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"Words Are Things": The Settler Colonial Politics of Post-Humanist Materialism In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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In criticism and theory today, we are witnessing a rise to prominence of new materialisms. These approaches loosely encompass object oriented ontologies, speculative realism, affect theory, vitalist materialism, and actor-network theory.[1] What distinguishes new materialisms from prior or competing theoretical traditions is a post-humanist understanding of materialism and materiality. Rather than pursuing questions of epistemology, new materialisms study the ontology of nonhuman matter. This approach promises to traverse the Enlightenment dualism of human/nonhuman that new materialists claim continues to structure and stifle much of criticism and theory today. As a result, a post-humanist perspective avoids, it is believed, the political pitfalls found in older theoretical traditions of historical materialism and poststructuralism that are considered human-centered frameworks. New materialisms foreground what these theories overlook, namely the relationship of the phenomenological experience of daily life to international political economy, the liveliness and agency of matter, objects, affects and bodies, and the role of embodiment in the age of global biopolitics. In emphasizing the infinitesimal, a new materialist framework offers to generate models of praxis that are affirmative and productive, which might helpfully replace the models of difference and alterity of prior and competing human-centered frameworks that are believed to lead to political and ethical fragmentation, destabilization, and, ultimately, defeat. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explain in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*: "The prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality … It avoids dualism or dialectical reconciliation by espousing a monological account of emergent, generative material being."[2] Put simply, new materialists want to stop deconstructing

and demystifying the world and instead begin constructing, building, and producing creative and sustainable alternatives to it.

While new materialisms have come to represent a new post-human turn in criticism and theory, this break from so-called human-centered theories I want to suggest is not so much a new development as it is an extension of a previous break Michel Foucault had inaugurated through his positive materialist approaches of genealogy and archaeology from the traditions of historical materialism and linguistic-centered poststructuralism. Against what he argued was a totalizing, teleological, and thus exclusionary functionalism found in Enlightenment theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism, Foucault, like new materialisms today, advocated for a method that could be inclusive of all of history's actors and their struggles. As Foucault writes:

> It is not therefore via an empiricism that the genealogical project unfolds, nor even via a positivism in the ordinary sense of that term. What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects (sic).[3]

Although Foucault didn't explicitly emphasize nonhuman ontologies, his local form of analysis nonetheless prefigures the logic of new materialisms insofar as it rejects the category of transcendental humanism that structured competing methods of analysis in order to write a productive rather than negative knowledge of history.[4]

I begin with an attempt to trace the emergence of new materialisms not to demonstrate its influences, which lie perhaps much more with Spinoza or Deleuze and Gutarri than with Foucault, but to reveal how the prominence of new materialisms today represents the most recent development in a much longer trajectory of theories of what we can now call post-humanist materialism. In this essay, I want to explore not only how we understand post-humanist materialism's emergence and its rise to prominence today in the fields of criticism and theory, but what kind of knowledge it produces about the histories and identities it represents. Moreover, as a historical form, how can post-humanist materialism help us periodize the era it tracks from its emergence in Foucault's break with historical materialism and linguistic-centered forms of poststructuralism to today when it promises to finally supplant and replace these older theoretical traditions? To address these problems, I turn to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, (1985), a novel whose aesthetic, I argue, embodies a similar form of post-humanist materialism that we see in Foucault's local analysis and the new materialisms of today. *Blood Meridian* is a historical novel that tells story of settler colonial conquest in the borderlands of Northern Mexico in

the years following the US-Mexico war of 1848. It fictionalizes the actions of a group of American scalp hunters who were paid by the Mexican state after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to help exterminate the Apache peoples and other Indigenous groups whose claims to and defense of their ancestral lands stood in the way of Mexican and US settler colonial expansion. The novel demonstrates that the essence of this history is like that of the very desert where the events of colonial conquest and violence take place: "This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone."[5] In emphasizing the nature of colonial conquest and violence as "stone," which is to say, as a history of the nonhuman, *Blood Meridian* becomes an important text that helps us understand the historical trajectory and political meanings of post-humanist materialism. This essay will demonstrate through a reading of McCarthy's novel that post-humanist materialism not only embodies a neoliberal colonial politics of recognition, reconciliation and affirmation that functions to erase the structural violence found in the histories of colonialism and capitalism, but is also a theoretical and aesthetic project premised on, even as it disavows, the settler colonial (re)production of indigeneity as the social ontology of the savage, wild, nonhuman outside to modern liberal humanism. In what follows, then, I want to argue for a reading of post-humanist materialism that understands it as a neoliberal settler ideology that traces and tracks, just as much as it seeks to manage and legitimate, the ongoing role of settler colonialism in our era of late capitalism.

Enlightenment Mastery, Negative Critique, and Optical Democracy

Scholarship on *Blood Meridian* is as expansive, disparate, and layered as the novel itself. After winning the National Book Award for *Cities of the Plain* (1992), McCarthy's previous works, including *Blood Meridian* and his earlier novels of Appalachia, were opened for critical excavation. Initial scholarship on *Blood Meridian* announced it as one of the most important novels of the twentieth century.[6] Formalist critics praised McCarthy's intricate and exhilarating prose style, while also admiring the novel's self-conscious form. But where the novel has attracted the most critical attention is in how it revises and subverts dominant frontier ideologies of westward expansion.[7] The novel voices and critiques these frontier ideologies most clearly in its representation of Captain White's army of filibusters who, early in the novel, recruit and enlist the help of the novel's protagonist, named only as "the kid," in their campaign to seize control of Mexico. As Captain White tells the kid, "do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them."[8] The kid who has become "divested of all that he has been. His origins [as] remote as is his destiny" is promised social mobility via land dispossession: "You ready to go to Mexico?," the recruiter asks the kid, "It's a chance for ye to raise ye self in the world. You best make a move someway or another fore ye go plumb in under."[9] When the kid asks about pay, the recruiter retorts "Hell fire son, you won't need no

wages. You get to keep ever thing you can raise. We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company won't come out a big landowner (sic). "[10] By representing the frontier less as a place of progress than as one of imperial expansion, economic opportunism, and violent dispossession, the novel serves as what Sara Spurgeon argues is a "counter-memory" or "anti-myth" to the narratives of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism.[11]

Still, *Blood Meridian* does more than revise colonial narratives. We can also see how it embodies a deconstructive method that foregrounds the instability of narrative representation itself. In one of the novel's most cited passages, the scalp hunters' co-leader, Judge Holden, ruminates on the function of the notes and sketches he makes and collects in his ledger. After one of the scalp hunters, a "Tennessean name Webster," contends that "them pictures is like enough the things themselves. But no man can put all the world in a book. No more than everthing drawed in a book is so (sic)," the Judge replies, "What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all .... Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world."[12] Echoing what Linda Hutcheon famously described as "historiographic metafiction," the novel lays bare that there is no original or genuine account of history hiding behind the official ideologies of the ruling order; rather, history itself is textual, the sliding of signifiers for signifiers, representations of representations, narratives that produce truths rather than reveal the truth.[13] That is, *Blood Meridian* does not merely revise, but destabilizes official accounts of US history — not by offering a more truthful account that would "correct" official versions but by highlighting the contingency and indeterminacy of narrative representation itself.

Of course, it is the Judge himself and what he typifies that becomes the principal target of the novel's deconstructive method. Perhaps one of the most engrossing and violent characters of American literature, the Judge serves as the group's desert guide and advisor in the work of scalp hunting.[14] While the Judge is many things — a devil-figure, theologian, murderer, scholar, pedophile, preacher — it's clear that his skills as rhetor are equaled only by skills in genocide, and that the two are intertwined as the novel presents his use of the word and his use of the gun as co-constitutive tools of colonial violence. When asked by the horse thief and fellow scalp hunter Toadvine why the Judge collects and records in his ledger specimens of the desert's plants and animals, the Judge explains:

> whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.... These anonymous creatures ... may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to

stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth ... This is my claim ... And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.[15]

Here the Judge's understanding of nature exemplifies what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeheimer described as the "dialectic of enlightenment," or the contradiction found in Enlightenment rationality that seeks to violently eliminate that which threatens its ideological consistency as a universal project of knowledge and emancipation.[16] For the Judge, nature or the other, signal the outside to or limits of Enlightenment master narratives that otherwise function as global explanatory histories. This is why both nature and the other must be forcefully seized, possessed, or killed in order to be explained away. In fact, what the Judge expresses is the Enlightenment promise of mastery and dominion precisely through representation: it is the Enlightenment subject's capacity to explain, represent, or express the world in language that gives him or her dominion over it.

In this way, the Judge's position on nature also comes to allegorize the Enlightenment logics found in structuralism. Claiming that "The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos," the Judge echoes early anthropology's use of taxidermy to represent and understand Indigenous peoples, a colonialist form of treating them as already always "vanished" peoples whose cultures are in need of categorization, preservation, and museumification.[17] Indeed, like the logic of "salvage" ethnography, the Judge categorizes, collects, observes, records, captures, and in so doing, kills what exceeds him. The Judge's desire, then, to explain everything becomes the same as structuralism's imperative to totalize social relations. When Toadvine questions the Judge's suzerainty, claiming that "no man can acquaint himself with everthing on this earth (sic)," the Judge replies:

> The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.[18]

The "task of singling out the thread of order" shares with structuralism the goal of finding the inner-logic or central law by which the social field under observation operates. When placed in the genocidal hands of the Judge, this method of representing structural causality comes to be seen as a form of social domination. It becomes, in other words, a form of human-centered totalization, and as such — and in line with Enlightenment rationality — excludes and marginalizes identities, ontologies, and

struggles that exist outside of structuralism's global explanatory framework.

While *Blood Meridian* models a deconstructive method that troubles the Enlightenment master narrative and the structuralist social map figured by the Judge, it nonetheless suggests that the power and force of such forms outmatch the novel's attempt to subvert or destabilize them. That is, the Judge who embodies the Enlightenment logic of totalization and genocidal (ir)rationality appears destined to prevail and dominate despite the attempts of other characters and the novel's deconstructive method to challenge his power. Of the members of Glanton's scalp hunters, the Judge alone endures, in the end raping and killing the kid in a latrine behind a Texas saloon only to take the saloon's stage moments later, dancing naked in the novel's final scene: "Towering over them all and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die," an ending that seems to indicate the novel's self-awareness of the limits of the deconstructive method.[19] As David Holloway puts it, "*Blood Meridian* surrenders ... provisional control of meaning to the totalizing force of the judge precisely because McCarthy's critique is informed by a deconstructive methodology. In surrendering this, the text also gives up the critical and the political agency which it needs to bring witness against him."[20] How should we read the novel's representation of the limits of its own deconstructive method? Critics point out that it demonstrates *Blood Meridian*'s most politically progressive feature: it is the sign of the novel's acute understanding of the function of a deconstructive method. The deconstructive move of the novel is not in its representational critique of the Judge and Enlightenment logic, but in the novel's self-referential image of its own failure to do so in the form of a positive representation. For Phillip Snyder, this is a kind of narrative form that "makes absolute hegemonic discourse impossible."[21] Holloway agrees, explaining that "where the oppositional voice is converted suddenly and violently into its own negation, one core feature of McCarthy's aesthetic might then be summarized as a testing of ideological limits ... what does not compute or is inexpressible in this or that theoretical language may then be a more damaging indictment of the theory in question than traditional ontological or metaphysical critiques."[22] By emphasizing the undecidability of its representational critique of Enlightenment narrative forms, McCarthy may fall short of representing alternatives to the domination and power of the Judge and what he represents, but the novel nonetheless successfully enacts a form of negative critique. Such a reading thus maintains that the novel's deconstructive method avoids privileging or even producing positive counter-narratives that might critique or compete against Enlightenment master narratives not because McCarthy is disinterested in alternatives, but because deferring positive representations allows the novel to maintain the position of critique, destabilization, and undecidability in which alternative thinking is possible in the first place.

Against this reading, I want to suggest that the novel is just as suspicious of deconstruction and other forms of negative critique as it is of the Enlightenment logics

embodied in the figure of the Judge. We should read the novel's staging of the limits of its representational critique of the Judge not as evidence of McCarthy's support of an aesthetics of deconstruction but as the novel's way of demonstrating the political weakness of deconstruction. The deconstructive method is shown to fall short of challenging Enlightenment hegemony precisely because, like other poststructuralist methods and theories, it ignores nonhuman ontology, the materiality of the body, affects, and daily life. Foucault had offered the same criticism of dialectics and (post) structuralist theories of language:

> Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. 'Dialectics' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and 'semiology' is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody, and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.[23]

New materialists Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin offer a similar critique of frameworks of negativity: "A relationality in the negative, dualistic sense presupposes the terms of the relation in question, whereas the creation of concepts [found in new materialisms] entails a traversing of dualisms, and the establishment of a relationality that is affirmative — that is, structured by positivity rather than negativity."[24] Here I want to make the claim that *Blood Meridian* serves as an early example in American fiction of what has become today in criticism and theory a turn away from the methods of demystification and deconstruction. The novel intimates that demystifying or deconstructing dominant Enlightenment logic doesn't do much towards changing the material reality this logic helps produce and sustain. To challenge what the Judge represents it is not necessary or practical to know how the Judge wields power as it is to know how to come together and struggle against him. Like Foucault's work and new materialisms, *Blood Meridian* suggests that we don't so much need a perspective that reveals the contradictions of power as we need a perspective that reveals productive points of intersection among those who struggle against power.

Such a perspective that illuminates the local and molecular and that as a result represents productive relationalities among the dominated, marginalized, and excluded is what the novel describes as "optical democracy":

> In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all

preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.[25]

In an early reading of *Blood Meridian*, critic Dana Phillips reads optical democracy as a form of description rather than narration in the terms defined by Lukács in his essay "Narrate or Describe."[26] As description, optical democracy scans and reproduces the experience of the surfaces of the social field rather than mapping, if there is one, its inner-logic. Against Lukács who argues that description is a form of reification — a representation of the mystified immediacy of capitalism — Phillips understands optical democracy as an important narrative form that overcomes the limits of teleological and homogenizing Enlightenment frameworks of periodization. As Phillips claims, McCarthy is a "writer not of the 'modern or 'postmodern' eras but of the Holocene, with a strong historical interest in the late Pleistocene and even earlier epochs," and that "Human beings and the natural world do not figure as antagonists. . . They are instead parts of the same continuum."[27] In a similar early post-humanist reading, Steven Shaviro points out how in the novel "Minute details and impalpable qualities are registered with such precision that the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified. The eye no longer constitutes the axis of vision. We are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human."[28] Through its optical democracy, the novel attempts to prove not only that "Books Lie," but that even if, as one of the scalp hunters tells the Judge, "God don't," the ontology of language is nonetheless nonhuman, or as the Judge reminds the group "these are [God's] words. He held up a chunk of rock. He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things." As the Judge says elsewhere, "words are things."[29] Optical democracy becomes the equivalent of the imperative found in post-humanist materialisms to center nonhuman ontologies, to traverse the human/nonhuman binary, and to give inanimate matter the attention it deserves.

Colonial Violence and Affective Witnessing

It is through this post-humanist aesthetic that the novel represents colonial violence in the form of a lively thing, that is, as a visceral and thus material affect of trauma and brutality that is meant to engage contemporary readers at a bodily (nonhuman) rather than cognitive (human-centered) level. For example, the following sentence, like so many in the novel, which describes the Apache attacking and decimating Captain White's filibustering party, attempts to offer readers not a counter-representation but a material affective experience of the violence found in history of colonial conquest:

> Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of bone flutes and dropping down off the sides of their

mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows.[30]

Here the overabundance of adjectives and indefinite pronouns defers and buries the sentence's subjects, decentering the scene's actors, presenting the events horizontally as an experience unfolding rather than preconceived. McCarthy also uses simile rather than metaphor, which for Phillips, seems "designed to increase the intensity and accuracy of focus on the objects being described rather than to suggest that they have double natures or bear hidden meanings."[31] By focusing readers' attention on the objecthood of the violence found in this scene, giving each detail equal weight, the novel attempts to reveal what Jane Bennett calls the "vibrancy of matter" or "Thing-Power" of objects: "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[32] To treat violence as a thing is to attune readers' perception to what new materialists call the agential power of objects, which in this scene and others like it where the affective experience of violence is re-enacted in order to produce a visceral and material response in readers, has the effect of engaging and entangling contemporary readers in ways that call them to stand as witnesses against forgotten and buried histories of violence underwriting US history. *Blood Meridian* thus fulfills what Timothy Morton argues is the role of an object oriented poetics: "a poem is not simply a representation, but rather a nonhuman agent" that does "something as physical as what happens when my car scrapes the sidewalk."[33] In experiencing colonial violence at a nonhuman bodily level, the novel's post-humanist aesthetic avoids the traps and limits of representation and counter-representation, critique, demystification, or deconstruction precisely because it allows, in the language of new materialism, readers to affirm the thing-power of the affects of colonial violence in a shared moment of productive witnessing.

Critics of Western American literature have praised McCarthy's aesthetic for its ability to unearth the buried experiences of trauma and horror found in the history

of colonial violence. Billy Stratton argues that "by bringing this horrifying episode in American history to the attention of modern readers, McCarthy gives voice to its anonymous victims . . . this is *Blood Meridian*'s greatest achievement. For in so doing McCarthy subverts the prevailing mythico-historical narrative of the Old West developed to keep traumatic events such as these buried in the dustbins of history."[34] Comparing *Blood Meridian* to the discourses of its source texts, Stratton celebrates how contemporary readers are able to experience and acknowledge the trauma and anguish of colonial violence that these discourses actively suppress. For Stephen Tatum, McCarthy's aesthetic exemplifies a wider "forensic aesthetic paradigm" of contemporary western American literature that focuses readers' attention on the material objects found in the scenes of ruin, loss, death, and decay of the American west.[35] In such scenes, objects mark the presence of a "spectral beauty," a utopian desire to recover the lost or forgotten stories of U.S. history whose traces remain in the fragments or material remains of the forensic scene. Focusing on the objecthood of violence beckons readers to "to reconstruct a whole body and a completed narrative so that the dead or missing in the end can have a 'voice,'" which as Tatum suggests performs a "kind of ventriloquism of and for the dead," giving readers a feeling that they have the "power to make the world 'right' again."[36] For Tatum, like Stratton, readers who bear witness to the trauma of colonial history are readers who not only seek justice for its victims but also search for more ethical ways of relating to them.

Yet to suggest that *Blood Meridian*'s greatest achievement lies in how it represents the liveliness of forgotten and buried material affects of colonial violence, which allows readers to politically and ethically stand as witnesses to the horrors of colonialism, is also to demonstrate how the novel's object oriented aesthetic displaces and thus defers an experience of the structural violence of colonialism. The materiality of colonial violence in the novel is located in the positivism — which is also believed to be the productiveness — of objects rather than in the negativity of colonialism's structures of dispossession. The difference is one between understanding settler colonialism as a event or experience of the past considered complete and finished and as a structure of dispossession that continues today to violently enclose and occupy the lands and bodies not only of Indigenous peoples of North America but populations around the world who through settler imperialisms are, as Indigenous feminist scholar Jodi Byrd argues, made to be "Indian," in their position as "peoples and nations who stand in the way of U.S. military and economic desires."[37]

By way of a brief comparison, we could say that McCarthy commits the same mistake in his representation of the genocide of Indigenous peoples that Adorno had accused Arnold Schoenberg of making in *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) that represents the genocide of European Jews. Adorno had pointed out that because Schoenberg chose to emphasize the images of the suffering of the Holocaust, he fails to accomplish the task of compelling listeners to condemn the fascist culture that produced it. The following could also describe McCarthy's post-humanist aesthetic:

There is something embarrassing in Schoenberg's composition ... the way in which, by turning suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising though they are, it wounds the shame we feel in the presence of the victims. For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment of it ... The aesthetic principle of stylization ... makes an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could confront the claims of justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation ... When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder.[38]

In attempting to enhance readers' sensitivity to the liveliness of the affects of colonial violence, McCarthy's optical democracy, like Schoenberg's committed images of suffering, seeks to produce a meaningful experience of genocide in ways that generate productive and affirmative moments between audiences and the victims of genocide. While McCarthy's aesthetic form does not privilege human over nonhuman suffering, like Schoenberg's aesthetic, it nonetheless suggests that readers can come to identity with the victims of colonial conquest. *Blood Meridian* may not elicit liberal humanist notions of empathy for the victims of colonial violence but it does call on readers to share in the experience of such violence when it is aestheticized in the novel as a vibrant matter — as an affect with the agential power to produce effects on contemporary readers. In assuming, then, that through the novel's object oriented aesthetic readers can stand as ethical and affirmative witnesses to acts of colonial violence, McCarthy asks readers to "play along" with and thus sustain the same culture that produces such violence in the first place, namely an American culture that continues to function as a settler culture, since it remains today premised on the ongoing attempt to eliminate Indigenous peoples. In other words, it is because of the post-humanist materialism of *Blood Meridian* — which eschews an experience of colonial violence as structural — that McCarthy fails to demonstrate how the cultural logic of settler colonioalism that inform his novel of the 1980s is the same that in the 1850s produced the violence that the novel's aesthetic attempts to make meaningful for contemporary readers. The novel's visceral depictions of violence do not so much offer an experience of colonial violence as they offer an affective experience of its effects. Which is to say, *Blood Meridian* may be bloody but we shouldn't consider it a novel of violence precisely because the violence of colonialism lies where the novel doesn't look: in colonialism's structural form rather than in its material effects.

It is in this way, then, that the post-humanist materialism of *Blood Meridian* participates in a wider set of neoliberal settler ideologies of recognition, reconciliation, affirmation, and forgetting. Such ideologies represent what Indigenous scholars and scholars of Indigenous critical theory such as Glen Coulthard, Jodi Byrd, Joanne Barker, and Elizabeth Povinelli, among others, have argued is a shift, beginning in the mid- to late-twentieth century, in how settler colonial states have come to govern Indigenous peoples.[39] In response to mobilized, militant, and collective forms of anti-colonial resistance found in Indigenous movements in North America and abroad, the settler-colonial state, Coulthard explains, was compelled to transform:

> [F]rom a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize [Indigenous] recognition and accommodation. Regardless of this modification, however, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained colonial to its foundation.[40]

Coulthard describes this new form of governance a "colonial politics of recognition," which corresponds to a wider set of neoliberal recognition strategies in which the cultural identity and/or experience of oppression and domination of marginalized groups is respected and affirmed while their class position or relation to capital — what is causing the experiences of oppression and suffering — is ignored or not addressed and thus left undisturbed. While it must be acknowledged that bringing to light histories of violence can certainly serve an affirmative role in building decolonial movements and solidarities, this strategy can also play into the hands of neoliberal settler-colonial governing modalities that offer conditional inclusion in modern liberal civil society through cultural recognition, appeals to reconciliation/healing, projects of forgiving and forgetting, and formal civil rights so as to leave unchallenged settler-colonial structures of dispossession.

Like the modern liberal settler-colonial state, the aesthetic of affective witnessing in *Blood Meridian* treats the violence of colonial conquest not as a continuous structure of dispossession but as an experience, or at best, a completed and finished project/event of the nation's past that through a proper post-humanist ethics of affirmation can be reconciled with a now seemingly repentant liberal settler state and civil society. Such a politics of recognition not only erases the ongoing violence of dispossession and occupation still taking place within the territorial boundaries of settler colonies of North America, but also suggests that where imperial violence is recognized today in places outside of North America it can be resisted by developing a perception of, sensitivity to, or what is an aesthetic taste for, the affects of imperial violence.

Thus, just as the settler state continues to dispossess Indigenous peoples through new governing strategies of recognition and reconciliation, *Blood Meridian* affirms the very violence it seeks to expose by suggesting that colonial conquest can be reconciled, overcome, or resisted through a personal and local ethics of witnessing.

The Political Ecology of Settler Colonial Conquest

At this point, however, a question might be raised concerning the novel's acute historical awareness of the economics of US and Mexican settler colonialism in the years following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. Does not the novel, which was the product of several years of McCarthy researching archival holdings throughout the US-Mexico borderlands, perceptively emphasize the role of capitalism in determining the violent events depicted? As an historical novel, in other words, is not the novel's faithful representation not only a genealogy but also an analogy of the economics of the 1980s? For instance, just as the novel had captured the imperialist filibustering spirit of the time in the representation of Captain White's army, it also details how the American scalp hunters are contracted by Mexican state governments to remove Apache communities from the land to prepare the way for resource extraction and settlement. The scalp hunters enter into a "contract with [Angel Trias]," the governor of Chihuahua who promises a "hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for [the Apache leader] Gómez's head."[41] However, the novel goes on to show how this agreement quickly dissolves as readers learn that the Americans begin to indiscriminately hunt and scalp both the Apache and the Mexican citizenry. As the gang's leader John Joel Glanton remarks, after his men kill a group of Mexican citizens of Nacori, "Hair, boys . . . The string aint run on this trade yet."[42] On returning, then, to Chihuahua to trade flesh for gold, the scalp-hunters

> entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor's house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers and the Sociedad was disbanded and the bounty rescinded. Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos post for Glanton's head.[43]

If in the beginning the Americans had killed for gold, this arrangement changes as they begin to kill for reasons that go against their economic self-interest and/or the interests of the Mexican and US settler states. Moreover, not only do they kill the very people subsidizing their ventures, they also gratuitously kill or at least terrorize, plunder, and rob a mining expedition, an American-run ferry service on the Colorado river, and the small settlement of Tucson protected by a US military garrison, just to name a few. It seems that violence overtakes the Americans as they give into a

bloodlust with no end in sight.

Dan Sinykin reads the scalp hunters' entropic trajectory that ends in violent disarray and the group's destruction as an allegory of the instability, unchecked violence, and the unavoidable chaos of the US economy at the time of the novel's publication. For Sinykin, "the violence figured by the scalp hunters institutes capitalism's order . . . and haunts the world it has created with the threat of a return to chaos."[44] The novel is a warning that "the apparent US economic resurgence through financialization and the regained faith through Reagan in US progress rested on chaos, a violence always ready to consume us."[45] Yet, while the excess violence found in the actions of the scalp hunters might emphasize how the bloody origins of US capitalism portend equally bloody ends, I read the novel's focus on excess, chaos, and entropy as a product of its post-humanist aesthetic that attempts to represent the social field of colonialism as a dense web or horizontal assemblage of nonhuman actants rather than as a structure of accumulation that exploits and dominants differentially.

If the novel accurately documents the roles of Glanton's scalp hunters as agents of primitive accumulation, the novel's optical democracy undercuts this view when it represents the social field of settler colonialism as an assemblage in which violence is equally distributed, administered and suffered interchangeably by Glanton's gang, Indigenous peoples, and the Mexican citizenry. All three groups become equally susceptible to attack or extermination, or as the Judge tells the kid, "what joins men together . . . is not the sharing of bread but sharing of enemies."[46] The advantage of one group over the other is often seen as arbitrary and random: Glanton's success becomes just as unpredictable as is his demise. When the Yuma kill most of the scalp hunters late in the novel, their vulnerability to violence appears equal to the vulnerability to violence experienced by Indigenous groups. The narrator notes how the Yuma pile up the bodies of Glanton and his men and set them on fire. While looking on, the Yuma "contemplat[ed] towns to come and the poor fanfare of the trumpet and drum and the rude boards upon which their destinies were inscribed for these people were no less bound and indentured and they watched like the prefiguration of their own ends the carbonized skulls of their enemies incandescing before them bright as blood among the coals."[47] Here, settlers who will bring towns and the "poor fanfare of the trumpet and drum" are considered "no less bound and indentured," or comparably victimized by colonialism as the Indigenous groups the settlers seek to dispossess and displace in the first place. Emphasizing the primary cause or principal agents of the violence becomes much less important than focusing on what is held in common among the different actors of settler colonialism, actors who are believed to be one in the same its agents and victims.

This assemblage of colonial violence also extends to include nonhumans. Animals hunt humans, and humans hunt animals; the desert destroys even as settlers invade and overtake it. In fact, the dualism of the human/animal fully breaks down and all that remains is a plurality of different bodies preying on and being preyed upon

by other bodies. After surviving the Apache attack on Captain White's filibustering party, the kid and Sproule wander through the desert only to be attacked one night by a "bloodbat" that drinks Sproule's blood, who after pushing the bat off him let out a "howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulse beat of the world."[48] Or, in another instance, the scalp hunters are attacked by a bear, that "carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond ransom or reprieve."[49] Like animals, the desert is also indiscriminately violent to all who enter it. As the kid and Sproule move further into the desert, "they saw half buried skeletons of mules with bones so white and polished they seemed incandescent even in that blazing heat and they saw panniers and packsaddles and the bones of men and they saw a mule entire, the dried and blackened carcass hard as iron (sic)."[50] Later, when Glanton's group wanders the desert, the narrator describes their experience as: "out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage as what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin?."[51] Conversely, there are many examples of animals and the landscape falling victim to the violence of humans. When Glanton buys a new set of pistols he tests them in a city courtyard, randomly selecting nearby animals as live targets, gratuitously obliterating in a matter of seconds a cat, two chickens, and a goat.[52] We also witness the killing of an innocent stage bear that is mercilessly shot while entertaining a large crowd in the novel's final scenes in the same saloon where the Judge ends the novel dancing. Moreover, the desert, at times, is seen as a space overrun and exhausted by waves of settlers hungry to exploit it: "they saw patched argonauts from the states driving mules through the streets on their way south through the mountains to the coast. Gold seekers. Itinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague."[53]

The point of representing colonial conquest as an assemblage of horizontal violence is to emphasize a percieved equality of vulnerability or precariousness among the bodies placed in a violent entanglement by colonialism. This equality of violence/vulnerability is what critic Georg Guillemin describes as a balance between *Blood Meridian*'s "'pastoral melancholia' (everything is equally worthless)," and its other form of "'ecopastoral elation' (over the fact that everything has equal value)."[54] The novel's non-hierarchical field of vision thus aligns with the optics of post-humanist materialism, which, as Jane Bennett explains, "is to find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants in order to be more faithful to the style of action pursued by each."[55] The historical role of the scalp hunters as agents of primitive accumulation dissolves into a post-humanist view of colonial conquest as, to use Bennett's language, a political ecology of violence/vulnerability. Through such a view, the novel attempts to accomplish the difficult task of resisting Enlightenment totalization embodied in the Judge whose master narratives excluded, erased, and subordinated nonhuman and other marginalized

ontologies. It does this by not centering or privileging certain ontologies over others, the result of which is that the novel might offer a view of the productive entanglements and intersections among bodies caught in a shared violence of colonial conquest.

We should not forget that this was the same goal of Foucault's local analysis of power. If Foucault urges us to see that "there is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case," he also suggests that we not, "ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours."[56] Like Foucault's local analysis and new materialisms, then, the aim of *Blood Meridian*'s assemblage of colonial violence is not to essentialize who or what to blame in the history of colonial conquest, such as the Jthe American scalp hunters who serve as the shock troops of primitive accumulation, but to emphasize what is held in common, a shared recognition that bridges the gap and traverses the dualism between settlers and natives, bodies and rocks, or humans and nonhumans, as a way to build, become, and live more sustainably together. As Jane Bennett explains the ethical and political goal of the assemblage framework:

> The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.[57]

In fulfilling this ethical vision that "all bodies are kin," post-humanist materialism seeks to politically activate those who might be passively mired in human-centered understandings that see certain causes as more important than others. It is through acts of cross-identification and mutual recognition of shared points of vulnerability that bodies considered human might learn to become active, engaged, and receptive to the forms of becoming that are already in many cases underway, assemblages which may lead to alternative or least more sustainable forms of social belonging. We see this in the goal of Karen Barad's new materialist theory of "agential realism" which is "not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities." And a similar point can be found in the work of Rosi Braidotti who calls for a "nomadic ethics," which is not a "master theory but rather about multiple micropolitical modes

of daily activism. It is essential to put the 'active' back into activism."[58] Against a politics of difference and alterity that is believed to undercut — because it centers certain struggles over others — attempts at coalition-building and cooperation across the divides of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the dualism of the human/nonhuman, post-humanist materialism promises more practical, effective, and active ways of building solidarity among bodies brought together by forms of shared harm. McCarthy's aesthetic contains the same political vision: just as the Yuma see themselves in the burning bodies of the Americans the Yuma have killed or like the representation of a desert that is scarred but also scars the scores of settlers spilling west, those of us today who see that "all bodies are kin" will have a better chance of coming together, the novel suggests, in productive ways to co-exist sustainably or at least less violently in late capitalism.

Yet in representing settler colonial conquest in the form of a nonhuman assemblage, *Blood Meridian* obfuscates the irreconcilable power disparities between settlers and Indigenous people in late (settler colonial) capitalism. If the novel suggests that settlers and Indigenous peoples come to relate through a shared nonhuman ontology, this post-humanist perspective ignores how the social ontology of the settler is premised on — relates antagonistically to — the social ontology of structural genocide of the Indian.[59] Put differently, settler sovereignty rests on the production of the Indian as the category of the savage, a type of nonperson who might occupy but can't own or labor on the lands capitalism encloses, the result of which is the social ontology of what Jean O'Brien calls the "ancient" and primitive, a form of life destined to disappear or "vanish" in the face of settler progress, that is, capitalist development.[60] Indigeneity thus serves, Byrd argues, as the position in modernity of "radical alterity," or that which functions as the outside to modern liberal humanism.[61] As Byrd explains: "European modernity hinges upon Indians as the necessary antinomy through which the New World — along with civilization, freedom, sovereignty, and humanity — comes to have meaning, structure, and presence."[62] What this entails, then, is that from the structural perspective of the settler any recognition offered or any attempt at a cultivating a productive becoming between the social ontologies of the settler and Indigenous peoples, will nonetheless be in the interests of perpetuating settler sovereignty.

As Coulthard, building on the work of Fanon, reminds us: the settler doesn't seek recognition from the colonized, but rather only wants the colonized to give up their land and vanish: "The [settler] colonial state and state society — does not require recognition from the previously self-determining communities upon which its territorial, economic, and social infrastructure is constituted. What it needs is land, labor, and resources."[63] The only condition of possibility for shared recognition, or a productive becoming, between settlers and Indiginous peoples would be the abolition of the social relation in which such recognition and affirmation is structurally impossible in the first place. Yet, instead of decolonization, as Coulthard

explains, "today it appears, much as it did in Fanon's day, that colonial powers will only recognize the collective rights and identities of Indigenous peoples insofar as this recognition does not throw into question the background legal, political, and economic framework of the colonial relationship itself."[64] For McCarthy's novel to represent the history of settler colonial conquest in the form of an equality of violence/ vulnerability among settlers and Indigenous peoples is to ignore this irresolvable sctructural tension of colonial difference.

In this way, we can see how post-humanist materialism's project of extending the spheres of modern liberal civil society to include the nonhuman, like the goal of *Blood Meridian*'s optical democracy to represent all ontologies and temporalities equally, is premised on the ongoing project of settler colonialism. For example, when Bennett argues, "surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs," it is assumed that the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the very liberal democracy dependent upon their colonization not only is a progressive development but that this ongoing colonization must inevitably serve as the unacknowledged condition of possibility for the included status of nonhuman ontologies in the first place.[65] We could say, then, that because post-humanist materialism eschews a knowledge of political ontology in favor of emphasizing object ontologies, it ends up reproducing the very project of liberal humanism against which it is defined. As Byrd puts it, "One reason why a 'post racial' and just democratic society," to which we can also add a posthuman society, "is a lost cause in the United States is that is always already conceived through the prior disavowed and misremembered colonization of Indigenous lands that cannot be ended by further inclusion or more participation."[66] In order for post-humanist materialisms to traverse the human/nonhuman binary, it requires both the continued production of the settler (human)/Indian (savage or wilderness) binary and the colonial structures of dispossession this binary legitimates. By representing colonial conquest as a horizontal assemblage of violence and shared vulnerability, *Blood Meridian*'s post-humanist form doesn't so much work to include and activate marginalized ontologies and their struggles in ways that produce cooperation and coalition-building as it further defers confronting what produces marginality, difference, alterity, and, antagonism in the first place.

The Post-Human Turn and Neoliberal Dispossession

I want to conclude by asking why it begins to matter in the 1970s and 80s and continues to matter even more in the current era of the post-human turn that we represent our positions in the world through a framework of nonhuman ontologies? Why does it matter that we think of ourselves as objects that relate horizontally rather than as subjects positioned hierarchically and antagonistically — some socially alive and others socially dead? The post-humanist materialism we see in *Blood Meridian*, the

work of Foucault, and new materialisms of today should be read as an ideological response to the perceived erosion of the liberal social contract in the era of late capitalism and deindustrialization when more and more groups of people experience structural exclusion from waged labor as well as fall victim to neoliberal forms of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession."[67] The group who has historically enjoyed protections from such forms of exclusion and dispossession, but who today has come to experience late capitalism as a process that erodes the liberal social contract, is the working- and middle-class white settler. If the liberal social contract is the product of coloniality — the right to have rights of property and person is the inversion of the incapacity of colonial peoples to own or possess their lands or bodies — then what it has always meant to be protected by this contract and thus to be counted and included as Human is precisely not to be colonial, which is to say, the object, the outside, the wild, the savage and heathen, or the nonhuman. For post humanist materialism to suggest we are all nonhuman and for this perspective to rise to prominence in the last few years, allegorizes the anxiety of white settlers who in the wake of the processes of accumulation by dispossession and structural unemployment have come to feel as though they have lost what has historically been a white-settler immunity from forms of colonial and racialized structural domination, dispossession and exclusion. In other words, we might read post-humanist materialism as the story of a white settler group experience that expresses the worry that we are all colonial now — that we are all like Fanon when he said: "I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects."[69] Post-humanist materialism's call to overcome the dualism of the human/nonhuman is thus the inverted form of a white-settler anxiety that believes that no longer is white supremacy or the ontological differentation between settlers and colonial peoples respected in late capitalism.

We see this anxiety represented in the brutal way the Judge rapes and kills the kid, who by the end of the novel is a middle-aged man. Nonetheless, if the kid was a scalp hunter by necessity as a dispossessed and displaced poor Tennessee white who travelled West to escape exploitation, in the end he becomes like the Indian he was contracted to murder. That is, just as the Judge had previously raped and killed both an Apache kid, "a strange dark child," and Mexican kid, a "halfbreed boy maybe twelve years old," the Judge does the same to the novel's Anglo American kid.[70] The kid's brutal death at the end of the novel caps the novel's representation of colonialism as an assemblage of shared vulnerability and dispossession: the novel suggests the kid was never immune or protected from colonial violence that he helped to unleash in the first place. He becomes an object of colonial violence among other objects of colonial violence. In this way, the novel projects a white settler fear that the Enlightenment will in the end turn against the human, or, put inversely, that the human might become the Indian, that the white settler might be reduced to the position of structural exclusion and domination in late capitalism.

Still, the novel's point in representing the kid's death as the ultimate example of horizontal dispossession is to develop in readers a sensitivity to this shared nonhuman ontology in order to find ways to come together against the forces like those figured by the Judge that in the end it appears indiscriminately target us all. Yet to suggest that we are all now horizontally dispossessed or that we should no longer consider or critique the colonial division between the human and nonhuman results in erasing and thus legitimating ongoing settler forms of dispossession that dominate and exploit bodies differentially according to land and race. Post-humanist materialism, in other words, rests on the deferral of settler colonial antagonisms, even as the language of the object, the outside, and the nonhuman, which are historical products of coloniality, are invoked to give meaning to the post-humanist assemblage form that promises to lead to more sustainable forms of social belonging in late capitalism. In a recent study of the relationship between object oriented theory, queer theory, and settler colonialism, Jord/ana Rosenberg argues:

> The ontological turn reiterates a version of [a] settler rationality, borrowing — or, rather, capsizing — a set of arguments from queer studies in order to grasp [nonhuman] biology as a kind of sheer queerness … that enshrines a primitive/brink temporal logic while appearing non normative … and resistant to the demands of capitalism's logics of time, discipline, and subject-formation. In this process, the molecular becomes the vehicle for the cleaving of ontology from politics–investing it with a dual temporalization that is simultaneously a dehistoricization.[70]

As Rosenberg suggests, nonhuman ontologies serve as the space of fantasized refuge beyond the social and historical constraints of capitalism in the same way that the frontier wilderness had functioned as a perceived escape from the alienation of modernity. In late capitalism, where it is felt as though the liberal social contract is under attack, white settlers, who come to believe that they are now dispossessed rather than protected, treat the nonhuman, the outside, the wilderness as a productive space where they join colonial bodies in an imagined shared harm that if recognized as such might help create new sustainable and less violent forms of social belonging. Yet in these assemblages, what can't be included, recognized, or affirmed is the political ontology of indigeneity because to do so is to confront how the continued occupation of Indigenous lands and the ongoing production of the Indian as the outside to liberal modernity serve as the condition of possibility for the meanings of the assemblage form as a productive form of social belonging.

Post-humanist materialisms thus come to serve as a settler class fantasy resolving the contradiction of differential exploitation and domination the results from the ongoing role of settler colonialism and racial capitalism in contemporary late capitalism. It imagines racial capitalism and settler colonialism as completed stages

rather than constitutive and continuous processes of the capitalist mode of production. It's the fantasy of building successful coalitions of resistance after difference and alterity have been dissolved in the nonhuman ontologies, it is believed, we mutually share as subjects no longer zoned by colonial difference. In this way, the productive and affirmative politics of post-humanist materialism are a false resolution to the failure of the Left to form a successful alliance politics in late capitalism. Writing around the same time as the publication of *Blood Meridian* and Foucault's work on biopolitics, Frederic Jameson had argued for a critical materialism of social totality as the framework for helping construct a successful alliance politics. Jameson had suggested that "the privileged form in which the American Left can develop today must therefore necessarily be that of an alliance politics; and such a politics is the strict practical equivalent of the concept of totalization on the theoretical level. In practice, then, the attack on the concept of 'totality' in the American framework means the undermining and the repudiation of the only realistic perspective in which a genuine Left could come into being in this country."[71] Jameson's point is that a successful alliance politics would result from the knowledge or experience of the negativity that a materialist framework or aesthetic of social totality provides. This kind of materialist framework involves representing how groups are positioned negatively, differentially, and antagonistically in the structures of colonialism and capitalism in order to avoid what we have witnessed as the limit of a post-humanist materialism that works to achieve gains at one social pole even though it might result in or often remain premised on losses suffered at the other.

Nevertheless, we should not ignore the resemblance of the assemblage form to Marx's notion of "free association." Perhaps the only difference between these similar utopian visions is of course the form of the critical method or aesthetic that represents free associations or creative assemblages as alternatives forms of social belonging. While the post-humanist materialisms found in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Foucault's local analysis, and the new materialisms of today see utopia in the sustainable, creative, and productive spaces of the nonhuman, a critical materialism of social totality that seeks to produce a knowledge of social antagonism sees utopia in the abolition of the colonial and capitalist structures that prevent living in creative assemblages or free associations in the first place. It would be, then, to this latter form of materialist critique that we should turn today if our goal is to achieve a genuine post-humanist world, since it is only after capitalism and colonialism are abolished that we can say we have never been modern.

Notes

1. Important introductions to and edited collections of new materialisms include: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012); Richard Grusin, *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2015). For notable works of new materialism see: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2013); Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2014); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005); Graham Harmon, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010): Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency.* (London: Continuum, 2008); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2003).
2. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 8.
3. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 83.
4. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 117.
5. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Random House, 1985) 330.
6. See Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988); Harold Bloom, "Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Sacred Violence,* ed. Wade Hall and Rich Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press) 205-221.
7. See Neil Campbell, "Liberty beyond Its Proper Bounds: Cormac McCarthy's History of the West in *Blood Meridian*," *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 217–26; John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
8. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 34.
9. *Blood Meridian* 4, 29.
10. *Blood Meridian* 30.
11. Sara Spurgeon, "The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness: Mythic Reconstructions in Blood Meridian," Cormac McCarthy: New Directions. Ed. James D. Lilley (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2002) 75-102, 76.
12. *Blood Meridian* 141.
13. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
14. McCarthy based the character Judge Holden on an actual historical figure of the same name whose role as a co-leader of a group of filibustering scalp hunters in late 1840s is documented in the memoirs of Samuel Chamberlain. Chamberlain was a member of the group and describes "Judge Holden from Texas" as tall, strong, learned, skilled in fighting, and without facial hair, among other things. McCarthy consulted Chamberlain's memoir while researching for *Blood Meridian.* See Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987 [1956]); See also John Emil Sepich, "'What kind of indians was

them?': Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Perspectives On Cormac McCarthy*. eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999).

15. *Blood Meridian* 199-200.

16. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).

17. *Blood Meridian* 199. For more on the history of taxidermy and its role in colonial history see Pauline Wakeham, *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008)

18. *Blood Meridian* 199.

19. *Blood Meridian* 335.

20. David Holloway, "'a false book in no book at all': Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy,* ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 195.

21. Phillip A. Snyder, "Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Western American Literature* 44.2 (2009) 127-39, 128.

22. David Holloway, "Ideology of Representation" 197.

23. *Power/Knowledge* 114-115.

24. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012) 127.

25. *Blood Meridian* 247.

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

27. Phillips 451, 446.

28. Steven Shaviro, "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy,* eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993) 153.

29. *Blood Meridian* 116, 85.

30. *Blood Meridian* 54.

31. Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts" 450.

32. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 6.

33. Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry." *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012) 206, 215.

34. Billy Stratton, "'el brujo es un coyote': Taxonomies of Trauma in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Arizona Quarterly* 67.3 (2011)167.

35. Stephen Tatum, "Spectral Beauty and Forensic Aesthetics in the West." *Western American Literature* 41.2 (2006) 123-145.

36. Stephen Tatum, "Spectral Beauty" 128.

37. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2011) xx.

38. Theodor Adorno, "On Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2010) 189.

39. See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2014); Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire;* Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

40. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks* 6

41. *Blood Meridian* 79.

42. *Blood Meridian* 180.

43. *Blood Meridian* 185.

44. Dan Sinykin, "Evening in America: *Blood Meridian* and the Origins and Ends of Imperial Capitalism," *American Literary History* 28.2 (2016) 375.

45. Dan Sinykin, "Evening in America" 376.

46. *Blood Meridian* 307

47. *Blood Meridian* 276.

48. *Blood Meridian* 66.

49. *Blood Meridian* 137-138.

50. *Blood Meridian* 46.

51. *Blood Meridian* 111

52. *Blood Meridian* 82.

53. *Blood Meridian* 78.

54. Georg Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (College Station: Texas A & M UP, 2004) 101.

55. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 98.

56. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 96; *Power/Knowledge* 97.

57. *Vibrant Matter* 13.

58. Karen Barad, "Interview," *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2012) 69; Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of 'Life Itself' and New Ways of Dying," *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 209-210.

59. See Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8.4 (2006) 387-409.

60. See Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2010).

61. Jodi A. Byrd, *Transit of Empire* 9.

62. Jodi A. Byrd, "Mind the Gap: Indigenous Sovereignty and the Antinomies of Empire," *The Anomie of the Earth: Philosophy, Politics, and Autonomy in Europe and the Americas*, eds. Federico Luisetti, John Pickles, and Wilson Kaiser (Durham: Duke UP, 2016) 123.

63. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* 40.

64. *Red Skin, White Masks* 41.

65. *Vibrant Matter* 109.

66. Byrd, *Transit of Empire* xxvi.

67. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

68. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 89.

69. *Blood Meridian* 116, 161.

70. Jord/ana Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality," *Theory & Event* 17.2 (2014) 4.

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Westworld: Ideology, Simulation, Spectacle

Larry Alan Busk

> It is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality — in late capitalist consumerist society, "real social life" itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in "real" life like stage actors and extras ... Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show."[1]

A smiling face with a microphone is looking into the camera, addressing the audience. We are watching an advertisement; the product being pitched is a vacation, "the vacation of the future — today."[2] The spokesman tells us about Delos, a high-tech amusement park and resort that offers the guest an immersion into a meticulously recreated "world" of the past, with the options of Roman World, Medieval World, and — "of course" — Westworld. Our pitchman solicits testimonials of guests who have just come from a stay at the park. The first is fresh from Westworld: "When you play cowboys and Indians as a kid, you'd point your fingers and go 'bang bang' and the other kid would lie down and pretend dead. Well, Westworld is the same thing — only it's for real!" The man then tells us, with alarming glee: "I shot six people!" The pitchman calmly explains that the guest has actually shot six highly sophisticated androids, amenities of the park designed to look, sound, and bleed just like human beings. "They may have been robots," the guest confirms, "I think they were robots...I mean, I *know* they were robots." For the second testimonial, the best thing about Roman World is "the men"; she describes it as "a warm, glowing place to be." The third endorsement has come from a stint as the "sheriff" of Westworld. When asked if the experience seemed "real," he responds: "It's the realest thing I've ever done."

That Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld* begins with an advertisement is oddly appropriate, not only because it evokes Adorno's claim that every product of the

culture industry "becomes its own advertisement," but also because it immediately establishes the film's central motif: the dialectic of reality and simulation.[3] It is likely that the ostensibly authentic testimonials are actually paid actors reciting prepared lines, but we are led to believe (by the advertisement) that these volunteers chosen at random have spontaneously offered their reviews immediately after a spell at the resort. The promotion is certainly compelling, but upon scrutiny it cannot possibly sit right. Did the production crew show up at an airport and wait around for perfectly articulate, satisfied customers to come along at just the right time in the pitch? The game is up, if we are not already hoodwinked, when the spokesman turns, raises his voice, and asks: "What do you think, folks, was it worth a thousand dollars a day?" and we suddenly see a crowd of enthusiastic people answering in the affirmative. The advertisement for an amusement park that insists so forcefully on its "reality" and authenticity is itself hopelessly contrived and phony, as all advertisements are, and the only possible way not to notice this is to mistake an obvious façade for reality. The advertisement is therefore the perfect introduction to the resort: one counterfeit production trying to sell us another. It is also remarkable that the film begins with what is unambiguously a *commercial* for the amusement park; no character in the film is watching the advertisement — it is addressed *to the audience of the film itself*. Pointing at the camera, the spokesman tells us that, at Delos, "*you* get the choice of the vacation *you* want." It is as though the audience of the film is being sold, not the film, but the vacation. We can even imagine that, if only for a brief time, one might fail to realize that the film has actually started — perhaps this is only another ad one has to sit through before the movie. The opening credits begin only after this initial sequence.

This year (2016), HBO is returning to *Westworld* and producing a series based on its central concept. It is thus an opportune time for critical theory to rediscover this film as well. Though over forty years old, it illuminates (however inadvertently) many of the problems that confront a critical analysis of capitalist society in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first: the ontological and normative status of "reality" as opposed to illusion under the ubiquity of the virtual, the limits of ideology critique in the era of simulation, and the implications of increasingly "spectacular" social relations. Even more interestingly, more contemporary films which more obviously and self-consciously concern these issues (*The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*) do not capture the cultural logic in question as forcefully as *Westworld*. In a sense, Crichton's film is a prophetic cultural document evocative of tendencies that were only nascent at the time of its production, something of an omen for political-cultural phenomena that would only later be fully articulated in theory. In what follows, I attempt to trace these phenomena as expressed in

Westworld and correlate them to three related but distinct moments in critical theory: the early notion of "false consciousness," Baudrillard's theory of the "hyperreal," and Slavoj Žižek's insight into "spectacular reality."

The three "worlds" that make up the Delos amusement park have been "re-created" with precision "down to the smallest detail."[4] The purpose of the resort is not the vicarious nostalgia that comes with visiting medieval castles or western "ghost towns," but the opportunity to exist, temporarily, in a refurnished world. It promises the ability to "relive" the height of decadent imperial Rome, courtly twelfth century Europe, or the lawless American frontier of the 1880's. As the guest, you leave your clothes and belongings in a locker to be retrieved upon exiting the resort. You leave your old life behind for a limited period of time and immerse yourself in a synthetic "old west" or "imperial palace" (notwithstanding one guest's anachronistic eyeglasses). In Westworld, the primary setting of the film, one gets a real gun and holster, a cowboy hat, and spurs. The food, whiskey, and rustic accommodations are all realistic. There are barroom fights, bank robberies, and jailbreaks. There is a colorful cast of predictable old west characters to interact with — all uncannily lifelike androids: a crusty hotel bellhop, a maternal hotel proprietress, a terse bartender, a sheriff, and a madam. One can even have sex with a robotic prostitute.[5]

The inability of the guests — and, by extension, the audience — to distinguish reality from spurious reproduction is introduced immediately (the first "testimonial" and the opening sequence in general) and is revisited almost ad nauseam. Early on, what we initially perceive as the camera flowing by stretches of terrain is revealed, through a zoom, to be a reflected image in a character's sunglasses. When we meet the film's two protagonists, Peter and John (Richard Benjamin and James Brolin), they are discussing Westworld's authenticity, the skeptical and curious Peter directing questions to John, a repeat visitor. When the two men are greeted by attendants transporting them to the park, Peter is unsure if they are robots or not; "probably," says John. A similar exchange occurs when they encounter the android prostitutes: "Are those two girls *machines*?" "Now how can you say a thing like that?"[6]

Westworld, as well as the other attractions of Delos, represent the most successful kind of imitation: one that has become, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from the real. It is not that the resort is literally mistaken for the actual bygone worlds to which it corresponds, but that it cannot be called "fake" insofar as the quality and experience of the copy are identical to the original; Peter cannot tell if he is having sex with a person or with a machine — is he having "fake" sex? It is this essential factor that makes the resort a simulation in Baudrillard's sense and not simply a replica: "[P]retending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact; the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.'"[7] The occasional reminder that the entire thing is a charade (John: "It may look rough, but it's still just a resort") is offset by more frequent remarks about its "reality" or authenticity. Peter

confesses at one point: "I almost believe all of this." John's reply cuts right to the heart of the film: "Why not? It's as real as anything else." That Westworld is not "really" the old west does not seem to matter, or else it is forgotten. The park is selling much more than amusement; it is selling an immerssive escape into a false world that blurs into a true world, into a "virtual reality." For a price, one can bracket the real world and live the simulation. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of Delos. As the daily life of contemporary capitalist society becomes increasingly bland and monotonous, administered and uniform, the excitement and escape offered by the exotic simulated worlds is irresistible, and for this reason almost "believable." We know that Peter is a lawyer from Chicago; we are unsure of John's profession or of the nature of their relationship. But we can assume that they live typically mundane professional lives, with enough disposable income for Delos but not enough imagination for anything but flat conversation. It is no wonder that for the third testimonial, "a stockbroker from St. Louis," his stay in Westworld felt like the "realest" time in his life, even while it was actually, to be sure, the most systematically contrived and fabricated.

The imitation-cum-reality aspect of the ersatz worlds also feeds on fantasies and childish fixations. Westworld in particular aims to bring childhood play to life — recall the first testimonial who likens the park to a "real" version of his boyhood "cowboys and Indians" game. We can also see John reading a copy of a dime-store western novelette, "The Brimstone Kid." This juvenile regression is juxtaposed with the more sinister, adult themes of the park. Recall here the second testimonial's not-so-subtle allusion to her sexual gratification. In all three worlds, there seems to be a delight not only in unhindered sexual abandon but also in violence. The resort is something of a playground of aggression. It is part of the "amusement" of Westworld to murder others in arbitrary, pointless saloon disputes. In a key scene, our heroes encounter The Gunslinger (Yul Brynner), an android seemingly designed for no other purpose than to provoke classic "old west" shootouts. When the robot taunts Peter, John is overly anxious to see his friend in a duel. "Go on," he says, "*kill him.*" Peter fires at the Gunslinger several times and produces large amounts of blood. "Pretty realistic, huh?" says John. Of course, both men know that the confrontation was only imaginary and that the violence is without any real consequence. Peter has killed an android, not a person.[8]

This brings us to a key aspect of the resort (and the film): it offers a safe and controlled version of dangerous and unforgiving situations. The brutality of the real worlds to which the resort corresponds is neutralized, whitewashed, made harmless, sterilized. You are a cowboy and not a penniless prospector, a king and not a serf, a noble and not a slave. No one would visit Westworld if it meant being a malnourished prostitute; Medieval World would be deserted if one had to actually till the fields. Insofar as the amusement park is designed for amusement, the advertised "immersion" into another world is not so much an immersion into the world alleged as an immersion into the glossy caricature of these worlds as seen in Hollywood films

and Arthurian legend (only with more explicit sex and violence). The very word "gunslinger" is in fact a creation of western movies and was not used in the nineteenth century. The "recreation" promised by Delos is therefore disingenuous in at least two respects: what is "recreated" is not the old west or imperial Rome "as it really was," but 1) as it appears in mollifying fantasies fed by folklore and sugarcoated media, and 2) in a completely controlled environment in which one cannot be harmed. This must necessarily collapse the "real" or "almost believable" dimension at play, but no effort is made to conceal this particular infidelity to the authenticity of the park. On the contrary, upon arrival an overbearing voice on an intercom tells us that "nothing can go wrong." "There's no way to get hurt," John assures Peter, "Just enjoy yourself." Beyond the dramatic irony given the ending of the film, this constant reassurance of safety — of the true lack of a threat in the officially threatening worlds they have chosen to visit — underlines the guests' expectation of comfort and security, the standard of convenience and well-being that goes without saying for anyone able to afford a vacation at Delos.

The interplay of reality and deceptive appearance, so visible in *Westworld*, is a familiar trope of the strain of critical theory that focuses on the critique of "ideology." There is no one way of understanding this concept or the terms of its examination.[9] In one interpretation, ideology names the systematic organization of cultural, social, and political symbols that serves to legitimate and/or sustain the present relations of production and exchange; for Althusser it is "an imaginary 'representation' of individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence,"[10] and needs "state apparatuses" in order to function. In other conceptions, ideology is a nexus of false appearances that conceals some more fundamental reality or truth. It is a kind of smokescreen that masks the violence, exploitation, oppression, and ecological devastation upon which the system is based. This system can perpetuate itself, according to this model, because it keeps our gaze focused on the ideology and away from the real. W.F. Haug captures this moment: "[D]omination over people is effected through their fascination with technically produced artificial appearances."[11] The world of capital can maintain its contradictory mode of operation only insofar as it maintains what Guy Debord calls its "monopoly of appearance."[12] It is in this framework that a notion like "false consciousness" gains currency and meaning. Marx's discussion of "commodity fetishism" in *Capital*, arguably the *locus classicus* of ideology critique, is a bit different. When a commodity appears in circulation, the labor embodied in it disappears, recedes, is forgotten; what is essentially a product of labor and of the relationship between persons "takes on the fantastic appearance of a relation between things." In other words, the encounter of the commodity divorced from any reference to its production *obscures the reality* of this production; this mystification is not the result of an intentional or accidental obfuscation of the truth, but a "spontaneous" and necessary result of the logic of the commodity form under capitalism.[13] As later commentators like Rahel Jaeggi have pointed out, fetishism is not

simply false, but "necessarily false" — or, in Adorno's oft-quoted phrase, "both true and false."[14] In other words, capital has produced a system in which the mystification of fetishism takes on a peculiar kind of "truth."

No matter what the schema, ideology critique thematizes the relationship between appearance and reality insofar as it pertains to the conditions for the possibility of the reproduction of capitalism.[15] Its key phrase is "as if." To quote Haug again: in ideology, "[people] experience their existence in [capitalist] society *as if* it were an apolitical natural state."[16] This description would hold to varying degrees for Gramsci's discussion of "hegemony," Lukács's "reification," and Horkheimer and Adorno's "culture industry."[17] Essential to all of these conceptions is the idea that insofar as ideology has a causally efficacious role in the reproduction of a society (and is therefore materially embodied), ideology is "real" in a decisive sense. Existence is not actually apolitical, but it is actually experienced "as if." As Althusser says, ideology is both an illusion that conceals reality and an *allusion* to its character.[18]

We have discussed the appeal of Delos as an escape for the clientele, a temporary (and privileged) release from their dreary realities into a fantastic dreamlike world, supplemented by the acting out of childish fantasies and violent, sexual urges (the relationship between political repression and the insights of psychoanalysis has been explored at great length — Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* is among the best). We have also analyzed the duplicitous nature of the resort, which goes to great lengths to appear authentic and to camouflage its obvious forgery. The "reality" of the park, from a certain perspective, amounts to a systematically manufactured illusion, an organization of symbols designed to produce a dissembling appearance. This is made evident when we visit the cold and sterile underbelly of Delos, the "control room," the computerized apparatus that supports its daily functioning. Out of sight of the guests, every action of the androids is puppeteered and all aspects of the park are supervised (the resort is something of a panopticon — they are always watching). The dead refuse is swept away underground clandestinely at the end of the day. The world is controlled from beneath by unseen forces behind the scenes, but we see only the appearance. (Strangely enough, Peter himself is "activated" (he wakes up) at the same time as the rest of the resort.) As critical theory says of the ideological relations of capitalist society, the guests of Westworld are kept at a comfortable distance from the reality of what is happening: the waste produced by the park is made invisible, all actions are without real consequence, security and stability are assured. Forces that are not immediately observable sustain both the illusion and its pretense to reality, "as if" the park ran on its own as a "natural state." The *telos* of this apparatus is reproduction — the reproduction of the park from the point of view of the realization of profit. Yet the "illusions" of the park, like ideology, are not simply and strictly "false" or "fake." We have asked questions like this: is Peter's sex with the mechanical prostitute "unreal"? Is the liquor served in the saloons "false liquor"? Are the bar brawls mere imaginings? Ideology has a certain material reality even if it is, to a greater or lesser

extent, a mystification. Delos is "still just a resort," but it is "as real as anything else."

The matter is even more complicated than this, however, and the deceptive appearance/troubling reality distinction has its limits as a critical tool in examining the cultural logic of capitalism — and in analyzing *Westworld*. Earlier we evoked this distinction made by Baudrillard: a simulation is not merely something false masquerading as real, but that which dissolves the line between real and false. For Baudrillard, the semiotic phenomenon most characteristic of contemporary capitalist society is not a false representation of the real (even one which is nevertheless "real in a sense"), but a representation without a corresponding referent, "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[19] Although Delos is at least some kind of mystification, it is not exactly an "appearance" of something real. It is Baudrillard's "pure simulacrum": a simulation without a simulated, a mask without a face behind it. What is being recreated is itself an imaginary world (the west of old movies and the medieval castles of folklore) and not reality. In other words, what is being recreated was never really a creature. And, as mentioned above, its virtue as a simulation is that it challenges the very distinction between real and unreal, between ideology and reality. The guests of Westworld know that they are only taking a vacation in a high-tech amusement park, but to a certain extent they are unable to tell what is flesh and what is synthetic — "that's the beauty of this place," says John, "It doesn't matter." He is right, but traditional critical theory would interpret his comment in this way: it does not matter if the bartender is a human or an android — he still serves drinks. This happens to such an extent that the guests' discriminating sense of "reality" falters and the playacting becomes real for them ("I almost believe all this," "it's the realest thing I've ever done"). But Baudrillard would read John's remark differently: the inability to distinguish between factitious representation and genuine article is a non-issue because *the representation refers to no genuine article*. Delos should advertise itself, then, not as a model of a past world, but as pure fantasy, a hyperreal, simulation.

In a well-known analysis, Baudrillard calls on Borges's image of the cartographers of an empire who make a map so meticulously detailed that it covers its territory completely, eventually wearing and decomposing such that vestiges of the real landscape appear beneath the tatters of the copy. Baudrillard first inverts the story: today, it is the real that copies the copy, and it is the former that is in a state of disintegration. He then suggests that even this inversion is misleading, as it supposes a clearly enough defined division between the original and the imitation.[20] On first inspection, Delos is an illusion draped over reality — the map covering the territory, though not without cracks and fissures. On another level, Westworld *is* the world, and that which is outside of it ("it's just a resort" — real life is elsewhere) is rendered irrelevant or is rapidly dissolving. Finally, any declaration about the inauthenticity or quasi-reality of the park becomes a non-sequitur — "it's as real as anything else."

About halfway through the film, something unsettling begins happening at Delos.

The "failure and breakdown rate" of the androids begins to rise above expected and anticipated levels. In an interesting scene, the technicians of the park discuss this development. They are unable to pinpoint the cause of the rise in malfunctions, which are becoming increasingly "central" rather than "peripheral," and liken the new wave of breakdowns to "an infectious disease process" — a "disease of machinery." The chief technician worries about the resort's ability to stabilize and maintain "homeostasis." Then something even more peculiar begins happening. Rather than simply malfunctioning, the androids begin to stop following programming. A robotic rattlesnake strikes and bites John (he is furious — "that's not supposed to happen!"), and a buxom maidservant in Medieval World ("a sex model") refuses the advances of a guest. Despite these troubling incidents, the management of Delos decides against closing the resort, citing the compelling argument: "Everything's fine."

Then, suddenly, the simulated world breaks down completely. The artificial characters of the amusement park go berserk — or, rather, they begin acting *as they would in real life*. The violent reality of the worlds supposedly depicted creeps in. A guest in Medieval World is stabbed to death in a swordfight with "the black knight." John is shot and killed, and Peter is chased by The Gunslinger. The all too cruel truth behind the illusion — or, rather, the ostensible "real" short-circuited by the simulation — comes to life and hunts him down. It is at this point that he discovers the "underworld" of the park as he is chased from one world to another, finally managing to subdue his attacker in a medieval dining hall.

The constitutive instability of the capitalist system is another familiar theme in the critical literature, as is its tendency to withstand this instability by virtue of ideological integration. In the twentieth century, critical attention shifted from the production of capitalism to its reproduction, its ability to maintain equilibrium despite internal antagonisms and contradictions (the chief technician at Delos is worried about "homeostasis"), which we have touched upon already. Theories of ideology are attempts at understanding how a system based on exploitation and domination manages to sustain and reproduce itself.[21] The collapse of the capitalist mode of production — the breakdown of its ability to reproduce itself — must then be concomitant with an ideological collapse, and with the disintegration of the "monopoly of appearance" discussed above (or, in the case of Baudrillard's analysis, with the revelation that the simulation refers to nothing). This is what happens, in a certain sense and to a certain extent, to Peter and the other guests in *Westworld*. The insulated, protected, and predictable world they have invested in ceases to function in the desired and expected way. They are unable to account for unforeseen deviations in the system ("That's not supposed to happen!"). The actual violence of the worlds supposedly represented by Delos is revealed, along with the automated system that clandestinely controls it.

There is something unique about the situation presented in this film, however, something that distinguishes it from other (superficially) thematically similar pieces

like *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*. Here, the intrusion of reality which destroys the ideology *is the very realization of the ideology itself*. It is not some truth hidden behind the fantasy that bursts through and destroys it, but rather the dreamlike fantasy itself that becomes a living nightmare. The medieval knight *really* wields his sword; the Gunslinger no longer loses every duel. We could even say that the androids do not "malfunction"; the problem is that they begin functioning too well. The guests are not exactly "disillusioned"; the frightening, terrible thing is precisely that their illusion is consummated. What we have described as the dialectic of reality and simulation in *Westworld* comes to an end here, and it is at the same time this moment of analysis which represents the most innovative form of the critique of ideology.

The best representative of this form is Žižek, and it is succinctly expressed in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. In taking up Badiou's concept of "the passion for the real," he argues that, in late capitalist culture, this passion manifests itself in a peculiar and contradictory way:

> [T]he fundamental paradox of the "passion for the Real" [is that] it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle* [...] If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the "postmodern" passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.[22]

His focal point of discussion here is the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, and the interpretation according to which this event represents a calamitous intrusion of "the real" into a culture of appearance and illusion. In Žižek's view, this interpretation misses something crucial. He points out that the hideous violence of the attacks is intimately familiar to us *qua spectacle* from both Hollywood disaster movies and from documentary footage of "third world" atrocities. This ubiquitous violence, our voyeuristic consumption of which is a manifestation of our "passion for the real," only shows itself to us as an image on film and television screens; the "real" is thus made spectacular and it is this spectral image of the real for which we are "passionate." In other words, the "theatrical spectacle" meant to embody the real is actually designed to keep the real at a safe distance. The World Trade Center attacks, then, represent the calamitous intrusion of appearance into reality and not vice-versa:

> We should invert the standard reading according to which the [World Trade Center] explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory sphere: quite the reverse — it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen — and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition

entered our reality. It was not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality.[23]

Žižek's analysis of September 11 and "the passion for the real" captures the cultural-political phenomenon that, in my reading, is thematized and made explicit in *Westworld*. The key feature of the prevailing ideological system is not a false representation of a concealed reality, or a simulated appearance with no underlying referent (although these are still important facets — just as they are at Delos), but rather a reality *made into a spectacle and thus deflated as a reality*. Just as in Westworld or Roman World, our affluence and comfortable distance enables us to vicariously experience devastating situations without really being involved in them and with none of the consequences, be it in violent films and television, documentary evidence of atrocities "elsewhere," or video games designed to simulate real-life wars. Put differently: we get to be in the world without really being in the world. This powerful ideological haze breaks down when what we are only able to understand as a spectacular simulation boomerangs and asserts itself in our reality, as when terrorists crash a plane into the World Trade Center or when someone opens fire at a movie theater during a screening of the latest superhero film. In yet other words: the moment of greatest trauma is not when the simulation breaks down, but when the simulation becomes real. The Delos amusement park poses a threat and becomes a catastrophe only when its promise of authenticity is fulfilled. As the guests, we wanted to experience an authentic reality — but in a controlled and disinfected way, as a playground for our childish fantasies and obsessions, the potential danger involved in the situation carefully neutralized. As Žižek says: "The problem with the twentieth-century 'passion for the Real' was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*."[24] This is precisely an ideological moment because the spectacular dissociation and deflation of this reality serves to reproduce the very system that generates it.

It is impossible to assign a date to the ideological developments under discussion here; we cannot say that the form analyzed by Baudrillard became dominant in such-and-such year or that Žižek's "deflation" hypothesis is only relevant after the advent of video games or the internet. It is nevertheless remarkable that *Westworld* illustrates what I have called the most innovative moment of this theme as early as 1973, decades before other less complex and more popular reality/appearance fables (*The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*). It does so better than any film to my knowledge. We have gone from a "monopoly of appearances" that conceals the real, to a "hyperreal" of representations with no corresponding reality, to a "spectacular real" the actualization of which represents the most dangerous calamity, and *Westworld* has followed us every step of the way — or, rather, we have followed it. My claim about these aspects of the film is not about authorial intent or some epistemic privilege of the 1970's. If Crichton's movie represents the ideological complexity of the political-cultural present, it does so "spontaneously."

At the very end of the film, after Peter has defeated The Gunslinger, he hears the soft whimpers of a young woman pleading for help from the Medieval World dungeon. Like a true chivalric hero, he unties her and carries her to safety. When he tries to give her water, however, the circuitry inside of her mouth cracks and fizzes. She is an android. Peter backs away and looks on with silent horror. We have said more than once that one of the constitutive factors of Delos is that it confuses the distinction between reality and counterfeit, between true and false. Its threat may be more than this: it may destroy the ability to experience any reality whatsoever. After slaying The Gunslinger, Peter thinks that his ordeal is over and that he has survived relatively unscathed; everyone else is either dead or a robot run out of power. But the encounter with the mechanical damsel in distress is the most traumatic of all. She represents not only the completed dissolution of his ability to distinguish between what is imposture and what is real, even after the amusement park is completely broken down and the live threat overcome, but the recognition that the pervasiveness of dissimulation may have permanently disintegrated his sense of reality. This encounter, I fear, illustrates the crisis that a critique of ideology faces today: that as the spectacle, or the "monopoly of appearance," or the "hyperreal" becomes more ubiquitous and overwhelming, our ability to interpret and incorporate real events (like the Trade Center attacks or the Aurora theater shootings) in all of their trauma and tragedy will gradually wither and diminish. They become just another spectacular series of images, like our slasher films or gangster video games. Our sense of the real may be irrevocably damaged, and it is possible that no event is capable of returning it. As this process of deflation continues, it is not only catastrophic events like September 11 that lose their urgent sense of reality, but even the mundane experiences of everyday life. Žižek again offers a helpful formulation: "What happens at the end of this process of virtualization… is that we begin to experience 'real reality' itself as a virtual entity."[25] We no longer experience the simulation as real; we experience the real as a simulation. Peter's final, chilling experience confirms what John said about Delos earlier in the film: "It's as real as anything else" — that is, not at all.

One of the bittersweet pleasures of *Westworld* is to observe that what goes on *before* the robots malfunction and start killing is actually more disturbing than what goes on after. No one seems to notice the despicable nature of the park: the sheer delight in random violence and coercive sex, the disingenuous hypocrisy of a "meticulous recreation" that suspends its authenticity wherever it counts, and the prospect of forming a relationship with a person who just might not be a person. There is something altogether sinister, and yet not at all unfamiliar, about this simulated world where childish fantasy is allowed free reign, where one can experience violence without being in real danger, and where the entire spectacle assumes the air of reality — or, even more, when it effects the erasure of a meaningful divide between the real and the spectacular. The first half of the film is more disturbing not only because of the dramatic irony in knowing the second half, but because it cannot help but remind

us of ourselves. This film is much more than another "cautionary tale" about the dangers of technology, and, whatever his intentions, more than a vehicle for Crichton to explore "chaos theory." It is rather an apologue for the multi-faceted ideology that sustains our present way of life. *We are living in Westworld*. We must be dimly aware, just as the guests at Delos are, that our stay is temporary, and, perhaps, not as safe as proclaimed. Yet we are seduced by the siren song of the commercial spokesman who speaks to us at the beginning of the film; it is a "warm, glowing place to be" and we "almost believe it." We know that the advertisement is itself phony, and that the smiling face with a microphone looking into the camera is only an actor. But if this knowledge is too burdensome — "Boy, have we got a vacation for you!"

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) 13-14.

2. All film quotes are from *Westworld*, directed by Michael Crichton (MGM, 1973).

3. Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991) 100.

4. Although contemporary English is still spoken in both Medieval World and Roman World.

5. It is unclear, and never alluded to in the film, what would attract women guests to Westworld.

6. The mechanics of this sexual encounter are left to the viewer's imagination. In any case, the impersonal, transaction-like quality of prostitution is compounded, exemplified by the terrifying moment when the cybernetic courtesan mechanically opens her eyes during the act.

7. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U of Michigan, 1994.) 3.

8. The "plot holes" of this film are many. We are told that the firearms have "sensing devices" that prevent them from firing on anything "with a high body temperature." This is to prevent the guests turning their guns on one another. But why is this device not also installed on the guns of the androids? Even more, why give the androids live ammunition in the first place?

9. For an anthology of perspectives, see *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994).

10. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014) 181.

11. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics,* trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 45.

12. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. anonymous (Detroit: Black & Red Press, 1983) 12.

13. See Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 163-177. See also in Marx: "All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance…which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation." *Capital Volume One*.

14. Rahel Jaeggi, "Rethinking Ideology," trans. Eva Engels, in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 68, 66.

15. This theme shows up as recently as David Harvey's *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, where "perhaps the most important contradiction of all" is "that between reality and appearance in the world in which we live" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 4.

16. W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* 98.

17. See: Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971) 83-222. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5-14.Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983) 94-136.

18. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 181.

19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 1.

20. *Simulacra and Simulation* 1-2.

21. This kind of analysis is already present in a nascent form in Marx. See *Capital*, 711-724.

22. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 9-10.

23. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 16.

24. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real,* 24.

25. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 11. See also: "[T]he dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real', to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition."* (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 19).

On Raymond Williams: Complexity, Immanence, and the Long Revolution

Daniel Hartley

The work of Raymond Williams is at risk of becoming residual at the very historical moment it could enable true emergence.[1] From the current explosion of social reproduction theory to the nascent development of world-ecology, from the gradual break-up of Britain that has enabled the emergence of socialist-inflected nationalisms, to the wave of collective struggles that have exploded across the world since 2011, the work of Raymond Williams has "got there before us again"[2] and is now more timely than ever.[3] Yet the commentary on Williams — as in Geoff Dyer's recent introduction to Verso's important reissue of *Politics and Letters* — is often bogged down in sentimental biographical nostalgia. This 'residual' construction of Williams is drastically partial:[4] it focuses solely on those passages of his work emphasising the importance of 'experience' or autobiography, failing to connect them to the broader project of politico-philosophical speculation in which they are embedded. Even more insidiously, Tristram Hunt's recent article on the occasion of the Penguin Vintage Classics reissue of *The Country and the City* attempts to co-opt Williams into a project of reconstitution of English national identity — the very Englishness that Williams, a self-described "Welsh European," consistently revealed to be part of a specific ruling-class formation.[5] Hunt goes so far as to suggest — bizarrely — that Williams's work would have provided a much-needed dose of "realism" to Occupy protestors led astray by the utopian pronouncements of Antonio Negri and David Graeber.

The present article attempts to counteract this dual tendency of residualisation and incorporation by reconstructing the systematic unity of Williams's life's work.[6] While this runs the risk of a certain 'synchronic' or — in Williams's terms — 'epochal' bias, it is necessary if we are to retain a sense of the wholeness of Williams's vision. To do so is important both to our sense of his overall political project and, arguably, to our capacity to think and intervene in the complicated totality of our own historical present. In other words, I believe that reconstructing a sense of the integral whole of Williams's oeuvre is a precondition of his continued actuality — a necessary ground-

clearing operation prior to more substantial elaborations of Williams's multiple connections to our contemporary concerns. One way of articulating this wholeness is via two seemingly banal maxims that I believe inform his work at all levels: Firstly, the world is more complex than you think it is (the maxim of complexity); secondly, you are in it (the maxim of immanence).

For the remainder of the article I shall attempt to educe the meanings of these two maxims and the ways in which they inform his theory of the 'long revolution.' In doing so, I hope to shed new light on some of his best-known concepts, such as the 'structure of feeling,' and to emphasise aspects of his work that have been hitherto neglected — not least the centrality of his lifelong engagement with naturalist drama. What follows is not intended as an introduction to his work, nor should it be taken to suggest that the maxims of complexity and immanence usurp other more canonical concepts (e.g., "cultural materialism" or "dominant, residual, and emergent") as the "keywords" of Williams's oeuvre. Rather, it is an attempt to articulate the informing logic that unifies and animates his overall project.

Maxim of Complexity

The word "complexity" has its own complex history. Originating in the Latin *complexus*, the past participle of *complectere* meaning "embrace" or "comprise," 'complex' entered the English language in the mid-seventeenth century. It rose to prominence as a theoretical term in the fields of philosophy of science and cybernetics in the mid-twentieth century. In an article entitled "Science and Complexity" (1948), Warren Weaver argued that science up to 1900 had focused on "problems of simplicity" involving only two variables, whereas the science of the first half of the twentieth century had developed powerful techniques of probability theory and statistical mechanics to deal with "problems of disorganized complexity" comprising billions of variables.[7] The task for the coming decades was then to devise a method for understanding mid-range complexity, located between simplicity and disorganized complexity, which he called "organized complexity."[8] For Weaver, complexity is thus a problem of scientific epistemology and method, linked primarily to situations comprising multiple variables.

In the sociology of Niklas Luhmann, however, complexity assumes a different meaning. Influenced by Talcott Parsons's 'structural functionalism,' Luhmann came to define the problem of complexity as that "of the threshold beyond which each element [of an environment] can no longer be connected with every other."[9] This "enforces selectivity, which in turn leads to a reduction of complexity via the formation of systems that are less complex than their environment."[10] Complexity for Luhmann is thus not so much an ontological condition as the retrospective projection of that from which a system differentiates itself. A system exists only to the extent that it maintains this process of self-differentiation; social systems are ultimately nothing but internally automated operations of self-reproduction. Perry Anderson

has provocatively described Luhmann's sociology as a "tacit construction of the Bonn Republic as a matter-of-fact complex of so many mechanisms of technocratic routine."[11] Where Parsons's structural functionalism, purged of all social contradiction, was a sociology appropriate to "the optimism of American capitalism in the epoch of its world supremacy,"[12] Luhmann's was a "saturnine variant" of Parsons, correlative to a Federal Republic based on consensus and "devoted to banality and blandness."[13]

This schematic overview is intended simply to suggest that the maxim of complexity informing Williams's work bears no substantial or political relation to Luhmannian sociology or systems theory more generally.[14] Complexity in the work of Williams is part of "lived culture"[15] or "the socio-cultural process,"[16] which consists of a potentially infinite number of social and artistic practices, relationships, values, and documents. The potential infinity of practices and values naturally exceeds the documents in which they are recorded. This means that from one historical period to another, all that will survive of the previous period is its "recorded culture."[17] Yet the very survival of recorded culture depends on the construction of what Williams calls "selective traditions": "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and pre-shaped present," it is not a neutral selection from previous periods, but "a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present."[18] Thus, Williams's social ontology always presupposes two interconnecting levels: a present in which the totality of potentially infinite social relationships and activities intersect, and an overdetermination of this present by a selective tradition, which is active within it and attempts to suture it to a selected past. Our contact with the past is then doubly limited: the recorded culture of any period is only a very small part of its total human activity, but even this part has been radically selected by the selective tradition. Hence the political importance of the maxim of complexity, encapsulated in one of the most emphatic passages of Williams's oeuvre: "*no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention.*"[19] Neither a problem of epistemology nor an excess of environment over system, complexity for Williams is the socio-ontological fact of the potential infinity — and infinite multiplicity — of human practices.

Williams's emphasis on complexity is both political and methodological: it is an attempt to produce a theory adequate to the discontinuities and potentialities of the *present* with a view to intervening into it towards a complex, common future. In developing and refining his major conceptual innovation, the "structure of feeling," Williams would further elaborate his theory of those elements of social complexity that are usually overlooked by what he calls "epochal" analysis.[20] The latter treats cultural processes as *systems*, thereby perpetuating the politically and methodologically fatal notion that dominant social orders do in fact exhaust all human practice and intention. As we shall see, his attack on epochal analysis is critical not only to his attempt to locate sources of resistance in the present, but also to his understanding

of the post-revolutionary process which, if it is to endure, must not be reduced to the simple seizure — and subsequent optimistic withering — of state power.

By the time of *Marxism and Literature*, Williams had come to define structure of feeling as "social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available."[21] He was concerned to capture those elements of social life which are still in process, still emergent, and which are irreducible to pre-existent ("precipitated") modes of thought or representation, but which are nonetheless not pure anarchic flux: they possess a "structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions"[22] and "specific internal relations."[23]

Williams developed the concept of 'structure of feeling' through a lifelong investigation of the politico-philosophical implications of literary style. This is clear from one of his earliest formulations of the concept:

> All serious thinking about art must begin from two apparently contradictory facts: that an important work is always, in an irreducible sense, individual; and yet that there are authentic communities of works of art, in kinds, periods and styles ... The individual dramatist has done this, yet what he [*sic*] has done is part of what we then know about a general period or style.
>
> It is to explore this essential relationship that I use the term "structure of feeling."[24]

Structure of feeling is thus located at the crossroads of two problems commonly associated with style. The first concerns individual style: the precise relation of an individual work or writer to collective literary conventions such as forms and genres. The second pertains to period style, or the general issue of periodizing and of generationality as such — that ineffable quality common to a distinct number of disparate phenomena at a certain point in time. In teasing out some of the wider implications of these issues, I shall refer to the first as the problem of transindividual subjectivity, and the second as that of historical temporality.

Williams's theory of style began with an investigation of the problem of speech in naturalist drama. Drawing on and criticizing the ideologies of language contained in the Leavisite journal *Scrutiny* and the influential writings of T. S. Eliot, he argued that the basic problem faced by dramatists (traced throughout *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht* [1968]) is that "once a certain level of conversational speech is set, you can never move beyond it: people are confined to its limits at moments when a greater intensity of expression is needed."[25] At the other extreme, however, "[w]hat becomes intolerable is either the adoption of an overall verse form which pitches everything at the level of myth, or the descent from the metaphysical to the trivial within a

uniform verse medium, such as you find in Eliot's later plays."[26] Thus, if a dramatist faithfully reproduces probable human speech, she risks an inadequacy of expression at crucial moments of intensity, but if she pitches her diction at too uniformly formal a level, she risks either negating the naturalist ideals of verisimilitude or of inviting comically bathetic switches from the sublime to the everyday.[27] It is no wonder, then, that Williams's implicit ideal of dramatic speech, from first to last, was an integration of multiple stylistic levels. Such an ideal would aim to produce a style adequate to the expression of the entire range of human feeling, from the seemingly most personal and pre-conscious affective fluctuation to the most officially, formally, and publicly recognized emotions.

Williams had long noticed the significance in naturalist drama of the domestic setting:

> It is perhaps a particular stage of bourgeois society, in which the decisive action is elsewhere, and what is lived out, in these traps of rooms, are the human consequences: in particular, the consequences of a relatively leisured society. To stare from a window at where one's life is being decided: that consciousness is specific […] The rooms are not there to define the people, but to define what they seem to be, what they cannot accept they are.[28]

Contrary to ancient Greek drama, which was characterised by an innate total stylistic integration,[29] the linguistic embodiment of this bourgeois structure of feeling is a style condemned to superficiality, one that is forced to hint at hidden depths of experience beneath what is actually articulated, and in constant danger of mere "wished significance."[30] As Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko once observed of the plays of Chekov, "[t]he dialogue the author has written is merely a pale reflection of those emotions, their outward manifestation, which still leaves a great deal over."[31] That Williams felt this was an untenable situation is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it was central to his whole conception of drama, in that his work exhibited a lifelong search for styles that would embody a "total form"— a modern equivalent of the ancient Greek totality of expression.[32] Yet it was also a constitutive aspect of his sustained critique of contemporary Marxist approaches to culture (which, in his view, were essentially variations on the base-superstructure model). These approaches all depended on "a *known* history, a known *structure*, known *products*"[33] — on internally complete systems of thought with an assumed fully achieved articulation without remainder. What such approaches to culture thus ignored was precisely that realm of pre-articulated transindividual experience at which naturalist drama was constantly forced to hint and in response to which Williams developed his theory of the "structure of feeling": "social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are evidently and more

immediately available."[34] Thus, Williams's recognition of the constitutive inadequacy of linguistic expression in early naturalist drama simultaneously provided his key line of attack — and, ultimately, the basic trajectory of his attempted reconstruction — of Marxist theories of literature and culture. It was also the source of his antipathy to those enthusiasts of revolution who believe that the seizure of the organs of the state was sufficient to achieving enduring social transformation; what such a view underestimates is the hidden depth of our social attachments and alignments — that which the eloquent silences of naturalist drama made apparent.

The problem of transindividual experience is also inherently connected to the issue of historical temporality. This covers topics ranging from historicism to the nature of modernity that arise from the attempt to theorize period styles. In its most basic form, it asks how it is possible simultaneously to think the sameness of heterogeneous phenomena unified by a single historical principle, and the difference that emerges with the advent of historical novelty. Williams attempted to do just this by developing a theory of historical temporality based on an expanded notion of inheritance.

When he returned to Cambridge after the war to complete his studies, he felt it had become an alien world: the people here seemed to speak a different language from the Cambridge he had known before.[35] In the context of this feeling of alienation — one in which the seemingly unproblematic political optimism of the 1930s had given way to a wave of political apostasy — Williams experienced a powerful connection to the drama of Ibsen, whom he studied for many months while producing a fifteen thousand word thesis for the Tripos. The intensity of this connection is significant: Williams says overtly that the central structure of feeling of Ibsen's plays — that everybody is defeated, but that this does not cancel the validity of the impulse that moved them — was precisely his own structure of feeling from 1945 to 1951.[36] He even goes so far as to state that it was Ibsen's plays which "protected him from the rapid retreat from the thirties" which his former Party comrades were now performing, and that it was at this time that "a quite different personality emerged, very unlike [his] earlier self."[37] The importance of Ibsen's plays in the formation of Williams's intellectual and political project is thus central because they touched the roots of his deepest personal and political commitments.

Their thematic material also provided him with the basis for some of his theoretical concepts. That is, Williams translated certain dramatic themes from Ibsen's plays into a theoretical register. The most important of these was the theme of filial inheritance: from financial bequeathement and indebtedness to genetic diseases.[38] I believe there are three reasons why this theme appealed to Williams so intensely. Firstly, F. R. Leavis's mode of literary criticism — the mode which affected Williams most deeply — was one based on the construction of lines of literary inheritance, which Leavis called either "traditions" or "bearings."[39] Secondly, as we have already seen, the situation of postwar Cambridge confronted Williams with the starkest possible embodiment of the discrepancy between two generations — that is, his obsession

with generationality was born from the unique historical circumstances of his return to Cambridge. Finally, as his autobiographical novel, *Border Country* (1960), testifies, Williams himself felt his relation to his own father to be torn between biological inheritance and social inheritance, this latter being disrupted by the changing patterns of economic development (whereby fathers no longer pass on knowledge of a specific trade to a child who will follow in their footsteps). Consequently, Williams was attuned to Ibsen's broadening of 'inheritance' from the primarily familial sphere to the social sphere more generally. After quoting a key passage from Ibsen's *Ghosts* — "I almost believe we are all ghosts … It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that walks in us. It is every kind of dead idea, lifeless old beliefs and so on. They are not alive but they cling to us for all that"[40] — Williams concludes: "We are, Ibsen insists, the creatures of our past. From the moment of our birth we are inevitably haunted, by every inherited debt."[41]

Such inherited debts include pre-existing cultural and social forms. Spectre-like, they haunt us, urging us to reproduce their modes of sociality. It is then no wonder that Williams would later modify Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which sees "relations of domination and subordination … as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living,"[42] by fusing it with his own tripartite schema of inheritance: dominant, residual, and emergent. This schema involves a suturing of past, present and future via three modes of presence — three modes in which the present presents itself. There are residual social inheritances which "formed in the past," but which are "still active in the cultural process," and which can offer alternatives to, oppose or reinforce the social order;[43] the dominant which is a totalizing but non-total incorporation of the social as such; and the emergent which is the making-becoming of an alternative future — that which the present will bequeath to future generations, provided it escapes incorporation into the dominant. The concept of "structure of feeling" is applicable primarily to this third mode of presence: "The idea of structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions — semantic figures — which in art and literature are often among the very first indications that such a new structure of feeling is forming."[44]

The key to this temporal complexity is its dynamism: the dominant remains dominant only insofar as it constantly incorporates emergence. The social hegemon must capture all emergent social relations if its own are to remain hegemonic. The status quo is never static, but a tireless operation of incorporation. In the literary realm, dominant styles and forms maintain their hegemony only to the extent that they catch and incorporate all emergent structures of feeling. Moreover, because dominant forms embody or imply certain distributions of social relations favorable to the ruling class, they act as a cultural bulwark to its state power. Truly emergent creation does, however, occur, and it is usually either prefigurative of, contemporary with, or an imminent successor to other widespread changes in the social formation (this is most obvious at times of social revolution: Romanticism with the French

Revolution, Modernism with the Russian). Such creation does not simply reflect these emergent forms of life, but directly and immanently embodies them.

There is no better proof of Williams's conviction in this regard than his work in the Workers Educational Association. Sharing that association's traditional objection to "Public Speaking" — "it produces a mechanical voice Style [*sic*], in the manner of an average RADA actress"[45] — he invented a course called "Public Expression." Rather than the superficial beautification of speech proposed by traditional public speaking courses, his own syllabus was designed specifically to "[equip] members of working-class movements for the discharge of actual public responsibilities."[46] The course was intended as a way of releasing latent social relations and of giving linguistic body to working-class consciousness: "Does one impose on a social class that is growing in power the syllabus of an older culture; or does one seek means of releasing and enriching the life-experience which that rising class brings with it?"[47] Rather than incorporating the working-class students into written and spoken styles whose origins lay in the social consciousness of the ruling class and its selective tradition, Williams sought to work with his students to enable them to produce styles which would be adequate to their unique social experience and would release their emergent practical consciousness. For Williams there simply would not *be* a self-respecting democratic society until the linguistic and cultural modes of social relation immanent to class society were transformed. It is precisely this emphasis on the necessary transformation of the whole range of social, cultural and linguistic forms that characterizes the expansive social scope of the 'long revolution.'

Thus, the maxim of complexity — "the world is more complex than you think it is" — can now be summarized as follows. Firstly, the potentially infinite multiplicity of social practices, relationships, values, and documents exceeds all thought, all surviving material artifacts, and all selective traditions that constitute our relation to the past. Secondly, social experience is not (yet) entirely articulable; it consists of patterned but unspoken or unrecordable elements which elude all known systems of thought and expression. Finally, the present is always discontinuous: a battle between residual, dominant, and emergent social relations. Together, these practical, experiential, and temporal modes of complexity constitute the maxim of complexity as such. All three of them are integral to Williams's theory of the long revolution. Before pursuing this line of thought, however, we must now turn to the second maxim of Williams's approach: that of immanence.

Immanence

The term "absolute immanence" first entered the Marxist lexicon via Gramsci's critical reconfiguration of its use by Croce. Gramsci's aim was to elaborate Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx stresses the secular "this-sidedness" [*Diesseitigkeit*] of thinking, an absolute "being-within-history."[48] Gramsci believed that Marx's inheritance of David Ricardo's notions of "tendential laws" and "determinate

markets" had enabled him to break definitively with the speculative philosophical tradition by positing "laws which have a validity within determinate and historically limited social formations."[49] Gramsci held that by extending Ricardo's insights to the whole of human history, Marx had produced a new concept of immanence understood as a "'unitary synthetic moment' which allows the transformation of the three pre-Marxian movements of classical German philosophy, French politics and classical [British] economy into theoretical moments, in relations of continual translation, of the philosophy of praxis."[50] Thus, for Gramsci, immanence means the mutual imbrication, constitution and translatability of politics, economics and thought via the philosophy of praxis. I claim that the principle of immanence informing Williams's work shares crucial similarities to this Gramscian sense of "absolute immanence,"[51] but that it is supplemented by a stress on *existential* immanence: the political imperative of dwelling (im*manere*) within (*im*manere) historical processes. Williams himself, however, never refers to his own theories in terms of immanence, so my task will be to reconstruct the central immanentist strands of his work in order to justify my larger claim. While the principle of immanence informs his work at all levels, for the sake of the present article I shall focus solely on his theory of "keywords" and his understanding of politics.

Williams describes *Keywords* (1976) as "the record of an inquiry" into "the [general] vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss our common life."[52] He continues: "Every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss."[53] Keywords like "culture" and "society" do not simply denote clearly delimitable things within reality (as with nouns like table and chair); they are in some sense constitutive of the very conception of reality to which they supposedly 'refer.' There is thus a clear mutual imbrication between historical antagonisms as they exist in 'reality' and the concepts which are deployed to think them; thought — the domain of concepts — is not transcendent of social being, but immanent to it, and this immanence results in a theory of logical coherence completely at odds with traditional conceptions of analytic rigour.[54] Keywords are "not concepts but problems, not analytic problems either but historical movements that are still unresolved."[55] These problems cannot be resolved in terms of internal logical coherence precisely because they are "historical movements"; they are immanent and constitutive factors of ongoing historical struggles. The resolution of these problems must then be practical, yet this must not be taken to mean that conceptual thought is null and void. On the contrary, precisely because these concepts are constitutive factors in the historical process, a conceptualisation of the contradictions they contain — That is, a theoretical and philological elaboration — will be a necessary part of any *practical* intervention into those struggles. Theory and practice are not opposed here but become two modes of the same historical substance. From the perspective

of the long revolution, this would suggest the necessity of a constant vigilance as to the very terms in which revolutionary action is conceived. Without it, one risks the unwitting inheritance of residual conceptualizations which will internally limit, and potentially even defeat, the revolutionary process.[56]

Immanence, however, is not just a conceptual imperative in Williams's work; it is also a political principle. This can be seen most clearly in his response to Terry Eagleton's now infamous (and parricidal) attack on his former mentor. Having played the apprentice to the master from the early 1960s, in 1976 a new, structuralist Eagleton — armed with Althusser and Poulantzas — struck out at his one-time mentor in an article which gained immediate notoriety.[57] He subsequently apologized for the occasionally shrill tone of the piece, but to this day stands by much of what he wrote.[58] Eagleton made three major criticisms of Williams's work: it was reformist, idealist, and populist. Williams, claimed Eagleton, had fused *Scrutiny*'s liberal humanist emphasis on the importance of individual experience with those "radical" elements of the Romantic "radical-conservative" lineage outlined in *Culture and Society* which could be "ingrafted into a 'socialist humanism.'"[59] This latter, however, was effectively a strand of labourist reformism. Indeed, Williams was only able to graft Romantic organicism to socialist humanism in the first place precisely because "the working-class movement is as a matter of historical fact deeply infected with the Carlylean and Ruskinian ideology in question."[60] The maneuver was enabled

> by the fact that both Romantic and labourist ideologies are in partial conflict with bourgeois hegemony; but it is precisely that partiality which allows them to embrace. Neither tradition is purely antagonistic to bourgeois state-power: the first preserves it by displacing political analysis to a moralist and idealist critique of its worst "human" effects, the second seeks to accommodate itself within it. What the book did, then, was to consecrate the reformism of the labour movement, raise it to new heights of moral and cultural legitimacy, by offering to it values and symbols drawn in the main from the tradition of most entrenched political reaction.[61]

Finally, to these charges of reformism and idealism (the latter the result of "displaced political analysis") Eagleton added the charge of populism. What he meant was the paradox by which Williams's "belief in the need for a 'common culture' was continually crossed and confounded with an assertion of its present reality."[62] This resulted in "the contradictory position of opposing a crippling hegemony whose power he had simultaneously to deny."[63]

Eagleton's attack was premised upon a set of unspoken assumptions as to what constitutes a supposedly authentic Marxism. What were its attributes? Firstly, if labourism or Romanticism were only partially antagonistic to bourgeois state power,

then true Marxism would be "purely antagonistic."[64] Secondly, Marxism was not to be contaminated with labourism or reformism: Revolutionary politics is seen as almost categorically distinct from them. Thirdly, having criticised Williams for placing his own theory within the same horizon as the very writers he was analysing, it is obvious that for this Althusserian Eagleton a clear distinction must be drawn within Marxist theory between ideology and science: "For historical materialism stands or falls by the claim that it is not only an ideology, but that it contains a scientific theory of the genesis, structure, and decline of ideologies. It situates itself, in short, outside the terrain of competing long perspectives in order to theorise the conditions of their very possibility."[65]

It took Williams several months to publish his response, "Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945."[66] It appeared, tellingly, in an issue of *New Left Review* notable for its emphasis on the problematic translation of the Russian revolutionary model to the advanced capitalist nations of Western Europe.[67] Williams does not mention Eagleton by name, but responds methodically to almost every accusation levelled against him. In a characteristic opening, he takes issue with the terminology that forms the basis of the whole exchange: "Marxism," he says, has changed its meaning several times since the war, depending on the specific political conjuncture in which it was active;[68] likewise, the meaning of "Labour Left" has also constantly shifted, as has its relations to "Marxism."[69] In other words: "What 'Marxism' is at any time seems dependent, finally, less on the history of ideas, which is still amongst Marxists the usual way of defining it, than on the complex developments of actual social being and consciousness."[70] By using the key terms from Marx's core formulation of historical materialism — namely, that social being determines consciousness and not the other way around — the cutting edge to this observation is clear: here, Eagleton is the idealist. The problem with Eagleton in this light is that he writes as if there existed some "pure … essence called Marxism."[71]

In that sense, he was an exemplar of the bad kind of what Williams named "legitimating theory," one of the three theoretical strands he saw as constitutive of Marxist theory in Britain since 1945. Legitimating theory dealt with "the legitimate inheritance of an authentic Marxism";[72] "academic theory," the second of the three strands, was concerned with the insertion or reinsertion of Marxism into a range of strictly academic work ("the question of 'communism' or one of its variants did not *necessarily* arise" in this context);[73] finally, "operative theory" provided theoretical analyses of the specificities of late capitalist British society, with a view to intervening into it.[74] Eagleton, the text implies, offered the worst of academic Marxist theory — his was an "academically congenial formalism"[75] — and the least helpful aspect of legitimating theory: "it can lead, at its worst, to a series of self-alienating options, in which our real political presence is as bystanders, historians or critics of the immense conflicts of other generations and other places, with only marginal or rhetorical connections to the confused and frustrating politics of our own time and place."[76]

Thus, for Williams, immanence is clearly a political principle: there is no 'outside' from which to look in; the outside is already a constitutive element of the inside. In that sense, the emphasis on the lived, or experience, in his work is not simply a residuum of petit-bourgeois ideology; it is a key component of his immanentist conception of politics. For Williams, experience names at once one's mode of insertion into transindividual socio-matieral processes (one's affective attachments, belongings, and alignments), and the constant imperative to remain one's own contemporary: to dwell within the true processual depths of the present.

Williams develops his attack on Eagleton's formalism when countering the accusation of populism. Like "Marxism" and "Labour Left," the meaning of "populism" has shifted repeatedly depending on its political context. Marxism has been constantly imbricated with various forms of populism throughout its history, and was thus never as pure as Eagleton made out. Nonetheless, Williams states overtly that he had never been a populist "in the sense of that residual rhetoric": "But because I saw the process as options under pressure, and knew where that pressure was coming from, I could not move either to the other most generally available position: that contempt of people … which makes the whole people, including the whole working class, mere carriers of the structures of a corrupt ideology."[77] Eagleton's blanket generalisation always smacked of Brecht's satirical remark that the government should dissolve the people and elect a new one; here, Williams hints at that angle, but adds to it a term taken from his reconfiguration of the Marxist concept of "determination." He understood determination as both the "setting of limits" and the "exertion of pressures"; such pressures "are by no means only pressures against the limits … They are at least as often pressures derived from the formation and momentum of a given social mode: in effect a compulsion to act in ways that maintain and renew it."[78] By voiding theory of the lived, immanent pressures of daily existence, Eagleton's formalism was not only contemptible in its abstract denigration of an entire class, but also politically futile in that it lacked all felt connection to contemporary political reality. The better solution, claims Williams, was to "stay with the existing resources; to learn and perhaps to teach new resources; to live the contradictions and the options under pressure so that … there was a chance of understanding them and tipping them the other way."[79] Formalism, in this light, is the insubstantiality of a thought that has failed to absorb the lived pressures of a political reality, to process them and, in doing so, to transform them into positive political potential.

It is in the section on reformism that Williams takes on Eagleton's self-proclaimed "pure antagonism" to bourgeois state power. He shows that at a pragmatic level reformism has always been a constitutive element of Marxism, not least because "a working-class political formation which does not respond to and represent the perceived, often short-term interests of the working class becomes impotent."[80] The problem with Eagleton's revolutionary strategy is that it relies far too heavily — and ahistorically — on the Russian model of revolution (one which, as we have seen, this

issue of *New Left Review* was designed to interrogate). Williams argues that this model is premised upon "societies in which the *political and social* defences of the system were very much weaker, and with its consequent reliance on simple breakdown as the crisis of capitalism which makes possible the socialist transition."[81] By ignoring the complexly stratified layers of civil societies in advanced capitalist countries, ones which act as a buttress to the bourgeois state, Eagleton's polemic is downright dangerous: "There is now a real danger, in a kind of theoretical opportunism leading to political, economic and sub-military ('terrorist') opportunism, of using the rhetoric against 'reformism' to the point where isolated militant sectors enter battles in which a totalizing alternative is precipitated against them."[82] What had seemed in Eagleton's attack a version of a pure Marxism has ended up running the risk of a descent into "terrorism." Indeed, one might even say that this is the limit case of immanence's nemesis: the terrorism of transcendence.

The principle of immanence thus generates, firstly, a methodology that seeks out the internal translatability between keywords and the historical situations of which they are constitutive elements, and, secondly, a politico-philosophical imperative that calls on theory to dwell within the pressures and contradictions of contemporary historical reality.

Long Revolution

Both principles — complexity and immanence — merge on the site of what has been interpreted as an *absence* in Williams's work: his supposed lack of a theory of modernity.[83] On one reading, of course, this is absurd; his entire oeuvre, structured as it is around the central notion of the long revolution, is nothing but an epic mapping out of modernity. Yet at the same time, it is true that Williams's work does not overtly recognize a sense of modernity as a qualitatively new experience of time (an experience premised upon the primacy of novelty as such). The reasons for this are complex. It is quite clear that Williams's theory of the emergent is implicitly premised upon the modern logic of temporal negation in its championing of the search for new social and artistic forms freshly adequate to new structures of feeling. Yet there is also a second, competing temporality at work in his writings: the time of tradition. The sheer strangeness of Williams's conception of historical temporality is that it combines a valorization of novelty typical of modernity with an emphasis on the force of biological, generational and (relatively) unconscious attachments typical of tradition. Williams's is precisely an immanent, self-conscious traditionality. It rejects the futurism of modernism, the desire abstractly to negate all traces of the past, by opening up the present to a consciousness of its attachments and selections — its determining lines of inheritance — the very traditional immanence of which means they cannot be simply wished away but must be worked through. Thus, it is not entirely true to say, as certain critics have done, that he lacks a theory of modernity: It would be more accurate to say that his conception of modernity is a

strictly oppositional one, in that it is a historically specific, political and theoretical rejection of the ideology of modernism — that mode of thought which believes it can break with the past by sheer voluntarism.[84]

It is also a rejection of those incipient transcendent strands of Marxist thought which reduce revolution to a non-complex, immediate seizure of state power. What such approaches ignore — beyond their underestimation of the powerful, stratified layers of civil society — is precisely the necessity of working through those Ibsenite inherited debts that is central to Williams's theory of revolution:

> [...] I see revolution as the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder, to which we can respond in varying ways but which will in any case, in one way or another, work its way through our world, as a consequence of any of our actions. I see revolution, that is to say, in a tragic perspective [...].[85]

This "tragic perspective" has nothing in common with the vague, anti-communist pessimism so beloved of contemporary liberals. Nor should it be mistaken as an aestheticization of social reality; on the contrary, Williams is arguing that tragedy is, in Alberto Toscano's words, "an experiential, narrative and political form."[86] He writes: "The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution. In our own time, this action is general, and its common name is revolution."[87] Whereas liberals construe the moment of revolutionary insurrection as an exceptional outbreak of violence and disorder, Williams argues that the capitalist social order is nothing but violence and disorder: revolution is the crisis and attempted resolution of this institutionalized disorder. He writes that "it is not simply that we become involved in this general crisis, but that we are already, by what we do and fail to do, participating in it."[88] Given that this is the case, "the only action that seems adequate is, really, a participation in the disorder, as a way of ending it."[89] As ever, the political principle — perhaps even the political *ethic* — of immanence forces us, firstly, to a realisation that we are *already* involved in specific historical processes, and secondly, to a *proactive* involvement in them as a way of transforming or ending them.

By echoing Aristotle's argument that tragedy is a "*whole* action,"[90] Williams extends both the social and temporal scope of what is conventionally understood by revolution. "[T]he absolute test," he writes, "by which a revolution can be distinguished, is the change in the *form* of activity of a society, in its deepest structures of relationships and feeling."[91] It is here that what may initially have seemed primarily literary or cultural concerns with form become retrospectively revolutionary. For revolution means, not only seizing state power, but also working through — and, where necessary, transforming — all the inherited forms and social relations which enable the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Certainly, many of the

principal forms will be related to economic production, but many others will relate to the deep "alignments" that constitute our very selves: our spontaneous ways of living and seeing the world.[92] It is this stress on the wholeness of social revolution that also informs Williams's later criticism of the Marxist category of the mode of production: "For the abstraction of production is a specialised and eventually ideological version of what is really in question, which is the form of human social relationships within a physical world."[93] Arguing that the notion of the 'mode of production' is too reliant on the capitalist definition of production (an argument he had already made in 1977 regarding the term productive forces) [94] Williams prefers the term "way of *life.*"[95] This seemingly vague term must be understood as an attempt to broaden the scope of the Marxist conception of totality and to connect it to the new social movements — of peace, ecology and feminism — which "are active and substantial in almost every area of life except [the economy]. It is as if everything that was excluded by the economic dominance and specialisations of the capitalist order has been grasped and worked on."[96] In such passages the logic of the structure of feeling assumes a revolutionary character: Williams is attempting to connect the revolutionary movement to precisely those elements of society which the capitalist order excludes.[97] There is a direct connection here between the eloquent silences of naturalist drama and the areas of excluded sociality from which the new social movements emerged. Thus, the first major consequence of Williams's understanding of revolution as a tragic whole action is his enlargement of the social scope of revolution; it is a scope whose complexity and existential depth defies both the simplifying inherited categories of capitalist social thought and the terroristic voluntarism of transcendent strands of Marxism.

The second consequence is his extension of the temporal scope of revolution: the long revolution. The meaning of this term shifted throughout Williams's life. In the 1961 book of that title, Williams distinguished between three revolutions which, together, constituted what most would call (though he often did not) modernity: the democratic, industrial, and cultural revolutions. The emphasis here was on the interrelation of the three revolutions, and the extreme difficulty of understanding them as a single process, not least because we find ourselves within it and many of the terms we use to investigate it were produced by it.[98] By the time of *Modern Tragedy* (1966), however, long revolution came to refer to what Toscano has aptly described as "a long transition, immersed and entangled in the ponderous legacies and contradictions of the capitalist society it determinately negates."[99] Even with a sudden capture of power — a short revolution — "the essential transformation is indeed a long revolution."[100] It is a protracted, potentially multi-generational process of working through the tragic disorder. By 1979, however, the Althusserian interviewers of the *New Left Review* were in no mood for gradualism dressed in sheep's clothing. When pressed, Williams made two important amendments to the concept. Firstly, he cuts the ground from under the interviewers by giving a more precise definition than theirs of the *short* revolution:

> It is accomplished when the central political organs of capitalist society lose their power of *predominant* social reproduction … The condition for the success of the long revolution in any real terms is decisively a short revolution, which I would define not so much in terms of duration as of the loss by the state of its capacity for predominant reproduction of the existing social relations.[101]

The second amendment sees the temporal duration of the long revolution extend, not only *forwards beyond* the short revolution, but backwards before it. The possibility of a short revolution in an advanced capitalist society "requires a considerable process of preparation which must not itself be limited to the immediate actions necessary to assure the transfer of power in a revolutionary situation."[102] Once again, what may have appeared at first to be relatively marginal linguistic concerns in the example of Williams's work with the Workers' Educational Association can be seen, retrospectively, as one instance of the long preparation for revolutionary transformation.

Conclusion

What I hope to have shown is that the unity of Williams's life's work consists in its constant, occasionally unorthodox, theorization of the long and difficult process of revolution. Everywhere guided by the political and theoretical principles of complexity and immanence, Williams's work — from his writings on naturalist drama to his analyses of a nascent neoliberalism — offers patient and profound reflections on the enormous obstacles to, and utopian possibilities of, social revolution. Directed as much against the myopic voluntarism and potentially fatal short-termism of certain contemporary Marxisms as against the dominant capitalist social order he so despised, his oeuvre maps the uncharted depths of sociality at which the future will be decided. The words with which Williams concluded his 1979 interview with the *New Left Review* capture the interrelation of complexity and immanence in his vision of the long revolution; they remain, in Williams's sense, emergent:

> The challenge is therefore to a necessary complexity. I have been pulled all my life, for reasons we've discussed, between simplicity and complexity, and I can still feel the pull both ways. But every argument of experience and of history now makes my decision — and what I hope will be a general decision — clear. It is only in very complex ways that we can truly understand where we are. It is also only in very complex ways, and by moving confidently towards very complex societies, that we can begin that construction of many socialisms which will liberate and draw upon our real and now threatened energies.[103]

Notes

1. Parts of this article draw on my forthcoming book, *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). Certain passages in the section on complexity are adapted from Daniel Hartley, "Style as Structure of Feeling: Emergent Forms of Life in the Theory of Raymond Williams and George Saunders's *Tenth of December*," *Emergent Forms of Life in Anglophone Literature: Conceptual Frameworks and Critical Analyses,* eds. Michael Basseler, Daniel Hartley and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT Trier, 2015): 163-182. An earlier version of this article was published online in French in *Revue Période* and Spanish in *Marxismo Crítio*. I am grateful to Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée, Alexander Scherr, and the anonymous reviewers of *Mediations* for their helpful comments on a previous draft. All remaining errors are my own.

2. Terry Eagleton, "Resources for a Journey of Hope: The Significance of Raymond Williams," *New Left Review* 1.168 (1988) 11.

3. From the republication of classic texts of Marxist-feminism such as Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), to special issues of respected online Marxist publications (the entirety of issue 5 of *Viewpoint Magazine* deals with social reproduction) and dedicated "Marxist-Feminist" streams at major international conferences (*Historical Materialism*), to increased attention to the rich Canadian tradition of 'social reproduction feminism,' the present moment is characterized by an embarrassment of SRT riches. While it has become a (partly justified) commonplace in the secondary literature on Williams that feminism constituted a significant lacuna of his work, the guiding impulse of much of his reconstruction of Marxist paradigms was nonetheless precisely to enable Marxist theory to incorporate social reproduction. The term, "World Ecology" is Jason W. Moore's, developed at length in *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015). I have begun to make the case that cultural materialism should be seen as a precursor — and important interlocutor — of world-ecology in Daniel Hartley, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Problem of Culture," *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016): 156-167. Finally, for important works on Williams's writings on nationalism, see Daniel Williams's introduction to Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003); chapter 4 of Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity and the Break-up of Britain* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); and Hywel Dix, *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-up of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

4. I recognize that Williams also allows for alternative and oppositional senses of the residual but the recent nostalgic memorializations of his life and work are neither of these.

5. Tristram Hunt, "From Jane Austen to Zadie Smith — the City v the Country in Literature," *The Guardian*, March 13th, 2016: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/12/raymond-williams-the-country-and-the-city-rural-versus-urban. Last accessed March 13th 2016.

6. In doing so, I am building on the systematizing impulses of Alan O'Connor's *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), John Higgins's *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 1999), Paul Jones's *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture: A Critical Reconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and Andrew Milner's *Literature, Culture and Society*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

7. Warren Weaver, "Science and Complexity," *American Scientist* 36 (1948) 537.

8.   Warren Weaver, "Science and Complexity" 539.

9.   Nikas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, ed. Dirk Baecker, trans. Peter Gilgen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013) 125.

10. Eva M. Knodt, "Foreword," *Social Systems*, by Niklas Luhmann, trans. John Bednarz, Jr., with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) xvii.

11. Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (London: Verso, 2009) 262.

12. Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," *New Left Review* I.50 (1968) 10.

13. Anderson, *The New Old World* 262, 260.

14. Certainly, there are dim echoes of Parsons's four subsystems (economy, polity, societal community, fiduciary system) in the four social systems listed in *The Long Revolution* (system of maintenance, system of decision, system of learning and communication, and the system of generation and nurture). Likewise, as we shall see, there exists a certain formal homology between the simplifying selectiveness of Luhmann's systems and the operation of what Williams calls "selective traditions." Yet this is where the similarities end. The informing impulse, as well as the actual substance, of Williams's social ontology has nothing in common with the technocratic autopoiesis of Luhmann's saturnine universe.

15. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1965) 66.

16. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2010) 246.

17. Williams, *Long Revolution* 66.

18. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 115-116.

19. *Marxism and Literature* 125 (emphasis in the original).

20. *Marxism and Literature* 121.

21. *Marxism and Literature* 133-134.

22. *Marxism and Literature* 134.

23. *Marxism and Literature* 132.

24. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, 2nd revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 8-9.

25. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with "New Left Review"* (London: NLB, 1979) 208.

26. Ibid.

27. "The biggest single mistake that Eliot made was his attempt to find an all-purpose dramatic verse which could function as a substitute for conversation. For the whole case for verse as capable of greater precision and intensity of meaning collapsed when characters had to ask whether someone had bought an evening paper, a perfectly ordinary conversational exchange, in a uniform poetic mode" (*Politics and Letters* 207).

28. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* 387.

29. See, Williams on *Antigone*: "The more one looks at the text of the play, the more one realizes that a simple, yet radical, pattern, a controlling structure of feeling, has been clearly isolated and designed in the writing. And then, if one looks at the performance, one sees that this design is being continually enacted, in the parts as in the whole. For it is a design made for performance; the purpose of the play is not report, not description, not analysis, but enactment of a design. The structure of feeling is the formal written structure, and also the structure of performance." Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991 [1954/ rev. ed. 1968]) 39.

30. Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954) 45.

31. Cited in Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* 46.

32. In his earlier writings Williams had called this ideal "total expression" but when the *New Left Review* interviewers quote his early definition of "total expression," he responds: "The idea is inadequately put there: I should have spoken of total form" (*Politics and Letters* 230).

33. *Marxism and Literature* 106-107.

34. *Marxism and Literature* 133-134.

35. This was the basic feeling and insight which sparked his idea for what would become *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983) 10.

36. Raymond Williams *Politics and Letters* 62-63.

37. *Politics and Letters* 63.

38. The whole of the chapter on Ibsen in *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht* focuses on this theme.

39. For example, F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932) and F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

40. Cited in Raymond Williams, *Drama From Ibsen* 49.

41. *Drama From Ibsen* 49.

42. *Marxism and Literature* 110.

43. *Marxism and Literature* 122.

44. *Marxism and Literature* 133.

45. Raymond Williams, "The Teaching of Public Expression," *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, eds. John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (Leicester: NIACE, 1993) 181.

46. Raymond Williams, "The Teaching of Public Expression," 181.

47. "The Teaching of Public Expression" 182.

48. For a detailed overview of this elaboration, see Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 307-383.

49. Peter D. Thomas, "Immanence," *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008) 241.

50. "Immanence" 241.

51. Note that what began as my maxim has now become a principle informing Williams's work.

52. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* 14, 15.

53. *Keywords* 15.

54. I choose the word "coherence" here quite consciously to highlight the affiliations between Gramsci's theory of conceptuality and that of Williams. Cf. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment* 364-379.

55. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 11.

56. In the final part of this article I give a brief example of this problem: Williams's criticism of the Marxist category of the mode of production.

57. Eagleton's attack initially appeared as "Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams" in the January-February 1976 edition of the *New Left Review*. It was subsequently reprinted in Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: NLB, 1976). I refer throughout to the reprinted version.

58. Terry Eagleton and Matthew Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic: Terry Eagleton in Dialogue* (London: Verso, 2009) 141.

59. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* 24-25.

60. *Criticism and Ideology* 25.

61. *Criticism and Ideology* 25.

62. *Criticism and Ideology* 28.

63. *Criticism and Ideology* 28.

64. *Criticism and Ideology* 25.

65. *Criticism and Ideology* 16-17.

66. As noted, the earliest version of Eagleton's attack was published as "Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams" in *New Left Review* in the January-February 1976 edition. Williams's "Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945" was published in the November-December 1976 volume. I refer here to the version of Williams's article reprinted in *Culture and Materialism* 233-251.

67. Williams's essay featured alongside Perry Anderson's profoundly influential "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci" as well as an interview with Ernest Mandel on "Revolutionary Strategy in Europe." See *New Left Review* I.100, November-December 1976. For a detailed critique of Anderson's article, see Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*.

68. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* 233-234.

69. *Culture and Materialism* 234-236.

70. *Culture and Materialism* 246.

71. *Culture and Materialism* 239.

72. *Culture and Materialism* 237.

73. *Culture and Materialism* 237.

74. *Culture and Materialism* 237.

75. *Culture and Materialism* 239.

76. *Culture and Materialism* 238.

77. *Culture and Materialism* 241.

78. *Marxism and Literature* 87.

79. *Culture and Materialism* 241-242.

80. *Culture and Materialism* 247.

81. *Culture and Materialism* 248-249. Anderson's article cites Gramsci on this point: "In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying—but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country" ("The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci" 10).

82. *Culture and Materialism* 249.

83. This absence has been noted by Jones in *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture* 181-194; and by Lawrence Grossberg in "Raymond Williams and the Absent Modernity," *About Raymond Williams*, eds. Monika Seidl, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (Oxford: Routledge, 2010) 18-33.

84. For a far more detailed account of "immanent, self-conscious traditionality," see my *The Politics of Style* chap. 5.

85. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1979) 75.

86. Alberto Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key," *Radical Philosophy* 180 (2013) 25. It is significant that Toscano

turns to Williams precisely in search of "a more immanent way of conceptualizing the tragic form of revolutionary and transitional politics" ("Politics in a Tragic Key" 30).

87. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* 83.

88. *Modern Tragedy* 80.

89. *Modern Tragedy* 81.

90. *Modern Tragedy* 65 (emphasis added).

91. *Modern Tragedy* 76.

92. "Any such resolution would mean changing ourselves, in fundamental ways, and our unwillingness to do this, the certainty of disturbance, the probability of secondary and unforeseen disorder, put the question, inevitably, into a tragic form" (*Modern Tragedy* 81). For more on "alignment," see the essay "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment" in Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989): 77-87.

93. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 264.

94. *Marxism and Literature* 90-94.

95. *Towards 2000* 266 (emphasis in the original).

96. *Towards 2000* 253.

97. "... it is a fact about the modes of domination, that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice. What they exclude may often be seen as the personal or the private, or as the natural or even the metaphysical. Indeed it is usually in one or other of these terms that the excluded area is expressed, since what the dominant has effectively seized is indeed the ruling definition of the social" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 125).

98. For more on this point, see Anthony Barnett's (2011) excellent introduction to a recent reissue of *The Long Revolution*: "We Live in Revolutionary Times... But What Does This Mean?", *Open Democracy* URL: https://www.opendemocracy.net/anthony-barnett/we-live-in-revolutionary-times-but-what-does-this-mean. Last accessed 13th March 2016.

99. Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key" 30.

100. *Modern Tragedy* 76.

101. *Politics and Letters* 420-421.

102. *Politics and Letters* 421.

103. *Politics and Letters* 437.

The Makings of a Heroic Mistake: Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," Communism, and the Contradictions of Emergent Subjectivity

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Close readers of Richard Wright's fiction are hard-pressed to find a hero who embodies a positive mode of intellectual, moral, or political engagement.[1] This point is especially true when one bears in mind the often catastrophic impact that the actions of Wright's would-be heroes have on women, and black women in particular.[2] *Native Son* (1940), Wright's most influential and popular novel — widely hailed (and sometimes denounced) as the first black best-seller of the 20th century — features one of U.S. literature's most infamous anti-heroes, Bigger Thomas, a brutally inarticulate tough who, under pressure, kills without remorse: not only does Bigger unintentionally suffocate left-wing socialite Mary Dalton, but also, more deliberately, he murders his girlfriend, Bessie, in part to keep her hidden from the police (adding to a long list of lesser anti-social acts).[3] According to Wright himself, as articulated in his 1940 essay "How Bigger Was Born," Bigger represents the contradictory possibilities inherent in the "dislocated" and "disinherited" multiracial underclass of modern society, potentiality which, as he then saw it, could become a force "of either Communism or Fascism."[4]

Lawd Today, Wright's first novel, (written in 1936, published posthumously), similarly features a bigoted and patriarchal black worker, Jake Johnson, whose misdirected aggression and psychological vulnerability manifest themselves in both wife-beating and a declared affinity for fascism abroad. Arguably Wright's last major novel, *The Outsider* (1953), written in exile, presents us with Cross Damon, a super-alienated worker-intellectual who offers penetrating reflections on the state of the world, but also comes to embody the very traits of cynicism that he would rebel against. Driven to excess by sensual and philosophical passions alike, Damon conspires to fake his own death in order to cut himself off from his wife, his mother, his children, and social responsibility generally, setting loose a spiral of

deceit, betrayal, and murderous duplicity that ultimately consumes him (as well as several others). Damon too, like Bigger, becomes an unrepentant, serial murderer.[5] While the unpublished manuscripts and posthumous publications complicate the picture somewhat, if Richard Wright's major works offer readers a sense of "what is to be done," almost always it is *negatively,* relayed by dramatizing the limits and the consequences of inadequate, existing modes of social thought and action.[6] His fiction further explores how an alienating social environment can pervert even positive human aspirations into their opposite, compounding rather than abolishing oppression.

Wright's short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938, 1940), might appear to provide exception to the anti-heroic rule.[7] Written during the height of Wright's commitment to the (then rapidly growing) Depression-era Communist Party, and based upon extensive investigation into contemporary struggles of black Communists in the US South, *Uncle Tom's Children* presents a range of characters who bravely stand their ground against white racist terror, and who often pay the ultimate price for it: exile, torture, death. Chief among them is Sue, the main character of the collection's closing novella, "Bright and Morning Star," a story added to the collection in 1940, though originally published in *The New Masses* in May 1938.[8] Readers have long hailed Sue as that rare thing, a Wright hero (indeed, that even rarer thing, a heroine!), one who overcomes inner and outer conflicts to intervene bravely, nobly, and skillfully on the side of social justice, transforming herself in the process of saving the day. Sue may represent the last and best hope of individual heroism in the major published fiction of Richard Wright.[9]

Indeed, until at least 2008 Wright scholars universally held that "Bright and Morning Star," had, if not a happy ending, then at least a heroic and redemptive one. According to this long-unchallenged reading of the novella, the main character "Aunt" Sue is able to meet the demands of crisis, saving the underground interracial communist collective her sons have helped to found from vicious state repression, through a heroic act of self-sacrifice. Certainly, her transformation is remarkable. The middle-aged, widowed mother of two young activists, Sue not only personally weathers racist violence and endures the certainty of her sons' torture and death, but she deploys folk wisdom in the service of radical resistance. She tricks the white authorities who aim to trick *her* into betraying her sons' cause, exploiting her oppressors' racist and sexist blindness to foil their anti-red plot. Her tactics are quite ingenious: posing as a mourning mother come to fetch the body of her soon-to-be-executed son, Johnny-Boy, Sue uses a white sheet to conceal a loaded gun, with which she kills the treasonous party-infiltrator (a white man ironically named Booker), before he can expose the fledgling organization.[10] In this dominant reading, Sue not only redeems her earlier error of trusting Booker with the names of the party members (against her better instincts) but allows the underground revolutionaries to live to see another day, at the cost of her own life. She makes her martyred sons'

cause her own, melding her inherited black Christian outlook with an emerging communist worldview, becoming perhaps the only major female character in Wright's published oeuvre to display serious psychological complexity and genuine political development, and the only main character in Wright's fiction to make such a direct and deliberate contribution to the Communist cause. Novelist-critic Sherley Anne Williams has underscored Aunt Sue's exceptional, and heroic, status within Wright's oeuvre, describing "Bright and Morning Star" as "one of the most deft and moving renderings of a black woman's experience in the canon of American literature."[11] The flat and undeveloped or even outright stereotypical depictions of other black women in *Uncle Tom's Children,* Williams argues, "are somewhat redeemed in the character of Aunt Sue."[12] More recently, Cheryl Higashida, in what may be the most lucid and richly contextualized reading of *Uncle Tom's Children* and "Bright and Morning Star" to date, concludes that, "It is precisely by transforming and uniting both ideologies [Communism and black nationalism] into a synthetic perspective that *Sue saves the Party from being destroyed by the state.*"[13] Though critics continue to debate "Bright and Morning Star" from sharply contending perspectives, they tend to agree that Sue is to be read as a hero who saves the party.[14] This is true even of critics who take a more anti-communist view, reading Sue as a nationalist rebuke to Communism, or as heralding Wright's own later break from the Party.[15]

With Gregory Meyerson's 2008 essay, "Aunt Sue's Mistake," however, the heroic status of Sue's final act has been radically called into question. Where previous critics have found meaningful individual self-sacrifice that leads to collective salvation, Meyerson — attending to long-overlooked textual evidence — has revealed individualist false consciousness leading to catastrophic unintended consequences: namely, the destruction of the fledgling communist movement that Sue has been hailed for saving.[16] "The problem with this widely-held reading," Meyerson writes, "is that it is very carefully shown by the story itself – through its painstaking thematic patterning — to be a *mis*reading. Sue's victory over the racists in "Bright and Morning Star" proves to be, tragically, Pyrrhic ... flying in the face of the book's main lessons. Ironically," he argues, "Sue's actions do not guarantee the survival of the party; *they all but guarantee its destruction.*"[17]

The core of Meyerson's corrective reading comes down to one, crucial, long-overlooked, but now indisputable fact. In the course of pursuing her self-sacrificing, solitary, and "total act" of salvation, Sue neglects — in fact, deliberately avoids — doing the *other* thing that needs to be done. Acting alone, she kills the stool pigeon, Booker, yes — and in dramatic, seemingly heroic, fashion — but she fails to save the party, for she *fails to warn the other comrades* about the sheriff's plan to ambush their scheduled red meeting — a fate which, Sue realizes, means their capture, death, and destruction come morning.[18] By acting "erlone," instead of with others, Sue helps to bring about the annihilation of the party she appears to be "saving." We shouldn't

be surprised either, Meyerson argues; for Sue's solitary act of martyrdom flies in the face of the recurrent anti-individualist lessons that run through every story of Wright's celebrated collection.

Meyerson makes a very compelling case, both regarding *Uncle Tom's Children* as a whole, and "'Bright and Morning Star" in particular, a case that has yet to receive the attention it deserves. As he shows in detail, throughout *Uncle Tom's Children*, individualistic action consistently fails in the face of systemic oppression. Not only do characters die despite and because of their (often astounding, back-breaking, brave) individual efforts, but their deaths "don't mean *nothing*," as Silas, another brave — and brutally patriarchal — martyr figure puts it in "Long Black Song."[19] The basic lesson is made explicit in "Fire and Cloud" (the story which closed the original 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*) when Reverend Taylor, following his brutal beating at the hands of state-sanctioned racists, counters his son's angry proposal to meet white violence with violence of their own: "Don be a fool, son! Don thow yo life erway! *We cant do nuthin erlone.*"[20] Rev. Taylor elaborates the point further, anticipating the militant mass march of black and white workers and peasants that ends the story: "We gotta git wid the people, son...Wes too much erlone this way! Wes los when we erlone! Wes gotta be wid our folks...."[21] To Meyerson's own useful review, I would add here that the very colloquial (mis)spelling of the word — alone as *erlone* — implies the way in which, for Wright, acting *alone* is almost necessarily to *err*. The absence of positive heroes in Wright's fiction here comes full circle as a critique of the very idea of individual heroism. In a sense, the only heroes to be upheld are collective(s): it is only to the extent that individuals admit or participate in such a collective project, that they too can become, in a sense, heroic. They can't do nothin' *erlone*. [22]

A crucial and corollary lesson of the collection *Uncle Tom's Children,* however — albeit a subtler one — is that collective action is not only necessary but *possible,* even in circumstances that may appear almost fatalistically desperate and determined — but *only if one finds the courage to speak up* to transform the inherited conditions of the situation, bringing out their latent collectivity. For instance, as Meyerson shows, in the famously "fatalistic" story, "Down by the Riverside," protagonist Brother Mann, though trapped by the interlocking dangers of rising flood waters and a racist police state, has several opportunities to speak up and potentially win allies to his cause, allies that could help him (and perhaps his wife, Lulu) to survive this crisis. He has at least two consciously recognized chances to break out of his isolation, to shift what will become his doomed coordinates of possibility; but Mann remains silent, thus participating in the sealing of his own "fate."[23] Collective agency exists as potentiality in *Uncle Tom's Children,* even for seemingly isolated individuals, but only if they dare to seize the moment and break the spell of isolation and fatalism. Only if they cease to think and act upon their situation as individuals, individualistically.[24]

Exploring Aunt Sue's Mistake

In the wake of Meyerson's scandalously corrective reading, new and vital aspects of Wright's widely celebrated, widely misunderstood text begin to emerge. Building on Meyerson's revelation that Sue makes an "individualist" mistake, the present essay will explore in detail the question of how so and why she comes to make it. I will further consider the question of what Wright's depiction of this mistake-process suggests, for him and for us: both what it says about Wright's late Thirties conception of the relationship between individual psychology and collective, egalitarian politics, and what that may mean for re-conceiving radical political subjectivity today.[25] A close reading of Sue's subjective processes, we shall see, reveals a complex dialectic of emergent political consciousness: disclosing interrelations between individuality and collectivity, courage and fear, insight and blindness, symbolic empowerment and ideological mystification. In this new light, "Bright and Morning Star" becomes for us a story that does not only document Wright's deep commitment and faith in the communist cause, but also foregrounds the difficulty of sustaining communist practice, dramatizing the precariousness of the bonds between comrades and their allies, even, and perhaps especially, when everything depends on them. No longer a heroic story of individual sacrifice, "Bright and Morning Star" turns out to be a cautionary tale about the need for communists to develop more thoroughly collective methods of work as a means of sustaining comrades' faith in one another — and in the people — such faith being particularly necessary in moments of life-and-death crisis.

The story further stands as a reminder of how Wright's existential reflections — about the difficulty of sustaining meaningful human relationships in a deeply alienating modern world — are found not only in later works such as *Black Boy (American Hunger)* or the *The Outsider*; they are rather a key aspect of his 1930s fiction as well. Our reading of "Bright and Morning Star" thus will complicate the common but all-too-simple (and Cold-War-inflected) periodization of Wright's work into "early Marxism" vs. "late existentialism," early "proletarian didacticism" vs. later "novels of ideas." Such schemas suggests a binary opposition between communist radicalism and deep individual psychological investigation that oversimplifies both Wright himself and the dialectical interactions between individuality and collectivity that he was at pains to reveal.

Keeping Quiet To Protect Reva — The Subject Supposed to Believe

Meyerson's essay can be summed up as establishing five crucial points: 1) *that* Sue makes a mistake; 2) that the consequences of this mistake are catastrophic, dooming the local branch of the party; 3) that Sue on some level knows this, and yet proceeds as if she does not;[26] 4) that this mistake is all the more glaring when "Bright and Morning Star" is read in relationship to the consistently anti-individualist lessons of the *Uncle Tom's Children* collection; and 5) and that the critics — "all of them" — have also made

mistakes in overlooking Sue's mistake for so long. Accepting these key points, we now need to fully excavate the ground they uncover, attending to the question of how Sue comes to make her error, and what this erring means.

At this point the relationship between Sue and Reva takes on great significance. For it is Reva, the young white communist — appearing twice in Sue's home as a party messenger — who most concretely presents Sue with the opportunity to think and act collectively in her moment of crisis, providing Sue the chance to inform the other comrades about the morning's ambush, and thus with a chance to save them. How precisely Sue comes to neglect this crucial task is thus worth closer analysis, as is the question of what Wright means to imply — about emergent political subjectivity, about intra-party and interracial relations — through this depiction of failed communication. That the Sue-Reva scenes provide us with the Wright-rarity of an extended interracial woman-to-woman encounter adds an important additional aspect to consider.[27]

Virtually alone among Wright's fictional depictions of white women, Reva is presented very sympathetically.[28] She is a young white communist whom Sue sees as an ally and even a friend, an impoverished local tenant farmer who has been actively risking her life and her health for the cause, and who appears to have genuine personal affection for Sue and for Sue's son, Johnny-Boy. As Wright puts it, Sue "liked Reva; the brightest glow her heart had ever known was when she had learned that Reva loved Johnny-Boy."[29] In marked contrast to Sue's (ultimately validated) suspicion towards the new white party recruit, Booker, there is no suggestion in the text that she does not trust Reva (or Reva's father, Lem); she has known them a long time and accepts the sincerity of their red commitment to class-based inter-racial unity. And yet, later, at the crucial moment, Sue not only neglects to tell Reva (both about Johnny-Boy's capture, and Sue's own giving the comrades' names to Booker), but verbally misleads her — suppressing crucial information, effectively lying to her at least twice. Finally, Sue literally *puts Reva to bed*, over Reva's own protestations and even her suspicions that something else is wrong. (Reva: "Yuh worried about something…Ah wanna stay up wid yuh."[30]) Sue hushes her, treating a friend and ally, as a "chile" who cannot handle the truth, who must be put to bed, ushered out of sight.[31] The alienation is truly profound. We do not have here a case of a character who is simply trapped in a solitary struggle, but rather a case of a character who is playing a part in constructing her own solitude, and then acting within those constructed (and terribly inadequate) confines as if they were fated or beyond her control. [32]

Wright describes Reva's importance for Sue and for Sue's emergent radical consciousness during their first scene together. Reva has come to deliver news of the planned police ambush, and to ask Sue to send Johnny-Boy to warn the comrades, so they can avoid capture. Wright offers Sue's thoughts:

> Reva believed in black folks and not for anything in the world would [Sue] falter before her. In Reva's trust and acceptance of her she had found her first feelings of humanity. Reva's love was her refuge from shame and degradation. If in the early days of her life the white mountain had driven her back from the earth, then in her last days Reva's love was drawing her towards it, like the beacon that swung through the night outside.[33]

What stands out about this passage — besides the analogy to the Memphis airport "beacon," an ominous figure that slices across almost every scene in "Bright and Morning Star" — is not only the way Sue is concerned with preserving Reva's belief in black folks, but the way that Sue's feeling of her own emergent humanity is bound up with and dependent upon that belief. [34] It might be more precise to say: dependent on her own perception of Reva's belief, or even, her own belief in Reva's belief. We have here something like what Zizek, following Jacques Lacan, calls the "subject supposed to believe."[35] That is, for Sue, Reva figures not only as a person, but as a symbol, or more precisely: a sustaining symbolizer. Reva's (presumed, posited, projected) belief in Sue (and in "black folks"), functions as a symbolic support for Sue's own emergent/transforming consciousness. "In Reva's trust and acceptance of her she had found her first feelings of humanity. Reva's love was her refuge from shame and degradation."[36] Wright depicts Sue as having a deep need for Reva's belief/love; it functions, for her, as a kind of personalized proof that humanity can transcend racial barriers; Sue needs to feel believed *in*, in order to believe (in) *herself*.

An interesting reflexive element here is that Sue sees Reva as seeing *her* — Sue — as a representative of "black folks." Sue believes that "Reva believes" not just in Sue or in Johnny-Boy, but in "black folks" more generally. This is not at all to say that Sue sees *herself* this way, as in some sense "representative" of "black folks." Nonetheless, Sue's perception of Reva's faith in "black folks" generally exerts a powerful force on Sue, one that, as we shall see, can become a source of both liberation and of alienation. The paradox of objective intersubjective belief here is that Sue need not *actually* believe in her own representative-ness in order to *act as if* she believes in it. She may not believe in race (subjectively) and yet may still perform/recreate it (intersubjectively); for she believes in (and feels she depends on) the *other's* belief, and acts in such a way as to protect that belief. Sue perceives that she must bear the burden of representing "black folks" in general before Reva's eyes, for the compound reason that Sue's individual "faltering" could undermine not only her white comrade's belief in racial equality, but also Sue's own belief in her *own* growing humanity.[37]

We should add that this very need to protect Reva's belief can also be read as a symptom of a *lack* of belief of another sort: namely a lack of faith that a "white" person (however *red*) might in fact accept Sue for who she actually is, that Reva could handle the truth, that this young white woman could remain loving of her and committed to anti-racism without an idealized buffer of ever-dependable "black folks." "Bright

and Morning Star" thus anticipates Wright's recurrent later critique of the tendency of white liberals and communists to idealize black people or black oppression, a critique that is present clearly not only in *Native Son*, but in *The Outsider*, and in Wright's autobiographical writings published under the title *American Hunger*.[38] But whereas in later depictions this critique tends to align with an anti-Communist — or even anti-communist — perspective, here Wright articulates it as an internal (self) criticism of the communist movement.[39]

It's important to note, however, that Sue's investment in (or dependence on) Reva's belief is not simply depicted as some kind of "false consciousness" that can be easily opposed to and/or corrected by something like the clarity of "scientific truth." The situation is more deeply contradictory: Wright suggests that without Reva — not only Reva as material actor (who makes tea, who bandages wounds, who brings news) but Reva as symbolic force (whose love represents for Sue the possibility of achieving full humanity) — Sue would not have been able to face the racist "white mountain."[40] She needed another to believe in her own aspiring humanity in order to assert and sustain that humanity in the face of a world that otherwise fails to recognize it. Her emergent subjectivity depends upon Reva as symbolic anchor. This psychological-ideological process, Wright leads us to believe, though based on a kind of reification, has had the positive and enabling effect of helping Sue to transition in a communist direction, towards a more self-consciously, insistently human subjectivity, enabling her courageous political resistance to white supremacy. Alongside her growing love and respect for her own sons' radical vision, Sue needed to believe that Reva (a "white person") believed in her (and in "black folks") to make this leap. Communist conversion required the belief of comrades, over and above their knowledge or strategic wisdom.

One is reminded at this point of Wright's dialectical treatment of black consciousness in his influential 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" — a text he developed almost simultaneously with "Bright and Morning Star." In that early manifesto, which like *Uncle Tom's Children*, seeks to delineate sharply a modern literary and political practice from the "Uncle Toms" who have come before, Wright argues for taking seriously and working through the understandably, and perhaps even necessarily, nationalist dynamic of Negro experience, precisely in order ultimately to transcend this nationalist horizon — towards a proletarian, class conscious, internationalist standpoint. As Wright wrote:

> Negro writers must accept the national implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it…. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of a capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple

fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.[41]

Far from an inevitable historical process, however, this dialectical path through nationalism is fraught with danger: narrow nationalism on one-side, race-blind economism on the other. In *Native Son*, as well as in *Lawd Today*, we see Wright's less-than-optimistic account of how such nationalist sentiments, if not properly worked through, may leave the oppressed open to the lures of mystification, misogyny, self-destructive violence, and even affinity for fascism. Similarly, in "Bright and Morning Star," Wright shows us how an intersubjective structure that is a necessary mediation towards a higher political state of consciousness may persist, even after it has done its crucial work, in ways that do not help but rather hinder progress on to some ostensibly "higher" stage of consciousness. Transcending the nationalist (and religious) aspect of folk consciousness and achieving true interracial trust and solidarity remains a protracted affair, a struggle that continues within and around the ranks of the communist movement.

Thus Reva's symbolic power continues to determine Sue's subjectivity, becoming, in the second Reva scene, a deadly threat to the life of Reva, and many others, black and white alike. In these crucial moments, Sue addresses herself not to the actual Reva (or to the political project with which Reva has taken up), but to the Reva image Sue feels the need to protect. "No she would not tell Reva; Reva was all she had left … Reva's trust would never be shaken."[42] In a kind of dialectical Marxian-psychoanalytic irony, Wright suggests that the very symbols that enable growth can become fetters on further development, or even worse, chains that threaten to pull the new communist subject — and the communist project — back into the alienation from which it has just begun to emerge.

It is in the second Reva scene that we see the damage done, the chains pull, the dialectical bridge buckle. To review the characters' immediate situation: since Reva's first visit, Sue has relayed the message about warning the comrades to Johnny-Boy, who has dutifully set out to do just that. After he leaves, Sue's home is invaded by the sheriff's posse; they question her about Johnny-Boy and about the party, beat her when she refuses to talk, and then again when she "talks back." Finally knocked unconscious, Sue awakens to find the newly recruited white "comrade" Booker in her house. Offering Sue sympathy and attending to her injuries, Booker reports that Johnny-Boy has been captured (before getting the chance to warn the other party members), and persuades Sue — against her better instincts — to tell this "comrade" the names of the party members, ostensibly so he can go warn them himself. Reva arrives for the second time at some point after Booker has left, hoping that Sue has relayed the message to Johnny-Boy as planned, and seeking confirmation of that fact. She promptly informs Sue that Booker is indeed, a "stool" (confirming Sue's fears).

At first it seems that Sue is planning to tell Reva the news — about Booker, about

Johnny-Boy's capture, and about the fact he hasn't been able to warn the comrades as planned. As Wright informs us, "She was wondering how to tell Reva about Johnny-Boy and Booker. Ahll wait a lil while longer, she thought."[43] While Reva dresses Sue's bleeding scalp, Sue thinks again how "She was feeling better now; in just a little while she would tell Reva." [44] One is reminded of the opening scene between Sue and Johnny-Boy, where Sue similarly waits until the work of nurturing and caring is done — allowing Johnny-Boy to eat, warm up, and dry off — before she drops upon him the hard news of "what is to be done." But unlike Sue in this earlier scene, Reva puts the question to her directly, before such soothing can occur:

> "Did Johnny-Boy come?"
> [Sue] hesitated.
> "Yeah."
> "He done gone t tell the others?" Reva's voice sounded so clear and confident that it mocked her. Lawd, I cant tell this chile...
> "Yuh tol im, didn't yuh An Sue?"
> "Y-y-yeah..."
> "Gee! Thas good! Ah tol pa he dindt hafta worry ef Johnny-Boy got the news. Mabbe thingsll come out awright."
> "Ah hope..."
> She could not go on; she had gone as far as she could. For the first time that night she began to cry. [45]

Sue here misleads Reva, effectively lying by way of omission. Why can't Sue bring herself to tell Reva the truth? The immediate "reason" Wright provides has to do with how Reva's voice sounds, "so clear and confident that it mocked her." Reva's clarity and confidence prompt Sue to see Reva in a protective mode, as a "chile," not capable of hearing the brutal truth. Similarly, once Sue's crying begins to make *Reva* cry, "She forced herself to stop. Naw; Ah cant carry on this way in fronta Reva...Right now she had *a deep need for Reva to believe in her.*"[46] We see that Sue is motivated not so much by protecting Reva as by protecting Reva's belief in her own trustworthiness. Sue cannot bring herself to show her own vulnerability around this young woman who both "believed in black folks," and who has deep feelings for her (now captured) son. The very feelings that have helped to buoy her up now hold her back.

It would be one-sided to put the blame on Sue here (her individualism, her Christian martyrdom, her residual nationalism), for Wright also directs us to the material context of the characters' interaction, asking us to consider Reva's role (and even Johnny-Boy's) as well. Reva refers to Sue as "An" [Aunt], in a way hailing Sue to continue to assume a protective role that hearkens back to the days of "mammy." Further, the contrast with the opening scene between Johnny-Boy and Sue is illuminating; it serves as a counter example, a successful scene of communication

that sets off the later, failed one. In the former scene, Sue deliberately and patiently puts off telling Johnny-Boy the bad news about the sheriff watching Lem's house — news which will require Johnny-Boy's prompt action — until he has a chance to "eat and get dry...Theres time yet."[47] Sue allows him to rest until well past midnight, not with a desire to avoid telling him — Wright indicates that she knows she will and must, that everything depends on the comrades being warned — but wanting to take the time to tell him in the right way.[48]

In the later scene, conditions have changed: time is running short and Sue's ears are still ringing from her beating at the hands of the sheriff. Yet the failure of Sue and Reva to connect cannot be blamed exclusively on the enemy's violent repression or the urgency of the situation; a genuine opportunity is missed — and Reva contributes to the miscommunication as well. Arguably, Reva's "confident" rush to get good news from Sue makes it all the more unbearable for her to deliver the bad news truth. It's also worth noting, as we parse the devastating disconnect, that — in stark contrast to later portrayals of white communists, Jan Erlone, Boris Max, and fellow traveler Mary Dalton in *Native Son* — Wright depicts Reva in "Bright and Morning Star" as extremely *similar* to Sue at the level of material conditions. Besides the fact that both are women — with the hint of love between Sue's son Johnny-Boy and Reva adding a near-familial connection — we learn that, like Sue's son, Sugg, Reva's own brother is in jail, presumably for political reasons. "Ma cries ever day..." she confides to Sue.[49] Similarly, Reva's poverty appears to be as acute as Sue's. Helping Reva with her coat, Sue is struck by the "scant flesh of the girl's shoulders. She don git enuff t eat."[50] Though "white," Reva and her family are dealing with the same kind of threats that affect Sue and hers — police terror and hunger. This makes the tragic disconnect between these two comrades all the more remarkable, tragic, and sobering. We have here not — as in *Native Son* — an account of the great (if still perhaps bridgeable) cultural or social distance separating Communist activists and those they would represent and organize, but rather an account of how barriers to trust, communication, and collectivity can emerge even between people (comrades!) whose conditions of life are quite similar.

The Desire to Deny the Enemy to His Own Face

Ironically, alongside this failure to communicate with a comrade, Wright draws our attention to Sue's psychological desire to communicate to her enemy, suggesting how this urge to be "heard" by the agents of repression clouds her strategic judgment. This desire is totally understandable, of course — perhaps, like her desire to protect her comrades, it is even necessary for (and constitutive of) her radicalization. Yet in the moment of crisis, the urge to prove the enemy other wrong *to the enemy's own face*, like the felt need to protect a comrade from an unsettling truth, throws Sue, her comrades, and their would-be-collective project into danger, death, and doom.

Sue's individualism takes the form of a desire to sacrifice her body in order to

prove herself to the racist enemy that confronts her.[51] Again, it is in a sense a "selfless" desire, and yet one that loses sight of actual others — and of the necessities of the situation — in its flight from responsibility, a narcissistic substitution of fantasy for strategy. Just as Sue's desire to "protect" Reva leads to her failing actually to protect her, Sue's desire to deny the other, to show and to prove to the other that "yuh didn't git what yuh wanted," actually allows the sheriff and company *to "git"* what they want, the destruction of the local communist organization. Early on, while Sue is still alone and waiting for Johnny-Boy's initial return, she reflects: "Lawd, Johnny-Boy…Ah just wan them white folks t try t make me tell who is in the part n who ain! Ah just wan em t try, n Ahll show em something they never thought a black woman could have!"[52] The lines reveal Sue's political desire as *a desire to see the enemy other seeing her* own strength in action, a desire not only to disprove the Enemy's notion of what a "black woman" is capable of — or to laugh at the deluded racists behind their backs — but to *have "them" watch her as she disproves it*. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this; arguably such desires for recognition are a necessary moment in a process of revolutionary self-assertion. The point, as it emerges through "Bright and Morning Star," is that such rebel desire for recognition from the enemy, despite — or perhaps because of — its psychological appeal, threatens also to create a kind of tunnel vision, drawing one's eyes away from what is to be done, leaving the subject reactive, stuck in the enemy's universe. Mired in immediate reaction, locked into seeking the enemy's gaze, it becomes difficult to create new coordinates of subjectivity that aim not to 'be heard' by ruling powers, but to subvert and supplant them.[53]

Later, Sue gets the chance to act on her desire for recognition, after her house is broken into by the sheriff and his posse. Watching the racist, red-hunting thugs tear through her home, Sue recognizes that they don't yet know where Johnny-Boy is. "She was consumed with a bitter pride…She gave him up because *she wanted them to know they could not get what they wanted* by bluffing and killing."[54] Sue's strength in the face of racist, anticommunist repression is impressive. But as she experiences the moment, it is not enough for her to deny them; she *wants them to know they are being denied*. This other-orientation leads Sue to confront the sheriff as he is about to leave:

> Yuh didn't git whut yuh wanted! she thought exultingly. N yuh ain gonna never git it! Hotly something ached in her *to make them feel the intensity of her pride and freedom*; her heart groped to turn the bitter hours of her life into words of a kind that would *make them feel* that she had taken all they had done to her in stride and could still take more. Her faith surged so strongly in her she was all but blinded.[55]

Sue's faith-surging shouts provoke the departing sheriff; he re-enters the house to hit her so hard that she loses consciousness. Sue reflects later (ironically right as she is in the midst of going silent before her comrade, Reva), that "If she had not shouted

to the sheriff, she would have been strong enough to have resisted Booker; she would have been able to tell the comrades herself."[56]

"Bright and Morning Star," or, the ambiguity of symbolic redemption

Sue's radicalization in "Bright and Morning Star," like Reverend Taylor's in "Fire and Cloud," is cast in deeply Christian terms, suggesting the potential for a kind of synthesis of religious and communist symbolism.[57] As Cheryl Higashida has shown, the novellas in *Uncle Tom's Children* represent a fleshing out of concepts Wright outlined in his 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," where he wrote that "Negro writers who seek to mould or influence the consciousness of the Negro people must address their messages to them through the ideologies and attitudes fostered in this warping way of life" of Jim Crow segregation.[58] Thus, though Wright had a very critical view of the "warping" effects of established Christianity, both in his own life and in the lives of black people generally, he saw religion and religious symbolism not as a static or unchanging thing but as one that could alter (and be altered — "moulded") in relationship to changing historical and social conditions, one that revolutionary writers needed to take seriously — as he himself did.[59] Thus, for Rev. Taylor in "Fire and Cloud," the specter of social justice is likened to the visiting of hellfire upon the oppressors, and, later, following his decision to march alongside the "Reds," the masses mobilizing to demand bread come to stand in the place of a redemptive "Gawd." Likewise, for Sue in "Bright and Morning Star," under the influence of her activist sons and her own life of labor and struggle, "[t]he wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party become another Resurrection."[60]

In marked contrast with the rousing symbolic synthesis that closes "Fire and Cloud," however, the symbolism in "Bright and Morning Star" plays an overtly contradictory role. Whereas Rev. Taylor in "Fire and Cloud" comes to see the existence of "Gawd" as at once confirmed and made flesh by the red-led, interracial, mass mobilization of the poor to demand bread — Christianity and communism aligning in a conclusion that is likened to "a baptism of clean joy" — for Sue in "Bright and Morning Star", the redemptive discourse of Christianity at once enables the development of radical subjectivity, on one hand, and yet threatens to hold it back or to compromise it, on the other.[61] Her Christian martyr's ambition — "to be like Him [Jesus] and suffer without a mumbling word" — is shown to be both an impetus and an impediment to collective action.[62] If "Fire and Cloud" depicts the progressive promise of a Christian-Communist synthesis, "Bright and Morning Star" suggests the promise, but also the challenges and dangers of such a fusion.

Startlingly, the very title of Wright's story, "Bright and Morning Star," foregrounds this ambiguous, double-edged status of redemptive Christian symbolism. The phrase, which recurs throughout the story, alludes to the Bible; Sue clearly sees it as a symbol for Jesus (though she sings it in such a way that the "he" in question could equally well

apply to her son Johnny-Boy, for whose safe return her heart longs).[63] However, the Biblical allusion is a contradictory one; it points readers to the possibility that what appears to be the coming of redemption may in fact be the arrival of its opposite. The first reference in the Bible to the "morning star" as an individual is in Isaiah 14:12, and refers not to Jesus, but to Satan: "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!" (New International Version). Both the King James Version and New King James Version of the text translate "morning star" as "Lucifer, son of the morning." Yet, in Revelation 22:16, Jesus identifies Himself as the morning star: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The "bright and morning star" could be Christ, or anti-Christ.[64] Wright's frequently ominous descriptions of the distant Memphis beacon-light that cuts across virtually every scene of the story further signal the double-edged symbolism, with the beacon light described as being "Like a gleaming sword above her head," a "blade of light."[65] The point here of course is not to engage scriptural debate about the proper interpretation — or proper translation — of the "bright and morning star(s)." The point is that the very title of Wright's story — a title which reverberates in Sue's hymn singing, in the distant Memphis airport "beacon," and, crucially, at the precise moment of Sue's fateful decision — refers us to a Biblical symbol that is widely taken to signify in two opposed and incompatible ways. [66] The status of the "bright and morning star," the symbol of redemption, is unclear; what appears to be a beacon of hope may turn out to be the headlights of doom.

As we've shown, things stand similarly with Wright's story itself. For the long-established reading of "Bright and Morning Star," Sue appears akin to a savior. But in reality, despite her best and even in many ways heroic efforts, she presides over the destruction not the redemption of the comrades, making "Bright and Morning Star" a story about collective betrayal that takes the form of what looks like — and is mistaken for — individual martyrdom and salvation. If religious signs, and the emotions they unleash, align with the radical subjectivity of Taylor at the end of "Fire and Cloud," in "Bright and Morning Star" Wright confronts us with the possibility that the former may be misread as the latter, redemption and resurrection fantasies substituting for rather than supporting and spurring on revolutionary practice, with catastrophic results.

What is at stake here, and what the title "Bright and Morning Star" points us towards, is not just the irony of readers and critics misinterpreting Sue's act, (interesting as this may be), but the tragic irony of Sue herself misinterpreting her situation (and its symbolism) so as to come to the point of committing this mistaken act in the first place.[67] This isn't just a case of Wright slipping one by two generations of critics (a noteworthy fact, nonetheless); a close analysis of Sue's '"internal"' psychological processes, and of the material conditions that set the context for these processes,

takes the issue to another level, revealing "Bright and Morning Star" to be a story about the misleading or illusory appearance of redemption. "Bright and Morning Star" thus becomes a story about how betrayal can take the form of what looks like salvation, about how the brightness of a star (or a beacon) can confuse or even blind one to the situation at hand, about how easy it is to lapse into "individualism" in the name of saving (or taking revenge on) others, especially in moments of crisis. "Bright and Morning Star" is not just a story about a mistake Sue made, but about the *makings* of this mistake.

Grasping the Transindividual Structure of Individualism

On one level, what I have written above can be seen as an extension of Meyerson's approach; I agree with him that in a sense Sue falls prey to "individualism." And yet, moving beyond an acknowledgment of "false consciousness," my close reading of "Bright and Morning Star" has revealed an interesting paradox: Sue's "individualism" tends to take the form of its ostensible opposite: a concern for (or even an obsession with) others, friends as well as enemies. Sue makes her crucial error not when she is concerned for herself (or even for her family), but when she is worried about upsetting another, her comrade (or worried about showing up the enemy). Her "individualist" going-it-alone is shown by Wright to be an effect of her attempt to be (or to appear to be) what (she thinks) her newfound ally expects from her (or, on the other hand, to defy what she thinks the enemy thinks of her). "Individualism" here is not a sign of selfishness or indifference for the collective, so much as — one the one hand — a lack of faith in the ability of another member of that collective to grasp and to accept the fullness of her own contradictory being, and — on the other hand — a too narrow focus on the enemy as the "audience" for her activism. Sue tries to "go it alone" for the sake of others, to protect their faith, or to make them feel their failure. Individualist "false consciousness" is a symptom of a broader — and collective — lapse.[68]

   We can thus intuit here Wright's suggestion of yet another — more collective — failure of faith, this one attributable to the local Communist party-movement itself, for not having involved Sue (this black, working mother and widow, this devout Christian) sooner and more fully in their organizing (in the weeks and months leading up to the crisis-night of the story). Sue's early reflection on how "Johnny-Boy ain the one t trust nobody t do nothing. He gotta do it all hissef…" thus reverberates with irony, and not just because, as other critics have noted, Johnny-Boy has been all too trusting when it has come to allowing white men — such as the traitor Booker — into the fledgling party.[69] An additional irony, just as profound and tragic, emerges from the recognition that Johnny-Boy's (individualistic) bearing of burdens by himself has — however unintentionally — allowed Sue to remain marginalized and under-politicized within the movement she is increasingly sympathetic to. Insofar as Sue's heroic lapse is a (very understandable) sign of her lack of experience with communist political activity prior to this crucial crisis moment, we can hypothesize

that Johnny-Boy's own individualist mode of communist work has inadvertently contributed to Sue's individualistic error. Doing the political work for others — rather than challenging them to take it up themselves — is here shown to be yet another "heroic" mistake. A mistake that breeds other mistakes.

The Stakes of a Scandalous Rereading

The present reading offers us more than a descriptive correction of "Bright and Morning Star." Fully grasping the subjective process by which Sue ultimately betrays the cause she aims to defend enriches our understanding of Richard Wright's pro-communist 1930's fiction, foregrounding and reframing his interest in human consciousness — and in relationships between comrades and the masses of people — as a crucial site of struggle, one with deep implications for the communist movement he sought to build.[70] Long hailed as an exemplary achievement of pro-communist/proletarian literature, "Bright and Morning Star" comes to stand as not only a compelling narrative that reflects actual, ongoing radical struggles of the time (though it is this, too), but an example of Wright using fiction as a kind of dialectical psychoanalytic tool through which to contribute to the radical cause, not (only) by touting its achievements, but by illuminating the internal and existential contradictions that threaten to undermine that movement from within. The powerful draw of martyr-like "heroism" was among the dangers Wright sought to bring to light.[71]

More broadly, re-reading "Bright and Morning Star" in this way gives us occasion to consider the (contradictory) formal dynamics of political subjectivization itself, understood as the process by which a particular, singular individual in specific material circumstances comes to infuse his/her life with the practical consequences of a political commitment to a universal, collective, revolutionary, and egalitarian process.[72] In this vein, Meyerson's corrective reading of "Bright and Morning Star" has given us the chance not only to document (Wright's awareness of) the dangers of individualistic, martyr-like substitutions for collective action, but also to explore the basis for this subjective error, as it can be traced to the workings of human consciousness and to comradely relations, in their complex interaction with the social and political conditions faced by an emergent, besieged communist project.

"Bright and Morning Star" thus becomes not only a critical warning about the danger of lapsing into individualist modes of thought and thus betraying causes that one seeks to support, but a call to study, engage, and transform the latent conditions that make such betrayal possible — including, but not limited to, the gendered division of labor, the persistence of racialized attitudes within the communist movement (on both sides of the "race" line), and the subjective deformations and disconnections these give rise to. This possibility, far from being best understood as a foreign or false ideology that is imported into the communist movement from the "outside," or as some residual "bourgeois" element, is perhaps better grasped as a danger that is always present, a possibility that is immanent to the political process of subjectivization

itself, not only because subjectivization is always a matter of working with those contents inherited from the past, but insofar as this subjectivization necessarily involves a tense dialectic of individuality and collectivity in the crisis-time of the present.

Similarly, our reading of Wright's novella suggests the continued relevance of his work — and perhaps of US proletarian fiction more generally — to contemporary theoretical discussion, developed by figures such as Alain Badiou and Jodi Dean, theorists who approach communism as a matter of subjectification and collective desire.[73] Arguing that, against the "democratic drive" that now dominates on the Left, "communist desire designates the subjectification of the gap necessary for politics, the division within the people," Dean has insisted that "this subjectification is collective — our desire and our collective desire for us…Communist desire is a desire for collectivity… the desire for collective desiring."[74] Against this framework of collective desire for collectivity, Dean criticizes Badiou for emphasizing acts of "individual decision and will." "Such an emphasis," she writes, "thereby assents to capitalist form, rendering communism as just another content, and object of individual desire rather than the desire for a collective subject. In Badiou's version," she adds, "the individual's active participation in a new subject doesn't even require any radical change on the part of the individual — he or she can remain 'the individual that he or she is.' What gets lost is the common that gives communism its force."[75] I gesture towards this debate here merely to suggest that Wright's text offers a means of mediating between Dean's emphasis on collective desire and Badiou's focus on individual incorporation in the communist Subject. Wright's story explores the relationship between individuality and collectivity in the precarious light of a communist horizon; it thus opens up space for discussion about the ways in which particular individuals may become incorporated (or fail to become incorporated) within a communist Subject. At the same time, "Bright and Morning Star" recounts Sue's subjective process in such a way as to foreground for readers the complex terrain of revolutionary desire, confronting us with how vexing the struggle to align personal desire with strategic action can be, of how individualist *form* may subsume communist *content*, even when some notion of a "communist horizon" is ostensibly in view, and a committed communist party at work.

Sue reminds us that to care about comrades and to dream of destroying enemies is necessarily to risk excesses of both caution and revenge. Similarly, to cultivate a will and a revolutionary faith that is up to the task of sacrifice is to court the fantasy of substitutive martyrdom; to be willing to die for a symbol of redemption is to risk dying for the symbol without materializing the redemption as revolutionary praxis. None of which eliminates the need to nonetheless heroically dare to act in the face of these dangers. Leaps of faith, like symbols, remain necessary — despite their dangers. For Wright, the stakes were high; the role of the revolutionary artist was nothing less

than to "fashion symbols by which his people will live and die...."[76] As my reading of "Bright and Morning Star" has hopefully made clear, however, Wright's radical Thirties fiction was not only concerned with *fashioning* such finished symbols as heroes to be upheld — or better yet, fixed beacons or "bright and morning stars," to be followed to the red horizon — but equally with depicting the contradictory potential that symbols and symbolism imply for human consciousness, and thus for political struggle.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Time-Line and Gender-Lines of Wright's Class War

Our reading of "Bright and Morning Star" sheds new light on Wright's famous self-critical comments regarding the original reception of the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom's Children*. Responding to the popular reception of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright expressed frustration that the emotional experience of his stories was preventing readers from grasping their social and political implications. Famously, he quipped that he "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" ("How Bigger Was Born"). Critics who reference this famous line of self-critique generally take it to refer to *Uncle Tom's Children* as a whole, making no distinction between the 1938 and 1940 versions. But this conflation of the two editions risks erasing "Bright and Morning Star" from view altogether. More specifically, it risks blinding us to how "Bright and Morning Star" does not merely represent a continuation of patterns established previously in *Uncle Tom's Children*, but rather in some ways, signifies a significant departure, a reflexive amendment that alters the meaning and impact of the *Uncle Tom's Children* as a (reframed) whole.

Notably, Wright's critique of *Uncle Tom's Children* in "How Bigger Was Born" was written and published before "Bright and Morning Star" appeared as part of *Uncle Tom's Children* later that same year. In fact, Wright was working to get his publisher to add "Bright and Morning Star" (and the "autobiographical sketch" "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow") to *Uncle Tom's Children* at roughly the same moment that he was writing, delivering, developing and publishing the speech that would become a pamphlet, and soon after an appendix to *Native Son*.[77] At the very least then, it is misleading to read Wright's famous self-critical comments on *Uncle Tom's Children* as applying directly to the version that includes "Bright and Morning Star." Indeed, it would seem more plausible to read "Bright and Morning Star" as a part of Wright's own critical reflection on the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom's Children*, complicating the triumphal and cathartic, indeed "baptismal" ending "Fire and Cloud". Adding "Bright and Morning Star" to the end of *Uncle Tom's Children* thus can be seen as a challenge to such cathartic modes of reading, a final warning about how "tears" and individual emotional release — however well intended — may obscure a clear view of the situation, blinding one to the actuality of what must be done. Even a "baptism of clean joy" cannot wash away those contradictions that still linger on beneath the

surface.[78] It is thus not only "banker's daughters" whose emotions risk blinding them to the realities of social struggle; rather, Wright suggests, the oppressed themselves can fall victim to the blindness of cathartic release, the temptation of "total acts" guided by ambiguous "bright and morning stars."[79]

For those accustomed to seeing Sue as that rare thing, a Richard Wright hero, not to mention, a sympathetic, richly drawn hero*ine*, the re-interpretation of "Bright and Morning Star" opened up by Meyerson and developed further here may seem like a symbolic loss: Does this re-reading merely add more evidence to support Sherley Anne Williams contention that even at his exceptional best, "Wright's loving characterization [of Aunt Sue] also reinforces the image of the black woman as a symbol of the reactionary aspects in Afro-American tradition implicit in the preceding three stories [of *Uncle Tom's Children*]"?[80] Similarly, in her insightful 2009 essay, Cheryl Higashida notes that the domestic scene of "Bright and Morning Star" can be seen as limiting the otherwise progressive gender politics of this exceptional story. "In representing female solidarity arising out of the domestic sphere, Wright also confines Sue and Reva's relationship within it."[81] These are valid concerns. And yet, in re-evaluating the gender politics of the closing story of *Uncle Tom's Children*, we would do well to reframe the discussion somewhat. For one, can we not read this politicizing of domestic space as itself a positive, progressive, even proto-feminist move? Contrary to a certain masculinist, militant bias that would suggest that the class war is won primarily on the picket lines and the barricades — an approach privileging highly confrontational, even overtly violent actions as the primary site or figure for radical politics — "Bright and Morning Star," as we have re-interpreted it, suggests that the struggle may be won or lost in the "private" sphere, in the kitchen and the pantry. With "Bright and Morning Star," Wright revises his famously violent and bloody collection to suggest that the key moments in the struggle for communism may involve not (just) guns, but conversations; trust, comfort, and patience among comrades may be as important as militancy, political consciousness, or courage.

Appreciating this aspect of Wright's work thus means rethinking a line of Wright criticism that extends back to Zora Neale Hurston's original review of *Uncle Tom's Children* (in 1938), a review that took to task a version of *Uncle Tom's Children* that did not yet include "Bright and Morning Star."[82] Notoriously, Hurston accused Wright of offering readers — and especially black male readers--"wish fulfillment" grounded in violence. "In each story," she wrote, "the hero suffers but he gets his man." To this she added that "Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work" [83] Putting to one side the retaliatory harshness of Hurston's review as an interpretation of even the 1938 version of *Uncle Tom's Children*, it is tempting to read "Bright and Morning Star" as a kind of reply — perhaps even a self-corrective one — to Hurston's critique. That is, "Bright and Morning Star" certainly does provide us with what may appear to be violent "wish-fulfillment," but it presents it in order to critique it. Sue "gets her man"... and that that isn't enough. Dramatizing the limits of heroic

violent individualist action, Wright gives us a story that is precisely about the need for "understanding and sympathy" between comrades, and about how difficult it is to achieve this combination in the context of race-class struggles in the Jim Crow South.

Beyond replying to Hurston, "Bright and Morning Star" suggests not only that such gun-slinging heroism can be inadequate to the task of revolution in times of crisis, but that a focus on this dramatic, climactic, "total" mode of action threatens to blind subjects to the less dramatic but nonetheless essential social and political tasks, tasks that remain essential if individual confrontational heroics are actually to mean anything at all. It's not just that violence is risky or inadequate, but that thinking in terms of such "total acts" aimed at blotting out of the Enemy can blind us to other crucial, collective work that needs to be done. Embedded in "Bright and Morning Star" then is an argument for taking seriously the contexts of comradeship, the mundane habits of speaking and listening, the cultivation of interpersonal relations — "understanding and sympathy" — traditionally "feminine" and feminist concerns. Sue's error is that she reaches for Johnny-Boy's gun instead of finding words for Reva.

In order to change the world, Wright's "Bright and Morning Star" suggests, we need to get better at understanding the processes by which human consciousness changes, as both subject and object of the world it seeks to shape, and also better at transforming the way comrades relate to one another, and to the masses of people in their uneven, emerging political development. In this light, critical examination of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of existing political collectivities — or the contradictions at work in revolutionary symbolism — is not a diversion or a "retreat" from the "real movement that abolishes the present state of things."[84] It is rather a part of that emancipatory movement, insofar as the things to be abolished and transformed are not just out there, but also in here, internal to political consciousness and, indeed, to the relations between comrades and the people. To become true participants in such a communist movement, Wright reminds us, is not only a matter of courageously "showing" the enemy, or of "proving" oneself a hero. It is a matter of more fully and honestly engaging the masses of people and fellow comrades alike, in the light of a strategic view of what truly needs to be done. Revolution is not only a matter of producing or clinging to symbols, but of grasping their meanings more fully, of making space and time for full and collective communication that can transcend the social divisions created by white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism, even in the midst of crisis. Even the best symbol can buckle or boomerang, if not handled dialectically, critically, and collectively.

Here, in the light of his own communist fiction, Wright's classic metaphor for revolutionary writing too demands renewed critical reflection. In *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Wright famously wrote of H.L. Mencken as his first radical literary influence: "The man was *fighting with words*. He was *using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club* ... Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?"[85] Here is

where the classic quote usually breaks off, with Wright endorsing the idea of using words "as a weapon." But Wright goes on: "No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but *how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.*"[86] It's not the weapon but the will and courage to wield it that most strikes the young Wright. Where does the courage to speak such fighting truths come from? Of course, reading against the grain here, the idea of using words "as one would use a club" can signify doubly; a *writer's club* is not only a metaphoric *weapon* that can be gripped by an individual, but also a *group* where people meet to build trust, to chart the best course, to choose the best metaphoric weapons, and to gather courage for collective action. Similarly, Wright's vision of a writer "fighting with words" takes on an enriched dialectical meaning in light of the struggle "Bright and Morning Star" dramatizes, the struggle to 'mould' the 'warped' materials of an oppressive society in a revolutionary direction. The struggle is not just to target the enemy (whether with words or with bullets), but also to cultivate — in oneself and in others — the courage to speak suppressed truths. Words then become not just "weapons" to be deployed against an enemy, but part of the very terrain of the struggle to constitute revolutionary collectivity as such. And so, yes, perhaps we should use Richard Wright's communist writing as one would use a *club,* not just as a weapon *but as a collective space for critical reflection in the midst of struggle*. As we do so, we might recall that Wright's own courage to speak so powerfully was sustained by his participation in the Chicago John Reed Club, that short-lived worker-writer project that fused his life-work with mid-20th century Communism. As Wright later described that movement's passionate call: "It did not say: 'Be like us and we will like you, maybe.' It said: 'If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone.'"[87]

Notes

1. Here I follow Barbara Foley, who has argued convincingly in her essay, "The Politics of Poetics: Ideology and Narrative Form in *American Tragedy* and *Native Son,*" that Wright's literary practice in *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) is aimed more at getting readers to scrutinize critically the social conditions shaping the narrative before them than at getting readers to "feel for" or identify with the protagonist of that narrative. I would add only that while *Native Son* may be a privileged case of Wright's "apologue" approach, such a tendency characterizes a great deal of Wright's oeuvre. Foley's essay can be found in the anthology *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. (New York: Amistad, 1993).

2. My approach differs here from that taken by a critic such as Sherley Anne Williams, who appears to argue the opposite in her quite brilliant and illuminating essay "Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995). Williams finds that Wright's male characters all too often embody a tradition of "black male heroism" (64) which "tends to foreground black male protagonists' struggle for self-definition and against oppression and their social environment in such a way as to push women into the "background." As she writes, "Neither women or 'women's questions' figure centrally in Wright's fiction; when they appear at all, they are subsumed under larger philosophical or political themes" (64). I do not contest that a number of Wright protagonists can be viewed as "heroic" in the problematically macho sense that Sherley Anne Williams outlines. My point is precisely that, read closely, and in the wake of the work of black feminist criticism, these characters no longer appear heroic. I will go one step further below, to argue that — against the grain of the "black male tradition" which Williams criticizes — the supposedly "heroic" characters' in Wright's fiction, whatever their own imputed intentions, *are shown by Wright to fail*, and even, in many cases to *compound rather than to relieve the oppression against which they seek to act*. Williams herself admits that "their acts of heroism" are "often nihilistic and Pyrrhic" (67).

3. There are a number of critics for whom Bigger Thomas represents a "hero" of one sort or another. For an interesting, but to my mind problematic reading of Bigger as a kind of "existential hero" see Petar Ramadanovic's essay "Native Son's Tragedy: Traversing the Death Drive with Bigger Thomas," in *Richard Wright: New Edition,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2009). A more recent, and very rich reappraisal of Bigger as a positively exemplary figure can be found in Anthony Dawahare, "Richard Wright's Native Son and the Dialectics of Black Experience." Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary, ed. Alice Mikal Craven and Yoko Nakamura (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)

4. "How Bigger Was Born" *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 521. That Wright would later come to equate somewhat these two social tendencies, (reminding of Hannah Arendt's thesis of "two totalitarianisms") in his 1953 novel *The Outsider*, should not keep us from seeing the radical distinction he drew between them earlier. While sharing roots in a common situation of modern alienation, Communism and Fascism were, for the early Wright, diametrically opposed social-political responses to that situation.

5. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

6. See for instance Barbara Foley's essay, "A Dramatic Picture … Of Woman from Feudalism to Fascism: Richard Wright's Black Hope." in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craven and

William E. Dow (New York, Bloomsbury: 2014).

7.   The 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) contained in order, "Big Boy Leaves Home," "Down by the Riverside," "Long Black Song," and "Fire and Cloud." The 1940 edition added, at Wright's insistence, the opening "autobiographical sketch," "Ethics of Living Jim Crow," and the closing story, "Bright and Morning Star."

8.   The story was subsequently included in both Edward O'Brien's *Best American Short Stories of 1939* and *Fifty Best American Short Stories (1914-1939)*.

9.   For present purposes I exclude here Wright's non-fiction works, such as *Ten Million Black Voices* (1941) and his autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945, 1977). Reverend Taylor, the protagonist of "Fire and Cloud" is another obvious candidate. His heroism however hinges precisely on his coming to refuse individualist leadership over or apart from "the people." In effect, I would argue, echoing Gregory Meyerson and others, that the real hero of "Fire and Cloud" is not so much Taylor as the mass of militant workers and peasants; Taylor's major "heroic" contribution is to realize this basic fact and to step back and out of the way, merging with and being subsumed by this emerging collective subject.

10. It is worth noting that the basic arc of Sue's final heroism — hiding a gun in a white sheet to shoot the racists who have violated her loved one — here repeats almost exactly a tale that Richard Wright would later report having heard and been deeply inspired by as a child. In his autobiography, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, written years after "Bright and Morning Star" and *Uncle Tom's Children,* Wright devotes two pages to discussing the overheard story. That Wright singles out this overheard childhood tale underscores its importance (to him as a child and/or to him as an author in the mid-1940s). Moreover, the way he reflects on this story, and its psychological-emotional resonance in his life, as a kind of symptom of his sense of powerlessness as a child, has implications for how we should read the "Bright and Morning Star" version as well. I am treating this topic in a forthcoming essay.

11. Sherely Anne Williams "Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," 67.

12. Williams does qualify her praise a bit, noting that "Wright's loving characterization also reinforces the image of the black woman as a symbol of the reactionary aspects in Afro-American tradition implicit in the preceding three stories" (Williams 67).

13. Cheryl Higashida, "Aunt Sue's Children: Reviewing the Gender(ed) Politics of Richard Wright's Radicalism" (*Bloom's Modern Critical Views New Edition of Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2009) 89. In this essay, she invaluably locates Sue within an emergent discourse of interracial proletarian solidarity that emerged during the Communist-led effort to free the Scottsboro Boys, arguing that "Sue is Wright's rendition of a Popular Front symbol — the radical black mother" (86). "In contrast to her sons' monolithic Communism that uncritically privileges class over race and gender," she continues, "Sue constantly negotiates and eventually transcends the contradictions between black nationalism and Communist integrationism."

14. For a range of readings of the story that reproduce this heroic interpretation of the ending, despite their marked differences in other areas, see: Edward Margolies, "Wright's Craft: The Short Stories" in Gates and Appiah, *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993). Richard Yarbrough's introduction to Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), ix-xxix, especially xxvi-viii; Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction,*

1929-1941 (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 206-9; Abdul JanMohamed, "Rehistoricizing Wright: "Psychopolitical Functions of Death in *Uncle Tom's Children*" in *Richard Wright* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views), ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House) 191-228; and Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism and African American Literature between the Wars* (Oxford: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 2003) 117.

15. For a recent example, see A. C. Kilinski's "Flinging a New Star: 'Fire and Cloud' and 'Bright and Morning Star' as Reflections of Richard Wright's Changing Relationship with Communism," *Epiphany: Journal of Transdiciplinary Studies* 5.1 (2012).

16. Gregory Meyerson, "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star'" *Reconstruction: Studies in Culture*, http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/084/meyerson.shtml, ed. Graham Barnfield and Joseph G. Ramsey. The conclusion of the essay offers a useful reader-response analysis of what may account for the universal misreading of this widely hailed story. To date, I am not aware of a single scholarly citation of Meyerson's 2008 article.

17. Gregory Meyerson, "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star.'"

18. Richard Wright "Bright and Morning Star" *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 235.

19. Richard Wright "Long Black Song" *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 153. Uttering this statement, Silas initiates a gun battle that he knows will lead to his death, leaving his wife Sarah and their newborn baby destitute, homeless, and abandoned. Whatever their symbolic force, such individual 'heroics' leave the others in the story no better off. Positive appraisals of Silas's last stand, such as George Yarborough's in the Harper Modern Classic introduction of *Uncle Tom's Children* — Yarborough deems Silas and Mann's choice of death-terms "an existential triumph of no small order" (xxiv) — demand a great deal of qualification.

20. Richard Wright, "Fire and cloud," *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper, 2004) 209, emphasis added.

21. Richard Wright "Fire and could" 210

22. This interpretation also casts new light on Wright's — otherwise quite odd — naming of Mary Dalton's communist lover in *Native Son*, Jan *Erlone*. In light of Wright's playing on this trope in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Erlone's last name calls our attention to the way this would-be communist has become detached and disconnected from the common people he would ostensibly serve or represent. A full tracing of Wright's complex and evolving negotiation of the relationship between collectivity and individuality is beyond the scope of this essay. However, readers surely will agree that from the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children*, to *Native Son*, to *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, to *The Outsider,* while Wright's work often implies criticisms of actually existing collectives (from the lynch mobs of the South to the contradiction ridden Communist Party) he simultaneously explores the dread, desperation, and often the death to which isolated individuals are destined, insofar as they attempt or are forced to try to manage their dangerous situations *erlone*. We might provisionally conclude that despite its political shifts after 1940, Wright's work consistently embodies a negative, anti-individualist politics, if not a positively collectivist one.

23. See Meyerson's discussion of "Down by the Riverside" in *Reconstruction 8.4*. The two key moments in "Down by the Riverside" are 1) when Mann fails to ask the pastor to exchange boats — which he knows could allow him to avoid the police, who are looking for Mr. Heartfield's stolen vessel; and 2) when Mann neglects to speak up to the black man Brinkley, to stop them from heading to the Heartfield's house, where Mann knows his doom awaits. A third, less collective moment comes when, after arriving at the

house, Mann briefly considers killing the rest of the Heartfield family with his axe — a moment that clearly foreshadows Bigger Thomas's notorious suffocation of Mary Dalton in *Native Son*. Meyerson helpfully draws out the way the Wright's text foregrounds these silences as moments of self-conscious alienation. Mann knows that he must speak up, but he cannot bring himself to do so.

24. We should add here that Wright's opening story, "Big Boy Leaves Home," does provide a more collective model of community resistance, albeit a defensive one. It is only due to Big Boy's reliance on his family, and their reliance on neighbors and networks across the Black community, that he is able to escape the lynch mob that is looking for him.

25. This essay will thus attempt to provide a more satisfying answer to the question of "What was Wright 'trying to say' by thus subverting his reader's expectations [in "Bright and Morning Star"]?" A question to which Meyerson in his essay admits: "I don't have a fully convincing answer."

26. The most extended of several passages clarifying this point comes on page 244: "Then all the horror of it flashed upon her; [Sue] saw flung out over the rainy countryside an array of shacks where white and black comrades were sleeping; in the morning they would be rising and going to Lem's; then they would be caught. And that meant terror, prison, and death. The comrades would have to be told; she would have to tell them; she could not entrust Johnny-Boy's work to another…"

27. The Aunt Sue-Reva relationship has been insightfully explored in somewhat competing ways by Sherley Anne Williams and by Cheryl Higashida.

28. For an overview of Wright's depictions of white women, an account that does not attend to Reva's exceptional status, see Tara T. Green "The Virgin Mary, Eve, and Mary Magdalene in Richard Wright's novels. In *Richard Wright: New Edition* edited by Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House, 2009) 35-53.

29. Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" 231.That Sue refers to Reva as "the brightest glow," using language so close to the symbolically overdetermined title of Wright's story, "Bright and Morning Star" again suggests the importance, perhaps even the emblematic status, of the Sue-Reva relationship. We will return to this symbolism below.

30. Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" 250-251.

31. Once she is sound asleep, Sue fetches the pistol from the dresser beside her bed, watching the young communist sleep as she quietly gathers the weapon. Re-read in light of Sue's mistake, this scene ominously foreshadows Booker Thomas's silent smothering of (white communist fellow traveler) Mary Dalton in the crucial scene of Wright's *Native Son*. And indeed, Sue's fear of disturbing Reva leads inexorably to death, destruction, and police repression in the community every bit as much as Bigger's suffocating Mary, an act which is similarly executed to prevent a racially tinged misunderstanding from coming between a Black person and his would-be white allies. Sue now appears as a forerunner for Bigger Thomas.

32. It's also worth noting here the uncanny similarity between the name *Reva* and *Eva*, the name of the main romantic interest and potential artistic comrade (another young white woman) that Cross Damon briefly connects with but ultimately drives to death (by suicide) in Wright's later novel, *The Outsider*. As with the Sue-Reva relationship, the major tension and struggle structuring the Damon-Eva relation — and arguably the book's climactic section itself — is the question of whether it is possible to fully and meaningfully communicate across racial lines. Though he knows what he'd like to say to Eva, Damon Cross doubts that Eva's life-experience and worldview will allow her to accept him and his situation in all its complexity (and horror). Indeed, in some ways, like the disconnect in "Bright and Morning Star" (to

be discussed further below), Eva's very (romanticizing, oversimplifying) sympathy for oppressed black people — or at least Damon's perception of this sympathy — becomes not just a bridge but ultimately a barrier to meaningful mutual understanding. Unlike in "Bright and Morning Star," however, Damon does finally spill his heart out to Eva, though never in its full complexity (he too is convinced that Eva can't handle the truth), and only after he has committed a number of irreversible and violent acts. Shocked by his confessions (of murder as well as love) Eva leaps to her death through a window, in a sense confirming Damon's sense that she could never understand him. While a full discussion of the parallels, similarities, and differences between the various scenes of failed interracial communication in Wright's work — even or especially between would-be intimates — demands more space than the present essay offers, we can at least observe here that Wright's concern with the complex psychological and cultural barriers to interracial communication — even and perhaps especially between would-be friends, lovers, comrades, and confidantes — runs through from his earliest to his latest fiction. Closely related to this is Wright's ongoing concern with exposing and challenging white liberals and communists idealization of black people. Such a de-idealizing of "the oppressed black masses" can be seen as a black-red thread running through "Bright and Morning Star" (among other stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*), *Native Son*, as well as *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, and *The Outsider*.

33. "Bright and Morning Star" 229.

34. "Like a gleaming sword above her head" (221), a "blade of light" (226).

35. For an astute discussion of this concept, see Zizek "The Interpassive Subject," Talk given at Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998. A classic example is that of belief in Santa Claus, as it operates in households with children approaching adolescence. The parents don't believe — but think (or want to believe) that the kids do. The kids don't believe — but don't want to disturb their parents' belief that they still do. Each 'believes' for the other. They don't believe in Santa Claus, but believe in the other's belief in Santa Claus, or (in the case of the child who performs belief for the parents) believe that the other still believes in one's own belief. The fascinating thing of course is that the entire ritual can continue, and can retain its "magic," even as none of the participating parties "actually" believe in old Kris Kringle.

36. "Bright and Morning Star" (229)

37. Again, this may or may not be in fact the case; what Reva *actually* believes or is capable of is another matter; we are dealing here with Sue's subjective perceptions, which is all that Wright's text allows us.

38. See for instance *Black Boy (American Hunger)* where Wright notes that "I talked with white Communists about my experiences with black Communists, and I could not make them understand what I was talking about. White Communists had idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw" (339).

39. Here and elsewhere I use the term *anti-Communist* to describe ideas or actions that are antagonistic to the particular institutions, positions, or leadership of the Communist Party; *anti-communist* signifies ideas or actions antagonistic to the ideas and goals of communism as such. Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is in many respects an anti-Communist text; however, it is not until *The Outsider* that Wright's anti-Communism slides into outright anti-communism.

40. Anthony Dawahare brilliantly explores Wright's use of "the white mountain" to explore the reification and de-reification of consciousness in *Native Son,* particularly at the very end of the novel. This developing treatment of this "white mountain" across these two late-thirties texts is yet another piece of evidence

suggesting the deep connections between "Bright and Morning Star" and *Native Son*, suggesting the ways in which Aunt Sue is a kind of predecessor for Bigger Thomas. See Dawahare's "Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the Dialectics of Black Experience" in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craen and William E. Dow (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

41. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1995) 199.

42. "Bright and Morning star" (250, 253).

43. "Bright and Morning Star" 248.

44. "Bright and Morning Star" 248.

45. "Bright and Morning Star" 248-249.

46. "Bright and Morning Star" 249, emphasis added

47. "Bright and Morning Star" 231.

48. The role that perceptions of time and depictions of temporality play in this story, and across *Uncle Tom's Children*, deserves further study.

49. "Bright and Morning Star" 229.

50. "Bright and Morning Star" 229-230.

51. This recalls also the moment in "Long Black Song," where Silas's long speech addressed to the dead white man, is juxtaposed to his failure to communicate with his wife, Sarah. "He began to talk to no one in particular; he simply stood over the dead white man and talked out of his life..." (*Uncle Tom's Children* 152).

52. "Bright and Morning Star" 225

53. One could perhaps speak here of a distinction between a *subject of rebellion* — aimed at gaining recognition from an oppressor (or an oppressive system), and a *subject of revolution*, which aims not to gain recognition from an oppressor, but to supplant that oppressor (or oppressive system) entirely. Paulo Freire addresses the issue in the opening chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000): "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility."

54. "Bright and Morning Star" 239-240, emphasis added.

55. "Bright and Morning Star" 240, emphasis added.

56. "Bright and Morning Star" 251.

57. This itself is an interesting fact, considering, as Cornell West has recently put it, Wright's status as "the most secular thinker the Black tradition has ever produced." *Black Prophetic Fire: in Dialogue with and Edited by Christa Bushendorf* (Beacon Press, 2014) 22.

58.   Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" 198-199.

59. For Wright's most sustained critical — but also deeply dialectical — treatment of the Church, see *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, "Part One: Southern Night." *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) also engages the contradictory — ideological, but also utopian — tendencies at work in the Black Church.

60. "Fire and Cloud," 204 and "Bright and Morning Star" 225. Wright was not merely imagining this christian-communist dialectic. For the classic study of the syncretic practices that characterized Communist work in the Jim Crow South, see Robin Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great*

Depression (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1990).

61. "Fire and Cloud" 220.

62. "Bright and Morning Star" 224.

63. Sue sings, "He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Mawnin Star / He's the fairest of Ten Thousand T Mah Soul" (222), as she hopes for Johnny-Boy's return in time for supper. While an earlier verse of this hymn — "Though all the world forsake me, and Satan tempt me sore, / Through Jesus I shall safely reach the goal," — makes it clear that the song refers to Jesus, the lines Wright includes in "Bright and Morning Star" do not.

64. Just to show how open this startling title-secret has been for some time: As of August 9, 2013, a Google search for the phrase "Bright and Morning Star," retrieves the following top 'results': *"Is the Morning Star in the Bible Jesus or Lucifer?"; "The Bright and Morning Star — Jesus of Lucifer?; "Why are both Jesus and Satan referred to as the Morning Star?"* Among other intertextual signs that Wright was often thinking about the coincidence of Christ/Antichrist we can include: his writings on Seventh Day Adventism; his paraphrase of black church doctrine in *12 Million Black Voices* (68-75), where both Satan/Lucifer and God/Jesus are depicted as "going down" to earth; and Wright's later naming of his protagonist in *The Outsider,* Cross Damon.

65. "Bright and Morning Star" 221, 226.The likening of light as "blades" also echoes — and gathers ominous association from — the closing pages of "Big Boy Leaves Homes," as Big Boy hides from the light in the back of his Chicago-borne wagon.

66. "Ah got to make her go t bed! Yes; Booker would tell the names of the comrades to the sheriff. If she could only stop him some way! *That was the answer, the point, the star that grew bright in the morning of new hope....* Ah could wade the creek n beat him [Booker] there...but what would she do after that? 'Reva, honey, go t bed. Ahem alright. Yuh need res." (250-1, emphasis added).

67. In "Aunt Sue's Mistake: False Consciousness in Richard Wright's 'Bright and Morning Star,'" Meyerson offers some compelling reader reception analysis near the end of the "Aunt Sue's Mistake" essay. "That Wright's closing story, and hence his collection as a whole, has been so long misread, that Sue's narcissistic death-dream has been mistaken for a radical and heroic encounter with reality, even on the left, is perhaps testimony to the continuing power that such fantasies of the "total act" continue to exert on contemporary readers."

68. In a sense we can see false consciousness here (in a political register) as somewhat analogous to Marx's famous critique of commodity fetishism (in an economic one). In the first chapter of *Capital vol. 1,* Marx traces the way in which the mystified consciousness of fetishism is not merely a matter of ideology, but is the effect of actual social relations of production; the crucial corollary is that to abolish, overcome, and transform this fetishism of commodities requires not just scientific discovery, but an actual revolutionary transformation of the social relations that give rise to this mystification. Similarly, one could hypothesize that the individualist errors Sue makes cannot be educated away in a direct sense, but only by addressing the lack of collectivity of which "individualism" is a symptom; communist consciousness requires communist social relations within the movement itself!

69. "Bright and Morning Star" 221. This is in accordance with Johnny-Boy's belief that class commonality is more fundamental than racial difference, and that, furthermore, practically speaking, it is impossible to grow the party if one maintains a stance of suspicion towards potential comrades (234).

70. For a very clear and useful review of Richard Wright as a writer deeply committed to Marxism and the communist cause, see James Smethurst's essay, "After Modernism: Richard Wright Interprets the Black Belt," *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alie Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (Bloomsbury: New York, 2014).

71. Likewise, we can see "Bright and Morning Star" as offering a sobering counterpoint to more triumphalist tendencies in proletarian literature or socialist realism, which, though — contrary to anti-communist stereotypes — seldom depicting the revolutionary road ahead as an easy one or victory as inevitable, often did suggest that the revolutionary consciousness that had been gained would not be easily lost. This counterpoint becomes clear when one juxtaposes "Bright and Morning Star" to one of Wright's likely models for this story, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. I take up the many textual relations of these two works in a forthcoming essay.

72. For a compelling formal account of communist political subjectivization see the closing chapter on Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010). Also see Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Living in a Time of Riots*. (New York: Verso, 2012).

73. See Dean's penultimate chapter, "Desire" in *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012). Notably, Dean's most recent book, *Crowds and Party* (Verso, 2016) published while the present essay was in production, turns to the Chicago section of Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* in order to develop her account of the relationship between individuality and collectivity in the U.S. Communist Party the 1930s. I review Dean's discussion of these issues — and of Wright's treatment of them — in a forthcoming essay.

74. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon,* 179, 197, 199.

75. *The Communist Horizon* 195.

76. "Blueprint for Negro Writing" 199.

77. The "Note on the text" in the Harper Perennial edition of *Uncle Tom's Children* points out that Wright wanted "Bright and Morning Star" added to the 1938 edition of the text, but was refused by publishers. Rejected, "Bright and Morning Star" first appeared in *The New Masses* in May 1938, two months after the appearance of the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*. Wright offered to pay the costs of adding "Bright and Morning Star" to the 1940 edition out of his own pocket (298). Apparently, he felt it was important that the story be added to the volume.

78. A recent essay by April Conley Kilinski does explore the rupture signified by adding "Bright and Morning Star" (and "The Ethics Of Living Jim Crow") to *Uncle Tom's Children* in 1940. Kilinksi however argues in a direction diametrically opposed to the present project, arguing that the addition of "Bright and Morning Star" represents the beginning of a mid-to-late-Thirties *anti-communist* turn in Wright's work, rather than a swerve within that continued pro-communist orientation. Kilinksi's interpretation, which would date Wright's break with the Communist party and with communism in 1937, hinges on a seriously flawed reading of both Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and his later biography *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Lacking the space to refute in full here, I will just note that the linchpin of the misinterpretation is Kilinski's erasure of the explicitly pro-Marxist and implicitly pro-communist perspective in both of these texts. She also ignores the fact that in 1937, for instance, Wright wrote over 200 article for the pro-Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper, and would continue producing fiction, poetry, and journalism for pro-Communist publications such as *The New Masses* for years to come. See

A.C. Kiliniski "Flinging a New Star: 'Fire and Cloud' and 'Bright and Morning Star' as Reflections of Richard Wright's Changing Relationship with Communism" in *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*: Vol. 5, No. 1, 2012.

79. Perhaps then we can say of emotional catharsis what Sue says at the very outset of "Bright and Morning Star," lines which, for readers of *Uncle Tom's Children*, come but a page after Rev. Taylor's teary-eyed epiphany at the end of F&C: "Rains good n bad. It kin make seeds bus up thu the groun, er it kin bog things down lika watah-soaked coffin" (221).

80. "Papa Dick and Sister Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," 67.

81. "Aunt Sue's Children: Reviewing the Gender(ed) Politics of Richard Wright's Radicalism" 91.

82. Hurston's review is at least in part a response to Wright's own scathing — and equally uncharitable — criticism of Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For a brilliant critical discussion of Wright and Hurston's fiction that complicates the operative opposition that frames much "debate" about these two writers, see William Maxwell "Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright –– Zora Neale Hurston Debate," *New Negro, Old Left*: *African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).

83. Zora Neal Hurston, "Stories of Conflict," *Saturday Review of Books.* April 2, 1938, 32-33

84. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: The German Ideology* ed. Chris Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970) 56-57.

85. Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger).* The first part only is quoted in the Yarborough introduction to *Uncle Tom's Children,* xiii.

86. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* 248, emphasis added.

87. *Black Boy (American Hunger)* 318.

The Task of the Inheritor: A Review of Gerhard Richter's *Inheriting Walter Benjamin*

Matthew Gannon

Gerhard Richter sets the stage for his insightful new study *Inheriting Walter Benjamin* (2016) by making the simple yet far from straightforward claim that "there is nothing at all self-evident about the notion that we should know how to inherit the thinking and writing of Benjamin today" (2). For Richter, to be an inheritor is not merely to be a successor, or one who can faithfully and directly carry out the (perceived) will of the deceased. The self-reflexivity of philosophy — and critical thought in general — precludes an easy and unproblematic inheritance. Instead, Richter surveys the complex poetic tropes of Benjamin's refractory and idiomatic passages, inheriting them through critical and close readings. To draw out Benjamin's rich legacy and its inheritability today, he puts Benjamin in dialogue with writers whose legacy Benjamin himself inherited, such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Kafka. He does the same with those who were contemporaneous with Benjamin or who inherited his legacy, including Heidegger, Derrida, and Richter himself.

There are high stakes and radical potentialities in inheriting a legacy such as Benjamin's. Inheriting is a task that, if performed responsibly, eschews the temptations of closure that a rigid and programmable interpretation would bring. To inherit a tradition entails a struggle to receive it and the necessity of transforming it in order to pass it on again. In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin warns against a "transmission that is a catastrophe" (10). When Richter applies this notion to its author, he finds that avoiding catastrophe requires inheriting Benjamin as an "irreducible enigma" and prioritizing an "interminable resistance to closure and completion," making

inheritance a never-completed task that allows Benjamin's thought to enter into surprising and even revolutionary configurations with the concerns of the present and the future (10).

Inheritance is more than a useful concept through which Richter can explore the state of Benjamin's writings today; it is something that Benjamin himself was concerned with, which is unsurprising for a thinker so preoccupied with temporal ruptures, the power of the past, and the logic of latency and afterness. Richter devotes a chapter to Benjamin's concept of inheritance in his 1934 essay commemorating the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death. Making linguistic observations on a single passage from Benjamin's essay, several lines from Kafka concerning original sin, Richter notes that in the original German both Benjamin and Kafka use the term *Erbsünde*, which, rather than original sin, more literally means "inheritance sin," shifting the emphasis of the sin from the original act to its transmissibility and inheritability. This transmission of sin becomes archetypal for the burden of inheritance as such and the difficult position of the inheritor, who receives a legacy that he may not fully understand, making necessary a process of confronting, reading, and interpreting of the inheritance. Referencing Derrida, himself an inheritor of Benjamin and Kafka, Richter contrasts mere appropriation with inheritance, arguing that the latter is not about possessing a legacy as something fixed and stable, but rather keeping it alive.

It is in this spirit of closely reading particularly dense and theoretically rich passages that each of Richter's chapters sets out to inherit Benjamin. Rather than offering definitive statements on Benjamin's intellectual legacy, Richter instead delivers "a critical *constellation*" of open-ended readings that illuminate the central concerns of inheriting Benjamin today (13, emphasis added). The focal points of this constellation are key passages from Benjamin that are representative of his larger intellectual project. These are best described as "cool places" in Benjamin's writing, borrowing Richter's term from his chapter on Benjamin's relationship to Nietzsche and Kant. In that chapter, Richter argues that these cool places, a term Benjamin himself uses in the *Arcades Project*, are moments of unusually striking language that articulate his intellectual aims non-systematically through "densely figurative allusions and poetically mediated figures of thought" (110).

Benjamin's writing not only traffics in cool places, it, as a whole, also occupies a cool place by eschewing the systematic for the figurative, the definitive for the open-ended. Richter points to a letter Benjamin wrote to Scholem describing his writing as "always radical, never consistent with regard to the most important things" (101). To read Benjamin, to inherit him, says Richter, requires attending to the ways in which Benjamin is inconsistent and abounding with internal, unresolvable tensions. To follow Benjamin's apodictic and idiosyncratic logic is to embrace the irreducible literariness and textuality of his writing that breaks through traditional modes of reasoning to provide something genuinely and radically new. Richter demonstrates this by revealing how Benjamin negotiates between two major methodological

approaches to analyzing media and aesthetics: the historical/genealogical model typified by Nietzsche and the formal/structural model of Kantian aesthetics.

Richter shows how Benjamin inherited from both Nietzsche and Kant the specificity and irreducibility of aesthetic experience, and, like them, awarded the aesthetic great importance for its ability to suggest possibilities of experience and the potential for freedom. Though Benjamin never explains the connection between the formal and genealogical modes of thinking, the cool places in his writings effectively stage this relationship dialectically, leaving interpretation radically, if unsettlingly, open. Richter's identification of cool places in Benjamin has its corollary in Benjamin's locating the cool places in aesthetic experience, or the moment in an artwork that is not self-identical or assimilable into a whole but is "at odds with itself... interrupted by the unexpected emergence of a radical singularity" (111). This has immense political consequences, Richter argues, as the cool place of an aesthetic work is precisely where truth is rendered visible in ways not typically accessible to dominant ways of seeing or thinking.

Richter's consideration of Benjamin's Kantian inheritance is further fleshed out when he puts Benjamin in conversation with Heidegger on the concept of the "thing." At stake in the post-Kantian legacy of critique is the critical perspective on the object, and even the necessity for critique to take itself as its own object. Richter contends that while it is typically unorthodox to read Benjamin alongside Heidegger, it is perfectly appropriate to do so in considering how they both inherited this thingness of Kantian critique. Richter describes them as both drawing from Kantian critique in their role as concrete thinkers, or, as Benjamin put it, "physiognomists of the world of things" (65).

This concern with thingness in Benjamin and Heidegger is also manifested in both thinkers' linguistic and textual approaches to materiality. Language offers mediacy, and, drawing on Schlegel's notion of critique as a mediation of history and philosophy, Richter highlights how thingness must be understood textually, making it necessary for the critic to read the things that inhabit his world. Heidegger's consideration of the materiality of things and language places him within the orbit of a certain kind of Marxian materialism for Richter. Furthermore, his ontological inquiry into the beings that surround us can be understood as taking into account our relation to things, one that seeks out hitherto unthought modes of being. Such a critique of the thing leads to a rejection of a scientific rationality that seeks a stable determinacy, and instead leaves the thing open to endless possibility in which the unthought and the nonexistent may yet come to be thought and to exist. This line of thought suggests a potentiality and futurity in the critique of things that carries significant ethico-political stakes. Richter is understandably cautious in yoking the politics of the Marxist and German-Jewish Benjamin to Heidegger, whose affiliation with Nazism is notorious. Yet he does so sensitively and sensibly enough to simultaneously avoid overstating his claim of their affinity while opening up Heidegger's corpus to radical political readings.

Analyzing one of Benjamin's most challenging cool places, and one that employs a very concretely material thought-figure, Richter tackles the issue of Benjamin's self-described, and highly contested, theological orientation by way of a passage from the *Arcades Project* in which Benjamin writes: "My thinking is related to theology as blotting paper is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain" (42). In his reading of this passage, Richter rejects those who would dismiss Benjamin's theology as the residue of an outdated and unacknowledged metaphysics, and he similarly opposes those who seek to extract Benjamin's thought from his theologically and often mystically inflected language. Richter's argument is grounded in the fact that to inherit Benjamin readers must accept that his writing is indissociable from theological tropes and categories.

At the same time as he defends Benjamin's theology, Richter endeavors to make sense of how Benjamin's politico-theological orientation can coexist with his simultaneous commitment to a radical secularizing that involved dismantling the manifestations of theological in contemporary life. It is this paradox between secular and theological that is the concern of that seemingly contradictory blotting paper passage. The linguistic difficulties in interpreting Benjamin's rhetorical figures are tied to the conceptual difficulties of his writing. Homing in on how Benjamin describes a process of *relating* in the passage, Richter highlights how self-reflexivity and openness is at work in the text, and in Benjamin's thinking as a whole. The relational character of Benjamin's thinking is, in short, the dialectical quality of his writing. The blotting paper, which erases in order to preserve the text, carries out a dialectical transcendence, an *Aufhebung*, which Richter reminds us means both cancellation and preservation. The constant erasure and preservation of the blotting paper thus embodies Benjamin's atheological theology, and reflects the restless dialectic of the openness and closedness of history itself.

While such attention to Benjamin's complex philosophy of history is illuminating, it also shies away from its more explicit political implications. It comes as something of a disappointment that Richter does not, for the most part, turn his attention to inheriting Benjamin's highly original articulations of Marxism. Richter's politicized readings of Benjamin's less obviously political writings are admirable, as is his opening up of seemingly apolitical writings (especially those of Heidegger's) to potentially radical politics. Yet Richter is curiously reluctant to even address the possibility of a Marxist inheritance from Benjamin, largely dismissing his "later, admittedly unorthodox, Marxian commitments" (37) and describing his politics as simply "anti-fascist" and "dialectically oriented" (62). Yet the benefits of inheriting a Benjaminian Marxism are all the more striking at this current moment in history, in which crises in the global economy and climate, among others, pose challenges that a resurgent and nuanced communism could provocatively address. This omission highlights the persistent need, and high stakes, of elaborating Benjamin's political inheritance.

While Richter concludes his book without engaging Benjamin's explicit politics, his

final chapter, a brief meditation on the temporality of photography, clearly indicates that any inheritance of Benjamin, including its political dimensions, is necessarily always ongoing. This final chapter, unlike the others, does not deal with a particular aspect of inheriting Benjamin; in fact it barely mentions him. Yet the chapter is populated by Benjaminian motifs, tropes, and concerns. Richter, presumably, is inheriting Benjamin not by discussing his inheritance, but by enacting it. He is keeping Benjamin's legacy alive, not by merely preserving it, but by continuing to deploy it, reworking it for the concerns of the present. Like the blotting paper that erases in order to preserve, signaling a dialectical transcendence and the possibility of genuinely, radically new knowledge, in this last chapter Richter effaces Benjamin's overt presence precisely as a way of inheriting him. Richter's thinking is saturated with Benjamin, as the blotting paper is saturated with ink. His presence, then, is felt most sharply by his absence, a cancellation that allows him to be not sterilely preserved, but living on in the text as an inheritance.

Review of *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*

Ruth Jennison

The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) has issued a compelling provocation to the field of literary studies. As the title suggests, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (*CUD*) places the combined and uneven development of capitalism at the center of a theory and practice of reading, and mapping, the forms and patterns of global literary production. Readers of *Mediations* are likely familiar with the centrality of combined and uneven development to Marxist geography, economic analysis, political economy, and models of revolutionary practice. For those less familiar with the concept, *Combined and Uneven Development* offers a concise and thorough introduction. WReC traces the development of the concept from its origins in Marx to its elaboration by Leon Trotsky in his account of capitalist development in the periphery and in his anti-stagist theory of permanent revolution; Trotsky describes the co-presence of developing capitalist forces and pre-existing modes of production and culture as "an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (11). From contemporary critical theory, WReC draws most frequently throughout *Combined and Uneven Development* on Fredric Jameson, whose work magnetizes unevenness into fields of variegated totalities. Informing Jameson's work are rich adaptations of Ernst Bloch's conception of the "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous," a conceptual translation into temporal terms of the spatial patchwork of combined and uneven developments. For all of these thinkers, and WReC, too, combined unevennes is a permanent and constituent feature of the capitalist system, rather than errors in its progress. The capitalist world system will develop, de-develop, and re-develop geographical economic sectors in response to shifts in labor regimes and resulting

migrancy, the promise of surplus value extraction, technological transformation, the threat and fact of the falling rate of profit, the destruction of the natural environment, and the production and destruction of markets, especially as processes underwritten by colonialism and imperialism.

The project of *Combined and Uneven Development* is interdisciplinary in that ways that the best work in Marxism always is. The book forwards a theory of literary form and textual production rooted in the political economies of a world system undergoing tumultuous and ceaseless rearrangement, especially in response to crises within the system. WReC therefore understands world literature within the compass of the capitalist world system. Where contemporary literary study has emphasized locational difference (either Derridian or liberal-multicultural) and the relative autonomy of national literatures, WReC suggests more fruitful investigations take as their point of departure both the "singularity of modernity as a social form and its simultaneity." Jameson, again, is the touchstone here, and modernity is understood as "the time-space sensorium corresponding to capitalist *modernisation*." Leavening this singularity, in which WReC "hear(s) the echo of a hundred years of dialectical materialist discussion of totality, system and universality," is "simultaneity" (12). "Multiple forms of appearance of unevenness" co-exist simultaneously within the larger capitalist singularity.

The introduction to *Combined and Uneven Development* offers, in addition to this useful redaction, the history of the concept of combined and uneven development, a series of pointed critiques of the state of contemporary literary studies, specifically its postcolonial, comparative and world literature iterations. WReC finds common cause with these disciplines' anti-Eurocentrism (especially work by Edward Said and Pascal Casanova); however, they protest against the idea that modernity is a Western phenomenon, and posit that modernity must be "situated within the capitalist world-system." Citing the work of Harry Harootunian, they argue that modernity is "the way in which capitalism is 'lived' – wherever in the world-system is it is lived – [and] 'however society develops,' its modernity is coeval with other modernities..." (14-15). In addition to this project of renewing the temporal, geographic, economic and political contours they feel the concept the "West" subtracts, they also want to insist, against certain somewhat ecstatic tendencies that emphasize an interactive globality of translation, of which Emily Apter's work is for them exemplary, that translation (like comparative literature as a discipline more broadly) is structured by asymmetries of power between nations in a capitalist world-system contoured by imperialist subjugation, colonial apparatuses, and semi-peripheral abutment zones.

In partnership with world-systems theorists, WReC finds the geographical articulations of "core" and "periphery" crucial, as these terms mark the convergence of spatiality and positionality within the capitalist world-system. The semi-periphery plays particular importance in their mapping of modernism, a phenomenon whose techniques they describe as "the determinate formal registers of (semi-)peripherality

in the world literary system, discernable whenever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism's bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)" (51). Corollary to the critiques of homogenizing "the West" and arguments against analogizing Europe and modernity, WReC pays special attention to peripheries and semi-peripheries *within* Europe, and at times, *intranationally* as well. The possible co-presence within the nation of all three spatial categories, core, periphery, and semi-periphery, tempts the reader to ponder the contours of a combined and uneven development heuristic within the field of American Studies, or any other field whose site of inquiry explores the interior of national borders. Still, WReC wagers that it is in the places most underdeveloped by regimes of capitalist modernization that the "pressures of combined and uneven development find their most pronounced or profound registration" (62).

This world-combinatory nature of unevenness troubles mechanical literary chronologies wherein realism gives way inexorably to, or is sublated by, modernism. Taking up Adorno's claim that modernism is a form of realism insofar as it encodes "the systemic crisis of European modernity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," WReC calls upon us to likewise identify the modernisms in the realisms, and the realisms in the modernisms, of the periphery and semi-periphery (66). This allows WReC the flexibility to explore literary forms which are themselves combined and uneven. The taxonomy of 'irrealism" appears frequently throughout *Combined and Uneven Development*, reflecting a critical desire to find a place beyond models of realism and modernism exhausted by attachments to a thoroughly ideological system of aesthetic value. In analyzing these hybrid forms as mediations of combined and uneven development, WReC aims to supercede models of world literary production that would put a bit too much distance between literary production and political economy. (This point in particular is a brief but significant critique of Pascal Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, which otherwise WReC cites approvingly, especially as it offers a corrective to models wherein literature "radiates" inexorably from the core into the periphery.) We can understand WReC's intervention as, in many ways, an extension of the kinds of conversations hosted within *Modern Language Quarterly*'s 2012 special issue on peripheral realisms, edited by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, with a contribution from WReC's own Sharae Deckard, as well as Jameson. The issue addresses, among other things, the relationship between realism, modernism, and the fate of third worldism, both in the "third world" itself and as a source of political imagination for academics in the core. Like *Combined and Uneven Development*, the *Modern Language Quarterly* issue seeks to challenge the accuracy, assumptions, and disciplinary value of longstanding binaries between modernism and realism, and to do this on the stage of world systems theory. What readers will find unique

about *Combined and Uneven Development* is its project of deploying combined and uneven development both as a determinate negation of the binary opposition between modernism and realism, and also its use of the concept as the basis for mapping historical transition onto form.

The last four chapters of *Combined and Uneven Development* offer case studies. These investigations provide exemplary, pedagogical models of how combined and uneven development is not only a fact of global capitalist development, but a foundational basis of the way to *read* that development. The objects of inquiry are all novels: Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Victor Pelevin's *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, and works by Ivan Vladislavic are given thorough treatment. The geographic and historical conjunctures are aptly chosen. WReC pays special attention to transitional contact points where developmental asymmetries are readily registered (Vladislavic's 1990s South Africa; Peter Pist'anek's 1989 Bratislava in *Rivers of Babylon*; and post-war Reykjavik in Halidór Laxness's *The Atom Station*). There are of course important geopolitical reasons why the novel is a privileged object of inquiry, insofar as it has been a key formal mediation of literary exchange, cultural imperialism, as well postcolonial adaptation and resistance. For WReC, as for many critics working in the post-Lukácian tradition, the novel functions as a way to read the relationship between consciousness and the totality of history. In *Combined and Uneven Development*, the lived structures of combined and uneven development, such as they operate as deictics of that totality, provide key entry points to understanding how literature functions an index of consciousness of the world-system. Consciousness is a somewhat undervisited category in the recencies of literary/cultural study and Marxist political and economic theory, its use in decline from earlier periods when its detection and diagnosis was central to Marxism's political project. WReC's focus on the novel excites questions about the relationship of consciousness to structure, and resurrects the Jamesonian legacy of embracing both in a dialectic: two unexpected dividends of their project. (In the close of this review, however, I wonder hopefully about the expansion of WReC's analytic beyond the novel form.)

Provocatively, *Combined and Uneven Development* poses, but does not offer a final answer, to the following question regarding the qualities of consciousness their texts reveal. They ask "whether we are reading for the *political unconscious*, the way in which form is unconsciously warped and fissured, or whether we are reading for a 'critical irrealist' politics of form: the self-conscious transformation by authors of those very fissures into sources of innovation which transform the genre of realism" (97). In a partial answer to this question, they point approvingly to the work of Roberto Shchwarz, in which Brazilian literature registers developmental asymmetries unconsciously at first, and later authors transform symptoms into "conscious aesthetic experimentation." WReC's (and Shchwarz's) linking of periodization to questions of symptom and agency is compelling; their example of the how Latin American magical realism became commodified and is now largely consumed by "metropolitan

elites" verifies Jameson's claim, which they cite approvingly: "what is progressive may very well harden into its opposite as the situation evolves, and the balance may shift the other way" (80). The claim that the word literature is the literature of the capitalist world-system sutures form to shifting, combinatory political, economic, and cultural developments, and allows us to free that form from static alignment with place (e.g. Modernism equals the West) or value (e.g. Modernism equals progressive). The question of whether literary form is symptomatic or the result of conscious experimentation then depends less on the critic's diagnostic powers than it does on the positioning of the text in the crosshairs of combined and uneven developments.

Since the bulk of *Combined and Uneven Development* is comprised of site specific studies, it might be useful here to follow the arc of one of the book's investigations. In the chapter entitled "*Oboroten* Spectres: Lycanthropy, Neoliberalism and New Russia in Victor Pelevin," WReC explores how Pelevin's novel reflects "Russia's rapid conversion into an authoritarian petro-state [and] might be read as a semi-peripheral resource fiction registering oil shock, the violent impact of petroleum extraction and reorganization of socio-ecological relations, not only in its content, but in its aesthetics, particularly its use of phantasmagoria and lycanthropy" (98).

The chapter is a fine example of what WReC understands as the rise of "critical irrealism" in the semi-peripheries, and in societies where combined and uneven developments testify to transition- especially transition into neoliberal regimes. Drawing from the work of Micheal Löwy, WReC argues that Pelevin's critical irrealist novel "willfully [expresses] the contradictions of a social order and [critiques] it, while reactivating the tradition of oneiric, surreal and critical irrealist fictions from Gogol, Doesteovsky, Kafka and Bulgakov onwards" (101). In a fascinating micro-history of lycanthropy legends, WReC reveals how "werewolf folklore frequently originates in traumatic transformations of local ecologies by imperialism or modernization" as was the case in Ireland, where deforestation and the turn to "plantation mono-agriculture" finds wolves cast out of their state of nature and into human communities. This occurs at the same time as "imperialist rhetoric used werewolves as an ethnic discourse to vilify the native Irish and naturalise them as 'sub-human'" (102). This is not dissimilar to the ambient history of the post-Soviet gothic, where we find registered "the stage of primitive accumulation which marks the transition to neoliberal capitalism." Here WReC draws on Trotsky, who observes that "artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms," in order to explain why residual and archaic forms and contents populate the imaginary of a society under transition into neoliberal capitalism: "the reactivation of residual forms is not arbitrary, but seems to draw on texts and tales congruent at similar points in long waves of boom-bust cycles and eco-revolutions, even if these points occur in different temporalities." (104-5) For WReC, A Hu Lui, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*'s sex worker and ancient fox spirit narrator, functions as a kind of formal impress of the intensification of women's sexual exploitation in the post-Communist landscape. But her character simultaneously

transcodes an enlightened Buddhist principle of nature, a "2,000-year-old residual," that points up the tyranny of universal commodification and protests against an immiseration so brutal that it appears premodern, which accompanies the uneven transformation of state capitalism into petro free market capitalism.

The reading of the novel is an extraordinarily lucid example of WReC's method. Particularly interesting is how the method operates both synchronically and diachronically: combined and uneven developments structure transitional geographies and the literatures of the semi-periphery offers a particularly observable intaglio of this. Supplementing this synchronic articulation is WReC's argument that certain residuals are "reactivated" because each new crisis, or "boom and bust cycle," while historically unique, energizes "congruent texts and tales" from previous crises. WReC is proposing that combined and uneven developments move and shift in the mantle of the present; but they are also offering an argument about which residuals become activated and when. This is a critical move that ratifies combined and uneven development not only as a descriptive hermeneutic, but one that, when combined with crisis theory, can offer a determinate account of the appearance, and re-appearance, of particular residuals.

Combined and Uneven Development poses a number of challenges: encouraging the reader to see world literature as the literature of the world-system; to forego the values, periodizations and geographies that have calcified around modernism and realism and embrace hybrid forms; and to grasp that any critique or account of these forms cannot be uncoupled from a Marxian account of historical transition and transformation. There is much promise and difficulty in this last challenge, especially as contemporary critique only infrequently takes as its project developing an account of the how of transition and the must of transformation. *Combined and Uneven Development* is a call to engage in what Jameson has called the "dialectic of the break and the period" by hovering in uneven tectonics of the break and forestalling periodizations that too quickly become homologous with a non-contradictory versions of "Europe" or "modernity."

As with all totalizing accounts of world capitalist development and literary form (of which we need more), questions of what is excluded, but cannot be excluded, arise. These are not deficits, but provocations for the dilation and extension of arguments. For instance, whither poetry in the system of world literature? Why is the novel still the privileged mediation of transition and unevenness, when twentieth and twenty-first century poetry offers both a rich map of translations to and from core and periphery, and forms whose curious adjacencies of dissonant particulars fit into vaster systems of figuration? Can other textual forms testify to and be illuminated by combination and unevenness?[1] For these reasons and more it is difficult to claim that the novel offers the chief site of world-literary contestation in late capitalism, as it once did in the period before our own. The important method of *Combined and Uneven Development* should be extended to and tested upon other texts of the world-system: cinema, poetics, performance.

Notes

1. See Sarah Brouillette's "UNESCO and the World-Literary System in Crisis" (Amodern.net, http://amodern.net/article/unesco-brouillette/, accessed March 1, 2017) for more pressure points on the novel, or even the literary text, as a reliable index of our contemporary moment.

Did Critique Become a Thing?

George Porter Thomas

As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, John Carpenter's 1986 science-fiction film *They Live* is about ideology.[1] The premise is simple: a drifter arrives in a mildly dystopian near future Los Angeles and gradually discovers that the world is secretly run by a cabal of monstrous aliens, disguised as people, who control the population through television and advertising. The film's hero, played by wrestling star Roddy Piper, is only able to see what is really going on through the aid of particular technology for revealing the evil truth behind things: a special type of x-ray sunglasses produced by the beleaguered resistance. These glasses allow him to see who is really an alien monster, and, most importantly, the subliminal messages through which they maintain a distinctly familiar hegemony: "CONFORM", "OBEY", "CONSUME", "STAY ASLEEP" intone this world's magazines, billboards, and television shows in a secret language of control. Of course, in the wake of Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault, et. al., we know that ideology is in fact much more sophisticated than this, but what about those x-ray sunglasses? Don't we still believe we have a pair? Don't we preserve the idea that underneath, inside, or behind power lurks the script of its operation, just waiting to be exposed?

These x-ray specs are the subject of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. By "critique" Felski has in mind a broad paradigm of textual interpretation: symptomatic reading, reading against the grain, ideology critique, the new historicism, and the various political and identitarian schools, which she brings together under the mantle of Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion." With this term, Ricoeur is thinking about the big guns: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud; Felski is thinking about their heirs, especially in the humanities and soft social sciences, where critique has reigned since the rise of

theory in the 1970s. Critique's debt to its continental forebears is clear: it must upend the facile epistemology of common sense; it must be suspicious because its objects of study are inevitably caught up in repression, obfuscation, and power. The text — like the world — must be interrogated, exposed, and overturned.

For Felski, critique is not so much a unified school (à la Harold Bloom's "school of resentment") but a style. Indeed, it is the *only* style: critique is "virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo" says Felski (7). "For many scholars in the humanities, it is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing" (8). Pretty much the worst thing you can be is uncritical (9). Critique, described in terms of its actual operation in the world and not its own lofty ambitions, is how academic work is done, a *de rigueur* method which graduate students must learn as part of their professionalization. It is a know-how, a "critical mood" (20), a rhetoric, even a rubric: a set of gestures, gambits, moves, and payoffs we make over and over again. Critique, suggests Felski stingingly, is "less a matter of *taking a stand* than of *assuming a stance*" (132) — a pose, even. As scholars, we are detached, skeptical, vigilant, wary, investigating, self-reflexive, and ironic. Our work is penetrating, iconoclastic, and radical; it speaks truth to power by unraveling power's own inner workings. Critique deconstructs, demystifies, denaturalizes, de-essentializes; it defeats again and again its great enemy: the commonsense world of widespread beliefs about what is obvious or normal or natural, the strangely re-usable Trojan horse through which bad power rules the world. The texts we read are either complicit, unwitting dupe-puppets of ideology or heroically subversive, resistant, complexly self-aware take downs of the system. Either way, as critics, we see through power and reveal it to the world. We make revolutions on the page. By interpreting, we "intervene.'"

Felski largely sets aside the fact that our win-loss record as revolutionaries is not great. Neither is she interested in "the critique of critique" (190) — the circular move of reading between the lines of critique to discover its own contradictions and scandalous complicities with power, thus producing more critique. Instead, she is interested in describing the extent to which critique, which she, of course, grants has been over the course of its reign a paradigm of exceptionally fruitful scholarly endeavor, has "run out of steam," as Bruno Latour (a familiar figure in this book) puts it.[2] This matters because our sticking to the script is preventing other kinds of interpretation: better attention to affect, circulation, to the complex networks and entanglements in which texts actually operate across time, to what makes us read in the first place. In proposing what she calls "postcritical reading," Felski thus joins the chorus of recent thinkers who have put pressure on our standard mode of doing business: Eve Sedgewick's work on "paranoid" and "reparative" reading, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' controversial "surface reading," the New Formalists and the New Ethicists, Dipesh Chakrabarty's, Wai-Chee Dimock's, and Jennifer Fleissner's forays against historicism, and of course Latour himself, whose skepticism toward

what he calls "the critique" as a paradigm in Western thought goes all the way back to René Descartes himself.

Felski's take is certainly a bold one.[3] Marxist scholars, in particular, will feel attached to critique and defensive of it; many would argue that Marxism simply *is* critique. The biggest question such readers will ask of Felski's book is whether we can be Marxist (or socialist, or even political) readers without some form of critique. We are, in short, not used to thinking of critique as a problem. We are used to demanding, like a twenty-six year old Karl Marx once did in a furious letter to the editor of an obscure Parisian periodical, "a ruthless criticism of everything existing." In a certain view of what it means to be a political intellectual, it is hard to imagine anything more heroic than that. So: what is so bad about critique?

For one thing, it has become trite. Critique has become an "auto-pilot argument" (9); it is played out, kind of boring. In an ironic twist, critique comes quite *naturally* to us now—critique is commonsensical. You know the drill: 1) map out an object against its historical context. 2) Argue that the text is complicit with, resistant to, or subversive of a bad "ism." Texts are always getting tangled up with bad "isms." "'Isms,'" as Ferris Bueller once pointed out, "are not good." Sexism. Capitalism. Racism. Phallologocentrism. Heteronormativism. Anthropomorphism. Ableism. Critique fights back against "isms." In critique, writes Felski, "both aesthetic and social worth…can only be cashed out in terms of *againstness*" (17). There are moral stakes involved. In one chapter, Felski compares the critiquing intellectual to a detective, probing the text, like the scene, for clues of the crime. Something is always already fishy: "As a style of academic reading … the hermeneutics of suspicion knows its vigilance to be justified. Something, somewhere—a text, an author, a reader, a genre, a discourse, a discipline, is always already guilty of a crime" (39). There are all kinds of hidden things that can only be brought to the surface by assiduous interpretation of the clues at hand, and "for the practitioner of critique … there *are* no coincidences" (88). Close reading has meant interrogation for so long we don't even think about that metaphor. *Is* the only way to read texts to see them, under a furrowed Sherlockian brow, as indices of criminality?

Of course not. You can open up any recent issue of *American Literature* or *Critical Inquiry* and see authors revering texts for their complexity and political engagement. But it turns out that this is critique, too: some texts subvert bad "isms" themselves. So, in certain cases, we need not be "suspicious of the text…because it [is] already doing the work of suspicion for us. Critic and work [are] wound together in an alliance of mutual mistrust vis-à-vis everyday forms of language and thought," says Felski (16). Such texts "fight back" themselves; they too are heroic acts of suspicious reading. In this more nuanced iteration of critique, texts can be both the objects and subjects of critique; they can be shown to be caught up in ideology but rescued by fine-grained ideology critique, all in one deft reading: "Rather than simply being condemned for its sexist or racist beliefs, for example, a film or novel [is] now hailed

as a contradictory knot of ideological tensions, allowing its more ambiguous or even progressive elements to be highlighted" (63). Sure, John Ford's *The Searchers* is pretty openly racist, but it also involves us in a powerful critique of racism. Sure, *Jane Eyre* is at times a bit rocky in the gender department but read in a certain way, it is basically *Gender Trouble, avant la lettre*. The circularity is clear: "as critical thinkers, we value literature because it engages in critique!" Felski points out (5). The problem with this approach is a familiar one: it leaves a substantial amount of what makes literature literary by the wayside — we are so busy searching for crimes that we no longer notice what drew us to literature in the first place. Even though we long ago nominally rejected notions of literary value as fusty elitism, a clear hierarchy of value has re-emerged: Toni Morrison is worth reading not because of the way the supple cadence of her prose evokes the overlapping resonance of different registers of time, or the way she tries to create in her dialogue autonomous black vernaculars, but because her novels critique race the way we do — *Beloved* is, as Walter Benn Michaels once put it, a "historicist novel."[4] The irony of historicism's ubiquity is that what we want, most of all, is texts that can be made to endorse (or at least justify) the politics of the English department, circa today. Literary texts give us myriad worlds and times, but what we tend to want from them is an endorsement of our own politics, right now. To use an adjective from our politics, right now, critique is rigged.

I think the heart of the problem with critique has to do with the frame shift involved in moving from analyzing social systems to cultural texts: what worked really well for Marx with the commodity form or Foucault with prison design might not work exactly the same way with lyric poetry or hip-hop. In teaching (rarely a topic that comes up when we talk about theory), modeling critique usually takes the form of telling your students that the way they have been reading — that is, what brought them to your class — is politically heinous. They really identify with the characters in Jane Austen, but that's a bad way to read, and of course as Edward Said has shown, *Mansfield Park* is compromised by colonialism. They read *On the Road* four times when they were fifteen, carried away into its vision of freedom, but you point out that it is among the most misogynistic books in the canon.

Felski, I am sure, would grant that such critiques have more than a grain of truth to them, but she is focused in the mode of thinking involved in the act of pulling naïve wanderers *out* of the rabbit hole, a mode which we re-enact not only in journal articles, but in seminars, too. As she puts it, with her characteristic whiff of droll irony, "the smartest thing you can do is see through the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others" (16). In a time of declining humanities enrollments, perhaps we should occasionally let our students remain entranced by Dickens or, perish the thought, Kerouac. Sure, books take us in, but isn't that a big part of why we read, to be taken in? Striking through the mask sounds heroic when you are talking about political economy, but a little vicious when you are talking about *Little Women*.

But vicious is probably the wrong word. I am here beginning to critique critique,

beginning to assert that it has become a corrupt thought-system that must be replaced by a new system, one that is not vicious. But this is a temptation Felski urges us to resist. "The danger that shadows suspicious interpretation" she argues, "is less its murderous brutality than its potential banality … It no longer tells us what we do not know; it singularly fails to surprise" (116). Indeed, critique, which paints itself as the iconoclastic arch-nemesis of common sense, now ironically tends to tell us exactly what we already believe: if a text is transnational, it is good; if it is exceptionalist, it is bad. If a text is heteronormative, it is bad; if it is queer, it is good. The problem here is not so much the politics (queer *is* good) but the immense temporal arrogance involved in presuming texts or people from other times and places must always be made to conform to the politics of the contemporary English Department. This is a serious problem for critique's key ally, historicism: it claims most of all historical rigor and ends up telling the stories we, in the present, want it to tell. One of the greatest pleasures of doing historical work is the confrontation with alterity it offers us, but we have become absolutely convinced that we always know better now (that is: in making the past our kind of queer, we actually *un*queer it). Why should this be? As Felski asks: "why… are we so sure that we know more than the texts that precede us?" (159). For that matter, why are we always so sure we know more than was known the past?

Students of Marxism will be particularly interested in Felski's critique of contextualism, usually seen as part and parcel of the historicist method in literary studies. This is one of the points at which Felski offers suggestions that might be useful to those not entirely convinced by her takedown of critique writ large. History is of course the one thing that usually stands outside of critique, or at least astride it. History is the concrete against which ideas must always be measured, a process of temporal situation whose own temporal situation is usually ignored, a universal prescription about always being particular. Context is the idea that historical change can always be measured the same way: the rendering of history into static "moments" which never actually existed: nobody ever lived in a context.

Felski is quite clear what she thinks about context: "[C]ontext stinks," she says (151). Again, the problem is that texts are confined to an interpretive duopoly: "conventional" texts reflect their historical moment while "exceptional" texts transcend it — complicity or resistance, yet again (153). The complicity/resistance diptych is particularly damaging in this temporal iteration: context becomes "a kind of historical container in which the individual texts are encased" (155), a set of givens against which the text reacts. Very few literary historicists (a group that includes almost everyone) will entirely accept this claim, but Felski has a point: in the last instance, the Althusserian notion of the "last instance" is in fact a very friendly form of reflection theory, and one which lives on in our need to imagine a text as neatly relating to an often arbitrarily designated context. "History is not a box" declares Felski, intoning against how periodization obscures the very things we look for in a literary text: the ability to transcend, to speak beyond a parochial moment in order

to create something new (154). As Martin Jay has recently written, discussing the work of the philosopher Claude Romano, one of the biggest problems with contextual analysis is that it rarely contains accounts of how *newness* emerges historically; what is interesting about cultural forms is ultimately not the degree to which they stem from their world but the degree to which they change it.[5] The point is to change it. Does critique still care about that aspect of its objects, or has it claimed all of the radicalness for itself?

The New Historicist blending of text and context — certainly in English departments the dominant vein of critique since the 1990s — does little to reform the problems of contextualism for Felski: in the wake of the end of historical metanarrative, of politically tainted stories about history's broad sweep, we learned to quarantine the past in an effort to keep it untainted. The past becomes a set of amusing (even inspiring) curios locked into airtight boxes: "we are inculcated, in the name of history, into a remarkably static view of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole" (157). Contextualization means that every text is surrounded from the start. Like the favored metaphors of Foucault, this incarceration is complex and sophisticated; it masquerades as a kind of progress, but History is always watching, ordering, determining. The freeze-frame, slice-of-time mode of much contextualist analysis (what Wai-Chee Dimock calls, perfectly, "synchronic historicism") is of course antithetical to what Marx was actually on about: the reproduction of the conditions of production does not happen on its own, and historical materialism is at its most fundamental level about *change*, driven by human activity.[6] Context, finally, is a fantasy that we can see what really matters about history by freezing it still, when what really matters is how it moves. History, usually appealed to when we try to dereify things, can be reified, too.

Felski cuts a broad swath here, so the next question is pretty obvious: what is the alternative to critique? What else should we do?

As I've already mentioned, critiquing critique is not the answer. Critiquing critique, after all, is what all critique does. It analyzes an anterior regime, resolving its internal contradictions to propose a new, more effective regime. The issue, then, is always the same: "the problem with critique, it turns out, is that *it is not yet critical enough*" (148). In a self-generative manner, a particular critique is married to an exposition of its own inadequacies to create a new, deeper iteration: critique conceives its own critique. Felski's explication of this process reminds me of what Gilles Deleuze calls "buggering":

> I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous, too, because it resulted

from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed.[7]

Marx buggers Hegel; Levi-Strauss buggers Saussure; Derrida buggers Rousseau and Plato; Lacan buggers Freud; Althusser buggers Marx; Deleuze buggers Bergson; de Man buggers Derrida. Critique, to return to my opening metaphor, excepts itself at precisely the moments when it purports to use the x-ray specs to look in the mirror. The critique of critique comes not to denaturalize critique (the thing) but to essentialize critique (the act). To bugger Adorno, immanence *is* transcendence.

One response to critique's self-propagation has been the occasional, almost cyclical, return to local form: the New Criticism (itself a response, we forget, to the "old" historicism), Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's "Against Theory" (or even, to really push the issue, Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method*) and the more recent New Formalism are examples of this eternal return.[8] Felski's argues, however, that we need a way of doing literary studies that is neither "ideological" (critique) nor "theological" (formalist or anti-methodological); we need to move past "a reduction of texts to political tools or instruments, on the one hand, and a cult of reverence for their sheer ineffability, on the other" (29). It is the crutch of dichotomized thinking that we most need to move past. Alterity or Power. Form or ideology. Defamiliarization or essentialism. Complicity or resistance. Here the book reaches its most convincing pitch: who hasn't felt pinned in by the infinite reductions of this paradigm, where we must, over and over again, line up texts in to two opposing camps: the camp of reaction versus radicalism, or the camp of textual fetishism, where you are always in danger of being branded with the Scarlet "F" of Cleanthbrooksianism? As if we have only two options: to reify critique or to reify the text.

Felski proposes a third option, what she calls "postcritical reading." This is emphatically not to abandon critique, but, to re-purpose one of its favorite words, to supplement it: "We do not need to throw out interpretation but to revitalize and reimagine it" (10). Felski argues that "there is no one-size fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all…aims simultaneously" (9). The recipe for postcritical reading thus involves pinches of pragmatism, phenomenology, affect theory, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT).[9] But at the heart of the idea is a shift in tone, a shift in the rhetoric of textual interpretation: "*We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the "de" prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the "re" prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception*" (17, italics in original). "Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (12). This can sound vague, but it could also be the start of something: could critical theory finally become something *positive*?

The figure of Bruno Latour hovers in the margins of this book like the cavalry in a Western, and he is called in, usually near the end of chapters, in order to drive home

the point that ANT is the solution to whatever problems have been outlined.[10] Given that Felski is such a theoretical polymath, the simplicity of this payoff may surprise some, but its' influence will largely depend on the extent to which people buy the idea that what Latour and Felski are suggesting: first, is ANT really as different from critique as they claim it is? And second, much more importantly, does ANT offers us a new way to interpret that is actually useful? There is one (rather convincing) version of Felski's use of Latour in which she sounds a lot like a Raymond Williams:

> Society does not stand behind and steer human practices, as if it were outside of an ontologically distinct from these practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master. Rather, what Latour calls the social is just the act and the fact of association, the coming together of phenomena to create assemblages, affinities, and networks. It exists only in its instantiations, in the sometimes foreseeable, sometimes unpredictable ways in which ideas, texts, images, people, and objects couple and uncouple, attach and break apart. (157)

To do ANT, to read postcritically, is to be social again, social in a properly historicist way, social without society, historical without context.

But there is a second, harder register in which Felski, again following Latour, describes texts as "nonhuman actors," things that make a difference, things that change the world (163). This version of "materialism" is a problem, because ANT, like the rest of the current vogue for things, always runs a substantial risk of sliding into reification. So long as the point is always to consider texts within networks of editors, reviewers, marketers, professors, and readers, the focus on human activity in and through texts is vital. But the moment that texts become actors is the camera obscura moment, when the world is, as Marx said, turned on its head. Uncle Tom, remember, was "the man who became a thing." It is never good to be a thing, and it usually takes some political unsavoriness in order for a thing to begin to be seen as "acting." Historical materialism is about processes, not things.

Since we are talking about things, actors, networks, and the material world, there is one more frame of reference that is relevant here: the contemporary university. In a practical sense, critique's failure is its greatest success — as long as English departments fail to actually change the world (a safe bet), critique will never actually "run out of steam." Perhaps this is the paradox at the heart of critique, the living embodiment of its highly market-driven scorn for the market: the more critique fails, the more need there is for more of it. This might not be accidental or benign. Indeed, critique might ultimately be a kind of substitute for the political action it always dreams it is. Hence the strange line currently walked in most English departments between utopian theory and dystopian practice, wherein a discipline increasingly organized as a brutal neoliberal learning factory staffed by impoverished adjuncts

and graduate students is justified via an enforced focus on the simulacrum of radical politics. In a double irony, the dereification we think we are practicing in our work (a process which is already itself reified) occludes our own increasingly hopeless status as cogs in a machine, as things ourselves.

In this context, the current critical vogue for things, objects, vibrant matter, even something like animism, is hardly surprising. And this paradigm could gel well with Felski's postcritical reading, with its emphasis on non-human actors acting through transtemporal social networks. But the most powerful thing about *The Limits of Critique* is Felski's stinging diagnosis of diagnosis itself. She is right: critique *has* become reified. Everyone from Althusser to our current New Materialists would criticize the following as saccharine nostalgia for a Marxist humanism that never cohered, but whatever: critique is (was?) at its best when it enables us to see that the world is made of sensuous *human* activity. This is not to dismiss the environment or animals or objects, but to insist that the matrix through which we access and interact with those things is a social one, formed of and by human action through time. The missing word is, as always, labor. Labor is the actor *and* the network. Move away from things, from reification, and focus on their making, distribution, framing, and use by people and you will never be too far off the mark. Critique, accordingly, works best, works at all, when we realize that *it is not a thing*; it is not a pair of magical x-ray specs that allows us to diagnose through the symptoms some disease. There is no such pathology, no such thing. The etiology is never unknown: it is always us.

Notes

1. John Carpenter, *They Live*. Universal Pictures, 1987. And Slavoj Žižek. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Zeitgeist Films, 2012.

2. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

3. Because this book is so vulnerable to charges of reductionism and political reaction, it is worth remembering the critical stature and political bonafides of its author. Before we sharpen our knives, we ought to note that the bravest thing about Felski's admittedly sketchy proposals is that they reach not for apolitical interpretation, but for new ways to be political, ways that we need.

4. Walter Benn Michaels, "You Who Never Was There: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust," *Narrative* 4:1 (Jan. 1996) 6.

5. Martin Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event," *New Literary History* 42:4, (Autumn 2011): 557-571.

6. Wai-Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112:5 (Oct. 1997): 1061.

7. Gilles Deleuze. *Negotations*. Translated by Martin Joughin. (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 6.

8. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (Summer 1982): 723-742, and Paul Feyeraband. *Against Method*. New Left Books, 1975.

9. Actor-Network Theory, or ANT, has its roots in Science and Technology Studies, and conjoins the semiotic work of post-structuralism with a focus on materiality and empiricism. As a method in fields from Sociology to Feminism, ANT is distinguished by a preference for description over explanation or evaluation, and by its emphasis on nonhuman actors. ANT sees meanings as arising from complex and ever-changing networks of actors both human and otherwise, instead of from deterministic discourses, paradigms, or structures behind the world.

10. *The Limits of Critique* is itself a model of an ANT method: Felski sets out not to critique critique, not to explain it, but to describe it — "let us look squarely at it," she says, "viewing it as a reality rather than a symptom, a many-sided object rather than a beguiling façade. Let us treat it, in short, as a major rhetorical-cultural actor in its own right" (121).

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