

Looking Backward
Historicism and the United States Literary Left

BY

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THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter I: Bartleby's Occupation: "Passive Resistance" Then and Now | 1 |
| Chapter II (Introduction): The Ruses of History | 21 |
| Chapter III: Class, Culture and the "Color-Line": Du Bois at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century | 26 |
| Chapter IV: The People, Yes? The Proletarian Novel in the Age of Multiculturalism | 67 |
| Chapter V: The Plot against History: The Suspicion of Narrative in New Historicism and the Postmodern Historical Novel | 99 |
| Conclusion: History, Class Consciousness, and Literary Form | 131 |
| WORKS CITED | 137 |
| VITA | 148 |
| NOTES | 150 |

SUMMARY

The dissertation examines the shifting sensibilities of the US literary left from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It distinguishes between two kinds of anti-capitalist critique: that which targets the market (or consumer society), and that which targets inequality. The dissertation primarily discusses authors—such as W.E.B. Du Bois, John Steinbeck, and E.L. Doctorow—who understood themselves to be engaged in the latter form of critique.

Even for those authors who identified the production of inequality as the central problem with capitalism, however, representing that problem proved to be surprisingly challenging. In particular, the emergence of the idea of cultural pluralism at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century marked a turn away from economic analyses of injustice, both racial and otherwise. Thus, in the work of Du Bois, the idea of culture becomes the switching point between a Marxian analysis of the “freedman’s” status in the post-Reconstruction South, and a nativist argument about the corruption of American values. In the work of Steinbeck, culture is disarticulated from race, and thus comes to substitute directly for class, as problems of capitalist exploitation are redescribed as problems of cultural marginalization. From this perspective, the task becomes to preserve the integrity of the “folk” rather than to eliminate their poverty through structural transformation.

The dissertation also engages with historicism in contemporary literary theory and criticism, in two ways. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate the ways in which

SUMMARY (continued)

contemporary literary critics' reinventions of "radical" texts and authors from the past frequently serve neoliberal political agendas. Secondly, through an analysis of the postmodern historical novel, poststructuralist historiography and New Historicist literary theory, it argues that contemporary literary criticism tends to be motivated by an anti-narrative view of history that forecloses the possibility of Marxist interpretation.

Chapter I: Bartleby's Occupation: "Passive Resistance" Then and Now

A version of this chapter was previously published online at

<http://nonsite.org/article/bartlebys-occupation-passive-resistance-then-and-now>

When the narrator of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" remarks, "[n]othing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (23), the reader cannot help but think of Henry David Thoreau.¹ And indeed, one line of "Bartleby" criticism, beginning with a 1945 essay by Egbert Oliver and extending to contemporary critics like Michael Rogin and Brook Thomas, without claiming categorically that Melville had read Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," nonetheless regards the short story as an extension of or, alternatively, a parody of the anti-authoritarian argument of the essay.² What these (otherwise very different) critical interpretations have in common is that they ultimately regard Bartleby and Thoreau as resisting a version of the same thing, described variously as "society," "social institutions" or "the social system." In my view, however, these terms collapse an important distinction between two kinds of social "institution"—the market and the state—that is fundamental to understanding the nature of Bartleby's resistance and its difference from Thoreau's.

The distinction has more than literary-critical significance, given the fact that "Bartleby" has achieved a new notoriety, beyond its perennial presence in college survey courses and literary journals—though, properly speaking, this newfound notoriety should be attributed to the enigmatic individual at the heart of Melville's text rather than to the text itself. Bartleby has arguably become *the* avatar for leftist political resistance (to both market *and* state) in recent years. I refer here to the dual phenomena of political theorists

like Agamben, Hardt and Negri and Žižek invoking Bartleby as a figure for a radical politics, and Occupy Wall Street's adoption of Bartleby (the original "occupier") as an unofficial mascot.³ Indeed, these phenomena are not unrelated, since the event known as "Occupy Wall Street" cannot be separated from its various interpretations—which is to say on the one hand that the question of what it meant is at least as important as the question of what it did, and on the other that, as the Occupy movement continues to evolve, the question of what it does seems increasingly to reflect the account of what it means (supplied in part by Hardt and Negri and Žižek).

I begin with the literary-critical argument, however. To put that argument in its bluntest possible form, while Thoreau resists the state in the name of the market, Bartleby resists the market in the name of the state. More precisely, the society Thoreau describes and to which his resistance is directed is imagined very differently from the society described in "Bartleby": the former is a society dominated by the state, the latter is a society dominated by the market. One implication of this interpretation is that it becomes problematic to describe Bartleby's resistance as civil disobedience. This is not only because his resistance is directed at a private employer rather than at the state. I want to suggest that, in the market-dominated social world described in "Bartleby," the notion of political resistance, and perhaps even of the "political" itself, starts to look tenuous. For Thoreau, political resistance does at least have a clear object—the state—and a clear justification—the individual's sovereign authority. Somewhat paradoxically, then, imprisonment in the Concord jail for Thoreau does not represent a curtailment of his liberty, but its more perfect realization: "The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and

locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles” (“Resistance” 76). To stand inside the prison, for Thoreau, is to stand outside the state. The market world Bartleby inhabits, on the other hand, is one in which preferences rather than principles are what matter; thus Bartleby resists by mobilizing the language—the only available one—of preference to subvert that world from the inside. Ultimately, I will argue, this subversion is motivated by a desire for the kind of society (one with a strong state) that Thoreau assumes already exists—a society that, in “Bartleby,” is represented by the prison itself.

What I mean by a “strong state” here is what we might call an interventionist state, a concept that only makes sense if one assumes the existence of a discrete realm of reality in which the state can intervene. Michel Foucault situates the emergence of *laissez-faire* liberalism within the history of what he calls governmentality: the attempt to coordinate state power, the economic management of the population, and individual self-discipline as elements of a total “art of government” (“Governmentality”). According to Foucault, *laissez-faire* emerged as a reaction to the philosophy of *raison d'état*, which assumed that the scope of governmental intervention in the life of the population was essentially unlimited, and therefore required the development of ever more intricate and intimate mechanisms of administrative and police power. Liberal political economy’s answer to this progressive expansion of state power was to define a zone that is off-limits—both in a descriptive and normative sense—to the state: namely, the market (*Birth of Biopolitics* 1-50).

It is a striking but often overlooked fact that, running through Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government”—which many would consider to be the most comprehensive and direct statement of his political principles—is a defense of economic liberalism. One might

by misled by the ironic tone of Thoreau's references to free trade; it is important to note that the irony is not directed at the idea of *laissez faire* as such, but rather at the fact that *laissez-faire* does not go far enough. At the same time, the essay contains several unambiguous statements of Thoreau's commitment to this philosophy: there is perhaps a hint of hyperbole but no irony in the statement that government is "at best but an expedient," but it is at its "most expedient" when "the governed are most let alone by it" (63-64).

Yet it seems difficult to square this Thoreau with the Thoreau of *Walden*, the Thoreau who coins aphorisms like "the thoughtful man becomes a hermit in the thoroughfares of the marketplace" ("Plea" 121)—the Thoreau, in short, who sounds a lot like Bartleby, retiring to his "hermitage" to escape the corruptions of Wall Street. Certainly, one could attribute the difficulty of pinning down Thoreau's political views to the author's semantic playfulness, a characteristic that has attracted interest and praise from post-structuralist critics in the past few decades. I want to suggest, however, that this ambiguity is not simply amorphousness but has a determinate structure, and, moreover, that this is also true of Melville's tale, which has been similarly celebrated in post-structuralist circles for its apparent refusal of meaning. In Thoreau's case, the ambiguity results from what might be described as a critique of capitalism as a mode of production, combined inextricably with an affirmation of its legitimating ideology. In Melville's case, the ambiguity results from the question of what, exactly, Bartleby is resisting. Economic criticism of the text has tended to go in two directions: either Bartleby is an alienated worker taking a stand against oppression, or he is, as Gillian Brown puts it, an agoraphobic, in the literal meaning of the term as "fear of the marketplace."⁴ These two alternatives

might not look like alternatives at all, and indeed, some critics (like Michael Gilmore [132-145]) have elided the distinction between the two, treating resistance to capitalism and resistance to the market as essentially equivalent. I want to suggest, however, that, firstly, they are not equivalent, and, secondly, with regard to Melville's story, both readings are right, but they can't both be right at the same time. The ambiguity of "Bartleby," in fact, has the same structure as that of Thoreau's work: it derives from the gap—what Žižek would call the "parallax view"—between the point of view of labor and the point of view of the commodity, between production and "the market" ("the market" being an ideological formation within capitalism, the story that capitalism tells itself about itself).

This "parallax gap" is inscribed in the very structure of a story Melville penned shortly after "Bartleby." Consisting of two juxtaposed sketches, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" contrasts the life of leisure and refinement enjoyed by lawyers in London's Temple Bar with the body- and soul-destroying drudgery endured by female workers in a New England paper mill. The narrator intuits some connection—an "inverted similitude" (327)—between the two scenes, but struggles to reconcile them: "Though the two objects did by no means completely correspond, yet this partial inadequacy but served to tinge the similitude not less with the vividness than the disorder of a dream" (326). The bipartite structure of the tale itself (as well as its title, which suggests that no "marriage" of the sketches' imaginative visions is possible) emphasizes this irreconcilability. It is important to note, however, that the irreconcilability does not arise simply from the contrast between wealth and poverty, or even between capital and labor: the relationship between the lawyers and mill workers is not one of capitalist and worker. Indeed, the lawyers in the first sketch are depicted primarily as consumers, insofar as they are

depicted as agents at all; anticipating Marx's description of the commodity-form in *Capital*, Melville endows the commodities the lawyers consume with a life of their own (the various courses of the dinner the narrator attends are imagined as military maneuvers, with the proffered delicacies—rather than the would-be “Knights Templars”—acting as the troops). Ultimately, then, the narrator's—and Melville's—difficulty in reconciling the two scenes stems not from the social division between labor and capital as such, but, once again, from the gap (a kind of blind spot) between the point of view of production and the point of view of the market. Appropriately, the commodity that the mill workers produce and that the lawyers consume, which therefore provides a tenuous link between the two sketches, is blank paper.

Similarly, to view *Bartleby* simply as a victim of capitalist exploitation is to diminish the structural ambiguity at the heart of Melville's story of Wall Street. To be sure, Melville invites such a reading—not only, as numerous critics have suggested, in his depiction of the lawyer's rationalization of capitalist social relations, but also in subtle references to the contemporaneous critique of “wage slavery” originating from Jacksonian Democrats, labor activists and Southern defenders of the (supposedly more humane) institution of chattel slavery.⁵ The ambiguous socio-economic position of the white Northern wage worker is signaled by the office's location between two walls, one the “white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft,” the other “black by age and everlasting shade” (14); other allusions to slavery are the narrator's reference to prosperous crowds “sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway” and his description of *Bartleby* as a “bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic” (28, 32). And while a scrivener is not the most obvious choice as a representative of “wage slavery,” adherents of the *Bartleby*-as-exploited-worker thesis point out that the

nature of his work—monotonous, non-creative, even potentially injurious—provides as much cause for discontent as any factory job.⁶

To make Bartleby a representative of “labor” in general, however, is to miss the importance of Bartleby’s status as not only a white but a *white-collar* employee. Structurally, Bartleby is a member of the proletariat, but, culturally, he might be regarded as a representative neither of labor or capital but of an emergent “middle class”: a term that, as historian Stuart Blumin observes, was just beginning to come into popular usage in the mid-nineteenth century (240-249). Though Melville does not use the term, it is striking that it seems to have entered the cultural lexicon at almost the same moment as the discourse of class antagonism exemplified by the protests against wage slavery (which, despite their too-easy conflation of wage labor and chattel slavery, were often quite sophisticated in their analyses of the relation between labor and capital). One might say that, as economic inequality and, with it, class antagonism became more apparent in the Northern states, the appeal of the idea of the middle class was that it redescribed class as merely a differential (rather than an antagonistic) relation, thus segregating its “economic” from its “political” content. Furthermore, as Blumin notes, the slipperiness of the notion of the middle class (and thus the difficulty it presents for historians who, like Blumin himself, attempt to investigate its existence) stems from the fact that what gives the “class” its unity is as much a set of cultural values as a socio-economic position, and, moreover, that those values include an attachment to an atomistic worldview that precludes the very notion of class (1-16).

Viewed from this perspective—which is to say, from the perspective of the parallax view that separates the structural notion of class from its self-negation as a culture of

individual enterprise—Bartleby’s occupation seems far from accidental. The tale begins with the narrator expressing a literary interest in Bartleby’s professional demographic, “an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners” (13). Bartleby is essentially a clerk, and as several historians have recently noted, clerks played a unique social and economic role in the “market revolution” of the nineteenth-century US.⁷ As Michael Zakim puts it: “it was the clerk who effectively administered all the new markets in the new market society” (567). The description is certainly appropriate to Bartleby’s occupation: though the title of *legal* clerk might suggest a non-commercial function, it is clear that the lawyer’s (and by extension, Bartleby’s) “business” as a “conveyancer and title hunter” consists precisely in the circulation of property (Melville, “Bartleby” 19). Furthermore, as Zakim notes, clerks not only administered, but *embodied* this circulation: the desire for social mobility that characterized these ambitious young men meant that “[their] very impermanence mimicked the perpetuum mobile of the commodity exchange they had come to the city to administer” (568). Clerks recognized that the most valuable commodity they could trade in the marketplace (their labor) resided in themselves—was, in fact, inseparable from the self. They therefore subscribed to an ethos of self-determination and self-perfection exemplified in the popular literature directed toward enterprising young men: a genre that included such edifying guides to moral conduct as Franklin’s autobiography and Henry Ward Beecher’s *Lectures to Young Men*, as well as more functional guides to business success such as *Hints to Young Tradesmen, and Maxims for Merchants* (Zakim 565-67). The personal diaries of clerks from the period display a similar concern with this project of self-cultivation in the name of social and economic

advancement: the young men whose diaries are the subject of Thomas Augst's *The Clerk's Tale* "accounted for their personal experience as a kind of capital, a means of owning the self in a fluid social world" (10).

These texts present a vision of the self with which Thoreau, of course, might very well have sympathized. While condemning the accumulation of property as a threat to political virtue (and as an unstable possession, liable to seizure by the state), Thoreau praises property in self as the basis of moral economy: "You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself, always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs" ("Resistance" 78). Bartleby's self-reliance is of a rather different nature, however. Social mobility was the watchword of the ambitious clerk: as one clerk put it, "there is no such thing as a stationary point in human endeavor" (qtd. in Augst 52). Bartleby is the antithesis of this entrepreneurial ethos. In a social world that places a premium on mobility and impermanence—on "*extra vagance*" (sic), to use one of Thoreau's favored expressions (Walden 324)—and as a member of a professional class that, more than any other, embodies those values, Bartleby is resolutely stationary.

This, of course, makes his arrest for vagrancy doubly ironic. And, not incidentally, this is the point at which the state inserts itself into the narrative economy of Bartleby. As I have suggested, Melville would not have had to search hard for anti-capitalist arguments.⁸ As I have also suggested, however, Bartleby's resistance takes the form not of a protest against the injustices of capitalism but of a withdrawal from the instabilities of the market. If resistance to capitalism and resistance to the market are not the same thing, where, then, could Melville find a model of the latter? My suggestion is that he found this model in the prison reform literature of the period.

As historian David Rothman has demonstrated, this reformist discourse was largely motivated by anxieties about the shift away from a stable, hierarchical social order to a society characterized by fluid social and economic relations. The emergence of the “institution” (the penitentiary, the almshouse, the asylum and so forth) can therefore be understood as a response to the instabilities of a market-driven society—instabilities that were regarded as producing various forms of “deviancy,” including crime, pauperism and insanity. The institution was imagined as an artificial environment that would serve both to reform its inmates (by insulating them from the dangers and allurements of the world outside its walls) and to provide a kind of model of ideal social organization. Nostalgic for the social stability of the colonial past, but adopting distinctly “modern” disciplinary methods borrowed from the military barracks and the factory, the designers of the nineteenth-century institution of reform aimed to reconstitute “a social order in which men knew their place” (108).

Central to the program of penal reform was the idea that inmates had to be isolated from pernicious influences originating both inside and outside the prison walls. Thus prisons like New York State’s Sing-Sing were constructed with separate cells for each prisoner, while inmates’ contact with friends and family members was severely limited (Rothman 94-99). As one Sing-Sing chaplain put it, “[t]he prisoner was taught to consider himself dead to all without the prison walls,” while the warden assured new arrivals that they were to be “literally buried from the world” (qtd. in Rothman 95). Despite its nickname, the Tombs (the New York City prison where *Bartleby* is confined), as Melville was no doubt aware, was quite unlike Sing-Sing in this regard. The prison was well known for its overcrowded cells, frequent escapes, and generally lax discipline (Gilfoyle). For penal

reformers, therefore, the Tombs was an example of the deficiencies of the prison system rather than a model institution: Dorothea Dix described it as “that most corrupting city-prison...where hundreds congregate, and communicate and receive evil influences continually” (16). Certainly, Melville’s depiction of the Tombs is hardly suggestive of the quasi-militaristic discipline characteristic of Sing-Sing, but neither is it the mob scene portrayed by Dix. Rather, the narrator encounters Bartleby in a setting characterized by silence and isolation, and sealed off from the world outside its walls: “The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them” (44). Melville’s Tombs, so it would appear, does indeed live up to its sobriquet (even before Bartleby’s death makes the name a literal description).

For Bartleby, then, imprisonment represents a welcome respite from the perpetual motion of the market; in prison, immobility is a virtue. Here Bartleby knows where he stands: “I know where I am,” he tells the lawyer (43). In this respect, however, it is necessary to distinguish Bartleby, the character, from “Bartleby,” the text, which reveals the former’s optimism to be naïve. His naïveté is exposed with the appearance of the entrepreneurial “grub-man,” who makes a profit by providing superior fare to those prisoners whose friends can afford to pay for it. Even the sanctified space of the prison, it would appear, cannot escape the contagion of market forces (an impression reinforced by the pun in the grub-man’s observation that the infamous criminal Monroe Edwards “died of consumption at Sing-Sing” [44]). Melville’s point is borne out historically not only by the fact that (as Rothman notes) such abuses did indeed take place in even the most advanced nineteenth-century prisons, but also, in a more recent context, by the increasing

privatization of prisons and their re-conception as profit-making ventures. From this perspective, we could say that, while *Bartleby* looks forward—optimistically—to the invention of the “providential” state, “*Bartleby*” looks forward—pessimistically—to the advent of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism reverses the relationship of state and market that mid-nineteenth-century prison reformers imagined and that would eventually take shape in progressivist and welfare state versions of interventionism: as Foucault puts it, neoliberalism envisions “a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state” (*Birth of Biopolitics* 116).

Thoreau, on the other hand, anticipates another central aspect of the neoliberal worldview. Something like Thoreau’s vision of the self-governing individual is a necessary supplement to the diminished role of government that neoliberals imagine. As Foucault notes, US neoliberalism challenged conventional economic analyses (both Smith’s and Marx’s) of labor with its redescription of the worker in terms of “human capital.” The nineteenth-century perception of labor as a form of saleable “property” was given a new twist: this property was redescribed as a form of capital, defined as “everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income.” As labor is redescribed as a form of capital, the laborer is redescribed as an investor. As Foucault summarizes, “from the worker’s point of view [these economists argue,] labor comprises a capital, that is to say, it is an ability, a skill...it is a ‘machine’” (*Birth of Biopolitics* 224). Neoliberalism regards the individual’s life as a “permanent and multiple enterprise” in which the individual acts as “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (*Birth of Biopolitics* 241, 226; brackets original to translation).

In this sense, neoliberal principles resonate with the ambitions of nineteenth-century clerks, as well as with Thoreau's transcendental individualism. Thoreau may have criticized the conversion of the "laboring man" into a "machine" (*Walden* 6), but the force of the criticism depends on his definition of the "laboring man" as one who labors for others (whether employers or customers) rather than one who labors *on* himself, *for* himself. As Zakim puts it, "[For Thoreau,] man himself would be the end—and no longer just the means—of labor. The modern production project, that is to say, would be devoted to producing one's self, which now accordingly became the most important form of property in a liberal regime, namely, property in oneself, or self-possession" (597). For Thoreau, then, as for the neoliberal theorists of human capital, the art of government is primarily an art of self-government: the most efficient political economy is ultimately an "economy of living" (*Walden* 52), an economy of the self.

At the same time, however, the notion of "resistance to civil government" becomes problematic with the advent of neoliberalism. For, when the neoliberal state has been absorbed by the market, how is it possible to resist it? Or, to put the question in a simpler form, how does one "resist" the market (essentially, the question posed by "Bartleby")? Neoliberalism, of course, has no interest in answering this question; its account of political resistance is not resistance *to* the market, but resistance *in* the market. In other words, resistance itself essentially becomes privatized, as (political) principles find their primary expression in (market) preferences. Concerned about the environment? Buy a hybrid car. Don't approve of NAFTA? Buy your t-shirts at American Apparel. This logic of privatization also extends to governmental policy itself: take, for example, the recent healthcare reforms (Obamacare, formerly Romneycare), which seek to guarantee "universal healthcare" by

requiring individuals to purchase their own health insurance. The implication is that principles (in this case, that the state should guarantee universal healthcare) can only be converted into effective policies by being redescribed as preferences: the redistribution of responsibility (from the state to the individual) this “redescription” entails is obvious enough.⁹ The management of what Jacques Donzelot calls “social risk” (270) is imagined not as the province of the providential state but of the individual: governmental policy becomes a policy of self-government. In the age of neoliberalism, then, both the functions of government and acts of political resistance (which perhaps can no longer be plausibly described as acts of resistance to “the government”) are increasingly privatized. Bartleby sought to express a principled opposition to the market in the form of a statement of preference, but his resistance remains a “dead letter” because to convert principles into preferences is merely to mirror the action of the market itself. Ultimately, then, rather than imagining the state as an effective mechanism of resistance to the market, “Bartleby” dramatizes the pervasiveness of the market (or properly speaking, market ideology), its ability to absorb resistance into itself.

Regarded in this light, Bartleby’s current vogue among anti-capitalist activists and theorists should be regarded as peculiar, but also telling. Beyond the minor ironies of Bartleby becoming a countercultural “brand” (one OWS participant’s blog describes her joy at finding a *shopping bag* emblazoned with the slogan “I would prefer not to”), the invocations of Bartleby as a figure for resistance to capitalist hegemony on the part of left intellectuals like Hardt and Negri and Žižek also fail to supply a convincing alternative to market ideology. Hardt and Negri’s reference to Bartleby (itself heavily influenced by Agamben’s account of Melville’s tale) as a figure for ontological resistance to Empire is

particularly relevant here in the sense that—like Bartleby himself—it produces a model of resistance that ultimately only mirrors what it seeks to resist. This is not, of course, an oversight on Hardt and Negri’s part: the claim that the potential resistance of the multitude is embedded within Empire, that the former inevitably reflects the “network” form of the latter, is central to their argument. Nevertheless—viewed in reverse, as it were—Hardt and Negri’s critique of Empire could be regarded as reproducing the ideological assumptions that authorize capitalist hegemony. This is not merely to say that “networks” of various kinds that might appear to be outside of or even opposed to the “system” of capitalist exploitation are always susceptible to co-optation: a point that Hardt and Negri would undoubtedly concede. It is, rather, to say that the concept of the network itself—as a way of conceiving both power and liberation from power—is merely an extension of market ideology (thus the proliferation of economic analyses and business manuals testifying to what Yochai Benkler calls “the wealth of networks”). What the network structure—like the market structure—conceals is class antagonism.

Marx, of course, formulated class antagonism as a binary opposition of bourgeoisie and proletariat: an over-simplification no doubt (even in the mid-nineteenth century), but nonetheless a necessary one. It is in this spirit that we should defend Occupy Wall Street’s slogan, “we are the 99%” against the conventional criticism that it reveals the movement’s lack of a coherent agenda. Certainly, the various individuals and factions that stand as representatives of “the 99%” have diverse political agendas and different socio-economic positions. Yet this is precisely why the slogan represents something of a triumph (albeit a rather modest one from a Marxist standpoint) as a rallying cry for class antagonism. Lack of a uniform political “subjectivity” (a term which I borrow from Hardt and Negri with

reluctance, since it implies a necessary relation between socio-economic position and political belief) need not preclude a coherent political message. Moreover, when protestors hold up graphs demonstrating the (indisputable) fact that the household income of the top 1% has risen out of all proportion with that of the rest of the US population, it hardly seems fair to accuse them of a lack of rhetorical specificity.¹⁰

For critics like Hardt and Negri, on the other hand, the lack of coherence that skeptics on the left and opponents on the right deride as a weakness of the Occupy movement should be celebrated as its strength. This is precisely because, for these thinkers, the form of protest is more significant than its content: what matters is not the movement's political message or agenda but its "horizontal network structure" (Hardt and Negri, "The Fight for 'Real Democracy' at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street"). Unsurprisingly, then, Hardt and Negri claim that Occupy Wall Street has "deep roots in the globalization protest movements that stretched at least from Seattle in 1999 to Genoa in 2001." And indeed, their celebration of the Seattle protests in *Multitude* emphasizes, again, the form or structure of the movement as its unifying element ("Social forums, affinity groups, and other forms of democratic decision-making are the basis of the movements") while insisting that the importance of this network structure is that it preserves rather than "subordinates or sets aside [the protestors'] differences" (86, 217). It is this commitment to preserving difference that ultimately reveals the limitations of the network structure as a way of conceiving liberatory class struggle, however: a point that becomes clearer if we return to the theorists' account of Bartleby.

Following Agamben, Hardt and Negri invoke Bartleby as a figure of pure potentiality rather than positive ontology: as Žižek puts it, "for HN, Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' is

interpreted as merely the first move of, as it were, clearing the table, of acquiring a distance toward the existing social universe; what is then needed is a move toward the painstaking work of constructing a new community" (*Parallax View* 382). Again, however, we could read (and indeed, given the internal logic of Hardt and Negri's work, its constant movement away from "constituted" reality and toward ontological possibility—*should* read) this process in reverse. Bartleby's gesture is not the beginning but the endpoint of a politics of pure refusal, the point at which difference cancels itself out in the general ontology of "being against." It is important to note, however, that this canceling out of difference is quite distinct from that which is entailed by the concept of the proletariat, which, as Lukács points out, is "totalizing" not in the sense that it reduces its various elements to "an undifferentiated uniformity" but in the sense that it provides the perspective from which to understand the relations between those elements—that is, the perspective of a central, organizing antagonism (12).¹¹ Hardt and Negri's concept of the "multitude", on the other hand, can actively seek to preserve (rather than merely explain) difference, precisely because all differences are equal in the "horizontal" structure of the network: the determinate differences among the multitude resolve themselves into Bartleby's indifferent refusal.

This is the point at which Hardt and Negri's and Žižek's ostensibly divergent accounts of "Bartleby" overlap. Žižek's criticism of the former is that, in imagining Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" as merely a preparatory stage in the work of social reconstruction, Hardt and Negri remain committed to "the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates" (*Parallax View* 381). This criticism is justified to the extent that, as I have suggested, Hardt and Negri's celebration of the

“network” as the site of resistance not only borrows its conceptual apparatus from market ideology but also empties the notion of resistance of any substantive content. Indeed, the Occupy movement’s latest incarnation as Occupy Sandy, admirable and necessary though its work may be, testifies to the extent to which the movement itself has taken this account of its “real significance”—as an organizational structure rather than as the bearer of an alternative ideology—to heart (one must assume that this is a thoroughly regretful transformation from the point of view of Žižek, for whom “humanitarian” organizations, by definition, fail to pose a challenge to the capitalist world order). Yet Žižek’s own reading of “Bartleby”—and his answer to Hardt and Negri—takes us even further in the direction of ontological (in)difference and thus away from the “concrete demands” that would supposedly undermine the authenticity of the protest: “[Bartleby’s] refusal is not so much the refusal of a determinate content as, rather, the formal gesture of refusal as such...There is no violent *quality* in it; the violence pertains to its very immobile, inert, insistent, impassive *being*” (*Parallax View* 384-85).¹²

The charge that Occupy Wall Street lacked a coherent political message is ultimately less convincing than the charge that it lacked a strategy for converting that political message into a strategic program, either by constituting a new party or by exerting its influence in the existing party structure. Again, from the point of view of both Hardt and Negri and Žižek, this could only be a good thing: any attempt to work within existing democratic mechanisms would be a capitulation to the hegemonic capitalist order and thus a betrayal of the movement’s revolutionary potential. In response to Žižek’s claim that “[t]he difficulty of imagining the New is the difficulty of imagining Bartleby in power” (*Parallax View* 382), however, one should object on both literary-critical and political

grounds: the basis of the objection in either case is the omission of an account of the state as a potential organ of resistance to capital.

In the tradition of the “what if?” school of criticism to which “Bartleby” seems to have given rise (What if Bartleby were a woman? An anorexic? A factory worker?¹³), one could say that Bartleby is not a radical, but *if he were*, his radicalism would be exercised through the state. From this point of view, both Hardt and Negri and Žižek’s account of the tale are simply more theoretically sophisticated versions of the literary critical arguments that make Bartleby a Thoreauvian figure resisting “the system” (an argument that, as I have argued, misrepresents the nature of the resistance in either case). In fact, Bartleby’s commitment to the state means that he is not so much anti-capitalist as anti-neoliberal (and in this respect, he is the antithesis of Thoreau).

Of course, it seems rather absurd to approach neoliberal ideology through the prism of two mid-nineteenth-century texts. My aim has been to suggest, however, that these texts, written at the moment of the “market revolution,” do in fact help us to understand the ideological bases of neoliberalism, precisely by expressing—and in Melville’s case, exploiting—the gap I referred to earlier, between the point of view of the market (which reaches its apotheosis in neoliberalism) and the point of view of labor. These alternatives also entail different models of governmentality, and different conceptions of the role of the state. Depending on how one looks at the tale, Bartleby is either a reluctant entrepreneur or a proletarian activist; he either successfully refuses to be commodified or is crushed by the capitalist machine; either the prison represents a respite from the thoroughfares of the marketplace or its walls are merely an extension of Wall Street. In Melville’s text, in fact, either conclusion turns out to be pessimistic—even Bartleby’s success turns out to be

illusory. Nevertheless, if history proved Melville right in one sense, it proved him wrong in another. The reformist state that became the progressive state that became the welfare state did, in fact, seek to redress not only the instabilities but the inequities of capitalism. That is to say, it recognized the gap between the viewpoint of the market and the viewpoint of labor. Neoliberalism, by contrast, seeks to assimilate the latter to the former. Its commitment to the self-governing individual becomes, at the same time, a commitment to ignoring structural economic inequality altogether.

It would be grossly unfair to accuse either Hardt and Negri or Žižek of sharing this commitment. What one can say, however, is that, in eliding the possibility that the state could operate (and has operated) as a site of resistance to capitalist hegemony, they sacrifice an important theoretical challenge to neoliberal ideology. What they sacrifice at the level of political practice, meanwhile, might best be summarized in Žižek's own words. In the same text in which he invokes Bartleby's absolute refusal as the necessary form of contemporary political protest, Žižek criticizes Simon Critchley for the claim that "politics has to be conceived at a distance from the state," at a local, "situational" level (qtd. in Žižek, *The Parallax View* 332). Žižek responds, "is not Critchley's position one of relying on the fact that *someone else* will take on the task of running the state machinery, enabling us to engage in critical distance toward the state?" (333). Increasingly, that "someone else" is represented by neoliberal leaders whose policies continue to serve the interests of capital and to intensify the exploitation of labor. It is important to note, furthermore, that these leaders typically portray themselves as pragmatic "realists" devoid of ideology. In this respect, the task of political theory is precisely to refuse "critical distance"—to take the disavowed ideology seriously, if only in order to contest it.

Chapter II (Introduction): The Ruses of History

The strangest thing about Edward Bellamy's 1888 socialist utopian novel *Looking Backward* and its sequel, *Equality*, is the novels' commitment to consumerism. Indeed, Bellamy is at his most prescient when he imagines the ease with which millennial Americans would go shopping. Consumers in Bellamy's perfected society select from an almost limitless selection of goods using a technology that resembles the Internet (though these goods are delivered through a system of hydraulic tubes rather than UPS trucks and Amazon drones). Gone are the utilitarian uniforms of More's *Utopia* or contemporaneous utopian novels like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*: clothing—which in Bellamy's utopia is disposable to allow for maximum variety—is acknowledged as an important expression of personal identity.¹⁴

It would be easy to condemn this attachment to consumerism as a failure of political or literary imagination on Bellamy's part: an inability to conceive of a world in which commodities would cease to have the importance they did in the era of the department store. To do so, however, would be to miss the novelty of Bellamy's socialist critique of turn-of-the-century US society. After all, in Bellamy's utopia, consumer goods are no longer commodities, those spectral abstractions of human labor that Marx describes. Since goods are not bought and sold, only distributed (in return for labor), they no longer possess exchange value, only use value: they have ceased to be a mystification of social relations, and now represent purely individual expressions of human need and desire. Individualism is perfected in socialism. In *Equality*, the market of the nineteenth century is described as "an artificial thing...a product of the profit system" (163). Under capitalism, the market is

merely a fiction designed to mask inequality; only socialism can give you the real thing—a truly free market.

In imagining a market without inequality, then, Bellamy makes it possible to distinguish the critique of the former from the critique of the latter. This distinction—between a critique of capitalism that targets the market (or consumer society), and a critique that targets inequality—provides the principle of selection for this dissertation. If one were to survey the canonical texts of twentieth-century US literature, virtually all of them could be included in the former category; a fact which says as much about the limitations of the anti-capitalist imagination in US literary and academic culture as it does about its prevalence. By contrast, texts in the latter category, even those composed by authors “on the left” are surprisingly scarce.

Moreover, even for those authors who do understand the production of inequality as the central problem with capitalism, representing that problem has proven to be surprisingly challenging. This challenge, I argue, takes two forms: one historical—meaning that it issues from the political exigencies of a particular historical moment—and one literary-historiographical—meaning that it issues from the problem of the literary representation of the proletariat as subject of history (as Georg Lukács would have it).

My third chapter—since it deals with texts that are strictly speaking more historical than literary—focuses primarily on the historical problem, as it emerges in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. I argue that Du Bois’s anti-racism was inseparable from his anti-capitalism; the “Negro problem” was, for Du Bois, a particular historical form of the exploitation of labor by capital. At the same time as Du Bois’s analysis of racial segregation was influenced by Marxian economics, however, it was also inflected with the Herderian historiographical

tradition, which posited not class but culture as the principle by which social groups were to be distinguished from one another. As Adolph Reed notes, Du Bois's attachment to the idea of culture was understandable as a response to dominant accounts of racial difference in terms of biology ("The 'Color Line' Then and Now" 257). Yet, as I demonstrate, it also ended up re-orienting his critique of inequality along racial-essentialist lines: a re-orientation that shifted the target of critique from a system of exploitation to a corrupt market culture.

By the 1930s, as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates, race had become the dominant paradigm through which to understand injustice in the US, while culture had become the dominant paradigm through which to understand both the failures of capitalism and the potential for resistance to it. Indeed, though Steinbeck's novels are frequently criticized for their exclusion of racial minorities (to the point of distorting the historical events that inspired them), the criticism—though perfectly valid—somewhat misses the point. For Steinbeck, the "Okies" in *The Grapes of Wrath* and their counterparts in his other novels essentially take the place of "black folk" in Steinbeck's worldview, which is to say that they represent both an oppressed, racialized minority and an alternative culture.

Steinbeck has, of course, frequently been derided as a purveyor of sentimental liberalism; with respect to his representation of the working class, however, Steinbeck's aesthetic and political assumptions were largely consistent with those of the ostensibly more radical proletarian literary movement. Here, the historical problem merges with the literary-historiographical problem: how to represent the proletariat as subject of history. In this respect, I argue, novels like Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* and Richard

Wright's *Native Son*, paradoxically, succeed as novels about class precisely by virtue of their failure to represent that subject. They imply that, in the absence of revolution, the proletariat can only be a kind of virtual subject: a subject-position that cannot be occupied by any particular individual. In doing so, they avoid the essentialist assumptions (again, based on dominant paradigms of race and culture) that clouded the vision of the proletarian novelists.

A brief consideration of the way in which two of these authors, Du Bois and Wright, are conventionally taught in US schools and universities and written about in US literary journals and popular media will suffice to indicate the ways in which questions of race and culture have continued to displace questions of class in the academy and beyond. This in spite of the fact that Du Bois expended an enormous amount of words on the issue of class exploitation throughout his career, and the fact that a third of Wright's most famous novel is devoted to an essentially Marxist analysis of racial segregation in the US. If part of my goal in this dissertation is to historicize the literary production of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, in so doing, to trace the shifting sensibilities of the US literary left, its other goal is to historicize contemporary literary criticism: to demonstrate the ways in which its reinventions of "radical" texts and authors from the past serve contemporary—and often surprisingly conservative—political exigencies.

The promise of a more accurate or nuanced account of the historical genesis of a literary text, oeuvre or movement is the founding gesture of most literary-critical articles and books written today. My goal, however, is not simply to substitute "good" historicism for "bad" historicism, but to contribute to the current debate around the place of historicism itself in contemporary literary criticism. The dominance of the critical mode

formerly known as “New Historicism” has propelled recent gestures of revolt: calls for affective and anti-“symptomatic” reading; defenses of the “ordinary reader” against the myth of the critic-hero.¹⁵ At the same time, critics of African American literature like Kenneth Warren are objecting to just how ahistorical much ostensibly “historicist” criticism really is. In my final chapter, I seek to take both of these criticisms seriously, by, on the one hand, tracing the guiding assumptions of contemporary historicism to their roots in the postmodern historical novel, post-structuralist historiography and New Historicist literary theory, and, on the other, outlining what I regard as the limitations of the historicist mode of literary criticism.

Chapter III: Class, Culture and the “Color-Line”: Du Bois at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

“Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me,” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *Dusk of Dawn*, “I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born” (573). In *What Was African American Literature?*, Kenneth Warren suggests that “one could paraphrase Du Bois by saying, but for the race problem, he would likely have been a run-of-the-mill, reasonably wealthy white man” (19). For Warren, Du Bois’s statement expresses an ambivalence about the “race problem” characteristic of African American literature during the segregation-era. I should point out here that, in Warren’s view, the notion of African American literature is, in fact, only coherent when understood as a response to “the enforcement and justification of racial subordination and exploitation represented by Jim Crow” (2)—hence the past tense of the book’s title. In that sense, Warren argues, African American literature was, paradoxically, committed to its own extinction, since it was committed to overcoming the social and legal constraints that gave it coherence in the first place. Yet, as Warren’s paraphrase of Du Bois suggests, what applies to African American literature here might also be understood to apply to African American identity. That is to say, Du Bois’s ambivalence stems from the fact that, while having the same chance as a white man to become “reasonably wealthy” would certainly represent a victory, it might also represent something of a loss in terms of the distinctiveness of African American (or, for Du Bois, “Negro” or “black”) identity.

Yet we should also note that Du Bois's statement permits a different—and perhaps more obvious—interpretation: namely, that his experience of segregation was important not because it gave him a different identity, but because it gave him a different set of beliefs about the “social order and economic development” of which segregation was a part. Indeed, this reading is largely borne out by the remainder of the chapter in which the passage appears, where Du Bois stresses his growing awareness (stemming partially from his education in Europe) of the relation between the “race problem” in the US and political and economic developments elsewhere around the globe, and also between “economics and politics” more generally (588). In fact, Du Bois's comments here begin to suggest the way in which the relation between racial injustice and economic inequality—or between race and class—was a central concern in his work.

This is not to say that Warren's interpretation of Du Bois's comment is unjustified: rather, one might say that the ambiguity of the statement points to a fundamental ambiguity in Du Bois's work. For on the one hand, it suggests that being black in a segregated society would make one more likely to challenge the social and economic order; on the other, it suggests that being black is *equivalent* to challenging the social and economic order—or, as Warren puts it, writers like Du Bois “posit an American ideological machine so powerful in its capacity to change its citizens into soulless automatons that, paradoxically, its most obvious victims turn out to hold within themselves the only hope for its redemption” (19). At the same time, Warren suggests the tenuous nature of this notion of black identity, expressed by segregation-era writers as a “fear or hope, an assertion or denial, that black difference—what [Richard] Wright describes as his ‘culture’—was little more than a function of an oppressive society” (27). And indeed, Warren argues, the

contemporary commitment to African American literature should be understood as a commitment to continuing to regard this difference as crucial, despite the fact that the specific structures of oppression which might be said to have generated it no longer apply to our present moment.

In this context, it is striking to note that what contemporary critics have typically found valuable in Du Bois is precisely his commitment to the particularity of African American (or black) identity. Moreover, one could say that, insofar as these critics understand Du Bois's attempt to articulate that identity to constitute the basis of his critique of the social and economic order, they essentially conflate the difference between the two interpretations—and the different understandings of Du Bois's political commitments they entail—described above. This conflation is, no doubt, prompted in part by the original work itself. In a moment, I shall show how Du Bois's 1906 essay, "Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten," exemplifies, on the one hand, Du Bois's commitment to understanding racial injustice and class exploitation as being inextricably linked, and on the other, his tendency to subsume questions of economic inequality under questions of cultural difference. My point, then, is not to say that these critics misread Du Bois so much as it is to say that they reproduce—and render unproblematic—Du Bois's move from class to culture.

First published three years after *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten" is a curious addition to Du Bois's oeuvre, for several reasons. The earlier work famously sets out to explore "the strange meaning of being black here at the dawn of the Twentieth century" (2). As the line itself implies, and as the remainder of Du Bois's most influential text goes on to demonstrate, *Souls* represents a turn away from the

social-scientific approach to the “Negro problem” employed in his earliest works, of which *The Philadelphia Negro* is the best-known example. Du Bois’s self-identification as “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of those who live within the Veil” in the preface to *Souls* emphasizes the point that the book will endeavor to address the Negro problem from within, eschewing the scientific objectivity of what he later calls “the cold statistician” or “the car-window sociologist” (6, 14, 100). The first thing that strikes the reader of “Die Negerfrage,” then, is precisely its emphasis on “objective” sociological analysis—complete with tables of statistics—and Du Bois’s reluctance, in contrast to *Souls*, to announce himself as possessing a distinctive racial subjectivity that would give him a privileged perspective on the “Negro question in the United States.”¹⁶

What is more striking, however, is the fact that, while Du Bois revisits material from *Souls* in the essay, he approaches that material primarily from the perspective of a structural economic analysis that foregrounds issues of class. For example, the first portion of “The New Caste Mentality,” the essay’s third section, is largely quoted verbatim from chapter 9 of *Souls*, “Of the Sons of Master and Man.” Yet the point at which the essay version departs from the book version is revealing. After addressing the “economic relations” in the South and the problems faced by black workers in both versions, “Die Negerfrage” goes on to discuss “the relations of the Negroes to their fellow white workers and especially to the trade unions,” as a topic of “special interest” to black workers—particularly as regards their chances of realizing a more “just economic system” (268). The chapter in *Souls*, on the other hand, personalizes the account of economic injustice and, to an extent, racializes its putative agents: “Left by the best elements of the South with little protection or oversight, [the black laborer] has been made in law and custom the victim of the most unscrupulous

men in each community”—the representative example of these “unscrupulous men” is the “enterprising Russian Jew” (109). Furthermore, when Du Bois turns to the question of “political” relations in the South, the essay focuses primarily on the disenfranchisement of black voters (largely due—directly or indirectly—to economic factors), while the book chapter focuses on the need for race-leadership, the crucial role of education in cultivating “civic virtue” among the black population, and, above all, “the power of the ballot” as the route to progress (*Souls* 109-11).

While *Souls*, then, seeks a solution to the problem of the “color-line” primarily through social and political transformation (refusing Booker T. Washington’s call to mere progress in economic affairs), “Die Negerfrage” points insistently to the more deep-seated economic antagonisms that, in the essay, appear to be the fundamental determinant of social and political inequalities—both race-based and otherwise. In that sense, as Du Bois puts it, “[t]he Negro question is only one indication of the increasing class and racial privileges [in the contemporary United States] and not, as many optimistically believe, its cause” (“Die Negerfrage” 284). What the Negro question “indicates,” then, is a growing inequality of wealth and an increasingly exploitative economic system: the “Negro problem,” as Du Bois repeatedly insists, is not the problem of Negroes alone, but merely the most pronounced (though obviously for important reasons) instance of class antagonism in the United States.

My interest here, however, is less in comparing the political commitments of *Souls* and “Die Negerfrage,” than in uncovering a tension between conflicting political commitments *within* the latter essay itself. While the essay provides a particularly pointed example of this tension, it can also be recognized in *Souls* and across much of Du Bois’s

oeuvre. The tension becomes apparent in the essay when Du Bois turns away from the perspective of class politics, precisely at the point where he seems to be establishing the legitimacy of that perspective most forcefully. After observing that “[c]lass hierarchy grows today in America, in the land that was founded as a mighty protest against this folly that rules the world,” and, as noted above, explaining “the Negro question” as “only one indication of...increasing class and racial privileges,” Du Bois abruptly seems to shift the grounds of his argument. In the very next line, he presents a *non sequitur* as the inevitable conclusion to his argument: “The only salvation from such a situation evidently lies in *not* placing all the energy on the class standpoint” (284, emphasis added). He goes on to say that we should instead “adopt the old national standpoint in the Negro question and shove aside on the one hand the demands of the plantation owners of the South and the capitalists of the North, [and] on the other the purely personal wishes of the blacks” (284). The move toward the “national standpoint” is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that, for the majority of the essay, Du Bois has been at pains to eschew a nationally particularist perspective in his treatment of the “Negro problem,” by, for example, equating the condition of the post-civil war “freedman” with that of the “oppressed peasants” of the old world (251). Moreover, it is by no means clear why, from the rejected “class standpoint,” the class interests of capital—Southern plantation owners and Northern capitalists—should be ranged against the “*purely personal* wishes of the blacks.” This point is especially problematic given that the essay in general seems to suggest the necessity of cultivating class consciousness (a kind of consciousness that is anything but “purely personal”) on the part of both black and white workers.

To a certain extent, the turn to the nation could be understood in terms of what Adolph Reed has characterized as Du Bois's "state-centered politics": his belief (one that places him within the mainstream of progressive-era discourse) in central government as the primary engine of social change" (Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois* 178). From this point of view, the turn from the "class standpoint" to the "national standpoint" would be a turn toward progressive reform as opposed to potentially more radical solutions to the "Negro problem," or indeed, the problem of economic inequality more generally. At the same time, however, the turn to the national standpoint must also be understood in the context of Du Bois's broader conception of what constitutes a nation: "the nation," after all, does not obviously or necessarily name "the state." Thus, while the portion of the essay that follows the turn to the national standpoint does gesture toward the need for institutional reform, it also gestures toward a more overtly racialized account of the nation that appears elsewhere in Du Bois's work, including *Souls* as well as his well-known account of the relationship between race and nation in "The Conservation of Races." Indeed, the question of *political* reform (as prior to or subsumptive of the question of economic reform) as it is articulated in both those texts is largely made dependent on the development of race-consciousness among American "Negroes." As we shall see, however, Du Bois also made the development of the Negro race inextricable from the development of the American nation—a move rhetorically achieved by fusing his accounts of American and Negro cultural identity.

This perspective on the nation also sheds light on the significance of Du Bois's apparently antisemitic remarks in *Souls*, as well as in "Die Negerfrage" itself. As I shall demonstrate, the figure of the Jew is invoked in important ways in "Die Negerfrage";

indeed, that invocation is crucial in producing the turn away from the “class standpoint” to the “national standpoint,” and thus from one set of political commitments to another. In this context, both the title of the work and the circumstances of its publication are significant. In the title, Du Bois replaces his usual formulation (and the one generally employed among his contemporaries), the “Negro problem,” with the “Negro question.” The substitution suggests a possible link between “die Negerfrage” in the United States and “die Judenfrage” in Germany. Du Bois was quite familiar with the debates surrounding the “Jewish question” from his time as a student at the University of Berlin.¹⁷ More significantly, the essay was originally published in the German journal, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, at the invitation of Max Weber. In his letter to Du Bois soliciting the essay, Weber asks Du Bois to investigate “the relations between the (so-called) ‘race problem’ and the (so-called) ‘class problem’” in the US, and hopes that the essay will “accentuate those connections and the influence of social-economic conditions on the relations of races to each other.” This kind of analysis, Weber believes, will provide a response to the “dilettantic” and pseudo-scientific antisemitic literature then prevalent in Germany (qtd. in Chandler, “Possible Form,” Pt. 1 196). Furthermore, though it is unlikely that Du Bois had read Marx’s “Zur Judenfrage” at this point in his intellectual career, his account of the “Negro question” as a question of the disjunction between economic status and political representation is largely commensurable with a Marxist understanding of the social position and perception of Jews in Germany. Nevertheless, Du Bois’s essay takes a different turn—one that is perhaps less reflective of his (in any case, second-hand) encounter with Marxist thought than of his exposure to the Herderian thought prevalent in the German academy at the time of his studies in Berlin. This latter line of thought

(espoused not least by Du Bois's instructor, Heinrich von Treitschke) was deeply concerned with articulating a definition of the nation as a culturally unified entity—a view that typically lent itself to antisemitism.

That said, my interest here is not in Du Bois's antisemitism *per se* nor, for that matter, in the specific character and extent of his engagement with German philosophical and political thought—both of which have been explored at some length by other critics.¹⁸ Rather, my point is to draw attention to the way in which Du Bois's turn to the nation in “Die Negerfrage” marks a particular kind of shift in his discourse, whereby what appears to be a problem stemming from economic relations—a problem of class, in short—finds a solution in “culture.” Thus while the first and largest portion of the essay seeks to understand the problems faced by the freedman largely in terms of his economic status, in the last portion of the essay (after the turn to the “nation”) the question of the “Negro's” potential cultural difference becomes paramount. The problem this turn presents is not merely that it shifts the grounds of the argument, but that it does so in a way that cuts against the focus on issues of economic inequality and exploitation in the first part of the essay. That is to say, the question of “culture” becomes a question of political inclusion in the “nation,” but political inclusion—as the first part of the essay amply demonstrates—does not necessarily imply economic justice.¹⁹

This tension—between a problem premised on class and a solution premised on culture—has, however, gone unrecognized by the majority of Du Bois's critics. The essays by Hortense Spillers and Nahum Chandler that appeared alongside the first published English translation of “Die Negerfrage” in *The New Centennial Review* will serve to illustrate this point. Indeed, insofar as these essays celebrate—rather than question—Du Bois's

attempt to subsume questions of class under questions of culture in “Die Negerfrage,” they are representative of the contemporary critical response to Du Bois’s work more generally. Furthermore, insofar as the way we read Du Bois now might have something to say about the current American political climate, the fact that the aforementioned tension has typically been elided in interpretations of Du Bois points to the way in which, as Reed puts it, “[c]ulture has swallowed or displaced class as an analytical category in American political debate, across the ideological spectrum” (Reed, “2004 Election” 4). Certainly, Du Bois’s advocacy of “culture”—whether understood in distinctly racialized terms or not—has seemed more appealing to a majority of critics than his work as a political economist: a fact which I take to be indicative of a widespread—though often unacknowledged—commitment to defining a sphere of the legitimately “political” that treats structural economic questions as inessential or irrelevant.

In order to embrace Du Bois’s notion of culture—which, on the face of it, is largely racially essentialist as well as nationalist and/or nativist—these critics have effectively been forced to read “race” out of culture. Deprived of the reference to race, however, the question of cultural difference—and of its political efficacy—typically becomes a purely ontological/epistemological one. As we shall see, in a variety of ways race is then read back into the conceptual account of the “political,” but in a manner that offers little guidance as to the significance (actual and potential) of race as a category of political analysis and a basis of political action—least of all, the way that race and class issues might intersect. To that extent, these readings ignore a fundamental aspect of Du Bois’s political thought: an orientation toward understanding issues of class and race to be inextricably linked (as demonstrated both in the first part of “Die Negerfrage” and, I would argue, throughout the

majority of his works). Indeed, Du Bois may still have important things to say to us on these matters. Instead, however, critics have—rather perversely—taken those aspects of his thought that now seem most antiquated and arcane (his Herderian views on race and nation, for example) for the foundational aspects of his politics.

The fact that Du Bois's nativist tendencies have largely been overlooked is even more surprising given that they are most clearly evidenced in the two of his works that have perhaps received the most critical attention: *The Souls of Black Folk* and the 1897 essay "The Conservation of Races." Taken together, these two works also articulate the conceptual aspect of Du Bois's work that has received more scholarly attention than any other: the double-consciousness motif. We should recall that double-consciousness is ostensibly a tension between a particular racial identity ("Negro"), and a particular national identity ("American"). On the face of it, the opposition seems to be a false one because it opposes two terms that are categorically different and thus not mutually exclusive. That is to say, the question of whether or not one belongs to a particular race should not (and in fact, post-Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment, technically *does not*) bear on the question of whether or not one belongs to a particular nation—that is, so long as one assumes that national identity basically describes a legal and political status (citizenship). As "The Conservation of Races" makes clear, however, Du Bois understands national identity as a form of cultural identity, determined by what he describes as the "*ideals of life*" that distinguish one nation from another (819). Furthermore, races are distinguished from one another on the same (cultural) basis: this is, in fact, what makes their "conservation" desirable, since each race (like each nation) has its own unique contribution to make to human history and world civilization.²⁰ The fact that the terms "race" and "nation" (and Du

Bois uses the terms more or less interchangeably in “The Conservation of Races”) both describe discrete cultural entities, however, is precisely what creates the crisis of double-consciousness: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (*Souls* 11).

In “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois poses the dilemma thus: “Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?” (821). One response would be the (basically anti-nativist) one I sketched above: if national identity merely refers to citizenship, then obviously Du Bois’s second question could be answered in the affirmative. Since the “nation” for Du Bois is essentially defined by its *culture*, however (a pro-nativist position, in fact), another response is required. The problem then appears to be how to reconcile potentially conflicting cultural loyalties—to the American nation and to the Negro race. Yet Du Bois’s resolution to this dilemma in “The Conservation of Races” and *Souls* suggests that, in fact, the opposition between “Negro” and “American” is a false one—not because they are categorically different, but because the *authentically* American culture is always already that of the Negro. Thus, as Du Bois puts it in “The Conservation of Races”: “We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy” (822). Du Bois will, of course, take up the same line of argument in the first and last chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*: namely, insofar as America has an authentic national culture, that culture is “Negro” in origin. Thus the Sorrow Songs, for example, represent *both* “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (*Souls* 155). The attempt to articulate a distinctively Negro cultural identity, then, has turned out to be identical with the attempt to articulate a distinctively American

cultural identity. When Du Bois announces, “[w]e are the first fruits of this new nation,” the ambiguity of “nation’s” reference (Negro or American?) is therefore crucial (“Conservation” 822).

Of course, this raises a question about the problem of double-consciousness: if Du Bois’s effort has been to make Negro culture and American culture seem identical, then what produces the crisis of identity? Or, to put the question another way, what remains on the “American” side of the Negro/American opposition? Critics have often assumed that “American” simply means “white,” and indeed, some of Du Bois’s rhetoric appears to suggest as much. Furthermore, when Du Bois imagines America as the meeting place between “two-world races,” it is likely that what he has in mind—however reductive it may be—is a meeting between “white” and “black” cultures: thus, for example, a variant of the Sorrow Songs is described as containing “both Negro and Caucasian” elements (*Souls* 16, 158). Yet we should also note that, from this point of view, “white” does not obviously name “American”: when Du Bois remarks, “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas,” what is on the “white” side of the color-line is not recognizably American (*Souls* 74). Later, reflecting on his first European sojourn in his final autobiography, Du Bois would remark on his growing perception of the derivative nature of white, would-be American culture:

Even I was a little startled to realize how much that I had regarded as white American, was white European and not American at all: America’s music is German, the Germans said; the Americans have no art, said the Italians; and their literature, remarked the English, is mainly English. (*Autobiography* 157)

As Sieglinde Lemke remarks, “[t]he Europeans’ dismissive attitudes toward Anglo-American culture only helped to confirm Du Bois’s view that cultural expressions of black Americans were superior to those of white Americans” (51). It also, I would add, allowed Du Bois to claim that black American culture alone was native to America and therefore represented its *only* true culture.

Du Bois’s affinity for “white,” non-American culture should cause us to reconsider the double-consciousness formation. It now seems that on one side we have the “Negro”—who, as we have seen, also represents the authentically American, while on the other, we have the “American”—an American who would appear to be in some sense “white,” but at the same time dissociated from the cultural achievements of the “white” (European) world in general. The following line in Du Bois’s autobiography, in fact, gives us a sense of what remains on the “American” side of the equation after this dissociation from the larger world of “white” culture has taken place: “All agreed that the Americans could make money and did not care how they made it” (*Autobiography* 157). From this point of view, the opposition between Negro and American seems less like an opposition between two equally valid racial/national cultures, than an opposition between an authentic national American culture—which is always already that of the Negro—and a rampant capitalism that stands for the absence or inauthenticity of culture on the other. The Negro, therefore, represents the only outpost of true culture amidst America’s “mad money-getting plutocracy” (“Conservation” 822), the “sole oasis of faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness” (*Souls* 16). If, however, the inauthentic Americans—representing not simply a non-American culture but a false American culture—cannot simply be named as “white,” then what name to give them? *Who are the inauthentic Americans?*

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the name given to this “false culture” is Mammonism, and its representative—not black but also not quite “white”—is the Jew. Indeed, at the point at which Du Bois invokes the idea of a “false culture” (127), the Jew is its avatar. The critique of Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism and materialism here shades into a critique of racial and cultural inauthenticity: “Political defence is becoming less and less effective, and economic defence is still only partially effective. But there is a patent defence at hand,—the defence of deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying. It is the same defence which the Jews of the Middle Ages used and which left its stamp on their character for centuries” (128). In fact, the basis for Du Bois’s criticisms of Washington and the basis of his characterization of the Jew is, at least from one point of view, the same: a resistance to the “false culture” of Mammonism. From this point of view, the cultural gifts of black folk represent the sole bastion of *true* American values amidst the rising tide of Mammonism. It is essential, therefore, that the black folk of the South—the cultural heartland of the race and thus the nation—not be seduced by Washington’s “Gospel of Work and Money”:

What if to the Mammonism of America be added the rising Mammonism of the re-born South, and the Mammonism of this South be reinforced by the budding Mammonism of its half-awakened black millions? Whither, then, is the new-world quest of Goodness and Beauty and Truth gone glimmering? (58)

If Mammonism, then, is a threat to the cultural integrity of the nation, the Jew embodies that threat. The Jew, we are told, “is the heir of the slave-baron,” perhaps even a more nefarious master than the previous one, since his lust for profit is undiluted by any “bonds of intimacy [and] affection” (83, 116); as Du Bois puts it, “only a Yankee or a Jew could squeeze more blood from debt-cursed tenants” (84). In the 1953 version of the text, Du

Bois has generally changed “Jew” to “immigrant” or “foreigner.”²¹ The substitutability of “Jew” and foreigner is revealing, however: the “Jew,” understood *as* the exemplar of the foreigner or immigrant, is also the agent of Mammonism and thus the representative of the nation’s potential cultural bankruptcy. That is to say, the values of Mammonism—of unchecked, self-seeking capitalism—are themselves identified as alien or “foreign,” and are in turn identified with the figure of the foreigner or “Jew.”²²

In this context, we should be attentive to two key points in “Die Negerfrage” where Du Bois’s analysis pivots on the question of the foreigner/Jew. The first concerns the emergent merchant class—a sort of third term (or “third estate,” if you like) between landowning capital and landless labor. As the supplier of the means of production to both landowners and sharecroppers and therefore the ultimate possessor (as creditor) of the products of land and labor, the “clever merchant,” in Du Bois’s view, “occupies the most favorable position in the region of the black belt” (250). It is therefore the existence of this merchant class that is primarily responsible for the conversion of the “freedman” into the “bondsman”: “[the merchant] pulled the meshes of the law so cleverly and so narrowly around the tenant that only the choice between misery and crime remains open to the black man” (250). Du Bois makes two important points here: firstly, that the “freedman” without capital is not free at all, and secondly, that capital itself is no longer associated with land but with credit (since both the worker and the landowner are in thrall to the ascendant merchant class). Indeed, the merchant’s account of value as both finance capital (the credit extended to the tenants and landlords) and pure exchange value (the value of the crop, of which he takes momentary possession only in order to sell it and retrieve his debt) is at odds with the “real” productive value of the land, as demonstrated by the fact

that the merchant refuses to let any other crop except cotton be mortgaged, thus forbidding the introduction of a rotation-system that would actually make the land more productive (249-50). If the merchant is therefore the true capitalist, he is also, as in *The Souls of Black Folk*, associated with various figurations of the outsider: “ambitious and greedy Yankees, clever and unscrupulous Jews.” “Into the hands of these men,” says Du Bois, “fell the workers of the South—white and black” (267). Du Bois thus links the interests of the white and black *workers* of the South (“every working class must suffer under such a system,” he goes on to note) and opposes those interests to the pure capitalism represented by the merchant class. At the same time, the merchant class itself is partially racialized: as the distinction between white and black workers (*qua* workers) is collapsed (at least rhetorically) a new racial distinction emerges.

The second point where Du Bois adduces the figure of the foreigner is at the turn to the “national standpoint” itself. Shortly after this turn, Du Bois contrasts the Negro, to whom the nation owes a historical “debt,” with “[m]en who 10 or 20 years ago came ragged and ruined across the ocean,” who “have no right to drive Negroes from the land their ancestors trod on before the pilgrim fathers” (284). We see here again the familiar outline of the immigrant or “Jew”: he who is American and not-American, the representative of everything that is antagonistic to the national ideal even while in a certain sense embodying the actual (capitalist) spirit of the nation. This figure thus comes to occupy the space of exception within Du Bois’s conceptualization of the nation. We should also note that his identification of the “inauthentic” American performs a double exclusion: by refusing the integration of the Jew or immigrant into the spiritual life of the nation, Du Bois appears to distinguish economic concerns (under the heading of the “class standpoint”)

from strictly “political” ones (under the heading of the “national standpoint”), since the immigrant/Jew is identified precisely with *economic* interests.

An alternative way to understand the rejection of the “class standpoint” is as a rejection of the ideology of the hegemonic class itself. Thus, as Du Bois remarks in the previous paragraph, “[a]s soon as the poison of the class mentality penetrates the life-spirit of a nation, then the standpoint of the privileged classes alone determines its judgment of good and evil” (283). From this point of view, rejecting the “class standpoint” would simply mean rejecting the standpoint of the ruling class. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of terms like, “the class mentality” and “the class standpoint” is key, here, since they can refer *both* to the ideology of the ruling classes and to the attempt to analyze social relations in terms of economic class. By associating class analysis, and, indeed, class consciousness, with the ideology of the ruling class (as opposed, say, to the “purely personal” wishes of black workers), Du Bois thus displaces the argument from the question of class to the question of national/racial “ideals”—or what we would now call “culture.”

To be sure, part of the reason race becomes fundamental at the conclusion of the essay (“above all consider one thing: the day of the colored races dawns”) is because the existence of racial discrimination is represented as a threat to the ideals of “American democracy” (287). Note, however, that this is a different threat than the one represented by “class hierarchy” as such: democracy does not, after all, imply economic equality, as Du Bois’s essay amply demonstrates. Thus when Du Bois notes, “the shop girls and factory workers, the foreign immigrants—all who are conscious of their own precarious position on the border line see the shadow of caste and flee hurriedly so that they themselves will not be entwined in it” (286), the term “caste” marks a racial distinction, rather than the

economic distinction it had increasingly come to represent in the first part of the essay. But overcoming the former (the threat of racial discrimination) clearly does not entail overcoming the latter (the existence of class distinctions). The point *should be* to say that these workers misunderstand the relation between themselves and others in a similar socio-economic position—in short, that they are not class-conscious (but are, instead, mistakenly race-conscious). Instead, Du Bois collapses the distinction between racial discrimination and class division: adopting the “national standpoint”—which, as we have seen, is in essence the standpoint of a national *culture*—appears to offer the solution to both. From this point of view, the question of the “Negro’s” potential cultural difference—rather than of the “freedman’s” economic status—becomes central to the analysis.

If my analysis of “Die Negerfrage” has aimed to make the move from class to culture—or, more accurately, the subsumption of class by culture—seem problematic, it has not seemed so to the majority of contemporary commentators on Du Bois. This is the case even when—perhaps especially when—those commentators regard Du Bois’s work as offering a critique of capitalism, and understand themselves to be sympathetic to that critique. For they are, in fact, sympathetic to the specific form that critique takes in the last part of “Die Negerfrage”—not in the form it takes for the majority of that essay and, indeed, in much of Du Bois’s oeuvre (even, at times, in *Souls*). That is to say, they are sympathetic precisely to the critique of capitalism *as a culture*, rather than as an economic system. The result is that—somewhat paradoxically considering the ostensible object of critique—structural economic questions come to seem politically irrelevant (or at best, a distant secondary concern) both for Du Bois and for the critics themselves.

Hortense Spillers's "The Idea of Black Culture" (which appeared alongside the publication in English of Du Bois's "Die Negerfrage" in *The New Centennial Review*) is exemplary in this regard. Spillers asks, "[w]hat might Du Bois mean for a cultural worker today, when she encounters these words from the 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*: 'and, all in all, we black men [*sic*] seem the sole oasis of faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness'?" (15). The quotation, of course, represents the opposition between spirituality and capitalistic excess as an opposition between black culture and its other (which, as I argued above, may not simply be "white"). Indeed, understood in cultural terms, Du Bois's racial politics are, Spillers argues, just as relevant—and relevant in precisely the same way—in the post-segregation era as they were in Du Bois's epoch: "what were questions for him are no less poignant now, but all the more urgent in light of the oblivion that sweeps over the Republic like a terrible blight" (15).

Spillers understands this cultural "oblivion" as being complicit with the instrumentalism of advanced capitalism—what Herbert Marcuse calls "operational and behavioral modes of thought" that perpetuate "the productive rationality of the given social systems...their defense and improvement...[but not] their negation" (qtd. in Spillers 19). Reading Du Bois alongside Marcuse, Spillers thus praises the former's "visionary sense of black American culture as a potential critique of American business culture" (15). Spillers, then, essentially reproduces Du Bois's (flawed) logic in "Die Negerfrage," to the extent that the rejection of what Spillers calls "American business culture" and Du Bois calls "Mammonism," and what one might simply call "capitalism," also entails a rejection of the "class standpoint." That is to say, precisely by treating capitalism as a *culture*—rather than as an economic system—the legitimate political response to the injustices of capitalism

must also take place on the ground of culture. Thus political dissent or resistance becomes a matter of imagining alternative cultures rather than of imagining alternative political economies. This, for Spillers, is ultimately the value in the idea of black culture: “black culture, having imagined itself as an *alternative* statement, as a *counterstatement* to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identifies the cultural vocation as the space of ‘contradiction, indictment and the refusal’” (25).²³ Yet, insofar as “American/Western” “culture/civilization” means capitalism, for (black) culture to “imagine itself” as an alternative statement is not actually for it to make an alternative statement. Rather, it imagines that no alternative statement—in the sense of a critique of capitalism itself—is possible.

The mode of “critique” that Spillers produces here is not limited to those critics who perceive themselves as “cultural workers,” as Spillers puts it. Indeed, while Spillers regards herself as reclaiming and re-asserting the value of cultural studies after its putative “exhaustion” as a mode of political critique, her argument bears a striking resemblance to one articulated over a decade earlier by Ross Posnock. Posnock, meanwhile, writing at a time when virtually nobody questioned the political relevancy of cultural studies, understands himself to be challenging some of its most fundamental assumptions. Yet, as we shall see, the notion of “culture” is equally important for Posnock, even if his account of what it means, and what it meant for Du Bois, is different from Spillers’s. Indeed, Spillers and Posnock in one respect represent two poles of contemporary Du Bois criticism: if the assertion of racial difference is, in some sense, crucial to Du Bois’s account of culture for Spillers (though it requires some careful theoretical surgery to resuscitate that notion for a post-essentialist contemporary context), culture for Posnock represents above all the

transcendence of racial difference. My interest here, however, is not in which critic gets Du Bois's definition of culture right. *Both* accounts, I would argue, are consistent with his usage of the term, since Du Bois vacillated—sometimes within a single sentence—between a universalist, hierarchical account of cultural development (something like “civilization”) and a relativistic, pluralistic account of cultural difference (i.e. “*cultures*” not “*culture*”).²⁴ Yet, whichever account of “culture” critics privilege (and most—including Spillers and Posnock—to some extent try to reconcile both), the key point is that they privilege the notion of culture itself as the political locus of Du Bois's thought. Furthermore, despite their apparent differences—Spillers's celebration of “black” culture and Posnock's celebration of a “higher individualism” that is “neither black nor white” (514)—both critics understand the relationship between culture and race in a similar way. Indeed, their understanding of that relationship—though quite different from Du Bois's, I would argue—is what generates the alleged political efficacy of the notion of culture.

Though invoking a different theoretical tradition (Pierre Bourdieu and the American Pragmatists William James and John Dewey rather than Marcuse and Michel de Certeau), Posnock's argument regarding the redemptive political function of culture is virtually identical to Spillers's. Thus, while “culture” for Posnock (unlike Spillers) basically refers to aesthetic production and appreciation, the purpose of those activities is precisely to cultivate “a mode of being in the world that cuts against the habits inculcated by capitalist rationalism” (502). Furthermore, while Du Bois's aestheticism embraced both Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism (though it wasn't reducible to either), what connects the two for Posnock is a shared rejection of “American identity,” understood as “culturally barren” and by the same token capitalistic (515).²⁵ Posnock takes pains, however, to argue

that this aesthetic attitude was not merely contemplative, but was political through and through—not an escape from “capitalist” America but the engine of its transformation.

Pragmatism provides the link between Du Bois’s aesthetic and political commitments for Posnock—not only because it shares aestheticism’s skepticism about “modernity’s instrumentality and cult of efficiency,” but because it turns that skepticism into a program for political action: one that is committed to “difficulty” and “ambivalence” (506-7). Posnock asks, “What does a political program look like that transcends transparency and efficiency?” (508). If the answer, based purely on Posnock’s own account, looks at times simply like a refusal to acknowledge any specific political commitments (an attitude of political quietism, more or less), he does point to one area in which Du Bois’s commitment to “ambivalence” was politically operative in a specific way: namely, it provided a challenge to racial essentialism. Indeed, Du Bois’s aestheticism and philosophical pragmatism was, on Posnock’s account, intimately bound up with his skepticism regarding racial classification: thus, in William James’s philosophy Du Bois found “a refusal of absolutist systems and purified essences, the modes of thought often employed to defend racialist assumptions and racism” (507). If we might fail to recognize this supposedly anti-racialist Du Bois in, say, “The Conservation of Races” (an essay Posnock cites, in fact), it is clear that, from Posnock’s point of view, what might appear to be precisely an attempt to elucidate an account of racial essences—including that of the “Negro”—looks like just the opposite: “Faced with the ‘pretended absolute’ of race, [Du Bois] turned it into a ‘program for more work,’ a challenge to the ‘ready-made compartmentalization’ (to borrow Dewey’s phrase) that racial distinction inflicts on psyches and society” (503).

I will not go into the question here of whether Du Bois's account of race was genuinely anti-essentialist, nor, indeed, whether a coherent anti-essentialist account of race is a logical possibility: critics have discussed these questions at length elsewhere.²⁶ I do, however, want to insist that Du Bois's critique of capitalism, insofar (and *only* insofar) as that critique takes the form of a rejection of the "false culture" of "Mammonism," pivots on an essentialist account of racial and national identity (and of the relation between the two). It is perhaps unsurprising that critics have typically ignored this aspect of Du Bois's thought, even while celebrating his general orientation toward a "cultural" politics. At the same time, however, these critics—even those, like Posnock, whose account of culture, on the face of it, "transcends" an account of racial identity—do not regard race as merely a false construction to be rejected and overcome; instead, they see it, both for Du Bois and for themselves, as a "program for more work." Thus—as the proliferation of interpretations of Du Bois's double-consciousness motif attests—it is precisely the "ambivalence" of Du Bois's account of race (what a more ungenerous interpretation might simply call its incoherence) that has proven most attractive to commentators who want, on the one hand, to insist on the political significance of race, but on the other, to reject essentialist accounts of racial identity. Indeed, as we have begun to see, these aims are less contradictory than mutually complementary: that is to say, for these commentators, the political significance of race pertains chiefly to the project of elaborating putatively anti-essentialist accounts of racial identity.

To that extent, even though Posnock likely regards himself as elaborating an alternative to identity politics and Spillers regards herself as resuscitating it (albeit in a revised form), authentically and legitimately "political" concerns, for both Spillers and

Posnock, are crucially related to the question of cultural identity. Thus, for Spillers, the “black” in “black culture” does not signify a specific racial identity, but precisely a “program for more work.” In fact, it is this re-working or re-thinking of racial identity that, for Spillers, constitutes the revolutionary potential in the notion of “black culture.” Spillers initially seems skeptical about the notion of black culture—and, indeed, of “culture” in general—as a site of political resistance. Citing Alberto Moreira, she characterizes our current political moment as subject to “the exhaustion of difference,” and remarks that “we appear to have reached a rather peculiar pass, wherein everything is culture (or so it seems), or everything mimics culture”: a development that she equates with “the dissolution of the political stage” (8, 12). Yet it quickly becomes clear that “difference,” not to say “culture,” is far from exhausted for Spillers—or rather, is only exhausted in the binaristic logic of, say, Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism. Reclaiming the “political” potential of cultural difference—and above all, its potential to offer a critique of capitalistic modes of thought and being (the “culture” of capitalism, if you like)—will, therefore, involve elaborating an alternative account of that difference.

Thus, in spite of the fact that Spillers recognizes the fact that “cultures” are easily co-opted by capitalism—“as black culture in its current avatar unfolds, it moves ever closer toward the posture that complements both democratic principles, at least on the face of it, and the imperatives of neoliberalist practices,”—she is not ultimately deeply troubled by this “paradox” (26). In fact, she implies that this is largely a problem about the way in which black culture is currently defined, as opposed to the black culture “yet to come”: one that would represent “the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on ‘race’” (26). Yet if race no longer

factors into the definition of “black culture,” then we are left merely with the notion of “culture”: a notion which, as Spillers herself puts it, becomes no more than a “*placeholder*” for resistance-as-such (albeit, in her view, a “crucial” one) (11). Thus the very indeterminacy (or “pluralness,” to use Spillers’s term) of the notion of “black culture” is what supposedly makes it politically viable: from this perspective, as Spillers puts it, “there are, perhaps, only [black] *cultures*” (12, emphasis and brackets original).

What, then, puts the “black” in “black culture (s)?” The response that Spillers’s essay provides to that question is ambiguous—yet, as we have begun to see, its ambiguity is precisely the point. Spillers concludes:

If we gather up these strands of argument [Marcuse’s, Du Bois’s, de Certeau’s] about the “idea of culture” we could set them down with great profit, I believe, on the terrain of “black culture” because it seems that the latter—never, even yet, an official cultural entitlement or a bellwether of the established order—offers one of the most fruitful sites that would allow these positions to stand out in the boldest of tensions: as an analytical property, black culture—it would be more accurate to say black diasporic culture—is born in the penumbra of the official cultures that are historically emergent at a particular moment that we could rightly call modernity.

(21)

Aside from the fact that this passage would seem to contradict Spillers’s contention about the ease with which “cultures”—however named—can be co-opted by capitalistic forces, the argument ultimately seems circular. That is to say, the assumption is that “black” (or, more accurately “black diasporic”) culture is inherently radical and anti-hegemonic; therefore, it must represent the alternative to the “official” hegemonic culture.

Furthermore, since the official hegemonic culture is described here as “capitalist,” then the mere *idea* of “black culture” supplies the necessary critique of capitalism—regardless of any specific content that idea may have. In fact, the lack of any specific content is key (which perhaps explains why the apparently more open-ended description “black diasporic” is preferable simply to “black”), for this is where the critique of modernity’s instrumentalist rationalism connects with the critique of racial essentialism: a concept of racial/cultural identity that, in Posnock’s terms, “embraces uncertainty, embodying difficulty” is one that also challenges the prevailing capitalist order. Thus, for Spillers, what looks like an epistemological problem *vis a vis* culture—what is it if it could be anything?—is redescribed as a political program: if “culture” (singular) simply names social reality as we know it, then it must be hegemonic, if only by virtue of its familiarity. Thus imagining alternative social realities—which on this account means imagining alternative cultures (plural)—is considered to be a radical political act in and of itself.

Several years ago (at the height of both cultural studies’ and deconstruction’s ascendancy in the academy), Dorothy Hale remarked that critical interpretations of Du Bois’s account of double-consciousness tended to formulate an account of “subaltern positionality” that was assumed to be politically subversive, yet only insofar as it represented a “negative capability,” possessing no “positive cultural content” of its own (464). Yet as Hale’s account suggests, it is precisely the absence of positive content—the fact that African American identity (here, instantiated in a certain kind of Bakhtinian literary “double-voicedness”) can be conceived of as “infinitely fluid”—that is assumed to constitute its radical, counter-hegemonic potential (463). As Hale notes, however, these arguments “[win] African American self-definition at the price of making all subaltern

identities the same" (464). One could equally say that Spillers's "pluralness," even while it celebrates (black) cultural difference, effectively makes all differences the same. That is to say, African American (or, for Spillers, black) cultural identity becomes a mere (empty) "placeholder" for subaltern identity formation—and thus for counter-hegemonic resistance—as such. Indeed, in this respect, while both Spillers and Posnock might regard themselves as rejecting the assumptions of an earlier cultural politics, they largely share its commitments *vis a vis* the political efficacy of articulating anti-essentialist accounts of subaltern identity.

One response to that set of commitments would be to say that it simply gets Du Bois wrong: one could argue, in contrast to the critics Hale describes, that Du Bois was, in fact, committed to describing the "positive cultural content" of Negro identity, as the passages from "The Conservation of Races" and *The Souls of Black Folk* I cited earlier would seem to suggest. While that may well be true, however, it does nothing to address what I have identified as the problem with Du Bois's own account of culture; namely, that it subsumes questions of class injustice under questions of cultural difference. To that extent—regardless of how their accounts of the specific content (or lack thereof) of "culture" may differ from Du Bois's own—these critics in fact get Du Bois *right*. Their mistake, then, is to fail to see *Du Bois's* mistake, and instead to reproduce it—albeit substituting a putatively post-essentialist and (therefore) counter-hegemonic account of race for Du Bois's ostensibly racially essentialist and nationalistic one.

As we have begun to see, the form this mistake takes in contemporary interpretations of Du Bois is to make his political commitments seem entirely subordinate to his ontological and epistemological ones (which are understood to be of a piece). That is

to say, the work of political resistance for Du Bois consists in his rejection of dominant modes of “being” (i.e., his deconstruction of racial identity) and of “thought” (i.e., his refusal of the instrumental rationality of Western modernity and advanced capitalism)—rather than, say, of dominant modes of economic organization. Nowhere is this tendency to assimilate political questions to ontological and epistemological ones more apparent than in Nahum Chandler’s treatment of Du Bois, and particularly his interpretation of the latter’s statement that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line”—an interpretation that he produces, in fact, in the context of a response to Du Bois’s “Die Negerfrage.” Indeed, if “Die Negerfrage’s” emphasis on class injustice seems to represent a sense of the limits to the “color-line” conception that is perhaps unique in Du Bois’s early work, Chandler is determined not to notice it: the problem of the color-line, he insists, is the fundamental “problematic” of “Die Negerfrage” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 2, 225).

In fact, the conversion of Du Bois’s “problem” into a “problematic”—that is, the conversion of an ostensibly practical difficulty into a theoretical one—is key to Chandler’s account of the color-line. If there is little doubt that the “color-line” for Du Bois primarily represented a practical obstacle to be overcome or demolished, for Chandler, it represents an “epistemological nominalization” that ought not to be simply rejected but re-thought (or, in his terminology, “desedimented”). Thus “a certain thinking of the color line might allow a different sense of world, a different sense of horizon, to arise”: for Chandler this is an “epistemic-political” project that Du Bois himself initiated (“Figure” 40).²⁷ What that re-thinking entails becomes clearer in “The Figure of W.E.B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought,” one of two essays by Chandler that appeared alongside “Die Negerfrage” in *The New Centennial Review*. There, Chandler insists on the importance of acknowledging the

relation between Du Bois's "historical situation" and his "possibilities of thought." Chandler goes on to represent the "fundamental character and distinct organization of that thought" as follows:

This was first and foremost an abiding concern with the question of the general conditions of possibility for the construction or reconstruction of *ideals* for social life. Thus we can underscore that *the most general and singular concern of the work of Du Bois across the entire itinerary of his thought was the construction or reconstruction of what he called "the ideals of life,"* those headings of value and distinction that would orient a collective social life, the terms that would assist in the organization and sustenance of a collectivity. (36, emphasis original)

Chandler clearly echoes the language of "The Conservation of Races" here, thus affirming a view of Du Bois's politics as primarily oriented toward questions of racial identity and culture.

What is more striking, however, is the way in which Chandler reconstructs the "historical situation" out of which Du Bois's thinking about race supposedly emerged. For Chandler, the "color-line" clearly refers to something more than the existence of racial segregation in the post-civil war US: on his account, Du Bois employs this "colloquial" expression only in order to transcend it in the service of a larger project of "elaborat[ing] an understanding of his historical present, an interpretation of modern global history as a whole" ("Figure" 39). For this reason, Chandler characterizes as "superficial" a reading of *The Souls of Black Folk*—especially those chapters, like "On the Dawn of Freedom" (about the Freedman's bureau), that "appear most particularistic"—that would emphasize their

pragmatic orientation as interventions in a specific political context.²⁸ Instead, the essays collected in *The Souls of Black Folk*

acquire their most powerful legibility and *theoretical importance*, then or now, when seen as the very path for Du Bois's development of an interpretation of modernity in general, certainly of America as a disjunctive scene of its devolution, but of a global, or worldwide, historical conjuncture understood from the trajectory of human history as a whole." (44, emphasis added)

Chandler's supposed commitment to historicization here becomes an attempt to locate Du Bois's thought within a historical epoch that seems almost boundless.

One way of understanding Chandler's attempt to locate Du Bois's thinking about the color-line within this larger history is as an attempt to make Du Bois's "historical situation" fundamentally equivalent to our own: indeed, Chandler suggests as much when he contends that Du Bois's invocation of the color-line "retains considerable bearing for any effort to understand our own historical present and future" ("Figure" 39). In *What Was African American Literature?*, Warren observes a similar tendency to collapse past and present in a variety of recent critical works dealing with questions of racial justice: a tendency that often assumes the status of an ethical imperative. As Warren notes,

the recent recourse to history in discussions of African American life and culture has tended to make discrete periodizations beside the point, and to attach a taint of injustice to periodization itself, which by its very definition has to insist on some distinction between past and present. (84)

For Warren, what is ultimately at stake in these analyses is the attempt to explain present injustices as a continuation of past ones. In other words, as Warren (paraphrasing Reed)

puts it, “the ‘discovery’ made again and again by recent scholarship is that, despite news to the contrary, ‘racism’ still exists” (85). Of course, Warren’s point is not to say that this is a false conclusion; neither is it to dismiss the role that the history of slavery and racial segregation has played in determining the life-chances of people of African American descent. It is, however, to question the extent to which “race, or antiracism, must remain an integral part of the way we respond to the world and contest the status quo” (86); in other words, it is to question the primacy of race as the frame through which we understand inequality and injustice in the present (and concomitantly, to question the efficacy of antiracist strategies to combat those inequalities and injustices).

What, in Warren’s account, has typically been occluded by this frame is precisely the question of economic inequality as such. Hence, when he quotes Du Bois’s famous statement from *Dusk of Dawn*, “the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia,” he does so, in part, to emphasize that what determines who gets to ride in what car (or any car at all) today is not race but class—and that this is no less true for those would-be passengers for whom “the story of their current impoverishment can be narrated as a tale beginning with the capture and enslavement of their ancestors” than for those for whom “such a tale is not possible, though their impoverishment is equally real” (95-96). Yet Warren also invokes Du Bois’s statement in order to suggest that the latter’s account of racial identity was ultimately grounded in a common experience of segregation that, despite the persistence of various forms of racial discrimination, does not define our contemporary moment. Whether or not we accept Du Bois’s statement as his “last word on racial identity” (95) (even for Warren himself, this is more thought-experiment than definitive judgment on Du Bois’s racial philosophy), Warren’s larger point stands: neither

“racism” nor “race” can mean for us, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, precisely what they meant for Du Bois at the dawn of the twentieth.

From this perspective, Chandler’s re-thinking of the color-line might be regarded as both a tacit acknowledgement of the difference between Du Bois’s historical moment and ours, and at the same time an evasion of the political consequences of that insight: an evasion achieved by transposing “race” from the realm of history to the realm of ontology. For Chandler, “African American” refers to an identity that is (for us as much as for Du Bois) “yet to come”: it names “a radical displacement of [Du Bois’s] inhabitation, in every sense, from any supposed simple or pure ground of reference in an origin” (“Figure” 35, 40). “African American” for Chandler thus functions in much the same way as “black” does for Spillers: as an alternative to racial essentialism and, by the same token, as a “placeholder” for (subaltern) cultural identity as such. Though this identity is ostensibly premised on race, however, its significance for Chandler ultimately transcends racial designations (“essentialist” or otherwise). Indeed, just as Du Bois’s interest in the color-line was understood to represent an engagement with a radically enlarged context of “human history,” his interest in articulating a racial identity turns out to be part of a larger program of articulating a “human” identity:

[G]roups such as the African American, *whose originality necessarily remains at stake in every instance of its promulgation* and thus always in a sense yet to come, might be exemplary for human existence: not exemplary as the final or absolute example; rather, exemplary of the historicity of our time and of the possibility of the making and remaking of ideals in, or as, the matter of existence in general. (“Figure” 40, emphasis original)

Thus the mere concept of the “African American,” quite apart from anything that concept might actually name, is made to do the work of a critique of “global modernity”; this critique can also be extended to “post-modernity, the persistence of colonialism or post-colonialism, or simply globalization or *mondialisation*, or something else altogether”: pick your hegemonic formation (“Figure” 44-45). The “color-line,” in fact, becomes simply a marker for “distinction” as such (“Figure” 37), while “African American” identity becomes a marker for resistance-as-such, precisely by virtue of its (epistemological-ontological) *indistinction*.

Unsurprisingly, then, Chandler regards the questions raised by “Die Negerfrage” as fundamentally epistemological and ontological: “the operative question throughout is, what are the terms of human possibility?” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 1, 221). On this account, Du Bois’s conception of the color-line becomes primarily a question of inclusion in the “human” community: “In the past and present, not all human groups have been considered of equal ontological (and hence political) status. The question was thus: who would be considered human in the centuries to come? Or better, what would be the exact meaning of such consideration?” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 2, 227). Chandler obviously gestures toward the work of Giorgio Agamben here in his contention that “political” inclusion is crucially related to ontological status. This is no doubt why the second question is “better” than the first—as for Agamben, it is less a question of simply expanding the human community (by, for example, extending the sphere of “human rights”) than of *re-thinking* the category of the “human.” This is why, for Chandler, the notion of “possibility” is so important—it names an “epistemic” openness that is itself the means of political transformation. In fact, this is where the ontological and epistemological questions line up: as for Spillers and Posnock,

the challenge to racial essentialism and the challenge to prevailing modes of thought (in general) are of a piece.

For Spillers and Posnock, as we saw, that challenge also entailed a challenge to capitalism. Chandler is, on the one hand, more circumspect in his account of Du Bois's attitude toward capitalism, while on the other—at least on the face of it—more attuned to the latter's sense of economic injustice. He remarks, for example, that “for Du Bois the question of the status and condition of the laboring class...was formulated as the guide to a deep understanding of modern historicity—not only in the US and in Europe, but throughout the world.” As the reference to “modern historicity,” suggests, however, class distinction is merely an instance of (ontological) distinction in general; thus “[a] pivotal aspect of this whole theorization [of the ‘labor question’]...was a conception of something that Du Bois eventually attempted to both generalize and specify as a global ‘problem of the color line’” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 2, 243). Questions of class inequality and exploitation, for Chandler, can therefore be readily subsumed under the color-line problematic—which is, again, primarily a question of political inclusion *as* inclusion in the ontological category of the “human.”

It is telling that the above observation arises in the context of a comparative analysis of Du Bois's early work (including his extensive sociological studies of the status of Southern freedmen, which contributed much to his analysis in “Die Negerfrage”) and Max Weber's work on the “Polish question” in Germany, an inquiry that concerned the political status of immigrant rural laborers. While that is also a question of political inclusion for Weber, it is ostensibly—even on Chandler's account—a question of the relationship between citizenship and *economic* status, rather than between citizenship and *ontological*

status. To that extent, Weber's analysis of the "Polish question" has a similar orientation to Marx's account of the "Jewish question," where the latter is conceived of in terms of the relationship between political recognition and economic status. Furthermore, Weber's treatment of the "Polish question"—which, incidentally, Chandler insists is "interwoven with the whole of the problematic of the so-called 'Jewish question'" ("Possible Form," Pt. 2, 251)—would also represent the kind of analysis of the relation between class and race that Weber requested from Du Bois when he asked him to write the essay that would become "Die Negerfrage." Yet on Chandler's account, Du Bois would have failed to produce such an analysis. Rather, he would have made the "(so-called) 'class problem'" entirely assimilable to the "(so-called) 'race problem'": that is, to the problem of the color-line conceived of as a problem of "ontological (and hence political)" recognition and inclusion.

Du Bois offers a very different account of the relation between class and race in the first part of "Die Negerfrage," however. In fact, whether or not Du Bois had read Marx's "Zur Judenfrage," his essay takes a similar approach to the "Negro question," which Du Bois—much like Marx in the earlier work—analyzes as a question of the disjunctive relationship between democratic citizenship and economic status, or between abstract political equality and empirical economic inequality.²⁹ Thus Du Bois engages in an extensive analysis of the ways in which the freedman's abstract citizenship (underwritten by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments) is undermined by an economic system that not only disenfranchises him, but also denies him many of the rights he supposedly possesses. Due to oppressive laws controlling the freedman's freedom of movement ("vagrancy" and anti-emigration laws), a legal system that profits from convict labor, and a system of debt peonage combined with the "unwritten law" of patronage ("by which a white man must

vouch for every Negro not known in the locality" [252]), the freedman in fact occupies a position of liminality *vis a vis* the political order—negatively included as virtual criminal, while positively excluded as virtual slave (244-257). Though in a certain sense this description might lend itself to an Agambenian account of the freedman as a kind of *homo sacer* (he who is included in the life of the *polis* "by means of an exclusion" [Agamben 7]), the condition of political liminality here is produced as a result of economic structures, not ontological ones. Indeed, it is precisely the contradiction between abstract political recognition and the fact of political exclusion—an exclusion that is produced by the freedman's status, not as *homo sacer* but as *homo oeconomicus*—that is at stake in Du Bois's analysis.

As we have seen, however, that contradiction is elided in the final section of Du Bois's essay, where the question of political recognition—re-imagined as a question of cultural identity—becomes primary. There, anti-discrimination—and thus political recognition as a subject of civil, and ultimately "human" rights ("In the struggle for his human rights the American Negro relies above all on the feeling of justice in the civilized world" [287])—becomes the remedy both for racial division *and* for economic inequality. Indeed, Du Bois's move to the question of the "human soul" in the final paragraphs of "Die Negerfrage" might provide some justification for Chandler's move to ontology—though not for his attempt to represent the last section of Du Bois's essay as theoretically consistent with its first and largest part. For Chandler, as we have seen, the problem named by Du Bois under the heading of the "color-line" is essentially the fact that "in the past, not all human groups have been considered of equal ontological (and hence political) status." Yet the problem for Marx in "Zur Judenfrage," and arguably for Du Bois in the *first* part of "Die

Negerfrage,” would appear to be precisely the opposite: namely, that human beings—under the twin headings of “civil” and “human” rights— have been and indeed are considered of equal political (and hence ontological) status, in spite of the fact that they are in important respects, not least economically, *unequal*.

Since, for Chandler, the question of economic inequality is subordinate to the question of political recognition, the freedman’s economic status is significant only insofar as it represents “a turn [or more accurately, return] to old forms of proscription”: that is, forms of proscription that properly belong to a pre-capitalist era (“Possible Form,” Pt. 1, 217). Again, Chandler’s account is meant to establish a common problematic between Du Bois’s and Weber’s projects. Chandler describes that problematic as the persistence of “old forms of hierarchy, subordination and exploitation” within “the projection of new or modern forms of relation” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 2, 253). Yet while he acknowledges that the establishment of new “forms of relation” described by Weber largely meant the economic re-structuring of society along capitalist lines (and a similar point could be made about Du Bois’s account of the Reconstruction-era South), Chandler—unlike Du Bois—fails to acknowledge the ways in which this transition might lead to *new* forms of “hierarchy, subordination and exploitation.” Indeed, the “color-line” itself—considered as a historically and locally specific mode of political, social and economic discrimination (in the post-civil war U.S), rather than, as Chandler would have it, an “epistemological nominalization” of global and transhistorical import—would be one such instance. Ultimately, however, it is as if on Chandler’s account Du Bois’s (re)thinking of the color-line amounts to an embrace of a purified capitalism: purified of the taint of feudalistic social arrangements, but also purified of its status as a particular mode of economic organization (and thus as a potential object of

critique). That is to say, capitalism is simply assumed to be the necessary background condition for the realization of a new, heterogeneous political community—meanwhile, problems of economic inequality and exploitation, we are assured, are strictly of the past.

It may be the case that the conclusion of “Die Negerfrage,” with its conversion of a question of economic injustice into a question of political inclusion, to some extent supports Chandler’s reading. Nevertheless, insofar as that question for Du Bois concerns the state of “American democracy,” it is important to note that the notion of democracy invoked at the conclusion of the essay—there, describing a society free of racial prejudice—is quite different from the one invoked a few pages earlier when Du Bois remarks, “American democracy is very sick” (282). There, the “sickness” describes the growing divide between classes—a divide that, to be sure, largely overlaps with racial discrimination, but is not simply reducible to it. Indeed, it is perhaps surprising that Du Bois traces “the announcement” of “the doctrine of democratic equality” to the Jacksonian era sixty years earlier—hardly the ideal of a racially inclusive and anti-discriminatory political community. The “democratic equality” for which Du Bois waxes nostalgic, however, “emanated from the obvious social equality of Americans at that time...the economic starting point was rather equal for all, mostly the end point too” (282). In other words, the notion of “democratic” equality that Du Bois insists on here (before the turn to the “national standpoint”) depends on substantive economic equality.

My point here is not to claim that Du Bois was right to privilege questions of class *over* questions of race in the first part of “Die Negerfrage”—nor, in fact, to claim that he does so. Certainly, the essay suggests the limitations of Du Bois’s conception of the “problem of the color-line”—that is, if that problem is conceived of simply as a question of

overcoming racially discriminatory attitudes (a “purely personal” question, if you like). It is in fact *that* conception of the problem that is in play in the final part of “Die Negerfrage,” where the political remedy to the situation of the freedman is premised on recognizing the cultural contribution of the “Negro.” In the first part of “Die Negerfrage,” however, it is clear that for Du Bois the problem of the color-line is as much a question of economic exploitation as it is a question of social—or even political—recognition.³⁰ This does not amount to putting class before race: it does, however, amount to understanding the relationship between the two as crucial for addressing the situation of the black freedman.

For most contemporary critics, however, whatever Du Bois had to say about class becomes irrelevant, since it is made entirely subordinate to what he had to say about race. Furthermore, since it is assumed that the only important things Du Bois had to say about *race* pertain to his alleged attempt to elaborate a de-essentialized notion of racial and/or cultural identity, Du Bois’s politics are ultimately made equivalent to his ontological and epistemological commitments. This mode of criticism not only disregards Du Bois’s views about class; it also—and largely for the same reason—substantially misrepresents his views about race. To cite just one example, the strategy of consumer co-operativism along racial lines Du Bois advocated during the Depression (and which had much to do with his resignation from the NAACP), was arguably a strategy motivated by his recognition of the relation between economic inequality and racial discrimination; it had little if anything to do with his account of the ontology of race, nor did it require such an account.³¹ Similarly, the analysis of problems engendered by the political economy of the South in “Die Negerfrage” in no way requires Du Bois to construct (or, for that matter, to deconstruct) an account of “Negro”/“American” cultural identity: to the extent he attempts to do so at the

conclusion of the essay, this represents a problem for the coherence of his essay, not a solution to the problems of the South.

Whatever the ambiguities and inconsistencies of Du Bois's account of the relationship between race and structural economic inequality, then, it is clear that he regarded that relationship as crucial in a way that contemporary commentators on Du Bois, and even on the political provenance of "race" in general, typically do not. Reed has commented on the ways in which the contemporary Left's discourse of anti-racism tends not only to disregard but to mask structural economic questions. He points out that this is a recent development: an earlier generation of civil-rights activists understood the campaign for racial and economic justice as inseparable ("The Limits of Anti-Racism"). That much also largely holds true, I would argue, for Du Bois, as the majority of "Die Negerfrage" (though one could cite countless other examples from his corpus) attests. Thus Du Bois's rejection and revision of formulations of racial identity must be seen in the context of his larger political commitments, which included, at the very least, economic reforms, if not a more radical restructuring of the economic system. The questions that we confront now regarding the relationship between race and class are, no doubt, substantially different from those that confronted Du Bois—and to that extent, as Reed points out, we should be attentive to the ways in which the "color-line" is drawn and re-drawn in changing historical contexts ("The 'Color Line'" 266).³² As we have seen, drawing that line for Du Bois sometimes meant subsuming questions of economic inequality under questions of cultural difference. For the majority of contemporary commentators on Du Bois, however, it means nothing else.

Chapter IV: The People, Yes? The Proletarian Novel in the Age of Multiculturalism

Although it occasionally receives a passing mention in studies of proletarian literature, Sherwood Anderson's 1932 novel, *Beyond Desire* (one of four novels published the same year that were inspired by the 1929 Gastonia textile mill strike) is not usually understood to be representative of the genre. Reviews of the novel—both favorable and unfavorable—written at the time of its publication give some indication as to why this might be the case. While some reviewers found the novel overly sentimental or simply incoherent with regard to its political theme (broadly speaking, industrial unrest and the rise of communism in the US), others praised it for translating contemporary political questions into the larger terms of “human life and emotion” (Dawson).³³ In fact, however, the latter assessment misses a tension between the personal and the political that is at the heart of Anderson's novel: a tension that is as significant for the author who aspires to write “political” fiction—that is, Anderson himself—as it is for the characters within his novel. For the novel's main protagonist, Red Oliver, to be “beyond desire” means to resist the temptation to “[sell] himself out” (307)—that is, to abandon political radicalism in favor of merely personal satisfactions and ambitions: the attractions of a wife and family and the desire to “get on” in the world (305). In that sense, Red's resistance to this temptation is akin to Anderson's when he decided, midway through writing the novel, to turn it into a political novel about “working people in the mills,” telling his publisher, “I'm through with the ordinary problem of middle-class people in love” (qtd. in Rideout, Introduction vii). Indeed, the novel's rather divided structure—a lengthy central section focusing on Red's love interest Ethel Long seems largely irrelevant to the novel's political themes—embodies

the conflict between these two aims (apparently, Ethel represents the temptation to “sell out” for both Red and Anderson). Rather than being a successful effort to render political questions in “human” terms, then, Anderson’s novel is in fact about the difficulty of doing so—or, more precisely, I will suggest, about the difficulty of rendering political questions in novelistic form *without* those questions becoming merely “personal.”

In *Radical Representations*, the most comprehensive critical study of proletarian literature to emerge in recent years, Barbara Foley identifies a similar problem with the proletarian novel as a genre. For Foley, the problem arises with the tension between “left-wing politics on the one hand and the novel on the other” (283). While Foley stops short of asserting that the novel is an inherently politically conservative form, intractable to any kind of political radicalism (for, as she points out, to do so would essentially derail her critical project from the start), she nonetheless contends that certain “bourgeois” tendencies of the novel form—in particular, its focus on the personal development of individual protagonists—might work against the articulation of a radical politics entailing collectivist commitments. For Foley, then, the problem facing the proletarian novel is understood as a conflict between revolutionary proletarian politics and the implicit politics of the novel form (the bourgeois politics that privileges the “personal” over the social). This tension (along with concomitant tensions between realism and didacticism, and the narratological concepts of story and discourse) structures Foley’s reading of particular proletarian novels in the second part of her study. In fact, however, the first part of that study, in which Foley discusses the attempt to define the genre of the proletarian novel in the late 1920s and early 1930s, points to a different kind of tension between the personal and the political—one that results not from the tension between revolutionary proletarian

politics and the bourgeois politics of the novel as such, but between a certain conception of the proletarian novel and the radical politics such novels were supposed to espouse.

As Foley observes, the criterion of proletarian authorship—or “subject position,” as she puts it—was widely considered definitive for the genre of proletarian literature in the late 1920s and early 1930s: hence the John Reed clubs’ cultivation of worker-writers, and the *New Masses*’ preference for literary contributions by the same. Indeed, Foley notes, even middle-class authors sought to claim proletarian credentials, either by referring to their humble beginnings or to experience with industrial employment: gestures that, even while they imply a less restrictive view of proletarian identity, reinforce the perception of that identity as crucial for the production of proletarian literature. Foley cites a 1930 proposal of the New York John Reed Club, enjoining the would-be proletarian writer to “attach himself to one of the industries...so that when he writes of it he will write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer” (*Radical Representations* 65). As Granville Hicks put it, “inasmuch as literature grows out of the author’s entire personality, his identification with the proletariat should be as complete as possible. He should not merely believe in the cause of the proletariat; he should be, or should try to make himself, a member of the proletariat” (qtd. in Foley, 93). Hicks’s comments might suggest that “identification” was ultimately advocated in service of a revolutionary agenda; on the other hand, the emphasis on subject position—whether it had to be achieved through “identification” or not—might just as easily tend to bypass the question of political commitment. As Foley observes, the question of authorial subject position often overruled the question of whether or not a novel could be said to articulate a radical class politics; in

other words, its putative radicalism depended less on the politics it expressed than on the identity of the person producing the expression (95-97).³⁴

In this regard, *Beyond Desire* can be read as a kind of meta-proletarian novel, an ironic meditation on the notion of proletarian identity itself, and by extension, on the relation between the proletarian novel and the identity of its author. The novel's central protagonist, Red Oliver, works in a textile mill in a North Carolina town—but only when he is home on vacation from university. Indeed, when the mill lays off workers and the threat of a strike looms, Red is re-hired on the assumption that he will take the side of the owners (despite the fact that his actual sympathies lie with the workers). He comes from a middle-class family: his father is the town's doctor. On the other hand, his mother was once a "poor white," and continues to cast doubt on her respectability by going to revival meetings where the congregation members shout "like Negroes" (18). He is called "Red" not because of his political commitments (which, for most of the novel, remain conflicted) but because of his hair color: indeed, the novel's opening pages establish a contrast between Red and his more politically radical friend Neil Bradley, who has developed communist sympathies as the result of a romantic relationship with a schoolteacher, a "sincere Red" (9). Thus, based on various criteria—vocation, affinity (real or perceived), family background, cultural practice, political belief—Anderson appears to establish, and then to immediately undermine his protagonist's "proletarian" credentials.

The conclusion of the novel, however, seems to suggest another alternative—not so much an alternative account of proletarian identity, as an alternative *to* proletarian identity, which is to say, to the conception of revolutionary politics in terms of identity. Though still conflicted about his own political commitments, Red is mistaken for a

communist organizer and falls in with the striking mill workers in Birchfield, another North Carolina town. The novel ends with a fatal act of revolutionary defiance on Red's part—he steps out of the crowd of striking workers and in front of the militia's guns: thus, the moment in which Red becomes radicalized (“a sincere Red”) is the moment of his death. The point that Red's action is not a function of his background, or even his class status, is underlined by the fact that Red and Ned (Sawyer), the man who shoots him, are, as Anderson puts it, “the same boy, the same young man”—which is to say, both middle-class boys raised in the South and exposed to the same cultural influences (329). Furthermore, Red's actions seem unpremeditated, almost automatic: “What the hell” is the closest he comes to expressing a decision (356). The lack of correspondence between Red's action and his intention emphasizes (radically so) the gap between the significance of the political act and the identity of the actor. Rather than reconciling the personal with the political, then, the conclusion of the novel performs a radical break between the two. The political struggle properly begins (and begins, we must assume, elsewhere, since this is also the end of the novel) at the point where the personal story ends. Thus, Anderson's “proletarian novel” turns out in fact to be a rejection of the *idea* of the proletarian novel, insofar as the point of that literary form is to privilege the relationship between revolutionary politics and proletarian identity.³⁵

As I have already noted, Foley shares some of Anderson's skepticism regarding a certain conception of the proletarian novel that would privilege identity: specifically, the idea that the mere fact of proletarian authorship could be sufficient evidence of a text's radicalism, regardless of whether or not the novel successfully articulates a “proletarian” politics (“the *cause* of the proletariat,” as Hicks put it). Indeed, Foley's skepticism is a

necessary consequence of her commitment to didacticism. Foley's project is in large part a response to the post-1930s critical consensus around proletarian novels, which portrayed those novels' didacticism as an aesthetic compromise resulting from a too-strict adherence to the "party line" on questions of aesthetic representation. Foley aims both to rescue the proletarian novel from the charge that it was simply following party directives on the one hand, and to rescue didacticism as a viable aesthetic option on the other. Indeed, the problem with many proletarian novels, for Foley, is that they are insufficiently didactic: in large part, this is a consequence of their adherence to "bourgeois" modes of representation, an inability to break free of the (implicitly ideological) aesthetic conventions of the novel form. As I have begun to suggest, however, the very notion of proletarian literature—insofar as it privileges the subject position of the author—could equally lead away from radical politics. Indeed, Foley seems to suggest as much when, at various points, she equates the "empiricist" attachment to subject-position with tendencies toward "workerism" ("an essentialist and romantic conception of the working class" [95]) and toward "reformism" and "economism" ("a political strategy limited to militant trade union goals and demands" [275]). Yet, even though Foley often sets these terms side by side, she does not theorize the relationship between them. Why should the "empiricist" attachment to subject-position and its concomitant "essentialism" necessarily lead away from revolution and towards reform? Why does "workerism" imply "economism"? In part, this is because Foley essentially abandons the question of how proletarian literature was *defined* in favor of an analysis of how various proletarian novels moderate between "realism" and "didacticism": the implication here is that an insufficiently didactic text (one too committed to the conventions of bourgeois realism, for example in centering on individual

consciousness) would perhaps succeed in making the working-class reader aware of his or her class interests, but would fail to instill an adequately *revolutionary* consciousness. Yet, aside from the fact that, as Foley herself acknowledges, didacticism need not necessarily “teach” revolution (and conversely, the commitment to realism need not necessarily preclude the presentation of “revolutionary” subjects), there is no reason to believe that the only alternative is “reformism” (or “economism”). Indeed, it almost seems as though Foley arrives at this conclusion by process of elimination: if these novels are somehow still “left-wing,” yet not revolutionary, then they must be reformist.

My goal in the remainder of this chapter will be to suggest that the commitment to subject position itself entails a certain politics; in that sense, the issue is not the conflict between proletarian politics and the implicit politics of “bourgeois” forms, but between proletarian politics and the implicit politics of the proletarian aesthetic. Furthermore, I will argue that this implicit politics, though it might still be considered in some sense “left-wing,” tends not only to lead away from revolution and towards “reformism” or “economism,” but away from the economic as such—or, to anticipate my argument about the relationship between Third-Period literary proletarianism and the aesthetics of the Popular Front—away from “the worker” and towards “the people.”

I allude here, of course, to Kenneth Burke’s exhortation, in his 1935 speech to the American Writer’s Congress, “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” to adopt the more inclusive symbol “the people” in place of the “the worker.” Burke’s speech has come to serve as a kind of ideological shorthand, both for the Popular Front strategy that would shortly be adopted by the CPUSA and for the sentimental populism that characterized many of the cultural productions of the subsequent decade. The speech famously elicited a

hostile reaction from many in the audience, including the novelist/critic Mike Gold and the critic Joseph Freeman, two figures who were instrumental in defining the program of proletarian literature as I have described it. As Michael Denning notes, “the talk was taken as a critique of the left’s rhetoric of class and the notion of a ‘proletarian’ literature”: a retreat from radicalism, both political and aesthetic (443). Yet from the perspective of Denning, whose influential study of Depression-era art and politics, *The Cultural Front*, is largely an attempt to demonstrate the “deeper continuities” (25) among the various factions of the left in the 1930s and 1940s, the reaction against Burke’s talk inevitably seems rather misplaced. And indeed, Denning argues that “[t]he emergence of a populist rhetoric” more generally was “not a retreat from revolution, but a response to the growing power of the movement” (126). Yet this statement is of course question-begging, since the argument between Burke and his detractors was precisely an argument over what that “movement” was—in other words, what it meant to be “on the left.” More specifically, it was an argument over the centrality of the concept of class to the politics of the left.

Somewhat surprisingly given his enthusiastic defense of the Popular Front, Denning is rather less enthusiastic about the author who has perhaps come to be associated most closely with its “populist rhetoric,” John Steinbeck. Denning notes that Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* “has always been taken as an emblem of Depression-era populism, embodying the ‘documentary impulse’ of representing ‘the people.’” Nevertheless, in Denning’s view, the novel is “not a true exemplar of the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the Popular Front” (259). The problem for Denning is not, of course, with the concept of “the people” as such, but with what he calls the “documentary impulse”: that is, the attempt to *represent* the people—or, more precisely, the attempt to represent the

people on the part of someone who is not *of* the people. Elsewhere, Denning distinguishes between novels that exemplify a “documentary” aesthetic and novels that exemplify a “proletarian” aesthetic. Novels that for Denning exemplify the former involve “established intellectuals going to particular sites of intense class conflict and ‘representing’ the ‘people’” (268); novels like Anderson’s *Beyond Desire* that depicted contemporary political events (like the Gastonia textile strike, the Harlan County coal strikes, or the Scottsboro case) were written “from the outside, as documentaries, competing with non-fictional accounts of the events” (236). When applied to *Beyond Desire*, at least, this argument seems specious: the strike itself only takes up a few pages of the narrative; moreover, it takes place in a fictional North Carolina town, which Anderson explicitly distinguishes from Gastonia (Anderson 250). Nor is Denning’s argument against the “documentary” aesthetic an argument that proletarian literature, rightly considered, is in some sense anti-realist: in the first place, the novels that exemplify the proletarian aesthetic for Denning are largely semi-autobiographical; secondly (and almost inevitably, given the first point), the depiction of real-world political events is often integral to their narratives. Ultimately, then, what Denning’s distinction between the “documentary” aesthetic and the “proletarian” aesthetic hinges on is simply the fact that the former are written “from the outside”: they are tales of how the other half lives, written by middle-class authors. Meanwhile, the various genres of proletarian literature—including the migrant narratives of Carlos Bulosan, Ernesto Galarza and Woody Guthrie (which Denning identifies with the migrant workers’ “struggle for recognition and *self*-representation” [268, my emphasis])—are tales of how *our* half lives” (230). Clearly, then, Denning subscribes to the definition of proletarian literature based on the criterion of authorial identity. From this perspective, *The Grapes of Wrath*, no less than

Beyond Desire (and regardless of the actual political commitments of the novel itself), could only look like a kind of *faux* proletarian novel—a necessarily incomplete project of “identification” with the working class.

My goal here, however, is not so much to reclaim Steinbeck as an “authentic” proletarian author, but to suggest that Steinbeck’s appeal to “the people” is in fact implicit in the conception of proletarian literature that Denning subscribes to. As we have seen, that conception (essentially, that the subject position of the author is the definitive criterion of proletarian literature) did not originate with Denning, but was in fact central to the understanding of proletarian literature that developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s—the very literature that the turn to “the people” was presumed to threaten. Thus, I argue, even though Denning rejects Steinbeck as an example of the proletarian aesthetic, his account of that aesthetic makes it clear why there was a certain inevitability in the cultural turn to “the people” in the later years of the Depression. But it also (inadvertently) makes it clear that Denning’s political commitments in *The Cultural Front* are essentially identical to Steinbeck’s in *The Grapes of Wrath*—even while, as I shall suggest, Denning updates Steinbeck’s vision of “the people” for a contemporary political context. That is to say, both Denning’s commitment to authorial subject position and Steinbeck’s commitment to “the people” ultimately subsume class politics under a politics of cultural representation.

In fact, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s commitment to representing “the people” is, in a sense, a commitment to overcoming what Denning sees as the problem with the “documentary” aesthetic: that is, the lack of correspondence between the object of representation and the identity of the person producing the representation. In this regard, *The Grapes of Wrath* can be understood as a repudiation of the “documentary” aesthetic of

Steinbeck's earlier strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, precisely insofar as the aesthetic project of the later novel is to collapse the distance between middle-class author and proletarian subject matter. This project, however, hinges on the re-description of the object of representation (in the earlier novel, the proletariat) as "the people."

In Dubious Battle was originally intended to be a semi-biographical account of the experiences of strike leader Pat Chambers, written in diary form (French x). Steinbeck ultimately decided to write a novel about a fictional strike instead, yet his comments about the novel suggest that he retained the commitment to a kind of documentary realism: "I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing." Part of what this means is a refusal to take sides in the political struggle the novel depicts (either at a particular or a general level): "I'm not interested in strike as means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition" ("To George Albee" 98). The character within the novel that best exemplifies this "outsider's" perspective is "Doc" Burton, a physician and sometime-collaborator of the communist strike leader Mac. Burton generally regards the machinations of the strike organizers with a wry detachment, and does not seem to share their political convictions. This leads Mac to question his motives: "Why do you hang around with us if you aren't for us?" "I want to *see*," Burton replies. Comparing the strike to an infection and the strikers to a single organism, Burton elaborates: "Group-men are always getting some kind of infection. This seems to be a bad one. I want to *see*, Mac. I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men...I want to watch the group, and see what it's like" (113). The desire simply to observe may seem comparatively innocent: certainly, in contrast to the strike leaders' revolutionary

fervor, manipulative treatment of others and cynical disregard for human life, Burton often sounds like the voice of reason and compassion in the novel. Yet, at certain points, Steinbeck seems to suggest that there may be something rather more disturbing about Doc's "outsider's" perspective. Immediately following his meditation on group-man and his desire to "see" how it behaves, Burton makes a seemingly incongruous observation: "Did you see those pointers of Anderson's? Beautiful dogs; they give me a sensual pleasure, almost sexual" (115). The connection between this "sensual pleasure" and the observation of "group-man" is made more explicit later in the novel, when the striking mob is described as "one big—animal...as different from men as dogs are" (248-249).

If Doc's perspective is here associated with voyeurism, elsewhere it is associated with violence. When Mac coldly administers a beating to a teenage vigilante, he confides in his comrade Jim, "I couldn't of done it if you weren't here, Jim. Oh Jesus, you're hard-boiled. You just looked. You didn't give a damn" (214). In turn, Jim reassures Mac of the necessity of the beating: "Don't think of it. It's just a little part of the whole thing. Sympathy is as bad as fear. That was like a doctor's work" (214). The passage suggests a certain congruity between Mac's (and, as spectator and enabler, Jim's) cold-blooded, hard-boiled perspective—the "long view" that entails doing what's necessary in order to further the cause (26)—and the "long view" that characterizes Doc's/Steinbeck's perspective. Indeed, earlier in the novel, Mac himself is initially nicknamed "Doc," after he delivers a baby in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the workers (despite the fact that his lack of medical training is probably endangering the young mother—another instance of his cold-bloodedness).

Yet we should not be too quick to collapse Doc's position into Mac's, and thereby to see Steinbeck's documentary realism as entailing sympathy with the strikers. When the real "Doc" arrives, his truly hard-boiled perspective becomes the perspective of the novel itself. As we have seen, part of what that perspective entails is the refusal to take sides: if there is a certain voyeuristic pleasure in this act of observation, it is a pleasure derived from not much caring which way the "battle" comes out. But beyond that, what Doc's perspective entails is the commitment to seeing taking sides as beside the point, since—as Steinbeck's own comments on the novel suggest—class conflict is somehow inessential, a mere epiphenomenon of some deeper problem (the "battle" itself is "dubious" in that sense). When Jim tells Doc of his hatred for the other side—"invested capital," as Jim puts it—Doc (in a statement that already begins to anticipate the politics of *The Grapes of Wrath*) replies, "The other side is made of men, Jim, men like you. Man hates himself" (199): class conflict is here reduced to a convulsion in the life of group-man. Thus, while in the scene described above, Mac acts to silence the class traitor, the novel—through the privileging of Doc's perspective—acts to silence class conflict. This is not exactly to say that it reverses the violence of Mac's beating, and beats up on the revolutionary proletariat itself: it is not against the proletariat so much as it is against the *idea* of the proletariat. Or, to put it another way, it not only refuses to take sides, it refuses to acknowledge that there *are* sides.

The Grapes of Wrath, of course, does take sides—it takes the side of "the people." But of course, since the essential point about the idea of "the people"—precisely what was attractive about it for Burke—is its inclusivity, taking the side of the people looks at the same time like a refusal to take sides. If "the people" potentially includes everyone, then

wouldn't one already be on their side? The answer to this question is, in a sense, "yes," but "potentially" suggests a way in which the appeal to the people can still look like the solution to a political problem. We should note, however, that it does so for Steinbeck in a rather different way than it does for Burke. For though Burke's invocation of "the people" was controversial because it seemed to abandon a rhetoric of class, it nonetheless did so (if we take Burke at his word) in the service of revolutionary Communist aims: "The symbol of 'the people'...contains the *ideal*, the ultimate *classless* feature which the revolution would bring about" (90). What the appeal to the "people" ultimately meant for Burke, then, was "identification" with the proletariat in the sense of identification with a revolutionary program that would ultimately lead to the abolition of the proletariat. Yet, as we have seen, this is precisely the kind of "identification" that Steinbeck finds problematic in *In Dubious Battle*. Indeed, one could say that Steinbeck finds himself unable to identify with the proletariat *qua* proletariat, insofar as that names a (potentially or actually) politicized group. "Identification" is only possible when the group is both de-classed and de-politicized (though, for Steinbeck, no revolution is necessary to bring this about): in short, when they are re-imagined as "the people."

In the context of *The Grapes of Wrath*, of course, "the people" in one sense means the dispossessed, the disinherited, the *excluded*. Yet, at the same time, referring to those people *as* "the people" (rather than, say, as the proletariat) is an attempt to overcome that exclusion. That is to say, the appeal to the people for Steinbeck both identifies a problem and solves it, since "the people" both names the marginalized group, and in naming them as such, is the technology of representation through which that marginalization is overcome. I want to suggest that *The Grapes of Wrath*, in fact, imagines itself as just such a technology of

representation (“the people” writ large, if you like). Before we get to the novel’s formal solutions to the political problem named by “the people”, however, we should note that the nature of the problem itself has changed in the transition from *In Dubious Battle* to *The Grapes of Wrath*, from the proletariat to the people. Firstly, if the social problem that the earlier novel addresses is class antagonism, the later novel re-imagines that problem as a problem of exclusion and inclusion. That is to say, the problem has a fundamentally different structure: if it is one of class, then it is fundamentally a problem of exploitation, not of exclusion. Furthermore, this necessarily entails that the nature of the “group” itself has been re-imagined. In the earlier novel, the structuring principle of collective identity, of “group-man,” was class—indeed, potentially revolutionary class consciousness. What is it in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

One way to answer this question is by answering another: who are “the people” represented in the novel? They are, of course, the migrant workers, or the “Okies.” Yet there is a certain ontological inconsistency between these two terms, since—as the novel itself makes clear—the point of the term “Okies,” applied in a derogatory sense, is to naturalize the distinction between the migrant workers on the one hand and the petite bourgeoisie and established workers of the towns where they seek employment on the other. In this regard, we should also note that the migrant workers are repeatedly racialized by members of the local communities they intrude upon, identified as “outlanders” or “foreigners” and described as being “as dangerous as niggers in the South” (235-236). To be sure, one can understand this tendency as a kind of false consciousness—an obfuscation of class relations—on the part of the Joads’ antagonists. As one representative of “business” puts it, “There ain’t room enough for you an’ me, for your kind

an' my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country" (121). The statement at once describes the distinction between the businessman and the migrant workers in terms of class (that is, as a difference between rich and poor), while at the same time re-imagining that difference as a difference between "your kind an' my kind": a structure of exploitation (which, of course, requires there to be both rich and poor) becomes an attitude of intolerance.

Whether or not Steinbeck understands this attitude as a kind of mystification of class antagonism on the part of the Joads' persecutors (and there are passages in the novel that suggest he does), the novel itself—as I have already begun to suggest in my analysis of Steinbeck's shift from the proletariat to the people—participates in a similar kind of mystification. And if thinking of the Okies as a marginalized race could only provide a kind of negative account of group identity—both in the sense that they could not actually constitute a race and in the sense that their group identity is solely based on the prejudices of others—the novel itself begins to suggest that this identity has a more positive content. We can see this in the novel's commitment to a kind of cultural authenticity; indeed, the question of authenticity cannot arise unless there is some positive account of identity that one could be—or could fail to be—authentic *to*. This commitment is initially presented in aesthetic terms, as a kind of anti-theatricality. Railing against the performance of a "stage play" by the occupants of Weedpatch, the government camp, the camp's resident religious fanatic bemoans the fact that the performers were not "*actors*...them already damn' people" but "[o]ur own kinda folks. Our own people" (309). The sin, according to the woman, was that "they was pertendin' to be stuff they wasn't." Indeed, aside from the dramatic activities engaged in by its residents, the mere existence of the camp is implicated in the same sin of

inauthenticity: “They’s wicketness in that camp,” says the local evangelical Preacher—“the poor is tryin’ to be rich” (320). No doubt the reader could be expected to be rather skeptical about these claims, given the novel’s cynicism about religion in general and this kind of moral fanaticism in particular. Nevertheless, shortly after the woman’s diatribe, Ma Joad, who might be considered the moral center of the novel, rebukes her daughter Rose of Sharon in strikingly similar terms. Suggesting that Rose has developed delusions of grandeur due to her (now errant) husband Connie’s bourgeois fantasies of technical education and home ownership, Ma tells her to “git to your proper place” (312). To imagine Connie’s aspirations to leave the proletariat as a kind of inauthenticity, a betrayal of his “people,” however, is to imagine the “people” in question not as an oppressed and exploited class (in which case, the point would be precisely to either escape it or to abolish it), but as a kind of culture. In that case, the point would seem to be to preserve this identity rather than to eliminate it: or as Ma famously puts it, “we’re the people—we go on” (280).

By describing poverty in terms of a cultural identity that one could or could not be authentic to, Steinbeck’s novel in fact participates in the racialization of the Okies; however misguided the businessman’s discriminatory attitude toward the Okies appears to be, the text ends up reproducing his conflation of class and “kind”. For if the appropriate response to discrimination is to insist on “the people’s” (i.e., the poor’s) right to exist and endure, then this would in turn seem to naturalize poverty: to turn proletarian identity into a version of racial identity. Indeed, from this perspective, the criticism often leveled at Steinbeck—that his account of “the people” apparently excludes racial and ethnic minorities—while factually accurate, is also somewhat misplaced. A comparison of 1935’s *Tortilla Flat* with 1945’s *Cannery Row* helps to make this point. As critics have pointed out,

the Mexican-American “paisanos” of the early novel are crude racial caricatures; as Denning puts it, they are “minstrel-show” figures standing in stark contrast to the “noble white Americans of *The Grapes of Wrath*” (267). While I would not disagree that Steinbeck draws upon racial stereotypes in depicting the “paisanos,” he does so precisely in order to emphasize their “nobility”: a nobility which they possess not in spite of their poverty, we should note, but *because* of it. As Steinbeck puts it in the opening pages of the novel, “The paisanos are clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business, and having nothing that can be stolen, exploited or mortgaged, that system has not attacked them very vigorously” (2). Indeed, the plot of the novel largely revolves around the disastrous consequences of acquiring property in disturbing the paisanos’ culture of camaraderie. *Cannery Row*, which similarly focuses on a group of roguish but lovable vagabonds, could be regarded as a virtual re-writing of *Tortilla Flat*, minus the earlier novel’s mock-epic tone, but more importantly, minus the Mexican Americans: the friends in the later novel are all white. Like the earlier novel, *Cannery Row* celebrates the indigence of its protagonists as a sign of their proximity to “nature” (14) and of their heroic resistance to the dominant (capitalist) “culture”: as one admirer puts it, “The sale of souls to gain the whole world is completely voluntary and almost unanimous—but not quite. Everywhere in the world there are Mack and the boys. I’ve seen them in an ice-cream seller in Mexico and in an Aleut in Alaska” (131).³⁶ Thus *Cannery Row* extends the logic of *The Grapes of Wrath*: poverty is no longer an effect of structural (class) inequality, but a sign of cultural authenticity. And if, in *Tortilla Flat*, the cultural difference of the paisanos might have looked like a function of their racial/ethnic identity, in *Cannery Row*, poverty itself is

enough to constitute that cultural difference (in fact, as the passage cited above suggests, this is a cultural identity that cuts across racial/ethnic lines).

If the symbol of “the people” is (for Steinbeck, at least) a technology of representation that both acknowledges difference—which we can now describe as cultural difference—and attempts to bridge that difference, then we can begin to see how Steinbeck’s novel about “the people,” *The Grapes of Wrath*, is meant to function in the same way. Again, the question of authenticity is crucial: if the problem with the “documentary” aesthetic—for Denning but also for Steinbeck himself—is its inevitable inauthenticity (since the story is told from the “outsider’s” perspective), then the novel understands itself as overcoming this problem. It does so by equating inauthenticity, once again, with a kind of theatrical aesthetic, which Steinbeck opposes to an authentic, folk aesthetic. Theater is associated with the artificial separation of performer from audience, and thus of art from the people. As Ma Joad puts it, “Thought maybe I’d sing in theaters, but I never done it. An’ I’m glad”; her impromptu performances within the local community are preferable because, as she puts it, “They wasn’t nothing got in between me an’ them” (219). In contrast to theater, “storytelling” is associated with other forms of participatory art like folk music and dancing: as Steinbeck puts it, “The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them” (325). The analogy between storytelling and folk art is further highlighted when the narrative itself takes on the rhythm of the folk song (329). Steinbeck imagines that his storytelling art closes the gap between the author and the object of representation (i.e., “the people” themselves)—that there is “nothing between” him and them. The “storyteller” (himself a kind of passive medium for the “story”), suggests

Steinbeck, is one with the people, even in a certain sense giving “the people” to themselves. If, on the one hand, that suggests a certain “documentary” ambition—the desire to represent “the people”—it also suggests that one can realize that ambition in a way that overcomes what Denning sees as the problem with the documentary aesthetic: that is, the distinction between the subject position of the author and the subject matter of the novel.

As Steinbeck’s commitment to anti-theatricality implies, the problem of identification that the novel sees itself as overcoming also concerns the subject position of the middle-class reader (for if theater is associated with inauthentic representation, the point of an authentic representation would be to invite identification). Furthermore, insofar as the novel can be understood as an appeal to the sympathies of that reader, this emphasizes its commitment to a politics of anti-discrimination rather than to a politics of economic equality. That is to say, the difference between the middle-class reader and the Okies—like the difference between Steinbeck as middle-class author and the Okies—can be overcome through sympathetic identification, in a way that the difference between the middle-class reader (or author) and the working-class subject cannot. A relevant counter-example here would be Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Consider Wright’s oft-quoted comparison between *Uncle Tom’s Children*, his earlier collection of stories, and the novel:

When the reviews of [*Uncle Tom’s Children*] began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.

(“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 454)

Wright's point is not that the banker's daughter is incapable of identifying with the book's protagonist; it isn't an argument about the incompatibility between her "subject position" and Bigger's. The fact that she *can* identify with Bigger is precisely the risk that Wright wants to avoid. Nor is the point simply to present an unsympathetic protagonist (though Wright does indeed go to some length to do so in the novel): the point is to make sympathy itself appear beside the point, a necessarily inadequate response. This is because Wright wanted to emphasize Bigger's class position, rather than merely his race. In other words, if one were to think of racial discrimination *alone* as the problem, then sympathy might look like at least a partial solution. But if one were to think of an exploitative class system as the problem, then sympathy could not be the solution—it could only be a way of avoiding the problem. That is to say, the difference between the banker's daughter and Bigger is a structural difference, not a cultural one.

In its commitment to a politics of cultural difference, however, *The Grapes of Wrath* can be seen as thoroughly representative of the "proletarian" aesthetic, as I described it in the earlier part of this chapter. As the reader will recall, the account of that aesthetic—first articulated in the late 1920s and early 1930s and elaborated by Denning in the 1990s—regards authorial subject position as the definitive criterion for proletarian literature. If Denning's account of the proletarian aesthetic therefore seems to rule out Steinbeck *a priori* as a proletarian author, we have seen how Steinbeck imagines that the difference between middle-class author and proletarian subject matter can be overcome through identification: an identification premised on the understanding of the difference to be overcome in cultural terms. My point here, however, is not to suggest that Steinbeck proves Denning wrong. My point is that the concerns that inform Steinbeck's aesthetic project in

The Grapes of Wrath—concerns of authenticity and inauthenticity, of inclusion and exclusion, of marginalization and representation (all of which revolve around culture rather than class)—are essentially the same concerns that inform Denning’s account of the proletarian aesthetic. As I shall argue, however, Denning’s treatment of those concerns is inflected by the neoliberal political context in which he is writing: an inflection that leads him to affirm a rather different notion of “the people” from Steinbeck’s.

If Denning’s account of the proletarian aesthetic hinges primarily on the identity of the author, we should note that the question of proletarian identity or “subject position,” as Foley puts it, is not as straightforward as it might appear. For, as Foley notes, though a revival of proletarian literature (and of critical interest in that literature) might take place along similar lines as other “canon-busting” projects focusing on “the discursive strategies by which marginalized subjects articulate selfhood and challenge dominant cultures” (*Radical Representations* 5, ix), it would be a mistake, first, to understand the project of proletarian literature, and second, to understand proletarian *identity*, strictly within the framework of marginalization. While I am skeptical of the first claim—part of the point of this chapter is to cast doubt about the degree to which the project of proletarian literature breaks free of that framework—Foley is certainly right to suggest that the problem of proletarian identity is not fundamentally a problem of marginalization. Commenting on the fact that class is “routinely treated as one subject position among three in what Terry Eagleton calls the ‘contemporary Holy Trinity’ of gender, race and class,” Foley observes,

Race and gender are also [like class] socially constructed categories enabling hierarchy and exploitation. But they signal experiential realities: there is a limited sense in which they can be abolished. Class, however, is nothing *but* a social

relationship: it is, indeed, the quintessential social relationship. Proletarians are people whose ultimate interest lies in their self-abolition *as* proletarians—that is, as inhabitants of a subject-position—and in their becoming, in the words of the “Internationale,” the “human race.” (x)

In fact, Foley could have made a stronger case for the difference between other “identity” categories—such as those hinging on race and gender—and class. For it is not simply that “there is a limited sense in which [the former] can be abolished,” but that virtually no contemporary critic would have any interest in abolishing them—even though, as we saw in the previous chapter, part of the project of *not* abolishing them is to subject them to constant critical scrutiny and revision. “Proletarian” identity, by contrast, is not the kind of thing you would want to hold on to: indeed, as Foley suggests, recognizing oneself as a member of the proletariat entails a commitment to wishing no longer to be a member of the proletariat. Furthermore, the fact that one could belong to a class but also imagine true self-realization as contingent on no longer belonging to that class suggests a way in which class is not simply a special kind of identity or subject position, but in fact not an identity or subject position at all, insofar as those terms “signal experiential realities” that are understood to be fundamentally constitutive (though not necessarily in an unambiguous, deterministic way) of an individual’s sense of selfhood. Part of the reason, then, that, as Foley notes, class often receives short shrift among the three identity categories that make up the “holy trinity” is that “working-class” or “proletarian” is an identity that cannot be valorized in the way that the others can—both because it is an intrinsically undesirable “subject position,” and because in an important sense it isn’t a subject position at all (but is, instead, merely a structural one). Moreover—and this is the essential point—the fact that

an inferior class position is insusceptible to valorization (in other words, its inferiority is not, strictly speaking, open to challenge) means that the attempt to overcome the “marginalization” of working-class subjects is misplaced. And indeed, if proletarian literature’s admission to the literary-critical “canon” could constitute a political victory for the working class (in the same way that admission of female and “ethnic” writers could be said to constitute a political victory for women and ethnic minorities, even if a relatively minor one), it could do so only insofar as the term “working class” is understood to describe a marginalized social group.

In fact, however, this is precisely the way that Denning understands proletarian literature: as a body of work that, by virtue of its content but, more significantly, by virtue of its authorship, sought to overcome—and largely succeeded in overcoming—the marginalization of the working class. Furthermore, this argument depends on regarding “proletarian” identity precisely *as an identity*, akin to—if not simply equivalent to—racial/ethnic identity: an account that, as we shall see, verges on essentialism. According to Denning, the “proletarian renaissance” that began in the late 1920s was “the opening of a class war in literature, the first act in a larger proletarian renaissance that stamped an indelible working-class imprint on American culture” (201). Denning continues:

[T]he renaissance ignited by the proletarian avant-garde was responsible for two key developments in American literary history: the emergence of a generation of plebeian ethnic writers who represented—in several senses of the word—the new working-class cultures of America and who were to transform American letters in the decades to follow; and the creation of a genre—the ghetto or tenement pastoral—that is still at the heart of the American novel. (201)

The first of these “developments” entails a direct appeal to identity (albeit an identity parsed in rather ambiguous terms, as both “plebeian” and “ethnic”): from this point of view, the political significance of proletarian literature was simply the fact that writers occupying this subject position achieved national recognition. The latter “development” ostensibly concerns a more nuanced question of literary form; ultimately, however, Denning’s account of the “ghetto pastoral” also hinges on the identity of the author (thus the two developments are essentially identical).

The ghetto pastoral, according to Denning, “hesitates on the line between fiction and autobiography”; furthermore, it tends to focus on the writer’s childhood—what Denning characterizes as a “pre-political” stage of development (236). In that sense, these novels represent a formal commitment to the notion of authorial identity as definitive for proletarian literature: that is to say, they firmly establish the author’s working-class credentials (by making it clear that the author was born into his or her class), while bypassing the question of the text’s political commitments. And indeed, if the test of proletarian authorship for some critics was that the author must be a “worker-writer” like Jack Conroy, Denning responds to this objection by observing that the authors of the ghetto pastorals had typically “grown up in working-class communities,” even though “several [had later] attended college and worked in white-collar jobs” (239). Thus proletarian identity, for Denning, is not only something that you would not want to lose (if only because doing so would prevent you from successfully “representing” your class), but something that you *cannot* lose, even when you ostensibly ascend to a higher class position.³⁷

If Denning's apparent essentialism here seems to blur the (already blurred) line between "plebeian" and "ethnic" identity, his account of the content of these novels begins to make proletarian literature look like a sub-genre of ethnic literature. Indeed, a constitutive feature of the ghetto pastoral is the drama of cultural assimilation and authenticity often associated with the latter. From this point of view, the triumph of proletarian literature *is* the triumph of the "immigrant saga":

As a result of the laboring of American culture by those second-generation 'ethnics,' the tales of 'foreign' and 'colored' neighborhoods were no longer a species of exotic regionalism but a national tale of daughters of the earth and native sons....By the time of Francis Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy and Don Bluth's animated epic of the Mousekowitzes, *An American Tale*, the story of the ghetto had become quintessentially American. (231)

It is hard to see what exactly the reference to "labor" adds to this formulation, however, or in what way Hollywood's appropriation of "the story of the ghetto" counts as a victory in a "literary class war" (or indeed, any other kind of class war).

If Denning acknowledges—even celebrates (since their focus on the "pre-political" is a sign of their superior authenticity)—the "lack of explicit political content" in these novels (235), then it is clear that their *implicit* political content lies in the fact that they "enfranchised a generation of writers of ethnic, working class origins, [allowing them] to represent—to speak for and depict—their families, their neighborhoods, their aspirations and their nightmares" (229). They represent, in other words, a victory in a war for representation. Thus, even though Steinbeck could not, on Denning's account, count as an authentic proletarian author, his commitment to representation of the marginalized—

indeed, his commitment to *seeing* “the people” as a marginalized group rather than as an exploited class—mirrors Denning’s own political commitments in *The Cultural Front*. In both cases, moreover, this re-description means that the proletariat (even though Denning retains the term where Steinbeck does not) is both de-politicized and de-classed: which is to say, re-imagined in cultural, rather than political-economic terms.

At the same time, Denning’s emphasis on “ethnicity” (and Steinbeck’s lack of emphasis on the same) suggests a way in which Denning does not simply reaffirm, but refashions Steinbeck’s commitment to “the people” for a contemporary context. For if “the people” for Steinbeck names the commitment to an imagined unity that, at best, simply elides or dissolves racial difference and, at worst, constructs an ideal of an authentic people in the image of the “noble white American,” Denning’s commitment to the people is, of course, a commitment to a multi-ethnic, culturally pluralist vision of the people. And in fact, Denning’s argument that the turn to “[t]he emergence of a populist rhetoric” was “not a retreat from revolution, but a response to the growing power of the movement” locates a major source of that power in the Popular Front’s commitment to what Denning refers to variously as “pan-ethnic Americanism” and “radical ‘cultural pluralism’” (130, 9). It is on this basis that Denning seeks to defend the Popular Front era’s invocation of “the people” from the conventional view that the term expressed a “sentimental liberalism which dissolved a politics of class conflict, of workers mobilization and self-organization, and obscured the divisions of ethnicity, race, and gender in an imagined unity of the ‘people’ and the ‘people’s culture’” (124). Yet, of course, to insist that Popular Front ideology was, in fact, committed not to “obscuring” but to recognizing and valorizing cultural differences based on ethnicity, race or gender only answers the second of these objections. In fact, the

first objection—about the declining significance of class in the politics of the Popular Front—is displaced onto the second, as Denning turns his attention to the contemporary debate over the significance of *race* in the politics of the Popular Front. By emphasizing the Popular Front’s commitment to cultural pluralism, Denning regards himself as answering the objections of both “radical” critics who argue that “[the Popular Front] ignored issues of race and ethnicity in the pursuit of a nationalist rhetoric,” and of “liberal historians” who argue that “the populist and Americanist Roosevelt coalition was fractured [in the postwar era] by a turn to the politics of race and to an ‘anti-American’ politics of anti-imperialism” (129). The answer to both is that the politics of the Popular Front was already a politics committed to recognizing and celebrating racial/ethnic difference (its Americanism was a “pan-ethnic Americanism”). Yet, as Denning elsewhere makes clear, the latter account of the “rise and fall of the New Deal order” (which already seems frankly more conservative than liberal) is equally an argument about “the eclipse of the ‘labor question’ in [postwar] American politics”: “the substitution of race for class as the great unsolved problem in American life,” as one account puts it. According to Denning,

The implicit and sometimes explicit counsel in these accounts is that liberals and the left should turn away from the politics of racial justice to lure back the “Reagan Democrats” with a politics of white populism. This advice is often combined with a cultural attack on the “identity politics” of the supposedly “politically correct” adversary culture in the arts, culture industries, and universities. (466)

Thus, for Denning, to be concerned *either* about the degree to which the turn to “the people” represented a turn away from class politics *or* about the degree to which questions of racial injustice supplanted questions of economic injustice in the postwar era (which, in

Denning's characterization, stretches from the 1940s to the present day) ultimately commits one to a conservative—that is, an implicitly or explicitly racist, nationalist, or even “imperialist”—position. In other words, it makes the commitment to class politics itself look fundamentally conservative. The flipside of that characterization, however, is that the “radicalism” that Denning attributes to the Popular Front ends up looking a lot like present-day “identity politics.”

This is not to say, of course, that insofar as the Popular Front social movement Denning describes did succeed in forging a broad working-class alliance across racial and ethnic lines, this did not represent a significant achievement. Nor is it to endorse the judgment that the turn to the politics of racial justice in the postwar era represented a turn away from class politics: to do so (at least, without much more judicious qualification and specification) would be to reinforce an analytical dichotomy between “race” and “class” that, as Adolph Reed has noted, tends to abstract away from historical realities (“Unraveling”). As Reed has also noted, however, the commonsense commitment to a politics of anti-racism in the contemporary US context can just as often tend to elide—even to mask—questions of economic injustice.³⁸ Just as it would be anachronistic to suggest that the commitment to “cultural pluralism” was not in some sense “radical” in the 1930s, then, it is equally anachronistic to suggest that the triumph of multiculturalism in the present can be unproblematically correlated with the campaign for a “laborist social democracy” (466) that Denning attributes to the Popular Front.

In fact, Denning's account of the proletarian aesthetic is a corollary of the subsumption of class by culture that Reed associates with “the triumph of neoliberal ideology” (“The 2004 Election”). Reed attributes the shift from class to culture in political

discourse in part to the mythic figure of the “Reagan Democrat,” which (as Denning’s comments on that figure, cited earlier, suggest) has become a touchstone for populist appeals on both the left and the right. Reed argues that this figure is indeed “mythic,” in the sense that it is representative less of an actually existing political constituency than of the attempt (on the part of the right) to create an essentialized notion of white working-class cultural identity.³⁹ This is a notion that acts to constrain the limits of political debate, since it is “a notion of class that has no particular economic or social structural foundation” (“The 2004 Election” 4). It thus finds its obverse in the equally essentialist myth of the “urban underclass”—a lineal descendant of the “culture of poverty” narrative—which is typically ethnically coded as black or Latino (Reed, “Reinventing the Working Class” 22). Though Denning’s notion of working-class identity is, of course, not coded as “white” (if anything, just the opposite), it also represents a certain kind of cultural essentialism that acts to displace questions of structural inequality. For if the “cultural enfranchisement of working people” can count as a political victory for the working class, it can do so only under the rubric of multiculturalism, whereby “working-class” is imagined as a form of cultural identity, and whereby the achievement of cultural representation is imagined as an end in itself. This is the context in which both the popular success of *The Godfather* movies and Artie Shaw’s/Arthur Arshawsky’s rise from plebeian obscurity to the national stage can represent a victory for the “class” (153). Furthermore, if achieving cultural representation is not precisely equivalent to achieving political and economic representation, it is nonetheless regarded as fundamentally part of the same project. This point is made most succinctly in Denning’s discussion of migrant narratives: “if the migrant workers failed in

their struggle for union representation, the representation of them in film and photographs, story and song, had an extraordinary resonance in American culture" (262).

Of course, the most "culturally resonant" of these narratives was Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. And indeed, if Denning's description suggests that "representation" was a kind of compensation for the failure to achieve substantive economic goals, we could view Steinbeck's most successful novel in a similar way. In that regard, we should also note the importance that representing "folk" culture came to play in the New Deal administration; indeed, a key part of the mission of the WPA arts projects was to compile collections of folklore and folk music. To that extent, the documentary aesthetic that has come to be synonymous with state-sponsored cultural production in the 1930s could be seen as identical with the proletarian aesthetic as I have described it (though it might seem self-contradictory, then, there may be some truth to Denning's statement that "the alumni of the [John] Reed clubs carried their proletarian aesthetics into the guidebooks and folklore collections of the Federal Writers Project" [227]). That is to say, "representation"—rather than a radical restructuring of the economy—becomes the goal: Roosevelt's "forgotten man" may not be any richer, but he is, at least, no longer forgotten. In that sense, the point of both the documentary aesthetic and the proletarian aesthetic is to compensate for poverty by making poverty *visible* (and visible as cultural richness)—a compensatory mechanism that functions precisely to allay more radical political objectives. Or, to put it another way, we can see how the proletarian aesthetic—as a politics of cultural representation—participates in the silencing of class conflict that Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* associates with the documentary impulse. As I have suggested, however, we can also see why that "silencing" would no longer look at all problematic from a contemporary

perspective. For the triumph of a politics of cultural representation—indeed, the triumph of the very idea of “culture”—in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is in large part the triumph of what Reed calls “neoliberal ideology”: that is, the commitment to imagining a social structure without class and therefore without class conflict.

Chapter V: The Plot against History: The Suspicion of Narrative in New Historicism and the Postmodern Historical Novel

Perhaps no literary-critical essay of the past five years has been as influential and contentious as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading: an Introduction." While far from constituting a manifesto, the article seemed on the one hand to give voice to a growing sense of exhaustion with the dominant critical paradigm of (not so-) New Historicism, and on the other to raise the hackles of those critics who saw in its critique of "symptomatic reading" a rejection of historicism *tout court*. What has been largely overlooked in the furor over the article is the similarity between its complaints and predictions about the state of the discipline and those of the New Historicists themselves a generation earlier. In her essay "Marxism and the New Historicism," included in the movement-defining 1989 collection *The New Historicism*, Catherine Gallagher shares Best and Marcus's skepticism about Marxist criticism, particularly in its Jamesonian mode. For both generations of critics, the Jamesonian mode of criticism casts the critic in the role of heroic revolutionary, unmasking the hidden ideological contradictions that literary texts artificially resolve. Their skepticism of this paradigm is motivated by a similar rejection of the assumption that, as Best and Marcus put it, "domination can only do its work when veiled" (2). Indeed, Gallagher suggests that the critical procedure of unmasking might itself be implicated in the system of domination it seeks to subvert: "Could the illusion of fragility maintained by a belief that the system could not bear an exposure of its contradictions be a functioning part of its endurance?" (43). For both the New Historicist Gallagher and the putatively post-historicist Best and Marcus, then, the problem is not with historicism *per se*

but with the kind of historicism that exaggerates the political consequences of the critical function, and in doing so, overdetermines the liberatory potential of the artwork itself (whether that potential is conceived positively, as an attribute of the work that the critic discovers, or negatively, as the result of a demystifying critical operation).

As we saw in chapter three, another critique of contemporary literary-critical historicism has emerged in the past few years, one motivated by very different concerns (though, intriguingly, another essay by Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” provides an example). So far, this critique has been primarily limited to the field of African American studies, and is best represented by Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* and Reed’s work on W.E.B. Du Bois.⁴⁰ Essentially, these critics argue that both contemporary literary representations of African American life and contemporary criticism of literature produced by African Americans (past or present) has tended to rely on anachronistic assumptions about the concerns, conditions and consequences of African American political praxis. These assumptions might be described as constituting a kind of “pastism,” meaning that racial injustice in the present can be understood as essentially continuous with a past that stretches back at least for the length of the twentieth century (and possibly much earlier), and, consequently, that the radical potential of works of African American literature from an earlier period needs only to be re-activated in the present.

It is striking that both of these denunciations of contemporary literary criticism—one of which rejects the imperative to “always historicize” and the other of which points to contemporary critics’ persistent failure to do so—should coexist. Moreover, one might ask what their coexistence reveals about the provenance of “the New Historicism.” The

question is especially relevant since, as I have pointed out, Best and Marcus's petition for "surface reading" is motivated by a similar rejection of Marxist literary criticism and the grand narrative of class struggle that informs it as that produced by Gallagher over two decades earlier. Yet, undoubtedly, without acceding to Jameson's Marxist worldview and while sometimes employing critical methodologies that Jameson would be unlikely to endorse, the criticism of the last thirty years has consistently respected both the imperative to historicize and the belief in the political potential of doing so. Indeed, Reed and Warren might claim that, in the literary works and cultural criticism that they examine, one grand narrative—that of class struggle—has simply been replaced by another—that of racial segregation. The question then becomes, do the theoretical premises of New Historicism permit some modes of political subjectivity and engagement while restricting others?

I begin to answer this question by looking in what might seem like an unlikely place: two historical novels by E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. If what I am attempting in this chapter is a kind of abbreviated history of "history" as it has functioned in literary criticism of the past thirty years, then I start by examining the ways in which the roots of New Historicist criticism can be located in what Linda Hutcheon would label "postmodern historiographic metafiction." What the two novels have in common with each other and with New Historicism is a suspicion of narrative as an inherently politically repressive form of discourse. Furthermore, these two novels are of particular interest, since together they trace a trajectory from Old Left to New Left to nascent neoliberal political ideologies. And if it may sound as though I am proposing a "symptomatic" reading of these novels, I in fact want to trouble the notion of the text as "symptom" insofar as it depends on a reductive notion of the relationship between history and literature whereby

literary texts are, in effect, “produced” by prevailing political ideologies and economic conditions.

The Book of Daniel (1971) provides a fictionalized account of, as its narrator ironically puts it, “one of the Great Moments of the American Left” (110), the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The narration is provided by Daniel Isaacson, the now adult son of the fictionalized Rosenbergs, some fifteen years after the trial. The dual historical context provides Doctorow with the opportunity to meditate on the relationship between the Old (i.e., communist) Left of the early 1950s and the New Left of the late 1960s.

On the one hand, the novel makes no attempt to disguise its status as fiction: “Probably none of this is true,” Daniel confesses at one point (249). On the other, it frequently suspends the narrative action to provide historical analyses—complete with scholarly references—that are perfectly serviceable as interpretations of the real historical events. The context for these analyses is Daniel’s dissertation, for which he is struggling to “find a thesis” while at the same time wrestling with his past and dealing with his sister’s attempted suicide in the present. The novel shifts without warning between its pseudo-autobiographical and historiographic modes, the point being to suggest that these differences are “merely” formal: neither has epistemological priority, which is to say that both are of equal value in telling the “truth” of the Rosenberg trial. Doctorow has frequently commented on the unstable boundary between fact and fiction, and clearly part of the novel’s point is to deconstruct that opposition. The political and aesthetic motivation for this project is supplied by the (somewhat ahead-of-its-time) postmodern insight that “images are what things mean” (71), which is to say that there is no “truth” of the historical

event to be discovered, merely images and counter-images, Disneyland and the March on the Pentagon.

As the opposition between fact and fiction is collapsed, however, another emerges—what might best be described as an opposition between image and narrative. The novel's experimental form—which consists not only of its generic inconsistency but of frequent shifts between first, second and third person, interruptions of the narrative with gnomic epigraphs, even grammatical and typographical irregularity—seems to bespeak a resistance to narrative coherence. The impression is compounded by Daniel's self-conscious observations on his own process of narrative construction: "What is most monstrous is sequence....The monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word after another. The monstrous magician" (245-46). Narrative threatens to produce the seductive illusion of a coherent reality, in contrast to the provisional and avowedly partial "truth" of the image.

It should be no surprise, then, that within the novel this threat comes not from the autobiographical narrative, which is understood from the first to be a "false document," but from the ostensibly plausible historical analysis supplied by Daniel's dissertation. It is here that the novel's formal/aesthetic and political/thematic concerns converge. The problem with the Old Left, the novel suggests, was its impulse toward narrative coherence—what a postmodernist would refer to as the "grand narrative" of the history of class struggle. The radical tendency to "connect everything," Daniel avers, leads to self-destruction: "At this point society becomes bored with the radical. Fully connected in his characterization it has achieved the counterinsurgent rationale that allows it to destroy him" (140). Searching for "one story from history that is invulnerable to radical interpretation," Daniel hits upon an

account of Swedish explorers taking a balloon flight to the North Pole, never to be seen again until their frozen bodies are discovered thirty years later (140-41). The reason for the story's "invulnerability" seems to be the fact that, due to the yawning thirty-year absence at its center, it isn't really a story—a narrative—at all, but a kind of non-story, an anti-narrative. Thus, *The Book of Daniel* refuses to become equivalent to "the novel as a sequence of analyses" (281). Indeed, this potential self-description is followed by a question that seems peripheral to the historical narrative: "But what of the executioner? A quiet, respectable man, now retired. He is in the Yonkers phone book" (281). The value of the anecdotal detail here is not that it provides a deeper historical truth but that it belies the comprehensiveness of the historical analysis supplied by the novel, and therefore shatters the illusion that such an analysis could indeed tell the truth—once and for all—of the Rosenberg trial.

Two decades later, the anecdote—that fragment of historical connotation that resists integration into a larger narrative—had come to signify a kind of touchstone for New Historicist practice, supplying what Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher call "the touch of the real." Referring to Joel Fineman's essay "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," an earlier attempt to define the New Historicist project, they remark: "Fineman...claimed that any *petit récit* would puncture the historical *grand récit* into which it was inserted. All anecdotes, simply as complete little stories unto themselves, perforate the context of narrative explanation" (49). Similarly, for Roland Barthes, whose critique of historical discourse Doctorow has also cited approvingly, "[the anecdote] divulges a different reality, which is behind or beside the narrative surface and composed of things that historians cannot assimilate into typicality or coherent significance" (Gallagher and

Greenblatt 51). The virtue of the anecdote, then, is its stubborn resistance to narrativization. Indeed, though anecdotes take a narrative form (which, on Fineman's account, paradoxically gives them the ability to fracture *grand récits* by virtue of their self-containment), Greenblatt and Gallagher go so far as to suggest that the function of the anecdote in New Historicist criticism is closer to the function of description in the realist novel: the descriptions of "a chair, a pair of slippers, or a tablecloth" might provide "clues" to the larger social environment of which they are representative instances, yet still resist systematization (39). The anecdote, on this account, is less a coherent narrative than a kind of inoculation against narrative coherence.

What was purportedly "new" in New Historicism is thus inseparable from this anti-narrative impulse. As Gallagher and Greenblatt put it, "Like Fineman and Barthes, New Historicists linked anecdotes to the disruption of history as usual, not to its practice: the undisciplined anecdote appealed to those of us who wanted to interrupt the Big Stories" (51). They go on to situate this "disruption of history as usual" within the larger practice of "counterhistory," referring to "a spectrum of assaults on the *grands récits* inherited from the last century" (52). The most relevant of these assaults, for our purposes, was staged by the historian Hayden White, whose writings on "metahistory" emerged simultaneously with, and undoubtedly exerted an influence upon, New Historicist literary criticism.

White posits that our recognition of a discourse as historiographic depends on the presence of narrativity. The annals and the chronicle—earlier forms of recording the past that were organized simply by chronology rather than by narrative considerations of development and closure—are dismissed by the modern historiographical establishment as merely precursors to the "history" proper. What if, White asks, we regarded these earlier

forms not as failed attempts to write history, but as alternative modes of historical realism? Or, to pose the question another way, what is it about the narrative mode of discourse that historians and students of history believe provides superior access to reality?

White's answer suggests a circular logic underlying the commitment to narrative as the proper mode of historiographic expression. What enables a set of historical events to cohere into a narrative, and specifically to achieve narrative closure is, for White, a moral context supplied by the narrative's situatedness within a specific politicosocial order (11). The logic is circular because the historical narrative in a sense calls "a specifically social reality" into being (25). In other words, we like narrative because it gives us a sense of a coherent social reality, and we like narrativity in historical discourse because it supplies the coherence we—being so accustomed to representing reality in the narrative mode—demand that reality possess.

The epistemological consequences of this revelation are unclear, in part because White's critique wavers between a poststructuralist view that would disavow the existence of an authentic "reality" outside or beneath the structures of discourse, and an empiricist view of discourse as either more or less congruent with reality (no quotation marks required). Historians, it would appear, claim both too much and too little for the realism of their discipline. Ultimately, however, White is not quite willing to go all the way with the poststructuralist skepticism of "reality." His complaint is thus not with the historians' ontological commitments but with their literary-representational ones:

Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be

presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.

(21)

The criticism amounts to the claim that historians are not self-conscious or overt enough about their use of narrative techniques. Yet it is difficult to see what would be gained if they were more so—if historical narratives came with some kind of disclaimer (“events in this history have been edited for narrative coherence”), for example.

White’s critique rests on the implicit supposition that the reader is likely to be seduced by the historian’s idealized version of reality. Yet, just because the historian presents the narrative as though it were immanent in the events themselves, doesn’t mean that we receive it as such, just as the form of a proposition “X is true” doesn’t require us to agree. Only the most naïve reader of history would assume that they were being granted access to an unvarnished account of “what really happened.” For most readers, a commonsense ontological and epistemological distinction obtains between fact (the real events that the narrative refers to) and interpretation (the selection of those events in particular as significant and the articulation of their meaning). As his oscillation between poststructuralist and empiricist perspectives suggests, however, White is not quite sure whether or not to subscribe to the same distinction, whether “facts” belongs in quotation marks or not.

If, however, we focus on the empiricist aspect of White’s argument—the claim not that historical narratives represent a nonexistent “reality” but that they distort reality as it really is (or was)—then the moral and political stakes of White’s analysis become clearer. For the problem with historical narrative is not simply its “desire to moralize,” according to White, but that this desire is inherently conservative and reactionary:

Where there is ambiguity or ambivalence regarding the status of the legal system, which is the form in which the subject encounters most immediately the social system in which he is enjoined to achieve a full humanity, the ground on which any closure of a story one might wish to tell about a past, whether it be a public or private past, is lacking. And this suggests that narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine. (14)

On this account, narrative is the means by which political ambivalence, dissent and utopianism are kept in check. For the moralizing impulse that gives rise to narrative, White suggests, is *not* ambivalent; its horizon of possibility is delimited by the existing social system. In other words, where there is the desire for narrative coherence, there is the impulse toward totalitarianism.

In his essay "False Documents," Doctorow perceives a similar threat in historical discourse—and indeed, any discourse claiming to possess objective, factual validity—which he associates with "the power of the regime."⁴¹ Like White, Doctorow is caught between a poststructuralist dismissal of facts and an empiricist insistence upon them: *The Book of Daniel* is intended as much to demystify as to fabulize the historical record of the Rosenberg trial. Hence the repeated references to bodily functions and their unruliness (culminating in the execution scene): these references to the body serve the same function as the New Historicist anecdote; they supply the "touch of the real." Yet, like the anecdote, these details are less significant for the connection to the empirical world they provide than for the coherent historical meaning they seem to deny, precisely by virtue of their

stubbornly material, non-formalizable quality. While in “False Documents,” then, Doctorow privileges the writer of narrative fiction, whose imaginative resources he associates with the “power of freedom,” over the writer of history, *The Book of Daniel* suggests that the distinction may be one of degree rather than kind, and that “the power of the regime” inheres less in the particular narrative mode (historical or fictional) than in narrative itself.

Thus, in a strange reversal, the totalitarian potential of narrative in *The Book of Daniel* becomes associated not only with the “official” version of events but with its radical re-interpretation. A true counter-narrative, the novel seems to suggest, would not only run counter to the established narrative but counter to narrative itself. Only a narrative characterized by inexplicable gaps, unruly interruptions, unmade connections, could be truly radical in nature. In this sense, the novel’s formal characteristics indicate the extent to which it embraces both postmodern aesthetics and post-communist politics. As the self-conscious reference to the executioner—one of the narrative’s loose ends—indicates, the novel aspires to the kind of incompleteness exemplified by the collage on the apartment wall of Artie Sternlicht (the novel’s surrogate for Abbie Hoffman). For Sternlicht, the collage, assembled by his girlfriend and combining seemingly incongruous images of FDR, Paul Robeson and Elvis (to name a few), represents what he is revolting against: “Corporate liberalism, and George Washington and the fag peace movement, and big money and hardware systems, and astronauts” (137); the work is titled “EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME!” (136). Yet, while the images themselves represent the antithesis of the revolutionary consciousness, its aesthetic—improvised, provisional, borderless (“I haven’t finished yet...I’m thinking of covering, y’know, everything, the whole house,” remarks Sternlicht’s girlfriend [135])—mirrors the politics of the revolutionary

movement Sternlicht describes. Sternlicht rejects the attempts on the part of both the Old and New Left to articulate a political agenda or program: “You’ve got to put down anything that’s less than revolution. You put down theorizing about it, dreaming about it, waiting for it, preparing for it, demonstrating for it....A revolution *happens*. It’s a happening!” (137).

Just as the collage can incorporate any cultural document and still remain itself, the revolution can incorporate any heterodox political philosophy and still remain itself; thus, even while rejecting New Left strategy, Sternlicht retains the core New Left belief in intersectionality: “You’ve got PLP down here, and a W.E.B. Du Bois, and the neighborhood reformers, and Diggers like me, and some black destruct groups, and every freak thing you can think of. Eventually we’ll put it together...” (134).

The novel’s sympathy with Sternlicht’s aesthetics and politics is indicated by the inclusion of a brief prose poem describing Sternlicht holding forth on the fire escape of his building, his voice blending with the music and voices of the street:

amazing grace, amazing grace, there is still in this evening on the fire escape floating
in the potsmoke like an iron cloud over Avenue B someone who knows what he says
or does is important With importance his life or self concerned, and the
surroundings are suddenly not obscure and the voice is amplified and a million
people hear and every paint chip of the rusted fire escape its particular
configuration and archaeology is truly important

(139, grammar and typography reproduced from the original)

The passage describes the underlying aesthetic principle of the collage: anything can be incorporated and, once incorporated, everything (even the “stuff underneath you can’t see anymore”) is potentially important. As Sternlicht puts it, adding a poster of the Isaacsons to

the collage would mean something, since “[e]verything is significant, every small act changes the world” (152); here, aesthetics and politics converge. What is imagined—and indeed, exemplified by the prose poem (loosely incorporated as it is into a larger text)—is an aesthetic experience without boundaries, without the “work” as such. Art without a work, history without a narrative, politics without an ideology, all become corollaries of one another.

Despite all this, however, the novel can’t quite commit to Sternlicht’s worldview, for two reasons. If Sternlicht’s ambition is to “overthrow the United States with images” (140), the novel retains a lingering suspicion of images, best articulated in its description of Disneyland (an account of the experience of postmodernity that rivals anything in Jameson). Rather like Donald Barthelme, for whom “signs are signs, and some of them are lies” (26), Doctorow finds in Disneyland the point at which an image (one might equally say a fiction) becomes a lie. Significantly, Daniel draws the distinction in relation to amusement rides that are based on US “history and language and literature,” on *Life on the Mississippi* and life on the Mississippi. It is unclear whether the difference is one of degree or kind, but there is certainly some kind of distinction between Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Disney film adaptation, the amusement ride based on the film (described as “a sentimental compression of something that is itself already a lie” [288]) and finally the gift-shop souvenir (which offers the Disneyland patron “his culminating and quintessential sentiment at the moment of a purchase” [289]). There is a complicated ontology here, especially given the realist parody that is Twain’s novel, but clearly Doctorow is not quite willing to grant the supremacy of “image” over narrative. Secondly, Daniel’s would-be dissertation supplies an analysis of the Isaacson’s trial and execution that situates it

plausibly within the Marxist “grand narrative” of class struggle. The novel never clearly endorses Sternlicht’s quasi-New Left perspective: even the prose poem is perhaps not without irony, prefaced as it is by the observation that, for Sternlicht, the Lower East Side is “a hatchery, a fish and wildlife preserve [that] seems created for him” (139); certainly, the irony of Sternlicht and his girlfriend shouting the worker’s anthem “Which Side are You On?” in Daniel’s face is not lost on either Daniel or the reader (154). While the novel’s form seems to ally it to New Left politics (via postmodern aesthetics), then, its explicit political content is firmly grounded in the Marxist tradition of the Old Left. From this perspective, the end of the novel—Daniel abandons his dissertation to join the student protest taking place outside the library—reads more like an exhaustion rather than a resolution of its political themes.

Doctorow’s 1974 novel *Ragtime* extends the formal strategies of *The Book of Daniel* while obviating its political tensions. The commitment to the anecdotal detail is here elevated into the structural principle of the novel. If the novel lacks a center of consciousness, its narrative structure certainly seems allied with the perspective of the “little boy,” the youngest member of the representative middle class family whose fortunes (along with those of the immigrant family “Tateh” and the “little girl”) delineate the story arc: “In his mind the meaning of something was perceived through its neglect....He was alert not only to discarded materials but to unexpected events and coincidences” (96). Indeed, the novel’s relation to specific historical events and figures is mediated by unexpected coincidences and neglected “historical” ephemera: Houdini appears on the doorstep of the middle class family just as the boy, an avid fan, is reading about him; the

boy inexplicably tells Houdini to “warn the Archduke”; Houdini meets the Archduke Franz Ferdinand while learning to fly in Germany, but forgets the warning; and so on.

In “False Documents,” Doctorow describes the power of *Robinson Crusoe* (which, as its initial audience would have been aware, was inspired by the biography of Alexander Selkirk) as deriving from an effect of “intravention, a mixing-up of the historic and the esthetic, the real and the possibly real” (21). Similarly, Doctorow’s literary fabrications of historical events in *Ragtime* are brazen, yet dependent for their power on the appearance of plausibility: when asked whether Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit had ever actually met, Doctorow famously replied, “They have now” (qtd. in Foley, “From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*” 95). As Barbara Foley points out, *Ragtime* differs from both the classical historical novel of the nineteenth century and the radical historical novel of the twentieth; in both cases, historical events are understood to occupy a different ontological plane from the fiction, though they may (as in the case of Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*) provide the narrative structure of the fiction. No such ontological distinction obtains in *Ragtime*. Foley quotes Doctorow: “One of the governing ideas of this book is that facts are as much of an illusion as anything else” (“From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*” 104). Moreover, Foley suggests, whereas Dos Passos subordinates his fictional materials to historical events, believing history to be more “dynamic and coherent” than fiction (93), Doctorow does just the opposite, apparently believing that “[history] does not provide a sufficiently coherent—or, perhaps, merely a sufficiently interesting—pattern around which to structure a causally related train of events” (94).

Indeed, the lack of differentiation between historical and fictional elements in *Ragtime* gives the narrative an effect of coherence that is lacking in *The Book of Daniel*, where the tension between history and fiction creates a schism at the heart of the

narrative. In the earlier novel, it is only the dissertation—a kind of meta-*sujet* to the *fabula* of Daniel's pseudo-autobiography—that provides a link to historical fact; everything else is speculative or clearly fabricated. In this respect, *Ragtime* seems more deeply committed than *The Book of Daniel* to Daniel's speculation that "images are what things mean." The novel's implicit historiographical claim appears to be that there is no access to the "real" of history that isn't filtered through images, and furthermore, that this is as true for those who lived through this history (at least, that of the twentieth century) as for those who seek to reclaim it. Thus, for example, Mother's younger brother develops an infatuation with Evelyn Nesbit thanks to a Charles Dana Gibson illustration of the model; Tateh, who has reinvented himself as a movie director (given to "framing" the world around him through a small pane of glass attached to a necklace) is attracted to Mother in part because of her resemblance to a figure in a Winslow Homer painting; the little boy watches the hem of Mother's skirt "brushing the leaves of grass" (55; 223; 57). The free indirect discourse employed throughout the novel at once alerts us to the characters' mediated experience of the world around them, while simultaneously drawing attention to Doctorow's artifice: the fact that his portrait of turn-of-the-century America is constructed largely through second-hand materials.

As in *The Book of Daniel*, images can sometime lie; Doctorow alerts us to this danger in *Ragtime's* opening pages, which describe a kind of newsreel view of life in the early 1900s:

There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the

fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (3-4)

Yet, in contrast to the earlier novel, Doctorow does not permit himself a separate vantage point from which to extrapolate a radical interpretation of the historical facts. Images can only be countered with alternative images. In this context, the information that Evelyn Nesbit's "underclothes were white" and that "[h]er husband habitually whipped her" has the same force as the revelation, provided by Emma Goldman, that "there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants" (5). They are both forms of history's counter-image: on the one hand, the anecdotal detail; on the other, the alternative ideology. Yet the alternative ideology here represented by Goldman does not appear to be that of the text itself; it is simply one more element in the pageant of turn-of-the-century life, one more "style."

Indeed, while *Ragtime* certainly contains the elements of a critique of capitalism—such as its references to unionization, segregation, trusts, the Lawrence textile strike, and J.P. Morgan's financial empire—its two main narrative strands move in an entirely different direction. The working-class immigrant Tateh becomes a successful entrepreneur, first with the aptly-named Franklin Novelty Company, then as a film director: "Thus did the artist point his life along the lines of flow of American energy" (111). To be sure, the climax of his fate—directing a film serial that clearly resembles *Our Gang*, the popular serial of the 1930s that depicted a multiracial group of boys and girls—is not without irony. Yet the irony stems from the films' premature multiculturalism, not from Tateh's betrayal of his radical beliefs. The second of the novel's major narrative threads, which essentially takes over the latter half of the novel and absorbs the middle-class family's story, concerns the

fictional Coalhouse Walker, a successful black musician who falls foul of a group of racist firemen who trash his Ford automobile. Walker's pursuit of justice leads to a bombing campaign and ultimately, his seizure of J.P. Morgan's library under the aegis of the "Provisional American Government." Despite its radical trappings, Coalhouse's story is curiously politically conservative when judged by the standards of *The Book of Daniel*; here, perhaps, Doctorow has finally found a narrative that is "invulnerable to radical interpretation." Coalhouse's motivations are entirely personal—one might add, more cynically, entirely bourgeois—stemming from the destruction of his personal property; he makes it clear to his followers that his revolutionary affectations are merely strategic. The source of racial injustice is also personalized: the fire captain Will Conklin is a caricature of an Irish thug, whom the larger population quickly begins to despise when they learn the facts of the case. In short, there is no attempt to link the novel's latent critique of capitalism (which remains part of Tate's narrative thread) with Coalhouse's experience of racial injustice. Rather, the novel ends up celebrating the entrepreneurial spirit that created modern America while condemning racism—as a matter of personal psychology—as the great problem of our time. In other words, it abandons both the Old Left and the New Left and embraces the neoliberal future.

What role, then, does history play in *Ragtime*'s political conversion? The novel's historical purview is complicated by the anachronistic elements of Coalhouse Walker's story; as Foley points out, Walker's campaign for justice has more in common with black political movements of the 1960s than with segregation-era activism ("From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*" 96). In *Ragtime*, Foley suggests, "Doctorow seems to be implying that accurate representation of the past is less crucial than revelation of the haunting continuity of the

past in the present” (96). To put this insight another way, one might say that *Ragtime* represents a different kind of anti-narrative than *The Book of Daniel*. Here, the resistance to narrative becomes a resistance to history itself. Historical consciousness—even when it articulates the “grand narrative” of class struggle—requires one to countenance the *discontinuities* between the past and the present. In *Ragtime*, the distance between then and now is the source of affective pleasure—nostalgia, ironic amusement, righteous rage—but not of historical insight.

Foley’s formulation of *Ragtime*’s historicist ambitions bears a striking resemblance not only to Greenblatt’s famous expression of a desire to “speak with the dead,” but, more pertinently, to recent formulations of historicism as the project of demonstrating that, in Saidiya Hartman’s words, “Then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead” (759). This insistence on the “haunting” presence of the past within the present, most fully theorized by Ian Baucom in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, has become a widespread tendency in contemporary treatments of African American history, though the tendency is more common in literature and literary criticism than in historiography *per se*.⁴² As we saw in chapter three, Kenneth Warren and Adolph Reed have been vocal critics of this tendency, which, in their view, obstructs our understanding of present racial and economic injustice by assimilating both to the political paradigms of an earlier era. As Reed put it in 1997, well before this anachronistic tendency had been explicitly theorized,

communitarian nostalgia for the organic simplicity that supposedly structured black life under segregation—a trope becoming hegemonic within the black petite bourgeoisie, even in the face of a rightist political counteroffensive that threatens to

restore a modified form of Jim Crow—bespeaks a wish to amend the world to fit the interpretive categories available for comprehending it.” (*W.E.B. Du Bois* 183)

Furthermore, as both Reed and Warren suggest, the “interpretive category” that has usually been occluded by this approach is class, an occlusion that has, on the one hand, justified the privileges of African American “elites” (from the “race spokesmen” of academia to homeowners in post-Katrina New Orleans⁴³) and, on the other, misrepresented and intensified the problems faced by working class African Americans (from healthcare disparities to housing foreclosures to mass incarceration). To resituate Reed and Warren’s point in relation to Foley’s: while for Doctorow in 1974 it might have seemed at least plausible to equate the struggles for racial justice in the present with those of the segregation era, to do so now seems like deliberate obfuscation.⁴⁴

As we also saw in chapter three, the “interpretive category” that typically does the work of establishing the continuity between past and present in contemporary criticism is not race *per se*—a category that had come to seem problematically essentialist even before geneticists confirmed its nonexistence—but culture (or rather, culture is what we think we are talking about when we talk about race). It may seem as though we have come a long way from Greenblatt’s innocently antiquarian impulse to “speak with the dead,” and in some ways we have: as Best notes, contemporary historicism’s project might be better described as a desire to wake the dead (“On Failing” 465)—and, Reed and Warren might add, to turn them into neoliberal zombies. Nevertheless, viewed from the perspective of the contemporary hegemony of the concept of culture in literary and cultural criticism, New Historicism’s project might not seem so innocently antiquarian after all. We should first note, however, that, in Greenblatt and Gallagher’s essays on New Historicism, we are

ostensibly dealing with a different notion of “culture,” something closer to the Marx-inflected domain of Birmingham-School cultural studies than contemporary cultural pluralism and its variants. In other words, the target of analysis is “culture” not “cultures”; as Stuart Hall notes, the notion of culture that was developed in the work of Raymond Williams considered social practices not in a narrowly ethnographic sense but as a kind of total system: “‘Culture’ is not *a* practice, nor is it simply the descriptive ‘mores and folkways’ of societies—as it tended to become in certain forms of anthropology. It is threaded through *all* social practices, and it is the sum of their inter-relationship” (60). This view of culture, which is generally the one operative in Jameson’s work, is fundamentally historicist in its orientation; it depends upon the implicit assumption, made explicit by Jameson, that “the human adventure is one” (*The Political Unconscious* 19). Despite its superficial resemblance to this understanding of culture as a total system or structure (a systematization which the anecdote has already been invoked to disrupt), however, the New Historicism of Greenblatt and Gallagher projects this totalizing impulse back into the realm of its anthropological and ethnographic precedents.

We can see the unity of these apparently contradictory notions of “culture” at work in the guiding assumption of New Historicism: that an entire culture—which includes texts in the conventional sense (written documents) but also events and objects (the potato, for example)—could itself be read as a text. Drawing on the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Greenblatt and Gallagher insist that the interpreter’s disposition toward this cultural data should be as ideologically neutral as possible, precisely so that the data can “speak” for itself, bearing witness to the internal structures of a culture that is not the interpreter’s own: a procedure they designate as “ethnographic realism” (28). The problem

with this account, however, is that the cultural anthropologist's activity, much less the literary-critical activity that adopts its methodology, is not ideologically neutral: it presupposes that the human species is divided up into groups called "cultures," and that it is the job of both anthropological enquiry and literary criticism to elucidate the features of those distinct cultures. We should already note our distance from Marx, for whom the crucial distinction is, of course, classes, not cultures. Yet we should also note the strangeness of importing this ethnographic critical framework into what is, after all, putatively a form of historicism. For there is nothing necessarily historical, even temporal, about the cultural analysis Greenblatt describes: whether the culture is that of Renaissance England or post-Arab Spring Tunisia, what counts is the distinctness of each culture at a particular moment in time (which differentiates Greenblatt and Gallagher's historicism from that of the African Americanists discussed above, for whom culture provides the mechanism by which to emphasize the continuity or even homogeneity between past and present). In other words, temporal distinctions are treated as equivalent to spatial distinctions. Again, Marxist historiography provides a helpful contrast. Here, class struggle provides the metahistorical (and, one might add, trans-spatial) schema that enables the coherence of the historical narrative, while at the same time enabling the historian to parse the significance of distinct moments within the temporal continuum. Moreover, what is true of Marxist historiography here is, as White points out, true of historiography in general: "history" as it is written is always ideological, since ideology is the condition of narrative coherence. We may deplore this situation—as White does—but we should not imagine that Greenblatt and Gallagher's "ethnographic realism" provides a non-ideological

alternative (and, one might add, at least Marxist criticism has the good grace to wear its ideology on its sleeve).⁴⁵

It will perhaps seem like what I have written so far is a defense of Jamesonian Marxist criticism against all other critical methodologies, but it is not intended as such. In the first place, it is worth recalling that this is not even Jameson's own express aim in *The Political Unconscious*: hence his repeated (if slightly unconvincing) insistence that his is not a polemical argument for a particular interpretive strategy that one might "choose" in preference to alternative strategies, such as deconstruction or feminism, but rather a description of the ultimate "interpretive horizon" of all those strategies. Indeed, taken merely as a description of contemporaneous political practice—of "how we read now," circa 1981—*The Political Unconscious* is insightful but fairly uncontroversial. Read as a kind of manual, on the other hand, it could be understood as privileging those varieties of criticism that tended to read moments of textual inconsistency or illegibility not as immanent philosophical or linguistic problems deriving from the nature of textuality as such (the deconstructive tradition, narrowly conceived), but as symptoms of unresolved social contradictions. Still, if this were the entirety of Jameson's prescription, then it would seem with hindsight to have been a fairly uncontroversial one, satisfied not only by his own work but by much—probably a majority—of the work produced under the rubric of "New Historicism."

The important difference for Jameson, however—and the basis of my quarrel with him, in spite of my own Marxist sympathies—stems from the nature of the social contradiction in question. It is here that we move from Jameson's first interpretive "horizon"—the "narrowly political or historical horizon" that pertains to the critical

maneuver described above (76)—to the second horizon of class struggle, in which “the individual text will be refocused as a *parole*, or individual utterance, of that vaster system, or *langue*, of class discourse” (85). Of course, New Historicists bristled at this injunction to read every text as being fundamentally *about* class struggle, not in terms of its explicit content but in terms of its formal structure (what Jameson refers to as “the content of form” [99]). Rightly so: even if it were possible in practice to do so, literary criticism would be reduced to the repeated revelation of the trivially true. Moreover, despite Jameson’s claims that we are still at the level of textual “immanence,” we have in fact been led to “formal” considerations that disregard not only the explicit content of the text but ultimately make its particular formal structure at best a kind of secondary code by which to read the master code of class struggle. We can predict with near certainty what the results of such a critical operation will be, since, as Jameson points out, “by definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class” (85). Alternative, proletarian voices, meanwhile, will be found within “the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, [etc.]” and their modern equivalents: “the oppositional voices of black or ethnic cultures, women’s and gay literature, ‘naïve’ or marginalized folk art, and the like” (86). Jameson’s account of proletarian literature, it turns out, is not that far from Denning’s, based as it is on the presumption of an organic relation between the author of the work and its politics on the one hand, and the presumption of a correlation between “marginalized” groups and anti-capitalist tendencies on the other.

When we then proceed to Jameson's third horizon, that of History (i.e., the history of class struggle) itself, the distinction between his own methodology and that of the New Historicists, paradoxically, diminishes. For both, culture (for Jameson, now read as one aspect of a dynamic historical conjunction of various modes of production) becomes the ur-text. This is not to downplay the ideological differences between Jameson's understanding of culture as an essentially unitary (or "total") historical process and what I have identified as the New Historicist's cultural pluralism. It is, however, to say that Jameson and the New Historicists make the same move—which I will shortly reveal to be a mistake—of equating cultural texts and culture *as* text, but from opposite directions: the New Historicists imagine that history can be read like a literary text, and Jameson imagines that literary texts can be read as history.

The paradoxical compatibility between Jameson and New Historicism is further illustrated by the former's critique of the latter in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (181-217). Jameson takes Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* to typify the New Historicist method of constructing homologies (between, say, literary modernism, *trompe l'oeil* painting and money) without supplying an explanatory framework by which to judge their ultimate significance or comprehend their structural relations. Yet what Jameson ultimately finds worthy of interest (if not quite approval) in Michaels's book is what he regards as its departure from the New Historicist norm, a departure that consists in its positing a theoretical object that supplies something approaching a determinate structural origin for the apparently free play of homologies: namely, the market. It's perhaps worth noting here that, as H. Aram Veesser observed in his introduction to the volume *The New Historicism*, the methodology designated by that name

has relied extensively on market terminology (“Circulation, negotiation, exchange” [xiv]) for its critical concepts, a fact which Veese takes to indicate the extent to which “a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe” (xi). On Jameson’s account, one way to understand Michaels’s undertaking in *The Gold Standard* is as an attempt to formalize this relation between criticism and “culture under capitalism” (to make it more than a merely “homological” relation).

Michaels’s book can be read in this light as a plausible argument about the implacability of the market’s “logic,” which is such that even works—like the exemplary texts of literary naturalism—that appear to subvert or resist the market end up reproducing its structures of thought and feeling. Yet Jameson wants Michaels to go further—and the latter obliges—by generalizing from *these texts’* failure to imagine alternatives to consumer culture to the situation of cultural criticism in general. Michaels frames the issue thus:

What exactly did it mean to think of Dreiser as approving (or disapproving) consumer culture? Although transcending your origins in order to evaluate them has been the opening move in cultural criticism at least since Jeremiah, it is surely a mistake to take this move at face value: not so much because you can’t transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn’t have any terms of evaluation left—except, perhaps, theological ones. It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don’t like it or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too. Even Bartleby-like refusals of the world remain inextricably linked to it—what could count as a more powerful

exercise of the right to freedom of contract than Bartleby's successful refusal to enter into any contracts? (18-19)

For Jameson, the above passage (and Michaels's project in the book as a whole) at once repeats the critical gesture of Michaels and Steven Knapp's earlier essay "Against Theory," which insisted on the impossibility of "standing outside our beliefs," and at the same time opens up the possibility of doing just that, insofar as it names the structure within which beliefs arise as "the market" (or, alternatively, "consumer culture") (*Postmodernism* 217).

For Jameson, of course, this still does not go far enough: the critical gesture could only be completed by positing a socialist alternative, from the perspective of which the individual texts' failures to imagine cultural alternatives to capitalism could be reassessed as historically determined rather than inevitable limitations (*Postmodernism* 205-208). Another way of putting Jameson's point is to say that the market cannot be critiqued on its own terms (which might be an apt description of what the novelists Michaels treats were trying to do), but that this is not equivalent to saying that it cannot be made the object of a critique at all. If it couldn't, there'd be no Marx (and, at least on my account, no "Bartleby" either). Here, too, then, the repression of Marxism—though without the explicit theoretical justification supplied by other New Historicists—is crucial.⁴⁶

Yet the key point here is that Jameson accepts Michaels's generalization—from individual texts' failure to imagine alternatives to capitalist culture to the *inevitable* failure of such an attempt—as legitimate, in its procedure if not in its results. Contra Jameson, this does not represent an advance on the argument of "Against Theory," but something more like a slippage between the two arguments that make up that essay (which, tellingly, Jameson treats as essentially equivalent): one about the nature of texts and one about the

nature of beliefs. What the first part of that essay demonstrated was that it made no sense to separate “meaning” from “intention” in the interpretation of a text, since what ultimately identifies something as a text is the fact that it is produced with the intention of conveying a meaning. It is from this perspective that the limitations of the New Historicist treatment of “culture as a text” come into view. The same interpretive protocols cannot be applied to “culture” in the sense of historical events, objects, and social formations as those applied to texts (whether the latter are designated as “cultural” or not). In the case of the former, meaning must be introduced from the outside, by the critic, whereas in the case of the latter, the critic must contend with the meanings already present in the text—regardless of whether those meanings are “intentional” in the strict sense of conscious design or whether they inhere in the text’s formal “content” or “political unconscious.”

Michaels’s mistake is to move from a convincing interpretation of specific texts’ inability to imagine alternatives to the market, to the claim that to do would be impossible, since it would require us to “stand outside our beliefs.” This claim only makes sense, however, if we understand “the market” not as a conceptual abstraction (and indeed, in Marxist terms, a kind of mystification) but as a kind of all-pervasive cultural context or semantic horizon, one that ends up bearing an unlikely resemblance to Jameson’s ur-text of class struggle (which the analysis of any individual text is destined to reveal). On this account, capitalism would appear to be both “a belief” (the thing you can’t stand outside) and the origin of all beliefs—and, for that matter, all texts. The sense in which this represents a slippage between the two arguments in “Against Theory,” then, is that Michaels locates the ultimate “meaning” of the texts discussed in *The Gold Standard* outside the texts themselves—in history—which then justifies his claim that we cannot stand

outside our culture (which is another way of saying that we cannot stand outside history) to make judgments upon it.

Jameson's response is to note that culture is never static, but part of a dynamic historical process, a fact which makes the possibility of imagining resistance to capitalism possible in even (or, from a classical Marxist point of view, especially) the most fully developed capitalist society. Yet even this response—which amounts to saying that Michaels is right to read these novels as evidence of history's ur-text, but that his reading is insufficiently Marxist—reproduces the confusion between literary interpretation and historical interpretation. For the political outcomes of the former cannot be achieved by fiat, whereas the political outcomes of the latter can—indeed, must—since history does not speak except through the interpretive paradigms we impose upon it. Had Michaels selected different naturalist texts or authors—Upton Sinclair rather than Theodore Dreiser, for example—his argument in *The Gold Standard* might have focused more on the exploitation concealed by the commodity form than on the commodity form itself, thus complicating his argument about the inevitable complicity between capitalism and cultural production. But, by the same token, he couldn't make *Sister Carrie* produce a critique of capitalism without deliberately misrepresenting the text itself.

My larger point, then, is that we cannot ask literary texts of the past to do the work of political activism for us, either in the mode of belletristic celebration or critical demystification; to that extent, I am sympathetic both to the arguments of Reed and Warren on the one hand, and Best and Marcus on the other. This rather strident assertion, however, will require me to clarify my understanding of the relation between history and literary form, on which the various arguments discussed here for the political efficacy or

inefficacy of literary texts have hinged. I will now try to do so by returning to that problematic in *The Book of Daniel*.

As we have seen, the structure of *The Book of Daniel* vacillates between historiographic and pseudo-autobiographical modes, between the “novel as a sequence of analyses” (281) and the “novel as private I” (269). Furthermore, we may say that the latter requires the didactic content supplied by the former in order to articulate a class politics: in this respect, Doctorow’s novel would satisfy Barbara Foley’s evaluative criteria for the “proletarian novel,” in that it overcomes the formal limitations of the novel as such and, in doing so, overcomes the political limitations of bourgeois individualism (*Radical Representations*).⁴⁷ Indeed, as the formulation “the novel as private I” (a phrase that appears in the text at the moment that Daniel rings the doorbell of Selig Mindish, his parents’ accuser) suggests, the risk of political inarticulacy stems from the narrative’s formal consanguinity with the novelistic genres of, on the one hand, the (pseudo-) autobiography and, on the other, the whodunit. The latter can only reveal the truth of the crime, not the truth of what the trial of the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs meant; the former can only reveal what the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs meant *to Daniel*, not what they meant to history. On the other hand, however, the novel begs a question: is a novel that is no more than a “sequence of analyses” still a novel? Or, to phrase the question differently, we know why *The Book of Daniel* needs the dissertation; why does the dissertation need Daniel?

Put in this way, the question gets to the heart of the general discomfort with historicist procedures that I believe informs Best and Marcus’s call for new modes of reading: the anxiety that literary criticism has become just another way of “doing history.” One can imagine a range of possible responses to the question posed above that would aim

at defending the special qualities of the literary—and, in this case, the advantages of the historical novel over traditional historiography—in terms of affective force or intellectual provocativeness. For me, however, the more convincing response to the question “why does the dissertation need Daniel?”—and the one suggested by the structure of the novel itself—is that it doesn’t. This is not to deny that, if we took the two aspects of the novel in isolation, we would end up with a less compelling novel (and a very poor dissertation). It is, however, to say that the novel’s ingenuity is to insist on the relative autonomy of history and fiction, even while it demonstrates them both to be derived from the same textual “substance” (narrative and/or “images”).

From this perspective, Doctorow’s argument in “False Documents” is less interesting for its revelation of the rather banal truth that the historian’s work always requires an imaginative or “literary” component than as an account of the literary institution known as “the novel’s” orientation (perhaps less a formal attribute than a sedimented history of reception) toward history. Doctorow argues that the novel has, since its inception, depended upon the effect of a referential relationship between the text and the life-world of the reader (hence the pertinence of the *Robinson Crusoe* example). I would add that the sense or effect of “reality” here is a specifically historical one: a stated or implied narrative of how things have changed, are changing, or are likely to change. The desire that sustains the novel is thus the desire that sustains the motion picture industry, according to *Ragtime*’s Tateh: “People want to know what is happening to them” (215).

Yet even here, where art perhaps comes closest to history, we cannot generalize about what kind of history or politics the novel in its various formal mutations and mutilations will produce. *The Book of Daniel* is a novel about class struggle, but its political

significance is not a function of its anti-narrative form, any more than *Ragtime's* very different political significance is a function of *its* anti-narrative form. At most, we can say that the anti-narrative impulse in the latter novel does not produce its nascent neoliberal politics, but merely enables it, by clearing out the cobwebs of the Old Left politics that still linger in *The Book of Daniel*. And in fact, we should understand the anti-narrative impulse as it has functioned in contemporary critical theory and practice in the same way: not as producing, but as enabling neoliberal ideology. As the comparison of Gallagher's with Best and Marcus's essay has demonstrated, "Marxist criticism" has remained suspect throughout the period of New Historicism's ascendancy and what is now perhaps its imminent decline. Yet, I would argue, this is not the result of any inherent theoretical deficiency in Jameson's work or even of a fundamental incompatibility between Marxism and New Historicism but, simply put, because Marxism went out of fashion in left-wing politics, both within and outside the academy (for reasons that are more "simply" historical than literary-historical or literary-critical).

Now that Marxism is back in fashion, it remains to be seen how the practices of "surface reading" will negotiate its terrain, if at all.⁴⁸ In the meantime, perhaps the most productive, if somewhat counterintuitive, way to read Best and Marcus's account of "the way we read now" is as an indictment not of historicism, but of (historicism's) formalism—that is, of the tendency to exaggerate the political entailments of literature's formal traditions and innovations.

Conclusion: History, Class Consciousness, and Literary Form

Two of the most successful "historical" dramas currently playing on US television are *Downton Abbey* and *Game of Thrones*. Though financed by US media companies (PBS and HBO, respectively), both appear to be British imports. *Game of Thrones* is, of course, set in a fantasy world, but one that is in various ways (regionally appropriate accents, the "wall" separating the North from the South, etc.) rooted in British history—or at least an "image" of British history, as Doctorow might put it. The Stateside success of these shows can be attributed to more than just Anglophilia, however; in different ways, they articulate a fantasy of classlessness that, ironically, seems so incongruent with the facts of American life that it needs to be imported from the Old World.

Downton Abbey clearly strives for historical authenticity; the plot, which follows the fortunes of the aristocratic Crawley family, is punctuated by familiar historical events like the sinking of the Titanic, World War I and the Teapot Dome scandal. At the same time, the show re-writes the traditional upstairs/downstairs formula and, in doing so, negates a good part of its affective appeal, by undermining the viewer's assurance that things are much better now than they were then. Instead, it offers the compensatory pleasure of nostalgia for a (fictional) world in which the possessors of wealth and power really cared about those less fortunate than themselves. Indeed, viewers in the post-recession US might well find themselves envying not the aristocrats—who, in any case, are stifled by social conventions and besieged by the forces of economic modernization—but the servants, who enjoy job security, free healthcare and stable accommodation. Tellingly, the expressions of class antagonism voiced in the show's first season by the recalcitrant servant Thomas

Barrow and the Irish nationalist chauffeur Tom Branson (who subsequently marries one of the Crawley daughters) are neutralized by their eventual acceptance into the extended family of the Crawley household—in spite of the former’s homosexuality and the latter’s humble (and Irish) origins. Meanwhile, another narrative thread concerns the struggle to protect the integrity of this extended family from the well-meaning but potentially destructive efforts of meddling government reformers. *Downton Abbey*, then, turns out to be a neoliberal fantasy of a society in which the rich both have an appropriate respect for diversity and can be counted on to solve economic problems more effectively than the state.

Despite its allusions to British history, *Game of Thrones*’ challenge to conventional historical representations of class division—indeed, to historical representation *per se*—is far more thoroughgoing. A soliloquy by Tyrion Lannister in the show’s fourth season, an anecdote about a cousin who spends all day smashing the life out of beetles, serves as an allegory for the show’s philosophy of history.⁴⁹ The anecdote, related with captivating intensity, seems to promise some kind of revelation about the nature of human violence: “his face was like the page of a book, written in a language I didn’t understand. But he wasn’t mindless; he had his reasons.” Yet, ultimately, Tyrion—the show’s most learned and reflective character—is unable to explain those reasons, to glean any meaning whatsoever from the story he has just relayed. In this context, the anecdote serves not so much as a disruption of the larger narrative as a reflection of its absence: that is to say, of the show’s stubborn resistance to offer up a narrative that might disclose any kind of ethical or political meaning. To borrow Hayden White’s terms, *Game of Thrones* is not, strictly speaking, a narrative at all: its form is rather that of the annals, in which death and

destruction are the only vital realities and in which “[s]ocial events are apparently as incomprehensible as natural events” (7). From this perspective, the show’s appeal is entirely affective: in offering up “history” as meaningless spectacle, it allows us to experience the resignation and the pleasure of our own sense of alienation from history. Nevertheless, as with the annals, there is a principle of selection—and omission—at work here. *Game of Thrones* privileges power as the fundamental social relation, but it presents a world in which power can be understood in isolation from the quotidian reality of economic exploitation: a kind of pop culture parallel to the theoretical tradition that leads from Foucault to Agamben.

Meanwhile, homegrown US popular culture is saturated with images of class division, from Hollywood movies like *Elysium* and *In Time*, to the *Hunger Games* novels (and their movie adaptations), to documentaries like *American Casino* and *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Yet, with the obvious exception of the documentaries, these texts are set in dystopian futures; thus, while they serve as evidence of the fact that class is well and truly back on the cultural agenda, they are also testament to the difficulty of representing class in historical, rather than (or in addition to) allegorical terms.

Sometimes these difficulties are extrinsic: there is no inevitability to Du Bois’s or Steinbeck’s conflation of class with culture, for example. If such a conflation was a mistake, however, it was at least an understandable one in the context of—for Du Bois—a society governed by a racist ideology that itself conflated biology with culture and denigrated African Americans on the basis of both and—for Steinbeck—a society in search of a progressive populism that could unite the interests of workers with those of liberal elites. Such excuses cannot be made for those contemporary critics who either treat texts of the

past as though they were embedded in the material and ideological conditions of the present or treat the present as though it were essentially identical with the material and ideological conditions out of which those texts emerged. As Marx said, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce.

At the same time, some of the difficulties of representing class as a historically embedded phenomenon are problems of representation itself—a point that can be illustrated by referring briefly to another TV drama, and one that has been widely acknowledged as a successful attempt to represent contemporary class divisions, *The Wire*. While enthusiasts of the show frequently praise its richly developed characters, to stop there misses its originality and ingenuity, which is to emphasize the relative insignificance of individuals in relation to institutions—and crucially (and here Foucauldian interpretations are insufficient), institutions grounded in class relations. The series finale sees Jimmy McNulty, the closest thing to a main protagonist the show has, enter into forced retirement from “police work” and simultaneously achieve the domestic contentment that has eluded him throughout the series.⁵⁰ A sequence of lingering shots in the final minutes of the finale (following shortly after an inebriated mock funeral staged by his fellow officers) shows Jimmy on the threshold of a new life, sitting silently with his girlfriend on the steps of their home: a nod to the character-driven drama that *The Wire* could have been but chose not to be. The conclusion of *The Wire* is therefore the inverse of the ending of *Beyond Desire*, but both revolve around the same disjunction: whereas in the novel, politics begins where the character study ends, in the show, private life begins where the political narrative ends. Texts like *The Wire*, “Bartleby,” *Beyond Desire* and *The Book of Daniel* indicate the difficulty—but also the possibility—of articulating class within fictional forms

(the novel, the short story, the long-form TV drama) that, as Foley writes of the "bourgeois" novel, tend to emphasize the individual over the collective. They come as close as it is perhaps possible to come (without a cataclysmic change in material history) to representing Georg Lukács's proletariat as subject of history.

The difficulty that subtends this project is as much a problem of historical consciousness as it is one of literary imagination, however. To articulate a class politics within capitalist society is to inhabit the space of the parallax: as "Bartleby" shows, one cannot opt out of the market—either as a practical or ideological matter—without risking one's very survival. When my students, many of whom come from working class backgrounds, learn the terms "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat," they find themselves in the difficult position of having to simultaneously affirm and disavow the truth of the Marxist worldview. For, while one might accept the abstract proposition that if one is born into the working class, one is likely to stay there, very few individuals are willing to read this insight as a premonition of their own fate; after all, it is likely that a major motivation for my students' attending college is to escape what they have just learned to call the proletariat. Put another way, the fact that one recognizes the market as a mystification of social relations does not remove the imperative to make oneself marketable.

"Class consciousness," then, requires a kind of dis-identification, a wrenching movement between incommensurable perspectives. This is something quite different from the kind of empathetic identification supposedly offered by literary works—as vaunted by Richard Rorty and frequently invoked in service of the "defense of the humanities." This conception of literary value, it should be noted, makes the question of literary form largely irrelevant; after all, one could empathize as well with a historical or biographical account of

suffering as a literary one. And while, as I argued in the previous chapter, literature does not have an exclusive claim on the representation of class, it seems fair to say that the question of whether or not a literary representation of class is successful is primarily a formal one. Moreover, literature—and the novel, in particular—perhaps does, by virtue of its ability to moderate between the individual and the social, the subjective and the structural, have an exclusive claim to the representation of class consciousness as I have described it. To reiterate, it is the failure of this project of moderation—the failure to make the incommensurable commensurable—that succeeds in representing what it means to be class-conscious within the social logic of capitalism.

Even where the texts I have discussed fail in less compelling and less inevitable ways, however, they demonstrate the existence of a tradition of US leftist fiction that has sought—though not always successfully—to represent class as a formal structure rooted in economic relations rather than as an organic phenomenon rooted in biology or culture. Indeed, these texts belie the accepted wisdom that the US is and always has been a nation that is either hopelessly naive or willfully ignorant about class. To reorient the vision of a classless society advertised by Hector St. John de Crevecoeur along Marxist lines, the absence of what Crevecoeur calls “ancient prejudices and manners” inherited from the Old World (44) affords the opportunity to more clearly see the “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” Marx condemns (*Manifesto* 222). Leftist US fiction has sought to represent economic injustice with equal clarity. In that regard, even its failures—if we are prepared to acknowledge them as such—are instructive.

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NOTES

¹ A version of this chapter was previously published (see works cited).

² Rogin 187-208; Thomas 164-82.

³ Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency” and *Homo Sacer* 48; Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 203-4; Žižek, *The Parallax View* 381-85. On Bartleby and OWS, see Greenberg.

⁴ For versions of the Bartleby-as-exploited-worker thesis, see Barnett; Foley, “From Wall Street to Astor Place”; and Kuebrich.

⁵ Foner provides a useful overview of the debates around “wage slavery.”

⁶ The strongest version of this claim is made by West, who contends that at least two work-related physical injuries are referenced in the text (215-216).

⁷ See Augst; Luskey; Zakim. I borrow the term “the market revolution” from historian Charles Sellers’s book of the same name.

⁸ Both Foley (“From Wall Street to Astor Place”) and Kuebrich make a convincing case that Melville would have been aware of both the actions and the class-conscious rhetoric of the radical labor movement in New York.

⁹ Of course, the most vocal criticism of Obamacare has come from the right. Ironically, however, the right’s defense of the “free market” against “big government” in this instance could equally be described as opposition to the market—or, more precisely, of the attempt to make governmental policy conform to the logic of the market. This illustrates the extent to which the rhetoric of *laissez-faire* liberalism fails to adequately capture the political realities of neoliberalism. By the same token, it illustrates one way in which Thoreau’s liberal conception of the relationship between self-government and civil government

differs significantly from neoliberalism's. For if the liberal state was supposed to simply leave you to pursue your own economic interests, part of the function of the neoliberal state is to tell you what those interests are (or should be): neoliberal policy privileges individual choice, while at the same time acting to *produce* "rational" market behavior (see Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 270). In a more Melvillian register, one might say that neoliberalism respects your preferences, but not your right to "prefer not to" (if that means opting out of the market altogether).

¹⁰ "The 99%" therefore expresses a different kind of generality than "the middle class," which is apparently the only admissible reference to class in mainstream US political discourse. Indeed, Rick Santorum missed the point when he criticized Mitt Romney for using this allegedly "divisive" term, since, as I have suggested, the point of the term is precisely to reimagine class as a differential rather than an antagonistic relation. In contemporary discourse, moreover, even this economic difference is minimized by the near-universal application of the term, which implies that there is no class outside the middle class (hence really poor people can only be described as an "underclass"—a term that typically carries the whiff of an accusation of social deviance). Underpinning this notion of a middle class that we (can or do) all belong to is the entrepreneurial ethos that shapes the worldview of the neoliberal economist no less than it shaped the ambitions of nineteenth-century clerks.

¹¹ Lukács also points out the irrelevance of the criticism that Marx's division of society into capitalists and workers is descriptively inaccurate or over-simplistic: "The critics completely overlooked the fact that Marx posited this society for the sake of argument, i.e.,

to see the problem more clearly, before pressing forward to the larger question of the place of this problem within society as a whole" (31).

¹² Of OWS, Žižek writes, "What should be resisted at this stage is any hasty translation of the energy of the protest into a set of concrete demands" (*The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* 82).

¹³ See Barber; Brown; Thomas.

¹⁴ See *Equality*, chapter VIII: "The Greatest Wonder Yet—Fashion Dethroned" (58-65).

¹⁵ See Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading"; Buurma and Heffernan, "The Common Reader and the Archival Classroom."

¹⁶ See Lemke 71-74. Lemke notes that Du Bois for the most part appears to identify himself with his German audience, only describing African Americans in the first person plural ("We are not barbarians or heathens...") in the last paragraph of the essay. For reasons that I hope will become clear in the course of my argument, this shift may well be considered significant.

¹⁷ See, for example, Du Bois, "The Socialism of German Socialists"; "The Present Condition of German Politics"; "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto."

¹⁸ See, for example, Barkin, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Love Affair with Imperial Germany" and "Berlin Days,"; Kramer; Lemke; Schäfer.

¹⁹ To that extent, the first part of Du Bois's essay is compatible with Marx's argument in "Zur Judenfrage," while the latter part would be subject precisely to Marx's critique of the ordinary understanding of the "Jewish question" in that essay, i.e., that the question of cultural difference obscures—rather than answers—the question of economic inequality. Indeed, though Du Bois may not have read Marx's essay, he did express a similar

understanding of antisemitic attitudes while in Germany: “[German] Socialism...[piles] on the shoulders of the Jew, all the evils ever attributed to capitalism” (“Present Condition of German Politics,” 175). It is remarkable, then, that Du Bois, as we shall see, largely makes himself susceptible to the same criticism. Du Bois’s apparently conflicted attitude regarding Jews perhaps reflects the contradictory currents of thought regarding the Jewish question he was exposed to during and after his time in Germany (Weber’s understanding of this “question”—at least as his letter expresses it—and Treitschke’s would thereby form two extremes).

²⁰ Thus, according to Du Bois, “[t]he English nation stood for constitutional liberty and commercial freedom; the German nation for science and philosophy; the Romance nations stood for literature and art, and the other race groups [including the “Negro”] are striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal” (“Conservation” 819): note the slippage between “nation” and “race” in this passage.

²¹ For a complete list of these substitutions, see Gates and Oliver.

²² As Michael Kramer notes, the terms Du Bois substituted for “Jew” in the 1953 version of *Souls* were “less specific but nonetheless nativist” (“W.E.B. Du Bois” 174). As I do, Kramer regards Du Bois’s antisemitism in the original version of *Souls* as complicit with his nativism. For Kramer, however, Du Bois (departing from his Herderian precedents) sought to disarticulate race from nation, in order to undermine the idea of the nation as a culturally unitary entity and thus to make the Negro’s cultural difference seem unproblematic. The problem from Kramer’s point of view, then, is that “Du Bois’s reconfigured American nationalism was essentially dualist, not pluralist” (172), which is to say that it included blacks and (non-immigrant) whites but not, for example, Jews. Thus, for

Kramer, the Jew represents a limit to Du Bois's "pluralism." Yet Kramer does not supply an explanation of *why* the figure of the Jew would constitute such a limit, except that it represented a convenient alternative to the Negro as a figure for "otherness" (176). On my account, however, Du Bois does not seek to disarticulate race from nation but to collapse the difference between the two, so that the Negro represents the authentic American (and to that extent, the nation appears as culturally monist, not pluralist), while the Jew—precisely as a result of his association with Mammonism—represents the inauthentic American. While for Kramer, then, Du Bois's antisemitism largely produces his nativism, for me, Du Bois's nativism produces his antisemitism. That is to say, for Kramer, Du Bois's prejudices (primarily against Jews but also against immigrants in general as well as against Native Americans) constituted the limit to his pluralism and thus the basis of his nativism (174); for me, Du Bois's nativist logic required him to posit a figure of the inauthentically American that was also associated with "Mammonism." Of course, it was no accident that Du Bois hit upon the figure of the Jew for this purpose, and certainly his references to Jews in the original version of *Souls* make use of prevailing antisemitic stereotypes. From that point of view, however, the 1953 revisions demonstrate the extent to which Du Bois's nativism was, *contra* Kramer, independent of his antisemitism.

²³ The phrase, "contradiction, indictment and the refusal" is Marcuse's.

²⁴ When, for example, Du Bois remarks that "[Negroes] are a nation stored with wonderful possibilities of culture," and in the same sentence, that "their destiny is not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture," the first usage refers to the potential contribution that Negroes could make to world "civilization" (the word Du Bois uses in the previous paragraph, in fact), while the latter obviously distinguishes between Negro and Anglo-

Saxon *cultures*. Similarly, when Du Bois accepts that “the Negro race [has] not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving,” he essentially accepts that “Negro” culture currently lags behind other cultures in the scale of “civilization,” while at the same time insisting on the uniqueness of their cultural contribution to that larger civilization. Thus cultivating the specific cultural ideals of the Negro race and raising the standing of that race in the scale of world culture (“civilization”) are, in fact, one and the same project. Du Bois, “Conservation” 819-20.

²⁵ Posnock generally uses the term “philistinism” to describe what Du Bois calls “Mammonism” and what Spillers calls “American business culture.”

²⁶ The most influential (and controversial) challenge to the possibility of a non-essentialist account of race is Anthony Appiah’s “The Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Illusion of Race.”

²⁷ Chandler contends that the “color-line” motif represents “a problem for contemporary thought in general: one that would fundamentally be epistemic even as it is irreducibly political” (“Figure” 41). He uses the abbreviated term, “epistemic-political” in the context of his account of “Die Negerfrage” (“Possible Form,” Pt. 1, 217; “Possible Form,” Pt. 2, 253).

²⁸ See, by way of contrast, Reed’s insistence on “the need [for critics] to consider agents as participants in historically specific modes of political discourse” (*W.E.B. Du Bois* 5).

²⁹ In this respect, while both Du Bois’s “Negro question” and Marx’s “Jewish question” concern the disjunction between abstract political equality and unequal economic power, the situation of the Negro freedman *vis a vis* this disjunction is the inverse of that of the Jew (as described by Marx): the Negro is less “powerful” than he appears, the Jew is more.

³⁰ Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that “Die Negerfrage” represents a broader approach to the problem of racial injustice, given that it was written for a German publication and that Du Bois credited his time in Germany—and particularly his acquaintance with the “Jewish” and “Polish” questions—as giving him a deeper insight into the “Negro problem” in the United States. See Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.”

³¹ See Holt. While Holt does occasionally link Du Bois’s attempt to elaborate a racial identity in cultural terms to his economic strategies, the majority of his essay demonstrates how little importance the former had for the latter. Instead, Holt’s main point is that the consumer-collaborative strategy was intended as a way of reconciling Du Bois’s (basically Marxist) socialism with the realities of racial discrimination. For an alternative account of Du Bois’s consumer-collaborative strategy—one that regards it instead as an attempt to reconcile his socialism with his commitment to “elite” leadership, see Reed, *Du Bois* 65-70.

³² For Reed, in fact, the color-line formulation—which he regards as essentially a technology of representation that allows an elite black stratum to speak for the race as a whole—is basically redundant as a method for “combating inequality and injustice in the present” (290). This is not to say that race has simply become politically irrelevant in Reed’s view; it does, however, mean that we need a more sophisticated account of the ways in which “ascriptive group boundaries are drawn, redrawn and imposed”—an account that recognizes that race is not the only form of ascriptive hierarchy but also that, as a particular form of such, “race” itself is highly “plastic and context-dependent” (266). I basically agree with Reed that the “color-line” formulation, insofar as it tends to oversimplify issues of racial representation and discrimination, is severely limited with regard to addressing questions of economic inequality. Reed contends that Du Bois himself

eventually came to acknowledge those limitations: “Du Bois subsequently retreated from his famous color-line assessment [as it appears in *Souls*] in concert with his perception of changed historical reality and his own changing interpretation of that reality. His changed perception was influenced in part by his embrace of a more Marxian view of politics, but his turn toward Marxism also reflected a shift in the discursive center of gravity among reform-oriented intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, a shift away from racialist, culturalist or other idealist understandings of the bases of hierarchy and exploitation and toward explanations rooted in political economy and class conflict” (258). Where I would differ with Reed is on the question of when the latter form of “explanation” took hold on Du Bois’s thought. I would argue that it predates Du Bois’s explicit embrace of Marxist thought in the 1930s, as my reading of “Die Negerfrage” is intended to suggest. Indeed, rather than suggesting that the “color-line” was a concept that Du Bois (for historical and intellectual reasons) simply outgrew, my point has been to say that the tension between class and culture in “Die Negerfrage”—which could in fact be described as a tension between competing conceptions of the “color-line”—is one that characterizes Du Bois’s work in general.

³³ For a summary of contemporaneous reviews of *Beyond Desire*, see Rideout, *Sherwood Anderson* 149-150.

³⁴ Foley’s own position on the question of definition (though she does not state it explicitly) is, I would argue, closest to that of William Seaver, who in 1935 argued that “[t]he key to any determination of whether an author had written a novel that should be considered proletarian...resided exclusively in its political orientation,” thus challenging earlier notions that a proletarian novel must be “written by a worker about workers or for

workers" (qtd. in Foley 118-119)—what Foley calls the "empirical" factors often invoked to define the project of proletarian literature. Of course, one problem with this emphasis on revolutionary "perspective" is that it essentially makes the proletarian novel and the radical novel equivalent, arguably making Foley's attempt to determine how effectively a particular proletarian novel expresses radical political commitments redundant (in the sense that if it failed to do so, it would also fail to be a proletarian novel). This is simply to say that the question of definition largely becomes irrelevant to Foley's discussion of the politics of particular proletarian novels. To some extent, of course, any analysis of works within a particular genre ("realism" would be an exemplary instance) will tend to refer to a body of texts that customarily have been understood to exemplify the genre: theoretical precision as to the definition of the genre itself is not necessarily a prerequisite to a productive engagement with those "canonical" texts (or with other, non-"canonical" ones that share a similar set of aesthetic commitments). However, as Foley notes, the question of definition was of especial importance to the project of proletarian literature, since, unlike other literary genres that are defined "*a posteriori*, based on extensive acquaintance with existing models...literary proletarianism was to a considerable degree born out of an *a priori* conception of itself" (45).

³⁵ This is not to say that Anderson's own politics are obviously "revolutionary." It would be difficult to derive a definite political message from the novel: its explicit meditations on communism, though not unsympathetic, would perhaps best be described by the adjective in the title of Anderson's 1935 collection of essays, *Puzzled America*. The point here is not to say that the politics of Anderson's novel—or, indeed, of Anderson himself—are somehow more radical than those of most proletarian novels or proletarian novelists. The

point is that the formal structure of Anderson's novel disarticulates the personal from the political, thus undermining the assumption that political radicalism is a function of identity: the assumption on which, as I have begun to suggest, the very notion of "proletarian literature" depends.

³⁶ Intriguingly, this tribute is delivered by a character named "Doc"; "Mack" is the leader of the group of vagabonds around whose exploits the novel revolves. *Cannery Row's* Doc is a marine biologist; Warren French notes that Doc's meditations on group-man in *In Dubious Battle* were influenced by the writings of William Emerson Ritter, a professor of marine biology (xvi). If both "Docs" are students of "group-man," the difference between the Doc of *In Dubious Battle* and the Doc of *Cannery Row* is that the latter has no trouble sympathetically identifying with the "group" represented by "Mack and the boys": indeed, as his comments here suggest, he is somewhat envious of them.

³⁷ This is why Denning can refer, without irony, to the "working class ethnic stars" of the culture industry: the idea that a Hollywood star could somehow remain a member of the "working class" reveals a fundamentally essentialist notion of class. Furthermore, Denning's claim that these stars were "tricksters" emphasizes that his understanding of working-class identity is modeled on (if not simply equivalent to) racial/ethnic identity (153).

³⁸ See Reed, "The Limits of Anti-Racism" and "The 'Color Line' Then and Now."

³⁹ See also Reed, "Reinventing the Working Class."

⁴⁰ See Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought* and "The 'Color Line' Then and Now."

⁴¹ The connection between White's work and Doctorow's "False Documents" and *The Book of Daniel* was first suggested to me by Richard King's article "The Discipline of Fact/The Freedom of Fiction?"

⁴² Hartman's "The Time of Slavery" is a particularly interesting historiographic example. The tendency of the essay is to raise theoretical problems about what it would mean to ground identity in an affective relation to the past only to "solve" them by heightening the affective intensity of the critical discourse itself. Hartman's prose, perhaps self-consciously, occasionally echoes that of Du Bois ("I imagine Ethiopia stretching forth her hand" [762]), but its switching between "historical" and "literary" registers is more pronounced and more radically dissonant than anything in Du Bois's canon. It is also worth noting that the function of affect—of "tears and disappointment"—is identified in the essay as the creation of "an opening for counterhistory written against the narrative of progress" (769). This "counterhistory" is identified not as an alternative narrative, however, but as a dismantling of the conditions for historical narrative, the collapse of the opposition between past and present: "Tears reveal that the time of slavery persists in this interminable awaiting—that is, awaiting freedom and longing for a way of undoing the past" (770).

⁴³ See Reed's "The 'Color-Line' Then and Now."

⁴⁴ This is not, I hasten to add, because we live in a "postracial" society, whatever that might mean; but neither do we live in 1904 or 1974. Attempts to redress racial injustice in the present must take account of what Reed refers to as the "plastic and context-dependent" notion of race and the various ways in which it functions to heighten inequity in the neoliberal era ("The 'Color-Line' Then and Now" 266).

⁴⁵ The appropriate response to White is to agree that a historical narrative always articulates an ideology, but that this fact—far from foreclosing the possibility of critique—provides one of the conditions by which to adjudicate between competing narratives.

⁴⁶ This repressed content has returned quite literally with a vengeance in Michaels's recent work, where the category of class (though not formulated in an explicitly Marxist way) has been ruthlessly deployed against the multiculturalist pieties of contemporary literary criticism and political discourse.

⁴⁷ For Foley, these formal limitations are not absolute, but rather represent "tendencies" of the novel (*Radical Representations* 261-262); it is for this reason that I find her account of the relationship between politics and literary form more convincing than the generalizations about that relationship I have discussed here.

⁴⁸ Stephen Best's "On Failing to Make the Past Present" presents an intriguing but troublesome foray into what might be considered posthistoricist criticism. Through a reading of Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*, which Best interprets as an "undoing of the affective history project" of *Beloved* (466), Best expresses his own skepticism about what I have called the deliberate anachronism of Baucom, Hartman *et al.* But, oddly enough, Best's admiration for *A Mercy* turns out to be motivated by an equally anti-historical impulse, for, on his account, the novel not only short-circuits affective identification, but forecloses any possibility of narrative continuity between the past and the present. This leads Best to the rather mystifying conclusion that "the logic of racial slavery does not fully describe or capture racial injustice in the present" (474). If we are not to take this as an expression of the most banal truth (and I think Best's reading of Morrison has prepared us for something more than this), then we should take it as an assertion of the irredeemable distance

between the past and the present. Yet this assertion of the past's absolute alterity seems no less satisfactory than the alternative—absolute identity. For while it would be absurd to suggest that “the logic of racial slavery” *could* “fully describe or capture racial injustice in the present,” it would be equally absurd to contend that the two had nothing to do with one another. Equally mystifying—and here one might mark the contrast between Best and Warren or Reed—is the suggestion that “racial slavery” constitutes the *only* frame by which one might make sense of present injustice, such that the undoing of its “logic” leaves us in the situation of being unable to “conceptualize the order in which we are living” (474). All of this suggests the enduring resistance—now resituated within a posthistoricist frame—of literary criticism to narrative on the one hand, and class politics on the other.

⁴⁹ “The Mountain and the Viper.”

⁵⁰ “30.”