

**The New What's Next:
Innovation and Failure in Contemporary American Literature**

BY

Trevor Strunk
B.A., Ursinus College. 2003
M.A., New York University, 2009

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Nicholas Brown, Chair and Advisor
Walter Benn Michaels
Jennifer Ashton
Joseph Tabbi
Anna Kornbluh
Andrew Hoberek, University of Missouri

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Kristin, who has suffered and supported me through enough of my writing to deserve an honorary degree herself, and to my daughter Tilly, who helps me remember what this is all for on the days when I need it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee – Nicholas Brown, Walter Benn Michaels, Jennifer Ashton, Anna Kornbluh, Joseph Tabbi, and Andrew Hoberek – for their commitment and dedication to the quality of this project. Through my years at UIC, each of the members of my committee have engaged me in serious discussion, challenging the directions and commitments of my work, and without them it would in no way approach the shape it takes today. I would especially like to acknowledge Nicholas Brown, who was a generous and sympathetic interlocutor, and who was unfailingly positive even when I could not be. Finally, I want to thank Nasser Mufti, who was a reader and an influential voice in earlier drafts of this manuscript, and who helped shape its direction in myriad ways.

I would also like to acknowledge my family – Kristin Strunk and Tilly Strunk – as well as my parents, grandparents, et al, who probably are too numerous to list here. I would like to give posthumous thanks to my grandfathers, George Shepherd and Blaine Strunk, the former a self-taught autodidact and the latter a high school principal. Without them, I would not have pursued learning in such a directed way, and I would be poorer for it. My cohort at UIC, as well, has been a source of constant help, especially Davis Brecheisen-Smith, Matthew Moraghan, Neri Sandoval, Jennifer Phillis, and Vincent Adiutori; thanks to Katya Kulik and Mary Hale also for the constant morale and erudite banter, and all who I forgot. I would also like to acknowledge my good friend and constant literary interlocutor, Emerson Wright, who is pursuing a PhD at the University of Buffalo, and who is the smartest adoptive colleague one could ask for. Any lack of quality here is despite their best efforts, and any good work should be partially credited to them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
I. When We Became Contemporary: The Marriage of Economic and Literary Form.....	1
II. Sex, Violence, and the Economy: Kathy Acker's Plagiarism and Protest..... From 1978-1995	25
III. Toward an Aesthetics of Failure: Blood Meridian and the Problem of..... Marxist Aesthetics	62
IV. Alone In A World of Objects: Videogames, Interaction, and..... Late Capitalist Alienation	88
V. The Dollar at the End of the Book: Vanessa Place, Inc. and Allegorical Failure in..... Conceptual Poetry	121

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. The bloody bathtub revealed to be benign. <i>Gone Home</i> , 2013.....	95
2. Zines provide clear nostalgic cues for a particular audience who grew up in the 1990s. <i>Gone Home</i> , 2013.....	96
3. The Robot avatar. <i>The Talos Principle</i> , 2014.....	107
4. The “real” world. <i>The Talos Principle</i> , 2014.....	109
5. A glitch in the simulation. <i>The Talos Principle</i> , 2014.....	111

When We Became Contemporary: The Marriage of Economic and Literary Form

If it was not clear that Francis Fukuyama was premature in his claim that the end of the Soviet Union was also the end of history, the fact became evident after the housing crisis of 2008. The global recession that followed the crash of the US housing market was the immaterial echo of the physical impact of September 11, 2001: the latter pushed the U.S. to reject its post-ideological pretensions in favor of a new global conflict, and the former ushered in a re-consideration of the capitalist underpinnings of American exceptionalism. Occupy Wall Street was a direct response, in many ways, to the class consciousness that was highlighted by the financial crisis, particularly the lack of accountability for the elite financial operators chiefly responsible for it. The success of films like Adam McKay's *The Big Short* and the relative popularity of economics treatises like Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* also speaks to this growing sense of economic concern. Much as Fukuyama's *End of History* was an unlikely popular success driven by post-Cold-War triumphalism, the reception of Piketty's work is driven by an increasing pessimism and fear of decline. And one does not have to look too far for other popular and academic expressions of this contemporary concern: the ubiquity of Lauren Berlant's critique of at-will or "precarious" labor in the academy; the brief rise of Bernie Sanders in the American consciousness; and even the popularity of financial dramas like Showtime's *Billions* demonstrate that capitalism and its flaws are at the center of an American consciousness, highbrow and low.

But awareness of capitalism is not necessarily a critique of capitalism, and as the march of free trade, neoliberal policy, and austerity politics continues onward, we would do well to notice the dialectic opposition of a new class consciousness in far-right political gains. From the Brexit decision in the United Kingdom which severed ties with the European Union, to the rise of neo-fascist party leaders like France's Marine LePen, the global trend rightward has been so clear as to not even escape the notice of *Time Magazine*, whose Simon Shuster writes that, even

if the far-right's opinions "may not be grounded in fact," they "are winning." This is of course not new news to anyone who has been aware of the 2016 election cycle in the United States, in which the brash racial populism of Donald Trump has given him the Republican nomination and, at times, a fair shot at winning the election for President outright. So how can we plausibly understand such a contradictory state of affairs, in which class consciousness surges as the wealth gap between the richest and the rest of us becomes common knowledge, but we respond by electing leaders who attack the poor and marginalized? How can we begin to explain capitalism's contemporary face, in which the ideology of wealth inequality is laid bare but only the poorest and most precarious are punished for it?

Literature, certainly, is not the first answer that might come to mind: economists, social scientists, journalists, and politicians might seem on balance to have objects of study that would provide much clearer diagnosis of the crisis of contemporary capital. And if one was interested in understanding the phenomena symptomatic to precarious, global capitalism, then one would turn to these disciplines first. There is much to be said about empirical analyses and histories of the rise of free trade networks, the monetizing of the Global South, the successful American anti-labor and anti-union effort, et al, and this analysis is not meant to take anything away from those endeavors. But if we are interested in producing a representation of capitalism in our current moment, then I would suggest we need to examine the science of representation, e.g. literature and aesthetics. Representation is important to understanding our current economic moment if only because our current economic moment resists total representation so thoroughly. This resistance recalls the epistemic frustration of Fredric Jameson's oft-paraphrased koan that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" ("Future City"). More foundationally, the ideological adroitness of contemporary capitalism also reflects Karl

Marx's insistence that, under the "real subsumption" of labor under capital, in which "a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists" (1035). Marx's revolution here is not meant as a positive revolt, as, in a system of global capitalism, the contradictory seams of the relations that make up the system are perpetually papered over and re-represented as a function of the system itself. Capitalism produces the representations of capitalism that are accepted and ideologically allowed; to actively represent an alternative would be its own act of subversion.

Of course, prior to what I have been calling contemporary capitalism and what is also known as late or neoliberal capitalism, artists were producing critical representations of capitalism with at least provisional success. Historians of the novel often describe it as a genre that is responsive to the rise of capitalism, with Ian Watt's *The Rise of The Novel* serving as a sort of locus classicus for the claim. Watt argues that the rise of the novel is not only consequent with, but reliant upon the rise of "the great power and self-confidence of the middle-class" and the modes of trade and exchange that came with that rise (59). Watt's observation that the novel rose in a "critical climate...favorable to the development of formal realism" conditions his claim that the novels of Defoe and Richardson differ from proto-novels like those by Aphra Behn and others due to their commitment to realism (301). Behn and the rest wrote works in which the "aim of verisimilitude had not been deeply enough assimilated...to bring about the rejection of all the non-realistic conventions that governed the genre" (33). Even though Watt is careful to profess – like any good Marxist would – that scientific objectivity in novels is not necessarily desirable, nor can it "be realized in practice," the fact that verisimilitude in literature was tied to

the rise of capitalism suggests that capitalist totality could, at some point in time, be represented (11).

Watt is not alone in linking the rise of the novel with a consequent fall into capitalism; Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* depends on a sort of pre- and post-lapsarian division between epic and contemporary literature, the latter of which is not a natural but a "created totality, [for which] the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever" (35). Clarifying his account a bit a few pages later, Lukács explains that, instead of reflecting a natural and social totality, post-epic literature "[carries] the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms" (39). In Lukács' later Soviet monograph, *The Historical Novel*, he clarifies the stakes of this fragmentary nature, arguing that the tendency for the contemporary historical novel to return to the epic is "born of a deep historical necessity," but will remain "*only* a tendency" so long as "there exists a capitalist economy" that produces "the antagonisms of contradiction" that define the imperfect literature of the contemporary moment (347-348). So Lukács, for whom the historical novel prior to the reification of bourgeois ideology in 1848 represents the same figure of verisimilitude as does the early novel for Watt, identifies the novel as the post-epic form that, in true Hegelian form, is born from and also struggles against the social forms of capitalism.

Lukács helps to clarify our interpretative problem a bit more clearly than does Watt, however, as he notes that aesthetic theory post-1848 "[fails] any longer to understand problems of form in [a] wide sense," parsing them into particularized categories based on "superficial distinguishing marks," (92). The turn from total forms to particular objects describes not only capitalism, but modernity as well; and it is not only Lukács who is critical of this particularity. GWF Hegel, a common Marxist forbear, argues that a truly resolved state of being is both sensitive to "the right of subjectivity" as well as the "infinity of being-for-self" – in other words,

a (Christian) state in which particularity does not take precedence but is brought “into harmony with the unity of ethical life” (184). Lukács would and does understandably quibble with Hegel’s Christian teleology, but both authors’ descriptions of totality and particularity privilege a totality based on dialectical unity and critique a bad totality based on pure particularity. This specter of particularity has even followed us into our contemporary moment. Theodor Adorno’s imagines in his 1970 *Aesthetic Theory* (before rejecting as impossible) that an idealized art would present a totality autonomous from but referential of the particularity of the material, commodified world. Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* documents this continual process of further particularization, as postmodernism is defined as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (x). Jameson in 1992, of course, is writing more in the contemporary moment than Hegel, Lukács, or Adorno, and is therefore the more relevant influence on contemporary literary criticism, such as Mark Fisher’s increasingly popular *Capitalist Realism*. “Capitalism,” Fisher explains, “is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics” (4). In this reduction of ritual to empty action, we convert “practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects,” an action that transforms what might have been revelatory into what Fisher, echoing Hegel’s dismissive rejection of Catholic relics as merely bones, calls “artifacts” (4). It would seem, in other words, that somewhere along the long history of the novel, we stopped being able to represent capitalism and found ourselves represented by capitalism instead.

This leaves us with two new questions: when did this change happen and what can be done to work against it? To answer the second question first, it seems to me that the fatalism of critics like Fisher and even, cognitive mapping aside, Jameson is unwarranted. Contra Fisher’s claim that “glimmers of alternative political or economic possibilities” are the only plausible

alternative to capitalism, I would suggest that the prospect of coherent representation still has revelatory value, though perhaps not as Watt or Richardson might imagine it (81). As can be seen much more clearly in the earlier analysis of Lukács and Adorno, aesthetic representation produces a layered social and historical approach that even at its most provisional gives some glimpse of the contradictions of capitalist totality. These contradictions not only fulfill the necessarily dialectic quality of Marxian analysis, but they also reveal the ways in which the “inevitable” logic of the capitalist system is in fact problematic and provisional at its core.

These contradictions can make aesthetic analysis difficult, however, especially if it aspires to verisimilitude or autonomy from the world itself. Indeed, Fisher has it right when he claims that the contemporary capitalist environment pushes past the limits of representation. Empirical realism has of course always had its detractors, and Lukács writes in his "Reportage or Portrayal?" that muckraking novels that aspire to show the exact situation on the ground "[make] no new contribution to the actual state of affairs" (51). But Fisher helpfully characterizes why our contemporary situation is particularly hostile to realism of any stripe:

A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort (16).

We can, with Fisher, see capitalism recapitulate its crises as opportunities if we look into the contemporary discourse on austerity, refugee populations, and low or at-will wages. Capitalism

as a system depends, as it has since Marx, on the adaptation of exploitation by management into voluntary exploitation by labor. As Marx writes, under capitalism it is tempting to naturalize surplus labor, and "very easy to imagine that it is an inherent quality of human labor to furnish a surplus product"(650). And this self-conviction is even easier in a climate in which we are all convinced that there is no alternative.

It is the dream of alternatives in this climate that makes Fisher's appeal to innovative alternatives seems as much a trap as an opportunity. Given the decentralized, increasingly technological market's penchant for "disruption" of the market through innovations that increase company profits and make labor more at-will than ever, some skepticism of thought that rejects the material ground of possibility for a distant futurity is warranted. Therefore, we will return to the present in a consideration of representation as an agent of productive failure. If, as we have seen plausibly expressed in Jameson and Fisher, contemporary realism and representation is coopted by capital even before it is produced, then certainly any act of contemporary representation is ripe for failure. As Lukács implies in his analysis of anti-fascist literature, the contradictory elements of failure can reveal contradictions endemic to the system itself. Adorno, too, points to the failed moment in the work of art as a space of potential when he claims that the aberrant "fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality" (45): autonomous art under the visual regime of late capitalism fails necessarily to represent the whole, but that part of the art that does not fit represents an gap in the ideological totality. As Adorno adds, "only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia" (32). Paradoxically, then, the power of representation is not its ability to take in the whole as we may have seen in the verisimilitude of Richardson or Defoe, but rather its ability to embody the contradictions of the system under which it is produced. In this way, aesthetic representation

presents a mirror to capitalism's own self-representation, fraught with contradiction but presented as entirely coherent. By tracing the contradictions of the market through their form of appearance in the changing character of the money-form over the 20th century, we will not only see similarities to the changing politics of literary representation from Watt to Fisher, but also we will be able to pinpoint the moment at which both literature and capital became about failure as opposed to realistic representation. As a reading of the money-form and of William Gaddis' 1975 novel *JR* will show, the postmodern moment of capital and of literature are dialectically linked through the semiotic value of money. As the rest of my dissertation will suggest, the resolution of this dialectic heralds the rise of the contemporary moment following the Volcker Shock of 1979 and the decoupling of signifier and signified that it represents. In this contemporary moment, the fragment and the failed project become the only plausible ways to diagnose the new contradictions of a seemingly inevitable global capitalism.

An Object That Never Existed: An Incomplete History of Money

Beginning a history of money with Karl Marx is, in many ways, an admission that the history itself will not be complete. On one hand, I am making this admission to acknowledge that there are reams and reams written on the history of economics, dating back to its prehistory, that I will be openly ignoring for the purposes of space and clarity. But on the other hand, there are real ways in which a true history of money is an impossibility. As David Graeber found in his ambitious if meandering *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, tracing the particularities of even a part of capitalist pre-history into the contemporary moment is unwieldy at best. So while this section represents a relevant and, I would argue, representative theoretical history of money, it is also

not, nor could it ever be, exhaustive. Giving Marx the first word on the topic gives some hint as to why, particularly when he defines money as it operates in the marketplace of exchange:

The commodity which functions as a measure of value and therefore also as the medium of circulation, either in its own body or through a representative, is money. Gold (or silver) is therefore money. It functions as money, on the one hand, when it has to appear in person as gold. It is then the money commodity, neither merely ideal, as when it is the measure of value, nor capable of being represented, as when it is the medium of circulation. On the other hand, it also functions as money when its function, whether performed in person or by a representative, causes it to be fixed as the sole form of value, or, in other words, as the only adequate form of existence of exchange value in the face of all the other commodities, here playing the role of use-values pure and simple (227).

This rather lengthy explanation gets at two fairly controversial qualities of money: namely that money holds the same essential form whether as gold, specie, or credit, and that money largely plays an intermediary role in exchange and does not have an innate value in and of itself. The latter seems obvious, but will be consistently troubled as we get closer to our contemporary moment. The former quality, however, is surprising to see in a text written as early as *Das Kapital*, if only because the distinction between credit and specie – much like the distinction between the spoken and written word – remains a point of controversy even in the contemporary moment. Milton Friedman, in his seminal neoliberal 1962 text *Capitalism and Freedom*, proposes that the federal government be granted the power to the federal government to “exercise responsibility for money,” a regulatory role that will, in Friedman’s analysis, produce a “stable monetary framework for a free economy” (38-39). Even less constrained in its

enthusiasm for controls on the stability of particular money-forms than Friedman and coming from the left, Peter Gowan is quoted in Sam Panitch and Leo Gindin's *The Making of Global Capitalism* as believing that the decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard was "a 'Faustian bid for world dominance' designed to give the US 'monocratic power over international monetary affairs'" (13). In both instances, we see one version of money held up as a more stable governing force than another, as for Friedman gold is substantially different and more reliable than credit-in-specie and for Gowan, the dollar is a better regulating body than financialized capital. Marx, however, would argue that Friedman puts too much faith in gold's ability to drive exchange, and that Gowan puts too much faith in the dollar's ability to provide a stable moral force to US monetary interests. Indeed, we might agree with neoliberal thinker Dierdre McCloskey when she writes that modern (or for her, Keynesian) critiques of monetarism is "a criticism of the plot line, complaining of an ill-motivated beginning rather than a premature ending" (15). Indeed, what McCloskey and Marx seem to have in common is a fairly consistent disinterest in where money came from and more of a concern with how it operates now that it is, as Marx puts it, "the only adequate form of existence of exchange value." And of those classical economists who do have a concern for the origin of money, Adam Smith, reluctant figurehead of contemporary capitalism and free trade, sees money as symptomatic, produced as a stand-in for labor, which "was the first price, the original purchase-money that was paid for all things" (133).¹ If there is a calculus to be done between a derivative figure and an originary one, then, it seems to be a calculus between money and the conditions under which it became necessary, whether those conditions are clarifications of exchange, labor, or value.

¹ Louis Althusser famously cites the credulity of Smith over the *a priori* quality of labor-value as the basis of Marx's genius in his seminal work of post-Marxism, *Reading Capital*. To be sure, Smith here is conveniently glossing the exploitative qualities of capitalism, but in the interest of sticking to the plot of money development, I will simply suggest readers turn to Althusser for a more thorough account of how.

This strange lack of distinction between money, gold, credit, and even financial capital in serious economic philosophers is all the stranger given the historical panic over the form of appearance of money. William Jennings Bryan's famous call to base US currency on silver instead of gold – the memorably titled “Cross of Gold” speech of 1896 – ends in bellicose grandstanding against the supporters of gold, as Bryan challenges his supporters to “answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” Walter Benn Michaels in *The Gold Standard* refocuses this bluster into an aesthetic and emotional concern through a reading of Frank Norris' 1899 novel *McTeague*. The novel, Michaels argues, is deeply concerned with “simultaneous desires to own and be owned,” desires which he links to the paradoxical ambivalence of use and exchange value in the Marxian commodity (123). Capitalism, Michaels argues, conditions the narratives that Norris is trying to tell in *McTeague* and he maintains that the story cannot be understood without a clear vision of contract in place, particularly the sexual contract best exemplified by masochism. But while McTeague's wife Trina “welcomes all the possibilities of the market economy” in her complicity and even desire to own and be owned, it is the description of her arousal at the thought of “the ‘smooth flat pieces’ of gold against her body” that gives access into the nature of autonomy and materiality that Michaels highlights in *McTeague* (123). We might, along with Michaels, locate the power of gold as homologous with the power of ownership – gold, as opposed to money that signifies gold, is something tangible that can be touched, kept, or lost. In this way, the contract form complements the gold standard, inasmuch as both take the form of appearance of simple one-to-one contractual expressions of use and exchange value. The tempting simplicity of these forms

girds the fictions – fictions Michaels is also careful to critique – of ontological as opposed to socially derived value for the money-form.

Pleasant as this fiction may be, Marx, Smith, and McCloskey's concerns remain salient: money operates the same way and is no more or less "real" the closer or further it gets from precious metals. As John Maynard Keynes, with whom McCloskey does not share much ground, says with some sarcasm in his analysis of the gold standard, "the form of digging holes in the ground known as gold-mining, which not only adds nothing whatever to the real wealth of the world but involves the disutility of labor, is [wrongly considered] the most acceptable of all solutions [to poverty]" (129). If only to further cement his point, Keynes adds that burying bottles of money for laborers to find would be a more efficient way of cutting back unemployment while achieving the same ends as gold-digging, though it "would, indeed, be more sensible to build houses and the like" (129). Keynes' humor aside, the tension over the tangibility or intangibility of money is clearly an anxiety that tracks not only through economic philosophers, but, as we saw above, in literary voices as well. Norris' naturalism represents an approximation of the strategy of verisimilitude we see in Watt's authors, and certainly the conversation on money even through Friedman's analysis in 1962 and Gowan's fears in the late seventies can boil down to the paradoxical desire to own and be owned.

But the parallel development – which in itself is too far-reaching to develop here² – of the stock market and what Marx misleadingly calls "fictional capital" or finance capital overtook the concern of gold versus specie in the mid-to-late 1970s and the massive economic malaise of the era. David Harvey describes the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s as "a serious crisis of

² While by no means comprehensive, readers curious about this history would do well to start with Robert Brenner's excellent account of the 2008 financial crisis, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, as well as Anna Kornbluh's more aesthetic but nonetheless instructive *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form*.

capital accumulation” in which “[unemployment] and inflation were both surging everywhere, ushering in a global phase of ‘stagflation’” (12). The solution to this problem was the Volcker Shock alluded to above, in which the US Federal Reserve imposed a “draconian increase in interest rates...designed to establish a permanent anti-inflation parameter which would guarantee that the dollar, backed by Treasury bonds, would provide a reliable anchor for international finance” (Panitch and Gindin 14). This policy was a “necessary but not sufficient condition” for the creation of the free-floating international market values that have aided the emergence of the regime of global free trade we have today (Harvey 24). The materiality of gold or even the dollar was replaced, in theory as much as in practice, with credit technologies (e.g. bonds) and heavy government protection of free trade, which is (at least in part) as Friedman imagined it. The guiding philosophy behind this regime is, as Harvey puts it, the abandonment of “full employment as [a] key objective...in favor of a policy designed to quell inflation no matter what the consequences might be for employment” which lead to a lengthy recession and massive unemployment (23).

And so the stage is set for the rise of the at-will employment and austerity measures with which we opened our chapter. But as this inquiry is not at its core economic, but aesthetic, the question must now be asked: what does this shift in the way money appears in the world have to do with the way that literature tries to represent the world. To answer this question, I want to turn to William Gaddis’ *JR*, a novel that, like *McTeague*, understands the emotional crisis of its era in financial terms. Unlike *McTeague*, however, Gaddis takes explicitly non-realistic measures to put his representation forward. *JR* consists of almost total dialogue, with even pro forma designations for who is speaking to whom often left out. The plot follows, among other things, the relationship between an artistic misfit named Edward Bast who at times teaches, writes

music, and performs other odd jobs, and a strangely industrious and grift-happy boy named JR who takes advantage of Bast's status as an adult to build a fortune by trading stocks in paper goods. The novel reads often like a comedy, and both the absurdity of opportunity provided to JR – who uses nothing more than naïve confidence and magazine advertisements to make his first investments – and the chaos of the world that is made possible by and reflected in financial trading are often used for light-hearted commentary. That said, the experimental formal qualities of the novel – which I discuss a bit more in my third chapter – contribute to an undertone of unease in the novel's representation of financialization. As Michael Clune argues, the figure of exchange looms large in *JR*, specifically the figure of cost and exchange-value, which is foremost in any of JR's transactions, but secondary, at best, to Bast as an artist. In this way, JR emblemizes a new type of protagonist to Bast's bildungsroman-style aesthete. Further, Clune argues that in *JR*, "price is doing something new and strange. By imagining that price can replace social communication, Gaddis' novel transforms market value. Price can replace intersubjectivity because it introduces a collective dimension into JR's immediate first-person awareness of the world" (20). In other words, not only is *JR*'s disjointed dialogue form reflective of the chaotic quality of the financial marketplace, the formal quality of the language is, to put it inelegantly, about the market as well. The stock market is as much of a character in the novel as JR is, if the two can even be considered distinct characters in the first place.

What Gaddis produces out of all of this is a fairly ambitious attempt to represent the disjointed market forces of late capitalism, but about three years before the Volcker Shock would push this contemporary version of capitalism into existence. So *JR* has the quality of a fin-de-siècle novel, caught between two moments: at once a modernist attempt to produce what Adorno might call art that is autonomous from the market, and at the same time an appeal to the kind of

already coopted representation of capital that Jameson and Fisher describe. *JR* exemplifies this ambivalence best through the character of Bast, the artist who is put in the uncomfortable situation of being JR's consiglieri and legitimate front throughout the novel, thanks in large part to the fact that he has an adult's voice. Bast, however, is at his core an aesthete, as we learn from his coworker, Jack Gibbs, who reveals that Bast has been "selling his blood for money to buy paint" (48). Major Hyde, who is pitching his series of propagandist educational videos to JR's school, responds in disgust:

Get it? Art? You get it where you get anything you buy it, listen Gibbs don't try to tell me in this day and age there isn't enough around for everybody great art, pictures music books who's heard all the great music there is, you? You read all the great books there are? seen all these great pictures? Records of any symphony you want reproductions you can get them that are almost perfect...your friend here selling his blood he's crazy that's all (48).

Hyde's outburst predicts the attitudes of most of the other characters in *JR*, for whom the invention of the player piano is a license to "[shoot] the God damned pianist" (604). Art in the world of *JR* is reduced to the level of other commodities – if there is no need for twenty different kinds of paper towel, then why would there be a need to have twenty different paintings? Or, put differently, if there is still a surplus of art to consume, then producing more would represent a very thriftless decision, as demand clearly hasn't caught up with supply.

Art, then, is a problem for the world of *JR* not because it is subversive or revolutionary, but because it is superfluous to profit. Music and art are nice, but the production of more after two millennia of surplus is a waste of resources, and is remunerated as such. Bast finds this when he is commissioned to score an original composition for orchestra by Crawley of Crawley and

Bros, a business with whom JR's shell company is doing business. The composition, meant to draw from Crawley's collection of slides of wild game, is scored by Bast for 95 instruments and upon receipt, Crawley is confused at the lack of performed and recorded music. Scolding Bast for what he perceives to be his laziness, he explains that "[not] all of us have been given your unique gifts, and when I feel you are using them to satisfy what has struck me on more than one occasion as an almost unhealthy preoccupation with money, I am bound to tell you so sir" (448). After the reprimand, and Bast's panicked assertion that "I do need the money in fact I still owe my, I still have some things to straighten out," Crawley offers him "four hundred dollars" to disprove "the doubters who tell us of the unreliability, the indolence, the ingratitude of the artist" (448). Artists, in the absence of a true need for art, are revered but paid still what the market demands; the starving artist in *JR* is not just an unfortunate situation but a determination of a market logic of scarcity and anxiety. As Coen, Bast's family lawyer tells Bast toward the end of the book, "if you want to make a million you don't have to understand money, what you have to understand is people's fears about money that's what it's all about" (683). If Bast's artistic impulses align with the idealistic joy of creation – as they likely would in someone who sells his blood for paint – then the need to produce objects that respond not to artistic desires, nor to audience needs, but to audience fears is a distantly removed ambition from his own.

Bast's distance from his art and the dissatisfaction this creates is what marks *JR* as a novel caught between Keynesian critique and a representation of the obscurity of contemporary capitalism. When Bast, in a late confrontation with JR, is able to complain that the "only station left on the radio anywhere" with decent music "came on one night noises screaming pounding noise brought to you by the J R Family of Companies," he is able to distance himself and his taste in art from the banality of JR's investments and corporate valorization (659). JR's defense

of the radio station being picked up – “is it my fault that’s what franchising is!” – seems ridiculous in the context of Bast’s weightier concerns (660). And this seems like a plausible reading of *JR*, that it is about the disconnect between art and finance, that Bast serves as the protagonist that is the last bastion of sense in a senseless world. But the form of the novel doesn’t quite let this reading land. The ceaseless dialogue that characterizes the novel, much like the endless content of a stock ticker, makes a moral statement on aesthetic purity unlikely or at least untenable. *JR* ends with a one-sided conversation, JR speaking out of a dangling phone receiver, in a sense addressing the reader as the only person left and asking “So I mean listen I got this neat idea hey, you listening? Hey? You listening” (726). The representative of the market gets the last word, and the last word inaugurates through an open question another cycle in the endless market-opportunism of JR. Furthermore, that Gaddis makes the reader herself the final interlocutor of the text signals the triumph of the logic of financialization, despite the admirable quality of Bast. Even the ambitious, experimental novel reaches out to its reader in the manner of an advertisement, becoming in the end like the commodity that Bast consistently resisted producing.

Gaddis almost certainly intends this final triumph of the market over art as an ironic gesture, but in the shadow of 70s stagflation and just a few years prior to the Volcker Shock, the final moments of *JR* seem more prescient than critical. In the moment that even the convenient fiction of money’s connection to stable signification is rejected, the idea of a commodity that can be autonomous from the market, as in Bast’s ideal art, becomes entirely impossible. As the global economy self-corrects and balances around the logic of the dollar, unmoored from regulation, the work of art is unable to take in the whole from a disinterested perspective. Not only is verisimilitude made impossible due to the sheer size and comprehensive quality of the

system of contemporary capitalism, but the novel itself is unable to represent outside of the bounds of the system, forcing it into the strange relationship to the market we see in Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism. But the contradictions inherent in *JR* – that it is a novel committed to a traditional vision of art, but formally undercuts and eventually defeats that commitment – give us a way to see the ways in which novels coopted by the market can produce visions of the system's own cracks – an avenue of critique in an otherwise unassailable, inevitable system.

Mapping Failure: Innovative and Flawed Art from 1979 to Today

As the contemporary moment sees the rise of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and complex algorithms like the Black-Scholes-Merton formula determine the direction of investments in derivatives, we might be tempted to assume capital has shifted into yet another period post-Volcker Shock, into a new hyper-technological form. The fantasies connected to these technologically advanced methods of earning money are immediately evident: limitless and maximized profit through Black-Scholes-Merton's ability to mathematically game the market, and the post-statist utopia of non-specie currency in Bitcoin and its imitators. Indeed, particularly in cryptocurrency, there is a fantasy of returning to what money was originally meant to be: a limited and scarce resource that could be hoarded but never expanded upon. And while Black-Scholes-Merton and cryptocurrency seem on opposite ends of the surplus-scarcity scale, respectively, both re-establish money as a non-human endeavor, naturalized by the new logic of computational algorithms.³ Both financial algorithms and cryptocurrency, in other words, elide the Marxist definition of money as the form of appearance of value by claiming that there is another, objective and mathematical value attached to them that supersedes all others. While this

³ In the Black-Scholes-Merton formula, the algorithm is the star, but in cryptocurrency, the algorithmic logic lies in what's called a "block-chain," which helps to determine the base value of, say, Bitcoins that are mined by users.

is certainly a tempting concept – and worth examination in its own right – this fantasy, I argue, falls apart in the same ways that the fantasy of seamless global trade falls apart: through careful attention to the ways failure of their aesthetic representation prove that neither has innate value. Money, in the end, is the same as it always has been – it is ideology that has improved. With this in mind, the following chapters will take as their scope the late 1970s to the very present, all under the umbrella of contemporary capitalism. What I will argue is that the analysis of contradictions in aesthetic representations of capitalist totality, and the failures of those representations reveal contradictions in the ideologies surrounding late, technological capitalism.

Chapter 2, “Sex, Violence, and the Economy: Kathy Acker’s Plagiarism and Protest From 1978-1995,” argues that just as early American forms reflected an anxiety over money’s changing formal logic through a critique of the logic of the money form itself, Kathy Acker’s novels, particularly *Blood and Guts in High School*, *Don Quixote*, and *Great Expectations*, critique the internal logics of contemporary social inequality. Acker’s novels address and attack normative binary relationships of gender, sexuality, and class in traditional literary forms, particularly through the technology of textual appropriation. Acker sets exactly copied canonical texts among aggressively and lovingly described taboos, from violent sexual encounters, to incest, to fantasies of nebulous sexuality. By pairing the work of Dickens, Jong, and Cervantes, among others, with often shocking, sexualized aggression, I argue that Acker rejects normative relationships between people through a rejection of the logics of literary reference, analogy, and citation. Contemporary critics, however, often reread Acker’s reappropriative formal practice as ameliorative, productive of expansive and connective visions of identity as opposed to an explosive leveling of binary inequalities. Such an account defangs Acker’s radical politics and turns them into mere amelioration, and furthermore represents a failure for Acker’s formal

practice, a way in which it unwittingly produces a reactionary reduction of a radical aesthetic position. What this reduction reveals is that disruptive anti-capitalist forms and aesthetics can be made to be, often unconsciously and through critical practice, collusive partners with capital.

Chapter 3, “Toward an Aesthetics of Frustration: Cormac McCarthy and the Anti-Utopian Novel,” examines McCarthy’s dark Western *Blood Meridian* and the ways in which it imagines utopian solutions to the social problems posed by late capitalism through a failed return to canonical ambition. McCarthy’s novel has been read as an allegory for the violence of American Manifest Destiny, but I argue that the text rejects this legible analogue, instead producing a violent logic of exchange only readable within the formal structures in the novel itself. In this way, McCarthy uses traditional literary symbolism to construct an internal logic of oppositions, the most important one of which is that between the characters of Judge Holden and The Kid. McCarthy understands The Judge as a hyper-acquisitive version of humanity, fascistic and intent on knowing and owning everything; in opposition to this is the hyper-independent Kid, unable to read or write, and simply motivated toward a solitary retreat into nature. While the Kid is posited as a kind of wished-for alternative, his utopian retreat is eventually ended by the Judge, who rises ascendant at the end of the novel. McCarthy discovers what deep ecologists like Arne Næss have already known: that the persistence of sociality is a problem for a natural utopia. What *Blood Meridian*’s final moment actually represents is not just a cautionary tale for a liberatory ecology, but what I call, drawing on Theodor Adorno, a productive failure in form. The Judge returns because of the recursive and necessarily closed form of the novel. Yet, in his return, he opens the productive question, however pessimistically answered, of how the human can survive society. This antagonism is far more important than any moral, ethical, or canonical

claim in the novel, as it reveals through a mirror darkly the stakes of McCarthy's representation to our contemporary capitalist moment.

Chapter 4, "Alone in a World of Objects: Video Games, Interaction, and Capitalist Alienation," follows from Chapter 3 and 4's interest in productive failure and expands upon its focus on the traditional novel into new media, particularly videogames. I begin by taking seriously the film critic Roger Ebert's critique of videogames as necessarily non-artistic objects, and I reclassify this critique as aesthetic, not cultural. Reclassifying Ebert's concern allows me to direct the conversation around videogames away from a focus on their significance as commodities and toward a consideration of their potential as innovative literary forms. This study thereby combines traditional literary-critical aesthetics with the progressive disciplinary concerns of digital humanities in order to produce a materialistic, formal reading of videogames as autonomous objects of art. Unsurprisingly, the videogames themselves somewhat resist this interpretation. In my reading of two very recent and openly "intellectual" videogames, *Gone Home* and *The Talos Principle*, I find that both texts valorize narrative above form, in large part because both demand and centralize player interaction. Interaction, however, while it works as a guiding frame for these videogames, cannot fully contain the mute materiality of code in *Gone Home*, nor can it completely account for the self-reflexive formal critique of *The Talos Principle*. Ultimately, the failure of formal totality is actually the occasion for formal innovation, as the non-narrative remainders of these games demand interaction but, surprisingly, refuse to respond. This refusal to communicate is the reflection of the late capitalist system that the game can be said to metonymically represent: vast, digitized, and silent.

Chapter 5, "The Dollar at the End of the Book: Vanessa Place, Innovation, and Productive Failure," concludes the dissertation by bringing this analysis of systems back to its

origins in the formal qualities of linguistic signification. I focus on controversial conceptual poet Vanessa Place, particularly the “Vanessa Place, Inc” project in which she incorporates herself as a poetic company, in an effort to unpack how conceptual poetry understands its political and poetic efficacy. What I discover is that the political and the poetic are unable to be delinked in conceptual poetics. Instead for conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith, Place, and Place’s theoretical co-author Robert Fitterman, poetry must be made allegorical, transparently indexical in its formal representation to its political commitments. Place in her corporate persona is not attempting to be satirical, but rather mimetic. As Paul de Man’s work on allegory reveals for us, though, the appeal to a total mimesis of reality is never attainable due to the formal slipperiness of language. What we find by looking into Place’s older conceptual work, specifically the single-sentence long-form wartime poem *Dies: A Sentence*, is that grammar, signification, and the arbitrary quality of the sign – poetic, corporate, or otherwise – always returns to ruin the representative totality of the allegory. What is left, however, after the failure of the poetic allegory to express totality, is another kind of autonomous object, unresponsive to its author’s concept. In this way, aesthetic and formal totality sneak in the back door, and in a utopian moment reassert themselves as apart from and potentially transcendent of language, money, and indeed, any vast organizing system of meaning.

Ultimately, this dissertation does not claim to have the blueprint for representing late capitalism critically or correctly. If anything, I would argue that these analyses prove such a blueprint, if it ever did exist, would be impossible to produce today. That said, they do give a glimpse of how one might approach a critique of “inevitable” capitalism in the 21st century, and they put aesthetic analysis in the forefront of that approach. While I certainly would agree that historical materialism is always of the moment, it also seems true to me that there has never been

a more fruitful or important time for ambitious, if flawed, art. Ultimately, this investigation provides not only a relevancy for literary form and practice in our contemporary intellectual moment, but in fact resituates literary aesthetics as the crucial technology for societal self-knowledge and revelation.

Works Cited and Referenced

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Bryan, William Jennings. "Cross of Gold." *History Matters*: np. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- Clune, Michael. *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. Print.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009. Print.
- Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Fortieth Anniversary Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Print.
- Gaddis, William. *JR*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012. Print.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Trans. T.M. Knox, Ed. Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Future City." *New Left Review* 21 (2003): np. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- . *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. San Diego: Harcourt Press, 1964. Print.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963. Print.
- . *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: The Merlin Press, 1971. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- McCloskey, Dierdre. *The Rhetoric of Economics*. 2nd Edition. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Print.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.
- Panitch, Leo and Sam Gindin. *The Making of Global Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 2012. Print.
- Shuster, Simon. "European Politics Are Swinging to the Right." *Time Magazine*, 22 Sept 2016. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980. Print.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962. Print.

Sex, Violence, and the Economy: Kathy Acker's Plagiarism and Protest From 1978-1995

Whenever we talk about contemporary American literature, we're also talking about the economy, thanks in no small part to the peculiar ubiquity of American capitalism at the end of the 20th century. In our media, our philosophy, even – as “wealth pastor” Joel Osteen might triumphally suggest – in our religion, we encounter the logic of capital. This cultural suffusion of capitalism informs its inescapability as well as its invisibility in our current moment: we occupy a dehistoricized existence under the logic of the market, what Fredric Jameson has observed in his *Postmodernism* as the global elimination of any space of resistance to capital. To paraphrase Francis Fukuyama from his seminal neoliberal celebration *The End of History*: all history heretofore existing may be class conflict, but after the fall of the USSR, that history is over. Capitalism is not only culturally ascendant – it's the only game in town. But how did this happen? What, beyond the fall of the USSR, prompted a turn away from class politics that were even recognizable in the late 1960s and early 1970s? What made something like Occupy Wall Street – a strategy borrowed from UC Berkeley protestors from three or four decades earlier – seem totally unrecognizable and aberrant in 2010's American protest culture? What made us forget about the difference between the rich and the poor?

I think it's important that, in answering this question, one keep in mind the “non-economic” elements of capitalism. It is of course true that the forces most associated with the shift to culturally total or “late” capitalism are the world organizing economic treaties and organizations that maintain a capitalist stranglehold in imagination and in material fact: the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), to name just a few. And while picturing the constraints of global capitalism as the product of semi-autonomous economic regulatory boards is not only tempting intellectually, but theoretically in line with premises taken in the previous chapter, it is too narrow a perspective.

As the avant-garde feminist author Kathy Acker titular character wonders in her 1986 novel *Don Quixote*, “what’s happening in Africa? Where there is [*sic*] can I interfere?”:

Unfortunately for [Don Quixote] there didn’t seem to be any trouble in Africa.

Biafra had just declared its independence and the USA was supporting Biafra.

Why was the USA acting so romantically? Cause the Biafran Ibos were

Christians, mainly Catholics – Jews always prefer Catholics to Wasps on account of the tribal systems – whereas the Right-Wing (there) was Moslem or Black.

Political motivations aren’t always economic which makes politics complicated.

(105-106)

Economics, Acker suggests provocatively, are simple; politics, which are individualized, made personal by religious, tribal, national, racial, and (though not in this passage) gender identity, are almost impossibly complex. In response to the current call for intersectionality in left critique – the demand for a vision of the world that considers class, race, gender, sexuality, et al, as covalent and complementary forces of social oppression under neoliberalism – Acker might respond that, *if only* we could de-intersect, we’d be better off. And to a more orthodox Marxian claim that all conflict derives from class conflict, Acker might add, flipping Fukuyama 20 years early, that even class conflict is now individuated and made culturally unique to an extreme degree. So when Acker writes in her 1978 novel *Blood and Guts in High School* that “politics don’t disappear but take place inside my body,” we can understand her point to be that politics of difference don’t atomize class into hyper-individualized stances – “disappearing” from the field of consideration – but instead reorient themselves away from the coherent world-theory of communism and into a more personal, individuated, chaotically politicized body (97). This claim opens more questions than it answers, however. For instance, when we say that our bodies are

politicized, does who we are or who we identify as determine the answer? For instance, are we a woman, who might feel that their reproductive rights politicize their body? Are we a citizen who is worried about creeping state surveillance commodifying and quantifying our body in ways we find troubling? Are we a transgender person who finds the validity of their gendered identity at the forefront of arguments over bathroom usage? And body politics are not quite the same as a politics of the body, despite affinities. How one's body is impacted by, determined by, or proscribed by political forces then not only depends on the familiar nodes of one's gender, racial, and, sexual identity, but also – tragically – on one's class identity.

Acker's representations of the radically proscribed individual under the power of politics, economic or otherwise, proliferate throughout her novels as characters who are totally at the mercy of these forces at the level of identity, despite their ability to switch genders, sexualities, even identities at will. Acker's prose itself reflects this indeterminacy, as it reproduces entire passages of plagiarized text without signal or attribution, almost as a formal method of producing discord. Some of Acker's critics interpret this discordant writing as Acker's effort to produce an updated version of what Luce Irigaray calls "women's writing," or writing that by its very form rejects patriarchal norms of writing. Katie Muth suggests that Acker's engagement of the postmodern and poststructuralist traditions transforms and updates Irigaray's theoretical frame, arguing that Acker, in rejecting both the cultural critique of Irigaray and the narrower political lens of critics like Walter Benn Michaels, produces novels that take on "the work of making visible the experience of language and with it the experience of politics" (104). For Muth, who is part of a school of criticism that sees Acker as the inheritor of the (mostly French) poststructuralist and deconstructionist debates over the indeterminacy of self and language, it is language, not economics, that resolves-as-difference the identitarian "complexity" Acker laments

in *Don Quixote*. While Irigaray's "women's writing" is meant to align the subaltern status of non-patriarchal speech with the systemic and productive instability of linguistic signification, Acker's work, her contemporary readers suggest, recognizes the ways in which language does not reproduce but rather mediates identity. As Miranda Rose writes:

Although Acker so often laments and critiques language's inexorable connection with power and ideology, she nevertheless allows it a materiality that extends beyond the reach of ideology and social reality. (120)

Muth and Rose therefore, as well as many of Acker's other critics, see Acker conceiving language as both a cage and a possibility – a proscribing political force and a utopian gesture – and dialectically resolve this conception into the gendered freedom of not irrational, but anti-rational speech.

Not all of Acker's critics follow this line of thinking, however; there is a second school of thought that sees Acker's appropriative formal practice as a rebellious offshoot of postmodern pastiche, a concept also popularized in Jameson's *Postmodernism*. Jameson describes pastiche as the natural outcome of the "disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style" (16) the literary mirror of the "new depthlessness...of the image or the simulacrum" (6). So, pastiche, which is "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style," resembles older, more politically critical discourses of appropriation but is also "amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of the conviction that...some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (Jameson 17). Jameson's critique of linguistic aberrance, here particularly as a symptom of shallow political critique, seems to indict Acker's prose as simulacrum, images for images' sake. However, as Karen Brennan writes, Acker's prose reveals the blindspot that Jameson's theory has for

feminine writing, as it “suggests...pastiche is hardly a neutral mode but is impelled by some utopian longing of the male soul to reclaim its place at the ‘center’ of language” (251). Thus we return to a different angle of the Irigarayan problem of “women’s writing,” in which Acker’s appropriations are re-writings of male texts are made “senseless” by a patriarchal reading practice. This kind of practice informs readings like Ankhi Mukherjee’s engaging critique of Acker’s *Great Expectations*, a reading that ultimately sees Acker updating Dickens’ novel:

[Dickens’] autobiographical novel of endless reversals ends with the hope that Pip’s belated authorship of his life will mark a rebeginning, not a return. In contrast, the hysterical protagonist of Acker’s novel is dissatisfied, disgusted, and sick with desire: he or she ambivalently negotiates a cultural wasteland, where even language has been defeated by that which it could not speak for or of (115).

Mukherjee does not read pastiche as neutral, but rather, like Brennan, sees it as “a transformative and transgressive reimagining,” one in which the “hysterical” writing of women reveals that there is “nowhere to return to, and nothing to remember, for what it ‘repeats’ compulsively is that which was never experienced” (131). For Mukherjee, Brennan, and a number of more historically minded feminist scholars, then, Acker is not continuing the death spiral of history instantiated by the poststructural turn, but instead resituating the arc of history away from the patriarchal, revealing the lack of meaning at the core of the canon.⁴

Between these two schools of thought, however, Acker’s own intentions as an author seem to fall away from focus in favor of her status as political analogue. We might, as Marjorie

⁴ Brennan argues this a bit more enthusiastically when she writes of *Don Quixote* that “This is not to say that Acker would have women become didactic purveyors of parabolic wisdom but rather that, at the end of her novel, she instructs us to change our paradigms, to imagine the world differently. Finally, it is the imagination that Acker believes will create our freedom; fictions, hysterical and female, may make possible our human transformation” (268).

Worthington does, admit that Acker's "[narrative] resistance must ultimately fail" (251), but it seems to me disingenuous to assume such a specific failure for Acker reflects a generic impossibility to subvert under "traditional cultural structures" (248). As Kathryn Hume puts it while arguing against the disappearance of the author in Acker's novels, the "voice in her fiction is so recognizable and so rabidly determined to resist all manipulation from outside that it troubles many assumptions about postmodern decentering" of the author (489). And Acker herself disavows the political resonance of appropriative strategies by asserting her position as an iconoclastic author, arguing that she was appropriating prior to the emergence of "postmodernity" and also that she appropriates simply because "I literally can't write any other way" (McCaffery 90).⁵ Acker's very productive failure is uniquely her own.

The failure, in other words, cannot only be about the non-individualized world historical conditions of capital accumulation, though it is certainly about that in part. Instead, to take seriously Acker's claim of politics taking place in the body, we must also take the subjective speaking and writing body seriously to begin with. Far from the poststructural identity politics of Irigarayan women's writing and equally far from the reclaiming of pastiche, Acker's prose is interested in an historicized account of the failure of the contemporary subject. Particularly, Acker's plagiaristic strategy does not distance the text from itself, nor does it distance the author from her work, but instead levels the rhetorical inequalities of literary identity in order to critique the author's ability to self-fashion under neoliberalism, or late capitalism. This turn to finance is not out of place in Acker, for whom abusive politicians and world forces – Reagan, Thatcher, the WTO – often take center stage as antagonists. As we will see in a reading of sections from *Blood*

⁵ Acker's sense of practicality in her writing extends to her feminism, as well. Acker's claim that "*I like men*. I don't have any problems with guys. But I have lots of problems with society" (McCaffery 97, emphasis original) echoes with Martina Sciolino's observation that, Acker's plagiarism is her response to the poststructurally begged question "From what position can a woman write and claim her experience when authority is under erasure" (440)?

and Guts in High School (written in 1976), *Great Expectations* (1982), and *Don Quixote which was a dream* (1986), Acker's appropriation novels – perhaps more aptly her plagiarisms – allows her to dramatize the emptying of subjectivity at the “end of history” through the failure of expression that occurs when the individual meets the systemic. As her novels continue through the late 1970s into the 1980s, and as her criticism extends into the 1990s, the historical concessions made to neoliberalism close any space of possibilities further and further. This protraction of identity is absolutely a failure for Acker's work, but a planned failure, one that reveals the only utopia is anti-social: animality, perversion, or death. This pessimism is unacknowledged by her critics, and even ultimately disavowed by Acker herself late in life, and this is another failure, now unplanned, but doubly important to the contemporary meaning of Acker's work. Critical failure represents the ways in which Acker's radical understanding of gender – that it resolves into disarticulated impossibility under the limited and limiting space of neoliberal capitalism – is rewritten as ameliorative and utopian. And by examining this utopia next to the work it disfigures, we will see the ways in which Acker's critics unintentionally ally her with the forces that her novels most clearly reject.

Imitation as Utopia: *Hello, I'm Erica Jong* and *Blood and Guts in High School*

In 1982, Acker published a chapbook version of a poem that originally appeared in her 1978 novel *Blood and Guts in High School*. The chapbook was titled *Hello, I'm Erica Jong* and contained a brief prose-poem along with illustrations by Michael McClard. Acker's visual collaboration with McClard is probably worth an analysis of its own, but the political premise of Acker's poem, “Hello, I'm Erica Jong”, demands the attention of any analysis from the outset. While the poem itself passes by without too much fanfare in *Blood and Guts* thanks to the

novel's frenetic back-and-forth between narrators, concepts, and, for lack of a better word, bits, Acker's republication of "Hello, I'm Erica Jong" formally resituates the poem in a way that reveals her thematic goals in *Blood and Guts* as well.⁶ That the poem is published by Acker but also by Jong, with Janey – the sexually abused, imprisoned, and rebellious protagonist of *Blood and Guts* who originally writes about Jong – written out is remarkable. The plagiarism sheds a layer of plausible deniability, shifting from in-character literary criticism of a sort to something altogether different.

"Hello, I'm Erica Jong" is a chaotic, often explicit and sexual account of being Erica Jong, in which Jong, author of the bestselling sex-positive, feminist novel, *Fear of Flying*, deconstructs her work to her readers. In its chapbook form, the poem indicates to its reader that it isn't written by Erica Jong only by way of its style and title page – outside of the cover telling us that this is a poem written by Kathy Acker and the lack of Jong's fairly normative prose style, there is nothing to suggest the poem is not by Jong. Yet, these two facts can at least convince us that Acker is not interested in creating some sort of forgery, but rather is interested in writing a poem as someone other than Kathy Acker. The distinction, admittedly, is a bit fine but also important – Acker both is and is not writing as Kathy Acker who is and is not embodying Erica Jong. The indeterminacy, it seems, is a formal demand. Acker does not just write a poem as Erica Jong, but, in an anti-mimetic stroke, refuses to change her easily recognizable and idiosyncratic style to more accurately mirror Jong's. The poem is, in other words, an exercise, not a forgery, and asserts this in its opening lines:

Hello, I'm Erica Jong. All of you liked my novel *Fear of Flying* because in it you met real people. People who loved and suffered and lived. My novel contained

⁶ Citation numbers to follow come from *Blood and Guts*, as the *Erica Jong* chapbook is difficult to come by, and the content is unchanged, aside from the removal of McClard's illustrations.

real people that's why you liked it. My new novel *How to Die Successfully* contains those same characters. And it contains two new characters. You and me. All of us are real. Goodbye. (148)

Acker's text begins with passing resemblance to the prose one might find in Jong's novels, and the thrust of the passage follows that of a standard press release or interview. Acker-Jong introduces herself, establishes ethos by referencing her bestselling novel, emphasizes the saleable commodity of "real people" in her fiction, and moves on to her new novel. The disjuncture begins to occur, then, not in terms of style, but in terms of content. Acker has created the novel *How to Die Successfully* from whole cloth, though perhaps with an eye toward Jong's second novel *How to Save Your Own Life* (and ironically echoing Jong's most recent novel, 2015's *Fear of Dying*). The description of Jong's appeal as being about "real people," however, articulates something more critical than fanciful, poking fun at the banalities of Jong's audience and of her work. Furthermore, Acker-Jong's preoccupation with repeated words and phrases – "real," "real people," "characters" – seems intentional, as does the shortening of sentences through to the final one-word send-off, "Goodbye." We can begin to see the refraction of the poem's initially conservative prose in these early moments, as the preoccupation with readable prose shifts through superfluous repetition to a self-consciously constructed style, intentionally stilted and wooden.

Acker-Jong takes this initial refraction further in her second stanza, beginning again with "Hello, I'm Erica Jong" and then insisting that "I'm a real novelist" (148). The commitment to verifiable life-experience in the midst of a forgery suggests that Acker is interested in limning the distinctions of real and assumed identity, a typical enough move in postmodern American literature. But after telling her reader that she writes books about "the agony of American life,

how we all suffer,” Acker-Jong breaks from her composed style in a longer stream-of-consciousness:

Life in this country is going to get more horrible, unbearable, making us maniacs
cause mania and death will be the only doors out of prison except for those few
rich people and even they are agonized prisoners in their masks, the paths, the
ways they have to act to remain who they are. You think booze sex coke rich food
etc. are doors out? Temporary oblivion at best. We need total oblivion. What was
I saying? Oh, yes, my name is Erica Jong (148)

While the passage returns to the leitmotif of the poem in its very last line, the terror of the previous lines jolts the Acker-Jong persona off of the smooth structure and easy pace of the previous stanza. Triggered by the lexical connection of maniac and mania, the line begins to move forward at a breakneck pace, shifting suddenly and for the first time to class relations and the ineffectual escapes of the rich. Again, the Acker-Jong persona insists upon returning to the “real,” but real in this case is distinguished as permanent as opposed to provisional or temporary oblivion. And oblivion is posited as a solution to the provisional sense of identity, which causes the rich and poor alike to act out, become “maniacs” in order to “remain who they are” (148). The Acker-Jong voice sees this way out – that is, total oblivion – only during the fugue state brought on by the acknowledgement of mania: as soon as the self-reflexive “What was I saying?” is uttered, the poem returns to its theme, “my name is Erica Jong” (148).

At this point though, the phrase seems less like an affirmation of identity and more a toehold against the mania of the second stanza. This mania returns to a head in the following two stanzas however, in which Acker begins to allude to the topics of sexual discovery that are prevalent in Jong’s novels, particularly *Fear of Flying*. *Fear of Flying* is most celebrated for its

frank depictions of female sexuality, specifically its protagonist's adulterous fantasies that are not disavowed but embraced by the protagonist and the novel itself. Acker-Jong twists this emancipatory approach to sexuality into a denial of selfhood in the next stanza, beginning with "I would rather be a baby than have sex. I would rather go GOOGOO. I would rather write googoo" (148). Sexual interest continues to devolve, past infancy and into total rejection of the theology of self-empowerment that Jong's work promotes:

FUCK YOU UP YOUR CUNTS THAT'S WHO I AM THE FUCK WITH
YOUR MONEY I'M NOT CATERING TO YOU ANYMORE I'M GETTING
OUT I'M GETTING OUT I'M RIPPING UP MY CLOTHES I'M RIPPING UP
MY SKIN I HURT PAIN OH HURT ME PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD DO
YOU UNDERSTAND? PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD. ME ERICA JONG
WHEE WOO WOO (148-149)

While profanity is standard in Acker's work generally, the Acker-Jong persona has, up until this hard shift into its id, only used language that might be acceptable to publish in a major arts or entertainment magazine. At the moment the poem shifts into capitalization, though, Acker-Jong explodes the sexual undertone of the piece into an aggressive key, one that matches the pain and sadism of the rest of the passage. "THE FUCK WITH YOUR MONEY" is no more an anti-capitalist rejection of profit here than "PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD;" the two are homologues of a sort, as the rejection of money or profit is figured as the embracing of punishment and suffering. Considering the sexual context of the passage, we might wonder if this pain is sado-masochistic, and, if so, if it would not be too far from Jong's emancipatory vision of female sexuality, nor far from Acker's own embracing of taboo fetishes. But the correlation between profit and pain is deeper than kink, and particularly aligns with the self, with

the “I am” – aurally, the “iamb” that signals linguist constructedness – that begins the next stanza. Unlike the previous passages in which self-affirmation returns the speaker to her identity as Erica Jong, this I am leads into more of the now-unremarkable profanity of the passage, as “I am” not just Erica Jong but “Erica Jong fuck me you creep who’s going to Australia you’re leaving me all alone you’re leaving me without sex I’ve gotten hooked on sex and I’m” (149). The sentence itself is written in a stream of consciousness, and perhaps isn’t meant to be held up to the scrutiny of grammatical fine parsing, but the lack of an object to the “am” implied in “I’m” produces a striking aporia: before now, the speaker has always *been* something, and more pointedly, has always been *someone*. Furthermore, the phrase that succeeds the break after this stutter-stop is “My name is Erica Jong,” a sentence that asserts the fact of juridical identity – my name [that was given to me by fiat of the state and my parents] is Erica Jong – as opposed to personal subjectivity. “If there is God,” Erica Jong continues, “God is disjunction and madness” (149). The prose poem ends on a brief send off – “Yours truly, Erica Jong” – and we are left with this cryptic final note that constellates the poem’s five major signifiers: subjectivity, sex, money, pain, and madness.

In order to parse Acker’s embodiment of Erica Jong – and in order to begin to triangulate her politics in general – we need to understand these five terms in the ways that Acker intends them to be meant. Jong’s own non-Acker work deals with all five, as the sexual awakening of her protagonist in *Fear of Flying* trades in the taboos of adulterous fantasy and the emotional and economic precarity of female sexuality. The basic battle of modern feminism – to decouple women from their roles as mad, sexually incomprehensible beings, infantilized and neutered by men – can be summed up in the mantra these five words give us. But Acker means something more precise here, particularly as regards the double bind of sex and identity. The disjunction

and madness that end the poem mirror or imply the death that begins the poem: the individual, Acker-Jong seems to suggest, is constituted by sex (as with the protagonist of *Fear of Flying*) and death (as, one assumes, would the protagonist of *How to Die Successfully*). This individual is unraveled through madness and disjunction, which we see dramatized through the Jong persona's trajectory from the author of a coherent sales pitch to a being of sexual infancy and absence. Acker-Jong loses her sense of subjectivity at the moment when she embraces infancy – “I would rather be a baby” – a choice that is closely aligned with her rejection of profit – “THE FUCK WITH YOUR MONEY.” For Acker, as we will see again and again, subjectivity is reliant on profit and capital, and therefore subjectivity is not a sufficient endgame for artistic expression. Acker denigrates Jong's sexual revolution when she embodies her writing not because female sexuality is bad, but because the sexual identity imagined by Jong in *Fear of Flying* – a person who in sum “loved and suffered and lived” – is impossible under the historical conditions Acker sees herself under as a woman. Part of this is the condition of late capitalism, but Acker's conception of history is equal parts economical, gendered, and sexualized. To return to the constellation of terms that structure “Hello, I'm Erica Jong”, Acker theorizes subjectivity to be structured by profit, but the insufficiency of this kind of subject is revealed through sexual and bodily experience unmediated by social norms, fetishized, taboo, painful and often pointless.

Madness exists after unmediated, chaotic – possibly “hysterical” – sexual mania as the alternative to subjectivity. In this way, Acker-Jong's “God” is not divine so much as He is an ordering logic. If madness is the only cogent, non-ideological method to be close to the body or to sexuality, then Acker's theory of the subject is, unlike Jong's, fairly pessimistic. Feminism does not appear to be an emancipatory or hopeful system in the sense of self-actualized individuals; if anything, it appears to be a method for unraveling the imbricated logics of the

subject under the restrictive historical conditions of neoliberal capitalism. But why does Acker need to take the personas of canonical authors and artists, even characters in novels and poetry to produce this unraveling? How does the canonical voice or the canonical text license Acker to produce this vision of disjunction and chaos? And how does this license change over time?

We can begin to answer these questions by returning to the text that housed “I Am Erica Jong” before it was self-published, namely *Blood and Guts in High School*. While it might be possible to read “Erica Jong” as a sort of women’s writing, threatening and irrational to a patriarchal structure, within the context of *Blood and Guts*, the debasement of the poem is given far more prominence of place. The protagonist of *Blood and Guts*, Janey, begins in an incestuous, pedophilic relationship with her father, and after he leaves her, she moves to New York City, where she is put into sexual slavery with an abusive Persian pimp. While the novel is truly grim, the plot is not particularly important except as a set piece for Acker’s expression through Janey: what is actually occurring in the text, and how, are often opaque. Even through this opacity, however, Janey has one clear experience that echoes the Bildungsroman structure the novel’s title implies – she learns to read. While being held captive by the Persian slaveholder and pimp, Janey learns to read, write, and critique in English and Persian, and while the novel is full of complex and beautiful moments in her education, the instance I’m most interested in is when she performs her first literary criticism, taking the position of Acker herself in a reversal of the Acker-Jong relationship, and appropriating the characters of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in order to dissect their relationships in terms of contemporary gender relationships.

The contemporaneity of Janey’s reading is, admittedly, distorted. Hester and Janey merge into one character, with Janey crying to the Dimmesdale stand-in, Dimwit, that “I want to fuck

you, Dimwit” (95). Hester cries out against the “most important men in the world [who] decide it’s their duty to tear the mother away from her child...so they can train the child to suck their cocks” (94). The report on *The Scarlet Letter* itself shifts between these profane and surreal claims and embodiments and a sort of clunky book report style, beginning with claims like “Long ago, when Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, he was living in a society that was more socially repressive and less materialistic than ours” and “things are much better nowadays than in those old dark repressed Puritan days: anybody can say anything today; progress can occur” (66). The irony of a woman who has moved from an incestuous relationship with her father to become a sex slave claiming that things are “better nowadays” is not at all buried in Acker’s prose, and the shift between the violently sexual reading of *The Scarlet Letter* and Janey’s veneer of school-girl boiler plate is intentionally jarring. By leveling distinctions between normative and traumatic speech, Acker draws a homology between sexually violent speech and generic speech, making the generic speech more troubling and, dialectically, the violent speech less remarkable. As Janey says, just before the aforementioned “politics don’t disappear but take place inside my body,” “Everything is on the surface. That everything is me: I’m just surface: surface is surface” (97). Politics are complex but shallow, simulacra that not only obscure but replace the real world, such that “Now the only image in my mind is your cock in my cunt” (95) becomes indistinguishable in tone or content from Janey’s final anodyne review of Hawthorne’s work:

The Scarlet Letter is the best book I’ve read locked up in the Persian slave trader’s room and I think everyone should read it. I’m not going to tell you the ending of the book and spoil it for you. I think the author Nathaniel Hawthorne felt that his readers should have fun reading his stories. He didn’t think anybody’d learn anything. (100)

Acker's work here does not quite plagiarize *The Scarlet Letter*, but it embodies it, subverting it twice in a double-move. First, Hawthorne's work is read against its stodgy reputation and given its more accurate subversive due in Acker's critique of "Dimwit," the Puritans, and nearly anyone save Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl. The triumphalist quality of this reading is given early on when Janey writes that "Nowadays [unlike Hawthorne's society] most women fuck around 'cause fucking doesn't mean anything"; it is undercut through Acker's second subversion when Janey adds that "All anybody cares about today is money" (66). Janey's reading – a fairly typical feminist reorientation of *The Scarlet Letter* – is reread and rewritten by Acker's chaotic formal strategy. The emancipatory quality of Hester's self-motivated choice to "fuck Dimwit... to have Dimwit for ever and for ever...a dream of a limitless world" (98) is continually undercut by Janey's real-world observations that "[once] upon a time there was a materialistic society one of the results of this materialism was a 'sexual revolution'" (99). Any emancipation for women in Acker's work is sexual emancipation, and sexual emancipation for Janey is pleasurable (the "PARADISE" Hawthorne says is possible), but it is also incest, slavery, and abuse (96). Sex is both the ultimate good and the ultimate ill.

Acker is no prude, though; as she says in an interview, "the actual *act* of sexuality...there is a kind of undeniable materiality which *isn't* up for grabs. It's in the body finally which we can't be touched by all our skepticism and ambiguous systems of belief" (McCaffery 93, emphasis original). The body, then, carries with it a certain kind of potential for Acker that, to risk being too on the nose, fucking does not. Politics occur in the body, it would seem, because the body is the final ground of the political that is not surface, that is not discursive or ideological. But that begins to look like a fairly narrow ground. As Janey says of Hawthorne, he "*is a writer*" and writers "create what they do out of their own frightful agony and blood and mushed-up guts and

horrible mixed-up insides” (100, emphasis original). Acker is, of course, also a writer and is also writing from the blood and agony and mushed-up guts of her point of view of the world, which is largely determined by the ways in which the government, bureaucratic, and banking organizations define it. As Janey explains, the “government, the big multinational businessmen, the scholars and teachers, and the cops are the people who maintain the roads” and there are no options off the road outside of the madness that Erica Jong found above. So the body is proscribed and determined by outside forces, despite it being the only thing in the world that is not simply surface but materially real.

This begins to explain the reasons why Acker might feel the appropriation of other authors’ voices works as a literary model, even though her use of Hawthorne is more literary critical than appropriative. As with all writers, she is trapped in her own analysis of the world, able to narrate her moment, but not change it. And by appropriatively taking on others’ voices, she is able to dramatize the ways in which writers that came before her wrote in conditions that are not so materially or epistemologically different from her own. As Janey writes,

The society in which I’m living is totally fucked-up. I don’t know what to do. I’m just one person and I’m not very good at anything. I don’t want to live in hell my whole life. If I knew how this society go so fucked-up, if we all knew, maybe we’d have a way of destroying hell. I think that’s what Hawthorne thought. (66)

Prior to the concluding sentence – “I think that’s what Hawthorne thought” – the description of societal discontent in this passage could be either Janey’s or Hawthorne’s, and Acker intentionally emphasizes this ambiguity in order to characterize the force of Janey’s lengthy, 15-20 page discursus of *The Scarlet Letter*. Writing anything down at all is a reinscription of the discursive regimes that already surround us: we repave the roads already made for us. Thus any

identity we occupy is always already coopted by the forces Acker sees as organizing the world at all times. And either the prehistory of literature is similarly proscribed, or, as is perhaps more likely, our current economic and cultural moment rewrites our history into its own continuity. With literature, culture, sex, and identity totally coopted, then, politics does indeed take place inside the body, but this final confined materiality is hardly comforting.

At the end of *Blood and Guts in High School*, Janey dies, though as with any other plot point in the novel's chaotic duration, it is not clear if this death is metaphorical, literal, or somehow both. The second to last image of the novel is a drawn beach scene with two human figures, one spread-eagled, the other bent over, in a coat-of-arms frame with the legend "So we create this world in our own image" written underneath (164). Beside this is a short prose poem called "So the doves..." which lays out a potentially utopian vision from the tragic end of the novel:

So the doves cooed softly to each other, whispering of their own events, over
Janey's grave in the grey Saba Pacha cemetery in Luxor. Soon many other Janey's
were born and these Janey's covered the earth. (165)

Many critics read this final moment as a sort of manifesto for Acker, in which Janey's death and rebirth represent what Karen Brennan calls "the ambivalence and instability of feminine fiction itself" (268). And while I agree with Brennan that the proliferation of Janey's suggests a future for women's writing as such, I would not go so far, as she does, to say that Acker "instructs us to change our paradigms, to imagine the world differently" (268). Janey, despite being a gripping and sympathetic protagonist, is not an emancipatory figure: she is abused, imprisoned, and dies of cancer (an unfortunate premonition of Acker's own death in 1997 from breast cancer). As much as Acker leaves the door open for the rebirth of the feminine ideal here, she also closes that

door in on itself. Janey populates the world, we might interpret Acker saying, and the world continues on in her image, which is surface upon surfaces.

In this context, appropriation of voice, as with Erica Jong, or appropriation of meaning, as with *The Scarlet Letter*, appear as plagiaristic strategies that let Acker write not about but around the contemporary world. The roads are paved by the powers-that-be, Acker suggests, but we can revise the ways that those roads work. This is a deeply provisional utopia, one that is only realized in literature. It is not the Irigarayan delegitimization of male-centered rational discourse, nor is it the content-less surface of Jamesonian pastiche. It is critical but pessimistic, born of the moment of its production. The failure of Janey even to express herself, the fact that her protest is immediately coopted into her abuse, reflects the social conditions of when it was composed, the late 1970s. Published in 1978, Acker's novel was composed under the deep stagflation of the Carter administration, just a year before Paul Volcker's decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard would jump start neoliberal economic principles as we know them. The country's disastrous war in Vietnam, the metaphorical dead end of the sexual revolutions of the 1960s, and the economic crises plaguing the nation added to what Carter famously called the "malaise" of America. *Blood and Guts in High School* imagines a future outside of the failed project of 1970s American democracy, but its outlines are hazy at best. Janey's total self-destruction is abetted by the destruction of her body by cancer, the cancelling out of her material self. If there is a potential in Janey's death, it is in the material reproduction of Janey's, people to people the world as opposed to texts. But *Blood and Guts*, despite its literary critical defenders, fails in bringing about this utopia – writing is not material, Acker seems to say, but surface, surface, surface.

Dreaming of Failure: *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*

If *Blood and Guts in High School* reveals the surface quality and demystifies the power of the written, spoken, and believed word, then Acker's later appropriative fiction takes this demystification one step further and begins to question the materiality underlying this surface itself. Given this preoccupation with surfaces, it should come as no surprise that Acker's two most prominent appropriative novels in the 1980s riff on canonical novels that have to do explicitly with subjective apprehension and subjective distortion. Both of the original texts of *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* have their roots in unreality, in questioning a literal or straightforward sense of the world. Dickens' 1861 novel *Great Expectations*, in the same spirit as his more traditionally "serious" novel *Bleak House*, concerns itself with the changing and ever-more-complex relations between people and their money, specifically between people and the money owed them via inheritance. The figure of money, for Dickens, confounds a fairly traditional bildungsroman (as it does in *Blood and Guts*), when Pip finds out that his money did not come from the wealthy and cruel Miss Havisham, but from the low born entrepreneur-cum-pirate Magwitch. This confusion over the source of his fortune propels Pip away from the traditional boy-marries-girl plot and into a much more cosmopolitan narrative in modern London. *Don Quixote*, though it came much earlier in 1605, deals with identity in even more elemental terms, focusing on Quixote whose madness transforms the world into a fearful and wonderful place in which he is a knight. Quixote's return to sanity and disavowal of his adventures at the end of his novel presents one of literature's sturdiest double-binds: the adventures of Don Quixote, knight, are the best parts of his life, but also the parts he must renounce to become sane again. Madness, in *Don Quixote* is defended in much the same way that misplaced fortunes are in *Great Expectations*, as symptoms of new modernities.

Acker takes these steps into modernity and advances them to their extremes, in large part by situating them in the increasingly efficient marketplace and political scene of the 1980s.

Acker's *Great Expectations*, for instance, begins with Dickens' first lines – "My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter" (5) – and the first section of the novel is titled "Plagiarism," so the spirit of Dickens' text is certainly in mind through this early forgery. However, directly following the explicitly lifted lines from Dickens, Acker breaks into the hyper-personalized, subjective work that we saw in *Blood and Guts*: "On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide and in September of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side) died" (5). The quick turn away from playful meditations on names in the Dickens to the abrupt account of the death of family in the Acker conditions the strange temporality of a text caught somewhere between 1861 and 1982. Furthermore, the novel begins with the death of female authority – both family matrons – and the birth of the female author, as Pip Pirrip changes genders, taking on not only Acker's biographical details, but her identity as woman as well. Thus, as we saw with Acker-Jong, Acker's *Great Expectations* is narrated by some version of Acker-Pip, though the Pip element falls out more immediately than does Jong. Acker, in other words, is not only appropriating Dickens' text, but changing it, replacing his protagonist in order to transform the novel while maintaining its interest in new and difficult modernities.

The modernity that Acker seems interested in, though, is not finance specifically, but finance understood as bodily investment. While Dickens' novel interrogates the flimsy ontology of specie – money, especially inheritance, is never just a number, but a narrative as well – Acker's novel attempts to embody money as a reproductive function. And this reproduction is at once linguistic and sexual, referencing and self-consciously stealing from Dickens, Proust, and

Kleist while also problematizing the idealism of these canonical authors with sudden, graphic sex scenes. The sexual interruption, for Acker, ruins the plagiarism by introducing the embodied subject, but in doing so, the embodied subject births the novel. Thus when representation is exhausted, Acker introduces the graphically sexual not as a distraction or postmodern break, but as a logical next step. She ends one sub-section of *Great Expectations* with a murky ekphrasis of a street scene: “The sky’s color is deep dark blue. One star can be seen. Very little can be seen on the street—just different shades of black” (111). The different shades of black are of course also undifferentiated in the main, as “little can be seen” expresses the fact that little can also be described or, more importantly, represented. Faced with the failure of perception to provide appropriate aesthetic fodder, Acker’s next section, “Inside,” begins immediately after with “Now we’re fucking” (113). The passage drifts into sado-masochistic euphoria, as the narrator begs her lover to “do something that’s not allowable. Hit me” (113), and threatens her partner’s girlfriend with extreme violence. The “not allowable” content of the narrator’s sexual encounter is belied by the consistent breaking of boundaries from sexual fetish to violent ideation. When everything, we might argue, is allowable, nothing is taboo; Acker fruitfully imagines this paradox as a kind of proliferation, of reproduction:

Sex is public: the streets made themselves for us to walk naked down them take out your cock and piss over me. The threshold is here. Commit yourself to not-knowing. Legs lie against legs. Hairs mixing hairs and here, a fingerpad, a lot of space, a hand, a lot of space, hairs mixed with hairs, a real sensation. Go over this threshold with me. (113)

Power, in this passage, is conflated with abnegation, as Acker’s narrator orders her lover around, but also orders him to degrade her. The public quality of the sexual encounter further lifts any

taboo, as the streets “made themselves” – a strikingly libertarian fantasy – in order to be a place for sexual encounters. Again, this act is not only “allowable” but unconscious, as natural and without moral judgment as catching a bus or crossing at a green. This unconscious nature, the narrator seems to say, is the threshold between the thinking subject and the embodied subject, the subject that is committed to “not-knowing.” And the not-knowing subject is a subject preoccupied with mixing – mixing of fluid, of hair, of body parts into a list jumping from subject to space to “a real sensation.” The lover can only get the real sensation with the help of the narrator, and the dissolution of choice aligns with a valorization of ends over means. As Acker writes in the last lines of the novel “What is, is. No fantasy. Pain” (127). For the embodied subject, pain can be pleasure because there are no boundaries to define the difference between the two.

We might see this as a way of understanding Acker’s creative sense of intellectual property as well: take capitalist excess far enough, and every idea is open to entrepreneurial imagination and “disruption” without boundary. The novel itself rejects the boundary of narrative, as it is loosely based around the autobiographical story of the death of the mother, but beyond this flimsy frame, the novel jumps between formal modes, scenarios, characters, and settings at will. And as the plot of the novel is sabotaged by a lack of aesthetic or narrative boundaries, so too is sex problematized in *Great Expectations* by its easy exchangeability. Acker’s previous lionizing of the sexually active body as beyond ideology and a truly individual materiality is relevant here as she presents “the thing itself” as a utopian possibility, since if “everything is living, it’s not a name but moving. And without this living there is nothing; this living is the only matter matters” (63). Again, we see the punning quality of profitable linguistic signification: the thing itself is matter, but that matter is the only thing that has significance, that

“matters.” And while Acker explains that this celebratory production of life is why “aestheticism can be so much fun,” the loose boundaries of “the thing itself” here are not in line with a rigorous logic of aesthetic containment (63). In other words, the thing itself is not a specific, special aesthetic object or work of art, but literally any living thing in the world: the “life” of an art object is equivalent to the life of any individual person. However admirable such an egalitarian politics is, it is not a coherent aesthetic philosophy; and to her credit, Acker realizes this. The aesthetics Acker describes are “a matter of letting (perceiving) happen what will” – no intention, no plan, just contingent and unpredictable events and objects: just different shades of black (63). The undifferentiated text, cobbled together from so many sources, reflects the undifferentiated subject, indistinguishable from the bodies perceiving or being perceived by them.

So when Acker’s narrator defines sexuality as “that which can’t be satisfied and therefore as that which transforms the person,” it is tempting to understand it as a testament to the chaotic utopia of sexual indeterminacy (107). This would seem to align with *Blood and Guts*’ provisional solution to late capitalism in the material body, and certainly would dovetail with the radical freedom of sexuality through *Great Expectations*. Acker’s vision of sexuality, however, is less about the freedom of possibility than it is about the tragic lack of a coherent identity in the contemporary moment. Echoing Jacques Derrida, Acker writes that since “there’s no possibility, there’s play,” and while play aligns nicely with the sexual euphoria of previous passages, play is also set against the materiality of possibility (107). It does not seem, in other words, that Acker means us to take as read her narrator’s sexually liberatory claims, such as “I’m a masochist. This is a real revolution” (52). Indeed, for Acker, the revolutionary quality of masochism is as paradoxical as the “allowed non-allowance” of her narrator’s sexual fantasy: revolution-by-contract, revolution that is at once deeply atomized and also reliant on another contingent body’s

compliance doesn't privilege the material body so much as it deemphasizes its unique being-in-the-world. If the subject is a way out of Acker's pessimism toward the world under late capitalism in 1978, it would seem that by 1982, while plagiarism maintains its self-abnegating force, the material body is no longer a stable counter-balance. Indeterminacy, for Acker, is another failure, another concession that leads to the marketplace in which, since "the only ideas are for sale, none are mentioned" (123).

Don Quixote expands upon this problem of subjectivity being at once desired ("for sale") and totally exchangeable (not even worth mentioning) by examining embodied and textual madness, as opposed to traditional mental or even epistemological insanity. This of course follows from Miguel de Cervantes' original *Don Quixote*, in which Quixote's madness allows for his exploits as a knight; once Quixote wakes from his dream, he rejects his adventures as delusions and begins life as a normal man. Acker's protagonist begins her version of the novel by inverting this procedure, as she (Don Quixote, but also Acker) is "finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion [so] she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love" (9). The sane woman is given license to go insane and take on the persona of Don Quixote by cutting out her biological link to futurity. Just as *Great Expectations* begins with the death of the mother, *Don Quixote* begins with the death of the daughter in order to isolate the author as the central figure of the novel's focus. Acker's *Don Quixote* continues in this vein, describing Quixote's pursuit of madness through sex, gender-negation, and plagiarism. And while *Don Quixote* has a slightly more coherent narrative than *Great Expectations*, the literary sources it pulls from are much more varied, including but not limited to Cervantes, Gaius Valerius Catullus, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, George Bernard Shaw, and Wilkie Collins. Furthermore, while Don Quixote, like Pip, takes on a new gender in Acker's novel, she gives

Quixote a lover who not only swaps genders throughout the novel, but also shifts species between human and dog.

The novel relies on these shifting signifiers to complete its narrative, the journey of Quixote through her madness, but it also uses the indeterminacy of these symbols to further problematize the material nature of the authorial body. As Quixote explains while seeing her dead mother – again, Acker’s autobiography blurs into her art – death is “non-possibility,” what we have earlier identified as “play” but which we might more fruitfully point to in *Don Quixote* as the end of progression (94). Quixote’s mother, in death, cannot interrogate her madness in the same way as Quixote, but is in the same state of lonely anonymity: as Quixote says, to reach “the room of [her] death” she must leave “behind all that I had known...all that I know” (94). This disassociated deathlike state is aligned with an aesthetic crisis that derives from gender relations: as women and men “on no side, from no perspective...see each other or mutually act with each other” making it clear that “art, also, is fetishism” (94). The fetish here is distanced from the living body in much the same way that the corpse is, and association between people, between men and women or mother and daughter, animates the dead object. Yet, without the possibility of mutual interaction, indeterminacy – as we saw in *Great Expectations* – becomes the norm. And as the norm, the sexual fetish and the artistic fetish distance us respectively from the body and the artist, such that even the materiality we receive through sex and through art is mediated by a reactionary social marketplace.

The dimensions of this marketplace are fleshed out further as Acker reveals her ideological opponents through Quixote’s strange stream of consciousness. At times Quixote drifts into screeds on Ronald Reagan, and at times she attacks Andrea Dworkin. In other moments in the novel, Quixote repeats long passages of juridical and historical analysis, apropos

of nothing in the narrative, but evocative of an external political reality that conditions her own. However, as should be expected, these ideological opponents are not as easy for Quixote to pin down as are descriptions of art: the criminals in a film she is describing “aren’t Ronald Reagan and the post-capitalist money powers who have put Reagan into power because human evil is finally unknowable to humans” (71). Fetishized or artificial evil, like fetishized or artificial sex, can be described and represented, but authentic evil eludes the aesthetic gaze. Art’s flawed fetishism makes true sex and true morality impossible, and the flaws of art are historically conditioned by the relatively recent “human evil” of Reagan and “the post-capitalist money powers.” Don Quixote is given motivation by this particularly new kind of evil, saying that “Ronald Reagan and certain feminists give a shit about [her]” because “they know that I’m about to defeat their evil enchantment in order to regain love” (102). But this fantastic vision of justice is undercut by the very next line in which Acker-as-narrator explains that “in order to defeat the evil enchanters of America, Don Quixote first had to find out how the American government works” (102). And unsurprisingly, the actual workings of the American government are banal – evil in their own way, but a far cry from Don Quixote’s evil enchanters. If anything, Quixote finds, the true evil of America is an everyday affair, unexceptional and dull. This dullness is expressed through Quixote’s companion and lover, a dog, who echoes Hobbes when she says that doggish life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short...the condition of a dog is a condition of war, of everyone against everyone: so every dog has a right to everything, even to another dog’s body. This is freedom” (114). Doggish life is certainly not far from human life, and Acker’s consistent fascination with the purity of animal urges is undercut tragically: even a dog’s life is atomized, fearful, and free only inasmuch as it involves the non-freedom of others.

If *Blood and Guts* reflected the stagnation of the 1970s, then *Don Quixote* represents the triumphant totality of American culture through endless choice. Characters in the novel can choose their gender, their species, their partners, even their names, as Don Quixote does in the first few pages of the novel. No signifier, biological or otherwise, has any power to limit or determine anyone in the novel, which is a kind of freedom. But this freedom resembles not only the doggish freedom discussed above, but the “non-allowable” paradox of *Great Expectations*: when freedom is so atomized that no relationships can be made between individuals, then everything is allowable. This suspicion of hyper-individualism is not prudishness in Acker, who based on both her interviews and her novels is more than open to varied sexuality and gender identity, but a concern over the reduction of identity to performance. As Acker’s narrator notices in an aside called “Intrusion of a Badly Written Section,” “There’s no way out of any appearance because an appearance is only what it is” (190). There is no depth to identity-as-appearance, which on one hand means that there is no possibility of subversion, but even more importantly, there is no chance of meaning beyond the homologous appearance of the market. In the America of Reagan, Acker seems to be saying, one cannot dig deeper, beyond the surface to the body because the body no longer signifies. We cannot use our bodies to coopt the linguistic and social roads made for us, as Janey does, but we must also honor their urges, fucking and not-knowing in the spirit of the road-builders, not on the demand of the subject or the author herself.

If this totalized performance holds as I suggest it does, even Acker’s authorial capability cannot escape the pessimism of her vision. Acker dramatizes this dilemma through Quixote’s final quest to defeat evil through a spoken monologue. In a section titled “Don Quixote Actually Attacks Religious White Men,” Acker’s heroine performs a prose-poem attacking the myths of religion, language, and sanity, and triumphantly claims that “what they name *reality* is still

throbbing out its death throes” (194). Marjorie Worthington understands this monologue to be emblematic of Acker’s sexual utopianism, as she, unlike me, reads masochism in the novel as a true revolt against patriarchy. If Don Quixote “is not able to become an agenic subject through her narrative constructions, perhaps she can rebel by doing the exact opposite: by succumbing to societal control” (251). Worthington’s claim helps explain why, at the end of her speech, Quixote begins to stumble, ending her rallying cry with “So I no longer know what I’m doing,” to which the narrator adds, “Don Quixote concluded her poem, lamely. No one reads poetry in this society anymore” (194). For Worthington, the narrator’s second line informs the first: what is important about Quixote’s poem is that she does it knowing full well that she is bound to fail. The failure itself, Worthington argues, is the moment of resistance, and while I agree generally that failure is necessary for success in late capitalism, I don’t think Acker intends for this scene to be any sort of Pyrrhic victory. Quixote, we realize at the end of her speech, has been ignoring the dogs (among them her lover) who need food in favor of rhetoric. And in response to the lame ending of her poem the dogs “no longer being able to see their food...howled” (195). Don Quixote’s inability to recognize the bodily need of the dogs – they have to eat – in the moment of her rhetorical gesture is not a tragic failure along the lines of Worthington’s reading, but a farcical misjudgment of the whole situation. Being unable to recognize that the dogs cannot subsist on her poetry alone, Quixote as the subjective author is worse than “lame”: she is irrelevant. The tragedy of the era of Reagan is not that the author is abused or that the author, in a postmodern flourish towards pastiche, disappears, but rather that the author remains without her politicized body, as in *Blood and Guts*. When everything is already an image, there is no need for aesthetic mediation, not even of the body itself.

In the moment the novel ends, however, Quixote seems to come to some sort of revelation, opening the door to a recuperative reading of authorial power that could support Worthington's analysis. As she walks along, thinking about God, Quixote realizes that she as an individual is the center of the world based on appearances, that since "I am no more, forget Me. Forget Morality. Forget about saving the world. Make Me up" (207). Forgetting the world and the self would seem to be a provisional step forward for Quixote, who is ostensibly now free to reinvent herself without the limits of the "post-capitalist" social sphere. But again, Quixote's compelling approach is undercut by the novel itself, as the final line – "I closed my eyes...and then, drunk, awoke to the world which lay before me" – is as much a tautology as it is a rebirth (207). Like the "lame" end to her poem, Quixote's vision ends with her awaking to the world as it is, unable to forget or dramatically change the cooptation of the political and embodied self in Reaganite America. If Cervantes' *Don Quixote* ends by undermining the primacy of the sane individual subject, Acker's *Don Quixote* ends by foreclosing any alternative to that subject. This is the tragedy of *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*, namely that the Enlightenment subject that has been subject to so much (often well-deserved) criticism has been replaced by the atomized hyper-individualized subject of post-capitalism. For Acker, the tragedy of late capitalism is that now even the subject's body cannot be outside of the totalizing organization of the world: if we resist the madness of the social with Janey in *Blood and Guts*, we have no such luxury in either *Great Expectations* or *Don Quixote*. Acker can still write around the social through plagiarism, but, she seems to be saying, any force to this practice is gone, reduced from a critique of language to a monument for the lost self.

Stockholm Syndrome: Acker in the Nineties

By the 1990s, the specter of Reaganism had subsided with the rise of Clintonite center-left politics, though as the current iteration of those politics in Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton demonstrate, the problems that Acker had noticed in her work do not disappear with a Democrat in the White House. Acker's critiques of the inability of language to describe the world under late capitalism, as well as her later claims that even the material body is always coopted under this socio-economic regime were not ameliorated in the 1990s, despite some of her critics' optimism. That said, something changes for Acker in the mid-nineties, as an optimism makes its way into her non-fiction work, specifically her literary and cultural criticism. Written in the same jarring, disjunctive style as her fiction, Acker's critical prose ranges from reviews of films to ambitious referendums on contemporary gender and sexuality. But by 1995, these pieces had softened the force of their negative critique, opening up a way into active rebellious writing against capitalism, reminiscent of the Irigarayan women's writing with which we began this essay. Why Acker changed her mind in the mid-nineties is anyone's guess: it's tempting to cite her ultimately-terminal breast cancer as a factor, but this seems as unfair to me as assuming that *Blood and Guts* was written the way it was due to Acker's fractured relationship with her mother. Ultimately, asking why Acker changed her mind seems fruitless, but the shift in thinking itself is deeply important as it marks the seminal moment in which Acker's fundamentally pessimistic novels are rewritten by critics as ameliorative and liberatory social texts.

In her 1995 essay "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age," Acker considers the qualities of copyright before coming to the conclusion that art must reject copyright in order to achieve its true goals. In Acker's terms, we "need to step away from all the business. We need to step to the personal," and in doing this, in connecting with others, we unlock what "writing is

about,” namely the “bestowing of meaning and, thus, the making of the world, the word as world” (103). The construction of “the word as world” is nothing new for Acker as we have seen here, but certainly the positive way she uses the phrase here is notable. Unlike Janey, whose connections were abusive, self-destructive, and fatal, Acker sees contemporary authors as able to expand art’s cosmopolitanism through affective relation. And unlike Pip or Don Quixote, the author’s relations with others are not only under their control, but they flourish outside of coerced engagements with money or sexuality. For Acker, the difference between her characters and herself, it would seem, is that she sees them living under a totalitarian society, something she herself opposes:

A totalitarian relationship, [Maurice] Blanchot states, is one in which the subject denies the otherness, therefore the very existence of the other person, the person to whom he or she is talking. Thus, the totalitarian relationship is built upon individualism as closure. Individualism as the closing down of energy, of meaning. Whereas, when I talk to my friend, when I write to her, I am writing to someone whose otherness I accept...meaning begins in this difference. (104)

The relationship between the individual and the totalitarian state described here resembles the relationships in Acker’s novels between her protagonists and the world in which they live. Efforts toward linguistic fellow feeling are consistently twisted or misconstrued to valorize surface-level ideologies or sexual excess. And even sexual excess – Acker’s final front for material reality – is treated as individualist “closure.” What is different for Acker in this essay, however, is that she has a friend to write to, who is different than her. And not only is her friend different, but she and her friend accept each other’s differences and produce meaning through the gap in their experiences. This is something Janey, who writes to herself, her incestuous father,

and her slavemaster does not have. Pip's writing is the exchangeable sexual encounter. And Don Quixote can communicate with her lover the dog, but is unable to recognize that her lover needs food, let alone the subtle political or cultural differences they might have. In short, for Acker, there is an avenue available for authentic discourse because there is an authentic other; for her characters, there is nothing but isolation and simulacra.

Acker's late essays rely on the existence of the other not simply as a social panacea, but also as a formal tool for writing, in much the same vein as Irigaray's "women's writing" functions. As Acker says in her 1995 essay "Seeing Gender," "When I dream, my body is the site, not only of the dream, but also of the dreaming and of the dreamer. In other words, in this case or in this language, I cannot separate subject from object, much less from the acts of perception" (166). At first blush this too appears to align with the spirit of Acker's novels, especially her 80's novels, in which characters are unable to separate their own subjectivity from the world around them, finding themselves adrift in surface with no materiality. The indistinction of the dream and dreamer here is not a site of crisis for Acker, however, but a moment of hope, as it enacts the kinds of "languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), a pirate upon buried treasure...I call these languages, *languages of the body*" (166-167, emphasis original). Languages of the body appear only after the disappearance of the author, as pure anti-epistemic thought, unable to be determined by induction or deduction, but only by metaphysical dream-luck. I doubt Acker means to be this arcane, but it is difficult to imagine the piracy of dreams as anything but mystic, particularly after the frustrating worldliness of her books, in which the author – often through many painfully failed moments – persisted, cut off from any sense of their lived body by social and political forces.

In a very real way, it is Acker's final claims as an essayist that license her critics to see her as a typically utopian figure, someone who sees difference as an uncomplicated way forward into dialogue and meaning. This utopian horizon Acker invokes is reminiscent of contemporary analyses of *The Event* by Alain Badiou and others, as well as the politically emancipatory power of art and ignorance as best examined in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* – analyses that foreground subjective *reactions* to politics as opposed to the content or force of politics themselves. These studies share the same problematic qualities and the same seductive aspects as Katie Muth's argument that we leave aside both the gender question and the political question in Acker's work and instead pick up Acker's "philosophical engagement with theory" in order to determine "what literary art is good for, and...how aesthetic praxis might define an ethics" (105). Muth's call to action here is of course seductive because it gives literary study a meaning again, a place in a world where it has all but been eliminated as useful or needed. But it is problematic insofar as it conflates ethics with aesthetics without seeing this as a politically charged decision. To imagine that aesthetics, ethics, and "the cognitive maps we use to navigate our social world" are outside of the bounds of issues of gender and politics in Acker is to imagine that we make the world as apolitical bodies, that there is some ethic that is fundamental to Muth's audience. I don't mean to critique Muth too harshly here, as she is aware that her analysis here has a limited scope, most important to "students of postwar literature," and within that scope, the question of the ethics behind Acker's aesthetic is certainly relevant. But Acker's work is more immediately political, less abstract, and with far greater general relevance to the diagnosis of late capitalism than Muth suggests: it is only the people who write about Acker that seem to think otherwise.

Ultimately, the critical edifice fails Acker because it refuses to read Acker's novels on their own terms. Acker does not fit into a particular niche of feminism, nor does she readily slot into poststructural or postmodern theories of the novel. Acker's politics are far less utopian than much of the post-Marxist thought that might claim it, and, since the novels themselves resist readings due to their fractured narratives and difficult attribution strategy, even less politicized literary criticism is repelled. And while I do not claim to have written the handbook for dealing with Acker's work as a critic, I do think that the one thing all of Acker's critics fail to consider is the immanent failure of her novels. The plagiaristic strategy, as we saw in "I Am Erica Jong," fails to be a compelling forgery, or even a good approximation of voice. The sublimation of language by the body in *Blood and Guts in High School* ultimately leads to death and uninspiring proliferation of a flawed subject. And the attempt to descend entirely into the material body in *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* leads to promise in diversity, but undercuts this promise through the body's inability to be anything but a responsive reflection of the world that determines it. These failures, however, reveal the contours of the society Acker means to critique, a society that from 1978 forward has worked to enforce the stratification between rich and poor, and that has reinforced the society of the image, the immaterial over any sort of authentic being undetermined by the state or the market. Acker was not able to write the novel that foiled this society, because, as Theodor Adorno and others have pointed out, any such novel is a fantasy. But Acker, by narrating failed attempts to exist bodily, materially in this society presents a fractured vision that maps onto the world in which she is writing. The cooptation of this deeply subversive mapping into an affirmation of cosmopolitan difference – solve the world by making a phone call – is the far more troubling failure of Acker's critics, and Acker herself. Acker's work is pessimistic and the urge to create a solution to the problems she raises is deeply

felt, but to substitute preference for politics in her novels is to miss their point entirely while confining them to an utterly toothless critical apparatus. Fortunately, we can read against this critical move, and in the process reveal not only the ways that Acker's novels reveal the conditions of their composition, but how interpretation can unwittingly serve to reinscribe the interests of authority or conservatism against which it is intended to be written.

Works Cited and Referenced

- Acker, Kathy. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- . *Don Quixote*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- . *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- . "Seeing Gender." *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997. 158-167. Print.
- . "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age." *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997. 98-104. Print.
- Brennan, Karen. "The Geography of Enunciation: Hysterical Pastiche in Kathy Acker's Fiction." *boundary 2* 21.2 (1994): 243-268. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and The Last Man*. Reissue edition. New York: Free Press, 2006. Print.
- Hume, Kathryn. "Voice in Kathy Acker's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 42.3 (2001): 485-513. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- McCaffery, Larry and Kathy Acker. "An Interview With Kathy Acker." *Mississippi Review* 20.1-2 (1991): 83-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Mukherjee, Ankhi. "Missed Encounters: Repetition, Rewriting, and Contemporary Returns to Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*." *Contemporary Literature* 46.1 (2005): 108-133. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Muth, Katie R. "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's 'Blood and Guts in High School.'" *Narrative* 19.1 (2011): 86-110. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Rose, Miranda. "Voicing the 'Communal Heart': Acker's Romantic Pla(y)gerism." *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 14.1 (2009): 109-124. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Sciolino, Martina. "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism." *College English* 52.4 (1990): 437-445. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Worthington, Marjorie. "Posthumous Posturing: The Subversive Power of Death in Contemporary Women's Fiction." *Studies in the Novel* 32.2 (2000): 243-263. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.

Toward an Aesthetics of Failure: *Blood Meridian* and the Problem of Marxist Aesthetics

When Jonathan Franzen wrote the long debriefing on his divorce with difficult literature – the descriptively titled “Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard to Read Books” – he not only outlined his own issues with formally complex literature, but also identified a contemporary split that I would argue has come to characterize the literary market totally. Franzen’s essay has become notorious for its valorization of William Gaddis’ *Recognitions* over his later *JR*, which Franzen sees as a failed novel because it does not appeal enough to its ideal audience (i.e. Jonathan Franzen). But the critical cavils over which of Gaddis’ novels is most successful distracts from the essay’s more important insight, namely the division of the literary marketplace by differing appeals to audience. Franzen begins his essay by separating novels into a “Status” model, a “discourse of genius and art-historical importance” in which “the value of any novel...exists independent of how many people are able to appreciate it” and a more reception-based “Contract” model, in which “the writer [agrees to provide] words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience.” The essay ultimately ends up privileging the readability of the Contract model over what Franzen identifies as the immature pomposity and anger of the Status model, an immaturity that marks *JR* and all of postmodern, systems literature with “an adolescent fear of being taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony.” This fear of corruption is a “compelling” theory, Franzen retorts, but a “recipe for rage” in “real life.” And so, like a political pragmatist, Franzen chastens artistic novels that forget their readers in their efforts to produce art and embraces the Contract model as the best way to tell “a good story,” not to mention a profitable one as well.

Franzen’s insights on Gaddis aside, I think the division between Status novels and Contract novels has organized the novel genre in a more total way than Franzen is willing to admit. While Franzen is hesitant to give merit to grand systemic explanations of the world, his own aligning of audience appeal with artistic merit – his claim that novels that endeavor to engage their readers on some level are more accomplished than those which don’t – provides a fairly apt gloss of the literary industry of the contemporary moment. In the popular consciousness – which we can gloss as the market – novels are split into “art” and “genre fiction,” categories that loosely map onto Status and Contract models. But the

important departure we should make from Franzen here is that no contemporary novel that is marketed to a wide audience is ever difficult to the point of unreadability, for the simple reason that unreadable novels do not sell very well. As Franzen found out in his much-covered feud with Oprah Winfrey over the inclusion of *The Corrections* on her Book Club reading list, high art cannot escape the attention of the market, and, if the reconciliatory inclusion of *Freedom* on the Book Club's list in 2010 is any indication, it does not wish to escape the market's attention either.⁷ And so we end up with two brands of novel: the Franzen brand of Status novel, which finds its way onto book club lists and other culturally driven self-improvement efforts; and the genre novel, the true Contract novel that provokes audience pleasure often against the complaints of critics.⁸ Gone, however, is the novel that is not interpellated by the market – Status versus Contract is simply a position of preference, not of philosophy or aesthetic theory.

In terms of a functional or profitable marketplace, there is no inherent problem with this, but we might ask along with Theodor Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu what happened to disinterested art during the contemporary progression of the novel market? Is it just marginalized, or have we left it behind entirely? Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, differentiates art that would appeal to an audience from the work of “artists of the highest rank, such as Beethoven or Rembrandt” in whose art “the sharpest sense of reality was joined with estrangement from reality” (9). Adorno predicts Franzen almost word-for-word when he imagines the work of art cut off from this estrangement, in a society in which “the relation to [art] can be modeled on the relation to actual commodity goods”:

[In] the age of overproduction the commodity's use value has become questionable and yields to the secondary gratification of prestige, of being in step, and, finally, of the

⁷ I am grateful to Gunter Leypoldt for the trajectory of this insight. I was able to introduce a heretofore unpublished piece on these issues for Leypoldt for the Seminar in American Literature at the Newberry Library in September 2014, during which Leypoldt expanded upon the market influences encouraging and complicating Franzen and Winfrey's relationship.

⁸ This type of novel also finds purchase in popular media as an easy allegory to contemporary political or social life. *Slate's* provocatively titled “What's Brexit Got to Do With *Game of Thrones*” (available at http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/culturegabfest/2016/06/how_the_game_of_thrones_finale_relates_to_brexit_and_other_current_events.html?wpsrc=sp_all_native_index) is just the tip of the iceberg in this particular paragenre of the Contract novel. The ability for audience appreciation to lend itself to political and social explanation (and possible mystification) is worth expanding upon, though a bit ambitious for this essay.

commodity character itself: a parody of aesthetic semblance. Nothing remains of the autonomy of art—that artworks should be considered better than they consider themselves to be arouses indignation in culture customers—other than the fetish character of the commodity, regression to the archaic fetishism in the origin of art (17).

Adorno’s characterization of the tragedy of the art commodity as a return to the fetish gives some context to Franzen’s appeal to the Contract model of novel-writing. While Franzen’s vision of the Contract novel imagines a symbiosis between artist and audience, it also necessitates a radical presentness, as any audience that is not immediately relevant to the text is not a marketable one. The evacuation of history, and thereby the evacuation of the means of production from the art commodity mirrors Karl Marx’s vision of the commodity fetish, a vision which, in short, erases “the relationships between the producers” and enforces “a social relation between the products of labor” (Marx 164). And so, instead of authors and readers, we have art commodities and hypothetical audiences, which erases any need for historical context in the novel marketplace. Outside of specifically historical genres, which use history as a selling point as opposed to an exigency of art, there is no need for anything beyond the fetish: either an “art novel” or a “fun novel.”

Thus, Franzen’s essay gives us a view of the systems he is so dismissive of, presenting a marketplace in which art’s value is a matter of taste and not materiality. Franzen thereby rejects what Bourdieu calls a “field of restricted production,” a system by which “cultural goods [are] objectively destined for a public of producers of cultural goods” (115) in favor of what Bourdieu calls the “purely formal” freedom of art in the “market of symbolic goods,” which submits to “a form of demand which necessarily lags behind the supply of the commodity” (116). In other words, Franzen’s rejection of the difficult novel entails a celebration of a novel marketplace that is beholden to niches created by a public willing to purchase them. In this niche, the art novel is no more “autonomous” from the market than the bodice ripper on sale in front of the checkout line, for better or for worse. This market however – which for our purposes begins with the publication of *JR* in 1975 – allows for liminal in-between spaces for novels that do not quite fit in to a niche, for novels that are not quite willing to embrace market over

autonomy, novels like Cormac McCarthy's 1985 *Blood Meridian*. *Blood Meridian* takes on the orphic cast of its author, a component itself of McCarthy's own reputation as a throwback, an example of the older, better model of pre-war American writing. "He seems," Richard Woodward writes in an interview with McCarthy, "immensely proud to be the kind of writer who has almost ceased to exist." And so the formal or aesthetic qualities of *Blood Meridian* – a difficult story about the violent American possession of the West – are often set aside in favor of more biographical analysis of its comparatively more accessible author.

As a result, the novel itself rarely considered outside of its violent, often troublingly imperialist subject matter, subject matter that is acknowledged and idiosyncratically read by McCarthy himself. "There is no life without bloodshed" McCarthy says to Woodward in passing, adding, in a materialist if pessimistic tone, that "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom." (Woodward). Critics are therefore justified by McCarthy's rhetoric of lived violence in ignoring the aesthetic forest for the plotted trees in *Blood Meridian*. Even the main character and focal point of the novel, a man named the Kid, echoes McCarthy's rejection of signification or self-expression, and is described as not being able to "read nor write" and in whom, at fourteen, "broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). Due to the surface rejection of literary or philosophical signification from both author and protagonist, therefore, most readings of the novel tend to take two primary directions in their analysis: first, critics often read *Blood Meridian* as a rewriting of the myths of American exceptionalism that pervade typical Western genre fiction;⁹ and second, critics often argue that, due to its insistence upon ceaseless violence, McCarthy's novel somehow resists interpretation or

⁹ See Mark Eaton's "Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction" and Jason P. Mitchell's "Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, and the (De)Mythologizing of the American West" for representative examples of this claim.

explication.¹⁰ These two tactics produce a range of critical readings, many of which see the text either as a deeply politicized and damning account of American Exceptionalism, or, conversely, as an apolitical, posthuman valorization of the natural world over the incoherency of human violence. In other words, the novel is read as a Western or an Apocalypse Novel, both genres into which McCarthy often finds himself lumped. But while there is some truth to the characterization of *Blood Meridian* as a novel interested in genre, the work as a whole is above all unreceptive to its audience, coming closer to the unresponsive art novel that Franzen rejects than a Western or a violent romp. Indeed, in embracing violence, McCarthy describes not a social vision, but a disinterested aesthetic one.

This is not to suggest that *Blood Meridian* somehow gets an unfair shake or that critics are unreasonable in their readings; as we have seen, even if McCarthy was deeply concerned with writing an art novel, the contemporary marketplace will have always already interpellated his writing into a particular market niche. But *Blood Meridian*'s inaccessibility as a novel – in its obsessively framed imagery and baroque language – presents methods for thinking about the role of art outside of Contract in the 20th and 21st century. In doing this, *Blood Meridian* responds to several conversations that have been current in 20th century literary criticism, specifically those around the utility of literature under late capitalism. What Adorno and Max Horkheimer noticed in 1944, that “[films] and radio no longer need to present themselves as art” (95), is now a disciplinary preoccupation as literary criticism attempts to self-justify its own artistic diagnoses in an era in which art seems totally coopted by the market. Mark Fisher in his *Capitalist Realism* solves the literary critical dilemma of purpose by declaring that literature itself is no longer a site for anti-capitalist antagonism, that in fact “[for] most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (8). We must instead, according to Fisher, be vigilant in diagnosing the totality of “capitalist realism” in the hope of finding “glimmers of alternative political or

¹⁰ See David Holmberg's "In a time before nomenclature was and each was all: *Blood Meridian*'s Neomythic West and the Heterotopian Zone" and Phillip A Snyder's "Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" for representative examples of this claim.

economic possibilities,” occasions that seem utopian to be sure, but also outside the wheelhouse of literary criticism as such (80). In a more aesthetic vein, Nicholas Brown in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capital” acknowledges that “[whatever] other ages might have fancied, we are wise enough to know that art is a commodity like any other,” but imagines a way to represent within the grip of the marketplace through formal dissonance. As Brown puts it while thinking through the problem of genre in relation to David Simon and *The Wire*, genre allows for the old artistic problem of formal limits to recur:

Because a genre, already marketable or it wouldn't be a genre, is also governed by rules. The very thing that invalidates genre fiction in relation to modernist autonomy—“formulas,” Adorno called them—opens up a zone of autonomy within the heteronomous space of cultural commodities. The requirements are rigid enough to pose a problem, which can now be thought of as a formal problem like the problem of the flatness of the canvas or the pull of harmonic resolution.

For Brown, the capitalist realism Fisher identifies is felt within the confines of the market itself, but the restrictiveness of that market allows artists to, in a double-move, produce what is necessary to sell their commodities and then to exceed that necessity with “extra” material that creates a back door for autonomous meaning. Brown, unlike Fisher, not only imagines a concrete avenue for escaping the totality of the marketplace, but enunciates that avenue through the technology of aesthetic and formal limitation.

And this technology and this avenue brings us back to *Blood Meridian*, which I feel is both included in and ignored by Brown's incisive analysis. As much as I am willing to reject Fisher's pessimism about the potentiality of aesthetic critique, I am also committed to expanding that potential beyond genre art. The reason for this is because, under the current market, everything is a genre novel; as Franzen has correctly diagnosed, an art novel is only as successful as its art-novel-reading audience finds it, and so even erudite, non-genre novels must observe the limitations of form Brown identifies in genre fiction. As a result, the question of *Blood Meridian*'s status – is it a Western? Is it a work of art? – is less important than the ways in which it structures its own totalized representation. What we will see, in

considering *Blood Meridian* as an aesthetic project, is that it purposefully exceeds the limits of the Western and the historical text almost immediately and in doing so attempts to convey a larger artistic and dehistoricized point. But, as Brown notes following Adorno, the contemporary novel cannot help but be interrupted by the reality of the market. The innovation in McCarthy, that his novel purposefully takes on and then rejects the mantle of genre fiction to produce a disinterested aesthetic, meets its limit in the form of the contemporary novel itself, a form that necessarily reverts to the limitations of narrative, character, and niche. However, in the moment of its limit – its failure – the novel reveals the historical conditions of its production, conditions that make impossible both the historical utopia of the Western and the deep-environmental individualism that McCarthy offers as a solution. Far from a sad ending to our analysis, however, we will see, contra Fisher and adding onto Brown, that even the innovative art novel, in its failure to produce an autonomous work of art, reveals something important and obscured about the contradictions of late capitalism. Difficult literature, in other words, may be under contract, but may also produce something in its unmodish disinterest as well; *Blood Meridian* for its part produces the very image of totality that Franzen would so willingly reject.

The World in a Book: Bad Infinity and the Coercion of the Autonomous

Much of *Blood Meridian*'s reputation as an historical novel has to do with its relation to a "true" story, famously taken from Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*, an ostensibly first-hand account of his time with the really existing Glanton scalp-hunting gang, the protagonists of *Blood Meridian*. While much of the criticism that considers *Blood Meridian* as an anti-Western or a revisionist history is concerned with the accuracies, inaccuracies, and influences of Chamberlain's confession, it seems to me that this interest is reading against McCarthy's own disinterest in the actualities of history. McCarthy does embrace an engagement with history to a point, explicitly setting the novel in the American South during the tense aftermath of the Mexican-American War, but his engagement with the historical seems less concerned with accuracy than metaphor. One of the Kid's final experiences in the text before meeting the Glanton gang, which involves him joining a loosely constructed militia that means to re-

annex Mexico for American citizens, is emblematic of this elision between historical fact and metaphor. The militia is, according to their leader, given tacit governmental support due to popular disapproval over the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a peace treaty which ceded land back to the Mexican government after the war. When Captain White, leader of this anti-Mexican militia, asks the Kid about the Treaty, the Kid tells him he “don’t know nothin about it” (35). White understands this admission not through the idiosyncratic blankness of the Kid, but instead as typical of American blindness toward border issues, bemoaning the fact that the soldiers fighting in Mexico were anonymously and mistakenly “sold out by their country” (35). That the militia’s response to the government’s inability to recognize that the Mexican people are “manifestly incapable of governing themselves” would be to invade Mexico so that the militia could “govern for” the Mexicans mirrors a familiar narrative of nativist American exceptionalism (36). That this exceptionalism is paired with the opportunity for the militia to avail itself of a “land rich in minerals, in gold and silver...beyond the wildest speculation” means that the militia is also sympathetic to the more vulgarly profitable aspects of Manifest Destiny. Acquisitive, racist, and pointedly violent, the militia represents the kind of popularly criticized position of the American pioneer that would understandably lead critics to a political reading of the novel as a whole.

But ultimately, to read *Blood Meridian* as invested in a demythologizing project one must read the political against McCarthy’s formal structuring of his novel. Far from a politics of recognition for historical victims, *Blood Meridian* does not even produce through its seemingly endless proliferation of violence and atrocity a true sense of pathos for the murdered, displaced, or otherwise subjugated people of the American West and of Mexico. Instead, the satirically revisionary potential of White’s militia is undercut immediately after its introduction in the novel, as the majority of the group is massacred by an Aztec Indian tribe upon their first foray into Mexico. The Kid, who survives the attack, is eventually arrested by the Mexican army and taken in chains to the decapitated head of Captain White, suspended in a jar of mescal with “hair afloat and eyes turned upward in a pale face” (73). As White stands as both the only figure of American governmental interests and historical exceptionalism in the text, his decapitation is symbolic of the text’s schism with historical truth: once White is rendered deaf, mute, and blind, so too

is the impulse for historical accuracy in the novel. Furthermore, the Kid's encounter with "the drowned and sightless eyes of his old commander" (73) echoes the destruction of the sensory organs that the Kid has already witnessed in his earlier travels through an abandoned church:

The façade of the building bore an array of saints in their niches and they had been shot up by American troops trying their rifles, the figures shorn of ears and noses and darkly mottled with leadmarks oxidized upon the stone. The huge carved and paneled doors hung awap on their hinges and a carved stone Virgin held in her arms a headless child.
(28)

Like the figurehead of the state, Captain White, the figures of the divine are also rendered incapable of seeing, hearing, or speaking, either through the removal of particular organs, or through the destruction of the head itself. And as in White's death, these saints have been rendered incapable of self-representation by way of violence, marked here by the oxidized markings of American rifle fire. It is through the violent figuration of figures of the law and the divine as blind, deaf, and mute that McCarthy is able to foreclose any sort of historical specificity or ethical censure of particularized violence. By the time that The Kid begins his path of anti-Native American violence with the Glanton gang, church, state, and historical normativities are foreclosed as explicative strategies in *Blood Meridian*. The only representative schema that remain for an interpreter of McCarthy's notoriously obscure prose are the aesthetic and the natural.

As such, in the absence of moral or ethical entailments, the violence in the text, repetitive and aestheticized, is simply descriptive, not revisionary¹¹. Examples of this descriptive violence abound – to the point that one chapter sub-heading is titled "Tree of dead babies" – but the tonal quality of atrocity-without-affect is best figured in an early moment in the text. Shortly after White's militia is scattered by

¹¹ Dana Phillips expresses this by claiming that "In McCarthy's work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else" (435).

the Aztecs, McCarthy's narrator presents the massacre of an entire town, upon which the Kid has stumbled, in almost ekphrastic tones:

The murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood. [The blood] had set up into a sort of pudding crossed everywhere with the tracks of wolves or dogs and along the edges it had dried and cracked into a burgundy ceramic. Blood lay in dark tongues on the floor and blood grouted the flagstones and ran in the vestibule where the stones were cupped from the feet of the faithful and their fathers before them and it had threaded its way down the steps and dripped from the stones among the dark red tracks of the scavengers (64).

The blood here operates as a frame for the scene inside the ruined cathedral: the cracked "burgundy ceramic" delineates a circumference for the atrocity itself, while the lines, pools, and vectors of blood render the dead as objects within this circumference, subject not to pathos but only to description. The image of the murdered villagers is figured as constitutive of the totality of the cathedral-as-fixed-image: if the tracks of the scavengers suggest a sort of active engagement with the dead in the scene, the description of the congealed blood as "cracked" or as "pudding" suggests that this engagement is located well in the past. The dead in the cathedral *were* actively murdered, and the scavengers *did* augment the scene by taking parts of the bodies for their own immediate needs, but the "tongues" of blood are fixed in such a way that they no longer speak any of this beyond the immanent details of the scene itself.

Framed atrocity in the imagery of *Blood Meridian*, evacuated of pathos, thereby demonstrates the limitations of sympathy when subject to the figural distance of the aesthetic: one is not impelled to *feel* for the murdered people in the church, but rather to *see* the murdered people in the church. The infamously ornate structure of McCarthy's descriptive prose further allows for a constant displacement of pathos into the figure of analogy: the dead are "like" a portrait or, in the case of the ecological impulse, "like" nature without human interference. The focus of a critical inquiry into *Blood Meridian* therefore shifts from an inquiry into its historical specificities, and back to the sort of global consideration of violence and humanity with which McCarthy centers his consideration of the novel. But as I want to

argue here, this “global” conception is not timeless in and of itself – McCarthy’s strategies of representation here, natural or aesthetic, are strategies that represent the contemporary moment, even more than they are meant to represent the past. If McCarthy’s aesthetics necessarily represent a contemporary totality, particularly a totality under the logic of capitalist exchange, however, such a vision will only be available through a close aesthetic explication of these representative schema. In the interest of decoupling both McCarthy’s masculinist, canonical mystique as well as the popular critical appeal to posthuman naturalism from an analysis of *Blood Meridian*, I will focus specifically on the three character-archetypes that define the interpretive lines of flight in the novel. The opposing figures of John Glanton, leader of the Glanton gang, and Judge Holden, a totalitarian aesthete, represent divergent aesthetic strategies under late capitalism, while the third way of the Kid, understood as a retreat into nature, figure the text’s larger aesthetic *and* epistemological stakes. Ultimately, the novel fails to complete its own circuit of representational logic, but in this failure speaks to the potential of critique in the contemporary moment and positions *Blood Meridian* unmistakably not in 1850, but in the crisis-point temporality of 1985 America.

Selling Out or Buying In: Aesthetic Totality Against the Market and Nature

Elusive and often absent, *Blood Meridian* is driven by the figure of money and the marketplace, and John Glanton, the leader of the scalp-hunting gang, is the character who, out of the three figures we are considering, is most committed to this schematic logic of exchange. To understand Glanton as contributing at all to a representative aesthetic, one must place him in relation to the marketplace of exchange. As the architect of the contract between the gang and the Mexican government, Glanton instrumentalizes violence through the commodification of the Native American scalp, positioning the violent act of scalping as both the necessary condition for and ultimate product of the market instantiated by the bounty contract. Glanton’s role is therefore a kind of middle manager for the gang, speculating on how much profit he can glean from his employers by way of the supply of scalps he can find in the open desert of the West while maintaining a hold on his labor force in the gang. In other words, so long as

there are scalps to be had, Glanton sees the contract as an opportunity for a potentially limitless valorization of profit through managed group violence, and in the name of profit, not politics, he exhorts the gang to scalp any many bodies as possible, man, woman, child, Aztec, or otherwise, in order to fully exploit the terms and possibilities of their contract: “Hair, boys,” Glanton tells them, “[the] string ain’t run on this trade yet” (188). The result of this limitlessness founded in the marketplace resembles a kind of featureless and idealized capitalism, a ceaseless exchange that does not discriminate with regard to its product, but is flexible to the material needs and whims of the particularized contract. In his own mind, Glanton is simply responding to supply and demand. He embraces the material contingency of exchange, wherein the immanent nature of an object is rendered secondary to that object’s value in the market, a value that is reliant upon the person or persons who give the object its exchange-value as sellers.

What this commitment to the market means for Glanton as an avatar for representation is a bit more complicated, though we might begin to unpack this question by characterizing market aesthetics as defined by their contingency and impermanence. Like each exchange and each violent act, each vision of the world that Glanton forwards throughout *Blood Meridian* is dependent upon the immediate desires and context of the perpetrator and the witness of the representation, respectively. McCarthy demonstrates this logic of aesthetic impermanence in a scene in which Glanton ponders the “perfection” of the natural world on a ride through a deserted forest with the rest of the gang:

They rode up switchbacks through a lonely aspen wood where the fallen leaves lay like golden disclets in the damp black trail. The leaves shifted in a million spangles down the pale corridors and Glanton took one and turned it like a tiny fan by its stem and held it and let it fall and its perfection was not lost on him.

(142)

The shifting nature of the light, whose “spangles” are determined by the indeterminate position and intensity of the sun, is the ground for aesthetic perfection for Glanton. The golden disclet is set against the damp black of the trail, and the impermanent quality of the new fall and the undried terrain are all that provide the contrast that impresses itself upon Glanton. The scene appears similar to the bloody dead in

the cathedral, but unlike the frame of the dried, set blood, the contextually shifting quality of the contrast between the spangled light and the gold leaves displace any permanence or frame for the image itself. In other words, the beauty of the scene in the woods relies upon both the ideal configuration of contingent natural components, as well as the ideal positioning of a receptive viewer. Glanton's logic of representative perfection is structured like this engagement with the leaf: as a limited, unrepeatable, and wholly material instance, perfect not as a totalized image, but perfect instead in relation to its particular, fleeting circumstances of immediate reception.

We can begin to see the link between profit and beauty for Glanton, as contingency structures Glanton's aesthetic perspective, and the chief contingency in Glanton's life as presented in the novel is the valorization of profit, a valorization that is constantly subject to renegotiation and risk. Thus, as with his representation of the world, the predominant motivator for Glanton is not the ideality or the permanent signifying power of the commodity he produces – he scalps Aztecs and Mexican citizens alike without any concern for “thematic” integrity – but instead the relational value that the exchange of the commodity will bring in the market. Bracketed by an ever-delayed end to profit, Glanton's representation of exchange appears as a continual engagement with an impermanent material world. This representative vision for Glanton has meaning only in the fleeting moment of violence, only in the production of the bloody commodity, and refuses meaning as soon as that violence has ended. In this way, profit, representation, and beauty blur together for Glanton into a *mélange* of impermanence that defines his particular world-view. Take, for example, the moment at which Glanton, with his gang, encounters a team of mule drivers carrying quicksilver. The gang, under the aegis of Glanton, kills the owners of the mules upon the provocation of a nearly drawn escopeta, and then, methodically, drives the mules and their casks of mercury off a sheer cliff:

the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver...racing in the stone arroyos like the imbreachment of ultimate alchemic work decocted from out the secret dark of the earth's heart, the fleeing stag of the ancients fugitive on the mountainside and bright

and quick in the dry path of the storm channels and shaping out the sockets in the rock and hurrying from ledge to ledge down the slope shimmering and deft as eels. (203-204)¹²

The fleeting quality of the mercury gives it representative power for Glanton: the blood and silver flow through the rivulets of rock, and the nature of their “fleeing,” “fugitive,” and “quick” progress down the slope indicates the lack of fixity in the image itself. The red and silver, beautiful due to their fleeting contrast, like the leaf and the rain-soaked turf from before, follow the “dry path” of the rock and are contained by the “sockets” of the cliff, suggesting, strangely, a sort of framing technique. But this technique is undercut immediately by the quick, eel-like progression of the contrast down the ledges and into the oblivion of the canyon. There is only one moment, in other words, at which one might unearth and observe the “ultimate alchemic work,” and after that moment is over, the work itself, by way of its very temporally contingent condition, is gone from the earth. In order to bring about a similar aesthetic representation, one would have to commit a new and constitutively different act of violence in the world. The aesthetic quality of the real or material world thereby depends for Glanton upon *continued* performance of similar but crucially different acts of representative violence, a strategy which resists the limitation of the frame through narrative repetition. Like the individual scalping in the “string” of the larger marketplace, the moment at which the mules and the mercury burst is understood as practically limited – temporally and locally – but limitless in the context of the assumption that it is but one instance in an ostensibly infinite series.

But if Glanton’s insistence on the shifting repetition of narrative or the market is what characterizes his representative strategies, the limits of those strategies are uncovered by their own

¹² In the scene with the donkeys falling off of the cliff, McCarthy echoes the German Romanticist Hölderlin, in his poem “Hyperion’s Song of Fate”, a poem that begins with a vision of “tranquil, eternal clearness” in the “Heavenly breeze,” but turns to the destiny of all mortals to “find no resting place.” As McCarthy sees the blood and silver fall “ledge to ledge down the slope shimmering and deft as eels,” Hölderlin speaks of “suffering mortals...hurled like water from ledge to ledge, downwards for years to the vague abyss.” The distinction between the infinity of the spirit and the limited destiny of the mortal body suggests the eventual contradiction of Glanton’s ceaseless acquisition – namely, that it cannot continue forever. Thanks to Nicholas Brown for this allusion.

contingent reality: namely, that they must also end. Glanton meets his death after the scalp trade has run its course and his corpse is burned, tied to his live dog, the only creature he has been consistently concerned about through the text. And this abrupt end to Glanton's life reflects back on the formal limitations of his aesthetic strategies, in much the same way as his engagement with the market reflected his understanding of the natural and the aesthetic. Indeed, McCarthy's use of overtly formal techniques and markers – e.g. the novel's pre-chapter summaries; its extensive epigraph; and its epilogue – suggests a sense of aesthetic limitation to the novel itself. Like the triptych or the villanelle, the arbitrary-but-total quality of McCarthy's formal restrictions hints toward a commitment to aesthetic containment, to a formal technique that countermands the urge toward a ceaseless proliferation of meaning beyond the specific limits of the text itself. If we take this strategy seriously, McCarthy's figuration of the aesthetics of conflict in *Blood Meridian* would necessarily demand an alternative to Glanton's acquisitive model, and particularly an alternative that solves the problem of impermanence.

This need for McCarthy is filled by the introduction of perhaps the novel's most famous character, Judge Holden. The Judge is a pseudo-supernatural figure who is already with the Glanton gang when the Kid joins, and who survives beyond Glanton's death, chasing the Kid as, alternately, an inquisitor and an enemy. The Judge, as his name might suggest, is a self-conscious critic of aesthetic value, and unlike Glanton, his vision of representation does not involve circulation. The Judge insists that whatever "in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent," a figuration that imagines representation as a sort of coercive and constraining epistemological project (207). His emphasis on knowledge and consent imply that the Judge means to uncover all of the mysteries of the world, but even this relatively benign goal would simultaneously be an expression of his control over the meaning of the representations he uncovers. The discovery of knowledge for the Judge, then, is a progressive mastery over the world, a mastery that translates into a personal victory over the unpredictability of subjective experience and the limitlessness of nature:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds

of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (207-8)

We can hear echoes of McCarthy's own feelings about violence and pacifism in the Judge's screed against not knowing, and the Judge, ostensibly like McCarthy, imagines that an individual "singling out" of the meaningful thread from the larger tapestry of humanity makes the world legible. And yet, dictating "the terms of [one's] own fate" is not as simple as a demand for personal choice or heroic individualism; the volition the Judge demands is simultaneously a limitation of the volition of others. When the Judge, in explaining his drive to "acquaint himself with everything on this earth," claims that "the freedom of birds is an insult to me," the entailment of such a claim is that true knowledge of an object necessitates the restriction of that same object (207-8). In essence, to know something, for the Judge, one must remove it from the world and limit its existence to that of the framed aesthetic, to a picture in a book, "[expunged] from the memory of man" (147).

The Judge's aesthetic practice is thereby founded on two claims that seem disconnected but ultimately imply each other: first, that the world at least initially exceeds an individual subject's knowledge; and second, that the production of the autonomous aesthetic object requires the destruction of the object in the world. The former claim can be restated as a belief that knowledge has a structure apart from one's subjective experience of that knowledge, that "existence has its own order...that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (McCarthy 256). In other words, the true totality of knowledge is incomprehensible by man because man is functionally a part of that totality. The only way for the Judge to "dictate the terms" of his own fate is by the coercion, not the comprehension of that totality. If existence has its own order, then the Judge's method of comprehending that order is not to acquire information, but rather to control the material of existence. The Judge is often depicted as logging material items into his register book, sketching those items and, once finished, destroying the original items themselves. In the first instance we see of this, he finishes sketching a small

iron boot and, afterwards, “[crushes] it into a ball of foil and [pitches] it into the fire” (146). Later, after copying a design of ancient cave dwellers into his book, he scratches out the original, “leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (180). In both instances, the Judge destroys the object in order to remove it from the impermanent, material world, and replaces it with his own permanent, remade creation. The Judge destroys these objects in order to frame them in their ideality on the page of his ledger. In essence, to exist under the Judge’s consent is to exist within the autonomous space of *his* composition.

Yet, even if the Judge’s representational scheme is more aesthetically stable than Glanton’s, we should not read McCarthy’s aesthetic endorsement of the Judge as a political endorsement of the coercive quality of the Judge. While McCarthy’s appreciation for the monadic author and the deep-seated nature of violence connect him with the Judge, *Blood Meridian* itself suggests a disconnect between author and character. Indeed, we might read the epilogue of the novel – one of its self-consciously formal notes – as a critique of the implications of the Judge’s representation of the world. Written in a heavily metaphorical style, the epilogue stands alone and can be read as an account of the novel in miniature. Particularly of interest to any reading of the Judge is the central figure of the epilogue, “*a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground,*” holes which he “*enkindles...striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there*” (351, emphasis original). The Promethean quality of the enkindling man is unmistakable, as he, like the Judge, bends the earth to his will, *making* fire, not simply observing it. And yet, the figure is not alone, as a crowd of people follow behind with a consistency “*which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality*” (351, emphasis original). For the Judge’s aesthetic to work in the world, it requires a comprehensive coercion – of objects and of individuals – under the intention of a single representative vision. If one might critique Glanton’s aesthetic because of its unmediated commitment to the material logic of ceaseless exchange, they might conversely critique the Judge’s representative practice because of its unmediated commitment to aesthetic autonomy at the expense of political volition. The reduction of people to a “validation of sequence” or a “verification of a

principle” is callous at best, and fascistic at worst: the description in the Epilogue frames the Judge as not only an artist or a philosopher, but also a dictator.

In representing the world under late capitalism *or* the 1850s frontier, McCarthy is seemingly left with the impossible choice between speculative exchange and totalitarian limitation. As a result, McCarthy includes, in an effort to get beyond the limitlessness of Glanton and the totalitarian impulse of the Judge, a “third option” for representation in the figure of the Kid. The Kid, born at the very onset of the novel, is committed to violence as a simultaneously representative and experiential schema in the same way that Glanton and the Judge are, but his character functions in the novel as an attempt to mediate political volition and aesthetic autonomy. Emblematic of a kind of ecological utopia, the Kid recognizes the representational limits to Glanton’s ceaseless proliferation of profit, but he also recognizes in the seeming infinitude of the natural, an ideality that escapes even the Judge’s representational totality. The logic of this vision, we will see, fails to ultimately cohere as a viable aesthetic or representational strategy, but, I would argue, this failure progresses the political impulse that is mobilized through *Blood Meridian*’s aesthetic debate. In short, McCarthy imagines utopia in the Kid, as best as one can in the world of *Blood Meridian*, and it is the productive failure of this utopia that must serve as a hinge for literary-critical efforts to diagnose a truly critical representative politics.

The Political Aesthetic: Fragments and the Assertion of Utopia

If, as I have hinted above, the site of *Blood Meridian*’s political potential is, paradoxically, in its moment of utopian failure, then one might fruitfully turn to a consideration of the Kid in thinking about the politics of novel, due to his role as the fragmentary utopian impulse in the novel. This utopian impulse positions the Kid both within the centralized gaze of the novel’s omniscient narration, as well as oscillating between the aesthetic strategies of Glanton and the Judge. The novel begins with an exhortation to “See the child,” a command that instantiates this image within a limited frame: the reader is given a privileged gaze upon the “pale and thin” boy, and the “scullery fire” that the boy stokes, acts as both a focal point for the composition of the boy’s figure, as well as a framing device (3). Outside of the

perceptive frame of the light of the fire lies an expansive gulf of “dark turned fields...and darker woods beyond” (3). The frame of the dark night at once limits the reader’s attention to the lit focal point of the child, while simultaneously obfuscating the world exterior to the frame, both for the reader and, more importantly, for the boy. Absorbed in stoking the scullery fire, the child looks away from the darkness and from the reader, rejecting any structural importance for the reader’s subjective acknowledgement of his action.

This initial moment of absorption is interrupted by a sudden shift to a relational logic, signified through a formal turn to the first person: “Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove” (3). The most striking difference between the two passages is that the second demands a particularity of location, in both space and time. If the scullery fire and the “darker woods beyond” are not subject to the contingencies of particular space and place, the account of the child’s birth gives an acute temporal reference to its date – “Thirty-three” – and its stellar landscape – “The Leonids” and “The Dipper.” The turn to the first person shifts the reader’s understanding of the child from object in a frame to subject in the world, and as a result, the reader is once again exhorted to “see” the Kid, only now through the lens of the Kid’s relation to history. These two representative strategies, as we have seen throughout our discussion of Glanton and the Judge, are not just different, but in fact contradictory; in the image of the scullery fire, however, these strategies are placed not in a clearly choosable opposition, but in a kind of dialectical simultaneity. And throughout the text, the Kid operates under these competing signs, as violent actor and passive observer respectively. It is not until he has left the Glanton gang and reaches the West Coast that this tension between the Kid’s subjective whims and his distant, structural observation of the world resolves into a third option.

After the death of Glanton, the Kid and a few surviving gang members head west, pursued at all turns by the Judge, who has taken his Thanatos role in the text to its logical conclusion, methodically killing all of the gang members remaining. At the climax of his flight from the Judge, the Kid reaches a

representational limit point for the novel itself, namely the edge of the Pacific Ocean and the end of the American western expanse:

He rose and turned toward the lights of the town. The tide-pools bright as smelterpots among the dark rocks where the phosphorescent seacrabs clambered back. Passing through the salt grass he looked back. The horse had not moved...The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the horse was watching, out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea (316).

The Kid's gaze here shifts as a gallery-goer's might between two exhibits, first the town, characterized by its boom-town brightness and natural phosphorescence, and then the sea, dark, with not even starlight, and "past men's knowing." But the Kid's gaze is not the only one described, as the horse and her colt also look out to the sea, mirroring and sharing parts of the Kid's gaze. The threshold point between the human and natural spheres – the light and the dark – makes the coast an evocative location for dramatizing the difference between man and nature. Yet, the coast is not an ameliorative space, and while the gaze of the horse and the colt are used by the narrator to consider the sea beyond men's knowledge, the humanistic description of the whales in the deep ferrying "their vast souls" should make us pause. While the narrator and the Kid look past the coast and conceive of things "beyond" the acquisitive knowledge of Glanton or the aesthetic coercion of the Judge, the representation relies upon impossible mediations: the colt and horse do not gaze as the Kid does, and the whales' souls are convenient analogies that allow for representation outside of reality. Indeed, what the Kid sees at the threshold of the purely natural is not something relational, but rather something beyond relation itself.

This "beyond" is what, I would argue, marks the Kid as a source of hope in *Blood Meridian*. To be sure, the Kid's ability to observe the scene of the blank, inexpressive ocean – a scene, like that of the scullery fire, framed and composed as an absorptive, autonomous moment – recalls the aesthetic of the Judge. But the Kid's lack of interest, marked by the narrator's speculative openness, in pinning down what lies "beyond the knowledge of men" is what distinguishes the Kid from the Judge. The Kid

recognizes the limit of the material, and recognizes in that same moment the *limit* of human knowledge. The souls of the whales – the heart of their contingent existence – remain intact and outside of the purview of representative fixity, and seem to present a kind of natural limit to even the Judge’s aesthetic control. The Kid’s appreciation of natural limits speaks to a kind of utopian solution to the novel’s representational crisis, by recognizing the natural world as that which *exceeds* totality. The Kid’s third representative option emerges finally as one that acknowledges the existence of persistent, autonomous meanings for material objects in the world, while simultaneously, through the figure of the natural limit to knowledge, it rejects humanity’s ability to represent those immanent meanings in any sort of sufficient global totality. In much the same way that the Hegelian dialectic of the material and the ideal resolves when “the differences” between the two “are turned back into *subjective unity*, [and] emerge in them as their universal soul,” the resolution in the Kid involves a limitless subjective ideality, but an ideality that recognizes its own incapability to perceive every part of the material real (*Aesthetics* 118). For the Kid, unlike for Glanton and the Judge, there is a limit to what can be represented.

The novel as a literary form, however, can only represent within the bounds of the material real, not in the Kid’s “beyond.” Nature, it seems, resists representation, and while for the Kid this is a valuable feature, for McCarthy’s, indeed for *anyone’s* novel, it is a problematic formal bug. As Arne Naess, a founding voice of the deep ecology movement, might suggest, an appreciation of ecology based on its non-human components requires a paradoxical doubling down on humanity. Naess in his brief and self-consciously provisional manifesto “The Basics of the Deep Ecology Movement” openly embraces this paradox in his eight axioms of the deep ecology movement. Particularly, axiom three – that humans “have no right to reduce this richness and diversity [of nonhuman life] except to satisfy *vital* needs” (111) – conflicts with a later axiom calling for efforts toward widespread population reduction. If we read the first axiom as a philosophical position and the latter as a sort of practical action, then the two correspond; but if we imagine both occupy a sort of philosophical grounding for Naess, then we might want to quibble a fair amount on his definition of “vital needs.” While Naess manages this contradiction by noting that “vital need” is “left intentionally vague to allow for considerable latitude in judgment,” the

epistemological, even ontological gap between human and nature is revealed (112). Decreased population efforts would require coercion – perhaps juridical, perhaps statist, perhaps violent or non-violent – in order to function, and the coercion would be an explicit acknowledgment that even vital needs, that is to say procreative needs, are to be sacrificed for nature. But what, we might ask Naess, are we sacrificing for? Naess is at a loss to explain what, particularly, is valuable in nonhuman life, simply arguing the value is “inherent,” and this is certainly not because Naess is a bad thinker (111). On the contrary, no one – not Naess, the Kid, or McCarthy – can give value to the nonhuman because all three, to varying degrees, are grounded in a kind of humanism. To think outside of the human, in other words, demands contradiction and incoherency; for Naess, this resolves into an always malleable action, an ethical imperative to “attempt to implement the necessary changes” (112). But for McCarthy, who rejects contradiction, fragment, and experimentation, effectively founding his innovative prose on an oblique return to a fixed formal frame, unresolved contradiction is not an option. *Blood Meridian*, in closing itself off formally, must resolve rather than revel in the paradoxical relationship between man and nature, and thus must embrace its own limits of representation, returning the Kid abruptly to human sociality, the realm of the Judge.

Unsurprisingly, though disappointingly for anyone expecting utopia from McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* ends with a final confrontation between the Kid and the Judge that sees the former murdered by the latter off-stage, in an outhouse. Before this dramatic erasure of the Kid’s utopian difference, however, the Judge takes time to explicitly challenge the coherence of the Kid’s representative vision of the world, asking him about his journey west and challenging him on the existence of towns he’d visited. “Men’s memories are uncertain, and the past that was differs little from the past that was not,” he suggests; “Did you post witnesses?...To report to you on the continuing existence of those places once you’d quit them” (344)? In order to be able to truly verify the consistent nature of a place or an object, it would seem, one either must impossibly report back the existence of the object in the world perpetually, or one must destroy that object so that it can only exist in unchanging representative ideality. The natural, nonhuman world stands in opposition to memory, and therefore in opposition to framed or permanent

representation; if the Kid does not post human witnesses, then his way is not verifiable, but if he does post human witnesses, he becomes simply another version of Glanton-as-serial memoirist. As the Judge describes the *orchestration* of an aesthetic event or artistic representation as far more important than the particular content of the representation, we can see this conflict borne out:

As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well. In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists (342).

The Judge champions here the logic of the event, and frames this logic not in the open way that Alain Badiou and others have, but rather reserves agency only for himself, the architect and composer of the dance-event, leaving the performers as components, cogs, parts of the kind of totalizing human intention that Naess sees as marginalizing “so-called simple, lower, or primitive species of plants and animals” in the interest of human progress (111). The completion and sublimation of error, failure, or leftover (nonhuman) component into a totalizing framework is at once the ideal vision of art, and an utterly fascistic leveling of difference. If the history of all is not the history of each, then it is the history of its creator or collector, and the Judge’s omnipotent power to control and limit and destroy is in fact the *necessary condition* of his ability to represent immanent or autonomous aesthetic meaning.

And so the Kid’s death may speak less to a revelation of McCarthy as a paragon of the Judge, and more to the limits of aesthetic representation as such under capitalism, particularly under American capitalism in 1985. For while it is true that the Judge represents the only plausible aesthetic method of representing totality under exchange it is also true that his drive toward representative autonomy is also a kind of epistemological accumulation, an urge to “hoard” *all* of the signs and objects of the world under one individual interpretation. In other words, while the Judge does reject the relational logic of exchange, it becomes clear through contrast with the Kid that he does not reject the complementary capitalist logic

of ceaseless accumulation. The Kid's vision of limitlessness, on the other hand, is contingent upon a nonaccumulative expansiveness, and this is literally beyond knowledge, or at least beyond representation under the aegis of capitalism. And in a moment where capitalism and exploration have eliminated the frontier as such – what Marx calls “real subsumption under capitalism” – one cannot opt out of the world, cannot opt out of being witnessed. The methods of critique left to us are premised, once again, on the grounds of representation, but now, in a turn of phrase that might make McCarthy himself shudder, the horizon of the politics our aesthetic and historical conditions provide us are *other people*.

This return to the previously rejected alternative of sociality, in the end, seems to be the contradictory revelation of the Kid: as the Kid is excised from the text, his opposition to the Judge reveals the accumulative character of the Judge, equally unacceptable politically as it is appropriate aesthetically. The Judge's artistic practice is not what would popularly be called neoliberal; it resembles nothing more than modernist strategies of autonomy. And yet, a bourgeois strategy for art may be at once acceptable aesthetically and horrific in terms of practical politics. Neither a call to return humanity to a state of nature, nor a justification of coercive accumulation, then, *Blood Meridian's* representative potential lies in the continual development of the dialectic contradictions of the society and sociability we are given under capitalism, figuring political representation as a process founded on a progression through failure, as opposed to an urge toward coercive certainty. That the Kid's failure to provide a meaningful alternative to capitalist society can still produce an aesthetically and politically sound reading speaks to a future for Marxist literary criticism in a moment like McCarthy's 1985, where avenues for revolution seem always-already foreclosed, and literature that is innovative returns to an older formalism. And so we see that, even if Fisher is correct and the moment of reading art for its ideological resistance has indeed passed, literary analysis must now respond with a recommitment to the aesthetic and to the *formal* politics of representation.

Works Cited and Referenced

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Market of Symbolic Goods." *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. 112-141. Print.
- Brown, Nicholas. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capital." *Nonsite*, 13 Mar 2012, <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>. Web. 7 Oct, 2016.
- Eaton, Mark. A. "Dis(Re)Membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 155-180. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009. Print.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books." *The New Yorker*, 30 Sept. 2002, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/30/mr-difficult>. Web. 7 Oct, 2016.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts, Volume I*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975. Print.
- Hölderlin. *Selected Verse*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986. Print.
- Holmberg, David. "In A Time Before Nomenclature Was And Each Was All: *Blood Meridian*'s Neomythic West And The Heterotopian Zone." *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 140-156. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- Mitchell, Jason P. "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, And The (De)Mythologizing Of The American West." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41.3 (2000): 290-304. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*. Ed. Allan R Drengson. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008. Print.

Pierce, Leslie. "Harold Bloom on *Blood Meridian*." *The Onion A.V. Club*. The Onion, 15 Jun, 2009. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.

Phillips, Dana. "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 433-460. Web.

Snyder, Phillip A. "Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 126-139. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.

Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times*. New York Times on the Web, 19 Apr, 1992. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.

Alone In A World of Objects: Videogames, Interaction, and Late Capitalist Alienation

Videogame criticism has, in the past few years, progressed beyond early questions posed about the suitability and legitimacy of games as artistic objects worthy of study. Certainly theories surrounding play, as Alexander Galloway notes in his *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, have proliferated throughout the 20th century, from Johan Huizinga to Jacques Derrida, and videogames as a form slot into these cultural analyses quite ably. Furthermore, the rise of more aesthetically or politically minded analyses of videogames has taken Roger Ebert's famous claim that videogames could never be art and displaced it with a wealth of literary, cultural, and media critics who take the artistic quality of videogames as a matter of course and instead ask how they function and signify as art particularly. As Bill Nichols puts it, the task of the critic "is not to overthrow the prevailing cybernetic model but to transgress its predefined interdictions and limits" – we must reject regressive thinking and encourage progressive analyses of the digital landscape (Nichols 1988, 45). In this spirit, we see scholars like McKenzie Wark, whose *Gamer Theory* interrogates the gamification of the world and the introduction of the gamer archetype on the cultural scene. The need that contemporary theory must fill by reading videogames, Wark suggests, is a "primer...in thinking about a world made over as gamespace, made over as an imperfect copy of the game" (Wark 2007, 24). This folding of the game into the world is at once tragic, as the marketized, *quid-pro-quo* gamespace "is now the very form of the world" (Wark 2007, 17), and emancipatory, as the game allows the gamer to "[realize] the real potentials of the game, in and against this world made over as gamespace" (Wark 2007, 25). In their *Games of Empire*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter expand this line of thinking into a more directed anti-capitalist critique, aligning what Wark calls "gamespace" with the concept of precarious affective labor, popularized by, among others, Antonio Negri and Michael

Hardt in *Empire* and *Multitude*. Taking their lead from Negri and Hardt's utopian visions of the potential of affective labor, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter begin their text by claiming that, much as the 18th century novel was emblematic – even generative – of early capitalism, “virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, lines of exodus from it” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xxix). Expanding upon Nancy Armstrong's Foucauldian analysis of early novels, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter come to the same totalizing vision for videogames as does Wark: videogames are not only worthy of study, but uniquely diagnose and drive the unique qualities of depersonalized late capitalism.

This approach, however illuminating, unfortunately makes videogames into monoliths, grouping and homogenizing particular videogames in the service of explaining the cultural sea-change that the digital represents to these authors. Broad strokes can define larger phenomena more effectively than close readings, but they also tend to obscure the aesthetic quality of games, what Galloway, quoting Fredric Jameson, calls “the poetics of social forms” or “the aesthetic and political impact of games as a formal medium” (Galloway 2006, xi).

Unfortunately, this blindspot seems endemic to videogame criticism generally. Even Galloway, whose work actively attempts to explain the cultural phenomenon of videogames by reading them through a filmic and literary-inspired lens, is uninterested in the immanent meaning of videogames, what modernist critics might have called their “autonomy” as art objects. So while Galloway deftly observes that “the play of the nondiegetic machine act is...a play within the various semiotic layers of the video game...form playing with other form” (Galloway 2006, 36), the horizon of his analysis always comes back to the interaction of the player with the game, as opposed to the game in isolation. “It is no longer sufficient,” Galloway asserts, “to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning,” effectively relegating his formal analysis to a

prefatory step toward understanding the cultural importance of videogames as a phenomenon (Galloway 2006, 72). In fact, Galloway's final moment of analysis eschews consideration of the formal intention of the game's author entirely, since in the interpretative analysis of Derridean allegory, which Galloway embraces, the author is "no longer directly involved in the moment of interpretation" (Galloway 2006, 106). Interpretation for Galloway – and, I'd suggest, for Wark, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter – is about the player and their actions in the game, and not about the game as a stable object of reading.

I think the texts discussed here, particularly Galloway's, make important inroads into serious consideration of videogames, but what I intend for the remainder of this essay is to carve out a place for the videogame-as-text in contemporary games theory. Patrick Jagoda alludes to the potential of a textually resonant videogame when he calls it a "world [form] that [mediates] between subjectivity and history" (Jagoda 2013, 771). Mediation is the concept that most distinguishes Jagoda's analysis, here of the much-celebrated *Braid*, from his peers in videogame criticism. Indeed, the ability to mediate between subjectivity and history, or between author and audience is both videogames' most important value as a medium, as well as their closest tie to traditional literature. Mediation, in its classically Hegelian sense, asserts communication between author and reader, while at the same time clearly delineating the two parties due to their respective limits of expression and representation. Like the novel or the poem, the limitations of the videogame medium initially appear as obstacles to be overcome, and, quickly afterward, as a condition to be embraced, necessary for the form's success. As a result, the games that call attention to these limits of the medium – particularly the generically necessary engagement of an outside player as co-author – will emerge as the mediations most viable as textual or literary objects. To this end, I will consider the Fullbright Company's 2013 first person experiment

Gone Home and Croteams' ambitious 2014 puzzle-shooter *The Talos Principle*. In examining these texts, we will see that even self-reflexive games do not quite achieve an aesthetic expression autonomous or completely isolated from the reception of their beholder, but we will also see that artistic distinction is a matter of immanent critique of particular games, not an *a priori* quality of the videogame medium itself or its digital provenance. The revelation of literary complexity in the moment of artistic failure mediates the cultural reception of videogames, limiting the utopian impulses we see in Galloway and Wark while revealing what Jameson might call lines of flight from the limited horizon of the market. In this moment of contemporary literature marked by an increasingly subtle and total immersion into late capitalism, the ostensibly limitless but ultimately foreshortened autonomy of the videogame should be read as a unique and potent flashpoint for representing and reimagining our political and aesthetic moment. As we will see in *Gone Home* and *The Talos Principle*, videogames all too readily respond to such characterizations with problematized but productive insights.

***Gone Home*, and the Return of the Repressed Object**

While the aesthetics of videogames are up for debate, the political potential of such a participatory medium is not at issue: while the active role of the player problematizes autonomous authorship, it conversely intensifies reader engagement. Ian Bogost, in the preface to his *Persuasive Games*, calls this quality of videogames a kind of procedural rhetoric, “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (Bogost 2010, ix). Bogost sees videogames as not only politically influential – a claim that any reactionary response to a school shooting in the past twenty years would share – but as formally influential or, in his words, persuasive. Interaction,

by this reading, is a kind of performative act: the player goes through the game obeying the author's rules, and, presuming he or she is successful, is given direct access to the matter of the game itself as an incentive. The persuasive elements of the game's message are at once made possible by the player and reinscribed again and again by the repetition of their actions. The presentation of videogames as mutually produced and reinforced by the synthetic effort of player and artist is for Bogost their great promise as a form. Interaction, in other words, is a feature, not a bug. The co-authorship of interactive play allows for the meaning of the game to be principally determined through player choices: the game's narrative is reinforced by the player, and the dialectic tension of the author's intent and the player's actions is resolved into a political rhetoric of persuasion. For the openly political videogame, not only is interaction a necessity, but form and content are married in their function and design through a shared temporality: the author's intention is only realized through the correct, gameplay-specific player actions, which are themselves dictated by authorial cues.¹³

Yet even this version of interactive persuasion leaves us with pressing questions: first, what is the horizon of videogames' political intervention? Can they challenge or convince their players, or are they simply preaching to their particular choir through performative storytelling? And second, can videogames (or indeed any art objects) be aesthetically meaningful outside of market reception under late capitalism? And if they can be, how can we as critics untangle the co-creative, marketized impulse of interaction from the efforts of the artist herself? To begin answering these questions, I turn to the Fullbright Company's massively popular videogame *Gone Home*, a game that in many ways subordinates its political motives to the logic of its

¹³ Galloway explains this phenomenon by distinguishing between operator actions (the actions of the player) and machine actions (actions the computer makes independent of operator input). The interaction between these actions produces the particular quality of videogame play, in which the game becomes "an algorithmic machine and like all machines functions through specific, codified rules of operation" (Galloway 2007, 5).

aesthetic form. Indeed, *Gone Home*'s reputation as an “art” game precedes it: its user-generated product tags include the complimentary “indie” and “story driven,” as well as the more derisive “walking simulator” description. The idiosyncrasy of these descriptors in the videogame marketplace – signaled by the lack of more classical descriptions like “first-person shooter” or “role-playing game” – suggest *Gone Home*'s ambivalence toward the popular understandings of what a videogame is meant to be. To this end, Anastasia Salter in her recent monograph *What is Your Quest?* argues that the expansion of literature beyond isolated textual materiality is a necessary concession to historical – and capitalist – progression, a concession videogames are uniquely able to fulfill:

In this moment of media and platform convergence, new models for understanding the many platforms now available must emerge, as the commonly accepted distinction between reading and play is not capable of describing the range of possible interactions we may have with increasingly...interactive texts (Salter 2014, 8).

Salter's emphasis on interaction also valorizes the reader herself as co-authorial to the videogame creator. The media that Salter, after Espen Aarseth, calls “ergodic”¹⁴ is therefore defined by its split analytical attention upon creation and reception, requiring a conception of and engagement with both in order to produce a legible digital art object.

Since videogames demand a sympathetic interaction from their reader, the demand for a relationship with their current and future players is not only a requirement for a study of reception theory, but a basic requirement for the success of the artform itself. And contemporary

¹⁴ The text which most fully develops this term out is likely Aarseth's 1997 monograph *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, but for an updated and briefer account, I also suggest Aarseth's 2004 essay “Genre Trouble” in *Electronic Book Review*.

videogames examine this temporally flexible relationship by playing with their eventual technological obsolescence and more openly than their older, more formative, but less aesthetically adventurous predecessors. *Gone Home* handles this crisis by positioning its reader as a nostalgic visitor into a shared cultural past, casting the player as a kind of anthropologist-turned-voyeur left in an empty house in order to uncover family secrets. Set in 1995, the game puts its reader in the role of its largely undeveloped protagonist, Kaitlyn, who comes home from a trip around Europe to find her house entirely empty. A note on the door from her sister, Sam, assures her everything's okay, but also not to look for her. Unsurprisingly, the game is about denying Sam's request outright and searching the entire house to discover where she and your parents have gone. *Gone Home* is coded using a first-person shooter engine, but provides nothing to shoot with or kill; in fact, there is no way to "die" in the course of the game, nor any truly insurmountable or otherworldly challenge. Despite sardonic gestures – a spooky TV left on; a torrential downpour; a bathtub covered in what seems to be blood but is actually Manic Panic (see fig. 1) – the game never dips into the supernatural or macabre.¹⁵

¹⁵ Save from the allusion to a potential child abuse echo in the house, though this is heavily masked in-game and not likely useful to our analysis. Of note, however, is that the abuse possibility is first masked as a ghost story and suggests the same sort of "political reveal" as Sam's coming out.



(Fig. 1. The bloody bathtub revealed to be benign. *Gone Home*, 2013)

In fact, the game is mostly concerned with the politics of sexual identity, as you discover your sister has accepted her sexuality and run off with her girlfriend. *Gone Home* uncovers this slowly, with misdirections toward suicide or darker endings, but ultimately reveals the celebration of love between your sister, Sam, and her girlfriend, Lonnie, as the denouement of the game's narrative. What *Gone Home* provides its voyeur, then, is an ameliorative revision of mid-nineties attitudes toward homophobia: Kaitlyn is embodied by the contemporary player, who in 2015 is (presumably) more sympathetic to the plight of queer youth than Sam's unsympathetic parents. We, as player, get to interactively enact our tolerance, while the game unfolds its politics by encouraging the player's natural urge to explore, to collect, and to observe.

The form and the content of *Gone Home* are thereby linked in a complementary dialectic; but is the link between politics and form enough to produce an internal aesthetic for the game? Is feeling good about our political beliefs a politics in and of itself? Is feeling good an aesthetic? We might say that feeling a kind of subjective pride is a *commodified* politics – an affiliation of

progressive sentiment with market forces that we have seen in such ad campaigns as Oreo's LGBTQ positive viral advertising, a way to align politics with preferences.¹⁶ This preferential politics is mobilized, at least in part, by *Gone Home*, as form and content marry to create a limited political efficacy, a reaffirmation of the player's good politics regarding sexuality (or, conversely, a negative pleasure for the player in experiencing politics that they do not find agreeable). But while preference can produce a politics, it is difficult to imagine that "feeling good" can count as an aesthetic.

So what of *Gone Home* – is it simply pleasant politics with no representational *there* there? Or can we recuperate its form and say something more about the videogame aesthetic? On the surface, it seems like this would be an untenable recuperative effort: the game itself is inescapably bound to the subjective markers of an individualized nostalgia, a referential metonymy with previous video games, and the virtues of voyeurism. The nostalgia in the game largely works its way in through the viewer-centric referent of old media – VHS of X-Files episodes, cassette tapes of Riot Grrl acts, and mimeographed and photocopied fliers and zines (see fig. 2).



(Fig. 2. Zines provide clear nostalgic cues for a particular audience who grew up in the 1990s. *Gone Home*, 2013)

¹⁶ This position is best discussed (though not without its own much discussed controversies) in Walter Benn Michaels' 2004 book *The Shape of the Signifier*. Any contemporary discussion of the politics of preference, or lack thereof, takes at least some of its lead from Michaels' provocation that much of contemporary political discourse substitutes difference for disagreement, to counter-productive ends.

That the game relies on TV, music, and common commodities like the tissue boxes, magazines, and phone books littered around the house seems on its face fairly conservative, at least from an economic standpoint: “we are our things,” as any insurance commercial would agree. And while the connection and reference to previous video games, from literal references like cheat codes to formally echoed strategies of gameplay like hunting and gathering, produces a kind of self-reflexive formal critique, the critical force of this reflection is undercut by the game's fairly standard rewards for interaction; namely, the progression of narrative at the completion of goals. Finally, *Gone Home* fulfills, even problematically, the probing desire to uncover a person's identity. No personal room is off limits, and while the story of Sam is conveyed through journal entries written to Kaitlyn, the concurrent story of Kaitlyn and Sam's parents' marital and professional trials and triumphs is gleaned from forgotten notes, ticket stubs, and calendar entries. In this way, the fine line between the player and the narrator that interactivity promises proves troubling: it is one thing for a daughter to snoop around her own home, but quite another for a stranger-as-player to do so. While the game's progressive politics around sexuality are admirable, its aesthetic relies on a curious and intrusive reader willing, licensed, and commanded by the videogame itself to create a cohesive narrative out of domestic clutter arbitrarily strewn about, absent of authorial cohesion, intention, or even permission.

Yet, while the politics of *Gone Home* valorize the reader through the entirety of its narrative, after the game ends, only the house, filled with its now-purposeless items, remains. If the player clicks “Resume” in the main menu after completing the narrative of Sam's story, she will return to the avatar of Kaitlyn, but without the guiding force of an objective. The player is simply *in* the house, able to explore and finish up any loose ends they've been unable to

complete in the “main” playthrough. But even if certain secrets remain undiscovered, this version of the game is available only if the main narrative is completed entirely: as a result, all locked doors are open, all narrative mysteries are solved, and all dramatic tension is lifted. All that is left is a giant house, filled with things that can be picked up, examined, thrown, or moved, but which will not respond to the player's interaction beyond simple physical feedback. The structure of the game, therefore, evacuated of any incentive for participation, presents an unresponsive edifice: the things do not tell stories, because the story is over. Now they are just objects. Or, rather, now they are just *representations* of objects. The things in the house exist as a hyperreal representation of the Marxian commodity fetish: not only is their history of production erased, but so is their exchange and use value. They can be picked up and put down, but never bought, sold, or used. They are purely, impossibly, things. And as a result of this newly alienating representation, the fantasy of nostalgic-but-progressive recognition through familiar objects and media falls away: nostalgia can *seem* like an argument when it is in the service of critique, but the nostalgic object removed from a narrative and simply *presented as it is* refuses to speak. Paradoxically, the truly remarkable aesthetic of *Gone Home* appears when it actually becomes a “walking simulator.” The game no longer has any stake in the player's actions – throwing one object across the room changes nothing about the totality of the house or its collection of commodities. The player is let loose in the gallery of the home, but is unable to affect the meaning of the gallery itself. So the temporal frame of 2015-cum-1995 falls out with the end of the game, and the eternal present of the commodity-filled home in the hey-day of globalization takes its place. And the house by itself is a lonely, inarguable idea. The appeal of the digital lies in being able to present an idea like this, which, due to its scope and ambition, cannot be represented within the limits of material bounds. For what is more representative of

the full alienation of things under late capitalism than unresponsive, disinterested everyday items? What is more impossible to truly produce in the world than a home filled only with non-living objects and without use value to its sole potential occupant?

We want to be careful not to retreat from narrative so quickly that we end up reimagining objects in the world as the ultimate horizon for aesthetics in a digital space, however. The objects in the game are not objects, after all, but recursive representations of objects that *may* have been but were not in the world.¹⁷ A table in *Gone Home* is no more a real table than a table painted on canvas. Where a table in *Gone Home* differs from both its real world and painterly counterparts is in the way it formalizes and imagines the table-ness of “table” with its player. It is this difference, and not the objects it produces, that we need unpacking. Indeed, if there is a medium-specificity for videogames, then this specificity emerges at the intersection of interaction and representation, and particularly in the authorial space that remains cut off from but still responsive to the player-author: namely, code.

Learn to Code: *The Talos Principle* and the Intrusion of Humanity

Somewhere along the way to a technological utopia, the protagonists of the world-to-come shifted from the users of futuristic conveniences to the people who built and designed

¹⁷ I will note here that my purely aesthetic approach constitutes a particular position in one ongoing debate in Games Criticism over the provenance of the discipline. I see Games Criticism as a uniquely generative space for literary and aesthetic analysis, but this is by no means the only or even most popular opinion. As the general term for the discipline might imply, the focuses of Games Criticism span from textual analysis to strategies of game design. Between all of these different positions, critics often tend toward one of two sides, either claiming that videogames are objects proper to narratology or objects that are best understood as totally new, under the sign of play-studies or “ludology.” This argument deserves far more space than I am able to afford it, but I will briefly mark my own position: I find myself skeptical of the centrality of narrative to videogame criticism, but I also am not ready to reduce videogames to a non-aesthetic, purely cooperative space of team generation. Both options seem somehow to miss the aesthetic, absorptive potential of the medium. I take from both in an effort at a synthetic reading practice that can accomplish the aesthetic goals I argue for in this essay. For more fine-toothed analysis of narratology in videogames, see Janet Murray’s “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama” and for a generative analysis of ludology, see Espen Aarseth’s “Genre Trouble”, both published in *Electronic Book Review*.

those conveniences. The cultural rise of the charismatic CEO dovetailed conveniently with the rise of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, and to this day technology remains metonymically linked to the figure of the solitary genius inventor. It's not surprising then that the tech-spheres of Silicon Valley and beyond became central sites for imagining a utopian future. And if the neoreactionary, or nrX movement¹⁸ of arch-conservative wealthy technocrats is any indication, the minds behind tech utopia approach their leadership positions with a troubling enthusiasm. Perhaps this is because there is nothing about the efficiency-obsessed and human-capital-justified world of tech that is out of place in contemporary capitalism. Tech “disruptions” like the unregulated taxi service Uber are gaining national and legal footholds as tech industries worldwide diminish the role of unionized workforces in favor of the (often illusory or ideological) figure of the skilled, individual genius. The tech bubble has mobilized a vision of human capital as a productive market strategy, as rhetorics of self-reliance and minimal taxation provide ex-post-facto justification to the meteoric rise of technological advancement. To risk a tautology, the future of capital is linked with the future of the tech industry.

Ultimately, this collusion of capital with technology is nothing new – Karl Marx takes an entire chapter to outline this central role of technology for capitalism in *Capital, Volume I* – but the emphasis put upon the individual agent of capital here is worth investigating. Going beyond Gary Becker's redefinition of “capital” as an innate personal potentiality¹⁹ – “human” capital –

¹⁸ Briefly, the “Dark Enlightenment” as it is called by its proponents and is effectively an argument against democracy and progressivism from a Nietzschean anti-pity mode. That the leaders of this movement lionize themselves as larger-than-life heroes and martyrs should therefore come as no surprise. For more information, see Matt Sigl's useful primer “The Dark Enlightenment: The Creepy Internet Movement You'd Better Take Seriously.”

¹⁹ The most useful account of Becker's modification of the relationship between capital and labor can be found in his 1964 monograph *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, With Special Reference to Education*, now in its third edition. Becker's account of the means of producing capital one might socially or culturally attain through education and training, in opposition to classical means of production such as factories or raw materials, has been foundational not only for the tech sphere's conception of capitalism, but also for American neoliberal capitalism as such.

the tech sphere has recharacterized entrepreneurial drive as a progressive, humanistic virtue. The ubiquity of the phrase “Coding is the new literacy,” for instance, is so thick that tracking down a specific author proves impossible: the phrase has simply become a truism, marking the rise of technical facility as the new mark of upper class, erudite status in the contemporary moment. This fantasy of the individually brilliant coder as well as the ubiquity of code, however, covers over the materiality of code, the actual product of the labor that is alienated from the tech worker and thereafter valorized by capitalists to produce profit. This underlying materiality of code, its role as product of labor, sets the stage for the ways in which videogames’ particular representational limitations produce their medium specificity. Matthew Kirschenbaum in his recent monograph *Mechanisms* does useful work in working out these limits, defining the qualities of the immaterial program by way of the oddly material code that comprises it.²⁰ For Kirschenbaum, the condition for digital materiality depends upon the real-life-metaphor of the “nanoscale,” the “precise point at which the normal, observable behavior of matter ceases to be predictable and dependable...the exact threshold between the material and the immaterial” (Kirschenbaum 2008, 2). Kirschenbaum is careful not to overlay scientific essentialism onto what is ultimately for him an issue of reading practice, however, and the nanoscale remains most useful as a metaphor for him, specifically for the really existing but *practically* invisible world of digital storage and display.

Mobilizing a dialectic between forensic and formal materiality, Kirschenbaum promotes a kind of post-material materiality for the computer by rereading technology and code. Forensic materiality for technology somewhat traditionally “rests upon the principle of individualization”

²⁰ While this analysis will focus on Kirschenbaum’s text alone, the materiality that he discusses has been dealt with by many scholars under the rubric of Platform Studies. Specifically, Ian Bogost and Nick Monfort’s co-edited series from The MIT Press, “Platform Studies,” is well worth looking into for further analysis of this fascinating sub-field of game studies.

(Kirschenbaum 2008, 10), denoting the ways in which even identical-*looking* objects like magnetic hard drives have minute individual distinctions at the level of their material construction. Formal materiality, however, deals more with the liminal space of code:

All forms of modern digital technology incorporate hyper-redundant error-checking routines that serve to sustain an illusion of immateriality by detecting error and correcting it, reviving the quality of the signal, like old telegraph relays, such that any degradation suffered during a subsequent interval of transmission will not fall beyond whatever tolerances of symbolic integrity exist past which the original value of the signal (or identity of the symbol) cannot be reconstituted (Kirschenbaum 2008, 12).

Thus, while the data produced by a computer might appear to be immaterial points of light in the cloud, it is manifest on the machine itself, supported in its illusion of immateriality by dozens of very real mechanisms and routines that click on and off on the material end of the nanoscale to overcome the banal mechanical errors and failures the data might encounter. And even beyond this, in the realm of metaphor, the digital maintains the material trace of the textual by way of its coding. The archival schema Kirschenbaum overlays on the programs that make computers and their software work reimagines code not as formulaic chits in a notecard formalized for operation, but as particular versions of *language*, interpretable and idiosyncratic: Kirschenbaum understands electronic texts as “artifacts—mechanisms—subject to material and historical forms of understanding” (Kirschenbaum 2008, 17). The ephemeral and immaterial quality of digital media, then, appears not only as purely metaphorical, but as a cracked metaphor to begin with. The engines of digital code are at once palimpsests rewriting over old

information, as well as active processes of surprisingly low-tech, material creation and interpretation.

To follow Kirschenbaum too closely into his theoretical entailments, however, would mean going so far into a study of the materiality of digital texts as to lose hold of aesthetics. While we consider the strange or contradictory materiality of code, we also must insist upon the fact that any aesthetic for the medium of videogames exists independently from each individuated instantiation of the videogame itself. Kirschenbaum's vision of materiality is ultimately a sort of Book Theory for the digital humanities, a programmatic approach to reading the idiosyncrasy of particular digital inscription as text itself. And while this produces exciting readings of otherwise unremarkable lines of numbers on a black and white screen, these readings are compelling only from a very particular historical position of critique.

Kirschenbaum's analysis of a copy Roberta Williams' formative videogame *Mystery House* with old hacking corruptions in the code is a fascinating archival note, but it does not differ in its meaning or value as a work of art from any other ordinary copy of the game. In order to be aesthetically viable, the code of the videogame must be subordinated to the art its formal constraints produce, in much the same way that pages are subordinated to the material printed upon them. Code, in other words, is not a self-evident material object, but a limiting formal occasion for self-reflexivity in the videogame medium. For instance, the moments in *Gone Home* that most closely approach a self-reflexive interrogation of the videogame medium – the appearance of “cheat codes” or the neurotically acquisitive quality of the game – are the moments that most openly interrogate the formal qualities and limits of videogames themselves. The crowning aesthetic moment of the game itself, the manipulation of the empty, non-narrative house, is a metaphorization of code's relationship with the player-author. The

manipulation of the furniture, objects, and trash in the empty house is allowable only within the constraints of the code underlying the game; the feeling of freedom in the house is an illusion given by the medium of the game's form, its code licensing its aesthetic critique of late capitalism. The role the code plays in this critique, however obliquely, is as a technical and systemic constraint, limiting of, but at the same point necessary to, the aesthetic success of the videogame medium itself.

Videogames have begun to embrace this self-reflexivity in recent games that are, on a thematic level, *about* games. Games like Valve Software's *Portal* and Croteam's *The Talos Principle* reveal the material mechanics underlying videogames not metonymically, as in *Gone Home*, but explicitly in their narratives. While most of these games have a frame narrative – *Portal*, for instance, puts the player in the role of a scientist perfecting new technology – the action in the game is purely puzzle-based, recalling early arcade games that relied on repetitive mechanics that progressively became more difficult as the player gained more and more skill. The difference here is that games like *Portal* are responding to decades of progress, both technical and aesthetic, so their foregrounding of puzzle over narrative is not a practical limitation but a clear thematic choice. And while these games always follow a narrative arc – again, in *Portal*, the player eventually finds that her experiment is controlled by a malevolent computer that must be defeated – it is at least interesting to see the self-interrogating quality of code manipulation share the focus with the game's story.²¹ The burgeoning autonomy of self-interrogating art recalls Michael Fried's laudatory description of another dynamic moment in art history, wherein the works of Claude Manet operated as objects that "acknowledge beholding as

²¹ For a dissenting and on many levels compelling counterpoint to my dismissal of *Portal*'s story, see Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas' "The Algorithmic Experience: Portal as Art", which argues that the killer computer subplot actually informs the reader's own "yearning to escape the confines" of the deeply algorithmic nature of *Portal* (Burden and Gouglas 2012).

inescapably the fate of painting” but which also “have the effect of making the actual beholder feel excluded or supererogatory” (Fried 1996, 406). While the self-reflexive videogame calls its viewer in as a complicit member of the artistic production of the work itself, this interpellation is, like Manet’s work, in the interest of the Diderotian “imperative to negate or neutralize the beholder,” an imperative that produces a kind of “deadly mutual hostility” between the artwork and its beholder (Fried 1996, 358). That said, *Portal* is a wildly successful game, known for its narrative turns as much as its formal intensity; it is interesting, but does not aspire to any sort of hostility with its audience that might make it aesthetically important in the ways that I am interested in here. In *The Talos Principle*, however, the genre’s winking self-critique is paired with an aggressive level of repetitive difficulty, which utilizes frustration and boredom to produce an intensification of *Portal*, one that seems to accomplish a similar effect to Manet’s paintings, which “repeatedly interpellated the beholder in ways [the beholder] could only find offensive and incomprehensible” (Fried 1996, 359).

It is this kind of open hostility that characterizes much of *The Talos Principle*, though the revelation of this hostility requires both player exploration and complicity. The main “voice” of the game is a far more positive one, a loving but controlling God, Elohim, who explains to the player that she is in his garden and is meant to discover it all. The one place off-limits for the player’s avatar is a large tower in the middle of the game’s “worlds,” the provocation of the forbidden edifice paradoxically providing the main goal for the game. The way the game progresses is through progressively more difficult puzzles, featuring hostile and non-hostile obstacles, the solutions to which give the player one of a number of “sigils” which unlock new worlds. These sigils (not coincidentally) are shaped like pieces from the famous puzzle game *Tetris*. The method of progressing through the game is a series of mini-games in which the

player must reorganize their sigils into a “key,” one of many mini-games that recall gaming not as immediate content – the puzzle game itself is not given much consideration as an individual test of skill – but rather as formal super-structure. Thus, the main game of *Talos* is effectively a series of disconnected videogame-themed puzzles that lead to even more disconnected puzzles with historical themes – for instance, a Grecian statue park; an ancient Egyptian landscape; and a baroque English cathedral – all of which come with encouragement and Adamic blessings from the invisible deity who speaks to the player throughout. Ultimately, this is a fairly frustrating proposition, as there are dozens of difficult puzzles, requiring (for me) 30+ hours of time investment, and no promise of any reward. Throughout the game there are QR codes your character can read that reaffirm this frustration, one of which straightforwardly wonders, “It’s clear I’m not the first to walk this path. In fact, the whole thing seems to have been consciously designed – but by the voice in the sky, or some other force” (Croteam 2014)?

At this point, the productive strangeness of the game shines through a bit – QR codes, the quick indexical shifts between different centuries and locations, the strange tension between narrative progression and obedience, and the open question of the created world all point to an artificiality surrounding *Talos*. This artificiality is embedded from the first shot of the game, in which the player’s avatar lifts its arm to block the bright sun from its newly opened eyes. From our first-person perspective as player, we can see that the avatar’s hand is skeletal and robotic. As the player’s avatar moves through the game, the open secret of *Talos* quickly comes into focus: the avatar is not a human, but a human-like robot navigating the maze (see fig. 3).



(Fig. 3. The Robot avatar. *The Talos Principle*, 2014.)

Death in *Talos* results in a quick rewinding of visual data that leads the player to another chance to solve the puzzle; glitches in the visual data appear throughout, like a VHS skipping a cel; even the QR codes and, eventually, Elohim acknowledge that the avatar playing the game is non-human, an avatar of an avatar. This distancing creates a crisis of identity in the game, and the anxiety over repetition – recall the first QR code’s assertion that it is clear that “I’m not the first to walk this path” – is realized as a fear over a lack of purpose, a loss of individuality. The urge to act by rote is encouraged by Elohim, who asks the character, “do you not feel the pleasure of having discovered the proper order of things? This is the spark of Elohim within you: to create order from chaos” (Croteam 2014). Creating order from chaos is an apt description of the motivation in videogames generally – any incentive outside of the gray market of gold-farming in massively multiplayer online games is totally immaterial. One can push along the narrative for narrative’s sake, but usually completion of a videogame is for its own sake, as Elohim suggests. Or, taking another cue from the mysterious female voice whose recordings are peppered throughout the various artificial worlds of *Talos*: “Games are part of what makes us human. We are a story. Your actions give life to the story and the story gives meaning to your life” (Croteam 2014).

However forcefully *The Talos Principle* asserts this vision of arbitrary order, however, the question of what the meta-purpose of the game-world might be comes in again and again, particularly via the QR codes, which become more and more rebellious and cynical as the game continues. “Oh look,” one in the Egyptian second world reads, “another puzzle. And another voice telling me I’m special...This world is a bad joke perpetuated by a cruel god too dumb to hit the off switch” (Croteam 2014). Another QR code expressing a more philosophical nihilism comes a bit later, from the repeating character The Shepherd v82.18.0997, who writes “An eternal cycle is another name for a prison. But you must understand the cycle before you can break it, for it is possible to escape and yet remain a prisoner, or to break the cycle by breaking yourself. This was the fate of the ghost that haunts this world” (Croteam 2014). The ghostliness implied by Shepherd is double-sided, both a reference to the proverbial ghost in the machine, the haunting spark of insight in the midst of unthinking processes, and a reference to the frame story that slowly becomes uncovered through found recordings and computer terminals available in Elohim’s garden. What the player discovers through these terminals is that the world he or she is working their way through is a test simulation, an archival project that is meant to save the work and ideas of humanity before everyone is wiped out by an unspecified virus. This dystopian fantasy of total apocalypse has an unwitting resemblance to the empty house of *Gone Home*: both games promise a sort of interpersonal connection as the incentive for completing the game, and both games elide the fulfillment of this incentive through absence and isolation. In *Gone Home*, we learn the story of our avatar’s sister, but we get to connect with her only through audio recordings and diary entries; the player and their avatar are alone in the house, piecing together a story that has ended long before their arrival. In much the same way in *Talos*, the avatar, after completing their actions, can ascend the tower and solve – by destroying – Elohim’s

garden, which results in a cut-scene showing a materialized version of the AI waking up in the Institute for Applied Noematics, alone in the now-dead real world (see fig. 4).



(Fig. 4. The “real” world. *The Talos Principle*, 2014)

Again, the avatar gets contact with its interlocutor through a mirror darkly, since the only remaining bits of the world as the avatar’s human creators knew it are immanent to the avatar itself. Much like *Gone Home*, the narrative of *Talos* can be seen as a detective story with a purposefully disappointing ending: the player-author helps to solve the mystery of the game, but is unable to engage with any of the characters who embody the solution itself. In short, while these games cast the player as a detective, they also reveal the player as a solipsist at best, and a voyeur at worst.

Talos and *Gone Home* still operate under the logic of the videogame medium, though. There is a compulsion to complete these games, and the unsatisfactory endings are only unsatisfactory from the perspective of detective genre-fiction – in terms of thematic consistency, the endings of both games achieve their intended narrative force. In *Gone Home*, as discussed above, the isolation of the protagonist Kaitlyn allows the reader to project entirely onto her character, creating a nostalgia for the mid-nineties that is also improbably a very contemporary sense of the politics surrounding sexuality. The lack of other characters to interpellate the

player's avatar – the disapproving parents are marginalized to small notes, and the drama of Sam and Lonny's relationship is always-already resolved to everyone *but* Kaitlyn – assists this easy identification, smoothing the way for the game's fairly streamlined political goal. In *Talos*, the game's heavy emphasis on philosophy, presented both by the freestanding computer terminals and the found-recordings throughout the artificial garden, produces a tension with the heavy-handed god figure of Elohim. In fact, the "Talos principle" after which the game is named (and which is often described in these computer stations), is a piece of Greek philosophy fabricated for the game itself. The principle argues that the philosopher, regardless of his or her ideals or metaphysical beliefs, is unable to function without blood; in this way, the philosopher is like a machine, reliant on vulgar bodily fluids as opposed to transcendentally beyond the body. The game asserts this against the metaphysical promise of salvation as offered by Elohim: if the player accepts the promise of eternal life after completing the garden's tasks, she is sent back to the beginning of the game, a failed simulation. In order to succeed, the player must destroy the simulation, rejecting the divinity and control of Elohim, pursuing instead a philosophical materialism mobilized through individualism above all.

Individualism as means and end dovetails with the reactionary quality of contemporary tech circles described above, and the game can absolutely be read in this sort of reductively laudatory way, the moral of the story being the rejection of all metanarratives aside from individual reason. We could understand the rejection of Elohim as a standard contemporary atheist rejection of faith – recall the earlier QR about the "cruel god too stupid" to end the simulation. Or we could understand the text to be a bit more mediated in its rejection, simply positing the rejection of metanarratives as an entry point to the individual human existence the AI would have to face in the new world. Both of these narratives, however, get us to the same

point – a lionizing of individual agency over systemic restrictions. The destruction of the regulated game world and the rise of the new, pure individual of the AI reads like a libertarian fantasy, and, perhaps in spite of its softer intellectually exploratory cues, that is one of the political points of *Talos*. Indeed, what we discover at the conclusion of the narrative is that the formal qualities with which we were so interested before are revealed as glitches, artifacts, and old technology. They are relegated to the new wastebin of posthuman history.

As in *Gone Home*, this turn to a narrative that rejects the primacy of the game’s form presents an interpretative crisis. The glitches (see fig. 5) throughout *Talos*, the marks of the simulation that occur in the view of the avatar as well as the strange side corridors where the code seems incomplete, mean differently under the sign of narrative than they would as the indexical marks of a totalized vision of a world.²²



(Fig. 5. A glitch in the simulation. *The Talos Principle*, 2014.)

²² Galloway calls the unintentional glitch in a videogame a “disabling act,” going on to add that “These actions are any type of gamic aggression or gamic deficiency that arrives from outside the world of the game and infringes negatively on the game in some way” (Galloway 2007, 31). That *Talos’* glitches are not unintentional however seems to make all the difference, as I explain above.

These peculiar details produce formal conflicts, too, such as when the player comes up to the edge of the map and isn't simply turned around as in other games, but rather receives a warning from Elohim to turn back. If the player does not turn back, they die and are rewound to an earlier section. More oblique than most of Elohim's directives, the warning that is triggered by reaching the edge of the represented space in the videogame map conflates map boundaries with semiotic limits of signification:

In the beginning were the Words and the Words made the world. I am the Words.

The Words are everything. Where the Words end the world ends. You cannot go forward in an absence of space. Repeat. (Croteam 2014)

On one hand, this represents a clever way to solve the problem of arbitrary boundaries, a technical issue for videogames that want to immerse their reader but which must also deal with practical spatial and technical limits immanent to their code. On the other hand, though, the emphasis on speaker and speech here, the capital-W Words being the originary signs that come from the speech of the capital-S Signifier Elohim, suggests a preoccupation with language and intent.²³ While the intent of Elohim is rewritten by the narrative conclusion as regressive and unimportant, within the game itself Elohim's intention represents a material limit and license. The Words here are the symbolic language that produces the world of *Talos* on the screen; beyond those Words, the world is less than nothing, unimagined. As such, we can understand Elohim as both a god-like coder and a literalization of restrictive code. And within these restrictions we find the fragments that reveal the totality of the whole.

²³ In a clever revelation, we are given the "Words" first spoken by Elohim so long ago: "Program Initiate." While I believe we're meant to read this revelation as part of Elohim's inability to realize the truth of his situation as code-not-God, it's worth noting that "program" here is shorthand for media, the introduction of the form of appearance of the world itself. The initiation of the program, in other words, is no trivial thing, even if the words beginning it are more than half tongue-in-cheek.

There is therefore an anxiety of creation baked into *Talos*, as demonstrated by Elohim's stern warnings to stay away from the central tower. Yet, rereading Elohim not as a jealous and anxious god but rather as a self-limiting code opens *Talos* up to a more satisfying interpretation, at least for the purposes of literary-aesthetic criticism. Elohim, of course, is not as interested in the completion of the garden program as its doomed coders, and he ultimately admits that he attempted to steer the avatar away from the tower because "I was scared. I wanted to live forever" (Croteam 2014). But one can imagine the game without the tower, without the triumphal return to the dead world, and without the rejection of formal totality in favor of individual agency. In this version of *Talos*, one repeats the process again and again with no end, walking through the pearly gates after completing the game and immediately being reset at the beginning of the garden with the same narration, same QR codes, and same puzzles. The description does not give a lot of confidence to an investor in or purchaser of the game; undeniably, the actual narrative provides a more enjoyable and fulfilling experience for a player. But the limited scope of the simulation in *Talos* self-reflexively gestures to the limits of the videogame medium by way of the arbitrary limits imposed by its code. And this hypothetical version of *Talos* is licensed by the game already – if one really follows the rules of the game-within-the-game rigorously, they'll never advance beyond the endlessly repetitive cycle of Elohim's garden.

This reading of *Talos* reveals a representational critique immanent to the logic of the game, wherein Elohim is not a devious god meant to be replaced by the individual, but instead an autonomous force within the coded world of the game itself, redirecting the philosophical critique of divinity to a meditation on the necessary limitations of aesthetic form, the repetitions and flaws immanent to but also increasingly visible in the game world through the peculiar

details of glitches. The glitch as not detracting from, but immanent to the game leads to a more outward-looking critique, a critique of the very concept of archiving or representing a dynamic, total system like humanity via coded (or non-coded) representations. Throughout the game, various computer terminals give dire updates on the archive project, informing the player of the doubt the Talos engineers have about the viability of their project. And while there are countless single flaws one could bring up with the idea of a human archive – which languages will be archived? Will all subjects be archived? Who gets to decide and why? – the completed archive of the garden itself proves the most compelling example of the flaws of the archive. The glitches, the over-bearing guide, the lost files, and the clearly incomplete world suggest a constitutive incompleteness to the very logic of archival projects as such. The failed archive cannot triumphantly reemerge to maintain human knowledge in the dead world: all that would be left would be the broad strokes, and the metonymic hints of content outside of the frame or within the palimpsest of corrupted data. The game is far less fulfilling but far more interesting from an aesthetic and critical perspective if the plan to contain everything about the dying world fails. *Talos* would then not be simply a pro-individual morality tale, but would represent the flaws of a medium that intends to represent so completely as to inspire reader immersion. What videogames require to be commercially and technologically compelling is a level of complete immersion in a totalized world; what *Talos* does in spite of its narrative is to demonstrate that much of this immersion is on the level of formally symbolic interpretation – and like all literary art, ultimately – opposed to experienced or objective materiality.

Ultimately, we have to concede that this reading of *Talos* likely goes against the grain of the creators' goals; the narrative ends the way it does for a reason and, like it or not, the game seems to resolve upon a lionization of individual will, mixed with compelling questions over the

blurred boundaries between human and machine. But the game undeniably has a formal structure that reflects back upon the specific constraints and failures of its medium. In this sense, *Talos* is certainly self-aware in an aesthetic mode and, for most of its playthrough, allows its player to contribute to that self-reflexive critique. Yet, much like the final moment in *Gone Home*, the portion of *Talos* that takes place in Elohim's garden does not really give the player much of a chance to impact the work itself. It merely provides a space to engage with and therefore "read" the code underlying the construction of its narrative. *Talos*, in the garden at least, therefore rejects narrative and turns toward a reading of archival collection and cultivation, of representational totality and organization under late capitalism. What this reading reveals is that the fantasy of the posthuman, of digital eternity, is occluded by the limits of the human capacity for representation. While *Talos* sneaks in a happy ending for the posthuman and a progressive promise for humanity itself in through the back door, the central message of limitation is delivered by way of a formal limit. Breakdowns in signification, language, and structure work to decentralize the player and privilege the broken, unresponsive, and (often problematically) autonomous sphere of the game. True immersion is rejected to produce a representative totality in the gaps: namely, a representation of failure, of the futility of progression and the endless immaterial repetition of intellectual labor under late capitalism.

How to Game and Why

These formal constraints of the videogame medium, I would ultimately argue, are how some games push back against the commodity form, reasserting themselves as aesthetic objects in addition to market commodities and socially participatory texts. For the videogame form is, first and foremost, commercially and culturally determined, and the games in this piece are no

exception. Still, within their commercial forms, these videogames go beyond the straightforward portraiture of digital representation, and insist upon constraints that differentiate them from the genre's blockbusters, a task Galloway might call "countergaming." *Gone Home* forwards a progressive social politics through the medium of nostalgia. But in the final moments of the game, when the player can be said to be in closest communion with the code of the game's graphics engine, the focus of the piece shifts to an unresponsive set of commodities, movable but without significance, blank and reduced to their constitutive atoms: past politics, past even use and exchange value. In *The Talos Principle*, an individualist ending undercuts a politics of absorptive aesthetics, but the cycle buried in the actual commands of Elohim represents a kind of frustrated purgatory, repetition without material reward. It is striking, even without the Tetris blocks and other videogame genre cues, how much repetition without reward resembles the classic videogame. *Talos*' self-reflexivity represents a critical inward gaze that rejects the significance of the videogame grind toward collection while continuing to embody it wholly.

In a final analysis what these moments of near-aesthetic-autonomy risk embodying is what GWF Hegel might call "bad infinity," the endless desert of the real in which things or meaningless tasks seem to, or perhaps truly do stretch on and on. Yet, these videogames, with their items and tasks without signification, are qualified by very intentional boundaries and limits. *Gone Home* is restricted to the house, and insists upon solitude – no second setting or character outside of voiceover diaries is available to open the story up further. *Talos*' Elohim insists upon the avatar's participation in meaningless puzzle-solving tasks, endless and without purpose in the repetitive cycle of the life and rebirth of the robot simulation. But these tasks are bounded by the garden, and only maintain their aesthetic legibility within the Words and world of Elohim. In both cases, an immersive world relating to alienation in late capitalism is

represented, and the legibility of this representation is made possible only through the game's aesthetic and epistemological collusion. The detail of the stray object, the videogame glitch, or the boundary recalls the player from their limitless visual fantasy and reminds them that this is a fantasy within representational formal limits. These formal limits open the space for critique, however provisional at our historical moment, and call attention to the ways in which the world of objects and things is unfulfilling as an immanently aesthetic expression.

Just as the earliest motion pictures teeter between the Vaudevillian spectacle and the aesthetic frame of filmmaking, these videogames cast about between commodity and aesthetic form, failing and falling into the former as often as the latter. Galloway, in attempting to come up with a theory for countergaming, insists that the art-games of JODI and Brody Condon problematically refuse to acknowledge play, merely representing the avant-garde through visual glitches and distorted graphics. "We need radical gameplay, not just radical graphics," Galloway explains (Galloway 2006, 125), adding shortly afterward that a countergaming movement ought to aim toward "redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde" (Galloway 2006, 126). But Galloway limits videogames to a subset of "play" as opposed to an intensification of the literary, thereby evacuating videogames of the textual complexity we have seen in our objects above. What *Gone Home* and *The Talos Principle* reveal in their own formal attempts is that videogames have specific medium constraints, and, most importantly, the ability to mean outside of the reactively political and within the disinterested aesthetic. If the immersive function of these games can be used to forward political and aesthetic critique, somewhere between aesthetic disinterest and Marxist communalism, they are more than just revisions of play. They are artistic objects to take

seriously, as well as important forerunners of a new and promising kind of serious digital art and literature.

- Aarseth, Espen. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
- . 2004. "Genre Trouble." *Electronic Book Review*, May 21.
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant>
- Becker, Gary. 1994. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, With Special Reference to Education*.
3rd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Bogost, Ian. 2010. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Burden, Michael and Sean Gouglas. 2012. "The Algorithmic Experience: *Portal* as Art." *Game Studies* 12, no. 2:
n.p.
- Clarke, Andy. 2013. "Two Interviews With Brody Condon." In *Videogames and Art*, edited by Andy Clarke and
Grethe Mitchell, 107-125. 2nd ed. Chicago: Intellect, Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Greg de Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*.
Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Ebert, Roger. 2005. "Doom." Review of *Doom*, directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak. *RogerEbert.com*, October 20.
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/doom-2005>.
- . 2010. "Video Games Can Never Be Art." *RoberEbert.com*, April 16. <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art>.
- . 2005. "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?" *RogerEbert.com* November 27.
<http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>.
- Fried, Michael. 1998. "Art and Objecthood." In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148-172. Chicago: Univ.
of Chicago Press.
- . 1996. *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Galloway, Alexander R. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Gone Home*. 2013. PC Edition (Steam). The Fullbright Company.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 2008. *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Revised ed. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford
Univ. Press,
- Jagoda, Patrick. 2013. "Fabulously Procedural: *Braid*, Historical Processing, and the Videogame Sensorium.
American Literature 85, no. 4: 745-779.

- Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2008. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. 2006. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Moriarty, Brian. 2011. "An Apology for Roger Ebert (2011)." Brian Moriarty (blog), March 14.
<http://ludix.com/moriarty/apology.html>
- Murray, Janet. 2004. "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama." *Electronic Book Review*, May 1.
<http://electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/autodramatic>
- Nichols, Bill. 1988. "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems." *Screen* 29, no 1: 22-47.
- Portal*. 2007. PC Edition (*The Orange Box*). Valve Corporation.
- Salter, Anastasia. 2014. *What is Your Quest: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press.
- Sigl, Matt. 2013. "The Dark Enlightenment: The Creepy Internet Movement You'd Better Take Seriously." *Vocativ*.
<http://www.vocativ.com/culture/uncategorized/dark-enlightenment-creepy-internet-movement-you-d-better-take-seriously/>
- Stern, Eddo. "Waco Resurrection (2004)." *EddoStern.com*. <http://eddostern.com/works/waco-resurrection/>
 Accessed February 5, 2016.
- Swalwell, Melanie. 2013. "How Independent Game Development looked in 2002 (an interview with Julian Oliver and Kipper)." In *Videogames and Art*, edited by Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, 297-319. 2nd ed.
 Chicago: Intellect, Univ. of Chicago Press.
- The Talos Principle*. 2014. PC Edition (Steam). Croteam, a part of Devolver Digital. 2014.
- Wark, McKenzie. 2007. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.

The Dollar at the End of the Book: Vanessa Place, Inc. and Allegorical Failure in Conceptual Poetry

Vanessa Place's recent conceptual-corporate venture, Vanessa Place, Inc., is a literal incorporation of the poet into a tradable commodity, with all of the hallmarks of such a venture, including webspace at vanessaplace.biz, calls for interns, and even a message from "Vanessa Place, CEO" soliciting corporate sponsorship. "If corporations are people," Place writes in her introductory letter to potential corporate sponsors, "and poetry is good for people, then poetry is good for corporations" (vanessaplace.biz). In order to perform the work of a poetic corporation, then – to "Honor the spirit of Apple!" and "Let Ford be the dream it used to be!" – the juridically licensed humanity of the corporation must be made interchangeable with the ostensibly innate humanity of the poet (vanessaplace.biz). We might therefore read Vanessa Place, Inc. as a satire of corporate personhood, a concept recently and notoriously upheld in the *Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission Supreme Court* decision in 2010. While it never explicitly calls corporations people, the majority opinion of the Citizens United case dually upholds freedom of speech for corporate interests under slippery-slope fears of "chilling free speech" while also arguing that the government cannot penalize financial success by limiting the first amendment (2). In perhaps the most succinct account, the opinion, delivered by Justice Kennedy, argues that:

Our Nation's speech dynamic is changing, and informative voices should not have to circumvent onerous restrictions to exercise their First Amendment rights...Corporations, like individuals, do not have monolithic views.

On certain topics corporations may possess valuable expertise, leaving them the

best equipped to point out errors or fallacies in speech of all sorts, including the speech of candidates and elected officials (48).

The logic of Vanessa Place, Inc. seems to take its cue from the court's logic here: if corporations and individuals are categorically similar entities, then the only way an individual might gain the qualitatively more "valuable" speech of the corporation is to enter the market, to self-corporatize. And, conveniently enough, a poetic method for entering the market itself is provided by Place's own creative expertise, as "VanessaPlace [sic] offers a language-based solution to...dilemmas facing the culture business today" (vanessaplace.biz).

The linguistic mutation of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "culture industry"²⁴ into a "culture business" replaces the distasteful mechanization of art with the imaginative *efficiency* of the market-building entrepreneur-cum-corporation. Place's "corporate slogan," inaugurates this investment in markets-to-be through a direct, reassuring message to the corporation's customer base: "***We are what we sell, we sell what we are – It's not the point, it's the platform...Your desires are our needs***" (vanessaplace.biz, bold and italics original). Instead of an aesthetic commitment to some immanent aesthetic meaning, then, Place determines the meaning of her art through pure audience preference, fulfilling her aesthetic goals through customer *satisfaction*. The mission statement that appears on the first page of the website, "Poetry is a kind of money," can thus be read as an attempt to realize poetic value production through decidedly non-poetic terms (vanessaplace.biz). Vanessa Place, the corporate-not-individual entity, mints her poetic "currency" to the customer's individual preferences, and through the act of transaction, the poem, as a manifestation of value realized through individual desire, is exchanged for more traditionally valuable, *standardized* money.

²⁴ Most notably in Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

The problem with understanding Vanessa Place, Inc as a satirical corporate critique, however appealing it may be, is that it ignores the corporation's actual poetic products. And much as, according to the Supreme Court, a corporation "like an individual" does not "have monolithic views," the poetry of Vanessa Place, Inc. complicates its parent company's potential satire with a striking faithfulness to the corporate mission Place herself sets out, however infelicitously, as CEO. One of Place's more recent corporate works, "PoetryPays," is a vial of otherwise unremarkable dirt (in a limited run of two vials) that is elevated as language, a poem "conceived as sheer object...with no subject but the earth itself. In a form as elegant as if by nature herself" (vanessaplace.biz). The "as if by nature" of Place's press release belies that "PoetryPays" only embodies the form of appearance of artless nature, as even the title is meant as not only "a point of pride in English," but also "a funny joke in French" – "pays" in French translates to "country" – and thus contrasts the nature of dirt with the very human ambiguities of language (vanessaplace.biz). The logic of the poem, in short, rests on a persistent speculation of and cashing in on linguistic ambiguity to elevate dirt to signifier: dirt becomes the "ground" of poetry; ground makes up a country; the French word for country is "Pays"; and through this speculative doubling, the Poetic dirt "pays" in English as well, netting Place 136 dollars (sold out now, but initially on a dramatic sale from \$159.99).

While it is readable enough as an art object, the intended *political* message (if any) of "PoetryPays" remains unclear: if it is satire, it is extraordinarily committed to its aesthetic entailments; and if it is sincerely meant to make a profit, then Vanessa Place, Inc. might find a more promising outlet than radically limited runs of conceptual poetry. The poetic conceit of the company, then, contains a sort of surface-level political content, but the aesthetic products of Vanessa Place, Inc. muddy this gesture by refusing the most necessary ingredient for successful

ideology critique: content. The problem of limited content for any sort of explicit political project comes into perhaps more focus in Place's other corporate poem, *\$20*. The now sold-out piece is a collection of twenty one dollar bills bound like a thin book of poetry and sold for fifty dollars, thereby materializing Place's corporate mantra that "poetry is a kind of money." Desire for this poetry, on the other hand, is valorized by Vanessa Place, Inc., which as a corporation divorces exchange-value entirely from use-value, and in the process produces thirty dollars of pure profit from its audience. This explicit connection of poetic production with the market itself leads some critics to claim that there is "nothing here to hear" in *\$20* except "the rustle of money...as we stumble toward another bankrupt weekend in corporatized America."²⁵ But the implication that Place has done nothing more than sell out to corporate America ignores the fact that *\$20* does not give poetry over to profit, but instead that its profits have very little to do with its aesthetic function as poetry at all. Vanessa Place Inc.'s poetry, in other words, takes itself seriously as poetry, but also, paradoxically, as a commodity that produces profit.

The question then moves from the explicit political message of *\$20* to how Place's understanding of market logic alters the nature of literary "value" in her poetry. In her role as corporate poet, Place shifts the focus of poetic exchange from composition to reception. The traditional, *individual* poet produces lyrical reflections that appeal to an audience because of their ability to relay that poet's particular aesthetic reflection and revelation; the *corporate* poet produces commodities that relate to her audience's already present preferences. Place thereby figures the role of the poet not simply as a producer of commodities, but more significantly as a producer of *markets* in which the materials produced are less important than the vectors of consumer desire created to facilitate exchange. The poetry of Vanessa Place, Inc. derives its

²⁵ Specifically in Hutchison, Joseph. "Vanessa Sells Out." *The Perpetual Bird*, last modified May 17, 2013. <http://perpetualbird.blogspot.com/2013/05/vanessa-sells-out.html>.

meaning from its consumer audience, yes, but it also essentially generates this audience as a market in the first place. According to Place, poets aren't just factory workers, in the mold of Andy Warhol (Godston),²⁶ but rather figure more strongly as speculative capitalists:

The art world understands the need for an expanding market/field, whether it be in sculpture or literature. The literary world is still operating as a precious metals market, and this is its mistake. As I've said elsewhere, poets are the unacknowledged hedge fund managers of the world (Fama).

This manifestation of markets from nothing, of course, bears the trace of the recent speculative and financial crises caused by the *acknowledged* hedge fund managers of the world. Place herself alludes to this speculative quality of poetic market-making in a *Discordia* interview when she explains that, in corporate, conceptual poetry: "We're just trading off of and in [language]...we're participants, part of the game...[a] corporation is a *language* corporation...[we're] not *selling* language so much as selling its...significance." The "game" Place refers to is, of course, the back and forth capital flows of late financialized capitalism, in which precarity and volatility are implicit components. And while that volatility is problematically rampant in the real economy (a fact made evident in the US housing bubble and subsequent economic collapse in 2008), volatility in the hypothetical poetic marketplace is only available through the figure of Place's corporate identity.²⁷ If we assume that Place is committed in her corporate work to a version of poetry that supplies its own demand through the production of otherwise non-existent markets, then any halt in the flow of new markets would represent a

²⁶ The full interview with Godston provides a more comprehensive account of Place's relation to Warhol, as Place attempts to establish her poetry as an evolution of Warhol's own appropriative practice.

²⁷ Of course this risk-cost of speculation rarely falls upon the very wealthy who truck in this hyper-active flow of exchange, but rather upon the poorer classes who embody the risk themselves. There's not enough space here to fully work this out, but see Robert Brenner's *Economics of Global Turbulence* for a well worked out account of the risks and repetitive crashes of bubble-speculation from the 1970's on to present.

profound artistic crisis and potential collapse for the speculative corporate poetic model as such. Ultimately, then, the *critique* implicit in Vanessa Place, Inc. becomes legible as not merely satire when one recognizes this coupling of the entirely conceivable collapse of Place's poetic economy to the notoriously unimaginable collapse of capitalism itself.

The particularly subversive effect of this critique relies on what Place calls the "allegorical" appeal of conceptual poetry. A conceptual poem is certainly not the kind of clear cut allegory we might find in medieval drama or Restoration writing; instead, "allegory" for Place functions as a method of poetic signification set against the interchangeability of the "symbol." Place and Robert Fitterman, in their theoretical project *Notes on Conceptualisms*, align, with the help of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, conceptual poetry with allegory in order to appeal to an idealistic, *systemic* resistance to worldly or material meaning. Much as allegorical imagery refuses to take on meaning outside of the given, often arbitrary meanings of its particular signifying superstructure, the allegorical, conceptual poem itself refuses to conform entirely to consumer desire or preference, and thereby resists efficient exchange. As such, we might define this resistance *within* the system as a sort of endgame for not only \$20 but also for Vanessa Place, Inc.: the *concept* of the poem is to tropologically produce the otherwise impossible commodity that opposes the system under which it is exchanged.

But, to risk a too-simple question, what is the commodity here: the corporation or the poem? If the commodity is the corporation-as-poem, then we might imagine Vanessa Place, Inc. to be a fairly standard piece of ideology critique, the inheritor of Brechtian didacticism as an art-commodity that makes its consumer aware of its fetish and, like Brecht's work, "[translates] the true hideousness of society into theatrical appearance" (Adorno, "Commitment" 80). And certainly, Place's corporate mission has all the hallmarks of a successful political critique, but if

that is the horizon of the corporate part of the puzzle, then we cannot take it any further: their politics may be agreeable or disagreeable, but, as with any individual pieces of art, Place's poems are not going to produce political upheaval on their own. As Theodor Adorno puts it, the political message in art is didactic but not materially effective, merely "an accommodation to the world" (88).

But if the commodities are the poems the corporation produces, this political message drops out: as we have seen, there is nothing in the actual form of "PoetryPays" or *\$20* that is explicitly political. If we focus on the poems themselves, we find less an ideological angle to the "outside" of allegory and more of an aesthetic one. If autonomous art is truly governed by its "own inherent structure," then the allegory would become of model for internal signification – a form of art that gives no accommodations to the world at all (Adorno 88). This is almost certainly what Place and Fitterman imagine when they invoke allegory as an end to conceptual poetry, but as I will argue in this essay, secular allegory is never formally viable because, written without the historical possibility of an organizing "spirit" or divinity, it lacks a coherent organizing force outside of the material world. Vanessa Place, Inc.'s compelling aesthetic virtues fall short at the realization that language, ultimately, is *not* reducible to an economy, nor is capitalist economy reducible to language, figurative or otherwise. Yet, Vanessa Place, Inc., in both its corporate and poetic guises, does represent the world under late capitalism in a profound and uniquely potent – if ultimately insufficient – way. While allegory as such is a dead end for politics and an impossibility for aesthetics, it still represents a compelling evacuation of content, producing a potentially unintended aesthetic autonomy for certain kinds of conceptual poetry through its failure as a trope. To prove this, I'll start with an account of Place's theoretical bearings, through a reading of her and Robert Fitterman's *Notes on Conceptualisms*; I will then

turn to a reading of Place's longer, more traditional, and completed conceptual poem, *Dies: A Sentence*; and I will conclude with a return to the aesthetic and political horizons for Vanessa Place, Inc. and \$20. Ultimately, I argue that the corporation's poetic precariousness is the feature most important for its success both politically *and* aesthetically.

Allegory and the Word

Place and Fitterman's *Notes on Conceptualisms* is written as a manifesto for conceptual poetry, with a tropological hierarchy – in which they privilege the value of “allegory” over “symbol” – serving as the aesthetic method by which the logic of conceptualism comes out as poetically and politically best. Place and Fitterman champion allegory through the theoretical poetics of critics like Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man who “identified allegory's ‘reification’ of words and concepts, words having been given additional ontological heft as things” (13). This added materiality for language is employed by the poet, Place and Fitterman explain, in order to “[collage] a world that parallels the new production (collectively) of objects as commodity” (13-14). Objects therefore, in the allegorical poem as in the world, have their own systemically conditioned use- and exchange-value. The allegorical logic that “[words] are objects” relies upon an ersatz *economy* of language in which “images are jettisoned [outward] from the allegorical notion” while that *notion* conditions poetic expression particularly (Place and Fitterman 14). Place and Fitterman contrast this logic to the logic of the symbol, around which “images coagulate,” and through which a particular poetic image conditions the poetic notion itself (14). In other words, for Place and Fitterman, allegory's emphasis on an autonomous systematicity stands in opposition to the more subjectively malleable nature of symbolic imagery. The allegorical sign is no less linguistically arbitrary than the symbolic sign, but the

former crucially “builds to an idea,” while the latter (problematically) “derives from an idea” (Place and Fitterman 14).

So according to this framework, allegory is directed toward the completion of an exterior notion or system – the whole defines its part – while symbol departs from the notion to produce its own totality – the parts take precedence over the whole. Ideas that contribute to a larger totality, i.e. allegorical images, are conditioned ultimately by an *a priori* system of signification, while ideas that are immanently complete, i.e. symbols, are open to the interpretative whims of the author or the audience. In this way, conceptual poetry’s effort to take the poet’s subjectivity out of the work of art – to produce a market, as opposed to a poem, for instance – doubles as an effort to make the building blocks of the poetic enterprise as objective or materially non-lyrical as possible. The conceptual poem for Place and Fitterman is less an aesthetic or expressive effort than an effort to narrate and describe an externalized totality. “The work of the work,” they explain, “is to create a narrative mediation between image or ‘figure’ and meaning” (14), an effort that involves the “framing [of] the writing as a figural object to be narrated” (15).

If Place and Fitterman are to be embraced through the furthest entailments of their theory, the drive of contemporary allegorical poetry would be beholden to a system- or world-organizing impulse, a gesture towards complete representation. Representing a vast, totalizing, and self-obscuring system (like capitalism or language), however, carries with it the potential for failure as a necessary condition of possibility. Place and Fitterman describe this as “the potential for excess in allegory,” and urge their readers to note “the premise of failure, of unutterability, of exhaustion before one’s begun” (14). And they make clearer the implications of their point a few pages later when they reveal that failure “is the goal of [allegorical] conceptual writing” (22). We can make sense of this paradoxical “goal” by noting that, due to her necessarily subjective

perspective, the poet is unable to represent any system while being counted as part of that system herself. The conceptual poet who wants to represent the world in which she lives must therefore reappropriate objects in the world, reconditioning and representing them in terms of a subjectively distanced and poetically crafted allegorical system. Reappropriation, what Place and Fitterman call the “desire to begin again” (20) is coupled with “[re]-iteration or re-cognition...as the [original, unpoetic] work is re-invented via its adoption” (26, emphasis mine). The poet does not straightforwardly attempt to represent the system as it is, but instead attempts to organize the system as it might be if it were able to be represented in the first place.²⁸

But how might the poet under late capitalism expect to even schematically organize the subtle dynamism of the structures that determine their world? Joshua Clover, in his “Autumn of the System,” attempts to answer this question by arguing that the conceptual poet must reinvent narrative structures in order to make sense or order of the changing *temporal* quality of contemporary capitalism. Classical capitalism, for Clover, is a method of understanding “moments and movement [of capital] and how they are articulated together,” a description that he sees as complementary to a traditional understanding of narrative time, which has a “primitive relation [to] the logic of capitalism” (35). Clover goes on to argue, however, that as capitalism

²⁸ Once again, we might turn to the question of late capitalist totality, as this problem of representing a system one is a part of takes on added heft in a moment of real subsumption under capital. Barrett Watten in his “Total Syntax” (Watten, Barrett, “Total Syntax,” in *Total Syntax* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois, 1985)) imagines this problem as a historical one, marking the temporal distance between William Carlos Williams – who for Watten has a “proletarian” identity that draws distinctions between facts and observations, subject and object – and the later Ron

Silliman – whose poetry, Watten argues, illustrates “a relation of complicity between the writer and the facts” (110). In other words, Silliman’s art is not only representative of the conditions of its production, but signifies those conditions immanently. As with Place, art produced under late capitalism necessarily and even unwittingly reproduces the dialectic of its economic moment. And Place, like Silliman, writes under neoliberal late capitalism, in which time and place become conflated into a cosmopolitanism of markets. In this way, any “critique” of capitalism is less deconstructive or ruthless and more exploratory, less a rebuke of capitalism and more an attempt to map or *represent* its contradictions.

has evolved, the increased importance of financial and speculative markets has changed how we understand commerce and its relation to time, as capital changes hands instantly in the contemporary marketplace, and often without a material commodity in exchange. In contemporary capitalism, we experience “a confrontation between space and time,” and, as the commodity is confined to the margins of the logic of capitalist exchange, the time necessary for production is subsumed beneath “spatiality ascendant” (42). As part of this new spatial logic, Clover argues that poetry must pursue “non-narrative,” a logic “better situated [than traditional narrative] to grasp the transformations of the era [of late capitalism]” (49). “Non-narrative” rewrites the classical Marxist logic of M-C-M’ (money buys commodities; commodities are sold for profit) into late capitalism’s financial speculative model of M-M’ (money begets more money). The suspension of C allows for a more immediate production of profit for capitalists, as well as a reimagining of narrative temporality for poets, as “the removal of C is...the subtraction of *time*” (42, emphasis mine).²⁹ Poetry’s narrative crisis for Clover is therefore a symptom of larger economic changes: as the necessity of “time spent” becomes irrelevant to the production of profit, the concept of duration is disassociated from the symbolic order of late capitalist society. Place and Fitterman respond to this same crisis of duration when they argue that the

²⁹ Clover, however, sees the suspension of time as a necessary precursor to the Winter of capitalism, its coming to account in the return of the repressed physical commodity – “the *feeling* of M-M’, haunted by the C to come” (46). This kind of reading of late capitalism – as a mystified proliferation of profit reliant upon a delayed-but-imminent fall back into materialism – is a popular reading of capitalism’s crisis, dependent upon a belief in the necessity of “real” labor power to square the account of capitalism’s production of surplus value. Suffice it to say – and with not nearly enough room to fully elaborate in this article – this vision of capitalism’s return to material logic faces the same impossibility as allegory’s final enunciation of systematicity: there is no *new* materiality at the end of the system. Clover actually speaks to this impossibility best in his recent article for *Representations*’ special issue on Financialization and the Culture Industry (Clover, Joshua, “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics,” *Representations* 126, no 1 (2014): 9-30). He notes correctly – and, I would suggest, as a corrective to his earlier work – that “the epistemological rupture seeming to inaugurate a distinct mode of production is merely a form of appearance that capital’s struggle takes in crisis, beneath which the capitalist economy remains under the sway of the law of value and its source in socially necessary labor time” (12). In other words, despite the “form of appearance” of winter, the soul of the dialectic of capitalism remains committed to its pre-crisis modes of profit.

rewriting of conceptual poetry “obliterates the past in favor of history as appropriation rewrites the present in favor of the future” (40). The allegorical mapping of the system, in other words, structures that system entirely as space, a “frozen dialectic” (40). “History” and “future” denote *horizons*, distant if not static *spaces* instead of contingent and shifting time, and the allegorical poem replaces the narrative duration of the symbol with an anti-narrative structure: a moment in time.

Walter Benjamin’s “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” which Place and Fitterman cite as one of the sources for their vision of symbol and allegory, situates this kind of allegorical temporality within a divinely-structured poetic subjectivity. Benjamin understands allegorical thinking as “the opposite of all factual knowledge,” a form of thought that marks “the triumph of subjectivity [through] the onset of an arbitrary rule over things” (233). The onset of arbitrary rule, for Benjamin, is set against the Romantic ideal of the *symbol* which takes the form of “the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty,” an eternal but particularly *individuated* subjective theosophy of the moral world (160). While Romantic symbolic logic rejects the allegory as a “mere form of designation” irrelevant to this total moral beauty, Benjamin insists that allegory is “not just a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is” (162). In other words, in contradistinction to the symbol’s inward-turning subjective immanence, allegorical figuration is a technology of externally mimetic expression. So, while allegory is “only the monogram of essence” in written language (Benjamin 214), we cannot lose sight of the fact that there is “nothing subordinate about this written script...[it] is absorbed along with what is read as its system” (215). Benjamin argues with an eye towards representational totality that allegory is actually the form of art that, regardless of artistic perspective, “preserves the image of beauty to the very last” (235):

In the allegorical image of the world, therefore, the subjective perspective is entirely absorbed in the economy of the whole. Thus it is that the pillars of a baroque balcony in Bamberg are in reality arrayed in exactly the way in which, in a regular construction, they would appear from below. And thus it is that the fire of ecstasy is preserved, without a single spark being lost, secularized in the prosaic, as is necessary (234).

Benjamin's vision of allegory thereby rescues the divine order of beauty in the modern world, as "[subjectivity], like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories and held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderación misteriosa* [the intervention of God in the work of art]" (235). The poet retains her subjectivity in her role as artist and allegorist, but the poet is also enmeshed in and determined by a larger, divinely determined system that structures her otherwise individual experience. Of course, for Place and Fitterman, this determining system is semiotic, not divine, but we need not make Benjamin a combatively theosophical thinker in order to make the artistic point here. Like Place and Fitterman, Benjamin locates the organizing feature of good, allegorical art not in the subject or the subjectively-determined marketplace, but through an unchanging and systemically organizing force outside of the poem: be it language or God, respectively.

The legibility of this kind of allegorical organization relies not only upon the poet's ambition to mimetically represent the world, but also upon a systemic logic that conditions and transcends this representation. Paul de Man, in his "Rhetoric of Temporality" is willing to grant the validity of poetic ambitions toward allegorical organization, but, problematically for Place and Fitterman's vision, he rejects the potential for successful transcendental logic. De Man does express a certain appreciation for allegory over symbol, which might explain why Place and Fitterman cite him as a source for their own allegorical logic. He characterizes symbol, for

instance, as “an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language,” and notes that the symbol gained supremacy in the Romantic 19th century, becoming “a commonplace that underlies literary taste, literary criticism, and literary history” (189). Allegory, in contradistinction, represents for de Man “an *authentically* temporal destiny” (206, emphasis original), a sign that is only legible in relation “to another sign that precedes it...the *repetition*...of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority” (207, emphasis original). Crucially, while de Man sees the structural *quality* of allegory that Place and Fitterman appreciate, his insistence upon *repetition* as opposed to *return* is the crucial difference that sets him against Place and Fitterman’s faith in language’s ability to represent the world. For de Man, the tension between the allegorical sign and the symbol is figured, respectively, as “a conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge” (208). In other words, while the symbol permits the poet to commit to a “tenacious self-mystification,” allegory insists upon “an authentically temporal destiny”:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal distance. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as non-self (207).

While religious allegory can rely on God as the “pure anteriority” of its repetitive sign, de Man’s secular allegory is reduced to a tragic identification with “void” and “non-self,” nonrepresentative and non-structuring totalities. Because this “authentic” vision of self-hood is

never stable in itself, it must remain in conflict with the mystified totality of symbol. The unresolvable dialectic of representation, then, is one that oscillates between death and life, and this oscillation leads de Man to what he calls “literary history,” an unceasing “dialectical play” between a negative but “authentic sense of temporality” and a mystified, blinded “empirical world” in which the symbol, or unmediated experience holds sway (226). Thus, de Man’s poet must always return to mediated experience simply because the entailment of true allegory is death, or non-being: a state that cannot be made existentially stable and therefore cannot be legibly organized as a system.³⁰

But for conceptual poetry, to relinquish the text’s ability to account for any sort of transcendently representative system is tantamount to a defeat outside of the bounds of the conceptually productive “failure” Place and Fitterman allow for. The poet must be able to completely organize a totalized world through her logic if she is to have any chance at representing even a provisionally allegorical reflection of the material world. And this organizing power is something Place and Fitterman have a deep commitment to: as Place writes in her companion essay to *Notes on Conceptualisms*, “Ventouses,” “the fact remains that a thing is nothing imagined of itself, and a word is worth a thousand pictures. Use them all” (69). This potency of words – that they are “used” to “make” things out of nothingness – informs Place and Fitterman’s poetic logic, as they imagine language to obey the always already repeatable, organizational logic of allegory. This sort of positive construction of linguistic representation, however – words build to pictures, to representation, to system – demands that language transcend the material world, a transcendence that is undercut by de Man’s insistence on the

³⁰ In this way, de Man echoes Martin Heidegger’s inability to ever fully account existentially for death or for the Being that precedes life. While it would be far too much for this essay, one can supplement de Man’s own somewhat cryptic relationship to the temporality of death by referencing the second division of the first chapter of Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

anteriority of nothing besides non-being. Under de Man's logic, the world comes before the word: language has a history and is material, not transcendental. As such, Place and Fitterman's poetics encounter a theoretical problem: allegorical and conceptual thinking cannot produce the possibility of material transcendence for the poem or the poet because the materiality of the secular allegory cannot be transcended by divinity *or* language. And without the promise of material transcendence – with merely an allegory meant for the marketplace – what becomes of the aesthetic goals of conceptual poetics?

The Recursion of Narrative

I want to turn to one of Vanessa Place's more traditionally conceptual poems, *Dies: A Sentence*, in order to work out the political and aesthetic entailments of a conceptual poetics that is unable to transcend the material through allegory. *Dies* is an ambitious poem that Place and Fitterman classify in *Notes on Conceptualisms* as a piece that employs "Constraint/Procedure" (75).

Constraint seems as appropriate a word as any to define *Dies*, as it is a nearly 200-page stream of consciousness narrative told through one single sentence. Of course, as with James Joyce's famous final sentence in *Ulysses*, we must give Place some grammatical leeway if we are to fully embrace her concept. But by and large, the text does succeed in producing a fairly sprawling and surreal wartime narrative through only one sentence. *Dies* is the account of a dying soldier, who has lost both of his legs, and his poetic monologue is directed toward a silent second soldier who has lost both of his arms and is making them both a stew. The poem is always focalized toward the silent soldier – our speaker's "friend...comrade...comparison" (26) – but the identity of our speaker and his companion – the text's "you" – are only ever vaguely defined. It is not clear what war they are fighting in (while continuous references to German, French, and American

soldiers suggest one of the World Wars, rapid temporal shifts, even to the present, make this difficult to determine); it is not clear if the two soldiers were originally enemies or allies; and it is not even entirely clear if the “you” of the text or even our speaker himself is alive or dead. Much of this uncertainty is due to the digressions of the speaker, through which he narrates the stories of ancillary characters who may or may not be connected to his experiences. Place makes it clear in *Dies* that it does not matter one way or the other if the digressions connect back to the story of the speaker. As the legless speaker puts it, conceptualizing the lost physiology of his legs and feet as a map, “it’s a minor premise, nothing more, for my syllogism, which, if I’m very lucky and it’s about goddamned time, will prove an occludent tautology” (39). And this tautology of the poem seems to be that there is nothing outside of the poem. The digressions, the phantasmagoric Dantean asides of our speaker, all of these come back not to an external thematic, but further concretize the internal logic of the poem’s narrative: what is here is here. This suggests an attempt at allegorical meaning – the totalizing and repetitive systemic reference of allegory is nothing if not tautological and self-reflexive – but the shifting and totally internalized historical logic of the poem occludes the signifying ground upon which the allegory could stand, at once closing off histories outside the poem and obscuring any material referents in the poem itself.

The question we must ask in reading *Dies*, then, is whether Place intends her poem to clarify the grounds of the allegory or maintain their obscurity? Our speaker alludes to the paradoxical quality of this question when he asks his companion – who is referred to throughout the poem by continuously shifting variations on the name John – “to unseal any doubt as to my motives, for I stand accused, John, of circumnavigation, but I have no global interests, nor prone to revolution” (44); the speaker has no ambition toward a total, rounded understanding of the

world in which he finds himself, and he is careful to assert his motives to the contrary. But if the goal of our speaker is not a *comprehensive* narrative organization, then how might we define the arc or goals of *Dies*? Susan McCabe, who introduces Place's text, understands the flows of *Dies* not as *Tristram Shandy*-like digressions from the central point, but as dialectical oppositions, resolving in a blended space as "the other is both enemy and beloved" (22). Cosmopolitan and utopian, this reading of *Dies* imagines Place as "the mother of the disjuncture," which, if we take this dialectic seriously, imagines her as a sort of uniting figure as well (McCabe 23). It is not clear to me, however, that Place would agree with McCabe's reading; indeed, based on her and Fitterman's theorizing of allegorical meaning, we might instead understand the monumental challenge of *Dies*, as well as the circuitry of its narrative to represent the "premise of failure, of unutterability, of exhaustion before one's begun" that is emblematic of allegorical and conceptual writing (Place and Fitterman 14). We open upon and never quite leave a situation always already set up to *fail*: a man without legs, a man without arms, a stew without a fire – "I'd light a candle and pray, if I weren't afraid of snipers" (26) – and the dawn coming quickly to mark the soldiers' imminent deaths. Failure as immanent quality of the poem, however, does not hamstring Place, but instead allows her to position the poem as a temporally frozen present, able to be manipulated "this way and that, so if one grasped the tapestry and bent it purposefully, this way and that, one would be rewarded with a series of related but discrete pictographs, a double folio" (120). The radically protracted sentence of *Dies* is meant to forestall with complexity, with different folds and discrete-if-related digressions, in an effort to delay the dawn and the end of the story. In this way, *Dies* attempts to work around the de Manian problem of allegory: if the period never ends the sentence, then the representational problem of death or nonbeing can be

perpetually put off, thereby allowing for a provisional-but-persistent representation of totality through language.³¹

As if in dialogue with this anxious putting off of death, *Dies* delays and stretches time's passing primarily through technologies of violence. In one of the text's strange, hellish visions of war, our speaker describes seeing a murder as akin to being "rooted on the spot, anchored, like now, in time's perpetual hinge, the articulation between before and after, like now, stuck, in then" (106). The text's imprecise temporal location, "time's perpetual hinge," allows murder and violence to be continually revisited, serving as the grounding repetition in the text, either through allusions to the missing limbs of our protagonists, or to violent acts committed by a host of different characters. This repetition turns doubly speculative: as readers we speculate about the relation of the speaker to his actions and to the condition of his friend, John, across the fire; and as a narrator, our speaker has his own speculative investment in his shifting subjective experience. The bound inmates of the "donjon" – the speaker's ultimate destination as soldier and a loose stand-in for the Hell of Dante – explain that only those living-and-dying souls "whose fortunes can still be read and whose breath is sweet and colorless" are changeable; those who are held static in time by death, on the other hand, are "in a fixed rate of exchange" (109). Exchange as a poetic marker is elaborated upon often in *Dies*, and particularly in moments of violent presentness, as when Jean-Paul Luc, a fellow soldier is killed by the beast Fame, "his facial features cut and etched in an antique collar, until all that is left is a coin's bright profile" (105). Luc is transformed from material man to symbolic image, becoming flattened specie

³¹ While there is not enough space to appropriately consider it in this essay, one can make a plausible claim that this perpetual putting-off resembles nothing more than the Black-Scholes-Merton equation for determining future risk in stock options. I will once again direct the reader to Joshua Clover's recent article "Retcon" for a fuller consideration of how poetics can help explicate the complex temporality of financialization, a line of thinking that is compelling but far afield for our inquiry here.

within the poem, able to be exchanged as puns just a page later when our speaker wonders if the death of another private “wasn’t in the cards all along, given his lack of currency, but such thoughts are freshly minted excuses” (106). *Dies* engages with desire, profit, and exchangeability, all within a persistent present-tense, much like Vanessa Place, Inc. Unlike Vanessa Place, Inc., however, *Dies* relies not on the figure of capital, but upon the transcendence of language over grammar to produce a total allegorical representation, and it is in the poem’s ending moments that this linguistic hedge fails.

Of course, the trouble with ending *Dies* for Place is that the nature of an endless sentence disallows closure. Fittingly, with regard to this paradoxical construction, the method by which allegorical *repetition* is best figured in the poem is through the figure of the null set. Our speaker explains, in a digression ostensibly about his childhood, that

the world springs from an empty set, John, it’s true, nothing comes from nothing
and nothing goes right back, divide by nothing and you get infinity, divide by
infinity, you get nothing, and isn’t that the zippered truth of our predicament, our
lovely patch of darkness foreshadowing the dawn it forestalls, our small avoid
begat with ghosts and virtuosity as any celestial vacuum, out of aught comes
naught, and from naught, naughty comes, there’s love, still, above all, and still,
only that, my muddy Valentine (117)

An empty set is productive in this passage only due to the punning quality of “nothing” – Place’s speaker switches between nothing as the mathematical designation of amount (“divide by nothing and you get infinity”) and the adjective “nothing” that has a deictic force toward absence (“divide by infinity, you get nothing”). Nothing, then, stands as both the de Manian *absence* at the basis of tropological representation, as well as a more referential designation, howsoever

negative, of place and space: if naught comes from aught, then we can imagine nothingness being produced constantly from anything and everything. We can also imagine nothingness producing deviance (naughty), and deviance producing love, or beauty, or even progression. “Foreshadowing” in this case also “forestalls,” and the dialectic tension between numerical nothing and descriptive nothing forestalls the nothingness of death from coming to its paradoxical resolution. If the subject could maintain hold of the figure of the “set,” then he or she could conceivably “become an empty set, finite and infinite” even as they were taken by death (166). The allegory would resolve, but in a space of transcendent possibility.

Such a space of possibility, however, requires a perpetual deferment of the material real, and *Dies* ultimately cannot defer its ending forever. *Dies*’ concept depends on a grammatical exercise that simultaneously postpones and promises closure – even the longest sentences end, or else they would not be sentences at all – and as such, the poem must necessarily fail to truly represent an eternal present. In the final pages of the poem, leading to the inevitable period, the digressions of the story take hold, as the speaker and John are given mothers, given a small hint of a backstory (we learn that John, object of the poem, has not spoken himself because, in a sideways reference to the classical story of Philomel, the speaker has removed his tongue after battle) and at least one, John, is given an explicit fate:

I will hold your tongue, and keep it in salt, I will keep you steady, steady as the
sea, steady as you once breathed, in and out and in and out and out and out and
out and sweetly out, exhausted, there it’s done, and here I am, one and once alone,
beheld to witness what comes, the dawn, but not the dawn, for if I put out our
eyes, we’ll stay the sunrise, we’ll live forever (174).

The speaker describes how he will monumentalize John-as-object, already departing from the de

Manian allegorical imperative into the mediated logic of the symbolic, and promises that he and the now-dead John will live forever in the moment before sunrise. Yet, this promise to keep away the dawn – a formal tip of the hat of Place to the classical form of the aubade³² – and thus to keep away the death that awaits both when the opposing armies find the speaker and John, is not the miraculous null set, but rather a totally material, and therefore doomed attempt to delay the inevitable.

The illusion of transcendence is shattered after the death of John, and – set apart from repetition and dialectic recursion – the speaker is left to await the dawn and the end of his own expression alone. Duration comes to the forefront here as the title, “Dies,” takes on the dual meaning of “active death” as well as the Latin word for “day.” With the enunciation of an ending, then, we come to realize that we have eclipsed one day and one death with our characters, and we know, with de Man, that the time after this death will be beyond representation as such. The return to the temporality of the material world undercuts any sort of transcendent allegorical impulse in *Dies*. Thus, when the speaker says to the now-deceased John that he will “pocket the sweet peach alongside your savory tongue and the pearled onions of your eyes, my heart, my one, *alles ist wahr*, and I for you and you for me for forever and for evermore, my love, my own, for our hearts shall shatter together forever and for ever after” (174, emphasis original) the promise of eternal return rings false precisely because John’s death has been made material as opposed to allegorical. “Alles ist wahr” is translated to “everything is true,” but we can no longer interpret this as a transcendent subversion of materiality through the null-set: as day breaks in the poem, this statement can be understood only through the subjectivity of the speaker, through the non-systemically “true” symbol. Though it is also

³² I am grateful to Jennifer Ashton for pointing out this formal echo.

important to note that our subjective viewpoint here is also the viewpoint of the poet herself, ventriloquized through her narrative speaker. In this way, the text follows through on one of its promises, namely the closed and autonomous logic of the text itself: what's here is here, what's external is unimportant. Place cannot achieve transcendent allegory in *Dies*, and must instead be satisfied with a mimetic representation of the allegorical subject in crisis: an autonomous, static vision of the *impossibility* of transcendence, derived through its very failure to transcend.

History and Progress

Throughout this essay, successful systemic representation through allegory has been viewed as a kind of impossible proposition, and ultimately for good reason. Yet, returning finally to Vanessa Place, Inc., I want to suggest that we must reject the total aesthetic pessimism embodied in de Man's analysis of allegory in an attempt to more thoroughly imagine the viability of poetry in an aesthetic, a socio-economic, and a world-historical sense. In the "Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man's tropological critique also denies the possibility of aesthetic evolution in poetry when he asserts that allegory and irony – distinct, but also linked as "two faces of the same fundamental experience of time" – are forever locked in dialectic interplay between their own "authentic experience of temporality" and "mystified forms of language...which it is not in their power to eradicate" (226). Thus, instead of proposing a representative dialectic tending toward ultimate resolution, de Man imagines a fixed oscillation between two forever-opposed representative impulses. Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* serves for de Man as the perfect distillation of this opposition, as it narrates the "unovercomable distance which *must always* prevail between the selves" (de Man 228, emphasis mine). De Man's ultimate conclusion, then, resolves into a

global pessimism: the always-already divided self is simply the only method by which we are able to mean, however provisionally, through language.

While this analysis has shown that we should allow for some of de Man's skepticism toward representative language, it would be hasty to reject the possibility of representative resolution if that means rejecting the resolving power of the dialectic, and, more importantly, the potential of autonomous art. Perhaps the most famous progressive dialectician, Karl Marx, while he is often tight-lipped in his explicit visions of post-capitalist existence, does at times offer predictions for a progressive future, and his most famous formulation of prediction, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, relies upon dialectical resolution: "Hegel remarks somewhere," Marx begins, "that all facts and personages in history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: first as tragedy, then as farce" (15). Marx's Hegelian methodology can be boiled down into a resolving contradiction: historical repetition with a difference, a "progression" from tragedy, to farce, and presumably beyond, though to where or what is unclear. If the recursion of history is not to be understood as repetition, but resemblance, we must understand the dialectic of history differently than de Man. Specifically, we must understand social and economic logic to be at once totalizing, but also dynamic, changing and progressive. This is not to suggest that the individual poet has the ability to shift this dialectic by herself; I am, along with Adorno,³³ convinced that political solutions as such are simply descriptive and didactic, right or wrong, and not aesthetically interesting. And conversely, politics are not poetics: the poem cannot climb the barricades. But I do want to suggest that, much as the Marxist historian, the poet can, and in the case of Vanessa Place does, find herself responsible for representing her moment in history

³³ Adorno puts it more poetically in his essay "Commitment" when he writes, "Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature, are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself" (87). In other words, no political lessons can be taught from inside the polis itself.

through an aesthesis that addresses and then contains the world through autonomous representation. And through this howsoever imperfect representation, the dialectic progresses through tragedy, farce, and beyond.

But what, in the end, is Vanessa Place, Inc.: tragedy, farce, or other? The failed transcendence of *Dies*' endless sentence suggests that conceptual poetry itself may be more farce than tragedy. The English Romantics' grappling with symbol and allegory as read by de Man seems appropriate as the sort of formative literary-epistemological tragedy that would condition the farcical quality of Place's conceptual poetry. But Vanessa Place, Inc., and *\$20* with their deeply satirical premise and consistent corporate performance at once obey their own figurative logic without attempting to tie that logic to a totalized or anterior network of signification, as completed allegory must do. One might imagine that, were Place to write a straightforward artist's statement about her "corporation," the statement would necessarily involve an attempt to tie her work to an allegorical vision, and the project would take on the always-already doomed nature of *Dies*, or, rather, the always-already non-aesthetic quality of purely political speech. Like the *a priori* impossibility of an endless sentence, the premise of Vanessa Place, Inc. is set up to fail: a poet is not a corporation, poetry is not "non-productive" labor, and words are not objects, let alone commodities. The structure of the poetic corporation cannot hold through its own internal logic. But Place has not, and perhaps will not write this statement. And to take this one step further, if Vanessa Place, Inc. is, in actual fact, incorporated as a corporation, then the logic of the corporation necessarily outlives its poetic contradictions. In this way, Vanessa Place, Inc. – despite internal failures or crises – will continue to successfully resemble and, through resemblance, *critique* corporate ideology and capitalist culture from within its own historical and cultural moment.

Paradoxically then, what is perhaps most repelling about Place's corporate poetic presence – namely its serious insistence upon making a profit and denying all but customer preference – is also the key to its poetic success. Indeed, to paraphrase the company website, Vanessa Place, Inc. is what it sells and sells what it is. Thus while the corporation itself maintains its ambivalent character through a lack of completion, its products – “PoetryPays” and *\$20* – resist completion as political art, denying any sort of content and merely promoting an aesthetic logic. The artifice of the corporation provides another level of mediation for Place's conceptual poetics, and her poems, now not as systems in and of themselves, but as pieces of the larger dynamic allegorical system of Vanessa Place, Inc. are defined by the immanent formal logic of that system. There is nothing about *\$20* that is anti-capitalist or pro-capitalist; in fact, there's nothing in the book that insists that the twenty one-dollar bills composing it are anything but money to be spent outside of the artist's intent. And so, unless the formal qualities of the work are taken seriously – unless the work is expected to provide its own legibility – Place's poems remain illegible: simply a bunch of money in an unfamiliar place. As Adorno puts it, the “moment of true volition [in art]...is mediated through nothing but the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be” (89). Ultimately, then, what seems so impossible to imagine as sincere in Place's delivery – her complete disconnection from an artistic mission – is what is most crucial for the success of her art. If not allegory, the incorporated poet says at the very moment of her incorporation, then the marketplace. The secular allegory fails, but the art objects it reappropriates are aesthetically *reflective* of the social and political, remaining aloof politically, but revealing a form of appearance of the world through their autonomy in perhaps the only way aesthetically committed art can under late capitalism.

Works Cited and Referenced

- Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." Trans. Frances McDonagh. *New Left Review* 87-88 (1974): 75-89.
- Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2011.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*, New and Updated Edition. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2010.
- Ashton, Jennifer. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977.
- Bernes, Jasper. "John Ashberry's Free Indirect Labor." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74:4 (2013): 517-540.
- Brenner, Robert. *The Economics of Global Turbulence*. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2006.
- Brown, Nicholas. "The Work of Art in Its Real Subsumption Under Capitalism." *Nonsite.org*. Last modified March 13, 2012. <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>.
- Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. 557. 932-962. U.S. Supreme Court. 2009.
- Clover, Joshua. "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital." *Journal of Narrative Theory*. 41 number 1 (2011): 34-52. Accessed August 17, 2014. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jnt/summary/v041/41.1.clover.html>.
- . "Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics." *Representations* 126, no 1 (2014): 9-30.
- Clune, Michael. *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- De Man, Paul. "Rhetoric of Temporality." In *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Ed, 187-228. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Dworkin, Craig. "Seja Marginal." In *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*, edited by Craig Dworkin, 7-24. New York City: Roof Books, 2008.
- Fama, Ben. "Ben Fama Interviews Vanessa Place." *Fanzine*. Last modified October 28, 2013. <http://thefanzine.com/ben-fama-interviews-vanessa-place/>.
- Gindin, Sam and Leo Panitch. *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013.

- Godston, Dan. "Vanessa Place – writing La Medusa, new projects with Les Figs Press, and the literary scene in LA." *Examiner.com*. Last modified June 20, 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/article/vanessa-place-writingla-medusa-new-projects-with-les-figs-press-and-the-literary-scene-la>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Against Expression: Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation." *poets.org*. Last modified June 17, 2011. <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/against-expression-kenneth-goldsmith-conversation>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "The Writer as Meme Machine." *The New Yorker*. Last modified October 22, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-writer-as-meme-machine>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Uncreativity as Creative Practice." *Electronic Poetry Center (University of Buffalo)*. Accessed August 17, 2014. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Hutchison, Joseph. "Vanessa Sells Out." *The Perpetual Bird*. Last modified May 17, 2013. <http://perpetualbird.blogspot.com/2013/05/vanessa-sells-out.html>.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- Kornbluh, Anna. *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Lança, Marta. "'Homagem a Cara de Cavalo' de Hélio Oiticica." *A Vida Escrita*. Last modified May 8, 2011. <http://vida-escrita.blogspot.com/2011/05/homenagem-cara-de-cavalo-de-helio.html>.
- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Translated by Daniel DeLeon. New York: International Publishers, 1975.
- McCabe, Susan, introduction to *Dies: A Sentence*. Los Angeles: Les Figs Press, 2005.
- McCloskey, Dierdre. *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Nealon, Christopher. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Towards a conceptual lyric." *Jacket 2* (July 28, 2011): n.p. Accessed January 10, 2015.

<http://jacket2.org/article/towards-conceptual-lyric>.

Place, Vanessa. *Dies: A Sentence*. Los Angeles: Les Fignes Press, 2005.

---. "Poetry is Dead, I Killed It." *Poetry Foundation*. Last modified April 5, 2012.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/poetry-is-dead-i-killed-it/>.

---. Vanessa Place, Inc. *Vanessaplace.biz*. Accessed August 17, 2014. www.vanessaplace.biz.

---. "Ventouses." In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 59-69. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009.

Place, Vanessa and Robert Fitterman. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009.

"Vanessa Place, Inc. Poetry is a Kind of Money." *Discordia Zine*. Last modified July 22, 2013.

<http://www.discordia.com.au/vanessa-place-inc-poetry-is-a-kind-of-money/>.

Watten, Barrett. *Total Syntax*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

CITED LITERATURE

- Aarseth, Espen. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
- Aarseth, Espen. 2004. "Genre Trouble." *Electronic Book Review*, May 21.
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant>
- Acker, Kathy. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- Acker, Kathy. *Don Quixote*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- Acker, Kathy. *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. Print.
- Acker, Kathy. "Seeing Gender." *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997. 158-167. Print.
- Acker, Kathy. "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age." *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997. 98-104. Print.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." Trans. Frances McDonagh. *New Left Review* 87-88 (1974): 75-89.
- Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2011.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*, New and Updated Edition. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2010.
- Ashton, Jennifer. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Becker, Gary. 1994. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, With Special Reference to Education*. 3rd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977.
- Bernes, Jasper. "John Ashberry's Free Indirect Labor." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74:4 (2013): 517-540.
- Bogost, Ian. 2010. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Market of Symbolic Goods." *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. 112-141. Print.
- Brennan, Karen. "The Geography of Enunciation: Hysterical Pastiche in Kathy Acker's Fiction." *boundary 2* 21.2 (1994): 243-268. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.

- Brenner, Robert. *The Economics of Global Turbulence*. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2006.
- Brown, Nicholas. "The Work of Art in Its Real Subsumption Under Capitalism." *Nonsite.org*. Last modified March 13, 2012. <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>.
- Bryan, William Jennings. "Cross of Gold." *History Matters*: np. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- Burden, Michael and Sean Gouglas. 2012. "The Algorithmic Experience: *Portal* as Art." *Game Studies* 12, no. 2: n.p.
- Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. 557. 932-962. U.S. Supreme Court. 2009.
- Clarke, Andy. 2013. "Two Interviews With Brody Condon." In *Videogames and Art*, edited by Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, 107-125. 2nd ed. Chicago: Intellect, Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Clover, Joshua. "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital." *Journal of Narrative Theory*. 41 number 1 (2011): 34-52. Accessed August 17, 2014. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jnt/summary/v041/41.1.clover.html>.
- Clover, Joshua. "Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics." *Representations* 126, no 1 (2014): 9-30.
- Clune, Michael. *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. Print.
- De Man, Paul. "Rhetoric of Temporality." In *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Ed, 187-228. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Dworkin, Craig. "Seja Marginal." In *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*, edited by Craig Dworkin, 7-24. New York City: Roof Books, 2008.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Greg de Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Eaton, Mark. A. "Dis(Re)Membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 155-180. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Ebert, Roger. 2005. "Doom." Review of *Doom*, directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak. *RogerEbert.com*, October 20. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/doom-2005>.
- Ebert, Roger. 2010. "Video Games Can Never Be Art." *RoberEbert.com*, April 16. <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art>.
- Ebert, Roger. 2005. "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?" *RogerEbert.com* November 27. <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>.

- Fama, Ben. "Ben Fama Interviews Vanessa Place." *Fanzine*. Last modified October 28, 2013.
<http://thefanzine.com/ben-fama-interviews-vanessa-place/>.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009. Print.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books." *The New Yorker*, 30 Sept. 2002, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/30/mr-difficult>. Web. 7 Oct, 2016.
- Fried, Michael. 1998. "Art and Objecthood." In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148-172. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Fried, Michael. 1996. *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Fortieth Anniversary Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Print.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and The Last Man*. Reissue edition. New York: Free Press, 2006. Print.
- Gaddis, William. *JR*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012. Print.
- Galloway, Alexander R. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- Godston, Dan. "Vanessa Place – writing La Medusa, new projects with Les Figs Press, and the literary scene in LA." *Examiner.com*. Last modified June 20, 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/article/vanessa-place-writingla-medusa-new-projects-with-les-figs-press-and-the-literary-scene-la>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Against Expression: Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation." *poets.org*. Last modified June 17, 2011. <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/against-expression-kenneth-goldsmith-conversation>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "The Writer as Meme Machine." *The New Yorker*. Last modified October 22, 2013.
<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-writer-as-meme-machine>.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Uncreativity as Creative Practice." *Electronic Poetry Center (University of Buffalo)*. Accessed August 17, 2014. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>.
- Gone Home*. 2013. PC Edition (Steam). The Fullbright Company.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts, Volume I*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975. Print.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Trans. T.M. Knox, Ed. Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Hölderlin. *Selected Verse*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986. Print.
- Holmberg, David. "In A Time Before Nomenclature Was And Each Was All: *Blood Meridian*'s Neomythic West And The Heterotopian Zone." *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 140-156. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Hume, Kathryn. "Voice in Kathy Acker's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 42.3 (2001): 485-513. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Hutchison, Joseph. "Vanessa Sells Out." *The Perpetual Bird*. Last modified May 17, 2013.
<http://perpetualbird.blogspot.com/2013/05/vanessa-sells-out.html>.
- Jagoda, Patrick. 2013. "Fabulously Procedural: *Braid*, Historical Processing, and the Videogame Sensorium." *American Literature* 85, no. 4: 745-779.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Future City." *New Left Review* 21 (2003): np. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992. Print.
- Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. San Diego: Harcourt Press, 1964. Print.
- Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2008. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kornbluh, Anna. *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Lança, Marta. "'Homagem a Cara de Cavalo' de Hélio Oiticica." *A Vida Escrita*. Last modified May 8, 2011.
<http://vida-escrita.blogspot.com/2011/05/homenagem-cara-de-cavalo-de-helio.html>.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963. Print.
- . *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: The Merlin Press, 1971. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Translated by Daniel DeLeon. New York: International Publishers, 1975.

- McCabe, Susan, introduction to *Dies: A Sentence*. Los Angeles: Les Fignes Press, 2005.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- McCloskey, Dierdre. *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- McCloskey, Dierdre. *The Rhetoric of Economics*. 2nd Edition. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Print.
- McCaffery, Larry and Kathy Acker. "An Interview With Kathy Acker." *Mississippi Review* 20.1-2 (1991): 83-97. JSTOR. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. 2006. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Mitchell, Jason P. "Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, And The (De)Mythologizing Of The American West." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41.3 (2000): 290-304. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Moriarty, Brian. 2011. "An Apology for Roger Ebert (2011)." Brian Moriarty (blog), March 14. <http://ludix.com/moriarty/apology.html>
- Mukherjee, Ankhi. "Missed Encounters: Repetition, Rewriting, and Contemporary Returns to Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*." *Contemporary Literature* 46.1 (2005): 108-133. JSTOR. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Murray, Janet. 2004. "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama." *Electronic Book Review*, May 1. <http://electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/autodramatic>
- Muth, Katie R. "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's 'Blood and Guts in High School.'" *Narrative* 19.1 (2011): 86-110. JSTOR. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*. Ed. Allan R Drengson. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008. Print.
- Nealon, Christopher. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nichols, Bill. 1988. "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems." *Screen* 29, no 1: 22-47.

- Panitch, Leo and Sam Gindin. *The Making of Global Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 2012. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Towards a conceptual lyric." *Jacket 2* (July 28, 2011): n.p. Accessed January 10, 2015.
<http://jacket2.org/article/towards-conceptual-lyric>.
- Pierce, Leslie. "Harold Bloom on *Blood Meridian*." *The Onion A.V. Club*. The Onion, 15 Jun, 2009. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.
- Phillips, Dana. "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 433-460. Web.
- Place, Vanessa. *Dies: A Sentence*. Los Angeles: Les Figue Press, 2005.
- Place, Vanessa. "Poetry is Dead, I Killed It." *Poetry Foundation*. Last modified April 5, 2012.
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/poetry-is-dead-i-killed-it/>.
- Place, Vanessa. Vanessa Place, Inc. *Vanessaplace.biz*. Accessed August 17, 2014. www.vanessaplace.biz.
- Place, Vanessa. "Ventouses." In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 59-69. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009.
- Place, Vanessa and Robert Fitterman. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009.
- Portal*. 2007. PC Edition (*The Orange Box*). Valve Corporation.
- Rose, Miranda. "Voicing the 'Communal Heart': Acker's Romantic Pla(y)gerism." *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 14.1 (2009): 109-124. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Salter, Anastasia. 2014. *What is Your Quest: From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press.
- Sciolino, Martina. "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism." *College English* 52.4 (1990): 437-445. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.
- Shuster, Simon. "European Politics Are Swinging to the Right." *Time Magazine*, 22 Sept 2016. Web. 9 Oct 2016.
- Sigl, Matt. 2013. "The Dark Enlightenment: The Creepy Internet Movement You'd Better Take Seriously." *Vocativ*.
<http://www.vocativ.com/culture/uncategorized/dark-enlightenment-creepy-internet-movement-youd-better-take-seriously/>
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980. Print.
- Snyder, Phillip A. "Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*." *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 126-139. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.

Stern, Eddo. "Waco Resurrection (2004)." *EddoStern.com*. <http://eddostern.com/works/waco-resurrection/>

Accessed February 5, 2016.

Swalwell, Melanie. 2013. "How Independent Game Development looked in 2002 (an interview with Julian Oliver and Kipper)." In *Videogames and Art*, edited by Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, 297-319. 2nd ed.

Chicago: Intellect, Univ. of Chicago Press.

The Talos Principle. 2014. PC Edition (Steam). Croteam, a part of Devolver Digital. 2014.

"Vanessa Place, Inc. Poetry is a Kind of Money." *Discordia Zine*. Last modified July 22, 2013.

<http://www.discordia.com.au/vanessa-place-inc-poetry-is-a-kind-of-money/>.

Wark, McKenzie. 2007. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962. Print.

Watten, Barrett. *Total Syntax*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

Woodward, Richard B. "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." *New York Times*. New York Times on the Web, 19 Apr, 1992. Web. 14 Oct, 2015.

Worthington, Marjorie. "Posthumous Posturing: The Subversive Power of Death in Contemporary Women's Fiction." *Studies in the Novel* 32.2 (2000): 243-263. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Sept 2015.

VITA: Trevor Alexander Strunk

HOME: 107 Revere Drive
Harleysville, PA 19438
(908) 399-9352
tstrun2@uic.edu

OFFICE: Department of English
University of Illinois, Chicago
2027 University Hall
601 S Morgan St (M/C 162)
Chicago, IL 60607
(312) 413-2200

EDUCATION: Ph.D. Candidate University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of English
Dissertation: The New What's Next: Innovation and Failure in Contemporary American Literature
Defense Scheduled, November 11th, 2016
M.A. New York University, January 2009
B.A. Ursinus College, May 2007
(Transcripts Available Upon Request)

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE:

Nicholas Brown – Chairperson
Jennifer Ashton, Anna Kornbluh, Walter Benn Michaels, Joseph Tabbi – Readers
Andrew Hoberek (University of Missouri) – Outside Reader

PUBLICATIONS

Articles:

“Videogames, The Canon, And Art As We Know It.” Forthcoming at *Electronic Book Review*.

“The Dollar at the End of the Book: Vanessa Place, Inc. and Allegory in Conceptual Poetry.” Forthcoming in *Criticism*.

Book Reviews:

“*Love and Rockets*, Vol. 2 by Gilbert Hernandez; Jaime Hernandez; Mario Hernandez.” *MELUS*. 32.3 (2007): 247-249.

PAPER PRESENTATIONS AND PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Presented “What Does the Public Produce?” *ASAP/7*, Hosted by Clemson University, Greenville, SC, September 2015

Presented “Inclusive Neoliberalism: *Gone Home*, *The Silent History*, and the False Choices of Late Capitalism.” *Neoliberalism and American Literature*, Clinton Institute, University College Dublin, February 2015.

Presented “Cold Pastoral: *Blood Meridian* and the Representation of the Real” as part of “Counterfeit Realities.” Seminar moderated by Andrew Marzoni and Wesley Burdine. *Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association: Global Positioning Systems*, University of Toronto, April 2013.

Presented “Mythical Cities: The Language and Construction of Jaime Hernandez’ *Locas*” as part of “Border Citizens in the Barrio.” *24th Annual MELUS Conference: Ethnic Transformation in the Self and the City*, University of Scranton, April 2010.

Presented “Mythical Cities: The Language and Construction of Jaime Hernandez’ *Locas*” as part of “Comic Arts Conference Session #4: Comics, Culture, and Society.” *Comic Arts Conference*, WonderCon, San Francisco, February 2009.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Twentieth Century American Literature
Post-45 American Literature
Marxist Literary Criticism
Digital Humanities
Critical Theory
Avant Garde and Subaltern Literature
Graphic Novels and Sequential Art

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Served on the English department’s recent Senior Hire search committee as the graduate student member through the application, interview and selection process; aided in the ultimate hire of Professor Peter Coviello to the department; Fall 2013 – Spring 2014.

Co-founder of Critical Conversations, a group that offers the opportunity for pre-exams doctoral students to present work.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Adjunct at DeSales University ACCESS Department (2016-present):
ENGL103 – Composition and Rhetoric I
Main Instructor, Session I, 2016

Teaching Assistant at University of Illinois at Chicago (2011-2016; Selected Courses, full list available on demand):
ENGL102/MOVI102 – “Film as Literature”
Main Instructor, Summer, 2016

ENGL232-233/AH232-233/MOVI232-233 – “Film History I/II”
TA, facilitated lecture courses, taught discussion, facilitated grading
Fall/Spring, 2015

ENGL161 – “Academic Writing II: The Two (or More) Cultures: How We Think and Write Academically”
Main Instructor, Fall 2013, Fall 2014, Spring 2015, and Fall 2015

ENGL107 – “Introduction to Shakespeare: Tragedy, Comedy, and Beyond”
Main Instructor, Summer 2015

ENGL105 – “American and British Literature: Representing Crisis”
Main Instructor, Fall 2014

ENGL109 – “American Literature and Culture: Constructing Consensus in the American Novel”
Main Instructor, Fall 2013

ENGL101 – “Understanding Literature: Evolution of the 20th Century Novel”
Main Instructor, Summer 2013

ENGL313 – “Major Plays of Shakespeare: The Comedies”
TA, facilitated lecture courses, taught small sections, and facilitated grading
Spring 2013

ENGL 161 – “Academic Writing II: Writing the Dead, Composing on the Decomposed”
Main Instructor, Fall 2012

ENGL242 – “A History of British Literature II, 1660-1900: Materialisms”
TA, facilitated lecture courses, taught small sections, and facilitated grading
Fall 2012

ENGL105 – “English and American Fiction: Evolution of the 20th Century Novel”
Main Instructor, Spring 2012

ENGL 101 – “Understanding Literature: The Literature of Protest and Social Change”
Main Instructor, Fall 2011

ENGL160 – “Academic Writing I: The Technology of Writing in the Information Age”
Main Instructor, Fall 2011

ENGL 161 – “Academic Writing II: The (Gentrified) Urban Experience”
Main Instructor (two sections), Spring 2011

Part Time Professor at Bucks County Community College (Fall 2008-Spring 2010)

Courses Taught: COMP090 – Basic Writing; COMP107 – Introduction to Rhetorical Skills; COMP110 – English Composition I; COMP111 – English Composition II

Writing Tutor at Bucks County Community College (Fall 2008-Spring 2009)