to have an actual (and thus paradoxically concrete) objective social existence.”³¹ I contend that the financier has been one of the key methods through which realism has confronted this problem of real abstraction, complicating the opposition between a realist drive for empirical description and the unreal reality of capitalist abstraction.

The need for a richer accounting of this figure motivates my choice of texts from such distinct historical moments. In examining *Madame Bovary*, a novel that has been so important to the theorization of realism, I argue that the financier is far from an incidental figure, taken up for diegetic fidelity or, in an instance of Barthes’s reality effect, as an object among others signifying realism itself. The financier, though not ubiquitous as a character in every realist novel and typically minor where he does appear, fills a constitutive role for realist fiction from the start. We might claim that the novel, in identifying capitalism with such figures, confuses commerce for capitalism and money for value, losing sight of capitalism’s defining (and contestable) realities in production. Such a reading would correspond with Jameson’s claim that “the realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and to change.”³² I argue, instead, that attention to the financier as a formal response to the problem of real abstraction allows us to see how realism can depict the undeniable reality of the impersonal, abstractive forces of capital while exposing those forces not as otherworldly but as profoundly historical and material, the product not of nefarious individuals but of emergent social relations.

I locate the contemporary legacy of this realist project in *New York 2140*, a novel set in a flooded future New York City and featuring, among its protagonists, a strangely sympathetic financier named Franklin Garr (through whom the implications of capturing abstraction in the form of character will literally come to a head). While Franklin might be viewed as a riposte to more farcical and postmodern depictions of finance (such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *American Psycho*), I read Robinson’s use of the financier as an endeavor to grapple with this central problematic of realist representation that we see emerging in the foundational and canonical instance of *Bovary*. As a corollary of this claim, I argue that Robinson’s novel, despite its future (if not quite futuristic) setting, is best understood in the realist tradition. As Robinson himself has claimed, science-fiction “turns out to be the realism of our time.”³³ Less interested in imagining a utopian alternative to or dystopian culmination of capitalism, *New York 2140*’s primary task is to represent the real abstraction of capitalism for an era (following the 2008 financial crisis) that has seen this abstraction seemingly increase—though this realist project actualizes, rather than curtails, the novel’s

revolutionary energies. Robinson, through his deployment of the financier, expands the purview of realism for an era in which U.S. hegemony is firmly entrenched in the financialized back-half of Arrighi's phase of accumulation. His novel understands finance to be both real *and* fictitious, and it can thus imagine a world in which abstraction is not merely the stuff of obfuscation and false consciousness but a terrain of political action.

I.

Discussions of *Madame Bovary* understandably tend to focus on its titular character and her supposed confusion of life for romantic literature, yet Emma's decline and death are intimately financial as well.³⁴ The role of Lheureux—the shadowy figure around whom Emma's debts coalesce—is correspondingly underexamined. Critical attention to Lheureux is generally brief and tends to understand him in demonic or supernatural terms. For Phillip A. Duncan, Lheureux “is an eruption of the occult in the dismal stagnation of provincial life.”³⁵ Frederick Busi, paraphrasing Marianne Beyerle, writes that “she sees him as the devil in disguise and as such he becomes part of contemporary literary traditions. His complete diabolical personality remains to be evaluated, however.”³⁶ To understand Lheureux, and the system he represents, as simply “evil” reduces us to a flat critique similar to the dismissal of the stock market as “fake.” Such critiques produce the sensation of irresistible, supernatural power through a failure to account for the specificities, limits, and peculiarities of that power. Rather than dismissing him as a stock character of the Faustian tempter, we might consider the particular importance Lheureux holds for the narrative and the language through which the text discusses his dealings. Flaubert's descriptions render Lheureux difficult to situate. Revisiting the moment of his introduction, we see that in the localized setting of Yonville, he is described as a multifaceted outsider:

Gascon by birth but Norman by adoption, he united southern loquacity with Cauchois cunning... No one knew what his previous occupation had been: a pedlar, some said, while others claimed he had been a banker in Routot. What was indisputable, however, was his ability to carry out, in his head, calculations so complex that even Binet himself found them daunting.³⁷

Lheureux's geographical and professional identities cannot be reduced to simple modifiers but require a string of prevarications and qualifications. Busi describes his initial form as “the tempter disguised as a merchant... his past is not well known, and vague reports circulate about his dealings in Yonville and elsewhere.”³⁸ The extent of Lheureux's financial network is only implied, but whatever its size, it exceeds the confines of Yonville and of the novel itself. The uncertainty of his past occupation continues into his ambiguous depiction in the narrative: when Flaubert

later states what might be taken as a revelation — “Monsieur Lheureux, in fact, was a pawnbroker” — the effect is not to clarify but to extend the web of Lheureux’s dealings.³⁹ The fundamental quality of Lheureux’s character, whose exact position, profession, and personality are in constant flux, is thus not evil but indeterminacy. Even from the narrator’s position of relative omniscience, his true origins are inaccessible, such that the “implied person” behind his narrative minoriness — the story of which he might be the protagonist — is thoroughly obscured.⁴⁰ While Lheureux appears to come from elsewhere, his outsider status does not reflect a specific backstory of movement from one place to another. Rather, Lheureux’s indeterminacy actively produces an “outsideness” — originating nowhere but “not here” — that remains, structurally, inside the larger character-system of the novel. Within this outside, of which we catch only glimpses, lies his mind and its capacity for complex calculations, for tracking values in a way that resists realist depiction or narration. The head of capitalism seems to be Lheureux’s head, though we do not — and perhaps cannot — know much about it despite its “daunting” capacity for computation.

Lheureux is certainly a tempter, displaying his shimmering goods to Emma despite her insistence that “there’s nothing I need.” When asked the price, he responds, “Oh, a mere trifle... a mere trifle; but there’s no rush; whenever it suits you — we’re not Jews!”⁴¹ This response is notable for its elliptical nature: money is never mentioned in itself, though it structures the entire sentence from without. Lheureux describes his potential transaction in vague and negative terms; rather than speak of materials, objects, and visible qualities, he describes quantities, vectors, and speeds. The price is a “mere trifle,” a strikingly non-numerical unit for a man of such mathematical acumen. The moment of payment is placed out of empirically measurable time; there is “no rush,” though without any standard to measure it against, this reassurance is logically empty. Lheureux likewise understands his own identity within the transaction in strictly negative terms. By positioning himself to Emma as a non-Jew, he presents a more ethnically familiar and lackadaisical version of finance, one that is in “no rush,” unlike the precise, punctual, Jewish form that is implied through its negation.⁴² When Emma ultimately rejects him (for now), he replies, “Oh well! Some other time, I’m sure.”⁴³ This combination of confidence and non-specificity captures the strange financial temporality (or non-temporality) that Lheureux inhabits. The “some other time” is completely indeterminate yet somehow inevitable. Lheureux’s capitalism is never late, but it does not hurry; it is always just-in-time.

While Flaubert’s realist narrative can quite successfully describe and even linger upon the particular commodities which move in and out of Emma’s domestic space, Lheureux’s plotting exists more in the two-dimensional realm of bills, receipts, and notes. We are offered a glimpse of Lheureux’s spatial world towards the end of the novel, as Emma pleads for his aid (or mercy):

Against the wall, under some lengths of calico, Emma caught a glimpse

of a safe, of a size that suggested it held something other than merely banknotes and coins. Monsieur Lheureux, in fact, was a pawnbroker, and the safe was where he had stored away Madame Bovary's gold chain, as well as the earrings he had acquired from poor Tellier.⁴⁴

Here, the text attempts to ascertain Lheureux's workings through realist description; money itself—mere “banknotes and coins”—is once again ignored in favor of something more solid and concrete: “the safe... where he had stored away Madame Bovary's gold chain.” The abstract world of fiscal exchange is safely moored in the gold chain—of aesthetic not merely financial value—which is physically secured within the fortified space of the safe. The revelation of Lheureux as a pawnbroker seems to deflate and familiarize him: despite his mysteriousness, he is ultimately a trader in physical goods, material commodities with real value. Capitalism thus seems safely contained, for a moment, within the realist purview. However, while Lheureux's operation is substantially slower and lower-tech than contemporary finance, it is still fundamentally speculative.⁴⁵ Lheureux's grammatical capacity for occupying non-time—that non-specific “some other time,” when there is “no rush”—is particularly so; he at once participates in immediate exchanges while waiting within a speculative future for the moment of reckoning when value is actualized with dire consequences for his borrowers.

Despite the apparent solidity of the safe, his speculation's actual movements are happening on paper. When Emma implores Lheureux for help, he counters by reciting from his ledger: “Let's see... Let's see... Third of August, two hundred francs... Seventeenth of June, a hundred and fifty... And I'm not even mentioning the notes signed by Monsieur... and the interest, there's no end to it, it's all a hopeless muddle.”⁴⁶ Lheureux occupies a contradictory zone of absolute fixity and absolute non-fixity. The unseen, unspecified moves of his operation can be pinpointed to exact dates and figures through the technology of the ledger, yet the totality of the situation remains “a hopeless muddle.” While Lheureux cannot be taken at his word, the reader is not afforded the total view, only the excerpted examples. These examples, however, are merely (to use Anna Kornbluh's phrase) spatiotemporal *situations*: temporary sites that are not meaningful in-and-of-themselves, but only as part of a larger context of surroundings. The atemporal and aspatial realm of paper affords Lheureux the simultaneous capacity to ruthlessly acquire that which is his while eschewing all responsibility towards the actual lives on which he feeds. Despite being a man of paper, when Emma “show[s] him the paper” of her debt to Vinçart, Lheureux responds, “Well, what can I do about it?”⁴⁷ He thus defers any personal agency to the system itself: what is happening is no one's fault, and there is nothing to be done.

Lheureux's “impossible” speculation places him in direct opposition to realist description, which for Barthes “is thoroughly mixed with ‘realistic’ imperatives, as if the referent's exactitude... governed and alone justified its description.”⁴⁸ Whereas

Flaubertian description might go on forever, given the inexhaustible details that might be enumerated, the ledger does not describe actions or objects so much as it contorts them into numbers, allowing for their movement and exchange. The narrative of how precisely one arrives at the final sum is lost, only glimpsed within the realist mode through Lheureux's elliptical explanation, but that does not prevent that unreal sum from actualizing itself in and on the real world. This contradiction is felt by Emma as she attempts to ascertain the numerical narrative that has been lurking in the background of her lived experience: "she did actually try to work out her finances, but she would come up with such outrageous totals that she found them impossible to credit. Then she would begin afresh, soon grow confused, drop the whole enterprise, and think no more about it."⁴⁹ Her inability to "credit" these "outrageous totals" reflects their seeming lack of correspondence to the otherwise empirical/visual nature of her narrative existence. Emma's incredulity, however, masks the degree to which the materiality of the ledger collapses the distinction between "real" commodities and "impossible" finances. The novel's narration keeps Lheureux's ledger at a distance, yet it serves as a potent example of how finance might be visualized and brought into the purview of not only realist literature but popular consciousness.⁵⁰ In this sense, the ledger is quite analogous to Flaubert's own descriptions, which likewise visualize that which is not "really" there. Indeed, finance registers itself equally empirically observable within Emma's domestic space via this very description: "The house was such a dismal place, now! Tradesmen were seen to emerge from it in a fury. Scarves lay around forgotten... and Little Berthe... went about with holes in her stockings."⁵¹ Finance physically rearranges the domestic space, brings individuals in and out of it, and pokes literal holes in things. Yet Emma maintains, "it wasn't her fault!"⁵² She may be right, but then whose fault is it?

Lheureux (as devil) would be the simple answer, but the novel undercuts the easy conclusion that agency and blame can be squarely placed on him (or Emma, or the two in concert). Lheureux's victimization of Emma is not personal, but part of a larger structural project: Busi, in noting Lheureux's other victims, concludes that "Emma may seem to be the principle object of his schemes, but in reality she is just a party of his master plan to dominate the business scene of Yonville."⁵³ Lheureux's "master plan" certainly has a goal that exceeds Emma's personal ruin, but the text complicates a reading of Lheureux as the lone agent behind her financial entrapment. When Emma approaches the lawyer Guillaumin for assistance, the narrative voice confirms that this "master plan" is by no means localizable to Lheureux's mind only:

Guillaumin knew all about it, for he was secretly in league with the merchant, on whom he relied to provide the financing required for the mortgage loans his clients asked him to arrange. He therefore knew (better than she did) the long story of those loans... continually renewed, until the day came when, gathering together all the writes for non-

payment, Lheureux, wishing not to appear bloodthirsty in the eyes of his neighbours, had called upon his friend Vinçart to initiate the necessary proceedings in his own name.⁵⁴

Lheureux is certainly the most potent human actant here, but his scheme relies upon the complacency of at least two other figures. Furthermore, the story is old hat to Guillaumin, who has seen it countless times before, such that the details are unimportant; Emma is rendered just another victim of its ever-repeating cycles of ruination. Any involvement in the unsavory business of finance seems to lead necessarily and automatically to ruin, a deadly fate sealed by Emma's original transaction. If Lheureux is behind all this, there is a sense that what is going on exceeds his individual will. To place the blame solely on Lheureux—or even the triumvirate of Lheureux, Guillaumin, and Vinçart—participates in what Fisher, channeling Jameson, calls “the abjection of evil and ignorance onto fantasmatic Others.”⁵⁵ Lheureux's devilish qualities make him an easy target for such fantasmatic Othering, but from Guillaumin's perspective, in which Emma's situation is but the latest particularized instance of a larger formal process, something has been set in motion that no individual can contain, command, or comprehend. In this emergent, vaguely conspiratorial network, the novel begins to glimpse the compulsions, imperatives, and tendencies (Wood's “laws of motion”) that constitute the capitalist mode of production, beyond any single actor's intentions, good or ill.

The ways *Madame Bovary's* financial scheme exceeds the figure of the financier and his individual will forces us to consider how the text, unable to contain the agency of capitalism solely within this one figure, points outside itself to movements of capital that can only be glimpsed in motion. The sense that Lheureux somehow lies beyond this scope has led, as noted above, to readings that align him with the demonic and the occult, while Jacqueline Merriam Paskow attributes his success at manipulating Emma to an almost supernatural (and narrator-esque) “virtual omniscience” of Emma's “weaknesses and inner thoughts” that enables him to “produce the effect of a ‘force of fate.’”⁵⁶ Lheureux is indeed an unreal figure, but this unreality should not be understood as a remnant romanticism from a prior mode of production. Rather, his fluctuating indeterminacy represents the realist novel's attempt to grapple with the paradoxically real and abstract forces of an emergent capitalism. We see here how the attempt to contain capitalism, in the guise of finance, within the figure of the financier fails. However, it is this very failure which allows the novel to capture the dialectical energies of a capitalist totality. By displacing capitalist logics into Lheureux's corporeal confines, which the former will necessarily transcend, *Madame Bovary* explodes understandings of finance as pure fakery, strictly the financier's concern, and in opposition to “real” capitalism. The head of capitalism proves to be unattached to any one body, its ruinations the product not of villainous schemers but diffuse social imperatives.

As such, the better model for capitalism proves not to be Lheureux's abstract non-presence, but the novel's free indirect discourse (perhaps its most famous innovation), which is everywhere and nowhere at once. Jameson has described the cognitive map of the era of market capitalism as following "a logic of the grid" and so producing "a space of infinite equivalence and extension."⁵⁷ This description is quite evocative of the two-dimensional, numerical space of Lheureux's ledger, which the novel, diegetically, resists via its mediated presentation and Emma's inability to cognitively access its content. Formally, however, the novel in fact adopts it via the technique of free indirect discourse. Through this technique, knowable commodities, unknowable financial transactions, and unspoken desires and thoughts occupy the same plane of narrative reality and are rendered equivalent and exchangeable. Rancière has identified something close to this phenomenon. He sees, in Emma's compensatory purchases, a yearning for "the law of democracy, a law of universal equivalence: anybody can exchange any desire for any other desire."⁵⁸ (236). Emma does not merely confuse literature for life, but rather, wishes to collapse them together, under a logic of emerging realist literature that "makes any subject matter equal to any other."⁵⁹ If there is a law of equivalence in *Madame Bovary*, however, it is less democratic than capitalistic. Lheureux, whose name means "the happy one," is perhaps happy precisely because of his privileged access to a quality that exceeds even Flaubert's relentless description of the referent: its price. While Emma's desire might be for a system of direct equivalences that are not mediated through the price-form, the ledger's presence makes the medium of such exchanges undeniable. Lheureux's success is thus less a matter of supernatural omniscience than of his understanding of the numerical non-narratives through which commodities and money transform into each other and back again.

Through Lheureux's accumulation, glimpsed in the material but not quite legible ledger, *Bovary* points towards the real abstraction that, while actualizing so many of the novel's distinctly physical events, eludes the gaze of realist vision itself. Even in its formative moments, the possibility of realism is threatened by its simultaneous need and incapacity to approach this abstraction, under which Emma's death—the definitive "event" of the novel—becomes less a tragic, exceptional occurrence than the ordinary result of an ongoing process. The novel's lingering on her body (pre- and postmortem) highlights that Emma was dead (or, at least, indebted) on Lheureux's ledger long before her death is eventuated within the narrative proper. The "black liquid, like vomit" that flows from her corpse's mouth—the ink of both the *récit* and the receipt—finally joins these parallel narratives in diegetic time.⁶⁰ Through her demise, and her daughter's proletarianization, the novel makes plain that Emma's desire for exchange is predicated on exploitation and death.⁶¹ Such fates are not happenstance misfortunes occasioned by misguided purchases, but the structurally necessary cost of producing the value on which Lheureux's fictitious exchanges depend.

II.

Understanding the financier as a means through which the realist novel has accounted for the abstractions of capitalism makes it possible to reconsider the form's legacy for our contemporary moment, in which the status of realism has been particularly vexed. The financialization of the U.S. economy dates back at least to the 1970s, with the Nixon shock's removal of the dollar from the gold standard and the *de facto* dissolution of the Bretton Woods system. However, the decades since—with increasing deregulation, most famously the repeal of the Glass–Steagall Act's provisions on securities—have seen exponential increases in financial activity. David Harvey notes that “the total daily turnover of financial transactions in international markets, which stood at \$2.3 billion in 1983, had risen to \$130 billion by 2001.”⁶² Such a staggering expansion of the circulation of fictitious capital reflects the inherently unstable, crisis-ridden nature of U.S.-led capitalism since the period of exceptional productive growth that defined the Fordist-Keynesian period.⁶³ The 2008 financial crisis would, seemingly, have been a ripe time to reckon with this instability through sweeping, structural changes, or even revolution. However, as the resulting (if much decried) bank bailouts signified, this road was not to be taken. Recalling Arrighi, this is not surprising: a critique of the financial crisis which limits itself to the realm of finance-in-itself (through focus on deregulation, out-of-control digital technologies, risky financial products, greedy bankers, or selfish home-buyers) cannot address the underlying causes of the *need* for financialization (the underlying declines in the production of real surplus-value). To address such causes would be, in fact, to call into question the entire capitalist system.

This apparent inability to question capitalism's inevitability has inflected discussions of realism (and its relationship to capitalism) since the 2008 crisis. This relationship has largely been understood as one of mutual reinforcement. Such a view is typified by Fisher, whose work has provoked a great deal of scholarly response.⁶⁴ While from one view the 2008 crisis demonstrated the inherent instability and destructiveness of (late) capitalism, it somehow emerged unscathed, even stronger than ever. Fisher, in trying to understand this apparent paradox, has theorized this period as plagued by an ideology he calls “capitalist realism,” defined as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.”⁶⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union, there is a sense that all alternatives to capitalism have been discredited. Thus, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the idea of letting the banking system fail appears inconceivable. The system has to be bailed out, rather than replaced or radically altered, because the idea of an alternative is literally unthinkable. Capitalist realism creates a sense that the only way to be “realistic” (in the colloquial sense) is to accept capitalist logic, and in this Fisher implicates the larger project of formal realism itself: “Capitalism realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself.”⁶⁶ Jameson echoes Fisher's claim when he states that realism “cannot but be threatened” by the proposition of a changeable

reality (political or otherwise) and that, thus, “the very choice of the form itself is a professional endorsement of the status quo.”⁶⁷

This complicity between realism and the status quo becomes particularly potent as the increasing financialization of the economy—in which more and more economic activity takes place outside the typical realist purview—puts burdens of representation on realism that seem to demand that the financier (a necessarily minor figure for Flaubert) take center stage. As Leigh Claire La Berge has demonstrated, the financiers of the 1980s (exemplified by Oliver Stone’s *Gordon Gekko* and Tom Wolfe’s *Sherman McCoy*), in allowing realism to claim a “narrative monopoly” on the representation of finance, produce finance as a “metonymic stand-in for ‘the economy’ as such.”⁶⁸ This metonymic substitution leads to a necessarily reifying (capitalist) realism which “reimagines the economy while maintaining that the economy cannot be imagined because ‘that’s the way it is.’”⁶⁹ In a Fisherian sense, the realist depiction of finance—the exposure (even in an attempted critique) of “how things really are”—paradoxically exalts the financier as the individual most adapted to this gritty reality and capitalism as the only system proper to such a harsh, dog-eat-dog world. Once realism had admitted the financier’s interiority and logics into its reality, the novel’s only recourse for critique seems to be a rejection of that reality, as seen in a text like Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, in which the unreality of finance calls into question the reality of the novel’s plot events (and, by extension, reality itself).⁷⁰ At the same time, if the contemporary realist work ignores this financial logic, it abandons the realist project proper (that is, representing social reality) in favor of preserving the outward style of its 19th century forebears (a style which capitalist abstraction, as we have seen in Flaubert, pushes to its representative limits from the beginning).

While postmodern fiction, like Ellis’s, embraces finance as a subject uniquely suited to literature’s experimental and abstractive capacities, other contemporary treatments of finance (from novels and films to popular journalism like the *Planet Money* podcast series) have devoted themselves to penetrating its arcane veneer, forming part of a genre Alison Shonkwiler calls “economic realism” (*Financial Imaginary* xxx).⁷¹ However, even for these ostensibly realist works, the pedagogical burden of explicating finance-in-itself tends to limit their capacity to connect finance to the larger social totality. This conundrum is perhaps best captured by Adam McKay’s 2015 film *The Big Short*, which, while providing a dramatic narrative about the crisis (and its prediction by a several exceptional individuals), devotes a great deal of screen time to fourth-wall-breaking lessons in financial concepts and jargon (featuring, among others, chef Anthony Bourdain and economist Richard Thaler). Through its emphasis on describing specific financial instruments and technologies, rather than the underlying crisis of accumulation to which these are a necessary response, the film implies that the crisis is caused by a certain (even if very large) set of actors who have perverted the stock market, bending its rules and producing an unfair game.

The viewer is left to imagine, with nostalgia, a stock market of days gone by, tied to the material performance and value of actual companies.

In seeking an alternative fate for realism—one that avoids the equally reifying options of representing and not representing finance—I turn to Robinson’s *New York 2140*. Set in a future New York City which is mostly submerged in water due to climate change, Robinson’s sprawling, episodic novel follows a large cast of characters, most of whom live in a housing cooperative in the MetLife Tower. Each chapter bears the name of a character or pair of characters as its title, most of whose stories are narrated in the third-person. Robinson employs a variety of styles for specific characters, however, including Beckettian theatrical dialogue for the duo Jeff and Mutt, the wider historical and theoretical narrations of a non-character known as “the citizen” (perhaps a stand-in for the author or a Whitmanian personification of the city itself), and, most importantly for my analysis, the first-person narration of high-frequency trader Franklin Garr. Given Fisher’s encapsulation of capitalist realism as the idea (attributed to both Jameson and Slavoj Žižek) that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism,” *New York 2140*, at first blush, seems to be a capitalist realist text *par excellence*.⁷² Robinson’s novel depicts a distant future in which climate change has had radically palpable effects, yet—beyond a plethora of technological innovations for managing and navigating the water—the political, social, and economic relations of capitalism (and in particular neoliberal finance capitalism) have not changed at all. However, through a complicated and fortuitous series of events—including Franklin’s recognition that the bubble of “intertidal” real estate (variously above and below water with the tide) is about to burst—Robinson’s rag-tag band help organize a “debt coup” through which, in the words of the citizen, finance becomes “for the most part a privately operated public utility.”⁷³

The debt coup, which essentially rehearses the 2008 financial crisis with a different result, might be the least “realistic” aspect of *2140*. Particularly from a capitalist-realist perspective, we might be conditioned to regard this coup as a sort of speculative wish-fulfillment that marks the novel as breaking with realism through the tools of utopian literature or science-fiction. However, if read as a utopia, the novel’s vision of a publicly co-opted finance system, while representing a radical alternative to the aftermath of 2008, is rather weak and reformist. As a dystopia, Robinson’s world simply isn’t that bad, since technological advances have rendered the fluctuating water levels about as inconvenient as typical New York City traffic. The novel’s title, cover (portraying a partially submerged New York skyline), and author (famous for his science-fiction work) might tempt us to read it as a work of science-fiction. But besides the diegetic matter of being set in 2140 and replacing cars with boats, the novel in no way engages in the formal project of science-fiction which, since Darko Suvin, has largely been understood as the “literature of cognitive estrangement,” through which “a set normative system” is confronted with “a point of view or look implying a new set of norms.”⁷⁴ *New York 2140*, in fact, creates the opposite effect: we

are struck by how little has changed, and this unchanged world, far from producing estrangement, offers the possibility of productive comprehension.

Suvin's definition of science-fiction may be overly restrictive, but I am less interested in answering whether or not *2140* counts as science-fiction than I am in arguing that, even if it is science-fiction, this does not prevent it from being realism. In fact, part of the difficulty of identifying a proper "economic realism" of the 21st century—one which meets Lukács's standard of "grasp[ing] that reality as it truly is" rather than "reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface"—might lie in restricting our view of realism to that which bears an external resemblance to classical realism.⁷⁵ However, Lukács maintains that "free play of the creative imagination and unrestrained fantasy are compatible with the Marxist conception of realism."⁷⁶ The purpose of such realism is not "naturalistic detail" but to "express the essential dynamic forces" of social reality.⁷⁷ This is why I argue that in order to properly understand *2140*'s contribution, we must understand it within the tradition of the realist novel and as advancing the project of articulating the real conditions of capitalism (particularly through its deployment of the financier), rather than looking to it as a non- or anti-realist gesture that upends capitalism by imagining outside or beyond it. *2140* engages with these conditions through a profound recognition of the real quality of capitalist abstraction, a willingness to depict said abstraction, and a self-consciousness (on the levels of content *and* form) of the fact that it is depicting abstraction. Robinson's narrative thus takes as its central problematic not the particulars of the 2008 financial crisis but the question of why the crisis—which should theoretically have exposed the hard realities undergirding speculative finance—led only to the reification of the status quo: that is, his central problematic is capitalist realism itself. By displacing his narrative into a distant future, he escapes the trap of endless explicating the "just so" particulars of actual events that plagues a work like *The Big Short*. Instead, Robinson's novel reveals that the forces underlying all capitalist crises—past, present, and future—are not natural but historical, not the product of phantasmatic finance let loose, but the material relations of production. Robinson's science-fiction is thus a realist treatment of an unreal situation: a financialized economy of a waning empire careening towards perpetual crisis and environmental devastation. Ultimately, Robinson finds the cure for capitalist realism's pessimism within capitalist logic itself, maintaining that, if followed through, capitalism holds within itself the capacity for its own dissolution. In a sense, this is nothing new, but rather a classic premise of Marxist dialectics, and a continuation of realist fiction, which Kornbluh notes "makes a world while highlighting the artifice of its making, in the process exposing the untenable opposition of real and made and the contingent fabrication of the life-worlds that parallel its own."⁷⁸ That is, by relentlessly depicting the world of finance, including the reality of capitalist abstraction, Robinson exposes capitalism's contingency and its capacity to be otherwise.

One of Robinson's most important formal tools for offering a comprehensive, realist account of finance is in getting us inside the financier's head, but not in such a way that the abstractions of finance (as in *American Psycho*) take over the narrative. Franklin Garr's first-person perspective allows Robinson to depict details of the financial system that would otherwise escape the empirical gaze of realist prose. Unlike the capitalist realist financiers La Berge analyzes, Robinson presents Franklin not as a ruthless cutthroat but as an oddly self-reflective, statistics-minded formalist, conscious of the abstracted quality of his work without conceiving of it as mystical fairy dust:

On my screen was displayed all the parts of the global mind most concerned with drowned coastlines, my area of expertise. It wasn't really possible to understand at a single glance the many graphs, spreadsheets, crawl lines, video boxes, chat lines, sidebars, and marginalia displayed on the screen, much as some of my colleagues would like to pretend that it is... No, one can glance at the totality, sure, but then it's important to slow down and take in the data part by part.⁷⁹

Here, *New York 2140* recalls Lheureux and his ledger, with the difference that we are afforded access to the financier's perspective on his tool of representation. Franklin recognizes that this statistical picture provides him with a certain model of totality, recalling Lukács's longing for the comprehensible and integrated epic universe he attributes to the ancient Greeks, for whom "the world of meaning can be grasped, it can be taken in at a glance."⁸⁰ Franklin's transposition of "at" and "glance" is significant, however; where the Greeks could view totality "at a glance," Franklin can only "glance at" it, briefly, before returning to his piecemeal data. Unlike his colleagues, Franklin recognizes with Lukács that totality is no longer available for representation, and like the novel, his computer screen serves as the form of a fragmented modern world. He nonetheless finds pleasure or even, as he puts it, "the economic sublime" in his work, giving us a first-hand account of the strange temporalities which Lheureux's elliptical statements only imply: "my screen was a veritable anthology of narrative, and in many different genres... The temporalities in these genres ranged from the nanoseconds of high-frequency trading to the geological epochs of sea level rise."⁸¹ Of course, to depict these theoretical insights in first-person narrative prose does not in itself comprise a complete articulation of financial logic, but Franklin's importance as a financier figure lies in the fact that he does not presume to fully articulate such a logic. For figures of the Gordon Gekko stripe, the complex specifics of finance are wiped away in favor of a capitalist realist aesthetic in which the financier's ruthless, unethical actions are defended as realistic ones. Franklin, by contrast, presents not a total vision but an abstraction—and, most importantly, *an abstraction that he knows is an abstraction*.⁸²

Franklin notes that in flooded NYC's chaotic intertidal zone, "no one knew who owned what, or on which side of the ledger any given asset resided... Were you in debt if you owned an asset... or were you rich? Who knew?"⁸³ While he answers this question confidently—"My index knew"—he immediately undercuts this confident assertion by diving into the details of the index, which is revealed to be, at its core, arbitrary:

My index contained and then concealed some assumptions and analogies, some approximations and guesses... I'm the one who made the choices when the quants laid out the choices for quantifying the various qualities involved. I just picked one... Ultimately the IPPI allowed for people (including WaterPrice) to concoct derivative instruments that could be offered and bought... So people loved the index and its numbers, and did not examine its underlying logic too closely.⁸⁴

Despite the fact that the quantifiable information the index produces is necessarily arbitrary, abstract, and fictional, the workings of finance nonetheless rely on such arbitrary numbers. To point out the index's fictionality thus does not stop the complex actors of finance capital from utilizing it towards ends that will ultimately have real effects. Robinson thus captures and aestheticizes the fundamental collective fiction that allows capitalism to function. Fisher, taking cues from Jacques Lacan, calls this *the big Other*, "the collective fiction, the symbolic structure, presupposed by any social field... the virtual figure which is required to believe when no individual can."⁸⁵ No individual financier, least of all Franklin, actually believes these formulas are real, but they all operate under the fiction that they are believed (by someone or something). Rather than naturalize this abstraction as "the necessary way of things," Franklin materializes it—through the realist depiction of his indexes and abstractions in their specificity—as a contingent aspect of reality under finance capitalism. His investments in finance are not ethical, political, or even personal, but rather formal and aesthetic.

Depicting capitalism is not just a matter of depicting its negative effects, which can play into the gritty, capitalist realist mindset, but of depicting its peculiar form, not quite real and not quite fictional. Audrey Jaffe has noted how, through such forms, finance itself becomes understood through as a sort of personage: "the market is a mass character, the imagined embodiment of an average man."⁸⁶ Franklin, as an imagined embodiment of this imagined embodiment, refocuses us to the fact that finance, despite its aggregated, imaginary nature, is an historical entity. He thus serves the role, for the novel, of giving form to things, of rendering finance formally legible enough that the novel may advance its vision of radical social change, reminding us that even such forms are profoundly material, historical, and contestable.

Franklin's role in that plot of radical change is indispensable, yet while he

makes perfect sense as a formally necessary perspective for the novel's vision, his transformation into a plot-advancing actant is difficult to explain. The novel's hinge moment occurs when its collective protagonists help to precipitate a financial crisis brought about by a mass refusal to pay rent, loans, and other debts, culminating in the so-called debt coup in which finance is placed into the public's hands. The most significant factor in actualizing this plan is the partnership of Franklin (who provides the financial know-how) with Charlotte Armstrong, an immigration lawyer and the novel's most outwardly progressive, politically-minded figure. While Franklin's non-ethical, aesthetic investment in finance does not preclude him from aiding the coup, the diegetic explanation for his participation is oddly libidinal. His only motivation appears to be an initially subconscious attraction to Charlotte, which is consummated in the novel's final moments. Only at this point, well after the coup itself, does Franklin become retrospectively conscious of his sexual attraction (and thus his previously mysterious motivation for advancing the novel's plot): "Okay, I liked her. And more than that, I wanted her. Did that mean I was falling for power?... No; power is not sexy. But Charlotte Armstrong was sexy." Franklin's prolonged prevarications over their age difference give narrative time to Franklin's previously unconscious desires before, finally, he gives into them: "But now was now" (590). In this moment, Franklin follows his sexual propulsion, which has led him, among other things, to the upending of finance capital as we know it, to the more narratively legible endpoint of consummation (and the marriage plot, or, at least, something that is its rhyme).

Through this strange plot element, we can detect the affordances of realism's embodiment of finance in the figure of the financier. The novel's reliance upon Franklin's libidinal drive to actualize its dialectical potential seems rather unrealistic (or, at the very least, silly) if we are to imagine the novel's project as providing a plot of how the entrenchment of capitalist realism might be escaped (are the progressive lawyers of the world to seduce stockbrokers into becoming communists?). However, while Robinson is not able to narrate a solution to material historical conditions, he is able to narrate a solution (or, at least, a resolution) to the problem of capitalist realism by activating the libidinal force implicit within the financier's embodiment. If the financier—the human shape within which the realist novel has contained the abstract forces of capitalism—has mostly served to reify those forces, that same physical instantiation makes the financier subject to human desire.⁸⁷ This is not merely utopian wish-fulfillment, an imaginary solution to an unsolvable social problem. While perceived via abstract, data-mediated forms, finance ultimately directs bodies, materials, and even psychological processes and subjectivities (chiefly Franklin's own), but this direction is not preordained. Franklin thus serves as a physical, human interface between the abstractions of finance and the material world in which their effects are felt. Franklin is not, in the end, fully determined by either side of this interface.⁸⁸ This is not a tension which can be resolved in theory; it requires the unity of theory and practice, as when Franklin, realizing his financial models "were simply

wrong about certain categories of building,” decides to “go out and put [his] eyeball to reality.”⁸⁹ Through this act of mediation, of reconciling the abstract and the material, Franklin helps destroy the very system to which he is ostensibly devoted. While it seems that he does this for no reason other than his own internal, unconscious drives, this is precisely the point. Franklin’s intrusion is not preordained, destined, or precipitated by a complex Rube Goldberg machine of plot contrivances; it simply *happens*. Franklin’s embodiment of abstraction, preestablished as a realist trope, affords Robinson the opportunity to use the body of capitalism against the head. This body serves, for the novel, as the site of abstraction’s materialization; through it, abstractions are revealed as real, material, and contestable.

Robinson thus does not offer a teleological road map for actualizing his novel’s plot in the real world, but a theoretically potent affirmation of contingency and possibility. While there is no reason Franklin’s role or the coup itself *has* to happen, there is likewise no reason it *could not* happen; even if its conditions of emplotment seem absurd, no natural, ontological law precludes it from occurring. Indeed, the mechanics of how the debt coup is triggered are ultimately less important than how it identifies abstraction itself as an arena of anticapitalist struggle. In a U.S. economy in which the point of production is decreasingly available as a site of political action and older strategies of organization are increasingly foreclosed, *2140* enables us to imagine how the spheres of finance, debt, and circulation remain fertile ground for political action, offering opportunities to expose the underlying crisis beneath finance’s discreet ones, the crisis of capitalism itself. Crisis provides, as Annie McClanahan elucidates, “an invaluable historical hermeneutic, compelling us to anticipate limits, to imagine alternatives, to welcome collapse, and thus to resist the ‘end of history’ triumphalism characteristic of late capitalist ideology in boom times.”⁹⁰ Robinson forces us not simply to accelerate towards the future but to consider how 2008 offered the same possibility as his fictional future crisis—or, as Charlotte puts it, “Every time this happens there’s an opportunity to seize the reins and change direction, but up until now we’ve chickened out.”⁹¹ That said, we struggle to see this possibility as having been extant until it crosses over into actuality. Robinson can narrate the before and after of the financial bubble’s burst, but not the bursting itself: “A new bubble, you might say, and you would be right. But people are blind to a bubble they’re inside, they can’t see it.”⁹² We never actually see the mass refusal to pay itself, only the call to arms (by an upper-class intellectual vanguard) and, retrospectively, the aftermath. While this focus on the upper-class and refusal to narrate the actual revolutionary moment might be seen as a limitation, I take it as a conscious one on Robinson’s part. The text does not fool itself into thinking that a “realist” reportage of a (fictional) revolution would make it occur. While *New York 2140* is comfortable dealing in the abstractions of finance, these are real, extant abstractions and thus within its realist purview. The collective political subject necessary for the concrete political change Robinson envisions is not extant, and he thus does not depict it. But in allowing such change

to have happened, he can assert its radical possibility and push the reader towards its actualization. 2140's most revolutionary potential is thus not in its specific politics but in its reignition of the revolutionary tendency contained within realism: the fact that a full and proper accounting of capitalist reality need not reify that reality but, rather, can expose a profoundly crisis-ridden system that continuously offers opportunities for political action and change. Robinson's financier, ultimately, does not hold the secrets of capitalism within his head; rather, his secret is that there are no such secrets at all, only the struggle through with the speculative becomes the real.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Emily Steinlight for her help crafting and improving this article. I am likewise thankful for the advice and encouragement of Jo Park, Knar Gavin, Alex Millen, Zach Fruit, JS Wu, Ann Ho, Aylin Malcolm, Nico Millman, Meghan Hall, and Martín Premoli.
2. Ian Watt. *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965) 32.
3. This understanding of realism is typified by Peter Brooks, for whom "realism turns crucially on its viscosity: its primary attention to the visible world, the observation and representation of persons and things." Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008) 71.
4. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990) 257.
5. Marx, *Capital* 255.
6. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. L. Stone (Chicago: C. H. Kerr & Co., 1904) 20.
7. See, for example, Dickens' *Great Expectations*: "As we contemplated the fire, and as I thought what a difficult vision to realise this same Capital sometimes was, I put my hands in my pockets." Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Mineola: Dover, 2012) 198. For an excellent analysis of *Great Expectations* and this passage, see Anna Kornbluh's *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), particularly chapter 2 ("Investor Ironies in *Great Expectations*").
8. Ellen Meiksins Wood defines these "laws of motion" as "the imperatives of competition and profit-maximization, a compulsion to reinvest surpluses, and a systematic and relentless need to improve labour-productivity and develop the forces of production." Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2017) 36-7; original emphasis. Crucial for Wood's understanding of capitalism is that it is a matter of compulsion, rather than will, intention, or greed: those caught in capitalist social relations, in order to self-reproduce, are forced towards participation in these laws of motion. See also Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review* 104 (1977): 25-92, on whom Wood draws.
9. See Brooks, who states, "I sometimes think that *Madame Bovary* is the one novel, of all novels, that deserves the label 'realist'" (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 54). Indeed, *Madame Bovary* has proven not just an outsized entry in the realist canon but an important tool through which the theorization of the realist novel—and even the novel more generally—has been approached [see Erich Auerbach, "On the Serious Imitation of the Everyday" *Madame Bovary*, ed. by Margaret Cohen (New York: WW.

- Norton, 2004): 423–448; Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” *Madame Bovary*, ed. Margaret Cohen Norton (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004): 449–454; Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 148–162; and Jacques Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed” *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (2008): 233–248.]
10. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford UP, 2004) 428.
 11. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 429.
 12. Jameson, *Antinomies* 143.
 13. *Madame Bovary* 92.
 14. Within the character-system of the realist novel (to use Woloch’s terminology), the minor character’s supposed insignificance—the “appearance of a disappearance” of the implied person behind their flatness—enables the novel to “inscrib[e] the very absence of voice that the distributional system produces,” to “enfol[d] the untold tale into the telling.” Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2003) 42.
 15. “Certain groups of privileged actors are engaged in circuits and calculations that ordinary people knew nothing of. Foreign exchange, for example, which was tied to distant trade movements and to the complicated arrangements for credit, was a sophisticated art open only to a few initiates at most. To me, this second shadowy zone, hovering above the sunlit world of the market economy and constituting its upper limit so to speak, represents the favored domain of capitalism... Without this zone, capitalism is unthinkable: this is where it takes up residence and prospers.” Braudel, qtd. in Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 25.
 16. Georg Lukács, “Marx and Engels on Aesthetics,” *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970) 79.
 17. On the tendency to confuse “capital” or “commerce” with “capitalism,” see Wood, especially chapter 4 (“Commerce or Capitalism?”), and Ernest Mandel’s introduction to *Capital, Vol. I*, where he writes: “Capital appears initially as usury and merchant (long-distance trade) capital. After a long historical process, and only under specific social conditions, does capital victoriously penetrate the sphere of production in the form of manufacturing capital” Ernest Mandel, Introduction, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, by Karl Marx (New York: Penguin, 1990) 55. See also Marx himself: “capital invariably first confronts landed property in the form of money; in the form of monetary wealth, merchants’ capital and usurers’ capital” (*Capital* 247); “Capital cannot therefore arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation” (*Capital* 268).
 18. For a nuanced discussion of the term “late capitalism” (the intended meaning of which might be better captured by “latest capitalism”), see the introduction to John Patrick Leary, *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019). See also Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London: Verso, 1980); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); and David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006) and *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).
 19. Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.1 (1997) 251. See also Harvey’s

account, in which “the breakdown of Fordism-Keynesianism evidently meant a shift towards the empowerment of finance capital vis-à-vis the nation state” (Harvey, *Limits* 145).

20. For an explicit critique of this tendency, see Joshua Clover, “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics,” *Representations* 126.1 (2014): 9–30. For literary studies which explicitly and extensively consider the problem of abstraction in 20th and 21st century U.S. literature, with varying degrees of skepticism, see Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstractions: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and the special issue of *Representations* on “Financialization and the Culture Industry,” *Representations* 126.1 (2014). See also Myka Tucker-Abramson’s review of Shonkwiler (“The Financial Imaginary of the American Middle Class?,” *Mediations* 32.1 (2018): 123–133) for a discussion of the potential pitfalls of such an approach. Note in particular La Berge’s argument that “the assumption of more abstraction is prevalent but never adequately explained, probably because abstraction, by its very nature, is not quantifiable; if it were, it would hardly be abstract” (*Scandals* 15).
21. C.f. Lauren M. E. Goodlad’s account of Lheureux: “As a naturalistic narrative of capitalist globalization which diverges from Balzac’s *Bildungsromane*, *Madame Bovary* evokes the failed revolution of 1848 and the regime that followed when Louis Napoleon declared himself France’s emperor... Modernizing French financial institutions in order to raise credit, Napoleon III helped to launch imperial projects such as the Suez Canal, while rebuilding the capital... This was the ‘universe of commodities’ which Walter Benjamin described in ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’—a world of speculative finance and fetishized objects which enters *Madame Bovary* through Monsieur Lheureux, the protean moneylender, salesman, and fashion maven.” Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 171–72.
22. “Here the absurdity of the capitalist’s way of conceiving things reaches its climax, in so far as instead of deriving the valorization of capital from the exploitation of labour-power, they explain the productivity of labour-power by declaring that labour-power itself is this mystical thing, interest-bearing capital.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991) 596.
23. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III 601. Harvey defines fictitious capital as “money that is thrown into circulation as capital without any material basis in commodities or productive activity” (*Limits* 95).
24. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 6.
25. Arrighi, *Long Twentieth* 8–9.
26. Arrighi traces this process from the Italian city-states to the Dutch, the British Empire, and, finally, the United States, while suggesting Japan and, later, China are bound to succeed U.S. hegemony [on the latter, see Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21st Century* (London: Verso, 2009)]. However, the cyclical nature of this process should not be taken to imply capitalism is a Nietzschean wheel of eternal recurrence and that the present moment of U.S.-based financialization is without its particularities. These shifting phases are ultimately moments within a larger process of capitalist expansion, which in our current moment confronts hard and increasingly imminent limits

of geography, technological development, and environmental depletion. In this sense, Arrighi's schema is less a cycle and more a downward spiral. To understand contemporary finance, we must understand its position in regard to both the discreet period of U.S. capital accumulation as well as the *longue durée* process of capitalism itself.

27. Kornbluh notes that "the opposition 'fictitious/real' cannot hold in capitalism, when the fictitious is the real" (8; original emphasis). Citing a House of Commons report declaring its inability to delineate between "real" and "fictitious" transactions, she writes how, for Marx, the report reveals "that capitalism is always already a machine of virtualizations, that something within all capital is fictitious" (*Realizing Capital* 7).
28. This is typical not only of fiction but even (and perhaps more so) of journalistic, academic, and economic narratives of financial crisis. For how a focus on individuals occluded the understanding of the 2008 financial crisis, see Annie McClanahan's *Dead Pledges*, especially the introduction and chapter 1 ("Behavioral Economics and the Credit-Crisis Novel): "Behavioral economists understood the financial crisis as a consequence of individual choices and cultural climates." Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2017) 16.
29. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016) 11.
30. Fisher, *Weird* 11.
31. David Cunningham, "Capitalist epics: Abstraction, totality and the theory of the novel," *Radical Philosophy* 163 (2010) 16. Original emphasis.
32. *Antinomies* 5.
33. Helena Feder, Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson, *Radical Philosophy* 2.1 (2018) 88.
34. For discussions of Emma Bovary as a desiring subject and consumer of literature, see Jacqueline Merriam Paskow, "Rethinking Madame Bovary's Motives for Committing Suicide," *The Modern Language Review* 100.2 (2005): 323-339 and Jacques Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed" *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (2008): 233-248.
35. Phillip A. Duncan, "Symbolic Green and Satanic Presence in *Madame Bovary*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 13. 2/3 (1985) 101.
36. Frederick Busi, "Emma Bovary and the Pursuit of Happiness" *Dalhousie French Studies* 30 (1995) 59.
37. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford UP, 2004) 92.
38. Busi, "Emma Bovary" 60.
39. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* 253.
40. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton UP, 2003) 13.
41. *Madame Bovary* 93.
42. C.f. Goodlad, who claims that though "Lheureux may be a secret Jew, like Trollope's Lopez, in the end, this consummate figure of a post-heirloom social order is as much Emma's mentor as her nemesis." *Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic* 172.
43. *Madame Bovary* 93.
44. *Madame Bovary* 253.

45. See Kornbluh: "Speculation takes place as soon as the most basic exchange relation is submitted to the very idea of formal equality in the name of 'value,' for equality between two qualitatively different goods, in two different spatiotemporal situations, is, as Marx put it, 'in reality impossible.'" *Realizing Capital* 7.
46. *Madame Bovary* 254.
47. *Madame Bovary* 253.
48. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, ed. François Wahl. (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1969] 1989) 145.
49. *Madame Bovary* 256.
50. Alongside Lheureux's ledger we might add another technology of visualization, the stock-market graph, which Audrey Jaffe analyzes in *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph*. In a method similar to my own interest in real abstraction, Jaffe, "rather than break down abstractions to reveal the fractured realities they conceal" is "interested in the way these cohesive images themselves not only become social realities, but structure representations of internal or psychological realities as well." Audrey Jaffe, *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010) 5.
51. *Madame Bovary* 256.
52. *Madame Bovary* 256.
53. "Emma Bovary" 60.
54. *Madame Bovary* 269.
55. *Capitalist Realism* 15. For a fuller discussion of the limits of the ethical, see Jameson (*Political Unconscious* 114-17 and *Antinomies* 116-119): "Not metaphysics but ethics is the informing ideology of the binary opposition... it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimization of concrete structures of power and domination." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) 114.
56. Paskow, "Rethinking" 326.
57. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 349.
58. Rancière, "Why Emma" 236.
59. Rancière, "Why Emma" 237.
60. *Madame Bovary* 295.
61. Following the timely deaths of Emma, Charles, and her grandmother, Berthe Bovary "became the responsibility of an aunt. She is poor, and sends the child to earn her keep at a cotton mill." *Madame Bovary* 311.
62. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 161. Harvey continues: "The \$40 trillion annual turnover in 2001 compares to the estimated \$800 billion that would be required to support international trade and productive investment flows. Deregulation allowed the financial system to become one of the main centres of redistributive activity through speculation, predation, fraud, and thievery." Harvey, *Brief History* 161.
63. Though, as Christopher Nealon notes, such instability is always implicit within capitalism: "For Marx the possibility of crisis is implied at every moment in the circulation of capital, which is

inherently volatile—not only because of the way money is obliged to serve contradictory purposes, as a medium of exchange and as an individual commodity, but also because value is produced out of exploitation.” Christopher Nealon, “Value | Theory | Crisis,” *PMLA* 127.1 (2012) 106.

64. For a diverse sample of scholarship in explicit dialogue with Fisher, see Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, eds. *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
65. *Capitalist Realism* 2. Original emphasis.
66. *Capitalist Realism* 4.
67. *Antinomies* 215.
68. Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 74.
69. La Berge, *Scandals* 75.
70. For a fuller discussion of the financial fiction of the 1980s, including readings of Stone, Wolfe, and Ellis, see La Berge.
71. *Planet Money*, which was launched specifically to cover the 2008 financial crisis (as a spinoff of the popular edutainment podcast *This American Life*), describes itself as “The Economy Explained.” *Planet Money*. NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/>.
72. *Capitalist Realism* 2.
73. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (London: Orbit, 2017) 602.
74. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 4–6.
75. Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001) 1037.
76. Georg Lukács, “Marx and Engels on Aesthetics,” *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970) 78.
77. Lukács, “Marx and Engels” 79. The full quotation reads, “Marxist aesthetics, which denies the realism of a world depicted through naturalistic detail if it does not express the essential dynamic forces, accepts the fantastic tales of Hoffmann and Balzac as among the highest achievements of realistic literature, since these essential elements are exposed through the very fantasy.”
78. Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) 4.
79. Robinson, *New York 2140* 18.
80. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 32.
81. *New York 2140* 18.
82. Much as Franklin insists to the reader that finance be understood as abstract but real, the novel as a whole frequently reminds the reader that they are not, in fact, seeing the whole picture. “Ease of representation... It’s an availability heuristic. You think what you see is the totality,” one character states. *New York 2140* 400. This is then repeated by the semi-omniscient citizen’s summation of the novel’s debt coup: “Note that this flurry of social and legal change did not happen because of Representative Charlotte Armstrong... Nor was it due to any other single individual. Remember: ease of representation. It’s always more than what you see, bigger than what you know.” *New York 2140* 603. By actively dissuading the reader from thinking the novel’s many aggregated characters

constitute a totality, the novel attempts to actively train its reader in the sort of dialectical thinking through which to cognitive map and access capitalist totality. This is captured not only by the novel's outright statements but by the odd repetition of phrases (like "ease of representation") across characters who have not diegetically interacted (disrupting our sense of their coherent individual psychologies).

83. *New York* 2140 120.
84. *New York* 2140 122.
85. *Capitalist Realism* 44.
86. *New York* 2140 15.
87. Such potential desire was recognized but left unexplored by Flaubert, as when the indebted Emma "pressed her lovely long, slender hand on [Lheureux's] knee," and he responds, "Don't touch me! Anyone would think you're trying to seduce me!" (261).
88. We might imagine this figure as mediating the space "between," the analysis of which Louis Althusser identifies as the space of Marxist critique: "Marx has at least given us the 'two ends of the chain,' and has told us to find out what goes on between them: on the one hand, *determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*; on the other, *the relative autonomy of superstructures of their specific effectivity*." Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1970) 111. Original emphasis.
89. *New York* 2140 279.
90. McClanahan, *Dead Pledges* 15.
91. *New York* 2140 575.
92. *New York* 2140 123.

Corbin Hiday and Anna Kornbluh. "Reading Realism Dialectically: a forum on Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons*." *Mediations* 34.2 (Spring 2021) 61-64. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/reading-realism

Reading Realism Dialectically: A Forum on Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons*

Corbin Hiday and Anna Kornbluh

An event in Marxist literary criticism, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* finds in realism less a document of nineteenth century capitalism than a paratheoretical inquiry into its causes and determinations. Citing the historical process of enclosure as a slow-moving catastrophe of dispossession which functions as one of contemporary capitalism's foremost causes, Lesjak centers imaginative remediations of what was lost. After a brief instructive engagement with John Clare's poetry, these remediations are sourced to the dominant cultural form of the nineteenth century, the novel. Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, a trio encompassing the realism spectrum from extravagant picaresque to tangled web to modernist-ish redaction, shimmer in Lesjak's readings as artists of character above all, who produce and probe the tension between type and instance in order to refract what is held in common, what sociability could and should direct in economic systems. Through closely considering the weave of character, Lesjak reimagines realism against its reduction to the mere representation of capitalism, educating instead its fluency with Marxist critique, from Marx and Engels, to Adorno's negative dialectics, Raymond Williams's democratic socialism, Jameson's utopian interpretation, Hardt and Negri's multitude, and Andreas Malm's fossil capital. This is at once presentist reading and engaged theory, speaking well beyond a discrete academic field, and thinking with the past for the sake of opening the future, precisely when its terrible closure seems more certain than ever.

Reductions of realism are lingua franca for non-Marxist even more than Marxist critics; the dictates of contextualization and of exposing power's ruses, and their entailed correlation of literary representation to reification or alibi, are etched in Victorianist stone. Lesjak's radical proposition to read nineteenth century realism otherwise – to genuinely receive its energetic making of social woofs as a kind of

utopian practice – dares to be dialectical: realism establishes figurative realms that register and depart from the abjections of the known world. The intensifying of these abjections in the twenty first century, which Lesjak adroitly touches at numerous moments in elegant coordination of enclosure and ecocide, render this dialectical impulse all the more crucial. Marxist literary criticism is activated here as receptiveness to the dialectic in creative work as it localizes the dialectic of social transformation.

“Reading Dialectically” is indeed Lesjak’s influential prescription for criticism, and fortunately for those so inclined there are many ways to do it. In *Afterlife* the way is character. It could have been plot (how better to mediate causality?), setting (environments for living, in common and not), or especially narration (what is more marvelously evocative of an inexistent commons than omniscience or free indirect discourse?!), and thanks to the book, all these prospects open widely for future Marxist Victorianists. The delimited choice of character strategically “counters or at least fractures the equation of nineteenth-century British realism solely with the ideology of liberalism and the consolidation of a capitalist world economy, captured most succinctly in Eagleton’s claim that ‘liberalism and the realist novel are spiritual twins,’”¹ and it does so as a literary figure that is constitutively, if counterintuitively, *material*. “The materiality of character” and “the material, collective nature of character” counter the association of character with interiority and individualism; “at the most obvious level, character types and commonness work by dint of their reproducibility: it is only by capturing what is typical or common, what is shared by others, that a type makes sense.”² Materiality as the interdependent relations of species-being that support individuation and materiality as common join in “type” as the materiality of print: “[c]haracters were conceived in terms of brands, stamps, letters of reference, and bodies of writing” and associated with “literal typefaces” and “literal impressions.”³ This latter conception of the “materiality of character” relies on matter, raw materials, the existent tools at hand for the production of books and their “engravings, caricatures.”⁴

Marxian materialism surely emphasizes such a realm of concrete materiality, but in its dialectical propulsion it also always emphasizes something like abstract materiality: the efficacy of the abstractions that animate the capitalist mode of production, the unrepresentable totality of social relations imposed by capital, and the ongoing struggle of making a commons that has never been given. As Alberto Toscano suggests, taking up Etienne Balibar’s formulation of a “materialism without matter” and Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s theorization of “real abstraction”: “[T]he materialism of practice of the early Marx ... must be pulled away from the humanist myth of a transparency of praxis, in the direction of a materialism attentive to the potent *immateriality* of capital’s social forms, in other words, a *materialism of real abstraction*.”⁵ Lesjak’s careful analysis pursues this dialectic by correlating the concrete fabrications

of character to the abstract systematizations of ecological degradation and imperial depredation. Eliot's narrator famously ruminates near the end of *The Mill on the Floss*: "Nature repairs her ravages – but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again – the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair."⁶ Against remaining stuck looking through "the eyes that have dwelt on the past," Lesjak reads in Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy's project of representing common character the impetus toward reparative, survivable futures.

In concert with current ecotheory, Lesjak borrows the notion of entanglement to suggest a kind of subjectivity that isn't merely equated with the liberal bourgeois individual. But just as so much of that prominent theory gestures to a generic humanity as the trouble in the Anthropocene without adequately pointing to the rapacious logic of capital in its specificity, the idea of shared relationality does not guarantee anti-capitalist politics. The book's underscoring of figuration makes this point affirmatively, albeit tacitly: imaginative mediations are integral to the work of composing solidarities around constructive representations of what should be; sharing visions and uniting in praxis ground a common neither in sameness nor in difference but in produced, dynamic synthesis. This is also why Marx's own theorization of character conspicuously insists on figuration: the *dramatis personae* of *Capital* are "personifications," bearers of social relations, who don "character-masks." Lesjak thus invigorates the Marxist literary critical project of embracing in realism's figurative mediations those inventions of the social which stake out terrain for human flourishing and operate collectivities against class rule. Realism's immanently critical project, *Afterlife* makes clear, at once maps historical processes like enclosure and speculatively produces what can come after. Through dialectical reading, then, Lesjak gives us a dissent on realism, a dissent on the closure of the nineteenth century, and as well a supple sense of the affinities between those imaginative efforts in the past and the imaginative challenges of the present. This is a model for Marxist aesthetic critique in general - whether it be period-defined or not, in the university or not - and the font from which the generative reflections in our forum spring.

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 98.
2. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 98-99.
3. *Afterlife* 98.
4. *Afterlife* 98.
5. Alberto Toscano, "Materialism without matter: abstraction, absence, and social form." *Textual Practice* 28. 7 (2014): 1223 (emphasis in original).
6. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York: Penguin, 2003) 543.

The One as The Many

Paul Stasi

"The critique of ideology," Theodor Adorno argued, rests on "the confrontation of ideology with its own truth," which "is only possible insofar as the ideology contains a rational element with which the critique can deal."¹ Adorno, here, seizes on a key element of Marxist dialectics, which is its ability to read contradiction productively, to reveal the utopian elements within even the most seemingly ideological forms. We can trace this idea directly back to Marx himself, whose critique of capital rested on the categories given by bourgeois political economy: the labor theory of value, wages, profit, commodities and the isolated bourgeois subject. Working through these concepts, moving from their abstract appearance to their mediated concretion as the "concentration of many determinations," Marx saw the liberatory potential latent in the forms of sociality built by a system dedicated to personal gain.² His work rested on an exposure of this potential, not as something given or teleologically guaranteed, as is often falsely assumed, but as something requiring effort to realize. And this was possible because bourgeois political economy was able to describe the forms of appearance of capitalist society, which, in turn, allowed for the revelation of their truth content through critique. Intellectual work, then, insofar as it is able to trace the liberatory elements of ideological forms has a part to play in their realization.

I thought of these ideas as I read Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, for here Lesjak finds the utopian possibility of thinking in common in a genre — the Victorian realist novel — that has often seemed dedicated to the tenets of liberal capital and its particular construction of the subject. In doing so, she pushes against a central thrust of theories of the novel, while also offering a way out of the dead-end into which ideology critique, as it has often been practiced within literary studies, and the critique of this critique has landed us.

Lesjak has already weighed in on this latter argument in her 2011 essay "Reading Dialectically." Arguing for the "ongoing necessity ... of a dialectical Marxist literary criticism," Lesjak defends Frederic Jameson's "articulation of the positive Utopian impulses that lie along negative critique."³ This dialectical relation is central to

Jameson's work, and places him squarely in the tradition described above. A similar idea occurs in Lesjak's review essay on Franco Moretti, where she refers to the need for "a theorization and interpretation of unconscious Utopian investments in realities large or small, which may in themselves be far from Utopian in their actuality."⁴ In each case, Lesjak writes against the uncritical "acceptance of the historically given," whether it occurs in the "abstract scientism" of Moretti's work in the digital humanities or in the idea of surface reading against which her earlier essay is pitched.⁵

So too, the new book is written in defense of the "utopian energies" within nineteenth-century realist texts.⁶ These energies are seen not in the places we might think to find them — in overt representations of enclosure, for instance, though there are some of those — but rather emerge in a series of figures that arise in response to the fundamental difficulty of representing enclosure. Enclosure takes place over a long *durée*, its history marked by "unevenness," its disruptions akin to the slow violence Rob Nixon has used to describe environmental degradation.⁷ (I will return to this unevenness below.) But the turn to figuration is not only a response to enclosure's long, gradual unfolding; it is not, that is to say, a representational choice dictated by the shape of the object to be represented. Rather, figuration is one way in which history makes its mark formally on a text. Less a reading of scenes of enclosure, then, Lesjak's book instead describes the ways in which these novels preserve a sense of the common world lost through enclosure through formal means. The key figure through which they do this is the type, which becomes a kind of master term for the book.

Here we can see Lesjak's most obvious departure from a novelistic tradition devoted to the individual. Types "rely on an indebtedness to others insofar as a common type has no meaning in isolation."⁸ Novel theory, however, rests on "a narrative of teleological development" whereby "character types gradually disappear ...replaced by some version of psychological interiority."⁹ "Such a view of character," Lesjak concludes, "implicitly endorses and naturalizes an individualist view of individuals as *de facto* more complex, psychologically rich, and 'developed,' thereby reproducing a noxious developmental hierarchy, in which individual interest superseded communal concerns."¹⁰ Novel theory has its own form of enclosure: one that bounds the liberal subject.

Lesjak develops this point in a key sentence that suggests the considerable distance she takes from traditional forms of ideology critique:

Against claims such as Terry Eagleton's that 'liberalism and the realist novel are spiritual twins' (*The English Novel* 164), or Alex Woloch's formulation of realism as an *opposition* between 'the one' (the unique individual) and 'the many' (homogenized society), Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy attempt to reconfigure the relationship between individuals and their social world as mutually constitutive rather than oppositional: social unity appears as an ensemble of rich individuality, and individuality finds

its richness in social being.¹¹

The final clause is, of course, a summary of a basic tenet of Marxism, expressed in many places but perhaps most succinctly in the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, which states that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.”¹² Marx, here, sets himself squarely against the liberal individualism often found in the Victorian novel. What is most striking, though, about Lesjak’s sentence is that it sets three avowedly liberal writers against two if not exactly Marxist critics, at least two critics who would likely agree with her restatement of Marx’s position. Nevertheless, it is the liberals who offer a utopian vision of transformation that eludes the Marxist-adjacent.

The Woloch reference is to his influential text *The One vs. the Many*, whose theory of character-space asserts that novelistic characters fight for our attention in a process explicitly likened to the competitive ideology of capitalism. “This field of characterization,” Woloch writes, “rigorously links the protagonist’s interior development to the dispersion and fragmentation of the many other minor characters, producing a textual structure homologous to the social structure of capitalism.”¹³ Thus “*minor characters are the proletariat of the novel.*”¹⁴ Given this claim, we can assume that Woloch’s sympathies are with the minor characters. And yet in locating the competitive structures of capitalism in the realist novel’s form, Woloch risks reinforcing that process even when it is his ostensible object of his critique.

A more rigorous form of ideology critique is suggested by Eagleton’s sentence, and it is indicative of a whole school of thought for whom the Victorian novel is the apotheosis of a restrictive social order. (Lesjak names many of these in her work.) More prominent in the Foucault-drenched 1980s than now, this type of argument tends to read literary texts through the prism of an aesthetic ideology that works in two seemingly contradictory ways. Either literary texts are taken to task for their flight from history — think, for instance, of Marjorie Levinson’s famous readings of Wordsworth — or they fail because they are incapable of being anything other than a vehicle for their culture’s ideology — as in D.A. Miller’s *Novel and the Police*, itself the occasion for Eve Sedgwick’s original discussion of “paranoid reading.” But the question always lurking in the background of such work concerned its efficacy. For what exactly gave literature such power that its unmasking was so seemingly urgent? The overestimation of the cultural impact of the literary text led directly to an overestimation of the power of its demystification, which in turn produced its dialectical opposite: a radical *under*-estimation of the literary text, which was incapable of doing anything other than reflecting, naively, the cultural values of its era. The result was the projection of the text’s sophistication onto the critic, who articulated a reflection theory of art that would make the most vulgar Marxist blush. This is the dead-end — falsely applied to a caricatured Marxism — to which surface reading, with its investment in the pleasure of what Sharon Marcus has called “just

reading,” tried to respond. But as I have already suggested, surface readings imagine that there is some straight-forward access to what is just there on the page; they thus remain content with the historically given facts and their forms of appearance. How then to attend to what is compelling about literature without negating its relationship to the ideological structures out of which it emerges?

I think Lesjak’s book addresses itself directly to this question. Taking up the type — that much pilloried relic of an older literary tradition — and transvaluing it, she shows how its very commonness offers a different kind of character, one less devoted to liberalism’s individualizing narrative. She does so by attending to what we might call the type’s unevenness, its contradictory nature. And this is key, for what the destructive form of ideology critique described above has in common with surface reading and the digital humanities is a flattening out of contradiction. Literary texts are homogenous; they reject history; they reproduce its structures; you can count the words and get the answers that are lying there in plain sight. Contradiction, in these accounts, disappears. But without contradiction there can be no change, which is to say no utopia, no possibility of imagining things otherwise. To be sure, Lesjak risks reproducing a Victorian literature in the image of what she would like the future to look like, a direct inversion of the risk courted by Woloch in reifying capitalist social relations as the only available way for novels to think of themselves. But I think she is aware of the risk.

If culture is a resource for thinking about our life in common, an idea implicit not only in *The Afterlife of Enclosure* but in the discipline as a whole, then we need to think carefully about how we reproduce that culture. Describing the history of the novel as the triumph of the liberal individual might just end up reinforcing that triumph. Tracing the utopian potential of another way of being — while attending to the ideological traces which are also, necessarily, present — provides one way out of a critical deadlock and, perhaps more optimistically but also more importantly, of the enclosures of capitalist subjectivity itself.

Notes

1. Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *Aspects of Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1973) 190.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) 101.
3. Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," *Criticism* 55.2 (2013) 246, 238.
4. Carolyn Lesjak, "All or Nothing: Reading Franco Moretti Reading," *Historical Materialism* 24.3 (2016) 186.
5. Lesjak, "All or Nothing" 203.
6. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 3.
7. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 25.
8. *Afterlife* 135.
9. *Afterlife* 123.
10. *Afterlife* 123.
11. *Afterlife* 5.
12. Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) 423.
13. Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 124.
14. Woloch, "One vs. Many" 27, italics original.

Reading Enclosure and the Global Commons with Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013)

Amy R. Wong

In Carolyn Lesjak's chapter on Thomas Hardy, we are offered glimpses of the author's "Facts" notebook, from which he draws to "represent ... the profound transformations that mark the slow but violent process of enclosure," the book's central subject.¹ In this essay, I reflect on how the Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke registers similar transformations in his film, *A Touch of Sin* (2013) — though against the backdrop of a far more rapid enclosure movement in China beginning in the 1990s. Much as Hardy draws from the *Dorset County Chronicle* for his realist fiction, Jia draws from high profile news stories from the Chinese social media network *Weibo* for his neorealist film. The film weaves together four stories that build up to desperate acts of violent resistance: a village massacre over mining profits, serial killings by a disaffected armed robber, the stabbing death of a government official by a spa receptionist, the suicide of a factory worker. In engaging Lesjak's arguments about British realism alongside a contemporary Chinese film, I hope to take up Lesjak's gestures toward potentiating a "global commons," as well as to unsettle some potential assumptions about globality.

According to Lesjak, British realism's *figurations* of a persisting commons after Britain's most heightened period of land enclosure offer imaginative resources for a present and future commons that extends outward to the whole world. Rerouting the commons primarily through character, Lesjak's chapters uncover resistance to the capitalist logics of enclosure in dialectical relationships "between individuals in their social world [that are] mutually constitutive rather than oppositional."² In Dickens, collections of "eccentric" characters hold open the "subjunctive" possibility of a future commons based on a mutual reification that yet maintains distinctions; in Eliot, a material, economic indebtedness between characters provides the ground for a "commonwealth of all"; in Hardy, enclosural logic's incomplete transformations of selves at the local scale figure relational, global selves to come.

Jia's film(s) — and the situation of modern Chinese land enclosure in the last forty

years — can offer something of a testing ground for Lesjak's ambitious claim that British realism's experimentations with character are up to the task of envisioning a commons for our global twenty first century. *A Touch of Sin* also figures the commons through character in similar ways, while subjecting its figurations to a more claustrophobic ethos haunted by the spectre of Maoist crowds. A collective project of social justice, mediated through the consciousness of the commons, can be strikingly mindless and psychotically violent. This, too, is registered in the moments that typical, suffering characters in the film snap suddenly into acts of violent protest, rendered only partially heroic through stylized choreographies and bloody scenes that allude to *wuxia*.³ Jia's film, uncertain about the subjectivity of the commons, opens up an important space for thinking with as well as against more optimistic possibilities for global solidarity against enclosure's capitalist logic. Below, I briefly discuss how the film's Chinese context brings into view important limits of the global that we must responsibly engage, even as the film grapples with the undeniable realities of the presently "entwined crises of global capitalism and ecological catastrophe" (a view that Lesjak argues Hardy already registers in "the great web of human doings ... from the White Sea to Cape Horn").⁴

Lesjak's book includes a clear account of British land enclosure's submerged and slow violence, unfolding at least since the fifteenth century into a nineteenth century poised between "the memory of the literal commons" and "a quickly consolidating capitalist system premised on private rather than collective property relations."⁵ British realism, Lesjak explains, is uniquely positioned to register the disappearance of land held in common, while yet remembering the concreteness of common ways of life. As such, Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy can figure future possibilities that draw from a past without falling prey to simple nostalgia. China in the new millennium is poised at a similar juncture. As is well known, after the Cultural Revolution, China in the 1980s began its stunningly fast (though uneven) transformation into a global economic superpower. Since the 1990s, China has been marked, too, by rapid land enclosure, urbanization, and rural village removal, resulting in migrant labor crises and inequality that, thanks to global flows of capital, are indubitably linked to the movement of workers across the global south. Focusing on China alone, however, Zhang Yulin estimates that between 1990-2013, approximately 10 million hectares were occupied or converted to state-owned land, while 130 million peasants have become landless, and villages reduced by about 35 percent.⁶ By way of comparison, more than three times the amount of land was enclosed in China within the span of 25 years than in Britain over the course of 400 years, and more than seven times the amount when compared to a 30 year peak of British enclosure in the early nineteenth century.⁷

What happens when enclosure is fast and "evental," and not the slow violence of industrial capitalism's *longue durée*? Can the genre of realism yet again register the various figurations of the commons that Lesjak traces, in such a context? Despite

the film's *wuxia* inspired stylizations, *A Touch of Sin* is a work of realism in ways that resonate Lesjak's accounts of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, particularly in her emphasis on type and typicality (as the director himself puts it: "there is no metaphor in this film; there is only reality").⁸ In addition to the film's Hardy-esque transformations of local resistance into scenes that oscillate between the typical and the (individually) tragic, the dialectic that Lesjak assigns to Dickens's "eccentric" commons — where the common derives from "the one as the many" — also surfaces in *A Touch of Sin*'s visual patterning.⁹ For each of the main characters, for instance, shots cut from static frames of "the one" to the many (figures 1 & 2). Drawing on Dickens's adaptation of Regency period "character books" that catalogue eccentric persons much like a museum collects curiosities, Lesjak argues that a dialectic of "the one as the many" contains a utopian gesture, for the common comes to life in pleasurable eccentricity.¹⁰ Likewise, *A Touch of Sin*'s characters come alive in relation to a protagonist group collected by the film's approximations of a weakly imagined community. Zhou San, the disaffected robber and serial killer — on the move between provinces, and in between city and country — lightly weaves the lives of the other three characters together with his fleeting encounters. But there is no such pleasure or utopian possibility in such a collection. Rather, in these mutual constitutions of the individual and the social fabric, eccentricity derives from a shared potential for violence amid the common conditions of enclosure: Zhou San's expressionless killings; Da Hai's desperate rampage; Xiao Yu's directed and precise stabbing, Xiao Hui's resolute fall to his death. Here, violent acts are eccentrically particular, as they come into being through a collectively suffered fate wrought by the state's alliance with neoliberal capital.



Figure 1a Da Hai alone in a room injecting insulin.



Figure 1b Cuts to panning across Da Hai's fellow mine workers on a lunch break.



Figure 2a Xiao Hui on his way to the factory seeking work.



Figure 2b Cuts to a panning shot of the workers in a cafeteria line that ends with this view of the collective whole.

Despite its clear critique of global capitalism, *A Touch of Sin* is in many ways a film that stays within the bounds of the nation, even as the characters are constrained by it. The film stages subtle questions about a global commons and its potential limits, specifically in small rupturings of a *mise-en-scène* generally dominated by class contrasts internal to the nation. Early in the film, when Da Hai rides his motorcycle into his village, he is intercepted by a truck carrying delivery workers asking for directions. Amid this group of workers, dressed in shades of grey-blue that blend them with their truck and the snowy landscape, is a cartoonishly bright painting of the Virgin Mary and Child. In the backdrop, the shadowy presence of a statue of Chairman Mao with his signature salute stages a meaningless confrontation between Eastern and Western symbols of value — parodically leveled to simulacra through the globalization of capital. In another scene, Xiao Hui on the way to the factory (figure 2a) exchanges a brief, friendly greeting with three black men drinking beer and Coca-Cola. The moment offers a glimpse into China's recent economic activities on the African continent (and a light juxtaposition with U.S. imperialism), but despite the friendly exchange, it is no gesture of global worker solidarity.

I read these moments of minimal globality as actively resisting a familiar liberal gesture that registers the grand complexities of global entanglement.¹¹ In their briefness and intransitivity, these ruptures into the global feel like asides in a film that is definitively national in its scope, in ways that feel claustrophobic, as might be expected — yet also reluctant before a certain form of global inclusion. Against a critical liberalist subjectivity that privileges connection (whether Eliot's realization of common "indebtedness" or Hardy's "great web of human doings") the film tightly shutters the Chinese commons between two nationally specific poles: *wuxia* heroes defending the poor against dynastic corruption, and the spontaneous violence of Maoist mass movements. When the characters snap into violence, they are equal parts knights-errant liberating the dispossessed, and the Cultural Revolution's mindless, leftist mob. Jia's realism, on one hand, shares what Lesjak identifies as British realism's wish to capture a figurative "unseen reality" of the commons, especially in *A Touch of Sin*'s toggling between fantasy and empiricist reality in order to do so.¹² On the other hand, the film not only resists globality, but also forecloses relationality through an aesthetic of tragic eccentricity that seems to exhaust itself the moment that violence has been committed. The film's historical drama, in other words, is not staged against the "opening" of the East to Western globality: rather, Western globality enters as a minor character in a longstanding and specifically Chinese story of class struggle.

This enclosure I am ascribing to the film's resistantly globalist logic resonates most palpably in the final turn of the plot, where the receptionist Xiao Yu's "escape" from her crime is to leave Hubei for a job with the Shengli Group in Shanxi, the same corporation that employed Da Hai (whose former head, Boss Jiao, he murdered). When Boss Jiao's wife, now the head of the company, notices during the interview that she has heard of Xiao Yu, she discreetly asks if "the problem" has been resolved — to which

Xiao Yu responds that it has. This is, strangely, neither a scene of hopeless bondage to capitalism, nor solidarity between women. It is transactional, but it is also built on trust (the new boss takes Xiao Yu's word). *A Touch of Sin's* taut resistance to "outside" understanding — whether in its minimal globality or non-emancipatory perspective on the commons — demurs from the kind of solidarity politics that characterizes what might be called the global, Marxist Left.

Thus, enclosural logics in the film operate both as oppressive containment and resistance to a particular kind of thinking that accrues (academic) "capital" in the West. Of course, *A Touch of Sin* is a film that has circulated precisely through the mechanisms of global capital, nominated for the prestigious Palm d'Or Award (while the film remains de facto censored in China). This is a good reminder of the dirty business of which we all are a part, a common indebtedness that Lesjak tags to Eliot — a lesson (that Dorothea finally learns) about the cost of things. Indeed, the film's final shot — of a crowd gazing at an opera singer who asks of them, "do you understand your sin?" (figure 3) — suggests that we are all of us common in how we sin. The resonance of this story of the commons in the modern Chinese context, however, forecloses the "commonwealth outside" that Goodwin the inlayer from *Daniel Deronda* envisions, suggesting that the afterlife of enclosure is enclosure all the way down — but also that openness may be a trap, and enclosure resistance.



Figure 3 The final shot

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 148.
2. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 5.
3. As Jia himself puts it in an interview, his characters are *cán xiá*, or “damaged knight-errants.” See Yanjie Wang, “Violence, Wuxia, Migrants: Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Discontent in *A Touch of Sin*,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 9.2 (2015) 165.
4. *Afterlife* 14; Lesjak quotes Hardy’s narrator in *The Woodlanders* (1887) as he turns to locate Giles and Marty’s local walking within a global set of relations, 140.
5. *Afterlife* 43.
6. Zhang Yulin’s “Understanding China’s Enclosures,” *China Villages Discovered* 3 (2014): 18-25. <https://www.zgxcfx.com/Article/77419.html>
7. Yulin, “Enclosures” 18-25.
8. Wang, “Violence, Wuxia, Migrants” 161.
9. Lesjak explains — contra Alex Woloch’s “one vs. the many” — that “the one as the many” is “an active problematic ... that navigates the destruction of one way of life and a creation of a new one” 49.
10. *Afterlife* 60.
11. I am thinking here of Nan Z. Da’s notion of “intransitive encounter” (in reference to her archive of nineteenth century Sino-U.S. literary exchange), which, she clarifies, “does not spring from a contrarian desire to prove that there is more apartness in the world than we would think or, worse yet, a protectionist stance toward globalization. It cultivates ... a mode of apprehending the lightness of contact in a very close world,” *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange* (Columbia University Press, 2018) 11.
12. *Afterlife* 129.

Realism as Walmart

Zach Fruit

The history of the commons is the history of the tension between collective life and individualized experience. Eighteenth-century British discourse around land enclosure registered a newly paradoxical conceptualization of the "public" wherein individual benefit (achieved at the expense of collective loss) was framed as a method by which collective benefit might be achieved. Picking up from John Locke, many advocates of enclosure rejected the ethical, moral, and political utility of the "commons." As Locke wrote, "God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniencies of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated."¹ Eighteenth-century advocates of enclosure like Arthur Young cast the commons as wastes full of "beggars and weeds"² that could be trusted to "fill a country with barbarians ready for any mischief."³ At the same time, many justified what they saw as the relatively slight losses of enclosure (enacted primarily upon peasants and small landholders) with the collective good of increased agricultural productivity. According to these reformers, the loss of common right was a sacrifice in the service of a more broadly conceived community: most often the nation. The justification for enclosure was deeply entangled with an ideological configuration of the idea of community itself. This ideological project, as Benedict Anderson has memorably argued, was reinforced by the emergence of the novel. In her new book, *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, Carolyn Lesjak pushes back against this figuration of the realist novel as an ideological apparatus of the nineteenth-century industrial nation — noticing instead the way that the more utopian variety of collectivity gets embedded in the form.

To support this argument, Lesjak makes a convincing case for the influence of eighteenth-century land enclosure on nineteenth-century realism. She takes up figurations of "the common" that exceed the purely representational mode frequently associated with realism, focusing instead on a set of ethical concerns clustered around commonality. In pursuit of this ethic, she turns most frequently to character. At first, this articulation of character and the common seems to be synonymous with the

broad universalism of liberal humanism which, like its representational aesthetic, has been widely understood as the nineteenth-century realist political project. In the same way that Lesjak gestures away from verisimilitude, however, she also refuses familiar definitions of realist character. For Lesjak, “type” structures nineteenth-century character. She traces type from popular eccentric biographies early in the century: these books featured detailed descriptions with accompanying portraits that catalogued such characters as “misers, persons with missing limbs and special talents ... to famous historical personages, such as Napoleon and Frederick the Great.”⁴ While these collections might seem to reify and dehumanize the characters that they display, Lesjak argues that they “turn human subjects into a collection less to ‘possess’ them than to preserve their individuality.”⁵ Against Lukacs (and, I would also suggest, Foucault), Lesjak argues that “their reification revivifies them rather than turning them into ossified commodities.”⁶ In Lesjak’s view, this thing-like materiality of character — taken up most obviously in Dickens, — “recognizes the embeddedness of characters in a profoundly social world.”⁷ The proliferation of difference, rather than its diminution, is representative of a social ethic of the commons.

This challenging line of argument refuses to cede to an Auerbachian definition of realism as serious representation of the actually existing world — a definition that, as Anna Kornbluh puts it, “bolsters today’s hegemonic consensus that literature is information.”⁸ Alongside recent work from Kornbluh, Lauren Goodlad, and Isobel Armstrong, Lesjak emphasizes that the political project of realism is found in its formal and aesthetic qualities, rather than in its function as a faithful document of past historical life.⁹ The nonrepresentational qualities of realism are particularly important for Lesjak because she is attempting to adumbrate the influence of land enclosure. Because land enclosure took place over at least six centuries (and is arguably ongoing), Lesjak turns to Rob Nixon’s theory of “slow violence” to interrogate the tools available for registering and representing expropriation and loss that is not easily perceptible in a human lifetime.¹⁰ This, in turn, informs Lesjak’s focus on nineteenth-century novels despite land enclosure reaching its peak during the eighteenth century. Enclosure and the commons are everywhere in the nineteenth-century novel, but representations of enclosure and the commons are rare. Partially out of analytical necessity, then, Lesjak links the commoning economies of pre-enclosed England to representations of the “common” as in “shared” and “coarse,” which are two major motifs of nineteenth-century realism.

I was resistant to this approximation of the common fields of pre-enclosure England with characterological abstractions. It seemed to me, at first, to be more of an etymological relationship than an historical one (even if etymologies are important histories of their own). The materiality of common fields — the way they were farmed, the kinds of produce they offered, the way they shaped the English landscape — seem to be the crucial details of the earlier mode of rural life. The physicality of

this landscape also makes its way into the realist novel, in descriptions of gardens, bucolic scenes, or desolate wastes. Lesjak's emphasis on character, and the abstraction of commonality, at first seems to have little to do with this spatial history. But, as Lesjak argues, "the commons can be realized only with a fundamental restructuring of everyday reality itself."¹¹ Common fields instantiated a certain kind of reality, an everyday experience of gleaning and gathering that provided the occasion for a particular social experience. In fact, the common fields themselves were simply physical reflections of a complex set of social agreements — from the level of the Magna Carta down to neighborly consensus — that became a rule of custom that could only be eradicated after centuries of strategic privatization. Lesjak shows that this social and ethical practice lingered and was renegotiated in the realist novel: while much of the commonness of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy might now be received through the political framework of liberal individualism, Lesjak contends that there is a more radical history, and more utopian future, at stake in this realist commons.

I am reminded here of Nancy Armstrong's claim, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, that the rise of the novelistic regime of representation ultimately enclosed and policed residual eighteenth-century forms of collectivity. Armstrong argues that "the novel provided a means of displacing and containing longstanding symbolic practices — especially those games, festivities, and other material practices of the body that maintained a sense of collective identity."¹² By enclosing the figure of the woman within a domestic space of apolitical desire, the symbolic methods for the formation of collective social identity were restricted to a masculinist political space. Lesjak, responding to Silvia Federici's argument that the loss of the commons led to the gendered division between productive and reproductive labor, argues that "the consequences of enclosure, and the specifically gendered differentiation of wage laborers, need not lead to nostalgia for the past but instead can point toward a different future, in which new visions of the commons would be possible."¹³ This dialectical recovery of the novel as an *apparatus* of hegemony deepens the affinity between Lesjak's project and Anna Kornbluh's latest book, *The Order of Forms*. Both insist on the utopian potential of realism: as Lesjak writes, realism can "evoke a *desirable* common future and engender a desire *for* that future."¹⁴

It is undeniable to me that realism was a mechanism of capitalist ideology: its elaboration of a bourgeois regime of ethical concerns, its validation of the individual experience of collective life, and its reification of the political present all work together to suppress radical visualizations of the future. At the same time, it is undeniable that the realist novel takes up the "imaginative task" of sustaining and reinventing collective life.¹⁵ This contradictory dialectic reminds me of Fredric Jameson's description of Wal-Mart as utopia: "what is currently negative can also be imagined as positive in that immense changing of valences which is that Utopian future."¹⁶ As Lesjak writes, realism "allows us to see that any possible common future must be grounded in the nitty-gritty details of material life."¹⁷ Her book stands as

a call to take seriously our contemporary realisms — and their own invocations of the common — in order to counter the ongoing hemispheric violence of dispossession. This Lukácsian faith in the power of realist literature to narrate new collectivities into being refuses the critical stagnancy of description. The question, I think, is whether realism's power to imagine can overtake its capacity to control.

Notes

1. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government, and; A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 114.
2. Arthur Young, *The Farmer's Tour through the East of England*. Vol. 2 (London: W. Strahan and W. Nicoll, 1771) 161.
3. Young, *Farmer's Tour* 438.
4. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 51.
5. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 54.
6. *Afterlife* 60.
7. *Afterlife* 66.
8. Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) 16.
9. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
10. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
11. *Afterlife* 173.
12. Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 18.
13. *Afterlife* 29. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).
14. *Afterlife* 172.
15. *Afterlife* 174.
16. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009) 423.
17. *Afterlife* 13.

Figural Reading, or, a "Weak Messianic" Undercurrent in Literary Criticism

Thomas A. Laughlin

Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* associates enclosure with a kind of "slow violence" — a term Rob Nixon uses to describe the accumulating effects of ecological devastation and climate change on the global poor.¹ For Lesjak, enclosure, like climate change, does not have a punctual, "evental" status; not only are its effects delayed and diffused, but new waves of enclosure are always extending enclosure's "afterlife" and problematizing any one-and-done explanations of its origin.² Moreover, if the commons are always being enclosed without any punctual or evental finality, they are always also *persisting* in pockets and being mobilized against further plunder and enclosure. The idea for her book, she explains, "took shape" in one such moment of resistance in 2011, when "Occupy reclaimed public space, and squares, parks, and plazas became for a time a commons."³ This insistence on "the persistence of the commons" gives her argument a dialectical twist. Lesjak is not just interested in how authors like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy register and represent the afterlife of enclosure — even though "the literal enclosure of land does not make its way into classic nineteenth-century realist novels ... as a discrete event to be narrated" — she also wants to examine how they *figure* "the persistence of the commons" as continued resistance to on-going enclosure.⁴

Lesjak's approach is "contrapuntal," to borrow a phrase from music theory that Edward Said liked to use. A counterpoint is a piece of music composed of two different melodies played in conjunction with one another. The afterlife of enclosure is played *against* the persistence of the commons — dispossession *against* its resistances. Crucially, though, the "social unity" projected by Lesjak's authors is "neither a given nor recoverable from the past, but instead something to be achieved ... in a future that has yet to come."⁵ For this reason, I propose to call her method of "reading dialectically" (as she calls it elsewhere) *figural reading* after Erich Auerbach's famous essay "Figura," and — in a connection that will become clearer later — Walter

Benjamin's conceptualization of a Marxist hermeneutic that brushes history "against the grain."⁶

As Lesjak's references to Occupy and renewed interest in the commons indicate, it is something about the present that makes her authors now readable as case studies in the persistence of the commons. In this sense, her analyses involve a form of what Auerbach calls *figura*, a Latin term which came to refer to "something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical."⁷ In the hands of the Church Fathers, "the aim of this sort of interpretation was to show that the persons and events of the Old Testament were prefigurations of the New Testament and its history of salvation."⁸ *Figura*, although similar to allegory, "differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies," implying, as it does, "the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event."⁹ One consequence, however, of the figural reading of the Old Testament was its annulment as "a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel."¹⁰ Here, we encounter a recurring risk of *strong* figural readings — their tendency to annul past meanings and contexts. This is a risk with which Lesjak gambles in each of her chapters.

Since the enclosure movement came to a head in the period from 1750 to 1850, when roughly 6 million acres of unenclosed land were transformed into private fields by Acts of Parliament, Lesjak tends to find *figurations* of the persistence of the commons not in the literal landscapes of her authors' novels, but "in the language of common characters and types; in visions of common culture and the common good; and in the language of common relations."¹¹ Turning to Dickens, she argues that, while his characters, as an ensemble, represent the new urban masses driven together by the displacing force of enclosure and the industrial revolution, each is unique and differentiated from the other, providing his novels with an image of utopian multiplicity. Here, Lesjak traces the influence on Dickens of "an earlier tradition of ... eighteenth-century 'characteristic writing,' 'eccentric biographies,' and 'character books.'"¹² She finds this practice of eccentric character-making at odds, however, with the consensus that sees in Dickens's characters — who often have a pained aspect of the maladjusted — a representation of the dehumanizing and homogenizing effects of capitalist reification on the individual.¹³ Her solution is to argue that Dickens's characters are marked by both aspects. They are Lukácsian "types," realistically representing the destructive and delimiting dynamics of the new class society on human independence and development, and, *at the same time*, a hodgepodge of "eccentrics," who embody the diversity of the collective and the

resiliency of the human spirit against dehumanization — in short, the “utopian many.”¹⁴ These two arguments, which could cancel each other out, are allowed to coexist: characterization in Dickens is both representative and exceptional — typical of the norm and also figurative of the exception.

In Eliot’s version of this “social chorus,” Lesjak again traces the figure of the “utopian many.” Lesjak sees Eliot’s narrator as teaching readers egalitarian humility, when characters that are too eager to separate themselves from the collective find themselves returned to the field of the many. But is egalitarian humility really the lesson Eliot is offering? In *Middlemarch*, the characters who fall back into the fold of the common are usually also forced to abandon their altruistic ambitions to intervene in history for the many. It is worth remembering that in her celebrated essay, “The Natural History of German Life,” a review of two works by Wilhelm von Riehl, she endorses the German author’s “social-political- conservatism,” which admonished “communistic theories” that “attempt to disengage” from the slow progress of “incarnate history” as being “destructive of social vitality”: “What has grown up historically,” she concludes, “can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws.”¹⁵ The lesson on offer is not egalitarian humility, but adaptation to the slow and painful progress of the new economic order that is emerging.¹⁶

Lesjak makes a lot of *Adam Bede*’s impressive range of “common” characters, but here again the *figural* treatment of character presents issues. The novel’s eponymous hero, a lowly carpenter, is devoted to self-improvement and economic rationality. He dreams of overseeing the local squire’s land, feeling that he can manage it more productively than the old man. The local tenant farmers the Poysers (i.e., capitalist farmers) feel the same. When the old squire tries to convince them to take on more dairy, so he can increase his rent roll by leasing some of their arable land to another farmer, Mrs. Poyser “has her say out,” telling the old man that they won’t take on the risk of making more dairy than they can sell. In Lesjak’s reading, Mrs. Poyser becomes a figure of the utopian many protesting the greedy landlord’s further encroachment on the commons.¹⁷ This forms no part of the actual discussion in *Adam Bede*, though.¹⁸ Mrs. Poyser is self-interestedly telling the old squire that, as *capitalist* tenant farmers, they can only make their money through products they can turn over on the market; unlike him, they don’t have a rent roll to pad their pockets. The squire dies and his heir goes into exile after ruining the life of a local dairymaid. The Poysers remain where they are and Adam Bede takes over management of the land — slow and painful progress is achieved through economic rationality in land use, not against it.¹⁹ Mrs. Poyser may be “common” but she is not a *commoner*. The issue turns once again on the one-and-both logic of Lesjak’s figural reading, which is also built into the interpretation of enclosure as always beginning and never completed.

Lesjak’s “longue durée of enclosure” is perhaps better conceived as a kind of “punctuated equilibrium,” in which patterns of capital accumulation are punctuated by new waves of enclosure as capital reorganizes itself around the globe. Each of

those waves would then have its own eventual status in the evolution and mutation of capitalism. What I mean by the above can be elaborated by a consideration of Lesjak's chapter on Hardy, where the argument turns less on character as a *figure* for the persistence/resistance of the commons as it does the actual land — the ominous heath of *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders* — which *figures* the shared environment that sustains and unites the characters as a laboring collective. Significantly, this collectivity is threatened not only by *figural* but also *literal* dispossession, when characters are evicted from their homes and forced into a life of itinerancy.

But here it may be important to highlight changes to rural life not directly related to enclosure that also contribute to the novels' structure of feeling. In her much-neglected study, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, Merryn Williams (Raymond Williams's daughter) observes that rural life in the south-west had stagnated significantly in the second half of the century when Hardy began writing his Wessex novels. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had exposed domestic production to foreign competition, but the real blow came in 1875 when "a series of disastrous harvests coincided with an influx of cheap grain from America and caused heavy losses among the corn farmers." For many farmers, the only "solution ... was to convert arable land to pasture, especially as a dairy farm required only about half as many workers."²⁰ This crisis spawned two great depressions (1875-84 and 1891-99) and massive waves of migration, particularly from Hardy's native Dorset which "was one of only nine counties in England which recorded an absolute population decline."²¹ There is certainly a sinister "afterlife" of enclosure here, which, as Lesjak says, makes "social space" feel both more empty and "constricted and constricting," since the loss of the commons makes the hardships of the unemployed and displaced all the more unbearable.²² But for its suffocating effects to be registered in this way, enclosure must, *pace* Lesjak, already have achieved a kind of punctual and eventual status as indeed it had by 1875.

My disagreements, then, are not with the *spirit* of the interpretations Lesjak puts forward, but with the *letter* — that is, with the *figures* that they take and with the heavy emphasis on character, which, in my opinion, is made to bear too much significance. This dynamic tension, however, between *letter* and *spirit* is part of figural reading itself. As Auerbach writes of the new Christians' emphasis on God's grace over God's law, "in its Jewish and Judaistic legal sense the Old Testament is the letter that kills, while the new Christians are servants of the new covenant, of the spirit that gives life."²³ Lesjak's method of figural reading, however, lacks the stability of a phenomenal prophecy supported by a new dispensation. Her novels' *figurations* of the persisting "commons" have a fleetingness and fragility to them that renders them vulnerable to a still radically undetermined historical present and future. A better model can be found instead in Benjamin's elective blending of Jewish messianism and Marxism in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

In thesis IX, Benjamin famously argues that History can be thought of as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage." Each historical

episode adds more tragedy and suffering to the pile, pushing the “angel of history” backwards into an obscure future. The angel “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” but “a storm is blowing from Paradise” which “has got caught in his wings.”²⁴ The task of the “historical materialist” is to “brush history against the grain,” not only to produce a history that tells the story of the vanquished rather than the victor, but also to illuminate, through “a tiger’s leap into ... the open air of history,” the latent but unrealized drive for justice in every revolutionary opening that ended in defeat or betrayal.²⁵ There is, however, a “*weak* Messianic power” operating in History — a “messianic” figure could arrive at any moment to redeem and fulfil these repressed calls for justice.²⁶ This power is “weak” because this figure will not fit the typical image of a messiah, but will instead be of a more common and embattled character: Benjamin, in this Marxist phase, was probably thinking of the revolutionary proletariat, which he saw as simultaneously betrayed by social democracy and Stalinism, and thus not having completed its historical mission.

Does this not describe Lesjak’s own hermeneutic? She too brushes literary history against the grain to reveal a story of dispossession that continues apace as the afterlife of enclosure. But, alongside this first story, she also illuminates the uneven persistence of the commons — buried utopian horizons — “hiding, as it were, in plain sight,”²⁷ but only graspable in the light of the present, in a political conjuncture like our own which takes the recuperation of the commons not as a backwards-looking interest, but as an immediate and pressing task for justice and survival in the present.

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 7.
2. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 22.
3. *Afterlife* xi.
4. *Afterlife* 10.
5. *Afterlife* 6.
6. See Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," *Criticism* 55.2 (2013): 233-77.
7. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 29.
8. Auerbach, "Figura" 30.
9. "Figura" 54 and 58.
10. "Figura" 52.
11. *Afterlife* 11.
12. *Afterlife* 47-48.
13. *Afterlife* 64.
14. *Afterlife* 74-76.
15. George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1990) 127 and 139.
16. For a reading of *Middlemarch* in this vein, see Thomas A. Laughlin, "George Eliot's Epic Syntax: History and Totality in *Middlemarch*," *Mediations* 33.1-2 (2020): 1-30.
17. *Afterlife* 101.
18. George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (London: Penguin, 2008) 371-80.
19. As the reader may have guessed, this paragraph previews the argument of a larger essay I am writing.
20. Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London: Macmillan, 1972) 5.
21. Williams, *Thomas Hardy* 111.
22. *Afterlife* 157.
23. "Figura" 51.
24. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 257-58.
25. Benjamin, "Philosophy of History" 257 and 261.
26. "Philosophy of History" 254.
27. *Afterlife* 2.

Realism's Unenclosed Spots of Commonness

Emily Steinlight

Famous for its intimacy with capitalism and its dynamization of mass historical experience, the realist novel surely knows something of the massive displacements and spatial divisions of land enclosure. The seizure of commons is not just prologue to industrial capitalism; as with so-called primitive accumulation broadly (as Silvia Federici has stressed after Rosa Luxemburg and others), it is a periodic, ongoing process of capitalist globalization.¹ But unlike, say, the introduction of power looms or the Napoleonic Wars, the centuries-long transformation of land into private property isn't an event. As Carolyn Lesjak observes, it poses representational challenges akin to other "attritional catastrophes" that Rob Nixon describes as slow violence.² It may thus be less apt to materialize as plot than in other aesthetic forms: perhaps in landscape descriptions that interweave, as Zach Fruit suggests, "the natural world and the capitalist world-system,"³ or even, per Lesjak, in realist characterization. *The Afterlife of Enclosure* finds the commons marking their absent presence in the novels of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy less as a place than as a force shaping figuration. Victorian fiction as Lesjak reads it elaborates a "worldly ethics at the heart of the language of the common"⁴ and attests to the persistence of communal relations after and against the privatization of the earth. Lesjak's engagement with realism affirms a broader reactivation of the category. Derided for decades as naïve or ideological, realism and its uses beyond nineteenth-century Europe afford fresh theorizations of its aspirations to totality — notably in the "Peripheral Realisms" issue of *MLQ* edited by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye, the "Worlding Realisms" issue of *Novel* edited by Lye and Lauren Goodlad, and the Warwick Research Collective's *Combined and Uneven Development*. It has gotten a critical recharge in Victorian studies too. *The Afterlife of Enclosure* joins Anna Kornbluh, Goodlad, and others in reviving the utopian energies Georg Lukács found in nineteenth-century realism — retheorized not as mimesis but, per Kornbluh, as speculative project in social making.⁵ Lesjak's distinctive contribution is to connect realist writers' valorization of what is "common" (in the sense of ordinariness) to the commons. Rather than elegize an agrarian past, this orientation

toward the common reactivates the promise of collective life in the present. From a literary-critical standpoint, locating the common in fictional character is intriguingly counterintuitive. Customarily aligned with the novel's individualist and privatizing tendencies, realist character becomes for Lesjak a materially conceived thing, marked by its worldedness and the traits it shares with others. Understanding "typicality" as vital to certain modes of characterization has a familiar precedent in Lukács's account of the typical or mediocre protagonist of Scott's novels.⁶ But Lesjak finds extant in Dickens, Eliot and Hardy a vocabulary of "type" more often read (e.g. in Elizabeth Fowler's account of "social persons") as antecedent to character — or as shaping it, per Deidre Lynch, in revamped forms that enhance interiority.⁷ Whereas Catherine Gallagher theorizes fictionality via the gap between type and instance,⁸ and finds in Eliot a tension between the referential impulse linking characters to social types and the particularizing drive that founds their non-referential status on deviation from those types,⁹ Lesjak rejects this tension. In Dickens, "the common comes to life, paradoxically, in the uncommon or the eccentric."¹⁰ The "thing-like nature of subjectivity," in his novels, as in the popular "character books" they recall, is not a symptom of reification or failure of depth but evidence of characters' "embeddedness ... in a profoundly social world."¹¹ This turn to the character book is intriguing, since the collection of types more routinely compared with Dickens is Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (which likewise oscillates between cataloging the generalizable and individuating the instance on different grounds). Even in famously rounder characters, Lesjak finds type activating Eliot's commitment to the common (including in its pejorative senses) and affirming "the material, collective nature of character" as speculative ground of a collectivist politics.¹² And in Hardy, who figuratively inscribes the geopolitical in the commons, she finds a dispossessed subjectivity in his novels that "den[ies] the fantasy of self-enclosure or self-possession even as they recognize the logic of enclosure as the current way of the world."¹³ If the commons, by this account, transmutes from place to person, it resists the developmentalist premise that private interests naturally supersede collective ones. In the emphasis on type across chapters there are distinctions worth sharpening: Hardy abstractly titling Tess "a pure woman" differs from the pleasures of eccentric biography for Dickens, which differ from Eliot's generically nationalizing physical description of Arthur Donnithorne as a "clear-complexioned young Englishman" one might be proud to meet abroad. Among the many conceivable modes of figural aggregation (e.g. Audrey Jaffe's "average man," numbers, masses, classes, species, etc.), typology seems tricky to embrace as wholly collectivizing, since it pluralizes only by separating (type entailing distinction from other types). Appeals to commonality on typological grounds risk getting identarian quickly, whether directly or by couching national or racial criteria in universalizing language, and can yield projects like Lombroso's "criminal man." Kornbluh's turn to set theory might offer a usefully contrasting mode of provisional

classification that can generalize, iterate, and delimit without essentializing. In any case, Lesjak's attention to the relays between figuration and generalization illuminates a crucial project of realism: to conceive the material, the common, and the everyday in perceptible relation to abstract and largely imperceptible geopolitical structures.

To see the communal lingering just where it seems to vanish is appealingly provocative, and it allows Lesjak to hold with Federici that commons (much as Marx said of capital) are not a thing but a social relation between persons.¹⁴ How geographically and historically particular is that relation or the collective subject in which it endures? If Eliot, Dickens, and Hardy personally "witnessed the destruction of the commons" and the lifeways it involved, does the experience of British writers implicitly define the concept, even as *The Afterlife of Enclosure* stresses the global and transhistorical scope of what David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession?¹⁵ Debates about that paradigm may exceed the scope of this nicely succinct book,¹⁶ but observing that land enclosure was an imperial process too, as Lesjak does, can still look like the view from England. Robert Nichols notes a relevant pitfall of many histories of capitalist transformation: Karl Polanyi or E.P. Thompson, when they mention colonization, frame it as an extension of "intra-European historical development," an external manifestation of processes such as enclosure of the commons, a further "example to which the original concepts apply rather than a context out of which a proximate yet distinct vocabulary may arise."¹⁷ Rather than assume prior collective ownership of land, he theorizes a recursive dispossession that "transforms nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones" at the moment of transfer, creating property owned only retroactively by those deprived of access to it. Whether or not one presupposes customary rights comparably in force across the precolonial Americas as in preindustrial England, for instance, what makes the commons not just an ethical principle of immanent commonality but an object of political struggle is that it entails concrete spatial confrontations over the use of a river or a street.

If the commons are not the English past but a planetary fact of human material interdependency and political possibility (enacted, say, by the Zapatistas' 1994 takeover of the Zócalo in San Cristobal de las Casas, or in right-to-the-city movements from Durban to L.A. to São Paulo), what kind of archive or cultural forms manifest this? *The Afterlife of Enclosure* makes a compelling presentist case for the uses of nineteenth-century texts now in inviting us to conceive precisely what is not past, and Lesjak's project attests to why realism too lives on in novel theory and cultural practice. Claiming their relevance to ongoing struggles for the commons, Lesjak holds Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy's novels vital "given the dearth of forms and narratives with the capacity not only to represent our current moment but also to inspire resistance to it."¹⁸ Past artworks can indeed powerfully refract the present and reframe the historical contingencies of the late capitalist world system. But to decry a lack or failure of contemporary aesthetic mediations of enclosure risks recalling Brecht's

summary of Lukács: *be like Balzac — only up-to-date!*¹⁹

Lesjak's thinking elsewhere, in a valuable essay on Jameson's reflection on the Brecht-Lukács debate, is a useful counterweight; there she finds Jameson mobilizing realism (via his own conception of cognitive mapping) as a method rather than a genre or aesthetic mode.²⁰ While Jameson unexpectedly gives Lukács the "last word" in our time if not his,²¹ it should perhaps be just as surprising that the maker of experimental proletarian theater — in dismissing as obsolete the nineteenth-century bourgeois canon that defined realism for Lukács — hangs onto the term.²² If realism remains "a matter of general human interest"²³ for Brecht and finds a "lively fate," as Esty and Lye frame it, "in the peripheries of the twentieth-century literary world-system,"²⁴ this surely owes to what Jameson describes as its cognitive rather than purely aesthetic status: its demystifying, totality-constructing, perception-renewing potential. The political urgency of realism, framed thus, might surpass any particular feature of existing texts, even if that feature — as *The Afterlife of Enclosure* attests — illuminates the availability of the particular for accessing what might be shared.

Notes

1. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).
2. Quoted in Carolyn J. Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 7, and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 7.
3. Zach Fruit, "Enclosure," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46.3–4 (2018) 675.
4. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 4.
5. Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), and Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
6. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 139–140.
7. Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), and Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
8. Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 361.
9. Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90.1 (May 2005) 61–74.
10. *Afterlife* 50.
11. *Afterlife* 65, 66.
12. *Afterlife* 98.
13. *Afterlife* 160.
14. Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018) 94.
15. *Afterlife* 67.
16. See esp. Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), and see also David Kazanjian, "Dispossession, Reimagined From The 1690s," *A Time for Critique*, ed. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019) 210–29. Cf. Federici & Linebaugh.
17. Nichols, *Theft!* 53.
18. *Afterlife* 172.
19. Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007) 76.
20. Carolyn Lesjak, "History, Narrative, and Realism: Jameson's Search for a Method," *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalization*, ed. Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005): 27–50.
21. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007) 212.
22. Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács" 80–82.
23. "Against" 76.
24. Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012) 269.

Figure / Ground

Ronjaunee Chatterjee

Commons: land, earth, air, ground. Also: loss, memory, romance, figure. Then and there. Here and now.¹ Finally: under, as in *undercommons*: covert, fugitive, underground.²

Depending on whom you ask, what you read, or where you are, the commons is one or more or none of the things listed above. "The commons" "commoning" and "common good" have become central to contemporary conversations grounded in left politics. And yet, there seems to be very little consensus, perhaps fittingly, about how to bring into focus a commons amidst the enormous violence of contemporary life. The "commons" is frequently invoked but seldom concretized: it is precisely its absence that feels most palpable.

Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character; and the Commons* (2021) renovates canonical realist novels of the nineteenth century, "decoupling" novels by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy from a "predictable liberalism"³ to argue for their often-radical figuration of a commons: "the intimate and expansive connections between the common and the ordinary — the commonplace world that, in the end, we all reside in, with greater or lesser ease — and the commons, the shared resources, the work and spaces that determine our being."⁴ For Lesjak, this definition of a commons is neither a recuperation of a nostalgic past nor a clear utopian future, but something far more errant: it is a "conditional aim rather than a realized achievement."⁵ I would go so far as to call the commons a poetics that makes itself felt in the rhythms and repetitions of literary language (on this point it's interesting to see John Clare's poetry of the "unenclosed" provide a kind a preface to the book's later readings of realist novels). This is a kind of poetics that wants to imagine, in Lesjak's words, the communal possibilities of a "wayward, unenclosed self,"⁶ or as the book puts it elsewhere, the "consent not to be a single being" (quoting Fred Moten, who himself borrows the line from Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant's 2009 interview with Manthia Diawara).

In returning to and privileging "the language of figuration,"⁷ *The Afterlife of*

Enclosure dismantles long-held notions of realism's purely mimetic qualities. Lesjak deftly remarks that "the language of figuration is meant to distinguish between a prosaic realism that privileges the visible and the seen and a figural or 'abstract' realism that aims to capture an underlying or unseen reality."⁸ By reading realism this way, Lesjak uncovers a history of enclosure and of the commons that is riddled with figurative trouble, making it particularly well suited to literary criticism. Indeed, one of the things I appreciate most about *The Afterlife of Enclosure* is the implicit case it makes for the politics of careful literary study: of the ways in which attending to figure remains crucial for reimagining our relationships to land, to ourselves, and to others. I want to briefly examine some other circuits of figuration — as well as their interruption — that run through *The Afterlife of Enclosure* and that bear on wider imaginative desires for a commons.

Centering the labor of figuration in Victorian novels is a reminder of the careful relay of figure and ground that structures the representational problem of capital for Marx, as well as the particular slippage of enclosure itself, this tethering between the social relations refigured by its violence and the material *ground* on which such a violence has enacted itself (or in the case of chattel slavery, the landlessness). Articulating this labor, Werner Hamacher untangles a "commodity-language" in Marx's *Capital*, particularly in *Capital*'s more well-mined sections. On "The Form of Value or Exchange Value," Hamacher invokes Marx's familiar example of cloth becoming a coat to observe: "money is the transcendental of commodity-language, that form which vouchsafes all other forms their commensurability, appearing as a copula in all the statements and postulates of commodity-language."⁹ Hamacher's reading is additionally punctuated by the phrase "the cloth speaks." This phrase is an uncanny refrain, bringing in to focus "one of the most powerful metaphors of the philosophical tradition: the metaphor of covering, veiling, mystification, and fetish."¹⁰ As Hamacher shows, the cloth is both recalcitrant material and abstracted figure, just like Marx's infamous dancing table is always wood, an object with use-value, and a mystical commodity animated by exchange-value, all at once. The tenuous lynchpin between these levels is also always figurative and rhetorical: Hamacher's "copula," metaphor, prosopopoeia.

We see this kind of trouble in *the Afterlife of Enclosure* too. In a section on Dickens and "Eccentric Biographies," for instance, Lesjak refers to John Stuart Mill's well-known arguments about liberal character from *On Liberty*. Here Mill argues for the need for "eccentricity" to combat the "tyranny" of custom. The paradigmatic figure for the tyranny of custom for Mill, and for innumerable other Victorians, is the "Chinese lady's [bound] foot."¹¹ Lesjak observes that at this crucial juncture in Mill's text, "Mill turns to simile" and "[i]ndividuality as a material thing comes into view, and then, as quickly, disappears."¹² While Mill's argument testifies to a wider argument of Lesjak's — that material character in Dickens' fiction skirts objecthood in order to bring a different form of eccentricity into existence — the Chinese lady's foot has

been subjected to a double disappearance: forever consigned to a figure, an ornament of Mill's text, as well as a pure vehicle of rhetoric. In other words, for eighteenth-century eccentric biographies to recuperate material objecthood, there needs to be a prior disavowal, this time of the "Chinese Lady" who remains suspended, as Jane Hu writes of other estranged Orientalist figures, "between commodity and person, aesthetic abstraction and racial embodiment."¹³

Mill is not alone in this figurative and imperial bind, so to speak. Debt, the subject of Lesjak's reading of the commons in Eliot's novels, opens up an alternative thinking of present-day understanding of debt — everything from "Third World" debt crises, predatory finance and credit, and more philosophical conceptions of the term — that originate in the transatlantic slave trade. As Anthony Bogues has recently put it: if "the black body could be deployed and exchanged as debt, as credit, as commodity, it seems to me that in this contemporary drive of capital to make us all indebted humans, then the drive to create a saturated commodified body draws from the practices that instituted racial slavery."¹⁴ Bogues follows Saidiya Hartman and Sylvia Wynter in arguing that "primitive accumulation" begins with the coeval seizure of land and people, with enslavement and colonial violence, with the conceptual tiering of the human beyond what a binary notion of class can accommodate. Viewed through the prism of racial capitalism, debt too interrupts the neat circuit of figure and ground, such that "forms of indebtedness"¹⁵ that symbolize the commons for Eliot and Hardy become complicated by material forms of debt bondage, and of debt as a living death for the formerly enslaved, a debt that forecloses freedom rather than opens up to it.¹⁶

There is thus a kind of figurative trouble that emerges out of the literature of the commons that invites us to read and theorize from within the anti-colonial, Black radical, and Indigenous critical traditions that are pressurizing Marx's key terms, giving them new life as it were, by having us understand what they figure and what they literalize. A politics of the contemporary commons must necessarily follow that trouble and grapple with what is incommensurate and potentially unsettling (at every level of representation) about commoning, rather than what is merely inclusive and expansionist. Think, for example, of the now well-known essay by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor."¹⁷ Here, Tuck and Wang argue that the domestication of decolonization into mere figure or metaphor is itself "a form of enclosure."¹⁸ Writing about the Occupy Movement, they observe that "Claiming land for the Commons and asserting consensus as the rule of the Commons, erases existing, prior, and future Native land rights, decolonial leadership, and forms of self-government."¹⁹ Some of the most powerful political movements of late — from *NoDAPL* to *Free Palestine* — stress the urgency of the actual return of material land, and of justice on the terms of the *ground* that often tends to recede from view when we reify the figures themselves.

As readers of the nineteenth-century British novel, to draw our attention to these histories of debt and dispossession is to widen the field in which they occurred, a

reading practice I wonder if the term “cosmopolitanism” or “global commons” is now entirely adequate to. These terms (especially cosmopolitanism), which have circulated in British studies for quite some time, often ring out as critically downgraded versions of the overlapping yet specific geographies of dispossession that saturate nineteenth-century British literature and the novel. To engender anything like a commons requires a potential reconsideration of these terms, and an engagement with a strong ethic of incommensurability: one that acknowledges the labor of the negative, forms of refusal, and the interruption of well-trodden figurative paths. An ethics of incommensurability could also begin with the assumption that the language of the commons needs to maintain radical difference, and radical singularity: what Lesjak begins to describe in her chapter on Dickens’ novels, “in which equality does not translate into reductive sameness.”²⁰ This is a vision of the subject — and a commons that might engender it — that I elsewhere refer to as *singular*, a subject who is not alone nor individuated through a liberal or Enlightenment blueprint. This is, finally, what I think Glissant meant by “consent not to be a single being:” the ground from which we can refuse and from which we can hope too.

Notes

1. I refer generally here to José Esteban Muñoz, “The Brown Commons” in *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, N.C: Duke U, 2020): 1-7.
2. Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
3. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 94.
4. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 171.
5. *Afterlife* 121.
6. *Afterlife* 165.
7. *Afterlife* 129.
8. *Afterlife* 129.
9. Werner Hamacher, “Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*,” *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999) 174.
10. Hamacher, “Lingua Amissa” 168.
11. *Afterlife* 51.
12. *Afterlife* 51.
13. Jane Hu, “Orientalism Redux,” *Victorian Studies* 62.3 (Spring 2020) 463.
14. Anthony Bogues, “How Much is Your African Slave Worth?” *differences* 51.5 (2020) 165.
15. *Afterlife* 109.
16. Scholars like Brenna Bhandar and Glenn Coulthard have looked at this argument from different historical and geographical perspectives. I am thinking of two essays that synthesize some of this work: Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction,” *American Quarterly* 64.3 (2012): 361-85; and Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, Chandan Reddy, “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities,” *Social Text* 36. 2 (2018): 1-18.
17. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40.
18. Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization* 3.
19. *Decolonization* 28.
20. *Afterlife* 66-67.

Fagin's Last Words

Nancy Armstrong

On the one hand, the book brings into view anew the connections between depictions of the common — the ordinary, common characters; the commonplace events; and the seemingly unremarkable mise-en-scene of everyday life that are the lifeblood of realism — and the historical existence of the literal commons — those shared lands that were once a defining feature of the British landscape and political imaginary. On the other hand, it argues for the enduring presence within nineteenth-century of utopian energies, which both hark back to the commons and point forward to a transformed society.¹

This passage encapsulates a problem with the concept of "the commons" that both vexes and enriches Carolyn Lesjak's study of character in three very different novelists considered the major British "realists." For purposes of these remarks, I find the vexing much more instructive than I do the enriching. Here, Lesjak implies, the men who proposed, passed, and implemented the Enclosure Acts during the 17th and 18th centuries did not stop at turning virtually all the land available for common use into property the exclusive use of which was protected by law. They continued the process of enclosure at the personal and social levels until they dispelled the reassuring sense of "common characters," "commonplace events," and "the seemingly unremarkable *mise-en-scene* of everyday life" under an earlier agrarian economy. But this sense of "the common" did not disappear as the English countryside was progressively fenced, squeezed between hedge-rows, and laced with roads that connected the towns and cities. Lesjak suggests that the sense of the common that left its indelible mark on the novels of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy persists in those strains of contemporary Marxist and environmentalist theory that "point forward to a transformed society."

A year of quarantine leaves me keenly aware of the forms of security that accompany private property, as well as the forms of sociality it prohibits and the class distinctions it inevitably reinforces. Although the signs now point to a future in which vaccination "passports" reinforce fear of the unvaccinated mass as they allow

the vaccinated to pass through the world from one sanitized enclosure to another, who among us, if given the option, would stake his or her life on herd immunity? Even the usually dysfunctional paranoiac who thrives under these conditions believes in a future where his or her negative sociality will uniquely keep the perpetual infiltration of foreign bodies at bay. Critical theory has spelled out in exact and well-documented detail the various stages in the transformation of property from real estate to foreclosures. As to how “the commons” became “the common” and, on that basis, “the afterlife of enclosure,” critical theory has not been so useful.

The idea of “the common” as the “afterlife” of enclosure presumes that the former was once the dominant term of the same “off-on” opposition on which Garrett Hardin blames “the tragedy of the commons.”² His inflexibly digital formulation assumes that whichever term dominates — whether “commons” or “enclosure” — that term can occupy the “on” position only if it completely negates the other term, seeing to it that the two ways of imagining the disposition of natural resources cannot coexist. Elinor Ostrom culls a model from a real-life example of local self-government that demonstrates that the commons in fact can be governed while remaining common insofar as it is self-governed, that is to say, governed consensually by the same group that depends on it for a livelihood.³ This position assumes that the natural environment is not the setting and instrument of human reason but indeed has a mind of its own. If heeded, human beings can prevent what Ostrom refigures as the tragedy of primitive accumulation: a fluctuating supply of fish, the cost of overfishing, and the internal conflict arising when certain individuals assume ownership of the prime fishing spots. How can one argue with this proposition? Under what conditions could a counterargument seem only reasonable?

The recognition that any accommodation of the practices of the commons to that of enclosure is a difficult and tenuous accomplishment goes back to the early Victorian period about the time when Dickens turned from the tradition of character books in *Pickwick Papers* to experiment with character systems in *Oliver Twist*. Rather than let familiar types remain in the boxes assigned them in character books, character systems began twisting and squeezing the social taxonomy that Fielding, Richardson, and even Austen could take for granted until large segments of the population that it had “represented” for them were wrung out by a fluctuating economy and dispersed them willy-nilly across the countryside. New fences, roads, and a postal system fed them into the streams of available labor that flowed into the industrial and commercial centers of England. Here, Dickens encountered these defaced and typeless characters disappearing into what was left of common space — backstreets, forgotten attics, junk shops, waste heaps, dead-end courtrooms, and bureaucratic snarls in the Victorian city — where the last drop of economic value could be wrung from their material remains. Lesjak emphasizes the principle of continuity linking Dickens’s use of character types to the earlier system of types from which each individual derived synecdochal value in relation to what Deidre Lynch calls “the coin of character.”⁴ But

the relation to the older vocabulary of types only increases in value, I want to suggest, if we also understand that it is a principle of rupture that gives meaning to characters once the old social taxonomy is gone. No question that Dickens felt terribly betrayed, if not by the character system that his literary forebears had taken for granted, then by the industrial machine that had remade the diverse society he loved into a zero-sum economic game. He recognized, as did Eliot and Hardy, that the semiotic rug had been ripped out from under the types he drew not only from character books, but also from walking the streets of London and assembling the bits and pieces of news, biography, and fiction in his weekly magazines. The material he gathered may appear to come from earlier books, satiric sketches, city comedies, and the like, but the social order he felt called upon to compose from its bits and pieces was irrevocably different.

Lesjak's convincing argument for Dickens's debt to the eighteenth-century character system ironically performs a service for scholarship by sliding over the possibility, as the character books themselves did, that something very much like the epistemic shift Foucault identifies in *The Order of Things* left its indelible mark on the novel form at some point between, say, the publication of Austen's *Persuasion* and the outburst of sensation novels and forms of realism that developed during the 1850s and 1860s. Assuming this mark was not an easy one to absorb and conceal, Lesjak's case for the continuity of the literary language of types tells me this is exactly where we must look for the artistry that negotiated this decisive shift in the relation between the concepts of "enclosure" and "the commons." By the late 1840s, I am quite sure, the two terms no longer conjured two contrary systems of value but indicated a relation of absolute contradiction. The pair of theoretical debates between Victor Frankenstein and his creature explicitly spell out the far-reaching implications of this transformation, as Victor first concedes the creature's point that there is abundant space and resources in the world for both species of man but then breaks his agreement to create the female companion for which the creature longs. Against the reasoning based on recognition of their common loneliness and deep need for each other, the second debate pits Victor's tortured version of the logic that surfaces in Hardin, logic that compels Frankenstein to dismember the half-assembled female, against the ethics of the common. Victor's counterargument to the right to the common not only negates the proposition that there are sufficient natural resources on earth to provide for both communities; it also criminalizes Victor's momentary submission to the creature's claim that they could both enjoy a better future that way.

No wonder Charles Dickens was hopping mad, so mad that he thumbed through character books and walked the streets of London incessantly taking notes and comparing the people he saw to their graphic representations. Day after day, as his notebooks attest, he bore witness to bits and scraps of humanity, no two of which were sufficiently similar to be represented by the same type, each therefore a type unto itself. This social information provided raw material for a character system that reconceptualized human nature along the same line Charles Darwin was rethinking

the interrelation of animal species. Both formulated a dynamic field overcrowded with phenotypes consequently jostling one another for a place to call home. No static taxonomy, this metropolis resembled Darwin's "entangled bank" in the merciless complexity of its interacting parts driven by a struggle that determined who was fit to survive.⁵ But there the parallel ended. What drove the struggle among human individuals, groups, and generations was the pervasive conviction that to survive as an individual one had, at all costs, to avoid disappearing into the group. To do so was to become as replaceable as the particular plant, bird, insect, and worm that provided the material for Darwin's image of the "entangled bank," as testimony to nature's artistry in choreographing a struggle for the means of survival. Dickens's snapshots of the urban wilderness in which he felt at home suggest that he was no less fascinated than Darwin with the diversity of human life forms allowing each phenotype to find a space in the new competitive economy to which it was uniquely adapted.⁶ His characters were who or what they were by virtue, not of continuity with the past, then, but because of their variations from shifting norms, or genotypes.

The sudden loss of the commonality among members of a type expresses itself in Dickens's felt need to compensate for the lack of typicality that can no longer assure either novelist or reader a place in the social classification system. This need finds expression in the singular deficiencies of speech and behavior that mark his common characters along with their physical anomalies, exaggerated mannerisms, and prosthetic attachment to signature objects. The accumulation of differentia invariably piles up in his urban settings to the point where it defies indexicality. Characters hop out of their columns, spill over the pages, and escape the covers and bindings of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the format in which his novels first appeared. Thanks to Dickens's sustained success at publishing serial novels, the characters that enjoyed this afterlife accumulated to the point where they constituted the holograph-like system recognized by the full range of readers and scholars as "the Dickens world." What makes this afterlife so powerful that it remains intact even today, where it continues at once to bludgeon and to entertain us with the systemic violence that destroys the sense of common, representative, or typical humanity captured in character books? *The Afterlife of Enclosure* persuades me that Dickens's sustained, exuberant, and absolutely unprecedented expression of negative energy marks a decisive rupture in the long history of the relation between "enclosure" and the concept of the "commons."

To understand this rupture symptomatically, one must identify two cultural factors as responsible for the shift in the "the commons" from land that, as Locke said, God "hath given ... to men in common ... to the best advantage of life and convenience" to the degraded and menacing human aggregate whose figuration Emily Steinlight describes.⁷ The scholar, cleric, and experimental demographer, Thomas Robert Malthus, helped to engineer that leap from "natural resources" to the exponentially increasing need to devour them. Spelled out in a simple mathematical formula that

turned natural abundance into scarcity at a rate that led inevitably to famine, disease, and war, Malthus transformed the commons into the cause as well as the “check” on overpopulation. If allowed to do so, nature would cull the herd and restore the balance of food supply to demand. Never mind that Malthus’s part in engineering the Great Hunger in Ireland (1845-1852) cost a million lives and forced as many Irish people to emigrate from a country where they had managed to survive despite centuries of incompetent English rule. Still more venal was the biopolitical argument that reappears in Hardin. This principle treats laissez-faire economics like another expression of the same natural law that declared that the means of sustaining life increase at a mathematical rate while populations grow exponentially. As demand outstrips supply, the economy rights the imbalance by means of starvation or worse. We might say that by reversing the logic of the parable of the loaves and fishes, the rhetoric of scarcity provided the rationale for criminalizing such practices as gleanings, exercising the right to burial in sacred ground, hunting for game, sleeping in the streets, and begging, all of which were once considered legitimate expressions of the right to the commons.

That *Oliver Twist* (1837) can be classified as Dickens’s first work of literary realism is because it called upon a criminalized commons to provide a potentially utopian alternative to the “child farm,” and orphanage with too little food and too many mouths to feed. There the mild-mannered Oliver scandalizes the administrators by famously asking, on behalf of the group, “Please, sir, I want some more.”⁸ Overly concerned with Dickens’s use of a defamatory Jewish stereotype, scholarship has paid scant notice to the patience with which Fagin teaches his “children” to pick the pockets of those who can well afford to provide significantly better nutrition than the boys enjoyed at the orphanage. Only when Oliver is miraculously rescued by a respectable benefactor whom he artlessly tried and failed to rob does Dickens turn against his own outrage and drain that positive energy from Fagin’s Satanic aspect leaving us alone with the predator. Why, then, does Dickens indulge in the overkill that guaranteed the novel’s continuing popularity in various media? Why allow this degenerate figure a moment of Shakespearean lucidity in which to scorn the institutions that will hang him at daybreak, “What right have they to butcher me?,” only to have him dissolve in tears the next instant and play on Oliver’s sympathy to make a last-minute deal for his life?⁹ Finally, as if to signal that he has run through the characters compressed in his one compound type, Dickens gives us Fagin, a stripped down voice of humanity: “He writhed and struggled with the power of desperation, and sent up shriek upon shriek that penetrated even those massive walls, and rang in their ears until they reached the open yard” surrounding the gallows.¹⁰ If Fagin’s impending execution detaches the momentary grandeur of Satanic rhetoric from his negative stereotypes as predator and Jew, then Oliver’s palliative offering of homiletic pieties comes close to the sort of emotional self-exculpation that drove Dickens nuts. Only because Oliver’s tactile memory of his parting kiss from a fellow Parish boy alone remains sufficiently

unsullied by the mutually-negating encounter between the principle of enclosure and that of the commons can this trace justify the positive emotional charge that Lesjak attributes to it — a feeling that testifies to the persistence of the principle of the commons in the very culture bent on criminalizing it. In singling out this moment, I would contend, she identifies the precise rhetorical turn by which the “the commons,” as the antithesis of land enclosure, became the concept of “the common.”

In closing, let me briefly address the final claim Lesjak makes in her statement of argument, namely, that the “utopian energies” she identifies with Victorian realism not only “hark back to the commons” but also “point forward to a transformed society.” On a landscape increasingly dominated by urban commercial and industrial centers, one can see in Fagin’s oscillation from defiance to compliance flashes of the positive energy that motivates Oliver’s timid supplication on behalf of the hungry community of Parish Boys, “Please, sir, I want more.” The same body of fiction that shows how capitalism transforms the community sustained by the practices of “the commons” into a predatory system, or negative utopia, also intimates the return of what had been “nature” prior to modernity in the form of “culture” after capitalism. Thus, where Locke had claimed that God “hath given the [natural] world to men in common,”¹¹ Matthew Arnold sought to conserve “the best that has been thought and said” by man,¹² and John Stuart Mill survived a nervous breakdown by cultivating “the inner man.” And here we still are: participants in a tag team that responds to the political-economic violence intensifying all around us with descriptive theories that either meet violence with the violence of utopian crime or cultivate the future community within.

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 3.
2. Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162.3859 (1968): 1243-1248.
3. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
4. Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
5. "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the ... conditions of life, and from use and disuse a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: Penguin, 2009) 426-27.
6. Darwin was profoundly impressed by the power of worms to imperceptibly change the topography of an entire region of foothills by slowly moving the ground beneath the surface.
7. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980) 18. See also, Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).
8. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Penguin, 2003) 15.
9. Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 448.
10. *Oliver Twist* 449.
11. Locke, *The Second Treatise* 18.
12. Mathew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 5.

Get It Together

Rithika Ramamurthy

Once you start looking for the politics of the commons, you will find it everywhere. It drives protests for popular justice of all kinds. It appears in actions against evictions nationwide, both before and during the coronavirus pandemic. It inheres in efforts to expand public transportation, to rebuild municipal infrastructure, and to abolish prisons. It animates fights for indigenous sovereignty across the globe, from Palestine to Turtle Island. The attempt to topple the relentless regime of capitalist expansion — to undo the accretive process of land privatization called enclosure — is ongoing. Centuries of escalating inequality and colonial violence has wrought legions of organized resistance and utopian dreaming. The continuing nature of this struggle firmly attests against the claim that it is easier to imagine the end of everything than to imagine the end of enclosure. This enduring and ubiquitous desire for the commons connects political struggles in the immediate present to their origins in the not-so-distant past. It allows us to link, for example, the political contradictions driving both Occupy Wall Street and the Swing Riots. The history of enclosure and the commons is, in other words, a history of capitalism and its discontents. It stands to reason that the realist novel, as one of the most enduring objects concomitant with that history, has particular insight into the nature and scope of the *longue durée* of endless dispossession and its energetic opposition.

Carolyn Lesjak's *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* begins with the bold claim that literary studies has almost entirely ignored this historical trauma and its present-day persistence. Critical scholarship, Lesjak argues, has not only ignored enclosure's appearance in the novel, it has reduced realist representation to the bad and bourgeois work of reproducing the status quo. Lesjak aligns her book with alternative accounts of realism — including recent monographs by literary critics Lauren Goodlad, Isobel Armstrong, and Anna Kornbluh — which "emphasize its generative possibilities and transformative or even radical politics."¹ These authors reinvigorate realism by attending to its uniquely dialectical mode of representation, its ability to think opposites together, to apprehend space

as both individual experience and transindividual structure. Following this strain of interpretation with an “overtly political aim,”² Lesjak proposes to revive the connections between the common as a figurative concept and the commons as a literal space. Doing so will illuminate the unifying thread linking various expressions of the commons as indirect figurations of “a collective *in the making*”³ rather than direct representations of privatized land or political programs. Setting the commons free from a mimetic imperative within the nineteenth century novel is the first step to reclaiming it in the present.

Figuration is often a confusing rather than clarifying term in literary criticism. Lesjak uses it frequently and with confidence, constellating the multiple meanings — construction, formation, projection — that convoke its psychic and material significance. In the wake of the physical destruction of the shared world and the social consequences of such decollectivization, she writes, nineteenth-century novelists produce “*figurations of the commons*,” in the form of “language of common characters and types; in visions of common culture and the common good, and in the language of common relations.”⁴ Time and time again, Lesjak finds in novels by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy a commitment to the collective nature of literary character, each amounting to different kinds of refusal of individual self-possession which Lesjak takes to be proof of faith in the commons as a political ideal. Literary character is so often subjected to undialectical treatment in nineteenth century scholarship, so Lesjak’s intervention is particularly welcome for its refreshing insight. One could perhaps imagine readings of these authors that might focus on narration as the primary site of this “decentering and literal objectification of self.”⁵ Take, for example, Audrey Jaffe’s argument on Hardy’s “exclusionary realism” examining perspectival constraint and the production of space in *The Return of the Native*, or my own reading of shame in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as an affective form linking spatial exposure and economic degradation. Such readings differ slightly from those in *The Afterlife of Enclosure* in their explicit linking of the psychic and material dimensions of third-person narration rather than the material collectivity of character. But by reframing a literary device such as character away from its tired definition as a representation of dematerialized interiority and towards its inspired reformulation as a collective conceptualization, Lesjak’s readings do offer a window into a world in which the individual is not of the utmost importance — a world made all but impossible by the enclosure of the commons and the dispossession of the people.

These immaterial reflections on material ruin grasp at the possible appearance of the commons at a historical moment when it cannot be realized. *The Afterlife of Enclosure* thus echoes the foundational claim of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*: that social reality and emergent consciousness develop in dialectical relation and depend on a process of figuration. Without conditions of figurability, particular modes of production, shifts in capitalist development, and even relations of class struggle are unavailable to thought. If we cannot think these social relations,

we cannot confront them. This, put simply, is the indispensability of the dialectical method, its uncompromisable necessity for any political project striving towards total liberation from global capitalism.

But “it is not enough,” as Marx says, “that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought.” In the last line of the book, Lesjak asserts that we are still faced today with the “imaginative task” of transforming collective life away from further privatization — a task nowhere more urgent than in the landscape of higher education. After four chapters mapping the commons within the nineteenth century imaginary as a set of symbolic meditations on community, it remains to be seen how literary analysis can bridge the yawning chasm between idealizations of collective being and materializations of political collectivity, especially when the discipline does not seem to agree on the politicization of reading. It is unclear, in other words, how literary study can help to realize a future free from exploitation when the study of literature has not only almost succumbed to aggressive material attack by boards of trustees and budget cuts, but when literary scholars further insist on the individual nature of reading. Critics have the responsibility not to simply avow literature’s singular pleasures, but to champion, as Lesjak does, the necessity of literary insight for social transformation. There is no task more urgent for academics today than the reorganization of the university according to the politics of the commons and the redefinition of higher education as a public good. We should get it together.

Notes

1. Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character, and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) 2.
2. Lesjak, *Afterlife* 2.
3. *Afterlife* 6.
4. *Afterlife* 11.
5. *Afterlife* 106.

Sameness

Bruce Robbins

Raoul Peck's 2017 biographical film *The Young Karl Marx* opens in a beautiful sun-dappled forest. Peasants are gathering sticks to heat themselves with — dead wood from the forest floor, nothing that's still growing. Suddenly they are attacked by police on horseback. Some are killed. We see their bodies in close-up, on the forest floor, eyes open.

The scene is historically accurate in at least two senses: in the 1830s, landowners in the wine-growing area of Trier, where Marx was born, were asserting exclusive ownership over common lands where tradition had afforded villagers limited but important rights, like the gathering of firewood. And it was this local experience of enclosure, rather than any of the usual isms or abstractions, that first crystallized the young Marx's sense that he was living in a place and a time of unbearable injustice. His analysis of what was happening, the subject of one of his early journalistic pieces, is pronounced, sentence by outraged sentence, in the film's opening voiceover.

It's a brilliant way for the director of *Exterminate All the Brutes!* to suggest that Marx and Marxism have lost none of their pertinence to the study of colonialism, at whose dark heart lies the theft of other people's land. For students of the nineteenth century, it is also a way of refreshing the sense of how Marx belongs to the context of the nineteenth century — an expanded and newly imagined nineteenth century, with less reference than usual to European revolutions or to the satanic mills that for residents of the developed, largely vaccinated metropolis now seem quite distant in space as well as in time. This is much the same brilliance that leads Carolyn Lesjak to organize her uncompromisingly nineteenth-century book around enclosure. We think of enclosure, considered literally rather than metaphorically, as centered in the previous century or even earlier. We think of it, structurally, as belonging to pre-capitalist society, which is to say as part of the process of so-called primitive accumulation that made industrial capitalism possible. But as Lesjak insists, enclosure is also a later and indeed an ongoing phenomenon. She reminds us of the ongoing displacement of indigenous populations around the world by extractive industries and the servile governments who do their dirty work for them. And to complicate the

politics, I would add that indigenous peoples are also displaced by *conservationists*, who have been complicit in removing the inhabitants from their traditional homelands and traditional ways of life for what are supposed to be the noblest of motives.¹

Admirers of *Working Fictions* will no doubt be struck in *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, as I was, by Lesjak's boldness in dealing with genre. In *Working Fictions*, she aims her argument at William Morris and Oscar Wilde, neither of whom wrote in a genre that is usually understood as even proximate to classical realism. Claiming them for the genre of realism is crucial, however, to her assertion of a synthesis or reconciliation between the (masculine) concern with work and the (feminine) concern with pleasure. It's quite a dazzling reconfiguration of the nineteenth-century canon. She makes a related move, equally startling, at the beginning of *The Afterlife of Enclosure*. In the literal sense, enclosure is a political and legal process imposed on the land. It happens in the countryside. So, after an obligatory stop at the poetry of John Clare, where does Lesjak begin her revision of the nineteenth-century fictional canon? With Dickens, who as she says is known as the quintessentially *urban* novelist. It's pretty daring — much like including Morris, writer of Icelandic sagas as well as utopian romances, in the canon of classical realism.

This suggests that it's after all *not* the literal enclosure of the land that is most important to her. And that is a reasonable position. When Marx put the section on primitive accumulation at the tail end of the first volume of *Capital*, he gave the impression that the physical violence of tactics like slavery, colonization, and enclosure was a pre-condition for capitalism, not a description of processes on which capitalism would continue to depend. He made it seem that commodification — where *Capital* does start — is capitalism's key, meaning that exploitation — the seizure of surplus value through the formal, seemingly non-violent means of wage labor — is enough to make the system work smoothly. For some time, however, the tendency has been to insist that exploitation has always been supplemented by expropriation — that capitalism never graduates from directly coercive tactics like the enclosure of land to a "mature" form in which surplus value is seized, without physical violence, by wage labor alone. The prevalence of racialized incarceration in the U.S. is one body of obvious and significant evidence. Cedric Robinson's "racial capitalism" is the go-to concept. Enclosure is, among other things, a useful way of keeping this issue in the spotlight. Those seeking a lucid and open-minded introduction to the subject can do worse than start with Nancy Fraser's "Is Capitalism Necessarily Racist?"²

To see the book from this angle is to suggest that the book's real center is not enclosure itself but the target at which enclosure aims: the commons. Lesjak attaches the adjective "utopian" to the commons, but I prefer to think of it not as utopia, a free-floating figure of desire, but rather as grounded, very literally and very firmly, in the history of the seizure of the land and in the moral sensibility that has been and continues to be offended by that violation. In other words, Lesjak offers us the commons as the base for an ongoing global resistance to global capitalism. The implicit

polemic here argues that the commons is truly “common” in two senses — that it stands up for the low and the vulgar as opposed to the unique and distinctive, and that it overrides the differences with which criticism has been so overwhelmingly concerned for some decades. This concern was an entirely natural and no doubt necessary correction to the false and frequently arrogant universalisms that preceded the 60s movements. Without it, we would not have achieved what Stuart Hall calls the “theoretical gains” that have been made in the name of gender, race, and sexuality. But the concern with difference makes it hard to agree with Hall that there *have* been “gains” — that political progress of any sort is possible. The so-called “new social movements” of the 60s entertained, at least intermittently, the goal of uniting as “the Movement.” That unifying impulse of the 60s-movement legacy has not always seemed as clear to its inheritors as the concern with difference, particularity, identity. Lesjak helps us take a step back, or forward, and feel that coalitional energy as our own. She does not call it sameness, and would perhaps object to that polemical note. But I can hear it all through the book, especially when she makes her eloquent case for character “types” as figures of collective existence.

Notes

1. See the report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 29 July 2016, item 66.
2. From *The Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 92 (November 2018): 21–42.

Natalie Suzelis. "Surrogacy, Value, and Social Reproduction: A Review of *Full Surrogacy Now*." *Mediations* 34.2 (Spring 2021) 117-122. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/lewis-review

Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family

Sophie Lewis

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Surrogacy, Value, and Social Reproduction: A Review of *Full Surrogacy Now*

Natalie Suzelis

At a time when "keeping families together" was one of the most effective rhetorical slogans against border regime policies, Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019) reinvigorated a decades-old call for feminists to abolish the family. Lewis's book sparked a fire among her readers, intervening in Marxist value theory and accounts of social reproduction by arguing that the communization of care is the best way to rid ourselves of the value production of global capitalism. Yet Lewis ultimately distances herself from the elevation of reproductive labor to the realm of capitalist value by arguing that *full surrogacy* would entail building a world beyond profit-driven care industries, the heteronormative nuclear family, and the value-producing system of capital itself. It is worth returning to this book as the family becomes ever more present in debates around climate, refugee, and migrant struggles, for, as Lewis reminds us, the family is a primary vehicle of exclusion, dispossession, and enclosure within the global capitalist economy.

Building on older critiques of the family form from Shulamith Firestone, Melinda Cooper, and Friedrich Engels, *Full Surrogacy Now* argues that the private family is a key governmental unit of capitalism, which makes babies "in the shape of personal mascots, psychic crutches, heirs, scapegoats, and fetishes, not forgetting avatars of binary sex" (116). In using commercial surrogacy as a case study for capitalism's reach into the reproductive realm, Lewis builds upon Kalindi Vora's analysis of the surrogacy industry by using it to highlight the contradictions of capitalist reproduction. As Lewis puts it, commercial surrogacy is "capitalist industry," while noncommercial

surrogacy is “capitalist hinterland” (59), and it is this dualistic relationship between industry and hinterland, exchange and use, paid and unpaid reproductive labor, which forms the cornerstone of capitalist reproduction. This cornerstone results in raced, classed, and gendered reverberations throughout the family form, a form which privileges the continued reproduction of white, heteronormative, and capitalist nuclear family in the Global North. This particular form is responsible for the boom of commercial surrogacy because it uses the reproductive labor of women in the Global South to produce white babies for export and sale in the Global North.

Lewis uses commercial surrogacy icon Dr. Nayna Patel as an example of someone who benefits from the contradictions of use and exchange in commodified reproduction. Patel’s Akansksha Infertility Clinic exploits both naturalized conceptions of birth and the commercial value of gestation. Patel is so successful, in part, because she extracts surplus from her workers while at the same time describing gestation as “priceless” (63). By exploiting a female surplus population, she also pays well enough that her gestators cannot find a better-paying job. Lewis seizes upon the opportunity of commercialized surrogacy to question the distinction between “naturalized” pregnancies and those assisted by biotech, or undertaken for the market, in order to pull apart the “two alienations” these forms of pregnancy represent (128). In first recognizing that the violence and labor of gestation should be worthy of a wage, and by embracing the denaturalization that results from seeing gestation as value-producing labor in commercial surrogacy — in for, example, seeing the violent effects of gestation as a workplace hazards —

Lewis uses the case study of commercial surrogacy to push back against romantic notions of the family, motherhood, childbearing, and the womb. This denaturalization, she argues, is essential for moving beyond the capitalist hinterland which continues to obscure the labor and violence of partum and post-partum — and the classed, raced, and gendered character of the family model — in service of capitalist reproduction.

Lewis argues that feminists against capitalism must be feminists against the family and vice versa, precisely because the heteronormative, nuclear family helps guarantee the reproduction of divisions between paid and unpaid work, public and private work, and between the gendered labor of the global North and South. In deconstructing the ideological role of the family in these processes, Lewis also draws attention to the connections between commercial gestation and sex work. If sex work is the “oldest profession,” Lewis writes, then gestation is that “other oldest profession,” and — in both cases — the family remains at the center of what gets counted as legitimate or formalized work. This contribution builds upon the work of other social reproduction theorists who argue capitalism specifically uses the family form to privatize and separate the reproductive and productive spheres, in eliding how much we are all, as Lewis puts it, “the makers of each other” and in obscuring from us how much we would all gain by “collectively acting like it” (19). In a literary and political sense, this is also a fight between capitalist realism and utopian possibilities, which is why

Lewis engages with feminist utopian and dystopian literature from Maggie Nelson, Ursula K. LeGuin, Marge Piercy, and Octavia Butler to imagine what an alternative organizations of reproduction might look like. Surrogacy, of course, would have to change beyond recognition for this to happen.

Now that reproductive technology makes it possible to gestate for someone else, Lewis argues, we can begin to imagine the possibilities of a reproductive horizon that would destroy the commercial demand for such gestation. Not only women can gestate, and not only heterosexual/wealthy/white couples want to raise children. Lewis suggests that the idea of surrogacy itself can push against familial self-replication and sameness for a queer futurity beyond heterosexual and capitalist reproduction. A queer and communized surrogacy would seek to destroy the differences between “natural” and “unnatural” pregnancy, as well as the legacy of heterodox sameness that perpetuates the logic of the family form. A full surrogacy utopia, she argues, would allow us to parent “politically, hopefully, non-reproductively — in a comradesly way” for a counter-reproduction of the social through a queer commons of care (117). Lewis defines *full surrogacy* as a gestational commons that would entail “a classless commune on the basis of the best available care for all” (44), which is why she urges us to struggle *for and against surrogacy*, towards a common horizon that rejects the economic, gendered, and racialized supremacy of the nuclear family and all of its genetic hang-ups (130). Such a world would first need to move beyond the dual-sided exploitation of capitalist reproduction.

Lewis’s book comes at a time when a long-standing debate between Marxists on the value of reproductive labor remains fraught. Some Marxists have argued that to conflate gestation with value-producing labor is to fetishize labor itself. Kevin Floyd, for example, argued in an issue of *Historical Materialism* that because there is no “automatic subject” of value production — that is, no guarantee that every life created under capitalism will produce labor power for exploitation, many accounts of social reproduction tend to isolate labor from its primary dependence upon capital.¹ Instead, Floyd argues that commercial surrogacy creates rentier value from the “lived biology of particular women,” and that this mode of reproduction is an emergent variation of capital’s “reduction of living labour to a condition of value-dissociated abstract life.”² Because only capital can define labor, he writes, the surrogacy industry and its equivalent industries of biotech should be thought of as part of an *expansion of capital relative to labor*. This distinction crucial for Floyd because it is 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” that he argues Marxists can sustain what has become a “religiously optimistic narrative of labour’s vitality in the present.”³ Floyd sees this “religiously optimistic narrative” extending into accounts of social reproduction that assume all labor is productive labor, and that all labor is value-producing.

In response, Alessandra Mezzadri has argued that reproduction under global

capitalism does indeed produce value for capital. For Mezzadri, all realms of reproduction play a key role in capital's processes of surplus extraction, which is why she argues that *only* interpretations of social reproductive activities as value-producing can advance our understanding of contemporary capitalism. Mezzadri argues that reproductive realms are value-producing because of their ability to deepen labor control beyond the working day, absorb external costs of reproduction, and expand the formal subsumption of labor through fragmenting and decomposing labor processes worldwide.⁴ This is especially true, she argues, in non-Western experiences, which is how "the majority toils on this planet."⁵ In similarly arguing that the white supremacist reproduction of the Global North capitalizes on both reproductive technology and a global division of labor, Lewis points to how capitalism is already using both human and nonhuman resources in dualistic ways for capitalist reproduction. She argues, in contrast, that we should be collapsing those distinctions for a non-capitalist counter-reproduction. For Lewis, gestation is a technological, material, and biological example of extracting a gestator's bodily nutrients in deploying "all manner of manipulation, blackmail, and violence" in making a fetus (162). That the commercial surrogacy industry can place a higher price on fetuses for white capitalists highlights what is really under surface in creating the raced, classed, and gendered subjects of global capital.

In a recent issue of *Spectre*, Sue Ferguson takes more of a middle ground in arguing that while Lewis is correct in seeing babies produced for commercial surrogacy as commodities that circulate on the capitalist market, she argues along with Floyd that this does not make them value-bearing commodities. Both Ferguson and Floyd see this distinction as crucial for understanding how value works as well as for recognizing the real terrain of struggle. Both also follow Marx in seeing reproductive processes as "free gifts of nature," whether gestation is commercial or not, and argue that the womb, like land, is "rented" for its use and fertility during commercial surrogacy. Gestational processes, according to Ferguson, cannot constitute labor because the womb's fertility — like the fertility of soil — is a "natural process of life-making" that contradicts capitalist value-creation with its own natural limits.⁶ Babies made and sold on the capitalist market are therefore pseudo-commodities, because they are not capitalistically reproducible and involve natural processes of fertility that fall on the side of production rather than labor. Like Floyd, Ferguson maintains that the essential problem with Lewis's analysis is that she equates all labor with abstract or value-producing labor under capitalism. It is also imperative to recognize, she argues, that we have yet to fully commodify the womb. This is a good thing because natural limits imposed upon capital can be points of resistance. In recognizing and prioritizing such limits, she argues, we are better positioned to resist capital's demands upon both labor and nature in moving toward a more equitable system of human-nature reciprocity.

In response, I want to turn to one of the more provocative and underdeveloped claims in Lewis's book, which challenges us to see beyond either the womb or nature

itself as a passive receptacle of reproduction. Lewis refuses to see either the fertility of the earth or people as “free gifts of nature” in insisting upon the technological cyborgicity of human gestation. Further, Lewis’s use of the term “gestational commons” shows an attention to possibilities of a fusion between an ecologically-minded and cyborg inter-species communalism. In her last chapter, Lewis lingers on the connections between reproductive justice and water justice: “Blood and amniotic liquid, baby-food and baby-drink and soil and brains and plants and river and sea are largely water as are people” (166). Instead of naturalizing either pregnancy or nature, for example, recognizing that “water is life” is merely a medical and technical fact that points to our complicated relationship with the cyborg fluidity of gestation and life-sustaining activities. In recognizing that these processes can be violent, difficult, and dangerous, Lewis is pointing us to a reproductive vision that does indeed recognize and embrace technological and environmental limits. Here Lewis aligns more with Donna Haraway’s call for multispecies environmental and reproductive justice that “must be practiced against human exceptionalism and in resistance to colonial capitalist divisions of species, landscapes, peoples, classes, genders, populations, races, natures, and societies.”⁷ Lewis is suggesting here that regenerative policies of gestational and ecological commoning could remain counter-reproductive against white supremacist and ecocidal tendencies of capital, if we can move beyond the idea of “free gifts of nature.” For Lewis, value-less reproduction for capitalism is neither natural nor free.

This is why Lewis is ultimately uninterested in quantifying or categorizing gestation as value-producing labor in her utopia. Putting a price on reproductive labor, she argues, “conjures a world that is even worse than the alternative” (76). Lewis certainly sees women workers as outnumbered by a global population of surplus labor, yet she argues that the distinction between naturalized labor as a “free gift of nature” and the “work” or technology of commercial gestation is what enables the surrogacy industry to exploit both sides of the gestational coin. The irony that the commercial slipperiness of gestation, a water-based cyborgicity, is so profitable in India — a post-colonial region wracked by class stratification, water shortage, and the rapidly increasing heat of climate change — is not lost on Lewis. To this end, she posits thinking through amnio-technics in order to pull reprotech away from privatization, for if we can “recognize our inextricably surrogated contamination with and by everybody else,” then the nuclear family, the surrogacy industry, and capitalist itself becomes unthinkable: “if babies were universally thought of as anybody and everybody’s responsibility, belonging to nobody, surrogacy would generate no profits” (167). Truly seizing the means of reproduction would mean taking deliberate steps to regenerate those other forms of gestation (water, the soil) as part of a queer commons of non-capitalist reproduction, while also de-emphasizing the human-nature and technology-nature divide.

Before we can establish a queer commons that could move beyond the contradictions

of capitalist exploitation, reproductive technology must be wrested from for-profit lean-in feminists like Dr. Patel, from its position of privileged reproduction for the Global North, and from the “still-active ideologies that construct the womb as a passive object of efficient and expert harvesting, a space of waste, surplusness, or emptiness that is being profitably occupied” (73). Like the air we breathe and the water we drink, reproduction, Lewis argues, must belong to all of us. Thus while the slogan “keep families together” responds to a system that keeps certain families outside of the benefits of white supremacist capitalism, and within its worst ecocidal tendencies, ending capitalism would mean seizing the means of reproduction in fighting for a “levelling up and interpenetration of all of what are currently called “families” (44). As Lewis puts it, fighting for our shared social and economic freedom entails decoupling from capitalist dependency, and the name for this decoupling is *full surrogacy*: “beyond cooperativization, toward the commune” (33). And the goal must be regeneration, not replication.

Notes

1. Kevin Floyd, “Automatic Subjects” *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 24.2 (2016) 74.
2. Floyd, “Automatic Subjects” 70, 82.
3. “Automatic Subjects” 81.
4. Alessandra Mezzadri, “On the value of social reproduction: informal labour, the majority world and the need for inclusive theories and politics” *Radical Philosophy* 2.4 (2019) 11-12.
5. Mezzadri, “On the value of social reproduction” 13.
6. Sue Ferguson, “Notes on Sophie Lewis: Wombs, Value, and Production,” *Spectre* 1.1 (Spring 2020) 72.
7. Donna Haraway, “Making Oddkin: Telling Stories for Earthly Survival.” *Duke Franklin Humanities Institute*.

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